



# The Rattler

## In This Issue:

- ◆ Docent Class 2009
- ◆ Mountain Lions in the park!
- ◆ Spring Programs

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## *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.*

**March/April 2009**

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#### **Dear Nature Friends,**

The wild cucumber has finished blooming and the ceanothus will cover the hillsides with white blossoms in a few days. The Great-horned Owls already have babies in their nests and all the other birds are into courtship, looking for the perfect mate and the best place to start a nest. The winter was mild and we were already hearing mating calls from the Pacific Tree frogs along the stream by the end of January. That's pretty early but exciting to hear those first calls.

Fresh new grass is poking through everywhere and wild flowers are in bud. It is this fantastic time where everything is fresh and new; full of hope and promise.

Come and walk on the trails and listen to the birds sing in the morning. The air is cool and moist; the sky is blue and so many smells everywhere in this beautiful place. Happy Spring to you.

*Evelyne*

#### **Update on the Museum and the Gift Shop**

Heidi and Bill Webber are now in charge of the Gift Shop and assisting them will be Diane Henry and Richard Norton. They have grand plans for the space and Alan Wallander is helping with any carpenter work they may need. They are in the process of measuring and procuring the display cases and wall displays to make the most of what room they have.

The museum is completely empty now, with the parts of displays recycled whenever it could be done. One of the smaller display bases is now at Whittier Narrows. This week (February 16) the contractors have started dry-walling the interior walls. We have had a visit from museum designer Jennifer from Acorn Naturalist. We would like to have a few bids on the museum before we decide. Then comes the fun part—funding!

#### **LEED**

In an effort to comply with the LEED requirement and in an effort to save trees and minimize our use of paper, I am pleased to announce that the Rattler will be sent in the PDF version to all docents and volunteers from Placerita Canyon Nature Center. We encourage all of you who are receiving a printed copy to ask for the PDF version too. Please send me a quick email at [evandersande@gmail.com](mailto:evandersande@gmail.com) and you will be put on the list right away. You will receive the Rattler much sooner and it will be in color. If you do not like to read on your computer, you can always print it (but then, here is my guilt trip about the trees again!)

We really appreciate your support in controlling our expenses of paper, printing, mailing and the manpower involved. I hope you will enjoy getting your new PDF version.



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**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.**

## Hiking Around Our Website

*Pam Koch*

May I direct you to take a look at our links page on our website: <http://www.placerita.org/>

First, drop down to the Living with Wildlife section and click on **Dealing with Coyotes**. January is mating season for coyotes and gestation is 9 weeks, so by March, there are babies about and the parents are looking for food to feed themselves and their young. Check out this site to learn how to co-exist and keep your pets from entering the food chain. Please do not feed coyotes – this practice seems generous but is unkind and only hurts them, you and your neighbors. More tips about dealing with coyotes can be found at the next link, **Keep Coyotes Wild**.

Speaking about nature babies, the season for baby birds and baby mammals is here and we'd like to remind you to leave them alone. If you see a baby by itself, chances are momma is nearby.

If you see a baby bird on the ground and it is uninjured and hopping around, it is a fledgling and is learning how to fly. Please leave it alone, and keep it safe from your pets. If it has no feathers, just fluff, it is a nestling. Try to put it back in the nest – yes mom will continue to care for it. If you can't reach the nest, make one out of a clean margarine tub and wire it to the tree at least 8 feet off the ground. Mom will find it and continue to care for the baby.\*

If you find a baby mammal and it is warm and uninjured, leave it where you found it and watch from a distance for a few hours or until nightfall. If momma has not returned by then, call an animal rehabber\*; the nature center has rehabber phone numbers to call; or surf the web to find a rehabber near you. The nature center is not a licensed rehabilitation facility and we cannot take in any wild animals.

Back to our website – see how easy it is to get interested in one topic and learn something new about nature? Please check out our links. You're just a click away from learning about other parks, the Local Group Astronomy club, the Sierra Club and various national nature websites. You can let your fingers do the hiking to the SCV Historical Society, the local radio station, KHTS, learn about what's happening around Santa Clarita and even brush up on the geology of Santa Clarita Valley. Don't forget to drink plenty of water!

\*([www.backyardnature.com/](http://www.backyardnature.com/))



## 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 10<sup>th</sup> of every other month. Mail your article to:

Placerita Canyon Nature Center  
19152 Placerita Canyon Road  
Newhall, CA 91321-3213

or you can email it to Evelyne at [evelynvandersande@gmail.com](mailto:evelynvandersande@gmail.com). Please email your article in MS Word if possible.



