On the first day of the month, I traveled to the Mott Training Center at Asilomar to present a session about managing short-term volunteers to state park staff. I had done this presentation several times virtually and so when I was invited to do so again and was given the choice between zooming and in-person I jumped at the latter. Zoom or Pacific Grove, easy decision. The day started out drizzly and when that turned to full on rain, I realized that my ulterior motive of outdoor exploration was doomed and although I would never “dis” the rain, I was a bit disappointed. Miraculously, just after I finished my presentation the rain stopped and the sun shone through the rest of the day. So off I went roaming the streets and bluffs of beautiful Pacific Grove and oh, what a few hours I had. My first stop was at the Monarch Sanctuary where I saw hundreds of butterflies clustered high up in the trees. It took a few moments to recognize the fluttering leaves were not leaves at all but Monarch butterflies huddling in large masses to rest and for protection from the elements. And I saw deer, so many deer who, although not tame, were unafraid of people and barely glanced up from their browsing when I walked by. I saw several young ones too including a buck with only a few forks in his antlers, reminding me of a teen boy growing his first whiskers. Speaking of whiskers, my stroll finally brought me to Lovers Point where I scanned the ocean and saw six playful sea otters “performing.” A few were swimming in circles, one was messily eating and a pair seemed to kiss. After all, it was Lovers Point.

At dinner that night I sat next to an interpreter from Calaveras Big Trees, one of my bucket list state parks. We were sharing public program ideas when she mentioned her interest in developing a pop-up display about “Life in The Subnivean Layer” to educate visitors about how human footsteps can destroy this fragile environment. I didn’t even what she was talking about, so I did a little digging. The subnivean layer, or the area between the ground and the bottom of the snowpack, is a “no man’s land” where small animals like shrews, voles and mice snuggle down for the winter. The way it works is that “as snow piles up, heat from the ground warms the lowest layer of flakes, transforming them into water vapor. The vapor freezes, creating a cozy winter home: icy roof above, bare ground below. Subnivean spaces can also form when tree branches, leaf piles and other natural objects hold snow off the ground.” Simple huh, but who knew? When the snowy season arrives, many animals head south, hibernate in their dens, or don their cold-weather coats, but some small creatures head below to the surface into a cozy, insulating world inaccessible to the wind, sleet, snow, and...
cold. These subnivean-dwelling mammals traverse through a maze of snow-covered tunnels, nibbling on leaves, seeds, and bark, or snacking on insect eggs and larvae. Holes that connect the tunnels to the surface allow for ventilation to flow in, and carbon dioxide to seep out. On the flip side, predators like coyotes, foxes, weasels and even owls listen for subtle sounds and when they sense potential prey scurrying underfoot, they plunge headfirst into the snow to nab their meal. My family will head to our cabin in Tahoe for Christmas. This year, you can be sure, I'll be looking in the snow for tiny tracks and small holes and will definitely stay on the trail and tread lightly to avoid the possibility of crashing through someone's roof!

The next day of training the class went on a field trip to Point Lobos and were lucky enough to see countless harbor seals nestled on a rock high above the ocean, lots of egrets and herons “stabbing and grabbing” tasty morsels from the cove and got a quick glimpse of a whale blow. With a robust volunteer program, our plan was to observe some of the volunteers in action. One of their core programs stations docents along popular trails, armed with engaging interpretive props. In another, docents staff a mobile pop up with tables displaying pelts, bones, and skulls. As I pursued the interpretive goodies a volunteer proudly pointed out their new Brant’s Cormorant specimen which had been stuffed, not using the old method of injecting chemicals but in the more environmentally sensitive process of freeze drying. Whereas the conventional taxidermy methods involve removing the skin, preserving it with chemicals and replacing it on an artificial body which is then posed; freeze drying taxidermy, on the other hand, is a relatively new means of preservation that removes all moisture from body tissues leaving them virtually intact. Then through a process of extremely low temperatures and the application of a vacuum over a long period of time, the tissues are dried out and protected from decay. It’s a lengthy process and so, a taxidermy could take up to a year. I was particularly intrigued because we recently were gifted a most stunning mountain lion specimen to add to our taxidermy collection. Apparently, Fish and Wildlife confiscated two beautifully mounted cougars from a private party whose loss was our gain. At the moment, our new prop is staged in the Los Trancos office and is a welcome site each morning and throughout the work day. What’s most magnetic about the huge cat is its eyelashes. Uh huh, you got that right I said the eyelashes (with the enormous furry paws coming in a close second). Never will I ever, or want to for that matter, get close enough to a cougar to study its facial hair or feet, but having the opportunity to see a real, not live, but real, animal up close helps gain appreciation for other life forms. Kind of “humanizes” it, if you know what I mean.

Speaking of magnificent creatures, according to Guinness World Records a Bar-tailed Godwit has just broken the record for the longest recorded migration by a bird, without stopping for food or rest. This satellite-tagged shorebird flew 8,425 miles across the Pacific Ocean from Alaska to Tasmania. The bird was tagged as a hatchling in Alaska with a GPS chip and tiny solar panel that allowed researchers to follow its first migration from seemingly one end of the Pacific Ocean to the other. After having flown night and day, the young bird arrived at its destination 11 days later after departing from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Because this species hasn’t been studied much, researchers are uncertain if this is a normal pattern, an accident, or if it got lost, but this Bar-tailed Godwit replaced the last entry in the Guinness World Records list for a migratory bird which was also a Bar-tailed Godwit, but one who only flew a mere 7,580 miles! Hopefully this award winner will stay long enough to fatten up after having lost half its body weight on this incredible journey, before flipping around and flying back to Alaska. Crazy stuff. We don’t see Bar-tailed Godwits here at Crystal Cove, but their cousins’ are one of our winter residents. Marbled Godwits are graceful looking sandpipers with long legs, cinnamon
plumage, and a two-toned sword like upturned beak it uses to probe into the wet sand at the shore’s edge searching for aquatic invertebrates. Sometimes they plunge their bill so deeply it seems as if their head has disappeared. We see lots of Marbled Godwits along the water these days hanging out with Willets, Whimbrels, and the Long-billed Curlew.

Reading about the extraordinary feat made by the intrepid Bar-tailed Godwit reminded me of a conversation my husband and I had with a couple while walking at Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve. He was a molecular biologist, and she was an artist, both enjoyed the benefits of nature, but didn’t know much. They asked if I knew which birds were roosting on the sandbar so we launched into a chat about the merits of being able to identify wildlife. The next day as I walked to my yoga class, I watched a foursome of White-crowned Sparrows nibbling seed on the ground. I thought back to the conversation and mused about how for me, when identifying a species, it sets off a domino effect into a whole new world. For example, by recognizing the tiny sparrows I knew where they breed, where they migrate to, and when we can expect to see them back in the park. I know that when I see them feeding on the ground, they are eating seeds from weeds and grasses and that when I hear a scratching sound in the scrub it’s likely to be a White-crowned Sparrow hopping through the low brushy foliage. I guess the point is that by being able to identify an organism it helps to illuminate their role in this great big world and makes them more tangible.

Whether it be Bolsa Chica Wetlands, the Monarch Sanctuary, here at Crystal Cove State Park, or while exploring any wild place I think of the words from poet Maya Angelou who wrote:

“We need hours of aimless wandering or spates of time sitting on park benches observing the mysterious world of ants and the canopy of treetops”

Wishing you a happy Thanksgiving and, as I always say… eat Tofurkey!

Winter