The Ponderosa

The Pine Ridge Association Newsletter
Henry W. Coe State Park

Summer 2006

From under My Brim

by Barry Breckling

California Buckeye

June is a great month. Any kid will tell you so. School's out, the days are getting longer, the breezes are warm, and fun is in the air. At Coe Park, June is a lovely time of year for lots of reasons, and for me the blooming of the buckeyes is near the top of the list.

I've always been fond of buckeyes, and I've read about them in several tree books to try to get to know them better, but most books just give you descriptions, like: A large shrub or tree that grows up to 25 feet tall with a broad rounded top; leaves bright green and divided into 5 to 7 leaflets; flowers white to pale rose, borne on an erect, many-flowered thyrse; fruit pear-shaped, enclosing a glossy, brown seed; nectar reportedly poisonous to bees.

I wanted to know more about buckeyes. I wanted to know them as I know people, but not like: Subject 5 foot 10 inches tall, 180 pounds, brown hair, blue eyes, tattoo of mermaid on right forearm. And not like: She graduated Stanford cum laude with a B.S.E.E., has served as a girl scout master for five years, and loves the out-of-doors.

I wanted to get close to buckeyes, and the only way to do that is to spend time with them.

The first time I tried to get to know a valley oak as a friend, I climbed into its lower limbs, settled myself in a hollow, and immediately jumped to the ground when I discovered that ants were crawling all over me. I learned three things in short order: Ants are partial to valley oaks, valley oaks don't seem to mind ants, and I wouldn't make a very good oak tree.

The first time I tried to make friends with a buckeye, things turned out differently. The buckeye I climbed into had a gentle, peaceful nature. Buckeyes have lots of rough surfaces, but the trunks and branches are often liberally adorned with lichens and mosses, and my perch on my newly acquired friend was a moss-covered throne.

I've learned that buckeye leaves are soft and sensitive. When you press an oak leaf to your cheek, the leaf feels warm to your skin, even on a cold morning. When you press a buckeye leaf to your cheek, the leaf is always cool to your skin at first, regardless of the air temperature. But in just a few seconds the warmth of your cheek will warm the leaf.

Several nature books classify buckeyes as shrubs because they often branch out from the base, without a distinct trunk. But I've decided that buckeyes truly are trees. I can't really picture myself perched in a shrub, and if you know me, you

Inside this issue . . .

There are aliens among us!

An unexpected visitor at the Mother's Day Breakfast

Description of the Coe Backcountry Weekend

Invitation to become a uniformed volunteer at Coe

. . . and more!

probably can't either.

Buckeyes are vulnerable to the extremes of wind and sun. They usually live in calm, sheltered spots on cool, north-facing slopes, in protected swales, and under the limbs of other trees. When a stray wind manages to find a buckeye, the whisper of its voice in the buckeye leaves is often muted by the louder chorus it makes as it passes through the over-hanging boughs of nearby oaks and bays.

Some hardier species of trees grow in areas that are frequented by the wind, and when the wind moves through their foliage, it often makes a noticeable, distinctive sound. When the wind travels through the boughs of a valley oak, it makes a deep, strong roar. When it vibrates the needles of a ponderosa pine, it makes a high, cool, modulating whistle. It's not easy to hear the wind in buckeyes, though, because of the tucked away places where they grow. But if you're patient and listen carefully, you may detect the gentle wisp of the wind's voice and sometimes the feather-soft wind chime melodies that breezes make as they flow through a buckeye's delicate leaves.

With their broad, thin, bright green leaves, buckeyes look like trees that belong in the tropics. But they've managed to develop methods of coping with the harsher conditions of temperate climates. In the sheltered areas where they prosper, their fragile leaves are protected from the sun and wind in the spring and early summer. But, to survive the hot, dry days of July and August, they've had to acquire a couple more tricks.

As the days of summer begin to get warmer, the leaflets of the buckeye trees start to fold in the middle so that only the edges are exposed to the direct rays of the sun. As the summer heat intensifies, the leaves turn brown and droopy and finally fall to the ground.

Buckeyes are the only trees in the Bay Area that drop their leaves during the summer. When you hike or drive through buckeye areas in the hotter months of the year, you might think you're seeing pockets of dead or dying trees in the midst of healthy green ones. Don't worry though; it's probably just the buckeyes taking their summer break.

