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TODAY'S SPOTLIGHT: FROG AND TOAD WALK



PHOTOS BY STEVE ZYLIUS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

CROAK: Naturalist Dorea Martin shows a western toad, which is used as an instructional animal. Hikers on the frog and toad walk at the Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy in San Juan Capistrano got an up-close look at the toad and a California tree frog (both in captivity) before the hike.

FORAGING FOR FROGS

The frog walk at Donna O'Neill Conservancy is popular with children as well as adults.

By **SHAWN PRICE**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

A chill settles into the winter green valley and the skies are threatening rain. The twilight seems to glow.

The mood is certainly set. Now will the frogs come and greet us? That's a tough one to answer. They're a capricious bunch. A chorus of them one moment, silence the next. Just when you think you're about to uncover dozens of them, or even a few, it all goes quiet.

Searching for frogs and toads in the chilly moonlight is a different sort of intrigue. It's partly the thrill of the hunt and partly the simple pleasure of an evening walk in the woods.

A half hour earlier, we were enjoying the company of a male western toad chirping, almost whimpering to be let go as Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy naturalist Dorea Martin gently held him up for our inspection. He was a fine lad with beefy thighs that make for haute cuisine in other places, but

Frog & Toad Walk II

7-9 p.m., April 12
The Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy, San Juan Capistrano.
\$5-\$10 or free for members.
Reservations and information:
949-489-9778

inspecting him up close. The kids pet him. Martin and the conservancy's executive director Heidi Keller give a brief introduction using the toad, a California tree frog, some tadpoles, a few books, several photos, and the recordings of local native frog and toad sounds or "songs" as they are called.

It becomes obvious quickly the songs vary from species to species quite a bit. Though typically, males do the vocalizing. "The thing is, we don't have that many frogs in the area, so it's easy to become an expert," Keller said with a chuckle.

here is simply out of the question.

He is well taken care of as an instructional animal for the conservancy, and he's good at his job. He must be, since most of the dozen people gathered for the evening take turns



WHAT'S THAT SOUND? Carrying flashlights, Nick Sariego, 7, left, and Alex Collas, 8, both of Lake Forest, participate in the first of two frog and toad walks held at the Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy.

The brief talk over, we head several hundred yards deeper into the conservancy's gated territory. Keller warns that it's nature, and there is no guarantee we'll see any frogs in the wild. The rain drops we are expecting should have fallen hours ago. That would have spurred a flurry of frog activity.

The site of a dozen small spot lights scurrying along the ground and brush on the trail is part of the poetry of an evening hike experience. The crisp air, the stillness of a meadow, the coming and going of a

frog chorus all nearly obscure the fact we're not having much luck finding what we came here for.

Martin checks under the small wooden bridge over a creek and the group slinks along looking and listening. No one seems disappointed when we head back to our cars. An off night frog hunting is still a better than an average Saturday night.

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