THE PINE RIDGE ASSOCIATION • HENRY W. COE STATE PARK •

The Ponderosa

The Pine Ridge Association Newsletter
Henry W. Coe State Park

September 1995

From under My Brim

by Barry Breckling

Something Stinks in Here

I enjoy writing stories that well up from the depths of my imagination, but as the old saying goes, "Truth is stranger than fiction," and ain't it the truth. The events described in this story really happened, and besides, it would be hard to spin a yarn as far-fetched and fragrant.

On your first day of work at a park with pit toilets, you can be sure that you'll be expected to learn the fine art of cleaning them. I got toilet trained on my first day as a Mt. Diablo park aid, and so did Dede Villareal on her first day as a park aid at Coe Park. Dede's training was a little more complicated than mine, though, as things turned out.

To digress for a moment, ever since I started in parks, I've wondered why we call those little wooden enclosures "pit toilets." "Outhouse" isn't a very inviting name either, but it beats the heck out of pit toilet. When I think of a pit, I think of something you catch wild animals in.

Getting back to the story, John Neef, the Coe Park maintenance worker, took Dede down to the campground on her first day of training to teach her how to deal with pit toilets. After he cleaned the first two, he handed Dede the bucket and said, "The next four are all yours." Full of first-day spunk, she cheerfully went to work, even though the atmosphere of the work in question doesn't normally lend itself to cheer.

People who've dealt with pit toilets are familiar with a certain smell, a particular aroma, shall we say, that hovers around pit toilets and nowhere else. All pit toilets have that distinctive smell—every single one—and nothing else smells quite the same. I think that Dede must have learned this law of nature as she cleaned her first three pit toilets, because a few moments after she entered number four, she was heard to say, "Something stinks in here!"

That remark would probably not have seemed unreasonable to the casual walker-by, but Dede had outdoors experience. The stink she referred to in the fourth pit toilet was one she was familiar with; it was the odor of skunk. She carefully bent over and looked behind the commode, thinking the skunk was probably hiding back there. To her surprise . . . no skunk. Where else could it be? Only one other place to look . . . in the pit. She looked, and sure enough, the skunk was sleeping down below.

Inside this issue . . .

Don't play with the black kitty with a white stripe!

Introduction to a damsel fly

Many improvements and other activities in the park

Calendar of other upcoming events

. . . and more!

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The first problem was solved; Dede had determined the location of the skunk. The next problem was a little trickier . . . how to get it out. Things could have been worse, though, if someone had tried to use the toilet after the skunk took up residence.

This situation was obviously too much for a first-day park aid, so Dede went and found John. John decided the problem called for a committee, so he went and found me.

John made a crude sign that said, "Stay Away, Skunk in Toilet," tacked it to the toilet door, and stepped back looking like he'd certainly done his part. I located a long two-by-four and suggested that Dede lower it into the pit. She did, and then we all stood back and waited, hoping against hope that the skunk would scramble up and make its getaway. No such luck.

Next, John fashioned a rather impressive looking "skunk ladder" and lowered it into the pit. Even though skunks normally sleep during the day and they must be able to tolerate pretty strong smells, I was fairly confident that the animal would soon get tired of its accommodations and scramble up the ladder. But skunk noses must be much weaker than I thought; several hours passed, and the beast was still down there.

Figuring that the Humane Society wouldn't get near this problem and that the wildlife rescue people would realize they were going to be tied up rescuing mosquito larva in Guatemala for the next few days, we decided to try the rope and bucket trick. With the rope strung through a loop in the toilet ceiling, we slowly lowered the bucket into the pit. "I bet the skunk will climb right in, looking for a darker spot, like a hole in a tree," I commented cheerfully. Once again, no such luck.

When you make careless comments like that, you can expect to be the one volunteered to try and nudge the skunk into the bucket with the two-by-four. Although the skunk was uncooperative, he didn't seem to be too upset about the board at first. After a few more persistent nudges, however, he must have gotten a little irritated because he raised his tail and aimed straight up. Moments later, a stinky little cloud passed in front of Barry's nose and blew right into John, who was standing in the doorway. The toilet was temporarily abandoned.

We gave the animal a few minutes to calm down and went back to work. I gave him a couple of determined shoves with the board, and he crawled into the bucket. "It's in!" I hollered as I dashed out the door, while John and Dede took off with the rope. Our fleeing figures were closely followed by a large yellow cloud.

Mission accomplished. The skunk was free, but was sure to be barred from the den for a while. The rescuers were allowed back in their homes, but they immediately had to strip off their clothes and hop in the tub.

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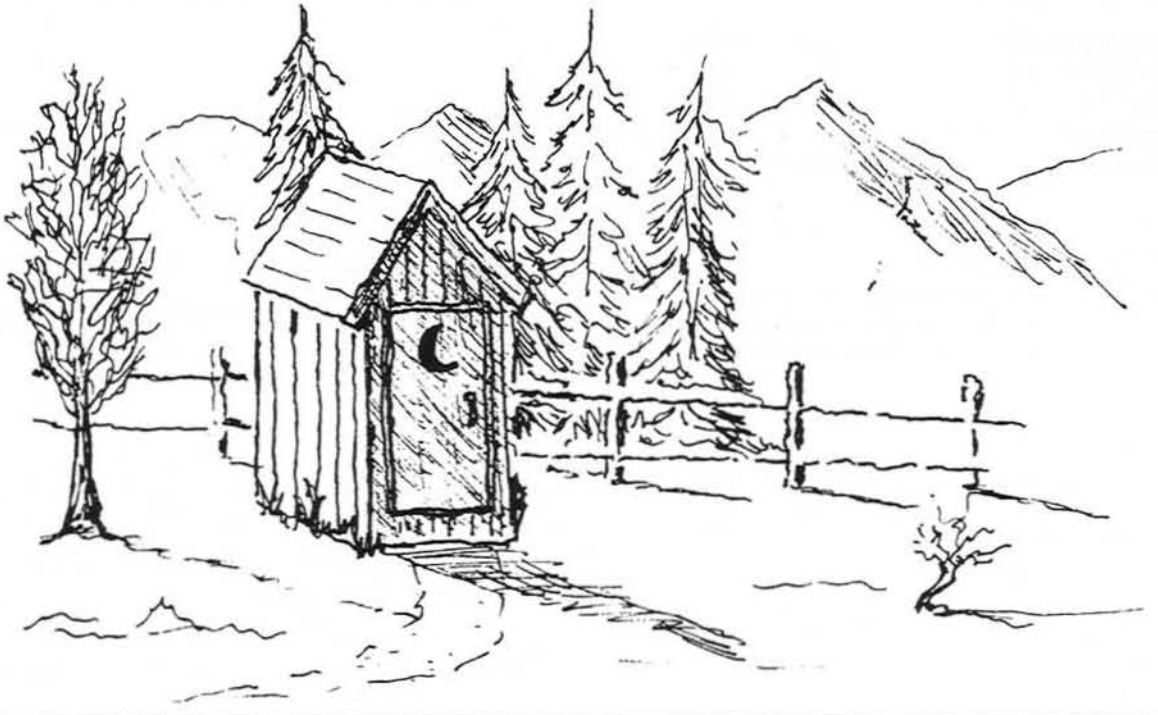
And that's the end of this true tale. All the participants in the drama had a lively adventure, and we all came out relatively intact. But shouldn't there be some kind of moral to the story? . . . Nah



An Up-Close and Personal Look at . . . Skunks

by Barbara Bessey

Of the four (or five, depending upon the source) skunks found in North America, our striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis)* is the one most commonly found living across the United States. The striped skunk is the one you are most likely to see in Coe Park (although you might not see many of them, as they tend to be more active at night). According to Ranger Barry Breckling, the spotted skunk, a smaller relative of the striped skunk, is rare in the park. Skunks are carnivores and are in the family *Mustelidae* along with the weasel, mink, and otter.

The size of a cat, the skunk has short legs, a stout body, with a white stripe that starts on top of its head and splits into a **V** along the upper sides of the body to the tail. Its bushy tail, from 7 to 16 inches in length, is carried high.

