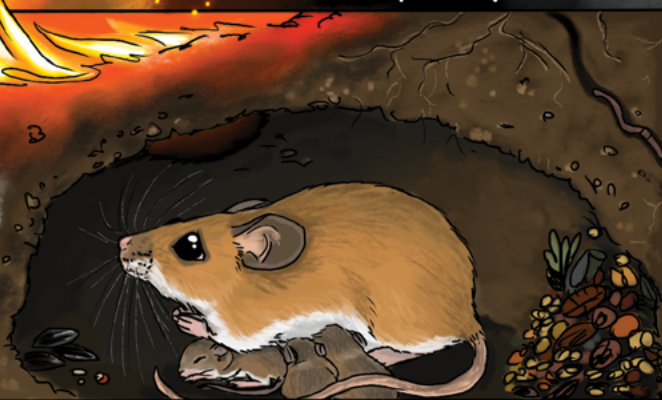


Pyrodiversity

When Fire Sparks New Life

By Emily Brunner

I was just a baby when the Eaton fire tore through the hills and town of Altadena.



As California deer mice, my family and I rely on the plants and insects that live in the hills to survive. When the ground cooled and we could finally emerge from our den, everything we knew was gone...



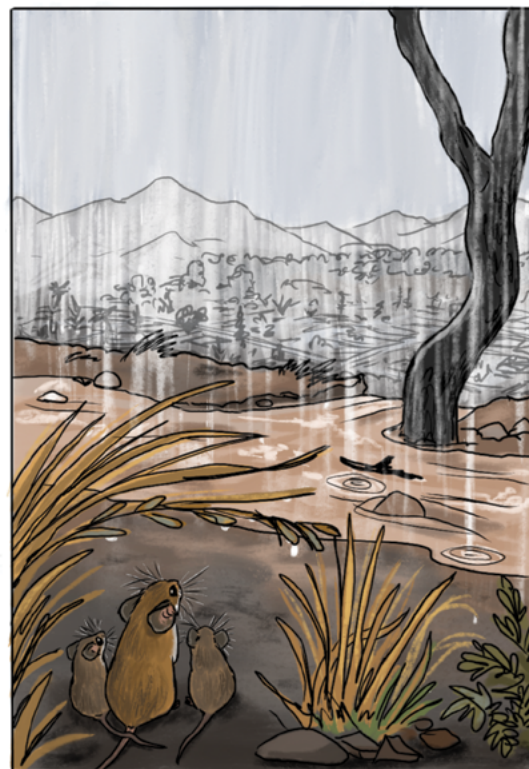
...so we, too, had to leave.



The fire left behind a blackened scar on the hillside. We survived as best we could, hiding in the greenery along the edge of the scar while coyotes, bobcats, and hawks hunted for displaced animals like us.



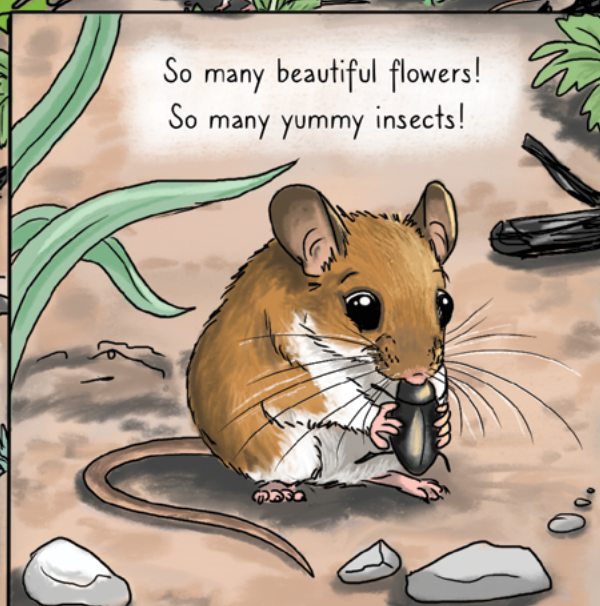
Heavy rain came not long after the fire, which was good, but it also washed away wide swaths of the burnt ground, creating canyons too big for us mice to cross.



