



Creepy-crawly Cowles Mountain

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

From a distance, Cowles Mountain, the highest peak in the city of San Diego, appears lifeless and boring. But as the month quickens to a close and young imaginations ponder goblins and werewolves, San Diegans can delight in the haunting howls of local coyotes and the quirks of miniature mountain savages. East County's Mission Trails Park, including Cowles Mountain, is teeming with a world of creepy-crawly drama. Bill Howell, a local biologist and insect photographer, shares a few grisly stories of Cowles Mountain's creatures.

Beetle Butts and Murderous Mice

According to Howell, the lowly stink beetle belongs to "the largest group of living things on the planet. One-third of all animal species belong to the beetle order. The stink beetle is opportunistic, eating mainly plant material but will nibble on a dead mouse as well. When you tease this guy he'll flip his little bottom skyward and ooze smelly stuff."

Unfortunately, the stink beetle's defensive stench is not enough to save him. Though Cowles Mountain's coyotes are well-known, few folks are aware of their tiny howling counterparts, the grasshopper mice. According to Bill Howell, the grasshopper mouse "squeals like a miniature coyote and can be heard from 100 yards away."

Like the coyote, this squawker is territorial, carnivorous and predatory. Only six inches from head to stubby tail, it has developed a cunning maneuver to slay its main course. "The stink beetle stinks, but the grasshopper mouse grabs the beetle and sticks its butt in the dirt and then chomps off the head. If you find little hollowed-out beetle butts, that means the grasshopper mouse has been by," Howell says.

What IS That?!

A more otherworldly creature is the large, bald-headed Jerusalem cricket. Howell says, "Some people are afraid when they find them but they're pretty harmless. They can bite if you handle them, though." They like moist areas so they can be found on Cowles Mountain in damp brushy hollows and under logs after rainy days.

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It Sits in Spit

Howell also divulged the mysteries of the frog hopper, an insect which resembles a little frog. “The larva of the frog hopper is called the spittle bug. It lives in a little glob of material that looks like spit. Spittle bugs sit on a stem and suck up plant juices. They suck in at one end and leak at the other. They like the local Sagebrush and Coast Goldenbush, which have tall stems.” Howell explains that the spittle is protective. “They’re out on a stem in the hot sun in a little igloo. It’s white, cool, and moist.”

Eight Hairy Drumsticks

The darling of all Halloween insects is the tarantula hawk, or pepsis wasp. The female pepsis wasp, in order to lay her one egg, looks for a tarantula. With a 2-inch, steely blue-black body and 3-inch, orange-red wings, these lovelies are nightmarishly big and they know it.

Howell shares the graphic story of a mother and her precious egg. “She flies close to the ground, her legs hanging down. When she finds a tarantula, she’s looking to pick a fight. You might think the tarantula would do in the wasp because a tarantula is bigger. But the wasp is quick, has wings and can do all kinds of stunts. She annoys the tarantula until the spider finally goes up on its back legs in a defensive posture.

“The wasp can then sting him; she has a barb-less stinger so it can go in and right back out. The tarantula then is paralyzed pretty quickly. She then grabs the tarantula by the fangs and hauls him off to a hole, which she dug earlier. Her victims are usually male tarantulas because they generally out on a stroll, but female tarantulas are also acceptable.”

“Once she’s parked the tarantula in the hole she lays one egg on him,” says Howell. “The egg hatches the larva, which immediately starts chomping away on the tarantula. Its food is fresh because the tarantula is still alive. The larva eats not-important parts first; it goes for the muscles and legs, eight drumsticks, and wanders around inside the tarantula, getting bigger and bigger, and near the end will begin to munch on the vital organs and the tarantula will finally die.

“But by then there aren’t many meals left. At the end of the cycle the larva becomes a pupa. When the wasp emerges after going through it’s cycle, it’s the same size as mom. There’s no such thing as a baby wasp. A wasp is born as an adult.” Tarantula hawks are common in spring and fall, so look for a showdown near you.

Learn More

The Mission Trails Visitors Center (www.mtrp.org) has more information on Cowles Mountain’s various creatures and trails. *Good Bugs for Your Garden* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill 1998), written and illustrated by Allison Mia Starcher, is a delightful read with beautiful illustrations.

Learning more about our creepy-crawly neighbors is yet another way to feel connected to this wild world of ours. So the next time you’re hankering for spooky stories, find your own on a close-to-home adventure. Explore one of Cowles Mountain’s trails and feel grateful that you’re munching on granola instead of tarantulas.

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