

Valley Wilds

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Watch Your Step

Here in Sycamore Grove, we have several types of snakes, ranging in size from quite small to as long as seven feet. As the weather warms up, we will see them more often. That's because, being cold-blooded, snakes need to get warmed

by the sun, and one of their favorite places to sunbathe is on open trails. Look out for them as you walk, and be careful where you sit.

Snakes may frighten park visitors, but they are getting a bad rap. Many snakes are important in controlling rodent populations. Of the many snakes we have, we will focus here on the three types most commonly seen in Sycamore Grove Park.

Gopher Snake (*Pituophis catenifer*)

Gopher snakes are very common, and are often seen basking in the sun. Adult gopher snakes can

grow up to seven feet in length! Though they may vary in color, ours typically are tan or bronze with a black spotted pattern along the back from head to tail. Being diurnal, they prefer to hunt during the day. Gopher snakes, like many types of snake, eat rodents such as mice, squirrels, and voles.

The gopher snake is non-venomous, but it can act like one of our poisonous snakes by coiling up, flattening its head, and even shaking its tail against brush to make a sound. When exhibiting these behaviors, the gopher snake could easily be mistaken for a...

Western Rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*)

This native Californian snake is the only potentially dangerous snake at Sycamore Grove. The size of this species varies depending on the region where it lives. Sycamore Grove rattlesnakes are usually not much longer than four feet.

They eat a large variety of prey, from small birds or bird eggs to squirrels and, if they get the chance, even small rabbits. They hunt by slinking along and

By Ranger Danny Haberman



Note the differences in head shape of the rattlesnake (banner) and the gopher snake (inset). Photos by Glen Florey.

sneaking up on prey, which they bite in order to inject venom. The rattlesnake then unhinges its jaw and swallows the creature whole.

When threatened or sensing danger to themselves, rattlesnakes coil up and shake the rattles on their tails, creating a loud, fierce sound. This is a warning that announces, "I am dangerous, keep back."

The superficial resemblance of rattlesnakes to gopher snakes causes confusion, especially since gopher snakes are known to shake their tails in leaves to make rattling sounds. Here are some tips to tell one from the other:

- The rattlesnake has more girth, that is, it has a much thicker body than the gopher snake.
- The gopher snake can flatten

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Livermore Area Recreation
and Park District

4444 East Ave. Livermore, CA 94550
www.larpd.org
Ranger Office: 925.960.2400

Ranger-Led Programs

Experience nature and history in a special way. Programs are generally 1 - 2 hours in length. A \$3 donation is requested. A \$7 parking fee is charged at Sycamore Grove Park.



Quick Look:

HPHP: Urban Wildflowers	Saturday, June 2	3:00 pm
Evening Bird Walk	Saturday, June 9	6:00 pm
Creek Adventure	Sunday, June 17	2:00 pm
Ants	Sunday, June 24	2:00 pm
Pond Play Time	Tuesday, June 26	10:00 am
Beat the Heat Hike (RSVP)	Saturday, June 30	8:00 am

Healthy Parks, Healthy People:

Urban Wildflower Walk

Saturday, June 2 3:00 pm

Come learn about the wildflowers that grow right here in Livermore! We will take a slow-paced one-mile (round trip) walk to the Granada Native Garden on the Arroyo Trail and look for flowers and plants along the way. Meet at Mocho Park near the play structure.

Naturalist Heather Day Mocho Park (1130 Mocho St.)

Evening Bird Walk

Saturday, June 9 6:00 pm

This will be an easy 2-mile walk through the nature area to see what birds may be out in the evening. Wear sturdy shoes and bring water. We'll have binoculars for you to borrow, or you can bring your own. Please call (925) 960-2400 for directions to the nature area entrance if you haven't been there before.

Ranger Vickie Eggert Sycamore Grove Park, Nature Area Entrance

Creek Adventure

Sunday, June 17 2:00 pm

Let's go for a walk IN the creek! We will begin at the most downstream spot in the park and work our way upstream. Ages 6 and up, please. Wear clothes and shoes that can get wet and perhaps leave a dry set in your vehicle to change into.

