

Explore the Watershed A Lungless Land Dweller

Scientific name: *Ensatina eschscholtzii xanthoptica*
Common name: Yellow-eyed ensatina

One of the most secretive yet distinctive salamanders found within the Sausal Creek Watershed is the yellow-eyed ensatina. Whether during the summer-dry or winter-cold seasons, this salamander prefers to reside within rotting moist logs, burrows made by other animals, or under large rocks or tree bark within heavily-shaded redwood forest, oak woodland, chaparral, or grassland habitat. But when it emerges, its striking yellow upper eye patch, embedded within an otherwise black iris, is unmistakable. Its overall body coloration is typically orange to orange-brown, reminiscent of the California newt (*Taricha torosa*).



Restoration Manager Erin Todd and Acalanes High School volunteers came across this ensatina in the redwood duff when planting at Fern Ravine.

The genus name *Ensatina* is Latin for sword-shaped, which likely refers to the teeth. The species name, *eschscholtzii*, is in homage to the 19th century German naturalist Johann F. Eschscholtz, an early explorer of the Pacific Northwest and California. The Greek subspecies name, *xanthoptica*, refers to the yellow eye.

This medium-sized (3-6 inches total length) salamander belongs to the family Plethodontidae (lungless salamanders). As such, they do not breathe through lungs but respire through their skin and internal mouth tissues. They are terrestrial so do not require the standing water of creeks and ponds to survive. However, they prefer damp environments and are most active during the rainy season. Unlike more aquatic salamanders, the yellow-eyed ensatina guards its eggs, which are deposited on land in moist, damp habitats and in and under rotting logs and bark. Hatchlings look like miniature adults. Adults can live up to 15 years!

Yellow-eyed ensatinas are dietary generalists eating a wide variety of invertebrates including ants, beetles, worms, millipedes, sow bugs, and snails. Stellar's jay, garter snakes, and raccoons are known to eat ensatina. To avoid being preyed upon, ensatina may drop their tails, which contain poison glands. Be aware that if you touch the tail and then your lips, you may have numb lips for several hours, but you will survive.

What can you do to protect the yellow-eyed ensatina? Please do not disturb downed logs, bark, or rocks on the forest floor, as these habitats are the favored and essential shelter sites of these and other native salamanders and reptiles within the Sausal Creek Watershed.

--Dr. Robert Leidy, Ecologist, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency