A young girl growing up in the 1960’s-70’s I had amassed a collection of Barbie dolls. Oh how I loved combing their hair, changing their clothes, and making up stories about their lives. I had them all, Barbie, Skipper, Christie, Midge, Twiggy, Ken, Brad and more. Years ago I gave my collection of dolls to an orphanage in Mexico, keeping just a few for memory’s sake. It’s been decades since I bought a Barbie doll, but I might break out my piggy bank to purchase the latest Mattel creation as “The Barbie Inspiring Women Series,” which pays tribute to incredible heroines of their time has released a Barbie doll worthy of owning.

“Recognizing decades of dedication, ground-breaking research, and heroic achievements as a conservationist, animal behavior expert, and activist, Barbie honors Dr. Jane Goodall, founder of the Jane Goodall Institute and UN Messenger of Peace, with a collectible doll made from recycled plastic.”

Joined by chimpanzee David Greybeard, Dr. Jane Goodall Barbie doll wears field attire and comes equipped with a pair of binoculars and a notebook. What a classic tribute to honor this courageous woman who paved paths for generations of girls.

We don’t see chimps here at Crystal Cove State Park, but it’s the time of year when we see tarantulas on the trail, and with their increased presence comes that of their adversary… the tarantula hawk wasp. These spider wasps are known for their painful stings, but luckily for humans, we are rarely the victims. If you’re a tarantula on the other hand, watch out. Males and non-breeding females are nectarivores feeding on flowers, pollen, and fruit, but adult females are nasty predators who hunt tarantulas as food for their larvae. Once stung, a tarantula becomes paralyzed and is then transported back to the wasp’s nest where she lays an egg on the spiders abdomen. Like a horror film once the egg hatches the larvae feed on the incapacitated tarantula who is subjected to being eaten alive. Tarantula hawk wasps are solitary, which is a good thing because seeing a colony of these large insects with their blue iridescent bodies, bright orange wings, long legs and hooked claws would be simply terrifying. The tarantula hawk wasp is most active during the hot summer months, flying very low to the ground to search for their unsuspecting prey and although their sting is reported to be the second most painful sting of any insect, they apparently don’t hold a candle to the Bullet ant, who fortunately for us, lives only in the rainforest from Nicaragua to Paraguay and is reported to have the world’s most painful sting. Ouch!
One insect that is revered by so many nature lovers is also making news, but sadly, for the wrong reasons. The Monarch butterfly, a regal iconic symbol of transformation and rebirth has been listed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) on their “red list” and categorized as “endangered” which is but two steps away from extinction. Alex wrote the following post for the park’s social media: “The listing prompts concerns about the devastating effect habitat loss can have on wildlife struggling to prevail against development, agricultural practices, and climate change. Pollinator species like the iconic orange and black Monarch butterfly are essential for keeping terrestrial habitats healthy and thriving, promoting plant growth and biodiversity. What is particularly worrying to scientists and land managers is the rate of the Monarch butterfly’s decline, with numbers dropping between 22% and 72% in just 10 years. Scientists studying the east coast populations of Monarch butterflies estimate that up to 95% of Monarch populations have been lost since the 1990s. The odds are stacked against them, but there are ways YOU can help these struggling pollinators! Create Monarch habitat in your own backyard! Plant native milkweed plants alongside other plants that attract butterflies. Refrain from using pesticides and herbicides in your garden and use natural alternatives. Finally, spread the word about the importance of these critical pollinators! North America’s eastern population of Monarch Butterflies makes the longest insect migration on earth, travelling thousands of miles from their Mexican wintering grounds all the way as far north as southern Canada on this miraculous journey. The butterflies we see locally are members of the west coast population who spend the winters along California’s coast and then migrate to states west of the Rocky Mountains. Nonmigratory Monarch populations in Central and South America were not listed as endangered.”