The buckeye got its name from the seed inside its pear-shaped fruit. The large, smooth seed is shiny brown like the eye of a buck, and it has a round spot that resembles the pupil of an eye.

The seeds contain a substance called aesculin that is believed to be toxic to humans; some people have reportedly died from eating the seeds. The seeds are said to be toxic to fish, too. Some books say that Native Americans built small dams in streams to collect pools of fish and that they tossed mashed buckeye seeds into the pools to stupify the fish and collect them for food.

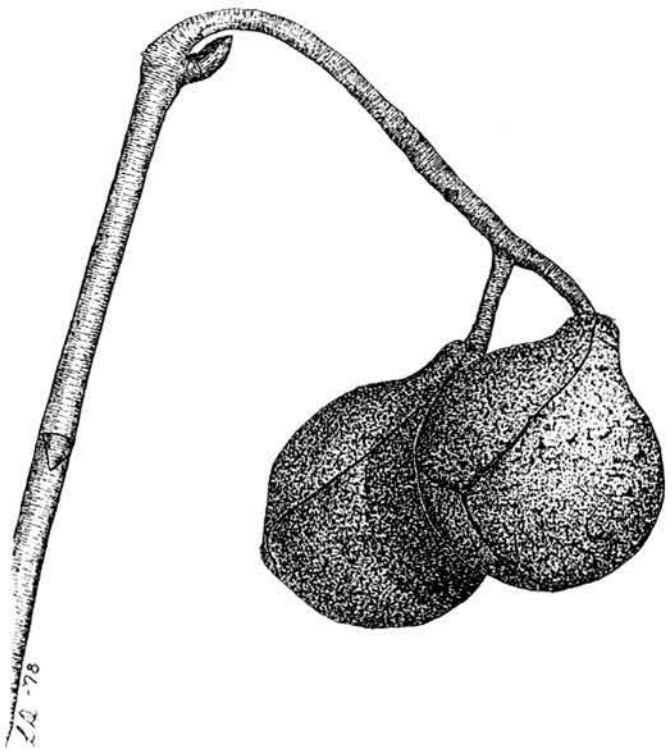
Although buckeyes have seeds that are toxic to some animals, for the most part the trees are generous providers. Ground squirrels eat their seeds and suffer no ill effects. And some books tell us that Native Americans relied on the seeds as an important source of food in years when acorns were scarce, although they had to leach the mashed seeds in water for a long time to remove the toxic aesculin.

Deer relish tender, young buckeye leaves. You can often see a browse line on buckeye foliage that shows how high deer are willing and able to stretch to get at the leaves. One summer, not too long ago, I watched a doe feeding on the leaves of a buckeye tree. She'd reach up, stick out her long, wet tongue, pull a whole leaf into her mouth (five to seven leaflets worth), chew and swallow, and then go for the next one. When she'd eaten all the leaves she could reach stretching her neck up as far up as she could, she reared up on her hind legs, and balanced for a bit to get a few more buckeye morsels.

I believe most of what books say about buckeyes, but I have my doubts about what some books say about buckeyes and bees. Some books claim that the nectar of buckeye blossoms is poisonous to bees. Some specify that European honeybees are poisoned. Maybe that's true of some species of buckeyes, but I don't believe that our California buckeye is anything but a friend to bees. One day I watched a horde of honeybees and lots of their relatives ravenously feeding at the blossoms of a buckeye tree. I searched for dead or ailing bees under the tree and couldn't find a single one. All kinds of insects were dancing around the flowers, including a clear-winged moth in bumblebee disguise. At least a dozen different kinds of butterflies were collecting nectar, and two of the butterflies did a beautiful mating dance on one of the blossoms.

Like the insects, I'm drawn to the gentle buckeye tree with its delicate, bright green foliage and beautiful, candelabra flower clusters. I'm attracted even more powerfully by the perfume of the flowers. The Jepson Manual, the current authority on California plants, describes the flowers as "ill-smelling." Nothing could be further from the truth. The fragrance is deliciously sweet, fleeting, and intimate.