Until finally...

A landscape with new plants growing after a fire. The ground is sandy and rocky, with several large, vibrant orange poppies and pink lilies. A small black bird is perched on a bare, black tree trunk. In the background, more bare trees and a hazy horizon are visible.

New life! Fire poppies, lilies, bushmallow, and whispering bells popped up everywhere! With the old plants gone, these new plants quickly took root. Mother told us that they needed the fire and smoke to grow! How strange!

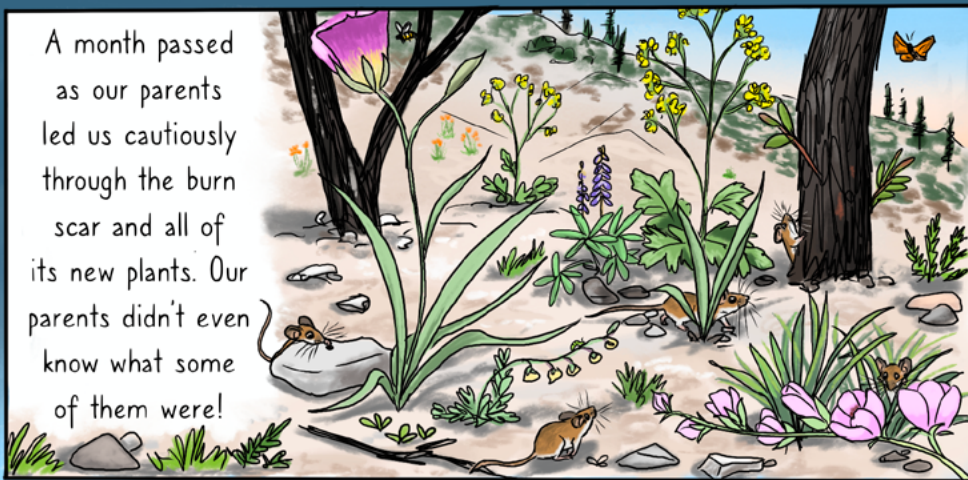
A close-up of a brown mouse with a white belly, sitting on the ground and eating a large black beetle. The mouse is looking down at the beetle with its mouth open.

So many beautiful flowers!
So many yummy insects!

A wide view of a scorched landscape. In the foreground, there are large orange poppies and pink lilies. In the background, a town is visible, with buildings and a large yellow excavator. The sky is blue with some clouds. A mouse is sitting on a rock in the foreground, looking towards the town.

Horrible screeching and banging noises carried up the hill from the human burrow of Altadena. We watched as enormous creatures ate great mouthfuls of the scorched land and carried it away. I wondered, "Why?"

A month passed as our parents led us cautiously through the burn scar and all of its new plants. Our parents didn't even know what some of them were!