Monarch and other butterflies will use their proboscis to sip fruit juice just as they would flower nectar. Perhaps that’s why we see Western tiger swallowtails, Behr’s metalmarks, and fiery skippers along Moro Canyon trail near the Catalina cherry, Prunus ilicifolia ssp. Lyonia. We actually have two in the park, a subspecies of the native Hollyleaf cherry, that were probably planted by trailer park residents long ago or sprouted from seeds dropped by birds. Cherries are my favorite fruit, hands down, and right now the fruit on these trees is plumper, and darker than I have ever noticed before. Not like I am picking them though (although a few of us tasted just one weensy cherry that had dropped from the tree), since they are better left for the birds and other wildlife. The Catalina cherry, a member of the Rosaceae family, grows in riparian habitat (in this case adjacent to Moro creek) or in disturbed roadsides. They grow in Southern and Central California, primarily in the Channel Islands region, but also on the southern coastal mainland. It grows fast, lives long and can top 40 feet. Late in the spring the creamy white flowers bloom, and by summer, the edible cherries (although mostly seed and skin) blanket the tree. I have admired the lovely Catalina cherry for years, mostly because for a long time an abandoned orioles nest dangled visibly amongst the branches, but this year the bountiful cherries have caught my eye. All the better for the butterflies, birds, and bees.
Early on in the restoration of the Historic District cottages at Crystal Cove State Park, one of the most iconic cottages, #46 the Art Studio, was converted into a rotating Visitor Center and Exhibit Gallery. Over the years state park staff and the Crystal Cove Conservancy have showcased many engaging interpretive exhibits to share the magic of Crystal Cove with the public. Our most recent exhibit, The Seasons of Crystal Cove, invites visitors to explore the changing park landscapes in winter, spring, summer, and fall in a single year. Photographer Sasha Cahill (who began this volunteer project while still 16 years old and has just headed off to college at Cal Poly Humboldt) returned to nine locations every season at approximately the same time of day and from the same point of view to photograph the changes in lighting, vegetation, and wildlife. These images illuminate the diversity and life cycles of plants and animals specifically adapted to Crystal Cove’s Mediterranean climate and included plants going from dormant to verdant, or from flowering and fruiting. Sasha also captured different animals he saw, mostly birds, but also lizards, spiders, and mammals and photographed behaviors including feeding white-crowned sparrows, a cackling Cooper’s hawk, and grasshoppers mating. This exhibit provides a closer look into the natural spectacle of seasonal change at Crystal Cove State Park and it was great fun to work with this budding photographer. A huge thanks to volunteer Brian Flynn for his tremendous contribution to this exhibit from design work to installation.

Campfire programs have never been a big draw at the park probably because the amphitheater is down a big, steep hill from the campground. But for the last couple of summers, Senior Park Aides Laurel Gifford and Elliott Wiley have created a unique evening “open house” that has become a huge draw for both campers and day trippers. With an impressive display of interpretive items featuring the “Park After Dark,” their chat and snack s’more night has been a huge success. I wanted to see for myself and so after a sunset hike on the 3-mile loop trail (great time of day to hike in the backcountry) I popped by the Berns Amphitheater and was awed by the number of interpretive props, taxidermy, and other engaging activities they put on display. They had a bat art project, tables with tarantula specimens, owl pellets, pelts and skulls of opossum, skunk, and bobcat, and of course Gunther, our Coyote mascot (a mounted specimen, not a live one). Both Laurel and Elliott, with the help of volunteers Susan Frank and Jane Welgan clearly invested a lot of time and effort to create this magical environment, complete with s’more fixins’, and brought the nocturnal world alive for the visitors. And I bet they didn’t even know that there is an actual National S’mores Day in August which recognizes this gooey, toasted campfire treat.

While observing both the kids and their parents at this campfire evening I thought about the intrinsic value of outdoor classrooms. As Vince Gowman wrote:

**The best education does not happen at a desk but rather engaged in everyday living – hands-on exploring, in active relationship with life.**

See you in the Park!