This is a great time of the year to take a walk at Coe Park, especially in the cooler hours of the evening. When you come up, I hope you'll walk slowly, breath in deeply the fragrant air, get a little better acquainted with some of my closest friends, and enjoy all the other blessings of June.



Aliens *Are* Alien

by Ken Hulick

Let's talk about the wide range of plants, animals, and microorganisms that came here from somewhere else. Known as exotics, non-natives, aliens, introduced organisms, or cultivars, people are frequently ambivalent about them. These alien organisms were frequently brought for a specific reason—as ornaments to our gardens, to provide fruits and nuts, to add variety to a depauperate living landscape, to provide a hunting experience enjoyed elsewhere, or to provide food for us.

Many of these organisms have become "naturalized," or so widely distributed and accepted that they will never be removed. But others represent a threat, both long term and short term, to the native vegetation in California, and it may be possible to control them. In various parts of the state, different species are seen as not merely weeds, or unwanted plants or animals, but as serious threats to not only human agricultural activities but to the existence of the natural world as we know it. The worst of these aliens are represented by plants and animals that displace native species or adversely affect economic species, out-competing them because of lack of natural enemies. Examples are numerous—Africanized bees, Mediterranean fruit flies, European wild pig, Italian thistle, Asian clams, and so on. Some of these species have required major efforts by government or industry groups to contain or eliminate them at high cost.

Someone once said that the first step in intelligent tinkering is to save all the parts. Since we are tinkering when we make wide-ranging changes to our natural areas through development and economic activities, it seems advisable to ensure that none of our native species are eliminated in the process. Stopping the loss of native plants from alien species seems to make sense.

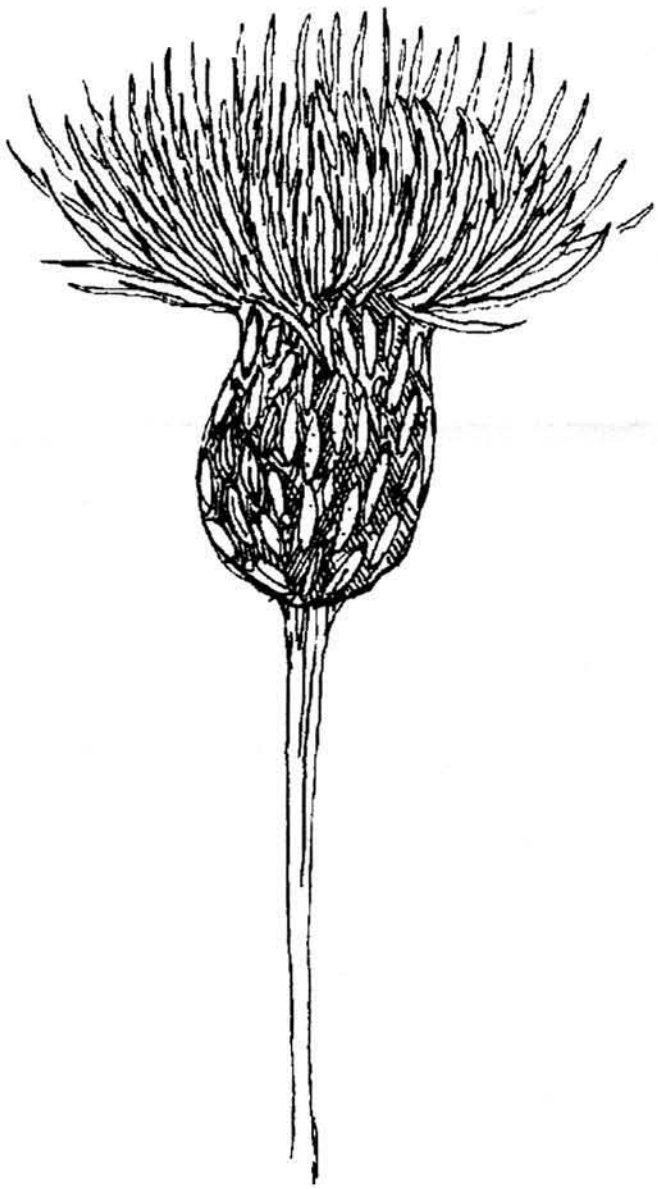
What if these are popular plants, like eucalyptus? Many people enjoy "eucs," as the firefighters call them, but their ability to crowd out many other species and form a monoculture, an area of only eucalyptus, is well documented. But what have we lost? Our beautiful oak woodlands, with deer and wildflowers, can be completely erased by eucalyptus, and these areas will expand unless limited by roads, active removal of the eucalyptus, or other means. The next time you drive to Monterey on Highway 101, look at the area just south of the San Juan Bautista turnoff. It is a complete monoculture of eucalyptus, and it is much more extensive than it appears from the highway. Firefighters fear a fire getting started in such areas, as it can be very difficult and dangerous to suppress.

In many cases we justify retention of these aliens because they have been here so long, or because we love their appearance. But we forget what we may have lost—the integrity of a group of organisms interacting in a true web of life, a vestige of primitive America that tells us how things were hundreds,

maybe thousands, of years ago. And don't forget the pure beauty of our varied California landscapes.

For all these reasons, and for many others, we should view alien organisms as "environmental cancer," subverting the reality of our native plant and animal life. They can be tolerated in our back yards if they aren't likely to spread out into natural areas. But in parks and forests they represent a long-term threat to the biotic stability of these areas that we should not tolerate. Our sense of stewardship should be strong, and intact ecosystems with all of their disparate parts are essential to perpetuation of life as we know it.

Alien species aren't from around here—they don't belong here. Aliens **are** alien.



Park News

by Michael Ferry
Supervising Ranger

Welcome to summer 2006 at Coe Park. At the last writing of this article, it was snowing and raining every other day. While we welcomed the wet weather, little did we realize the problems it was creating on our roads and trails. Just about every trail in the park has downed trees and limbs. Our maintenance staff have been hard at work ever since, clearing the roads first and the trails second. To help the maintenance staff, we will be providing chain saw training to some volunteers and visitor service staff in June. We expect to be clearing trails late into the summer. A big thank-you to our volunteers and park aids who ventured out and inventoried the trails for downed tree problems. I am sure we still have some trails that have not been checked or cleared, so if you see a problem in the park, please call me (408/842-9249) or Randy Neufeld (408/842-9257) so we can get it on the list.

The rain stopped just in time for the Backcountry Weekend and the Mother's Day Breakfast. Boy! We were sweating it out ten days before the Backcountry Weekend, as many predicted a sure rain-out. However the sun gods were with us, and we had a spectacular weekend. Despite the short spring, the wildflower display was plentiful for all to see during the weekend. We estimate that over 800 visitors came into the park for the special event, including two in wheelchairs and a blind person with a Seeing Eye dog. The changes we made from last year were a big success. Backpackers were pleased to be able to come in early on Friday afternoon and get a head start into the backcountry. Traffic coming in Saturday morning was light compared with previous years, most likely due to opening the gates earlier, along with backpackers coming in the previous evening. The campfire program was great fun! There were close to 200 people to watch Ranger Cameron Bowers host the program. There was lots of entertainment from the Boy Scouts who sang songs and performed skits. A new addition to the campfire program was Cowboy Poetry reading. A big Thank You to the steering committee and all the volunteers who worked hard to make this year's event a success. Fun was had by all!

The Mothers Day Breakfast was another great success! The weather was perfect—sunny and warm (the following Sunday it rained!). There were over 350 meals served. All the mothers received complimentary carnations. The food was delicious as usual. The highlight of the day was when a two-foot rattlesnake was found neatly coiled under the preparation table guarding three flats of strawberries. I was called upon to take care of the problem and wasn't sure exactly how I was going to do that. As a small crowd began to circle me, a mild panic began to set in. Suddenly, I was swiftly pushed aside by our new park aide, Mason Hyland, who said "I will take care of that." Before I could say "Mason don't touch that snake,"

Mason had it securely and safely in his hands and was now doing an impromptu interpretive program on rattlesnakes to the now large crowd that had gathered around us. I forgot that Mason was our reptile expert. Mason saved the day for me and the snake. Mason relocated the snake to a safer location away from the special event. Thanks Mason! I also want to thank the breakfast committee for doing a wonderful job taking over for Lee Sims (who had coordinated the event since he first proposed the idea many years ago).