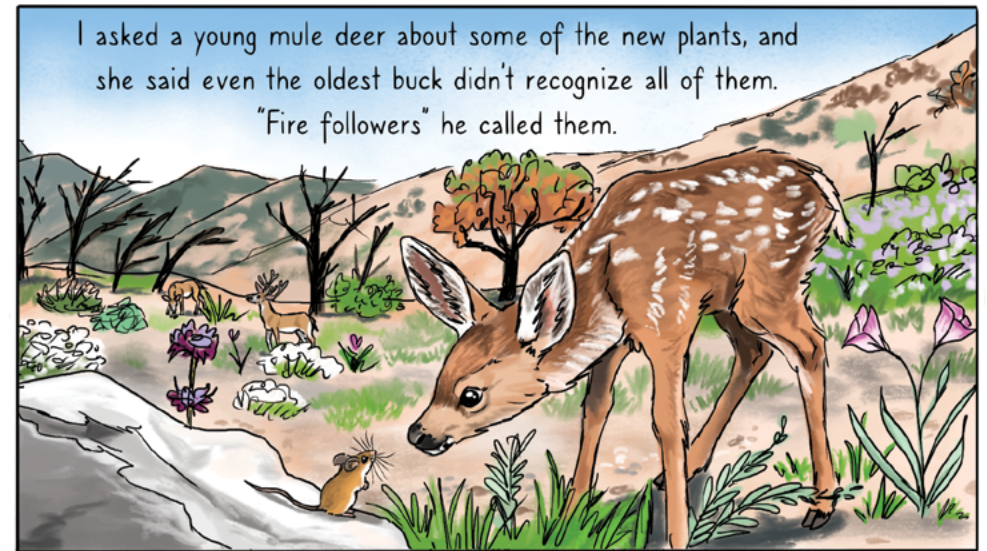


We dove for cover as a great horned owl swooped overhead and landed on a charred oak. Hidden under a towering black mustard, I stifled a sneeze. The annoyingly peppery plant had popped up everywhere in recent days, but at least it provided cover from the owl!

