



The Rattler

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- ◆ Fire!
- ◆ Earthquake!

Placerita Canyon Nature Center

PCNCA's Mission Statement

To inspire a passion, awareness and respect for the environment, and to preserve and protect for future generations the history and ecosystem of Placerita Canyon.

January/February 2009

Dear Nature Friends

I want to wish you, your family and friends a very happy, healthy and fun 2009. Take the time to have a good look around you, enjoy this beautiful state we live in and most of all, be excited about the nature around you.

We are so pleased with our new docent training class starting January 13. Check out all the topics covered by those classes and you will understand why. Welcome to all the future new docents and the Class of 2009.

We spoke about this in the last issue of the Rattler, but I want to remind you that the park is open and all the activities are on as usual. The main building is still in reconstruction until March or April but this has not stopped us in the past and won't in the future. So come and enjoy the cool weather in the park. The vegetation is waking up from the last couple of rains and new fresh green growth is everywhere. It is a great place to be on a clear winter morning.

Thank You, Pam Koch, Assistant Editor

You might have noticed that this issue of the Rattler has a slightly different look than previous issues. It is not the result of some artistic or creative decision but it is a sort of "Help, I am sinking" situation. I found myself in the middle of house renovations, with gravel dust and constant noise, no privacy, many days without electricity and some without running water. I want the Rattler to be a quality newsletter but it was impossible for me to do so under those circumstances.

I cried for help and I can tell you the docents at Placerita are a fantastic group, always ready to help each other. They always keep in mind that the reputation of our natural area comes first and they are ready to do the work. In this case, Pam Koch came forward, she wrote many articles herself to cover different topics as needed and other docents sent different articles to make sure we had some variety of topics. We hope you will enjoy reading this issue. It is always our goal to not only inform you but to interest you as well.

Thank you so much Pam, for all your work that makes this issue possible and to all the docents who volunteered their help. It is so heartwarming to see a group effort in action.

Dues and Voting

Just a reminder for everyone. You need to pay your dues now for 2009. You have to be a member of record as of March to be able to both vote in the board election and run for a seat on the board.

Here are the categories:

Student Naturalist	\$15
Senior Citizen over 62	\$15
Individual or Docent	\$30
Family	\$45

Please send your check to Placerita Canyon Nature Center, 19152 Placerita Canyon Road, Newhall, CA 91321, Attention Membership Chair.

Thank you for your interest in the docent organization and your support throughout the year.

The Rattler is a bi-monthly publication sponsored by the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates to promote the preservation and enjoyment of the Placerita Canyon Natural Area. Please come, enjoy, learn...and volunteer.

Adopt-an-Animal

PCNCA gratefully acknowledges **Luke Stabe** of Saugus for his adoption of Rosie, our rosy boa (a gift from Missy Bierend) and also **Julia and Alexander Melchiorre** for their adoption of Rosie also. These are special guardians, helping in the care and feeding of their adopted animal at our Nature Center. Thank you!



Placerita has a Blog

By Ron Kraus

If you've been locked up in a cave without a TV, radio, or a computer for the past several years, maybe you haven't heard of the term "blog." Blog is a contraction of "Web log" and is defined as a Web site, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video.

Blogs are convenient places to post short articles to groups of people with similar interests. So, as a supplement to our Placerita website (Placerita.org) I have started a blog. I've used it to communicate information about the Sayre Fire, post a video showing common Placerita birds, show some pictures of the NCA Awards Program, and put up some information of interest primarily to the volunteers and staff of Placerita. You can find it at:

<http://placeritacanyonaudio.blogspot.com/>

Blogs are designed to encourage 2-way communication, so you can post comments on anything you read on our blog or you can become a contributor and post your own articles (contact me at ron.kraus@placerita.org for access.) Hannah White has become a contributor and has posted an excellent article about falconry. Helen Sweany did some research about the different kinds of holes that can be seen around Placerita and that has been posted.

So, check out the blog regularly for all kinds of information about Placerita Canyon!



The Rattler

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If you have an article you feel would follow the interests of this publication, please feel free to submit it. The deadline is the 10th of every other month. Mail your article to:

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Newhall, CA 91321-3213

or you can email it to Evelyne at

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Please email your article in MS

Word if possible.

Moving? Please let us know so you won't miss any issues of the Rattler.

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Visit our Internet site at www.placerita.org--Ron Kraus is the webmaster.

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Disclaimer

Because there is often limited space on various field trips, we find that we need to enforce the following: All trips and dinner celebrations are open only to Placerita Canyon docents and volunteers who have paid their yearly dues. Many trips can be open to family and friends but only with previous authorization from the person planning the trip. Thank you for your understanding.

The Placerita Canyon Nature Center and Natural Area Park are located within the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County in the Supervisorial District of Michael D. Antonovich. The Natural Area and Nature Center are operated by the County of Los Angeles, Department of Parks and Recreation, in partnership with the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates

Pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the County of Los Angeles, Department of Parks and Recreation, has designated an ADA Coordinator to carry out this Department's compliance with the non-discriminatory provisions of the ADA. For more information you may contact the ADA Coordinator's Office at TEL 213-738-2970 TDY 213-427-6118 FAX 213-487-0380; Upon 3-day request notice, sign language interpreters and related materials in alternative formats (Braille-transcript, large print, audio-record, video-captioning, live-description) or any other reasonable accommodations are available to the public for County-sponsored activities and events.



Power Lunch with Supervisor Mike Antonovich

Jim Southwell and Pam Koch enjoyed a spectacular lunch in Chinatown on November 24 with Supervisor Mike Antonovich. Did you know our County Supervisor spoke Chinese?

Also joining Jim and Pam at lunch were Santa Clarita Field Deputy Rosalind Wayman, Press Deputy Tony Bell, Parks Deputy Sussy Nemer, Special Operations Deputy Al Citraro, Social Services Deputy Helen Berberian, and Budget and Assistant Chief Deputy Lori Glasgow.

Topics of discussion at the lunch included PCNCA and the County working with the City of Santa Clarita to access the SDI property for event parking. Jim and Pam discussed the SDI property with Mayor Bob Kellar in August and Jim recently followed up that discussion with City Parks Director Rick Gould. Escrow is scheduled to close the end of January.

We have inadequate event parking at Placerita Canyon Nature Center and currently rely on the good graces of our fine neighbor Disney Ranch. They have been generous in granting us event parking in the past and they are most gracious but we

fear overstaying our welcome or finding circumstances some year which would deny us this privilege.

In addition to the good location of the SDI property for event parking, it is also a perfect area for safe access to Walker Ranch and the open space corridor of Golden Valley Ranch. Parking at the entrance to Walker Ranch is limited and hazardous often resulting in cars parking along narrow two-lane Placerita Canyon Road. Jim and Pam were interested to learn the County of Los Angeles gave the City of Santa Clarita \$250,000 towards the purchase of this property and were delighted to hear Sussy Nemer and Rosalind Wayman were discussing the possibility of a trail from the SDI property across the Golden Valley Ranch open space easement and onto Walker Ranch. There is an old trail there now that could be reworked.

Jim stated a desire to open lines of communication with the County and was warmly encouraged to invite Deputy Director Hayden Sohm to quarterly board meetings. Jim also said we need better signage for the Oak of the Golden Dream and suggested a sign be erected on Placerita Highway, one at the entrance to the park and one at the trail head leading to the oak tree.

It was a great time in Chinatown. Xie Xie (thank you) to Supervisor Antonovich and his wonderful staff.

Power Lunch with Bob Kellar

Jim Southwell and Pam Koch had the first of three 'Power Lunches', won at a fundraiser. This first lunch was on August 27th with Santa Clarita Mayor, Bob Kellar. Jim and Pam had an opportunity to ask about the city's purchase of the SDI property, adjacent to Golden Valley Ranch and Walker Ranch. It would be a nice area for event parking for the nature center, as well as off-street parking for access to hiking trails. Escrow should close on the property sometime in January and we look forward to working with the City on possible parking access for our patrons.



Lunch with Congressman Buck McKeon

Docents Jim Southwell and Pam Koch had an opportunity to meet with Congressman Buck McKeon over lunch on October 28th. During this most enjoyable hour, also attended by Congressman McKeon's Deputy Chief of Staff Bob Haueter, they had a chance to talk about the Nature Center and its need for a new museum. They also discussed HR6156, Eastern Sierra and San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act. This bill will add Magic Mountain and Lower Piru Creek among other areas to protected lands and preserve them for future generations. Congressman McKeon visited Magic Mountain recently and had the rare pleasure of seeing six condors fly overhead. This was the second 'Power Lunch' of three lunches won on behalf of PCNCA at auction at the SCV Press Club Newsmaker of the Year Award Banquet held February 29, 2008. Pam and Jim met with Mayor Bob Kellar August 27th and with Supervisor Antonovich on November 24th.



Thank you so much Jim and Pam for giving this kind of exposure to Placerita Canyon Nature Center with our Congressman, our Mayor and our Supervisor. You had an incredible opportunity to bring our beloved Natural Area in the bright light with all those very influential political gentlemen and we are very grateful that you were able to participate to those very important lunches.



Premier Birder Leaves the Nest

By Pam Koch

Ian Swift isn't just a birder. He's a biologist, an entomologist, a native plant authority, and all around nature guy. He has been at the nature center for 20 years. He first came to Placerita at the tender age of 9 and has been fascinated with nature ever since. He volunteered for Junior Rangers, and as he grew up, was hired on part time and became supervisor, then Superintendent of Placerita Canyon Nature Center. To our utter horror he has moved to northern California after accepting a job with the Contra Costa Water District as a biologist. Friends and colleagues gathered together at the nature center's picnic grounds on October 26 for a send off party.

Mickey Long said he wasn't just losing a Superintendent, which as important as that is, he is also losing an environmental specialist.

Throughout the years, Ian has taught us all about the plants, animals, geology, history, ecology, and politics of our canyon. He was Frank Hovore's protégé and what better mentor was there? The party drew attendees from various nature centers and walks of life.

We enjoyed a potluck lunch while telling stories about Ian and listening, a bit sadly, to his farewell speech. He said "I don't want to leave, I love it here. Thank you very much for coming out here – it's very bittersweet. I have the best job in the world. I'm excited about my new job, but it's very sad to leave. At most jobs people are there because they have to be there. Everyone here is here because they want to be here, it isn't because they have to be here. Although I think Diane (Southwell) makes Jim come here", Ian added, smiling. We presented Ian with a memory book that we all took time to sign and add our private wishes for him. And we 'passed the hat' to give our underpaid friend some cash to help him build a nest egg.

Ian is stretching his wings, and rightly so, but his accomplishments to date are already impressive for a young man. Ian's specialty is insects and in particular, beetles. He has traveled all over the world, mostly to Latin America to study beetles. He even helped with the BBC film, David Attenborough's "Life in the Undergrowth". It was filmed in French Guiana and the highlight was capturing the world's largest insect, *Titanus giganteus*, a giant beetle around 6 inches long.

Ian has discovered new species of insects. One, which his research confirmed in 2007, was indeed a new species living right here in Placerita. It was first discovered by Frank Hovore in the mid 1970's. Ian named it *Xylotrechus hovorei* in Frank's honor.* Ian has insects name after him too. In 2005, an inch-long longhorn beetle, Ian's specialty, was named *Strangalia ianswifti* by the co-discoverers, Frank Hovore and John Chemsak.**

Ian's knowledge goes beyond bugs and encompasses the entire natural habitat. He has been our teacher, mentor, leader, and friend. It was a bittersweet day for all of us. For the last three years Ian has been on the list of Santa Clarita's top 51 most influential people. I'm sure he'll continue to be influential in Contra Costa County, and who knows, he may fly back to us one day.

*<http://www.the-signal.com/news/archive/634/>

**<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/FOR+A+BEETLE+LOVER,+BUSINESS+AND+PLEASURE+CONVERGE+RESEARCHER+TO+SIFT...-a0148639638> DAILY NEWS

For those of you who missed it (and for those of you who made it, too) there are some pictures of Ian's going away party on the Placerita Flickr site at:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/placerita/sets/72157608424641806/show/>

Is This a Job?

By Deb Walt

Placerita's newest Rec Leader, Deb Walt started at the nature center as a docent, joined the board, then joined the County. While we'll miss her on the board, we certainly are happy to know she's working at one of our favorite places in the world. She describes her new job

Is this a job? Out behind the trailer during the "Golden Hour", all alone with the Acorn Woodpeckers, Ravens, Western Bluebirds, Scrub Jays, I'm doing "dishes" with a symphony of bird calls around me. No patrons, no staff-even the animals have been evacuated. Now the last red hazy light goes below the outline of oaks. The breeze kicks up. Sycamores chatter and acorns fall. Commuters are flying home on the road and spotting planes are fewer and farther between checking on the recent fire.

It all started with some advice from Ian Swift to apply for a recreation leader position. Ten months later with encouragement from Frank Hoffman I was accepted and now, dare I say it, I work at one of my favorite places in the world. Surrounded by interesting/interested people--all enthusiastic and caring; many of them volunteers who come because they love it here too. We learn together and laugh a lot. There really is a sense of family here.

Hopefully, all of my hair will be gray when I must leave. There is an infinite amount to learn--even about the plants (my favorite). I look forward to sharing this wonderful natural area with my new friends.

The 3 B's

By Richard Norton



Observing backyard bird behavior has become a new hobby of mine. When I moved to Sylmar last year I had no idea that the area was a virtual aviary. I have counted at least 19 species of birds just around my house and I'm sure I'll be adding to the list. I do have an advantage in that the house came with a balcony which makes birding effortless and allows me to observe certain flight behavior which might be more difficult from the ground. Also, one of my neighbors has a variety of chickens, roosters, pigeons, and exotic birds--one pair of Emu from Australia, a pair each of albino and Indian blue peafowl. It makes it a little noisy in spring breeding time, but to see peafowl fans 6 - 8 feet across (truly glorious) is well worth it. This only adds to the plethora of observable avian behavior right from my backyard.

One of the most striking bird behaviors that most of us have seen is called "mobbing." From my backyard I've seen ravens mob red-shouldered hawks and then immediately get mobbed themselves by 3 or 4 northern buntings. I've seen a black phoebe sit on a fence, and when joined by a raven sitting 6 feet away, repeatedly hop up and down 5 feet in the air until the raven leaves. Almost every backyard bird species has mobbed the raven pair at least once. Sparrows, chickadees, buntings, orioles, hawks, doves, have all had their turn on the ravens. Even the chickens and roosters pitch a fit when the raven comes around. It's easy to conclude that most birds view the crows and ravens as a threat to their food and nest resources.

Everyone has heard birdsong and groups of sparrows, acorn woodpeckers, or king birds chattering together in trees, but viewing birds using body language

to teach or discipline their young is a behavior that might be new for some of us. I saw a juvenile black-capped chickadee sneak out from the nest which lie under the roof tiles and take a walk until the parent raised its head over the eaves and gave a sharp chirp and head movement. That juvenile returned to the safety of the nest as fast as it could and still got a good scolding. A fledgling sparrow tried to fly, only to quickly turn and perch awkwardly on a drain spout. The parent appeared, spread its wings and tail feathers while perched, and with precise movements demonstrated flight to its youngster.

Now that spring is here, courtship behavior is easily observed. Among sparrows, displays of aerodynamic prowess might be the tipping point in regard to mate selection. I witnessed a male fly straight from the ground to where a female was perched, then stop in midair, invert his whole body and with wings tucked in, bullet shaped, drop rapidly to the ground. The male's recovery at the last second only added to my amazement. In the bottle brush trees, many species' vocalized disputes often reach a volume louder than the roosters. The conflicts occasionally spill to the grass below to be settled more aggressively.

Both large and small passerines have flown so close to my balcony that flight patterns are clearly visible. One pattern had several wing beats followed by a streamlined glide with slight undulations of the body resembling a dolphin swimming through water. The sightings of hairpin turns are too numerous to mention. Sometimes the turns appear right-angled, where the bird actually stops to turn sharply left or right. The perfection of form and function among birds ensures their total mastery of flight.

The creation of backyard habitats or the strategic placement of feeders will increase opportunities for viewing bird behavior. One morning I had removed my hummingbird feeder for cleaning and as I moved away, an Anna's hummingbird blocked my path and hovered for nearly 5 seconds. She stared at me as if to say, "Where do you think you're going with my breakfast," then flew straight up and out of sight. My seed feeders attach to the windows and attract many house finches and other small birds. The squabbling for dominance and position creates interesting observing from inside the house. Soon I will purchase a large bird bath for the yard, which I know will allow the viewing of new types of behavior.

Everyone has heard the wise advice to stop and smell the flowers. I have always tried to follow this advice, but now have discovered that observing backyard bird behavior is equally rewarding. I have learned that birds are far more intelligent and communicative than I had ever thought possible. The complexity and variety of bird behavior observed from my backyard has enriched my understanding and appreciation of our feathered friends. I will give birds their due respect because should we lose them, or their numbers diminish significantly from human attempts to conquer the planet, insects would overrun the world and we would surely starve.



**Sycamore Leaves
on the Canyon Trail**



One of the things that irk me in the fall is the lack of respect the fall color in the Southern California mountains gets. Transplanted easterners always say there are no seasons in California and usually go on to wax poetically about the beautiful display of leaves each autumn brings in the east. Well, we have local fall color; it's just more subtle and nuanced. To check out the fall color in Placerita Canyon follow the link below:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/placerita/sets/72157603949246013/show/>



**Red Rose Hips &
Pink Poison Oak**



A Bit about Falconry

by Hannah White

Falconry or Hawking is an art or sport which involves the use of trained raptors to hunt or pursue game for humans. There are two traditional terms used to describe a person involved in falconry: a falconer flies a falcon; an austringer flies a hawk. The words 'Hawking' and 'Hawker' have been used to mean petty traveling traders, so the terms 'Falconer' and 'Falconry' now apply to all use of trained birds of prey to catch game.

The origin of falconry is uncertain, but there is evidence dating back to the first century BC, that favors the Near East as an origin. Historically, falconry was a popular sport, and status symbol among the nobles of medieval Europe and feudal Japan. (In Japan it is known as Takagari). In medieval times, the use of falcons was more or less restricted to the noble class due to the fact that falcons need a much larger hunting area than hawks. Falcons hunt by flying hundreds of feet in the air, and then just gliding on the air currents above until they spot their prey; then they dive through the air reaching speeds that have been clocked at up to 200 mph, (depending on the species) and at the last moment they un-tuck their talons and smack their prey in the back of the neck, therefore breaking the prey's neck. A hawk usually finds a tree branch or other high perch (telephone poles are often where you see them) to sit and wait until they spot their prey. Then they glide down and grab their prey with their talons, aiming at the neck. The nobles owned more land than the peasants, and if your bird took prey within the noble's land....well let's say you wouldn't want that to happen.

Falconry remained an important symbolic sport long after it was no longer popularly practiced. Eagles and hawks displayed on the wall could represent the noble himself. Paintings of falcons or falconry scenes were very popular with the wealthy; displaying them was the next best thing to partaking in the sport itself.

Falconry is very popular in literature and films, Virginia Henley's historical romance novels, 'The Falcon and the Flower', 'The Dragon and the Jewel', 'The Marriage Prize', 'The Border Hostage' and 'Infamous' have numerous mentions of the art of falconry, as these books are set at dates ranging from the 1150s to the 1500s. In 'Isabel, Taking Wing' part of the American Girl series 'Girls of Many Lands', falconry is referred to several times, as the story takes place in 1592. T.H. White was a falconer, as indicated in some of his books, including 'The Goshawk'. The main character, Sam Gribbley, is a falconer in the novels and the movie 'My Side of the Mountain' and its sequel, 'The Far side of the Mountain'.

Falconry is not a sport of the past, it's the most popular it's been in 300 years. Thanks to things such as lure flying displays at country houses and game fairs, breeding programs, education and awareness through nature centers and rescue centers, it will only become more popular.

Reference: Wikipedia, Dave Stives, my sponsors Kate Marden, Jim Tigan and Elizabeth Johnson

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- _____

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What's With All The Badgers?

By Jessica Nikolai

When you think of native California mammals, the badger usually doesn't come to mind. After all, we hear about opossums eating from our garbage cans, raccoons fishing in our koi ponds and skunks digging for grubs in our yards, but we almost never hear a word about badgers. In fact, I had no idea we even had badgers in California until recently.