I would like to announce the replacement for Ken Parrish. Congratulations to Eric Griggs. Eric will be living up at Coe HQ where Ken lived and will be starting June 26. Eric comes from three generations of state park employment. Eric is transferring from Chino Hills State Park. We will have more on Eric once he arrives. Welcome Eric!

An update on the Gilroy Hot Springs is that the previous owner, Masaru Seido, is in the process of developing a non-profit organization partnership with state parks with the idea of securing funding to open and operate the facility. This will take some time, but the process is under way.

I hope all of you have a safe and wonderful summer.

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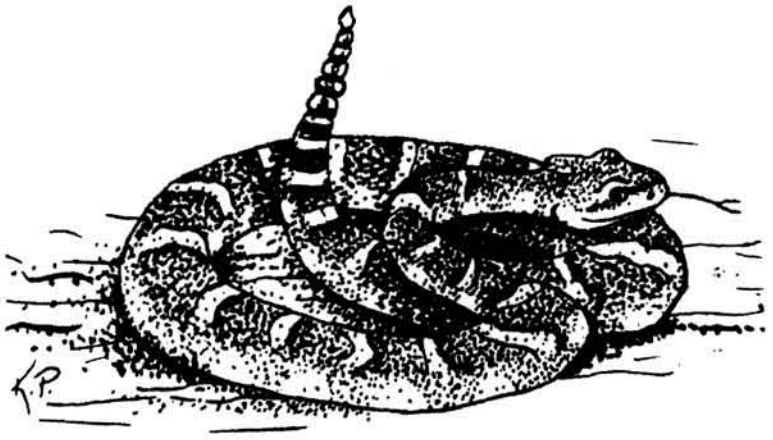


Hurray for Coe Backcountry Weekend!

by Stan Soles

Hurray for Mother Nature! Hurray for Coe Backcountry Weekend! Hurray to everybody involved who made it all possible!

It was my first Backcountry Weekend and let me tell you—great weather, a beautiful wildflower display, people having fun, that potluck, the campfire with great music, skits, and poetry, mini-burros—it just does not get any better. Well, it turns out that it did get better. Did you get to the Dutch oven demonstration? Wow! Chicken dumplings, ice cream made on the spot, and pear dump cake. I want to nominate Fitz Fitzharris and everybody else involved for a Nobel Prize!

I was fortunate to have arranged time away from the ol' salt mine and walked to the Orestimba Corral from the Visitor Center (started on Thursday). Then on Sunday, I headed north to Pinto Creek to make a loop back to the Visitor Center. A funny thing happened on the way north. After walking for a while on the Orestimba Creek Road, I decided to stop for a nibble and maybe a short snooze. I saw a nice blue oak a short ways off the road and went over and sat in its shade. Time passed. I watched hikers, bikers, and folks with llamas returning from their weekend festivities. My eyes grew heavy. Just as I was about to doze, I was startled by the sudden appearance of a truck coming down the road from my left. It was enveloped in a cloud of dust and was moving with a sense of urgency. At that exact same moment (really) from my right a group of bikers escorting a person on foot came into view. I noticed the pedestrian had his left arm wrapped up and one of the bikers was a uniformed volunteer (Chris Turner). Ah-ha! The truck stopped. Rita Gormley and Jim Mason piled out and went to work. I was witness to Swiss Precision. Turns out the young fellow was returning from the weekend at Paradise Lake with dad and did an "El Rollo" over the handlebars. Chris Turner came upon the scene while on bike patrol and got things in order pronto. Great work, folks! In spite of the injury, the young man seemed to be doing well and had the good sense to save the nasty business for the end of the trip. Speedy recovery.

The rest of my trek was great. A beautiful walk up Pinto Creek, over the Mt. Stakes Trail to Red Creek, then over Bear Mountain, through the Narrows, and back to the Visitor Center. And, oh yes, I did take the waters at Barry's Bathtub. Now maybe it's just my imagination, but I think my hair is growing back in. I'm planning on doing something similar next year. Give me a yoo-hoo, and let's cook something up.