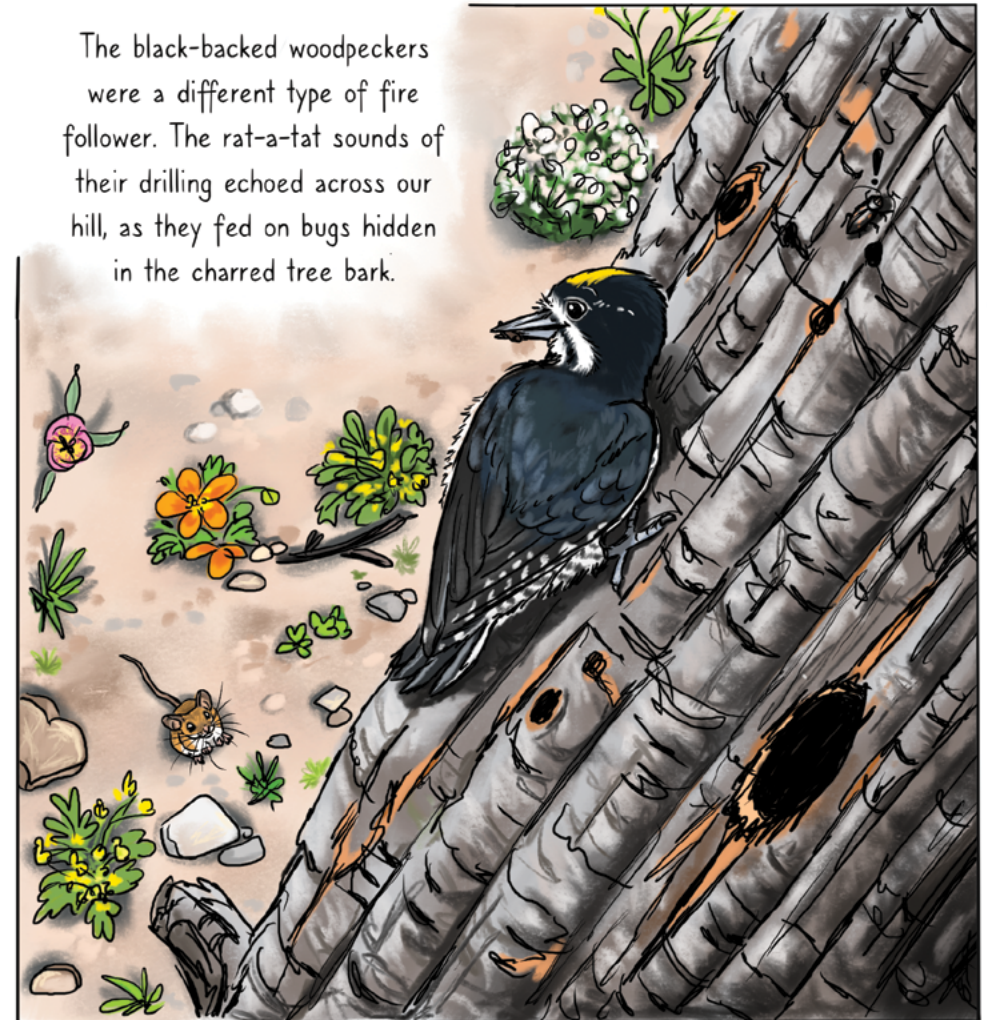


When father said it was safe to move again, mother pointed out some elderberry sprouts. She said with enough sunlight, they would grow delicious berries, if only they could outcompete the mustard.

I asked a young mule deer about some of the new plants, and she said even the oldest buck didn't recognize all of them. "Fire followers" he called them.



The black-backed woodpeckers were a different type of fire follower. The rat-a-tat sounds of their drilling echoed across our hill, as they fed on bugs hidden in the charred tree bark.



When summer arrived, my siblings and I parted ways to start our own families in the recovering land.



I spent my days foraging seeds and exploring the shade provided by a growing web of sages, vining island morning glories, monkey-flowers, and wild cucumber.



Within this shelter, I found toyon, ceanothus, and manzanita seedlings. My deer friends would devour these yummy sprouts, if it weren't for the plants growing above and around them. Overhead, I heard the ravens discussing ecological succession, whatever that means. I wish I could be as smart as they are someday.

One early morning, as I was returning to my burrow to sleep, I spied a large group of humans trudging through my home!



Such curious creatures! They avoided stepping on certain plants, but pulled out others. The nasty black mustard, fountain grass, and yellow star thistle were all pulled out by the roots. The goldfinches would have something to say about that! We all hated the thorny thistle, but the finches loved its seeds!

A year after the fire, I had a family of my own. I told them all about the fire followers that they may never see in their lifetime. I hoped my pups would never experience the fear of fire like I had, but I loved sharing with them the beautiful things that came after it...

