

# TRACKS

A Publication of the Newport Bay Naturalists & Friends

June–August  
2009

## Our Neighbor the Bobcat

Residents around Upper Newport Bay—the “Back Bay”—continue to observe bobcats prowling around the greenbelts that surround their homes along the bluffs. These cats are being seen at all times of the day and night as they search the bushes in pursuit of a bunny rabbit which is by far their most favorite meal.



photos by Dick Newell

They are not bashful and at times seem oblivious to our presence particularly if they are not scared away by loud children or barking dogs. We have one bobcat that is known to researchers by the name of Babe that has lived along the margins of the Back Bay for several years now and she can be recognized by the white tag she wears in her left ear.

This particular cat has become too comfortable with humans for her own good as she will casually walk down the bike path right past you. She has never shown any aggressive behavior, even when an off leash dog occasionally chases her off into the brush. Nevertheless bobcats are wild animals and our children and pets need to learn to respect them and to never attempt to handle or interfere with them or their kittens.

People frequently ask if the bobcats are becoming more numerous or why they are being seen more often around our homes and in our gardens. The answer is pretty simple: We continue to build into the hills which for generations they have called home and now they have few options other than to try to share the land with us. For them life is all about defending their territory from other animals and feeding and breeding. Bobcats are obligate carnivores, meaning that they will only eat meat and when no rabbits are available then a ground squirrel will do just fine. If a female bobcat is feeding her litter of young kittens she will be even less fussy and

may take small rodents, birds or whatever else is easy to catch but never anything that would remotely present a threat to her safety. Often they will be seen carrying a "coot" up from the marsh. We wonder why they would seemingly choose this bird but we need to understand that for a wild animal it is all about capturing the most calories possible while expending the least amount of energy. Many of our local ducks such as the mallards, pintails and teals can virtually explode and take off going straight up thus making their capture difficult. This is not so for the coot as it has short wings and webbed feet. For it to take off it needs to run a considerable distance to get up enough speed to fly and that is its ultimate downfall. The bobcat sneaks up in the marsh grasses and usually has only to make one quick lunge to score a dinner.

Bobcats provide a valued service for us in that they will minimize the number of ground squirrels that tunnel into the bluffs. They will certainly keep the rabbit population under control and may help us get rid of other small rodents that frequent our yards.

If you should ever observe any hostile interaction between your pet and a local bobcat you are most likely seeing a bobcat trying to protect what it believes to be its turf or perhaps trying to protect its kittens. Wild animals will scent-mark the boundaries of their territory but frequently our pets don't understand this system and that's when confrontations between them could occur.

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### NBNF Mission:

- To **preserve** and **restore** the ecosystems of Upper Newport Bay.
- To **educate** the public about the ecological value of the Bay and its watershed and help ensure compatible public use.

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## African Clawed Frogs

Not all of the predators found at Upper Newport Bay are as likeable or as beneficial as the native bobcat. Indeed one invading predator – the African clawed frog (*Xenopus laevis*) – has wreaked havoc with the native wildlife in the ponds and streams of Big Canyon. This amphibian carnivore has no tongue or teeth; it just uses its clawed hind legs to tear its prey apart and its forelimbs to stuff food into its mouths until its stomach can no longer hold any more. Definitely not the model for any successful dieter! Scavenger that it is, it will eat living, dead or dying insect larvae, tadpoles, fish, crustaceans, worms, freshwater snails, other invertebrates and amphibians and organic waste. It is so voracious that when it sheds its skin once a year, it turns around and eats it! When other food supplies are exhausted it cannibalizes smaller and weaker fellows.

The African clawed frog, a native of eastern and southern Africa, was first brought to the U.S. in the 1940's for use in pregnancy testing. Female frogs would be injected with a woman's urine. If the frog released eggs two or three days later this would signify that the woman was pregnant; if the frog did not



release eggs then the woman was not pregnant. Though these frogs were no longer needed once the pharmaceutical companies had synthesized the chemicals for these tests, they were subsequently used extensively in other scientific research. Additionally they became a popular aquarium pet. Many were released or escaped into the wild with dreadful results, particularly in California where the African clawed frog enjoys the climate so much that it appears to produce more prodigiously and grow larger than in its home continent. A population estimate of over 100,000 frogs was made at one water body. Because of the threat to native amphibians and fishes, importation or possession of this invasive

species is prohibited in California and Arizona (where permanent feral populations have existed for a few decades now) and several other states. Large numbers are found in natural creeks as well as drainage ditches, flood control channels and golf course ponds throughout Orange County.