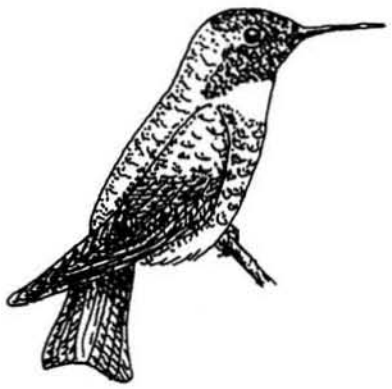
An Invitation to Join the Uniformed Volunteer Program

Would you like to learn more about Henry W. Coe State Park—its fascinating history, interesting animals, beautiful wildflowers, singing birds? Would you like to share your knowledge with park visitors? Then consider joining approximately 140 others who donate some of their time to assist Coe Park visitors. Consider becoming a uniformed volunteer.

Uniformed volunteers add to the park visitor's knowledge, interest, enjoyment, and safety by assisting regular park employees through interpretation, operating the visitor center, patrolling the park trails, and carrying out special projects. Uniformed volunteers receive free admission to Coe Park and the other parks in the district and, more importantly, receive the satisfaction derived from doing a job well and providing a necessary service to the public and to the park. In addition, uniformed volunteers find that the initial training and the continuing workshops and classes on topics such as wildflowers, bird identification, tracking, and how to plan an interpretive program are of significant value.

There is a series of classes each fall for all new uniformed volunteers. Topics in the next classes include geology, geography, climate, ecosystems, plants, animals, humans in the park, history of the park, being a volunteer, dealing with the public, interpretive techniques, and first aid. The training will be held at the park on eight weekend days from September 9, 2006, through the beginning of December. Some of the training will occur during hikes and a camp-out in the park. Graduation will be held during the annual meeting of the PRA on February 3, 2007.

Applications are available now. August 12 is the deadline for receipt of applications. Applicants will receive a telephone call to set up a short interview, which will be on August 17, 19, or 20 at park headquarters. If you have any questions or if you would like to obtain an application, call the park at 408/779-2728, or visit our web site at *www.CoePark.org*.



August 5–6: Burra-Burra Moonlight-Daylight Hike-Hike

by Bill Gingras

The Burra-Burra Moonlight-Daylight Hike-Hike will take place this year on the weekend of August 5 and 6.

The B-B M-D H-H has been a PRA tradition for many years, and takes place in the backcountry of Henry Coe State Park. Attendees of the event can arrive when they want on Saturday, August 5, and spend the afternoon hiking or just relaxing. After dinner, when the sun goes down and the moon rises, we set out on a hike to Burra-Burra peak where we can listen to the night sounds and view what the surrounding landscape looks like under a full moon. You'll be amazed at the dramatic moonlit scene around you, and be as equally amazed by the constant symphony that fills the air, courtesy of the Coe nightlife. The following morning, we repeat the hike and observe the differences between the night sounds and scenes and those in the daytime.

A few details are as follows: Plan to arrive on August 5 after 1 p.m. but no later than 8:30 p.m. Camping for this event is recommended (at the Pacheco Creek crossing). If you plan to camp, bring your own food (dinner, breakfast, and snacks), drinking water, camping gear, and a chair. Propane-fired barbecue grills will be available.

You must sign up in order to gain access to the backcountry. The number of participants might be limited, so sign up soon. **Give me a call at 408/227-5424 (home) or via e-mail at** *bgingras@sbcglobal.net* for more information or to sign up, and I will contact you with final details as the weekend draws near.

TFest: Saturday, October 7, 2006

by Rick Leonard

It's time to start thinking about the fall TarantulaFest. The annual barbecue offers a choice of Santa Maria steak, marinated chicken, gardenburgers, or hotdogs. Each meal includes beans (vegetarian or regular), grilled bread, salad, and watermelon. Soda, beer, and wine will be available at nominal prices.

The annual raffle to benefit the Visitor Center Expansion Fund promises to have some wonderful prizes. You will be receiving more details about the prizes and raffle tickets in a separate mailing.

The day will be jam packed with interesting events. Park volunteers will lead several Tarantula Walks. The Interpretive Center will be open and filled with interesting exhibits and information. Tarantulas, both native and exotic, will be on display. Are you ready for a photo with a tarantula on your

head or shoulder? Snakes, children's art activities, and Smokey the Bear are among some of the other interesting options. While you are at the park, take a walk on one of the many beautiful trails.