While driving home from a class one summer night in June I was on Balboa Boulevard and I noticed two furry objects in the road near the 5 freeway. I'm an avid roadkill picker-upper, so I decided to pull over and investigate and to my surprise those objects turned out to be a large badger and smaller cub. The American badger (*Taxidea taxus* for all you scientific name junkies) is usually found in open, dry fields which accommodates its preferred diet of rodents (especially ground squirrels), although being omnivores they will also take birds, reptiles, insects and the like.

Badgers can also be found across the western two-thirds of the US, and their range extends into southern Canada and Mexico. They're stocky creatures and very low to the ground, which aids the badger in foraging in the dirt for rodents by staying close to the ground. They are expert diggers and have exceptionally long claws, and they use these tools to excavate prey and to create large dens underground. Badgers are nocturnal and solitary except for during the breeding season (which occurs in the summer and late autumn) and their territories range from 1-2 miles depending on sex. They are also very aggressive and make it known when they have been disturbed.

And so with all this knowledge now swarming around in my head,



I still had one big question: why have I never seen a badger before now? Not only had I seen those two badgers on Balboa, but a week later I found another roadkill badger on the Foothill Boulevard (not far from Balboa). I have also seen a roadkill badger on the 118 freeway, Bouquet Canyon Road and recently a patron brought in a deceased badger he had found in Castaic. I'm also hearing one was spotted in Castaic Lake.

After having done my research, I also learned that the most common demise of the badger is usually death by car. While most of the badgers I had seen were indeed quite dead, the most exciting experience I recently had with a badger was right here in Placerita Canyon. Thanks to Dave, we tracked a badger in the park and were able to snap some great shots (not pictured here).

But again, why suddenly are we seeing badgers when we didn't see as many before?

One of the theories I have discussed with park staff is that the new houses that are being developed against the foothills may be driving the badgers out of their natural environment; after all they are solitary animals who live in large, open fields with a healthy population of rodents to eat. Fire may also be a culprit. We may also be seeing more badgers due to our excessive drought, and they could be traveling into urban environments searching for water and/or food (which explains the roadkill!). Of course we do not have any scientific proof as of now, but it's just a hunch. Whatever the reason for these frequent sightings, it could become a regular occurrence to see these strange and stocky creatures more often in Southern California.
Reference "Walker's Carnivores of the World" by Ronald M. Nowalk

Holiday Dinner

Rainbow Glen has a beautiful club house, all the Christmas decorations were ready for us and we were very grateful that Jim Southwell made it available for our little group.

The food and the company were a big success. We were happy that our very own Santa, Bob Moss, was just back from New Zealand to participate in this joyful evening.

Two plaques were given during the evening for outstanding services: The Frank T. Hovore Award was presented to Ron Kraus for inspiring dedication to and exceptional standards of volunteerism and nature education. The Frank McDaniel Award was presented to Diane Erskine-Hellrigel for outstanding dedication to trail maintenance and community service.

Thanks to everyone who helped set up and clean up the room. Thank you Heidi Webber, for picking up those gorgeous deserts. It was a fun and very friendly Holiday Party and you all looked gorgeous!

Disaster Drill at Placerita

By Pam Koch



Earthquake Drill <http://placeritacanyonaudio.blogspot.com/>

Placerita Canyon staff and visitors participated in the big earthquake drill on Nov 13. Everyone gathered in the parking lot for instructions and information from Frank Hoffman, Park Superintendent.

So stated Placerita Ron on his new blog. Visit the link above to see pictures of this exciting day at Placerita. Acting Superintendent Frank Hoffman led park visitors and docents in a mock emergency drill. He got on the loud speaker and called everyone within hearing distance to join him in the parking lot in front of the office trailer. About 40 school children and their teachers, docents, and 40 students from Cal State University, Northridge were in the park that day and joined the drill. Some of the participants volunteered to be 'injured'

and some volunteered to be helpers. Frank took the opportunity to include fire safety and evacuation along with the earthquake drill.

It was an informative and rewarding experience as people across Southern California participated in controlled chaos as part of the largest earthquake drill in U.S. history. Its purpose is to test the preparedness of governments, emergency responders and residents.

It started at 10am and was based on a fictional 7.8 magnitude quake on the San Andreas Fault. A real quake of this magnitude is estimated to kill 1,800 people and cause \$200 billion in damage.



FIRE!

From Placerita Ron's blog:

It's Thursday, Nov 20 and although the fire danger (and smoke) has passed, there have been some effects on the park, not caused by the fire itself but by firefighting activity. The firefighters did a great job, but after all fires there is evidence of their work.

They re-graded the firebreak ridge that goes up to the top of the mountain and some of the dirt blocks the top of the Manzanita Mtn trail--no big deal. (Our trail-meister, Jason Gondek, went up there and fixed it -- see photos) For more pictures re: the fire aftermath go to: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/placerita/sets/72157610251080215/show/>

From a disaster drill on November 13th, to a real disaster on November 14th, Placerita Canyon Nature Center's Superintendent Frank Hoffman has had his hands full. Although the Sayer Fire could be seen just over the ridge from Walker Ranch, our side of the mountain remained safe.