Skunks take advantage of the wide range of foods that are seasonally abundant: voles and grubs in spring, berries in summer, berries as well as crickets and grasshoppers in the fall, and mice and voles or even rabbits in winter.

Skunks are probably best known for their ability to spray a foul-smelling liquid when irritated. The fluid is yellow and oily, with a musky scent (chemically it is a sulfur-alcohol compound). The fluid comes from two scent glands that are located on either side of the skunk's anus. Just before spraying, the skunk bends its body so that both head and bottom face the threat. Very strong sphincter muscles contract, and one or both glands discharge the musky fluid in a fine mist stream that can reach up to fifteen feet. Spraying is not the first line of defense for skunks. If they cannot scuttle away, they may stand firm and hiss or growl. Despite their potent odiferous weapon, skunks usually are quite docile, and they seldom seem to be in a hurry.

Skunk tracks are often hard to see due to their erratic meandering and the presence of long hairs on their feet. Long claws on their front feet are used for digging in grassy areas when looking for insects.

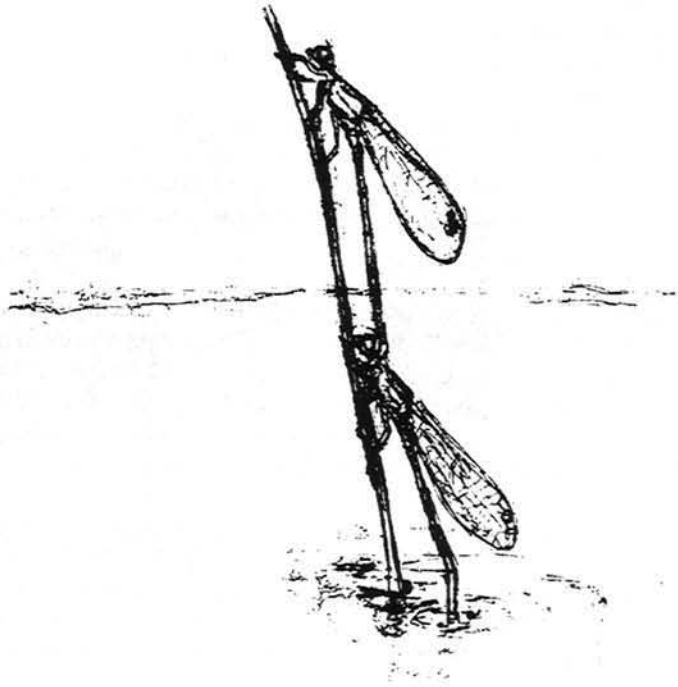
If you would like to learn more about skunks, consult *A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in North America* by James Halfpenny and *A Guide to Animal Tracking and Behavior* by Donald and Lillian Stokes.

Damsel Fly
(family Coenagrionidae)
Civil Bluet

by A. J. MacLaren

Walk down a stream or fish in some remote pond, and you will be able to find this specimen. It's not a major study like the Bald Eagle, but Ethology crosses all bio-barriers. What is Ethology? It is the study of behavior of all living organisms, quite a few of which we take for granted. I, myself, have been fascinated by the study of all creatures, no matter their size and relationship to the ecosystem. My goal is to give you an appreciation for the critters you normally walk by or over or whatever.

Why the Civil Bluet? This is what I saw one day while poking my nose under rocks in a creek bed. I was looking for a frog in the reeds and noticed two Damsels connected in an odd fashion. The first thing I thought was: mating. This was not the case. The male had his forked little ovipositor (tail) around her neck and was leading her as if she were on a leash. They would fly through the air in perfect tandem like two locomotives linked up for the same mission. I was quite fascinated by the pair, so I stuck around to figure out the "why" of it. I found out. Every so often he would land the both of them at the base of a stalk that was protruding from the water. She would dip her "tail" into the water, moving it around rather rapidly. Had I been able to catch samples of her deposit, I probably would have found a couple hundred eggs had been laid there. All Damsels, Skimmers, and Dragonflies use water to incubate their eggs. After the eggs are hatched, the larvae are on their own. This is just one more fascinating bit of behavior from the animal world.



