

# The Joys of Observing the Natural World

by Alycia Matz

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One of the greatest delights is reveling in the beauty of nature with others who are just as curious to know more about the wondrous plants and wildlife that also happen to call our planet “home.” In early June, Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed hosted a bioblitz at Deer Park in Fairfax, where 25 attendees set out on the trails, guide-books and cameras in hand, eager to explore.

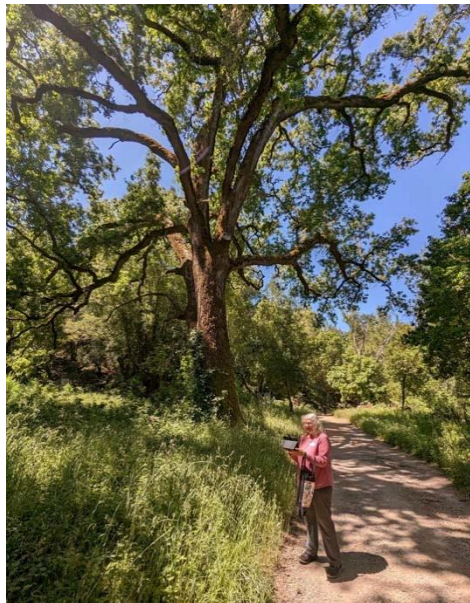
So, what exactly is a bioblitz? A bioblitz is an event where participants document as many species as possible in a given location and within an established time period. Bioblitzes have exploded in popularity in recent years, not only because they are an opportunity for the community to engage outdoors, but because they provide massive amounts of observational data to scientists. Bioblitzes are used to inform researchers on everything from the extent of sudden oak death throughout California to what plant species are first to emerge postfire. The free app iNaturalist is often the tool of choice. Users can simply snap a photo, upload it, and receive AI-generated species identification suggestions. A diverse community of hobby naturalists and professional scientists can verify if that species ID is correct.

Our bioblitz did not have any particular scientific aim. Rather, the main goal was to have fun getting to know the world around us. We had attendees of all ages and experience levels, from pre-K to college students, to retired professionals who have spent decades working in the environmental field. Especially for our young scientists, we wanted to show that there are many ways of knowing that go beyond learning a species name.

The key is using all the senses. We delighted in the flickering of delicate butterfly wings, as multiple pipevine



*Budding naturalist Cameron Sage examines a baldhip rose. Photos by Morgan Cantrell*



*Some magnificent valley oaks arch over Deer Park's trails.*

swallowtails mingled in the dappled sunlight. We crunched up California bay leaves, bringing them up to our noses and inhaling their peppery scent. We touched plants' leaves (excluding poison oak, of course!), wondering why woodland madia leaves are sticky while beaked hazelnut leaves are soft. We tasted lemony, freshly-emerged Douglas-fir tips, with the calls of chestnut-backed chickadees and spotted towhees as our soundtrack. We made connections between the world we know and the world we were discovering, as one young learner observed that baldhip rose reminded her of blackberries (indeed, they're in the same plant family, *Rosaceae*!)

It was a fulfilling day, with well over 100 observations, and new friendships made. Of course, you don't have to be part of an organized bioblitz to get out there and start making observations yourself! Especially in today's fast-paced world, the more you slow down to really look—and I mean *really look*—the more you start to notice, the more your curiosity is spurred, and the more deeply you'll feel connected with all of nature's wonders.

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