

The Community VOICE



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Fall comes to our native plants



By Daniel Goulart November 4, 2010 01:58 am

As the warm summer months draw to a close and autumn begins its refreshing change over California, many species of native plants lay dormant waiting for newly wet ground over the cool, damp Mediterranean winter ahead. But even before the rains begin in earnest, there's still plenty to explore and see. I'll be going over two new species, continuing a series to inform hikers, cyclists and walkers in the south county area of the species - several of which are such a part of our landscape, many simply overlook them - that help make this area what it is.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa contains a variety of plant and animal life, some species found only here, and others occur from within our area all the way up and down the western coast. One such species, the Valley Oak, stretches its habitat from Shasta down to San Diego County. Growing to tremendous proportions and living up to an average of 300-400 years (there is a saying that they take 100 years to grow, 100 years to live, and 100 years to die), it's easy to distinguish from a close cousin and another native of California, the Coast Live oak, by its velvety, deeply lobed leaves and rough bark. Often found in deep, moist valleys and stream-side riparian habitat, as the tree requires a constant source of groundwater, the tree is perhaps the premier keystone species of southern Sonoma County, where it provides essential habitat including food, and hunting and nesting sites, for hundreds of species of birds, mammals and insects. Previously vast tracts of valley oak savannah, grasslands dotted with oak trees, once covered the area and its nutritious acorns were the staple food for Native Americans for thousands of years.

The Coffeeberry plant or California Buckthorn, seen from southern California to southwestern Oregon, doesn't produce coffee as the name would suggest, but rather produces a seed inside of its berries that looks surprisingly like the roasted bean much loved by many. Growing large, 2-5 meters tall (6.5-19 feet), this shrub is often used in water-wise gardens and landscapes for its attractive deep green leaves, berries go from bright red to a deep purple-black through summertime, and resistance to deer grazing. This evergreen plant loves windy, exposed areas, and has been introduced in the state of Hawaii as the state's famous volcanoes, provide large tracts of habitat that fit just that description. And though the name might suggest you could take the berries, dip them in chocolate and eat them, it's not recommended; some local tribes used the berries as laxatives, and only in very small amounts, as any more than a little could prove quite dangerous to a person, especially a child. Look, but don't touch.

According to Conservation International, the California Floristic Province, including most of the state, is one of the 36 ecological hot spots in the world noted for its huge variety of species - both flora and fauna - as well as its danger of being over-harvested and urbanized that put this multitude of species in peril. As one of the rare Mediterranean climates in the world, California is a precious area that attracts many people, seeking its cool, wet winters and dry summers, while often times displacing the unique wildlife that also live here. We should remain mindful when observing where we live and work to not only keep what we have, but improve it for everyone, even the smallest flower.

Daniel Goulart is a graduating senior at Sonoma State University, and has been working with Cotati Creek Critters since late last year to restore the Laguna de Santa Rosa channel. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, a 501(c)3 nonprofit public benefit corporation, fiscally sponsors Cotati Creek Critters.

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