Nature Rules

by Doug Meyers, Coe Sector

I have, so many times, wanted to write an article about Nature. I thought that by doing so I would be making a contribution towards our understanding of Nature and how we, as humans, fit into the greater scheme of things on this planet.

As I see it, Nature rules. Nature was here before there were humans and will be here long after the humans are gone. I have complete, total, and absolute faith in Nature. I believe that Nature is perfectly in charge of all the goings on here on earth and that, in the grand scheme of it all, everything makes perfect sense. Whether we agree with the way Nature takes care of its business or not is totally irrelevant.

Humans are merely tools of Nature, no more or less important than any other life form. We are all fulfilling the purpose for which we were created/evolved, and like every other life form, we are expendable. All created things born into existence on this planet eventually die. Nature is a just master.

Park News

by Kay S. Robinson,
Cooperating Associations Liaison

This year has been a very busy one for staff and volunteers at Henry W. Coe State Park. The Redfern Resource Inventory is coming along well; all but one area has been adopted, and volunteers are out on foot scouring their land for roads, fences, possible trail connections, unique plants and animals, and a variety of other features. The most outstanding event of the first weekend in June was the sighting of a (non-aggressive) mountain lion by volunteer Carl Clinger from a distance of 20 paces. Information on our new property continues to come in and is being compiled at the sector office.

Speaking of the sector office, we moved from our temporary quarters in San Juan Bautista to a great location in Gilroy that accommodates a shop, office, and equipment yard for five of the seven employees assigned to Coe. Stop by and see us at 5750 Obata Way, Suite A. But call first (408/848-4006), because we never know when we will be at the office or out in the park.

For example, yesterday I had an opportunity to hike the under-construction Woodchopper-to-Grapevine Trail. Trail construction is being jointly funded by State Parks and by the National Park Service (NPS). The trail parallels the route of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail (1775–76) as they trekked through Coyote Creek Canyon in what is now Henry W. Coe State Park. This new trail will become part of the "retracement" route of the Anza Trail. Grant funding became available from NPS, which is paying for five weeks of hand work by wards from James Boys Ranch. The trail was cut by a 4'-wide mini-bulldozer by park heavy equipment operator Sam Craig, and onsite supervision of the crews is provided by park maintenance staff Ric Carpenter, Rick Perez, and Manuel Ramirez. In only two months, we will have two miles of new trail. If you get a chance, plan a trip to the park to hike this beautiful trail.

Summer and fall used to be the slower times of year, but the times, they are a-changin'. *Bay Area Backroads* produced a very good segment on Coe and aired it initially in March. It was rebroadcast twice in August. This has stimulated interest in and visitation to Coe, with the result that our attendance and revenue have increased greatly. Two major improvements at Coe are the installation of two new water tanks servicing the "ranch" buildings and the recent repaving of the entire headquarters parking and campground areas. Activities this fall will include the beginning of the 16th Volunteer Training Program, another Fall Barbecue (announcements sent out separately from this issue of *The Ponderosa*), a mountain bicycle competitive race, repair of the septic system at Pacheco Camp, development of a Master Trail Plan by the Trail Advisory Committee, and continued submission of grant proposals for raising funds for the visitor center expansion.

As you may have read in the newspapers, California State Parks are facing a serious shortfall in funding for fiscal year 1996–97. Our Department has been working on a variety of scenarios to deal with different levels of cutbacks. Reductions in operating expense funds, temporary help funds, equipment purchases, and even possibly reductions in personnel and closures of parks are being considered. Public support for State Parks is critical. Your support of the Pine Ridge Association and Henry W. Coe State Park is important to us not only locally but statewide. Parks have always been supported by the public, by public funds, and have been viewed as a need of society. Such public funding is becoming a way of the past, with use fees, concessions, leases, and alternative funding sources becoming more the norm. I encourage you to let your elected officials know that you care about the environment and the need to preserve, protect, and maintain public lands for the benefit of today's visitors and for generations to come.

