My son Alex recently wrote a children’s book “It’s Raining Cats and Dogs…and other animal idioms, sayings, and expressions.” As an ESL tutor Alex has pondered how to convey these challenging expressions that English speakers take for granted. For example, how would you describe to someone who is learning our complicated language phrases like “hold your horses” or “the cat got your tongue” and so, he has begun creating engaging interactive tools to help his students understand the concepts. I thought of his book while I was walking in the backcountry one morning and literally “stopped to smell the roses.” As a naturalist, I also stop and smell the elderberry, stinking gourd, and any flowering plant that I know has an aroma, good or bad. So while I was breathing deeply into the yellow center of the native California Wild Rose and watching the bumble bees buzzing about I was musing how to describe the term “stop and smell the roses” when it’s not about smelling roses at all? I think Alex is on to something and hope he’ll include this proverb, which encourages people to take the time to enjoy and appreciate life, in his sequel.

According to the Jepson Manual, Higher Plants of California at least eight species of native roses bloom throughout the state. Some are wood or ground roses while others, including the pretty California Wild Rose, are thicket-forming roses. This is the time of year to see the delicate hot pink Rosa californica along Moro Canyon as clusters of fragrant flowers bloom abundantly through spring and summer. In additional to smelling good to humans, California Wild Rose provides a one-stop-shopping through the seasons for many organisms such as pollinators like bees and butterflies who are attracted to the flowers, songbirds who nest and rest amongst the thickets, and cottontail rabbits and woodrats who feed on the red rose hips once they begin fruiting in the fall. Like other rose bushes, California Wild Rose has thorny hooks, but some animals have developed adaptations to avoid getting snagged. I guess those that use this robust deciduous shrub have figured out how to navigate the spiny stems and enjoy the many benefits that the plant offers.

I am not much of a tech girl and remember fondly the old method of identifying a plant. You’d get out the tomb-like Jepson Manual and comb through the ID steps. It was a lot of work and with marginal skills my ids were often incorrect. But the Seek app by iNaturalist has changed all that and now, with just a wave of the camera you can pinpoint a plant. You don’t even have to take and upload an image instead this amazing technology allows users to simply hold the phone up to a plant and watch as the details pop up. If the iNaturalist online library can’t determine the plant all the way down to the species level, it will provide the most accurate id information from the genus on up in the Linnean classification system (kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus species.)

I wanted to check if iNaturalist could identify animal scat so I held my camera over a perfectly formed piece of poop, but instead, the app mistook it for the Black Velvet Leatherleaf Slug Belocaulus angustipes from South America. Comparing the two, I could see the resemblance, but it proved that even with the most sophisticated technology there is plenty of room for errors. Nonetheless, these apps for plant identification, bird sounds, or mammal droppings (my newest addition) are fabulous field tools.
For years we would see Cooper's Hawks nesting in the Eucalyptus trees lining the road in the Historic District hollow, but this year a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks were the celebrities. For over a month, whenever I ventured into the hollow I was greeted by the soaring, flapping, and high pitched repeated kee-aah territorial call. Well, that was during the spring and the mating season, then lo and behold, within six weeks or so the activity changed because now there was a family. If I am correct, three chicks hatched and when I saw them, they seemed to be chasing each other from one tree to another. According to Audubon, mama hawks stay with their young for most of the first three weeks of life while the males bring food for the female to feed to the nestlings. Nearly seven weeks later the chicks move out of the nest but continue to take “handouts” from the folks. I haven't heard or seen any of these colorful raptors for the past couple of weeks but since Red-shouldered Hawks often reuse nests from past years we can hope that they will return the next nesting season.

