

## Oaks, A Smorgasbord for Wildlife

by Sandra Guldman

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Have you heard that insistent tapping and looked up to see a black and white bird with a red crown? It was probably an acorn woodpecker, busily burying acorns in a tree or the side of a wooden building. If you were lucky it might have been the much larger pileated woodpecker, looking for carpenter ants, its favorite food. Or have you noticed the chatter of busy squirrels hopping from branch to branch gathering acorns in the late summer and fall?

We all admire the beauty of stately old oaks, but it's easy to forget they also provide food and shelter for wildlife. Food is the main resource produced by oaks, but the nooks, crannies, perches, and passages where animals live, breed, or rest are of greater overall significance. An oak woodland with complex structure – an overstory of old, middle-aged, and young trees, along with understory canopies of shrubs and herbs – forms an abundance of micro-habitats for animals to occupy. Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed is working on several restoration projects, and we hope that some of them will grow into mature, complex oak woodlands that future generations of Marin County residents – human and animal - will enjoy.

Such an oak woodland can provide habitat for more than 100 bird species, more than 60 mammal species, and more than 80 species of amphibians and reptiles. (We won't even try to discuss the thousands of invertebrates – snails, bugs, beetles, and spiders -- that live in an oak woodland.)

Scrub jays and the crested Steller's jays are noisy, conspicuous residents of these woodlands, but scores of other birds either live there year round or use them seasonally. Cedar waxwings, elegant yellowish-brown crested birds, migrate through our watershed in the fall and spring. They eat berries on understory plants, especially toyon shrubs. Western screech owls are found in open oak woodlands and at the edges of denser woodlands, where they hunt rodents and insects from perches on the trees. If you follow the sounds of scolding songbirds, you may find a northern pygmy-owl, a very aggressive daytime bird hunter that perches inconspicuously in the tree canopy. Hutton's vireos are small, active birds that move through the oak trees in flocks. The flash of an iridescent crown may draw your eye to a male Anna's hummingbird, doing a dive display or enjoying a bite to eat. In oak woodlands near sheltered water, you might find wood ducks, which nest on the ground. In the breeding season, the male is vividly colored with a bright green head, but the females are drab – all the better for hiding from predators.

If there is enough space in the oak woodland, you might find a family of deer taking shelter in the understory. Nocturnal dusky-footed woodrats are seldom seen, but they build large, easy-to-spot stick houses up to six feet tall on the ground or in live oak trees. These complex structures have multiple chambers within them ranging from the actual nest to latrines and food storage areas. Bats, gray foxes, and ground squirrels are among the other creatures that live in these woodlands.

Two of the prettiest reptiles found in oak woodlands are ringneck snakes and western skinks. The ringneck snake is a slender olive snake with a coral belly and band around its neck. When it is frightened, it might roll over and display its brightly colored belly as a warning. The western skink is a small lizard that has a brilliant lapis blue tail when it is young. The color fades as the lizard ages. Mid-summer, when the young have just hatched, is a good time to see these shy, brightly colored lizards in our watershed.

All these creatures depend on woodlands for place to live and breed: oak woodlands are particularly good. The wildlife around us is part of the rich background to our lives in Marin. We may barely notice it much of the time, but we would miss it if it were not there. Each of us is responsible to share in efforts to protect and restore these woodlands, to pass on their beauty and vitality to those who come after us.

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