

Native Flora and Fauna Facts with SFC

Sierra Foothill Conservancy docents will take us on a journey of discovery about native flora and fauna in this new Mountain Press column. The docents are excited to share their knowledge with the community, and we are excited to have them! First up: Coyotes.

The Coyotes Among Us

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If you, like most foothill folk, often hear the yips and barks of coyotes nearby, you might have a den full of pups closer than you think. Coyotes mate in January and February, with the pups making their appearance in March or April. If you're lucky, you may have seen several coyotes together recently, but don't think that they "pack" like wolves to bring down prey. You're likely seeing the mating pair plus a couple of their offspring from last year's mating season who stuck around to help mom and dad raise the pups. In some areas, like Yellowstone, coyotes do form packs to hunt large prey, but most coyotes eat smaller animals and even insects, wild berries and seeds, so there is no need for them to pack from the diet perspective.

Coyote territories, best described as the area a coyote will defend against other coyotes, are generally hexagonal. Their natal dens are located in the most defensible position, often near the middle of the territory. Transient coyotes—those looking for a mate—usually exist along the borders of established territories.

The Native Peoples used to call the coyote the Trickster, the Song Dog and the Medicine Wolf. The Trickster played a large role in Native storytelling often as a sacred being with special powers. In Todd Wilkinson's wonderful book "Track of the Coyote," the author quotes in one of these stories: "In the beginning before there was earth or sky, darkness or sunlight,

the Creator fashioned a mischievous four-legged animal out of clay and called it coyote." In fact, the coyote evolved in what is now the American southwest. The name, originating as "Coyotl" in the Aztec language, evolved into coyote during the interactions between the Native Peoples and Spaniards according to Dan Flores's well researched book, "Coyote America". Biologists call the coyote *Canis latrans*. The *Canis* genus also includes wolves and domestic dogs.

One of the questions I get most often during the "Coyote Talk" I give while leading hikes on the Sierra Foothill Conservancy Nature Preserves is, "Are coyotes dangerous?" There are only two confirmed cases of fatal attacks on humans by coyotes in U.S. history; this compares to an average of forty fatal attacks on humans every single year by domestic dogs in the U.S.

Studies show that coyote populations increase in response to human hunting and poisoning because they begin producing larger litters. We refer to the howls, yips and barks coming from multiple locations as "roll call". Female coyotes actually produce more reproduction hormones when fewer coyotes are heard at roll call. Left alone, coyotes will reproduce only to the carrying capacity of the ecosystem.

Coyotes help maintain the predator-prey balance. As an example, without coyotes, the population of mesopredators such as raccoons, opossum and fox would increase, throwing off the balance of critters lower on the food chain. We now know of many instances where the



(Above) A female with her pups. (Below) A coyote caught in mid-air pounce.



removal of predators such as coyote, wolf and mountain lion has dramatically damaged the environment. Without enough predators to keep browsers and grazers such as deer, elk and sheep in check, overbrowsing and overgrazing can lead to serious erosion, increased sediment in streams and even loss of native plant species. Just having to worry about a predator in the area helps preserve the environment because these herbivores will keep moving instead of overgrazing an individual area, something we call "the

ecology of fear."

Those of us of a certain age remember Wiley E. Coyote and the Roadrunner cartoons. Things don't turn in favor of the real-life roadrunner very often, whose top speed is about half the coyote's full sprint of forty miles per hour. These thirty-pound predators are efficient hunters and adaptable survivors with no need for a strap-on rocket from the Acme Company that Wiley E. Coyote used to propel himself off a cliff before landing in a cloud of dust.

Fresno Chaffee Zoo mourns the death of orangutan Sara

Officials at Fresno Chaffee Zoo are saddened to announce the death of Sara, a 49-year-old Sumatran orangutan who arrived at the zoo in 2001. Sara was humanely euthanized after the discovery of metastatic cancer in her liver, intestines and lymph nodes. She had well-surpassed the median life expectancy of female Sumatran orangutans, which is approximately 26 years.

Sara was good with babies and was well known for her skill at helping to raise the babies of other orangutans. She was mother to Labu, born in 2010, and acted as a surrogate mother to Siabu, a 31-year-old female that came to Fresno Chaffee Zoo with her. Zookeepers recall that Sara enjoyed playing hand games with them. Other favorites of hers included ChapStick, tomatoes, and men with beards.

In addition to Siabu and Labu, the zoo is home to three other orangutans.



Sara mothering a younger orangutan at Fresno Chaffee Zoo.

"The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today." — Franklin D. Roosevelt

Welcome home

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to arrive, participants were greeted below the staging area by an excited Claudine Rix. As a "thank you," she distributed homemade cookies wrapped in patriotic packaging and directed well-wishers to further up the roadway.

Even though the afternoon was misty, it could not dampen enthusiasm that surrounded this event. American flags were on display as well as hand-crafted signs, balloons, and congratulatory messages painted on windows. Approximately 20 cars holding numerous family members, friends and neighbors anxiously awaited Rix's arrival.

As she approached the final left turn to her home, Rix was greeted by progressive horn honking and cheers.

She was overwhelmed by the show of support. As she slowly inched closer to home she graciously received messages of congratulations, and thanked those who made her welcome home a special surprise.

The entire Schlaefer family—Mark and Connie, along with daughters Abigail and May—were on site to welcome Rix home. Connie Schlaefer feels particularly proud of Rix, and they share a couple of very important connections. Both are proud Sierra High School graduates, and now both are alumnae of the United States Air Force Academy.

The family watched with pride as Rix made her way, with distinction, through the rigorous program which includes academics, athletics, and leadership. "Seeing that kind of success from our small community and schools is inspiring for all of us," Schlaefer shared.



Anticipation, patriotism and pride were on display as SUSD board members, families, and friends took part in the celebration. About 20 cars lined the approach to Rix's home. CHENEY PHOTO