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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](http://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.

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates  
Thank You!

- Yes! I want to contribute to help fund programs at Placerita
- \$25 Friend     \$50 Donor     \$100 Sponsor Wall
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Your tax-deductible donations are needed to help fund programs provided by volunteers.  
Send your donation to:

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**Tesoro Adobe Historic Park**  
Rancho Tesoro

The Placerita docents visited a local park on Wednesday, January 21 and received a tour led by Al, a county park employee. Tesoro Adobe Historic Park was built and owned by western film actor, Harry Carey. This park offers a peek into the area's history and what life was like in the Santa Clarita Valley in the early 1900's. The park has nine historical buildings made of adobe and contains historical artifacts from the 1930's time period. The park was donated to the County of Los Angeles in 2005.

The name, Harry Carey, was familiar but when we saw the collection of pictures in the bunkhouse, we realized that those of us who watch John Wayne movies have often seen Harry Carey as the sheriff in many of those movies. Harry Carey was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and he was also inducted into the Western performers Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. Harry Carey was a friend to William S. Hart, whose ranch is also located in Santa Clarita.

The park was originally 1700 acres when the Carey Family lived at the site. The original house was destroyed by fire in the 1930's and was rebuilt by Harry Carey Sr. People from Los Angeles would come to the ranch on weekends to attend rodeos that were held there. There was also a trading post attended by about 80 Navajos. The Navajos lived a Hollywood life at the ranch. They made silver jewelry, raised sheep for wool rugs they hand crafted, wove baskets and operated the trading post. The trading post was swept away by the San Francisquito Dam break in 1928. The trading post was never rebuilt.

The Carey Family owned the land until about 1952 when it was sold to the Clougherty Family who were owners of Farmer John. The ranch became known as Farmer John Land. It had been intended to be used to raise pigs. They turned the ranch into a vacation home when they found out that Santa Clarita was too hot and dry for pigs. It was the Clougherty family who donated the land to Los Angeles for a park.

*Sue Wallander*

**A THOUGHT FOR TODAY:**

Nature is ever at work building and pulling down, creating and destroying, keeping everything whirling and flowing, allowing no rest but in rhythmical motion, chasing everything in endless song out of one beautiful form into another.

*John Muir, Naturalist and explorer (1838-1914)*

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**Oops!**

In the last issue of the Rattler, the article "The Three B's" had a couple of errors. Richard Norton would like to set the record straight: "The Northern Mockingbird is what I meant (instead of Northern Bunting). I used two books to identify the chickadee, but it was more probably the Chestnut-backed Chickadee (instead of Black-capped Chickadee), known to live as far south as northern L.A. which tends to lose its chestnut color the further south it lives."

Thanks Richard. We non-birders can't tell a sparrow from a crow, so it is nice that you let us set the record straight.

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**Rufus**

*Deb Walt*

Hello, my name is Rufus. I am a red-tailed hawk. If you have ever visited Placerita Nature Center you have probably seen me in the courtyard. Yes, you have seen me in a large enclosure or "mew" as my keepers call it but I have had quite an adventurous life.

According to the Nature Center's records I am at least 32 years old. A red-tailed hawk in the wild has a 1 in 20 chance of making it to the age of five. That average life span for those that make it to adulthood is 21 years. When I moved here I had an amputated wing and needed the help of humans to survive- obviously they are doing a great job.

Recently, the nature center is undergoing a reconstruction project. My keepers put plywood around my enclosure thinking that I wouldn't like the noise and activity. My hunger strike convinced them to give me a room with a view. One board was removed overlooking the canyon. What they didn't understand is that I am very fond of my home and wanted to see it undergo a beautiful transformation. I picked at my food again so they took all the boards down and I was happy to watch the comings and goings.

Come and visit me when the nature center reopens. You can make donation or adopt me if you wish, I am a very special hawk.





## Kendra Geiger

**1. Where were you born and where did you spend your childhood?** Though I was born in Riverside, I spent my childhood to my mid-teens in the San Francisco Bay Area. My family moved to Denver in my later high school years and I graduated in 1971 from Thomas Jefferson High School. Unable to support myself with only a high school education, I moved to Southern California's Low Desert to live with my mother until I got married a year later.

