

Fall 2008

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Thank You

Our thanks to Mr. and Mrs. T. J. Nightengale for their generous donation of \$500 to the Nature Center in memory of their son Gary.

Gary's inspirational leadership is always in our hearts as we carry on his lifelong work of sharing nature with children.

Oak Grove Docent Council

The Dripping Faucet

Native Skills : Fire Making

Fire making was one of the most important skills that the native people of California (or anywhere) had to know. It was the difference between cold food and cold body or hot food and being warm and comfortable.

In California the hand drill was the method used to make fire. It required two pieces of wood, one was the hearth board and the other the drill. And not just any piece of wood will do. The wood had to be very dry. One of the pieces is usually of a softer wood than the other. This is because the softer wood will release particles of itself as it rubs on the harder wood. These particles are

what will eventually catch fire from the heat generated by the friction. And that heat is considerable, well over 800 degrees Fahrenheit to get that "spark". Some of the woods used include willow, elderberry, mule fat, cottonwood, buckeye, arrow weed, and cedar.

The hearth board was usually from two to several inches wide and about one inch or slightly less thick. A shallow hole or depression was carved into the board very near the edge and about the diameter of the drill piece, and a channel or slot was cut from the edge of the board into the hole. This slot allowed the "spark" to

travel out of the hole and into the kindling that was placed under the edge of the hearth board.

The drill piece was between one and two and a half feet long and about one half inch in diameter. The thicker end of the drill was rounded slightly—continued p-2



Hearth board, drill and kindling of a typical Native American fire starting kit.

by James Rexroth**Special Focus—the Ringtail**

The Ringtail (*Bassariscus astutus*) is in the same family as Raccoons and Coatis. Also known as the Miner's Cat, Civet Cat and Cacomistle, Ringtails can be found throughout most of California, east to Texas and south throughout Mexico and Baja. Found in a variety of habitats, they seem to prefer chaparral, rocky hillsides and riparian areas. Due to the destruction of

riparian habitat in the central valley they are no longer found in this area. Dens are made in rock crevices, boulder piles, underground cavities or hollow trees. Breeding usually starts in March with kits, usually 3 or 4, born in May or June. Males assist the females in raising the young and in late fall or early winter, when the juveniles are able to fend for themselves, the family group

breaks up. Their diet consists of an assortment of small animals, acorns, fruits and berries. Ringtails are unique in having retractable claws and walking on their toes. Other members of the Family Procyonidae have erect claws and walk on the soles of their feet (like us). Ringtails are very agile and can leap like squirrels. Their sharp claws allow them to climb trees with ease.



A Monarch laying eggs on a young milkweed. Unfortunately not at our site. But hopefully soon.

Monarch Update

I think we spotted two Monarchs (or maybe only one twice) flitting about the milkweed in the Native Plant Garden this summer. Not the myriads we had hoped for ... but perhaps a small sampling of what next year's attendance will be? Martha Mallery

Our new Docents



Tim Camuti joins us as a weekend staffer at the Nature Center.



Darren Gillis is volunteering to help with staffing, tours and projects.



Native Skills : Fire Making continued

to fit the hole in the hearth board.

The action used to generate the heat was to place the drill into the hole on the hearth board and grasp it between the open palms and rotate it back and forth while applying downward pressure. As the drill rotated, the hands would travel down its length. It was important to maintain the contact of the drill tip with the hole in the hearth. This was done by grasping the drill with one hand as they neared the bottom, moving the other to the top of the drill again and holding it as the first hand was moved back to the top also. With practice this can be done rapidly, minimizing the loss of heat from the brief stop. As the

first signs of smoke appeared the speed was increased to raise the temperature quickly and get the "spark" or ember to form and fall into the kindling or tinder.

Once they got the "spark" to fall into the tinder, they had to be quick and careful in turning it into a flame. The tinder, usually dried grass, moss, or other fine fibrous material, sometimes with a small amount of well rotted wood, was picked up quickly and carefully blown on to get the "spark" to expand into the other materials. As the smoke increased the person would blow on the tinder a little harder and so on until it burst into flame.

Once the tinder was aflame, it was placed in the fire pit and small twigs would be placed over it. As these caught fire, larger and larger sticks would be added until they had a good blaze going.

Since fire making was hard work, fires were rarely allowed to go out. If they had to let it die down, they would cover the hot coals with ash, which slowed down how fast the coals went out and usually allowed them to restart the fire several hours later without having to 'make fire' again. And if they had to move from one place to another, they would bundle a large, hot coal in ash, wrap it in leaves or hide, and carry it to the next encampment and start their fires from that.

Meet Our New Docents

We want to welcome our new docents to the Nature Center family and provide our current members and supporters with a brief introduction.

Tim Camuti's interest in science brought him from Sacramento to Stockton where he earned his undergraduate degree in biology from U.O.P. Before settling in his current position as a middle school science teacher in Tracy, Tim served for 2 1/2 years in the Peace Corps in Guyana. He describes his experience as a "frontier ecotour" where he lived among small family farmers, teach-

ing chemistry, reading and life skills to the people. Tim's science expertise and knowledge of early California history will be greatly appreciated at the Nature Center. When he's not out hiking or kayaking, he'll be joining us as a weekend staffer.