I spend a lot of time, primarily during the spring, exploring the tidepools with students. Usually, my aim is to find the charismatic creatures that everyone wants to see like sea stars or an octopus. One morning I was with a class and noticed a young girl crouching low to the ground patiently observing the activity in a pool. She pointed out some movement amongst the tiniest of organisms, so I sat and observed with her. Turns out we were watching several Buckshot Barnacles waving their infinitesimal legs while searching for food. Barnacles, members of the crustacean family along with crabs and lobsters, start life as free-floating larvae and eventually find a place to permanently attach themselves. When they do, they attach upside down and build a hard calcareous shell to protect their bodies. As filter feeders barnacles extend and retract six pair of feathery appendages called cirri to grab microscopic plankton to pull back inside their shells which is exactly what transfixed us. As the tide comes in, a muscle in the barnacle opens up four plates near the mouth and the sensory hairs on the feathery legs sift the water collecting plankton for the barnacles to eat. What we couldn’t see is how the comb-like structures of these teensy-weeny creatures remove the plankton from the legs before sticking them out again for more food. Buckshot Barnacles cover the rocks at the highest level of the tidepools, the splash zone, and rely on the ocean spray to bring them a meal.

Within days of our final field trip, we segued immediately into California State Parks week, and then into summer programs including Junior Lifeguards (we teach those water loving kids about the terrestrial animals and plants found in the Park,) Camp Coastal Wild and Camp Cove. Along with the Crystal Cove Conservancy we have an array of public activities to show off the “Cove’s character” (sunset walks, movies on the beach, full moon hikes, and Plein Air painting workshops.) A shout out to all the enthusiastic park aides who have taken on projects including staffing the mobile tidepool cart in the Historic District, sanding and staining the parks bulletin boards (and replacing cloudy plexiglass when necessary,) and re-stenciling the marine organism walk from the Los Trancos trailer to the tunnel. I also want to convey a special recognition to lifeguards Neil, Carlo, and Ryan who because of their swift and efficient response saved a woman who had suffered
a dangerous stroke while on the beach. I watched a video of the woman who returned a year later to thank the guards for saving her life and had tears in my eyes. This incident was simply one that was publicly documented, but lifeguards make rescues and save lives regularly throughout the busy summer. Our California State Park Lifeguards are professional, disciplined, and expertly trained. They are heroes every day.

We just finished our whirlwind week of Camp Coastal Wild, the best one-week camp around, if I may say so myself. We host 20 kids and flood them with nature-based activities like animal evidence scavenger hunt hikes, owl pellet dissection, and bird walks. This year we were treated to a presentation by Ciara Belardes and Naomi Knox who shared about their Acjachemen culture and brought a trove of traditional items including a musical instrument made from deer toenails, and a cape made from rabbit pelts. I do think though that my most memorable moment of the entire camp was on our “Ew that’s gross” day when the kids lined up to eat crickets. We had sour cream and onion or bacon and cheddar and the looks on the faces of the kids were priceless. Even Alex gave it a taste. Shortly afterwards, we played a matching activity in which the campers had to match a photo of animal scat with a candy. For example, bobcat scat resembles tootsie rolls, rabbit pellets favor M&M’s, and 100 Grand bars were used to show Coyote poop. They loved it! But mostly what I like about this small boutique camp, is watching friendships form. Timid kids who start day #1 not knowing anyone else end up smiling, laughing, chasing, and lunching with new friends. It’s heartwarming to watch these bonds form. With only 20 kids they tend to attach. On the beach I watched as the entire crew collaborated to dig holes in the wet sand and build protective walls to keep water out. Our most gratifying reward was watching how three returning campers who hadn’t seen each other since last year immediately fell back into the friendship they nourished at Camp Coastal Wild 2023. Priceless!

Sometimes during these hectic summer days it’s hard to slow down and just “smell the roses.” I’m determined to enjoy and appreciate how lucky I am to work in one of the most exquisite places along the California coast. A walk on the sand, a hike on the trails, or a ride on the bluff can bring that feeling of “ahhhhh.” Even if there are no flowers to literally smell, as Sir John Lubbock said:

“Rest is not idleness, and to lie sometimes on the grass under trees on a summer’s day, listening to the murmur of the water, or watching the clouds float across the sky, is by no means a waste of time.”

Have a leisurely, safe 4th of July