**2. How did your love of Nature start?** As a child in the Mt. Davidson area of San Francisco in the early 1960s, I loved going places where there were activities in Nature with animals and other kids. The San Francisco Parks Department offered summertime trips for children which included going to the zoo, aquarium, natural history museums, the local beaches, amusement parks, and of course, Golden Gate Park. There was also a small but terrific nature center at the top of Twin Peaks that my sisters and I visited a couple of times when we were very young. This place allowed me to have my first up close experience with living forest animals.

In South San Francisco, I spent many hours outside playing where there were lots of natural spaces of undeveloped land. My friends and I would find little ponds, and we were always collecting frogs and salamanders—only to have to let them go! We also enjoyed discovering new adventures in small eucalyptus groves. Once I joined the Girl Scouts and experienced outdoor camping trips, my perspective of Nature and my part in it seemed to take on a deeper meaning. Even science classes in elementary school provided opportunities to visit marsh sanctuaries, rivers, and forest habitats and taught me a lot about the importance of our environment.

**3. What was your education?** Though it's not much to brag about, I am proud to say I *finally* earned my AA degree in 2007! I worked much of my life to "survive", but at last I did take the steps to getting more education. After I'd had finished my first PNC docent training session, the desire to gain more education increased, and so I registered for classes at College of the Canyons. Without a doubt, it is because of the docent training that I did very well in my biology courses!

**4. What is your work experience?** As for work experience, I've worked in several fields. I started in the medical business field even before I finished high school. At one point, I owned my own billing service and submitted claim data electronically for 65 physicians. I stayed in this field until 1998, and took a "career sabbatical" and decided to pursue a higher education. While at College of the Canyons, I was honored to be asked to join the English tutoring staff in the TLC for the fall of 2002, and have worked there almost steadily since. Initially as a volunteer, I eventually secured a part-time job for LA County in the Dept. of Juvenile Probation as part of a literacy program to increase low reading skills with incarcerated youth. I remained there for over five years. Presently, I have returned to COC/Canyon Country as an English tutor and help students of all ages and abilities with essay assignments.

**5. What is your family life?** I am happily married to a great guy, Harold. We have been married for ten years now. I have three grown children ages 26, 23, and 20 from my first marriage. The eldest son lives here in the Santa Clarita area; my daughter and her husband, Jeff, live in Canada with my handsome four year old grandson; and my youngest son is in Utah living with his dad and working. Harold also has three children (a generation older than my own) from a previous marriage; they all live in Southern California, so we get together occasionally. My mom and two of my sisters live in the Low Desert while a third sister is now living in the state of Washington.

**6. When did you come to Placerita for the first time and why?** I came to Placerita with my children in 1993 to see the park with a girlfriend and her son for a picnic. If my memory is still intact, I seem to remember that PNC had a playground in the picnic area. I'll have to look, but I think I may even have a picture of my youngest playing there. I remember thinking that PNC was a great place to bring my kids to let them run and see Nature up close with the creek, the trees, the birds, and to hike the trails.

**7. What are the titles you have held at the Nature center?** The only title I've held at the Nature center is—proudly—docent!

**8. What did or do you like most about your job at the Nature Center?** As a docent, I like the people I've come to know that also work here: the county park employees/staff and of course, all of the docents. I like the kids that come to explore Placerita. Each group of school children that visits PNC is *always* special. For me as a docent, it makes coming back, time after time, a special experience.

**9. What did you or do you not like about the job?** I do not like contact with snakes or spiders. Someone else will have to handle them for the animal sharing moments—*not me!*

**10. At Placerita, is there some special accomplishment that makes you feel proud?** Yes. Just being a small "cog-in-the-wheel" with the other dedicated PNC docents makes me feel as though something greater is being accomplished. One doesn't have to be the one who gets an award to feel special in a place like Placerita...everyone is part of what gets accomplished!

**11. What is your favorite food?** Chinese, especially moo shu chicken wraps!

**12. What is your favorite color?** Every color I've ever seen in Nature—from the most vibrant magenta to the goobiest glob of clay-brown. Aren't they all wonderful to behold?

**13. What is your favorite TV show?** My favorite comedy TV show is Corner Gas (on WGN), I am passionate for Beethoven, and I love to read, visit gardens, museums, and discover new places.

**14. 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 believe God's plan for my life is to help all children discover His goodness (which is obvious if we'd just take the time to look a little closer and be quieter). Placerita's natural beauty allows each docent the opportunity to give Nature as a precious gift to all the children encountered here.

