

A BEAUTIFUL EVENING TO REMEMBER

by Michael Marchiano

Friday, July 8, 2012

As the sun set and a light wind blew through the valley oaks, five of us gathered in the Mitchell Canyon parking lot for a leisurely evening hike. We were greeted by the sounds of field crickets as we crossed the gate. We headed up Mitchell Canyon Road observing and listening to the last birds of the day heading for roosting spots or singing their night-time serenade. An acorn woodpecker was tapping away at the top of one of the “pantry” trees, juncos and a titmouse flitted among the branches



Black Point at Sunset • Ray Mengel

of live oaks, blue oaks, and gray pines. Starlings were finishing an insect meal at the top of another snag. A black-headed grosbeak was singing its heart out in one of the oaks, and a turkey vulture soared overhead as many springtime insects buzzed through the air.

Most of the spring wildflowers along the trail had disappeared. The wild oat grasses had turned golden in the evening light. The most alluring late spring flowers were the delicate white “lilies” of the wavyleaf soap plant. These appeared to dance on the end of their thread-like stems. In the shaded areas were remnants of elegant clarkia flowers, and Ithuriel’s spear still bloomed among the grasses.

What creatures would we see or hear as the sunlight dimmed and the sky darkened? This question would only be answered by what lay ahead of us.

As we continued our twilight hike, we turned at the intersection of Mitchell Canyon Road and Black Point Trail and then turned onto Globe Lily Trail. Along the chaparral section of the trail, chemise was in full white bloom, and the pale pink-colored mallow with its light gray-green leaves and stems dotted our way. The trail itself was coming alive with harvester ants, picking up tiny seeds and carrying them into their underground burrows.

Along the trail, we found numerous tarantula burrows. As we peered into them using our flashlights, we could see the velvety spider sitting at the entrance of its home waiting for that unsuspecting prey to wander by and become an evening meal.

We reached Red Road and, in the dim glow of the darkening sky, bats could be seen swooping overhead, soaring and turning and chasing the hundreds of flying moths, mosquitoes, gnats, lacewings, and other airborne arthropods. Many species of bats inhabit the canyons of Mount Diablo, all of them insectivores. In flight, it is all but impossible to tell one species from another, but at least one of the bats was twice the size of the others, and we believed it to be a big brown bat, one of the largest bats in our area.

As the night darkened, I took out a small black light flashlight and shined it into a pile of downed tree branches. There scurrying among the debris was a small scorpion, glowing in the ultraviolet rays.

Another tiny night hunter was on the prowl. The pathways were also littered with Eleodes beetles, those slow-moving black stink beetles that point their tail ends up in the air whenever they feel threatened.

As we left Red Road and returned to Mitchell Canyon Road to head back, we picked up the bright shining eyes of two other night-time wanderers. Although we could not make out the creatures (except for the eyes, and they disappeared into the heavy brush immediately), we believe the first was a coyote and the second a deer.

One more time on the way back I took out my black light as we neared a rocky outcrop, and again we were all pleasantly surprised with at least a half-dozen scorpions glowing among the rocks.

On our final approach to the visitor center, we had the pleasure of seeing a western toad hop across our path and a large Jerusalem cricket (potato bug) run in circles on the path after we shined our light on it.

Many wonderful sights greeted us on this night-time hike, and yet many we expected eluded us. We did not hear the coyotes howl; we did not hear or see an owl; poorwills did not call; glow worms were not seen; and no snakes were slithering about. Chorus frogs were not heard, and no bobcats were seen. Who knows what will await us next time... Only by completing the adventure will we unlock a tiny bit of Mother Nature's treasures. We hope to see some new adventures on our next night hike!

Michael's hikes are sponsored by Mount Diablo Interpretive Association (MDIA), the nonprofit, all-volunteer cooperative association that provides interpretive and other support activities for Mount Diablo State Park. Email mmarchiano@gmail.com. For more hikes and information, go to the Events Calendar at mdia.org.