As a precaution, all the animals and important records were evacuated to our sister park, Vasquez Rocks. We have many people to thank.

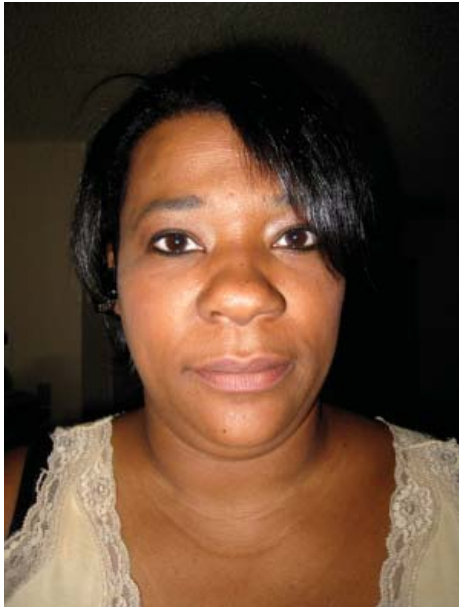
First of all, we want to thank all the firefighters who continue to do an invaluable service under impossible conditions.

Next, we'd like to thank Carl Goldman of KHTS radio for his station's continuing superb and reliable reporting of the fire. It is a great comfort to us all to have this valuable resource.

A huge thank you to Bill and Heidi Webber for spotting the fire and sounding the alarm. A task force of the park's first responders showed up to help Bill evacuate the animals and records. Quickly on hand to direct efforts were Frank and Mary Hoffman. Responding to the call for more help were Dave Stives, Roger McClure, Ron Kraus, Evelyne and Johan Vandersande, Deb Walt, Bob Moss, Chris Sapovichak, Jessica and Larry Nikolai, Donna Fagan, and Billy Webber.

Other trained disaster responders remained by their phones ready to help if needed. Thank you Candy Arney, Rosemaire Sanchez-Fraser, and Brent Karner from LAC Natural History Museum. A special thank you to Vasquez Rocks for taking in our animals -- Monica Chocooj, standing by, and Linda Therrien on hand to assist and receive our animals.

Docents and staff are regularly trained to respond quickly and efficiently to calls for help. We are grateful we were not harmed this time. When the air quality improved after a few days, all the animals were safely returned to their homes at the nature center.



Janelle Harmon

Where were you born and where did you spend your childhood? I was born and raised in Hancock Park, Los Angeles, CA. How did your love of Nature start? We had a large backyard and as a child my 2 sisters and I used to dig around in the yard to find little creatures. We had a lot of trees and therefore had a lot of tree life. We use to watch the squirrels running up and down the trees. We use to spend our Christmas' in Hawaii. There we always use to hike in the rainforests. I grew an appreciation for nature at a young age.

What was your education? I went to Loma Linda University La Sierra campus and there I was a double major with math and physics. After my freshman year in college I auditioned with the Los Angeles chamber orchestra, playing the flute, and was accepted. However at the time I was not ready for that kind of responsibility, I just wanted to know if I was good enough. I had been playing flute at that time for 10 years.

What is your work experience? Right now I am a Los Angeles police dispatcher/911 operator. I love my job; it is so rewarding to know that what I do actually makes a difference. What is your family life? About 3-1/2 years ago I moved out to Canyon Country with my 2 children, my daughter Morgan is 14 and my son Michael is 12.

When did you come to Placerita for the first time and why? I was at the library one day and I saw a flyer for Placerita docent naturalist training. I have always loved nature and I thought this would be a great opportunity for me to get back into nature. What are the titles you have held at the Nature Center? Docent Naturalist and Gift Shop Manager. What did or do you like most about your job at the Nature Center? I love the looks on the children's faces when they are learning about the world around us and the importance of all living creatures. At Placerita, is there some special accomplishment that makes you feel proud? I love being a docent at Placerita and I would not change this experience for anything in the world. Everyone there is so nice; it is a pleasure to be part of the team. What is your favorite TV show? Or music? or pastime? My favorite TV show is 24. It is such an adrenaline rush every episode.

Contrary to popular belief I am actually a metal head. I love the sound of the electric guitar. Most people would not have thought I could be into rock music. I spent my entire 20s going to concert after concert.

Is there anything else that describes you that we should know? Is there any passion or special events in your life that you would like to tell us about? I am an avid scrapbooker although I have only been doing it for 3 years.

As a teenager I use to compete in figure skating for about 6yrs. I was actually really good and took home many medals and occasionally an honorable mention.



Wish List

Perhaps you would like to make a donation to Placerita Canyon Nature Center? Our association is a 501c3 non-profit organization and 100% of your donations stay at Placerita and are applied appropriately. We certainly have an on-going need for cash for animal care and programs, but we're happy to get certain items as well. Here's our wish list:

- Your old cloth towels for animal care
- Orchid bark substrate for our reptiles
- Audio tour sponsor - \$25 per month so we can have the canyon trail audio tour available for download onto your cell phone – oh this new technology!
- A new copy machine (please!)
- A new phone answering machine for multiple lines.
- A large drop-down AV screen and AV equipment.