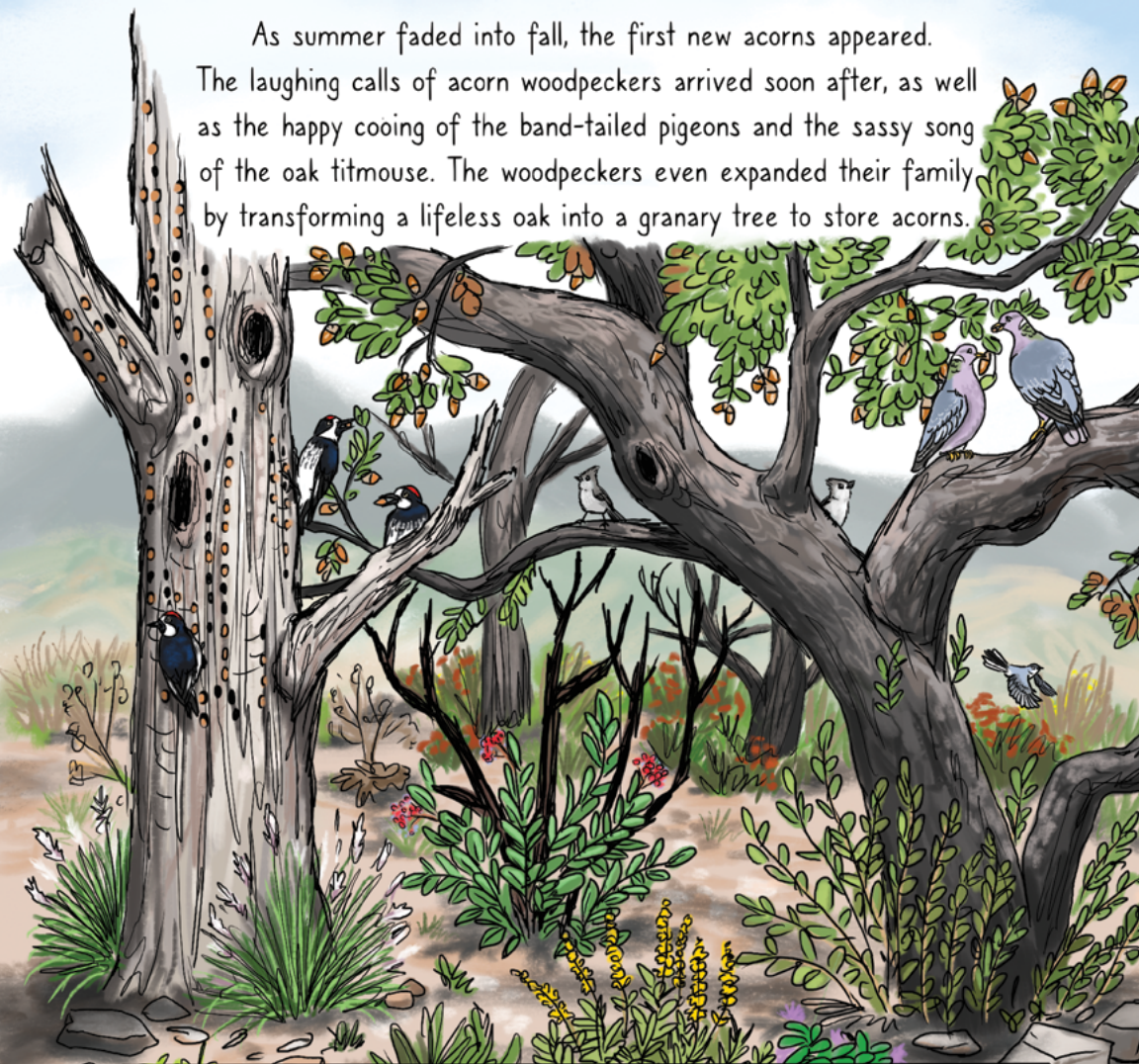


...like the blackened oak trees that had resprouted...

...and the bluebirds who crafted their nest in a hole hollowed out by a woodpecker. I found beauty in knowing that their fledglings would explore this new world alongside my little ones.



As summer faded into fall, the first new acorns appeared. The laughing calls of acorn woodpeckers arrived soon after, as well as the happy cooing of the band-tailed pigeons and the sassy song of the oak titmouse. The woodpeckers even expanded their family by transforming a lifeless oak into a granary tree to store acorns.



The ground squirrels buried acorns by the thousands! I secretly hoped they would forget where they put them so even more trees would grow.



More banging and screeching noises came from the burrow of Altadena. My partner and I sat and watched as more enormous creatures built new dens for the humans. We both found the noises scary, but it was also oddly comforting to see them rebuild their homes, like we had.



No more power lines swayed in the wind. The squirrels said the humans buried them underground to help make the terrible fire we experienced a thing of the past.

Spring is back again! There is even more new growth! Every year the humans come back to remove more of the nasty invasive plants. I now know why! Invasives, like black mustard, grow too fast and crowd out native plants. When they dry out every summer, they make fires so much worse! Removing them prevents future fires from becoming so large and out of control!



As the sun sets, I sit and contemplate. I am old now. Three years have passed since the fire, and our ecosystem thrives with more plants and animals than ever before. Turns out, fire has a place in our home after all...



...so long as each one of us plays our part.

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For each of our free eBooks, the storytellers select a local Los Angeles nonprofit to highlight. The creator of "Pyrodiversity" chose the California Wildlife Center.



FROM THE CREATOR

"I chose the California Wildlife Center because of their ongoing support and care for native Los Angeles wildlife and environments. Wildlife rehabilitation is a tough job in such a massive urban area like LA, and they truly put their hearts and souls into animal rescue and educating the public about how to best help our native wildlife. Given that my story highlights a variety of native animals, it seemed like a great fit."

--Emily Brunner, Creator of "Pyrodiversity"

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