The African clawed frog particularly thrives in warm (usually about 60-80 degrees), stagnant ponds. If the pond should dry up, the frog just burrows in the mud and can lie dormant for over a year. Its physiology also allows it to do well in brackish water. During wet weather, it can crawl long distances but it cannot hop like other frogs.

This frog has a smooth, slippery multicolored skin with olive and brown spots on its back, and a creamy underside. It has the ability to change appearance to match its background, becoming dark, light or mottled as the need arises. The males are only about 2" to 2.5" long, and the females are larger at 4" to 4.5" long. Since the males have no vocal sac, they use rapid muscle contractions in their throat to produce a clicking noise to attract the female. Calling is done underwater where the frogs spend almost their entire time, so they are typically neither seen nor heard. It is believed that many populations established themselves several years before they were discovered. By then the damage was already done. The frogs use olfaction and a lateral line system to detect waterborne scents and the movements of aquatic prey and thus they do well in murky waters where they can just wait for their prey to come by. When they are found in traps it often means that they have eaten most of the other wildlife. This is the case at Big Canyon.

Dealing with the problem is extremely difficult. Harassed frogs excrete an extremely slippery and irritating mucus from their skin glands that deter many potential mammalian and aquatic predators. Known avian predators of clawed frogs include great blue herons, great egrets, common ravens and western gulls, but these bird cannot function in areas overgrown with vegetation. A major restoration project at Big Canyon is in the final planning stages. The project will include a new fresh water pond replacing the existing pond. One of the design features will be the ability to drain the pond for maintenance and pest control purposes. At this point control of the African clawed frogs is the best that can be done.

Once established in a climate and habitat where it thrives, it is virtually impossible to eradicate an invasive species. Introduction needs to be prevented. Failing that, swift intervention action is needed. That is why early detection programs are so important. You can do your part, too. Please don't release exotic pets into the wild. We've seen the odd python here at the Bay, but luckily no more.



# Upper Newport Bay Calendar of Events

June–August 2009

## Kayak Tours—Every Saturday, 10:00 a.m.–noon at the Dunes

Join a trained Naturalist for a guided kayak tour of the Back Bay. Meet at the Newport Dunes Resort. \$20/person, 8 & up. \$10/NBNF members. Be prepared to get wet. Reservations (949) 923-2269. Location code: NDR

## Kayak Tours—Every Sunday, 10:00 a.m.–noon at the NAC

Join a trained Naturalist for a guided kayak tour of the Back Bay. Meet at the Newport Aquatic Center. \$20/person, 8 and up. \$10/NBNF members. Be prepared to get wet. Reservations (949) 923-2269. Location code: NAC

## Twilight Canoe Tour & BBQ—Saturday, June 13, July 11, Aug. 22, 4:00–7:00 p.m.

Join a trained Naturalist for a guided canoe tour of the Back Bay, then enjoy a barbecue on the shore courtesy of the Newport Sea Base. \$30/person. Reservations required. Call (949) 642-5031. Location code: NAC

## Voyage to Shellmaker Island—Saturday, June 20, Aug. 15, 1:00–4:00 p.m.

Join a trained Naturalist for a voyage on a 25-passenger pontoon boat from the Newport Sea Base to the Back Bay Science Center on Shellmaker Island and into the Ecological Reserve. \$25/person. Parents accompanied by children 7 and up. Reservations required. Call (949) 642-5031. Location code: Sea Base

## Walking Tour—Saturday, June 6, July 4, Aug. 1, 9:00 a.m.

Join a trained Naturalist for a 2-hour walk along the Bay. Bring binoculars and sun protection. Free. No reservations needed. For information call (949) 923-2269. Location code: BBSC

## Big Canyon Walking Tour—Saturday, June 20, July 18, Aug. 15, 9:00 a.m.

Join a trained Naturalist for a 2-hour walk along Big Canyon Trail and the Bay. Bring binoculars and sun protection. Free. No reservations needed. For information call (949) 923-2269. Location code: Big Canyon parking lot.

## Sunset Stroll—Saturday, June 20 (7:30 p.m.), July 18 (7:30 p.m.), Aug. 15 (7:00 p.m.)

Join park staff for a 90-minute twilight nature walk and discover the wonders that nighttime brings to our Nature Preserve. Then, create your own nocturnal critter to take home! May be re-scheduled due to weather. Dress warmly for the evening chill. All ages. \$3/person. Pre-registration required. (949) 923-2275 or email [unbic@ocparks.com](mailto:unbic@ocparks.com). Location code: IC

## Shellmaker Discovery Tour—Saturday, June 20, July 18, Aug. 15, 9:00–10:30 a.m.

Join a Naturalist to learn about Shellmaker Island's rich history; the future of the Back Bay Science Center; and discover unusual and endangered plants, birds and crab habitats. No reservations required. No latecomers. Free. For information call (949) 640-9956. Location code: BBSC

## Steward Days—Every Wednesday, 9:00–11:00 a.m.

Support the Bay's unique genetics at our restoration sites by collecting seeds & propagating plants. Learn how to grow natives in your backyard, attract wildlife and conserve water. For information call (949) 640-0286. Location code: BBSC

## ROOTS Restoration Teamwork—Saturday, June 27, July 25, Aug. 27, 9:00 a.m.–noon

Help restore Back Bay habitat by installing and maintaining native plants while learning about wetland ecology. Reservations required. Refreshments, tools provided. Call (949) 640-0286 for information, reservations and location.

## 2nd Sundays Restoration Program—June 14, July 12, Aug. 9, 9:00 a.m.–noon

Join the staff at the IC to enhance the Nature Preserve habitat with non-native plant removal, native plantings and Butterfly Garden maintenance. Pre-registration required. (949) 923-2295. Location code: IC

## Marine Life Inventory—Saturday, June 20, July 18, Aug. 15, 8:30 a.m.–noon

Marine biology students ages 12 and up are invited to participate in a variety of hands-on marine life monitoring programs in Newport Bay with the Dept. of Fish and Game. Children under 18 must be accompanied by an adult. Free. Reservations (949) 640-9956. Location code: BBSC

## Astronomy Night—Friday, July 17 (8:00 p.m.), Aug. 14 (7:30 p.m.)

Join members of the Orange County Astronomers for an inspirational 2-hour tour of the night sky. This program is open to all ages and will include a presentation and observation with telescopes. There is no fee for this program, only a suggested donation of \$2 per participant. Space is limited and pre-registration is required. (949) 923-2275 or email [unbic@ocparks.com](mailto:unbic@ocparks.com). Location code: IC

## Scout Programs—Tuesday through Saturday upon request

Join a Naturalist for a 2-hour Brownie or Junior Girl Scout Try-it or badge program, or a Tiger cub, Bear Cub or Webelo badge program. \$7/child including patch. Call (949) 923-2269 or email [scoutssi@sbcglobal.net](mailto:scoutssi@sbcglobal.net). Location code: IC or BBSC.

## Train for a Day, Volunteer at the Bay!—Saturday, July 18, 9:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.

Become a part of this dynamic estuary! Learn about the habitats and wildlife of the bay. Participate in habitat restoration and special events. Assist with tours. Greet and educate visitors. Registration (949) 923-2296. Location code: IC

For all of the following, call (949) 923-2275 to register or email [unbic@ocparks.com](mailto:unbic@ocparks.com). \$5 per child (Conservation Club free). Come prepared for an exciting outdoor experience! Location code: IC

### Tidelands Tots (Ages 2–5)

Thursdays, 10:30–11:15 a.m. Join staff for a parent and child experience that may include arts and crafts, story telling, hands-on activities or outdoor nature walks.

"Critter Camouflage"—June 4

"Funky Skunky Friends"—July 30

"Top Dogs"—June 11

"Soak up the Sun"—Aug. 6

"Neat Feet"—June 25

"Exo-shell-etons"—Aug. 20

"Nature's Night Lights"—July 2

"Cool Cacti"—Aug. 27

"Lizard Lore"—July 9

### Wild! Tales (Ages 2–8)

Fridays, 10:30–11:15 a.m. Visit with staff for story-telling fun! Then, learn more about the natural history of the Bay through crafts, hands-on activities and nature walks.

