

# Learning about the Birds and the Bees — one Bug at a Time

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I thought for sure it was a scorpion.

It was curled up in a ball, slimy looking, inside the shoe I was just about to put on.

Two things crossed my mind: Do I have to throw the shoes out and is my whole garage crawling with scorpions.

I very gingerly lifted up the shoe and placed it in a Ziploc® gallon size freezer bag with the easy slide zipper. This bag went inside a grocery bag and then it all went in an enormous Crate & Barrel shopping bag.

Out of breath from the whole ordeal I take the bag to my neighbor. This was a job for Mr. Nature: Sam Smoker.

Sam and his late wife Kay were sitting outside in the back yard when I tore through their gate screaming and panting. They barely blinked.

I hand Sam the shopping bag and without hesitation he takes out bag after bag while simultaneously rolling his eyes and shaking his head. He gets to the shoe, peeks inside and with his bare hands just pulls out the scorpion! With that, I start to run and they start to laugh.

It was a potato bug.

I mean really; what the heck do I know from potato bugs? Where I grew up, a potato was a potato and a bug was a bug.

It was either divine intervention by the Greek God of Nature or total pay back for laughing at countless episodes of Green Acres that I ended up living next-door to the retired Director of the Lindsay Wildlife Museum.

To fully appreciate the magnitude of this sitcom-like-over-the-fence- neighbor thing, it's important that you see the whole picture. Sam is the real deal. At 86, he still does his own yard work. He's a man for all seasons – enjoying winter camping in the snow and summer camping in the desert. In between he hikes up Shell Ridge or Mt. Diablo. If he's traveling, he walks to BART to catch a train headed for SFO – luggage and all. He continues to be a passionate volunteer for several open space organizations and when he needs a haircut, he walks to town. And then there's me.

Sam, Kay and their daughter moved to Walnut Creek in 1967 when Sam was offered the Directorship of what was then called The Alexander Lindsay Junior Museum. With a paid staff of two and a small band of volunteers, Sam had a role in every aspect of the museum. From helping with injured or orphaned wildlife to being head-curator, docent and teacher for the throngs of students and visitors, Sam was instrumental in the growth and success of what is now one of the most famous wildlife museums in the country.

Which brings us back to the scorpion.

Potato bugs were, well, small potatoes compared to where I am now. We're talking that I can tell by their tracks which critter has run through my yard. I know what to do when the bird hits the window and lays stunned on the ground. Or how and why a bird lines its nest with dryer lint. Sam has given me mace and a whistle for when the deer decide to have lunch at my kitchen table and I even know a flower from a weed. Ok, maybe some of the time.

Even when I don't want to learn, Sam makes me learn. One morning when I pulled into the garage I saw a dead rat in the trap. I thought about getting a broom and just sweeping it outside -- but then I'd still have a dead rat on my driveway which would serve as the lunch bell to a bunch of other critters. No, this job calls for Sam, and call Sam I did. Does Sam bring with him a Ziploc® gallon size bag, hell no. He doesn't even wear gloves. He just picks the rat up by its tale, studies it and tells me that it happens to be a mama-rat. "I don't care Sam, just get rid of it!" He points to the rat's nipples (yes, rats have nipples) and explains because they are enlarged and exposed, this mama rat was still feeding her litter when she met its demise. Great, now I'm not only feeling nauseous, I'm feeling guilty.

Sam has taught me how to drown out a yellow jacket nest and when it's okay to knock down a Mud Dauber wasps nest. I learned how to plant sweet corn and the Latin name for just about everything. When I unthinkingly called his 86-year-old pet tortoise Gertrude a turtle, I found out there's a big difference between a tortoise and a turtle and never called Gertie a turtle again. What's more, Sam has every tool, epoxy glue and hook you can imagine so when I need something I don't go to Home Depot, I go "Sam's Club."

Sam pretends to be bothered by my barrage of badgering but I don't believe it for a minute. He finds no greater joy than sharing his knowledge and love of nature and wildlife with anyone eager to learn.

"Oh my god! What the hell is that?" Time to go bug Sam.