## VISTA DEL LAGO VISITORS CENTER

*By Candace Arney*

When you leave the Nature Center and travel North on I-5 for about 30 miles, you will come upon the Vista del Lago Visitors Center overlooking Pyramid Lake in Gorman. Stop in for a few minutes and take a look...

Exiting Vista del Lago off ramp and driving West, you will see a large Mediterranean red tiled roof building. This is the California Department of Water Resources' premiere Water Education Visitors Center. This FREE non-profit center profiles all of the major water conveyance systems within California providing a wealth of information on water, conservation and safety. I have been a DWR employee for the past 20 years and was fortunate to be here on opening day 15 years ago.

When you enter the building you will notice a large tiled fountain in the center of the room, people typically ask "Why isn't there any water in it?" the response is always the same "It's a water conservation fountain." This immediately sets the tone of the center. You will then be greeted by the Tour Guide on duty and can begin your self-guided tour through each of the seven rooms.

As you stroll through each room, through fun filled hands-on exhibits, you will learn about water usage; how it's captured from the Plumas National Forest into Lake Oroville and then transported through the California Aqueduct. You will view timelines profiling past and present events, including the Tataviam & Chumash Indians and the discovery of gold in Placerita Canyon located at our Nature Center. If you look out the panoramic windows behind the mini theater, in the center of the lake you will see Chumash Island. It is shaped like a dinosaur lying down and was named for the Chumash Indians that lived in this area. We do not know that the Tataviam Indians traded goods with the Chumash tribe.

As you continue your journey, you will enter the US Forest Service Room that explains how nature provides habitats and impacts the availability of water and the importance of conservation in California. If you choose, don't forget the Water Story Theater that features 29 movies. Just make a selection, relax and take in a little history.

Vista del Lago has seating around the outside perimeter of the building, so while eating your lunch, you can enjoy the vistas and peaceful beauty of the great outdoors. The balcony is currently undergoing repairs until late Spring; does that sound familiar to the Nature Center?

The center is open daily from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. For more information or group tours, call Candy or Kathy at (661) 294-0219.

### Fun Fact:

How many inches of snow equals an inch of rain?

It varies from place to place and for the type of snow; heavy and wet, or dry, powdery snow. The average is ten inches of snow equals one inch of rain according to meteorologist Jeff Haby. <http://www.theweatherprediction.com/habyhints/346/>



### Lucretia McEvil and Emily Dickinson

One definition of personality--at least as applied to human--is "the characteristic pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that make a person unique." But can nonhuman animals also have personalities? While animal behavior is generally easy to observe and measure, assessing an animal "thoughts" and "feelings" is difficult at best. That is one reason many researchers long rejected the concept of unique personalities in animals.

The tide turned a little more than a decade ago. The first time scientists applied the term "personality" to a nonhuman in a major psychology journal was in 1993 – in reference to an invertebrate, the octopus.

Roland Anderson, a biologist at the Seattle Aquarium, noticed that keepers had vivid nicknames for the facility's Giant Pacific octopuses. "Lucretia McEvil" tore up the fittings in her tank every night. "Emily Dickinson" was crippledly shy. The animals seemed to have individual personalities, but could this be quantified scientifically?

Anderson and psychologist Jennifer Mather of the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada, devised an experiment with a smaller species, the East Pacific red octopus.

They tested how individuals responded when gently poked, startled or offered food. Each octopus, it turned out, had a unique and consistent set of responses – in other words, a personality.

Ref : "They Have Got Personality" by Cynthia Berger

### Spineless Minds

*The character of spiders.*

Anyone who has ever lived with a dog or a cat probably accepts the fact that animals like lions, gorillas and foxes can have unique personalities. But insects and spiders? Scientists are indeed discovering that a variety of spineless creatures, from water striders to crickets, exhibit "behavioral syndromes" that by most definitions would qualify as personality.

Take funnel-web spiders. For many years, biologist Susan Riechert of the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and her colleagues have been studying 2 populations of the same species of these spiders, one along a wooded riverbank in Arizona and the other in a dry New Mexico grassland. They have discovered that individual spiders from both groups tend to behave in consistent, predictable ways. They are either bold or timid toward potential predators, prey and competitors of the same species.

The researchers also found that more spiders in New Mexico act aggressively than do their Arizona counterparts.