"The Bumblebee Queen"—June 5

"A Log's Life"—July 24

"In One Tidepool"—June 12

"Verdi"—July 31

"Animal Dads"—June 19

"Dig-Wait-Listen, A Desert Toad's Life"—Aug. 7

"Way out in the Desert"—June 26

"Who Pooped in the Park"—Aug. 14

"A Day in the Salt Marsh"—July 3

"Under One Rock"—Aug. 21

"A Hummingbird's Life"—July 10

"Bat Loves the Night"—Aug. 28

"Around One Cactus"—July 17

### Bayside Buddies (Ages 2–8)

Thursdays, 3:30–4:30 p.m. Calling all junior naturalists! Discover our amazing natural world at the Bay through hands-on activities, crafts and nature walks.

"Alpha Animals"—June 11

"Scavengers of the Sky"—July 30

"Astronomical Adventures"—June 25

"Sen-Cetacean-al Fun!"—Aug. 20

"Bobcat Buds"—July 9

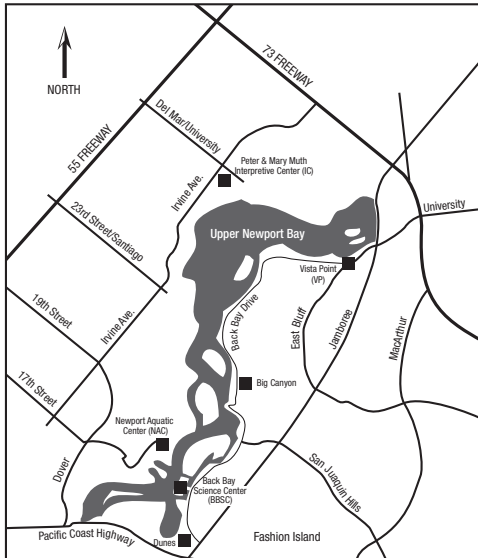
"Slithering Sidekicks"—Aug. 27

"Fossil Finds"—July 23

### Conservation Club (Ages 2–13)

3:30–4:30 p.m. Ready to dig in and get dirty? Come work with staff to establish healthy habitat for Bay wildlife and important native plants. Activities may include weeding, watering, planting and debris clearing. Adult guardian required with participants. Older students welcome also. Free.

Thursday afternoon—June 4, July 2, Aug. 6



**WEB SITES**

Newport Bay Naturalists & Friends: [www.newportbay.org](http://www.newportbay.org)  
 Peter & Mary Muth Interpretive Center: [www.ocparks.com/unbic](http://www.ocparks.com/unbic)  
 Back Bay Science Center: [www.backbaysciencecenter.org](http://www.backbaysciencecenter.org)  
 California Coastal Commission: [www.coastal.ca.gov](http://www.coastal.ca.gov)

**LOCATION KEY**

Peter and Mary Muth Interpretive Center (IC) 2301 University Drive Newport Beach, CA 92660	Back Bay Science Center (BBSC) 600 Shellmaker Newport Beach, CA 92660	Newport Aquatic Center (NAC) 1 Whitecliffs Drive Newport Beach, CA 92660
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**TRACKS CREDITS**

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**Upper Newport Bay's Earth Day celebration took place at the Peter and Mary Muth Interpretive Center on Sunday, April 26. Thank you to all the volunteers, staff and others who contributed to a successful and enjoyable event.**



**Our Neighbor the Bobcat (cont.)**

Bobcats are not normally interested in your pet as a food source. More realistic threats to our small pets would include hawks, great horned owls and of course coyotes. Even the bobcat understands these threats and has been known to hide underneath a raised patio deck or in some other secluded space near us when its time for them to give birth and nurse their kittens. A particularly favorite birth site might be a yard that is completely walled in, has decking or some other structure that they can crawl under, lots of shrubbery and plenty of rabbits living nearby. They are so secretive that often the residents of the house will be unaware of their presence.

More information on one of our favorite wild animals will appear in a future issue.

Dick Newell is a wildlife researcher and animal tracker in Orange County and has written extensively about our local bobcats. You can see more of his work at [www.octrackers.com](http://www.octrackers.com).

You can report your observations of bobcats at: <http://newportbay.org/bobcatq.htm>