We will publish, and post at the nature center, updates to our list, so please check back with us from time to time.

Thank you Judy McClure

Docent Judy McClure has come up with another brilliant idea. She has put samples of some of our common plants on the counter at the gift shop. Please stop by and have a look. They will help you identify a few of the plants you see on your hike:

- Redberry (*Rhamnus crocea*)
- Holly Leaf Cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*)
- California Buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*)
- California Sycamore (*Plantanus racemosa*)
- Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*)
- Poison Oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum* aka rhus diversiloba) **DON'T TOUCH!**

The following article was suggested by Janet Kubler. While the focus is on eastern oaks, it can still apply to ours in the right circumstances.

Acorn Watchers Wonder What Happened to Crop

By Brigid Schulte

Washington Post Staff Writer

Sunday, November 30, 2008

The idea seemed too crazy to Rod Simmons, a measured, careful field botanist. Naturalists in Arlington County couldn't find any acorns. None. No hickory nuts, either. Then he went out to look for himself. He came up with nothing. Nothing crunched underfoot. Nothing hit him on the head.

Then calls started coming in about crazy squirrels. Starving, skinny squirrels eating garbage, inhaling bird feed, greedily demolishing pumpkins. Squirrels boldly scampering into the road. And a lot more calls about squirrel roadkill.

"I'm used to seeing so many acorns around and out in the field, it's something I just didn't believe," he said. "But this is not just not a good year for oaks. It's a zero year. There's zero production. I've never seen anything like this before."

The absence of acorns could have something to do with the weather, Simmons thought. But he hoped it wasn't a climatic event. "Let's hope it's not something ghastly going on with the natural world."

To find out, Simmons and Arlington naturalists began calling around. A naturalist in Maryland found no acorns on an Audubon nature walk there. Ditto for Fairfax, Falls Church, Charles County, even as far away as Pennsylvania. There are no acorns falling from the majestic oaks in Arlington National Cemetery.

"Once I started paying attention, I couldn't find any acorns anywhere. Not from white oaks, red oaks or black oaks, and this was supposed to be their big year," said Greg Zell, a naturalist at Long Branch Nature Center in Arlington. "We're talking zero. Not a single acorn. It's really bizarre."

Zell began to do some research. He found Internet discussion groups, including one on Topix called "No acorns this year," reporting the same thing from as far away as the Midwest up through New England and Nova Scotia. "We live in Glenwood Landing, N.Y., and don't have any acorns this year. Really weird," wrote one. "None in Kansas either! Curiouser and curiouser."

Simmons has a theory about the wet and dry cycles. But many skeptics say oaks in other regions are producing plenty of acorns, and the acorn bust here is nothing more than the extreme of a natural boom-and-bust cycle. But the bottom line is that no one really knows. "It's sort of a mystery," Zell said.

A word about the mighty oak. Long before people paved over the area, much of the Washington region was covered by oak and hickory forests. There are at least 20 different species of oak trees in the region, and they produce acorns on different cycles: white oaks every year and red oaks every two years. Each tree, too, has its own two- to four-year cycle, producing many acorns one year and few in other years. Stressed trees, including those trying to survive extended drought conditions in the Washington region, often wildly overproduce acorns to ensure the survival of the species.

Oaks are one of the few trees that can self-pollinate and "clone" themselves. But they prefer the genetic variety that comes from the flowers of male trees pollinating the flowers of female trees. That's a dance that takes place every spring, usually in May, for anywhere from seven days to two weeks, depending on the weather.

And the weather is critical. A late frost can kill the flowers and any chance of pollination. But there was no late frost in this area last year, according to the National Weather Service. Gypsy moths and other insects can damage trees, but because the pollen is airborne, insects don't play much of a role in oak reproduction.

That leaves Simmons's theory. Last spring was so wet, he reasoned, perhaps the pollen was washed out of the air and down storm drains before it had time to do its work.

Ed Zimmer, regional forester for the Virginia Department of Forestry, doesn't buy that. "It would have to be Noah's flood kind of rain for me to believe that. Forty days of constant rain," he said. "I don't think that could be a factor because there's so much pollen and all these trees release it at different times, depending on if they're in full sun or partial sun, or even from different places on the tree."

But last May, when the oak trees would have been busy flowering, coating cars and sidewalks with a thick dusting of golden pollen, the National Weather Service logged 10.6 inches of rain at Reagan National Airport -- three times the normal amount, making it the third wettest month on record since 1871.