Ranger Amy Wolitzer Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Road Entrance (1051 Wetmore Road)

Ants

Sunday, June 24 2:00 pm

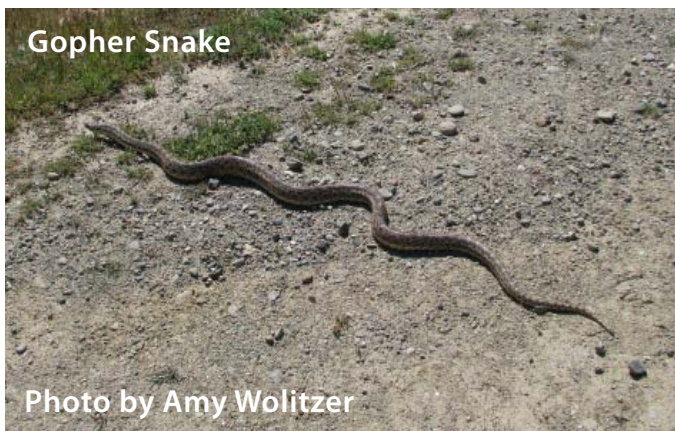
Their strength is legendary, as is their ability to ruin a picnic or raid the kitchen pantry. Ants are amazing insects that are found all over the world. Some are hunters, some are gatherers, and some are farmers. Join us today to look into the life of these little critters and explore some of the different species from around the world. Please call (925) 960-2400 for directions to the reservable picnic area if you haven't been there before.

Ranger Dawn Soles Sycamore Grove Park, Reservable Picnic Area

Watch Your Step (Continued)

its head only temporarily, while the rattlesnake has a permanently flat diamond-shaped head that doesn't change (see banner photo).

- Both snakes have similar patterns along their backs. However, the gopher snake's body narrows almost to a point. The tail end of a rattlesnake is blunt and wide.
- A gopher snake has no rattles – the end of its tail is a narrow point. But just because you don't see a rattle don't assume it's not a rattlesnake - the rattles on a rattlesnake may or may not be visible, as they sometimes break off.



Rattlesnakes are predators, but they also serve as prey for animals such as hawks, eagles, and even another kind of snake...

The California Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula californiae*)

Seen less often than the previous two, this snake still makes frequent appearances, most often seen in the tall grasses of Sycamore Grove's hills. The kingsnake, measuring three or four feet, is easily distinguished from gopher snakes and rattlers by its distinct



striped pattern of color. Often this consists of thick black bands separated by smaller white stripes, but sometimes those colors are closer to brown and yellow.

Kingsnakes are opportunistic eaters. They will eat anything they can constrict (squeeze) to death, and their diet includes rodents, insects, and small birds. But they earned the name "King" by eating other snakes, even rattlesnakes! Kingsnakes have evolved immunity to the venom of rattlesnakes in their area.

The next time you are walking in Sycamore Grove, keep an eye out for snakes sunning on trails or slithering through grass. Seeing one is a special experience. For your safety and theirs, it is important to keep your distance from all snakes, even if you don't think they are venomous. You will be glad to know we have never had a report of a person bitten by a rattlesnake at Sycamore Grove Park.

Snakes know people are too big for them to eat. Giving snakes space and room to move away, prevents them from feeling threatened and striking out. Snakes can easily be frightened by pets. Over the last several years, a few dogs have received rattlesnake bites in Sycamore Grove (which they survived after getting medical care). Be sure to keep dogs on leashes (as the park rules require) and watch where your pets stick their noses!

If you see a rattlesnake in a high-use area (such as the parking lot or picnic area), please call the ranger office at (925) 960-2400 so the snake can be relocated.

The Sheriff

By Ranger Darren Segur

Henry (Harry) Nicholson Morse was born in New York City on February 2, 1835. He proved to be an adventurous lad, and by age ten, with his parents blessing, he shipped out as an able-bodied seaman, sailing for the next four years between New York and Liverpool, England. He caught gold fever in 1849 and took a ship "round the horn" to San Francisco. Harry, like most of the Argonauts, had little luck prospecting but was able to do fairly well working around the Bay Area as a sailor and a butcher. In 1852, he and a partner built a hotel in Redwood City, but had to sell it to pay off creditors a year later. Harry met and married Virginia Heslip, daughter of a prominent attorney, in 1855. They would have one son and two daughters. Harry had already lived a full life by his twentieth birthday.