Again we are fortunate to have the Tarantula Band to entertain us with a lively and fun selection of music. An order form will be available on the park website in August. Additional information? Contact me at *dadoco7@aol.com.*

Summer Programs

From June through September, evening programs will be held at park headquarters at 8 p.m. on most Saturdays. There will also be two programs during the day. The first is a backpacking class on June 10. The second is a moonlight horse ride on September 9. To check the program schedule and get more details about the summer programs, check the park's website at *www.CoePark.org.*

New Members through April

by Margaret Mary McBride

We are pleased to welcome the **new members** listed below. Thank you for your support, and welcome to the Pine Ridge Association!

Margaret Barnett, San Martin
Nancy Christensen, San Jose
Cal and Carla Cornwell, Sunnyvale
Lauren Crux, Santa Cruz
Solveig Dimon, San Francisco
Damien Filiatrault, San Francisco
Sean Fitzharris, Hollister
Tom Givnish, Madison, WI
Donna Kirchner, Morgan Hill
Daniel Martinez, San Jose
Kim Nevitt, Morgan Hill
Mansur Nur, Union City
Brad Richards Family, Morgan Hill
Dean Silvers, Santa Cruz
Jiten Vaidyn, Sunnyvale

We need your help to keep our membership list current and accurate. If you are a paid member, your *Ponderosa* mailing label includes an expiration date. (No expiration date for life members and organizations.) If you have any questions regarding your membership or if you would like to update your address, please contact us.

E-mail: PRA@CoePark.org
Snail mail: 9100 East Dunne Ave., Morgan Hill, CA 95037
Fax: 408/778-5749
Phone: 408/779-2728

PRA Calendar

Saturday, August 5 & Sunday, August 6: **Burra Burra Hike weekend.** See article on page 6 for more information and to sign up for the weekend.

Saturday, August 12: **Deadline to submit applications to become a Uniformed Volunteer.** Uniformed Volunteers play an important role in staffing the Visitor Center and providing interpretive programs to the public. Please see article on page 6 for more information about the Uniformed Volunteer Program. For information about what a Uniformed Volunteer does and to download an application, please check out this link on the Coe Park website: *http://www.CoePark.org/volprogram.html.*

August 17, 19, and 20: **Interviews to become Uniformed Volunteers.** Please see the article on page 6 for more information about the interviews.

Saturday and Sunday, August 26 and 27: **Springs Committee Work Weekend.** Join the Springs Committee and help maintain the springs in the park. For more information and to sign up, please contact Ruby Domino (408/779-4664).

Saturday, October 7: **Tenth Annual Fall TarantulaFest and Barbecue.** Please see the article on page 6 and contact Rick Leonard (408/226-3100) for more information.

Saturday and Sunday, October 21 and 22: **Springs Committee Work Weekend.** Join the Springs Committee and help maintain the springs in the park. For more information and to sign up, please contact Ruby Domino (408/779-4664).

Saturday, October 28: **Fall Trail Day.** Help maintain the trails at Coe Park. No previous experience necessary. For more information and to sign up, contact Ranger Cameron Bowers (*CBowe@parks.ca.gov*) or contact the Coe Park Visitor Center (408/779-2728). The website describes what a typical trail day is like: *http://www.CoePark.org/trailwork.html.*

Saturday, November 25: **PRA Coe Thanksgiving Saturday.** Celebrate Thanksgiving Saturday at Coe Park. Bring a dish and drinks to share. Hors d'oeuvres will be served starting around 4 p.m. This is always a fun event, rain or shine. Please call the Coe Park Visitor Center for more information and to sign up (408/779-2728).

Don't forget!
The Saturday evening programs held at the Coe Park Visitor Center continue through September.

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The Ponderosa is a publication of the Pine Ridge Association with approximately five issues per year. The PRA's mission is to enhance and enrich the public's experience at Henry Coe State Park through education and interpretation. Articles and artwork relating to the natural history, history, and management of the park are welcome. Please send submissions to the editors at 127 Glenwood Avenue, Woodside, CA 94062-3512; or call 650/851-7813.

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