Great American Backyard Campout coming in June

By Julie Leibach, Audubon

Have you planned your summer vacation yet?

With recession fallout still falling, and high gas prices still rising, the task may seem daunting. Here's an easy idea for a mini-vacay: Join nature-lovers across the country on June 25 by participating in the Great American Backyard Campout.

Part of the National Wildlife Federation's "Be Out There" campaign, the event encourages campers from all generations to find a site anywhere—backyards, balconies, parks—where they can connect with nature and each other. Judging by a few testimonials on NWF's website, it sounds like a good time: "It was the most fun night of my life. All of my friends and family became closer and got to know each other a lot better. I'm so glad we were all together, it was the best night ever!"

If slumbering in your own yard isn't "wild" enough, and you've got the traveling means, search for a park using the US Forest Service's kid-friendly site, DiscovertheForest.org. (Register to camp as an individual or team here. If the 25th doesn't work, you can still sign up and camp on a different day.)

Read the whole story

Ski report: It’s going to be an egg-ceptional day



This is the final ski report of the season – and the final day to ski at many Lake Tahoe area ski reports.

Here is the Easter ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

Dog trained to sniff out aquatic invasive species

By Leigh Paynter, News 10

OAKDALE – Debi DeShon had been training dogs to sniff out contraband for the last 15 years, but a decline in the economy and a rise of an eco-threatening animal made her swap narcotics for nature.

At her new business she’s using some of the same techniques she used to “Mussel Dogs” is DeShon’s new detective venture, and She’s training dogs to find invasive species of mussels – the quagga and zebra mussels.

According to DeShon and park officials at the Woodward Reservoir in Oakdale, the Quagga and Zebra mussels can multiply out of control and dramatically change the ecosystem. They are often transported from lake to lake by boaters. The

mussels are only about the size of a finger nail, and their larvae can be microscopic, making them tough to find. Quagga and Zebra mussels can also live for up to 30 days out of the water. The mussels have been found in lakes in surrounding states and in southern California.

Read the whole story

Talking a walk on the wild side in panda paradise

By Kathryn Reed

CHENGDU, China – Fur against my cheek, gnawing away on his (or her?) apple, I so wanted to suddenly be able to speak panda.

For a brief moment, I was in black and white heaven as I held the 6-month-old on my lap. Thoughts of running off with it, learning to grow bamboo in Tahoe, and wondering how to contain it in my back yard filled my head.



Kathryn Reed in panda heaven in Chengdu, China.

With claws that looked like they could slice and dice me and whatever else it wanted to, I decided to let it stay in China.

The donation to hold this bundle of fur (a Christmas gift from Sue) goes to the reserve to continue research on the endangered breed and to help sustain its existence.

Although I have mixed feelings about humans holding wild animals, I know without such contributions it's likely future generations might not ever see a panda other than one that is stuffed.

For nearly 30 years, the World Wildlife Fund has been working in China to help preserve the 3.8 million acres of forest in and around the habitat of pandas. The giant panda is listed as endangered in the World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Animals. There are about 1,600 left in the wild. Nearly 300 live in zoos and breeding centers around the world, mostly in China. The nearest to Tahoe are in San Diego.

Pandas have been special to me ever since they first arrived in 1972 at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. I was in grade school, living outside of the capital at the time. Every time someone would come visit, I'd ask my parents if we could take them to see the pandas.

I still have one of my stuffed pandas named after those two original ones – Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing. Mom made me a pantsuit with pandas. I had sheets with pandas. I insisted on visiting the current pandas when I was in D.C. a few years ago. I have panda pajamas.

Last month, I went to their homeland of China – specifically, the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding. This reserve opened in 1987 with less than a dozen pandas and now has 80.

The goal of this site is to study their behavior, have them reproduce and one day reintroduce them to the wild – though

the latter is a future goal.

Our guide, Philip He, gave us a little history lesson as we drove to the reserve – like how the word panda did not exist in the Chinese language before the 20th century. Panda means bear cat. It was a French explorer who named this animal panda. Their habitat is in five major areas, two of them in Chengdu where we were.

Still, the panda has been a symbol of peace in China for centuries. Armies would put a panda on flags as a way to signal a day of rest from war, according to He. And it was 39 years ago they were a symbol of peace when President Richard Nixon made his groundbreaking trip to China.

Part of why their population is dwindling in the wild is that they are solitary creatures and their mating season is short.

They are big eaters – consuming about 44 pounds of bamboo a day. It could be one of 60 kinds of bamboo.

He said in the 1980s large areas of bamboo died, which led to numerous pandas dying off.

At the Chengdu breeding center about two dozen pandas are born each year. On this particular day three 6-month-olds are sleeping in a tree. Then one scrambles down, deciding mom looks bored. They tumble around in a playful manner until mom gets tired of this game and saunters off.

The 321-acre reserve is also home to red pandas – but in my world – they are just weird looking raccoons and not real pandas.