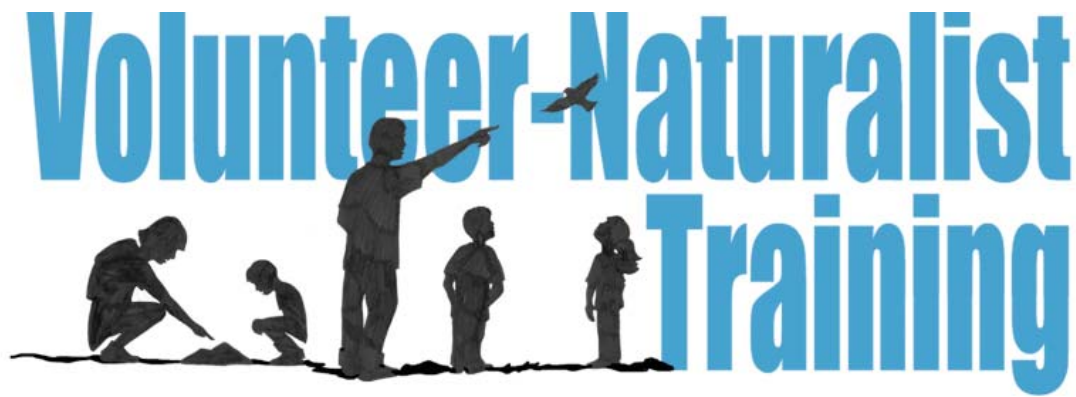
Whatever the reason for no acorns, foresters and botanists are paying attention. But they say they're not worried yet. "What's there to worry about?" said Alan Whitemire, a botanist at the U.S. Arboretum. "If you're a squirrel, it's a big worry. But it's no problem for the oak tree. They live a long time. They'll produce acorns again when they're ready to."

White oaks can live as long as 300 years. Faster-growing red oaks can reach 200. And it takes only one acorn to make a tree, he said, which in an urban area with little open space is often more than enough.

"This is probably just a low year, a biological event, and it'll go away," Zimmer said. "But if this were to continue another two, three, four years, you might have to ask yourself what's going on, whether it is an indication of something bigger."

Foresters survey acorns, nuts and berries for their annual "mast" report that helps wildlife managers figure out how much food there might be for deer, bear and other wildlife. Those reports can fluctuate, and the foresters have noticed how "spotty" it is this year in parts of Northern Virginia.

"This is interesting enough to ask some questions and pay attention to," said Adam Downing, forestry and natural resources agent with the Virginia Cooperative Extension. "Fortunately, natural systems are resilient. Oaks are tough."



Placerita Canyon Nature Center

Become a Volunteer-Naturalist!

- *Learn about the natural environment.*
- *Teach children about nature.*
- *Make a difference in your community.*

No special background needed—
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Other volunteer opportunities are also available that don't require the 9-week training program such as animal care specialist, office helper, and gift shop staff. Bilingual (English/Spanish) volunteers and docents are especially needed.

For further information call or visit

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For more information go to:

http://www.placerita.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=93&Itemid=44

A Voice In The Oaks

by Bob Fischer



Most of the birds I've reported on in the Rattler have been species fairly easy to see because of their size and color. But some of the most interesting birds frequenting Placerita Canyon are smaller and less colorful but nevertheless worth paying attention to. If you are out walking in the canyon among oak trees, you are likely to hear a clear bird-call that sounds something like "dee-dee-dee-do or a scratchy tsicka-dee-dee". You are listening to an Oak Titmouse, a small bird with a crest, pale, brown-tinged gray upper parts and paler face and underparts. The bill is small and black, and legs and feet are gray. It can often be seen foraging on the ground under oak trees but more frequently it will be seen flitting about in the trees. Its crest gives it a distinctive silhouette as it is the only small crested bird (5 inches long) we see in the canyon. There is no difference in appearance between males and females. It does not migrate so you can see it all year around. If you can't find it in the canyon, you can see it on You Tube. Just search for Oak Titmouse. Photos are also available on

many web sites; one of the best being: <http://www.pbbase.com/tgrey/yard&page=6>

One reason I find the Oak Titmouse fascinating is that it is not a shy bird. You can often walk quite close to them whether on the ground or in a tree. Another interesting aspect is that they have a variety of calls besides their dee-dee-do and tsicka-dee-dee. If you hear a bird calling and you can't figure out what it is, Oak Titmouse may well be the answer. There are three other titmouse species in the titmouse family but none are found in southern California. This species lives year-round on the Pacific slope, resident from southern Oregon south through California west of the Sierra Nevada to Baja California, but not in the central valley. It prefers open woodlands of warm, dry oak and oak-pine at low to mid-elevations. Oak Titmice eat many kinds of insects and spiders, and are sometimes seen catching insects in midair. They will also take berries and some seeds. They forage on foliage, twigs, branches, trunks, and occasionally on ground, sometimes hanging upside down to forage, and hammering seeds against branches to open them. Oak Titmice are attracted to feeders with suet, peanut butter and sunflower seeds.

The Oak Titmouse builds its nest in a woodpecker hole, a natural cavity or a nest box, using grass, moss, mud, hair, feathers, and fur. It breeds from March into July, with peak activity in April and May, laying usually 6-8 white eggs, lightly dotted with brown or reddish spots. The female is the primary incubator, which takes 14-16 days. Young are altricial, i.e. undeveloped and needing to be fed and are tended by both parents in the nest for 16-21 days. Parents continue to tend to young for another three to four weeks after young leave nest. The Oak Titmouse mates for life, and pairs defend year-round territories. Most titmice find a mate in their first fall. Those that do not are excluded from territories and must live in marginal habitat until they find a vacancy.

The Oak Titmouse is such an interesting bird. I can think of no better reason to stroll in Placerita Canyon looking for one.

Sources: Wikipedia, Point Reyes Bird Observatory, PRBO Partners in Flight, Kenn Kaufmann, "Lives of North American Birds", You Tube, Oak Titmouse.



The Rattler

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