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Critter Creek Wildlife Station  
36710 Sand Creek Road  
Squaw Valley, CA 93675



# Critter Creek Chronicle

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**SPRING OPEN HOUSE**  
**Saturday, March 21**  
**11:00 am to 2:00 pm**  
**Last tour begins at 1:30 pm**



**MOUNTAIN LION CAGE IS MOVING FORWARD**



**Critter Creek Chronicle**  
Animals for Education

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**PERMANENT RESIDENT**  
Panda: Opossum

Opossums are considered ancient mammals with ancestors that existed during the reign of the dinosaur. They are slow, clumsy and seem to have a basic intelligence level.



“The adult opossum (*Didelphis marsupialis*) weighs about seven pounds. It’s face is elongated, narrow and cone-shaped. The opossum has black ears that are leathery in texture. Their tails are naked and scaly, and their feet are shaped like hands.” Usually opossums have dense underfur that is white with grayish tips, and guard hairs that are dark gray or black making them appear grayish in color. Panda has pure white fur, rare but not unheard of. Opossums have black beady eyes set in the whitish head, and the feet are black with pink or white toes, but Panda’s feet are white and we know he isn’t an albino because his eyes are black not pink. “The female opossum has a wooly pouch on her abdomen for carrying and nourishing her newborn young. The skull of the opossum belies its ancient lineage because it contains 50 teeth, the most of any U.S. mammal.”

The breeding season for opossums begins in February. Young are born within two weeks after mating. From 10 to 20 offspring leave the birth canal and crawl to the female’s pouch. Helpless and less than an inch long, the offspring struggle to gain possession of one of the 13 teats contained in the pouch. The successful young remain attached to the teats for a month before they begin to leave the pouch for short periods. As they continue to grow, they are forced to abandon the pouch, and the mouse-sized youngsters retreat to the mother’s back, often clinging to her tail as she wanders in search of food.” Litters are not produced at any particular time but are born over a relatively long period from spring through fall in California. “Females can produce two litters per year. The young remain with the female for about three months. The final litter of the season may be traveling with the female when the first litter of the next year is born.”

“Aside from the overwhelming reproductive powers, a reason for opossum survival is their ability to eat nearly anything, vegetable or animal, in any state of decomposition. They serve as scavengers, thriving on foods discarded or rejected by other animals. Opossums eat eggs and young or fellow creatures and occasionally kill sleeping poultry and ground nesting birds. They do not hibernate, but amble forth in search of food in the night.” They have few natural predators. Coyotes, domestic dogs, fox, and owls will prey upon them, but the opossum’s reproductive capabilities overcome any losses. Their slow travel pattern across roads and highways probably spells doom to more opossums than any other adversity.

(Source: Information sheet from Indiana Department of Natural Resources)

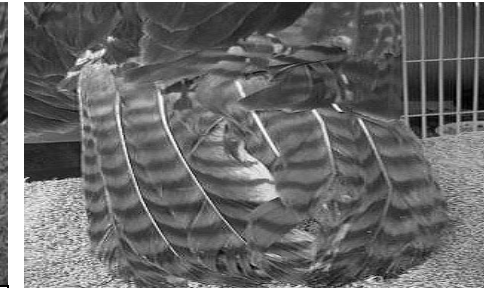
Panda came to us only a few months ago when a family that had successfully raised a litter of opossums had singled out Panda as a pet. Once a year old, the novelty of opossum pet ownership and the fact that it is illegal in the state of California to have a pet opossum convinced them that Panda would be better off at a nature center.

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE ?

When Critter Creek is first contacted about an injured bird, it is always helpful if the Good Samaritan can identify the bird for us. Common hawks found in the Central Valley can be confusing to tell apart. The three most common large hawks are the Red-tailed Hawk, the Red-shouldered Hawk and the Swainson’s Hawk. To a novice all three of these hawks look similar when they are on the ground being intimidating. Regardless of the hawk, the larger of the two when they are paired up is the female and the smaller is the male. This is easy to distinguish when they are side-by-side on a branch but a little trickier when one is apart from the other. To add to the confusion is the difference in immature and mature plumage. In the case of the Red-tailed Hawk, its most identifying feature, the red tail, doesn’t appear for four or five years. The immature Red-tail has gray-brown



Mature Red-tailed hawk tail



Immature Red-tailed hawk tail



Red-shouldered hawk tail

striped tail feathers which can be confused with the starkly contrasted black-white tail feathers of the Red-shouldered Hawk (whether mature or immature).

Red-tailed hawk black shoulder patch



Probably the safest identifying feature of a Red-tailed Hawk in the Central Valley is the black shoulder patch on the underside of the wing. The problem is that if the bird isn’t in flight, it has to be handled in order to extend its wing to see it (not a good idea for a first-time hawk experience). Neither the Red-shoulder nor the Swainson’s Hawk have such a shoulder patch. Another factor making it difficult to identify these three hawks is the variability of their plumage. Each can have a light or a dark phase; each has immature chest plumage that is streaked and spotted.

The Red-shouldered hawk is a slightly smaller hawk with short and rounded wings. The plumage appears to be much more contrasted in black and white, sharper in the streaks and stripes on the tail and chest than the other hawks.

The Swainson’s Hawk has longer more pointed wings with wing lining contrasting the wings’ flight feathers. With the exception of an immature Swainson’s, these hawks usually are dark reddish brown on the chest.



Red-shouldered hawk wing



Swainson’s hawk wing



Red-shouldered hawk

Location and season helps sometimes to identify the bird. Red-tails are fairly pervasive in the Central Valley. Red-shouldered hawks prefer areas near some source of water like a nearby seasonal creek. Swainson’s Hawks prefer open plains like alfalfa fields where there are abundant rodents. They winter chiefly in South America. For some people, they are happy that they can identify the bird as a bird of prey, but we have others who are eager to learn how we can take one look at the bird and are able to identify it. They ask good questions. Hopefully these suggestions of what to look for will help them to understand “what’s the difference.”



Immature Swainson’s hawk