Darren Gillis is a retired steel worker who is interested in the outdoors. "I've caught a lot of fish in this pond, the best being a 10 pound catfish." Darren is looking forward to his time volunteering to help kids (of all ages) to become aware of the things around them in this area. Nancy Shephard received her undergraduate degree from U.C. Berkeley during what she describes as "those wonderful

and tumultuous mid-1960's." She earned her teaching credential from U.O.P., raised a son who now lives in the Bay Area, and taught elementary school for Stockton Unified for many years. Nancy recently retired from teaching but maintains an active interest in community volunteerism and international travel. We are most fortunate that she is finding time to share her extensive experience by leading school tours and helping with Nature Center staffing.

Nancy Shephard and her granddaughters enjoying a visit to the Nature Center.



Left: Wayne Earthman cutting tules. **Center:** Delta College students Tekhour Thy and Hung Phan laying tules out to dry. **Right:** James starting to lay out the smaller tule bundles and support rod for the first of the large tule bundles.

James and Delta student Joshua Sinclair tying up the first large tule bundle.

“It Floats!”

That was the opinion of three of the four intrepid paddlers who took turns venturing onto the lake in our first tule boat, Scirpus I. Comments ranged from “It’s a bit tippy” to “So quiet and peaceful on the water” to “My seat’s wet” as Tim Camuti, Pamela Reyes and I returned to shore from our short voyages. The other paddler was tipped into the murky gray waters up to his chest and voiced a different opinion. “D@%*! There are leeches in the lake, they’re all over my feet.” That comment came from James Rexroth, the man responsible for this whole project. James had attended a tule boat building class in Marin, and he produced an inspiring slide show detailing

construction of their 16 foot craft. “We can do that,” I thought. I begged Judy Downer, her friend Wayne Earthman, and Delta College students, Tekhour Thy and Hung Phan to go out with me to Honker Cut and harvest tules. Up and down the riprap we climbed, hacking tules from the edge of the water and loading them into my car. After a couple of hours we returned to the Nature Center with around 500. While the tules lay in the sun drying, James collected another large batch, bringing our total close to 1,000. On a Saturday morning a few weeks later construction began when James showed us how to make little tule bundles that he would later make into three large bun-

dles that would be tied together for one boat. Joshua Sinclair from Delta College gave James a hand, and Tim Camuti and David Marraccini worked most of the afternoon. By 4 p.m. we were ready to go. The guys hauled our homemade craft over to the boathouse where it garnered wide-eyed attention as it made its maiden voyage amid bright orange paddle boats and oversized swans. * * * * * Three successful voyages out of four wasn’t bad, we later decided, but hopefully next year we’ll add another, larger, sturdier boat to the fleet. For those interested in braving the murky waters, James will send out an e-mail notice of the next sailing date sometime in October. Hope to see you then!

by Martha Mallory



David Marraccini and James putting the finishing touches on the tule boat.



Above: James smiling as he prepares to enter the tule boat, which sank under him. **Below left:** Tim Camuti paddles off into Nature Center history. **Below right:** Pamela Reyes returning from a trip around the lake.



President's Message

I am announcing that our upcoming elections will be held on December 2nd, 2008. Officers to be elected are : President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and Recorder. Also to be elected are At-Large Board Members who usually fill Committee Chairs: Animal Care, Communications/Newsletter, Education, Membership, Native Plants and Publicity. If you're interested in filling any of these positions, please call 953-8814, and leave me a message and I'll forward your thoughts to the nominating committee.

David Marraccini—President

Dates to remember:

October 7th, 6:30 PM—
OGDC Board meeting at Nature Center. All welcome.

October 12th, 8:30 AM—
Oak Grove Park Bird Census. Volunteers admitted free. All levels of experience welcome.

October 15th, 9:00 AM—
School Tour, Brookside Elementary. Call 953-8814 if you would like to assist.

October 17th, 7:00 PM—
Nature Nights, Dr. Greg Anderson, PhD from UOP will present

“Habitat Restoration along the Calaveras River.” Don't miss it.

October 23rd, 9:00 AM—
School Tour, Podesta Ranch. Call 953-8814 if you would like to assist.

October 24th, 9:00 AM—
School Tour, Wagner Holt. Call 953-8814 if you would like to assist.

November 4th, 6:30 PM—
OGDC Board meeting at Nature Center. All welcome.

November 7—9th—
Lodi Crane Festival. We will have a booth at the festival and if you can help staff it please call 953-8814.

November 9th, 8:30 AM—
Oak Grove Park Bird Census. Volunteers admitted free. All levels of experience welcome.

Additional activities and events will be coming up. Check the website or call (209) 953-8814 for more information.

OAK GROVE NATURE CENTER AND DOCENT COUNCIL

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**Committed to preserving the natural environment
of the Oak Grove and educating others to the
values of continuing such preservation.**