It was the 1½ year olds playing on their jungle gym of sorts that captured me. One just sat there chomping away on bamboo, oblivious to the camera shutters clicking away.

The pandas are reason enough for me to book another flight to China.

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Hike offers extreme Sierra challenge

By Marek Warszawski, Fresno Bee

Backpacking across the Sierra Nevada as a high school freshman changed Chris Casado's life forever.

Now, Casado wants to use that experience to help change the lives of others.

Casado, a 31-year-old Orinda resident is co-founder of Trans Sierra Extreme Challenge, which this summer is guiding a series of 75-mile hikes across Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in central California. The nine-day trek traverses some of the most remote areas of the parks before culminating in an ascent of Mount Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous U.S.

"The trip had a huge impact on me, just as it has for dozens of others," Casado said. "It lets you know you can do anything you set your mind to, including climbing Mount Whitney."

The TSX Challenge is patterned after similar backpacking trips led by Gettysburg Elementary teacher and professional guide Mike Murphy since 1983. Murphy, who has stood atop Whitney 35 times, is a co-founder of the new commercial venture and will provide logistical support.

Read the whole story

USFS making plans to open Tahoe recreation sites

The U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit is about to begin the annual process of opening recreational facilities around the Lake Tahoe Basin. Campgrounds, day-use areas and forest roads traditionally open in mid-May, weather permitting.

The Taylor Creek Visitor Center and the Tallac Historic Site normally open Memorial Day weekend.



It's almost cycling season on the bike path at Camp Richardson. Photo/LTN file

Before facilities can be opened, the Forest Service must hire crews to staff and manage the sites, clean up from winter, remove safety hazards and wait for the danger of a freeze to pass before turning on water systems.

As a reminder, until recreation facilities officially open, there is no parking, trash removal, or restroom facilities available. Park your vehicle off the roadway and do not block

access gates. Pack out all trash and where pets are allowed,clean up after your animal.

For a complete list of projected opening dates, visit our 2011 Campground and Forest Road webpage.

Ski report: Don’t expect sunshine



The annual Snow Golf Tournament at Alpine Meadows scheduled for April 23 has been postponed to May 7.

Here is Saturday’s ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

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1 week until Upper Truckee Marsh is off-limits to dogs

By Kathryn Reed

It’s the afternoon of April 22 at the Upper Truckee Marsh in South Lake Tahoe. Four dogs – two are leashed, two unleashed. This high percentage of unleashed dogs is what has led the California Tahoe Conservancy – the landowner – to issue an

edict banning all dogs for three months beginning May 1.

On Friday, the dogs were being encouraged to run toward the riparian habitat to chase a ball. As the foursome walked toward the lake the people were yelling at the dogs – clearly not in control of their two dogs.



Two dogs are encouraged to run free April 22 in the Upper Truckee Marsh. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The two other people with one dog each on leash exchanged comments about how it's too bad the responsible dog owners are being punished for the acts of others. They both agreed this area is no longer fun to visit in the summer because of the unruly nature of humans and canines.

For now, not all of the meadow is accessible because the water is in the backyards of some residences.

Trout Creek is visible, but only because that's where the water is running the fastest. Otherwise, its banks have disappeared.

The CTC may have an item about the dog ban on its May 19 agenda. People can always comment on items not on the agenda.

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Tahoe Bike Challenge adding fundraising component

The 6th annual Tahoe Bike Challenge 2 Work, School and Play is May 23 to June 3.

This annual event challenges everyone to ride their bike in lieu of using an automobile to go to work, school or just riding for errands and enjoyment. In 2009, more than 700 people, 87 company teams and six schools registered online to log their trips and miles for a total of 23,000 miles.

Last year's event added an unforecasted challenge – snow and cold temperatures that significantly reduced participation.

For this year's Bike Challenge, the Lake Tahoe Bicycle Coalition is inaugurating a community program called Bucks 4 Bikes. Bucks 4 Bikes is being promoted to raise dollars for the purchase of bicycles for Tahoe's youth who might otherwise not have one. Individuals and teams will be asked to consider pledging a dollar per mile they ride during the Challenge for this program.

Individual and Team awards will be given to those who raise the most dollars.

More details will appear online.

USFS engaging mountain bikers in trail design

The U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit has hired professional trail and bike park designers Hilride to work with trail users to create a plan for improving the Corral Trail. The Corral Trail is a popular multi-use trail on Lake Tahoe's South Shore that is popular with mountain bikers and open to dirt bikes and all-terrain vehicles as well.

The first opportunity to participate in the redesign will be a workshop facilitated by Hilride on April 28, from 6-8pm at 35 College Drive, South Lake Tahoe. This meeting will be an information-gathering session at which trail users will be able to describe their interests and identify what types of experiences they are seeking.

On June 11, National Get Outdoors Day, Hilride will lead a design workshop on the trail after a brief session at the Forest Supervisor's Office. More details on the on-site workshop will follow.