During the Civil War, Harry Morse became active in the strongly pro-union Oakland Guard – an endeavor which propelled him to election as Alameda County Sheriff in 1864. At the time, Alameda County was essentially divided into two parts, namely, the settled and populous west and the more lawless east (consisting mainly of the Livermore Amador Valley and surrounding hills). At that time, the Livermore Valley was occupied primarily by Californios, who were unsympathetic towards the Anglos and would often harbor outlaws. A particularly lawless area was located in what is now northeast Livermore. Most of the outlaws, initially unimpressed by Harry Morse, gave the young sheriff the nickname "El Muchacho" or "The Boy." As Morse gained experience and began racking up "arrests" (dead or alive), they grudgingly gave him a new name: "El Diablo" ("The Devil").

Morse wounded Narcisco Bojorques in a gun battle at Scotts Corners in Niles Canyon in 1866. In 1867, one outlaw was captured by the young lawman, and another was killed. In 1869 the constable of Murray Township, Ralph Famille, met Harry and soon became his deputy and right-hand man. In September of that year, after a



Photo from findagrave.com

grueling 41-day chase, the two of them captured murderer John Newell south of Los Angeles and brought him back to Alameda County.

The early 1870's saw Morse at the top of his game. In 1874 he was enlisted by the governor as one of several California Rangers assigned to track down long-time bandit Tiburcio Vasquez, who was captured after a six-week manhunt. Harry was responsible for locating the outlaw's hideout. And it was Harry who killed gang member Juan Soto in a shootout. After some detective work, he also located and arrested Procopio Murrietta, alleged nephew of Joaquin Murrietta, in the red light district in San Francisco.

The fact that Sheriff Morse had plenty of courage, no one could question. In addition, he was considered a just and fair lawman. In 1871, Ramon Amador was sentenced to hang for murder. Harry had doubts about Amador's guilt and petitioned the judge to change the sentence to life in prison. The judge denied the petition, and, what was worse, it was Sheriff Morse who had to perform the unpleasant duty of carrying out the sentence. These examples are only a small

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The Sheriff (continued)

slice of Harry Morse's professional exploits. He continued serving until 1877, when he stepped down to start the Morse Detective Agency.

Harry had seen that the rapidly growing Bay Area needed a private detective agency similar to the Pinkertons' back east. With his connections and experience from his years as a sheriff, he soon had a thriving new agency with a reputation for honesty and getting the job done. He employed as many as 66 men – both uniformed patrolmen and plain-clothes detectives. In 1883, in the Morse Detective Agency's most famous case, Harry himself arrested the infamous Charles Bolton, also known as stage robber and poet Black Bart. Harry's detectives had tracked down Black Bart using the laundry mark on a handkerchief left at the scene of one of the holdups.

Morse continued to run his detective agency up until 1906, when the great San Francisco earthquake destroyed his offices. Shaken by this event and now over age 70, he decided to retire. His wife died in 1907. For the next few years he was active in anti-corruption politics. On January 11, 1912, Harry Morse, the old lawman who had faced violent death countless times, died peacefully in his bed.

This article was derived primarily from "Lawman: The Life and Times of Harry Morse" by John Boessenecker

Hook and Ladder Run - June 10

The Hook and Ladder Run will be Sunday, June 10. Sycamore Grove will be open during the race, but there may be traffic delays on Arroyo Road, and lots of runners on the trails until about noon.

More Ranger-Led Programs

Pond Play Time

Tuesday June 26

10:00 am

Come learn about the critters that live in the creek, then wade in and see what you can catch. This program will be geared towards 3 to 6 year-olds, but siblings are welcome. Adults and children should bring a change of clothes and shoes, and wear closed-toed shoes and clothes that can get wet.

*Naturalist Heather Day Sycamore Grove Park,
Arroyo Road Entrance (5049 Arroyo Road)*

Beat the Heat Hike (RSVP)

Saturday, June 30

8:00 am

The park these days is hot and dry. With an early start, we can beat the heat and maybe see local critters who are also trying to get things done before the temperature rises. Join us for a leisurely 1 to 2 mile stroll on dirt trails through the nature area. Bring water and a camera if you like. Please RSVP by calling (925) 960-2400.

*Ranger Darren Segur Sycamore Grove Park,
Arroyo Road Entrance (5049 Arroyo Road)*