Time to Run for the PRA Board

The Pine Ridge Association will hold its annual election for Board of Directors in December. The terms of three directors expire at the end of this year. Now is the time to prepare your candidate's statement and send it to the Board's Recording Secretary, Kevin Gilmartin, 127 Glenwood Avenue, Woodside, CA 94062.

Any association member may run for the Board. A member may also nominate another PRA member. To do this, send Kevin a short statement explaining why you believe the person would be a good Board member, and he will contact your nominee to ask the person to consider running.

The most important qualification for a Board member is a willingness to attend Board meetings and to participate in carrying out tasks for the association. Meetings typically take place every other month on week nights. The term of office is three years. If a Board member is also a Coe Park volunteer, meetings and board-related activities count toward volunteer hours. If you would like to attend a Board meeting to see what they are like, the next one will be held on Thursday, September 28, in Gilroy at the Coe Sector office starting at 7:30 p.m. Please call PRA Chair Dennis Pinion (408/779-3916) to get a copy of the next meeting's agenda and to obtain instructions on how to reach the meeting location.

We use the special nonprofit bulk-rate mailing permit for sending out association-related materials. However, this means that some members may not receive their newsletters or materials for several weeks after they are mailed. So that the ballots can be distributed (and received by all members) in a timely fashion, it is important that all candidate statements be postmarked on or before **Friday, November 17, 1995.** Please send your statements to Kevin at the address above. (If you plan to nominate someone else, please do so at least two weeks earlier.) Your statement might be a few paragraphs long and might contain information like how long you have been a PRA member, why you became interested in Coe Park, ways that you have served the park or other volunteer activities in which you have benefited the public, any special qualifications or experience that you have, and specific plans that you have for improving the park as a Board member.

If you have any questions about what it would be like to be a Board member or if you would like additional guidance on putting together a candidate statement, please call Kevin at 415/851-7813.

Membership & Contributions

by Lee Dittmann

As of August 21st, we welcomed a number of new members to our organization, bringing the total number of memberships to 324. Thank you all for your support, and welcome to the Pine Ridge Association!

Brian S. Bean, San Francisco
Dr. Margene Bloom-Roza, Gilroy
Thomas Conrad, Morgan Hill
Dave & Patty Flack, Sunnyvale
Nancy Giannetto & Janet King, Gilroy
Ann Watters, San Francisco
Wayne Wyko, San Jose

New Contributors to the Visitor Center Expansion Fund

Will & Margaret Betchart
Mary Brandeau
Dr. Margene Bloom-Roza
Al Heckbert
Donald Kozain
Nancy Lowe
Ann Thalls

The PRA Calendar

Saturday, September 23: **Roadside cleanup at Coyote Creek gate:** Flyer sent under separate cover. Meet at Coyote Creek gate at 9 a.m. Call Kay Robinson (408/848-4006) for information and to sign up.

Saturday, September 23: Join the San Jose Astronomical Association members as they return to view Jupiter and the **celestial splendors above Coe Park.** Call (408/371-1307) for more information.

Thursday, September 28: The next regularly scheduled meeting of the **PRA Board of Directors**, which will be held at the new Coe Sector office in Gilroy. Please call Chair Dennis Pinion (408/779-3916) to obtain more information.

Saturday, September 30: The PRA's annual **Fall Barbecue.** An order form for BBQ tickets was mailed under separate cover; September 23 is the deadline for ticket purchases. The BBQ starts serving lunch at 11:30 a.m. This year, four food choices will be available: steak ($10), chicken ($8), vegetarian ($6), and hotdog ($4). Please call Roberta Wright (408/683-2219) or the park headquarters (408/779-2728) for additional information.

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The Ponderosa is a periodic publication of the Pine Ridge Association. Its mission is to enhance and enrich the public's experience at Henry W. Coe State Park through education and interpretation. Articles and artwork relating to the history, natural history, and management of the park are welcome. Please send submissions to the editors care of Henry W. Coe State Park, P.O. Box 846, Morgan Hill, CA 95038; or call 415/851-7813.

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