The difference makes sense. While woodlands harbor more predators that may pick off the boldest spiders, desert grasslands support less insect prey, meaning that timid spiders might starve.

Ref : "They Have Got Personality" by Cynthia Berger

## Mason Bees

The UPS truck stops at my neighbors' house and I see her walking with a brown box under her arm. "Hi Evelyne! Do you know what is in this box? I have ordered a whole bunch of orchard Mason Bees?"

I have never heard of this bee before so I put on my Placerita Cayon Nature Center hat, cross my arms over my chest and start the questioning "Well, I sure hope those are native bees "

She takes one look at me and I know I am in deep water. This lady is an avid gardener and all her research is done very seriously. "I will send you the link so you can check it out. Also, I have 2 biologist friends who just came back from a symposium and the orchard mason bee was one of the topics" Well, it is never too late to learn....

20 minutes later the link appears on my computer and what I read is fascinating:

"The orchard mason bee *Osmia lignaria* is a small black gentle bee, native of almost the entire Continental United States. Mother Nature's great spring pollinator, the orchard mason bee was pollinating the fruits and flowers of the continent for millions of years before the first colonists brought the honey bee to North America.

It is a common species used for early spring fruit bloom in Japan and the United States.

They are completely non-aggressive. The males don't even have stingers and the female will only use theirs in times of true distress.

Unlike honey bees which visit flowers that are miles away, she prefers flowers that are nearby the nest"

This last part is very important to gardener and orchard keepers. This is the reason why they order those bees through the mail hoping they will stay put and work for them.

The nest making process is very interesting.

"Orchard Mason Bee likes to nest in narrow holes or tubes, inside cedar shakes and even keyholes. She arranges the nest as a series of partitions, with one egg per partition. She begins the process by collecting mud and building the back wall of the first partition. Then she makes trips to the flowers. She can visit 75 flowers per trip and it takes 25 trips to create a complete pollen/nectar provision.

Once the provision is complete, she backs into the hole and lays an egg on top of it. She collects more mud to seal of the partition. The orchard mason bee, like many insects, can select the gender of the egg they lay by fertilizing the egg, or not. Unfertilized eggs are males, fertilized eggs are female.

The adult bee lays female eggs in the back of the burrow and the male eggs toward the front.

She lays about 3 males to every one female.

Once the female has finished the nest, she plugs the entrance with one thick mud wall. An *O.lignaria* female lives for about 4 to 8 weeks and she can complete an average of four 6-inch tubes in her lifetime, with about 8 eggs per tube. That is nearly 60,000 blossoms visits per female.

Because of this, farmers have cultivated the insect for pollination purposes in fruit orchards."

Reference : Wikipedia



**Rachael Komulainen**

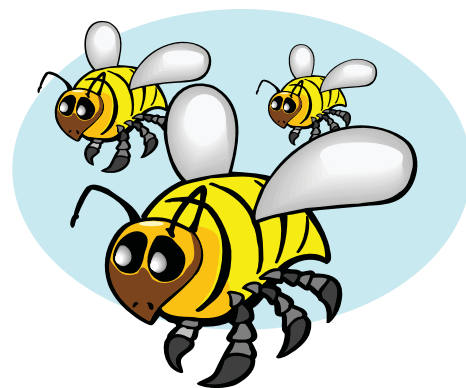
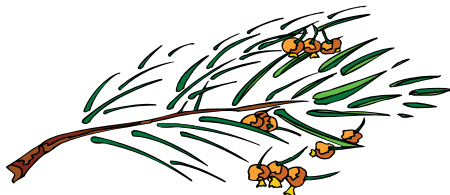
If you come to the Nature Center on Thursday morning, you will have a beautiful vision of this young lady walking slowly or sitting in the sun with a bird of prey on her hand. What is she doing here? She is manning her birds. "Manning" a bird consists of the steps that must be taken towards getting a bird of prey accustomed to you and its surroundings. You and everything around you have to be accepted by the bird.

Who is Rachael? She is a friend of Dave Stives, our Senior Animal Keeper and she has been an animal handler for 10 years. She is trying to put together an animal shelter and she gives our birds some exercise and attention. Thank you Rachael and good luck for all your projects.

## Etho-Botany

Placerita's new naturalists/docents are in the middle of their three months of training. On February 3, Vanessa Acosta from the Southwest Museum conducted a class on Ethno-Botany for the new docents. Vanessa showed the plants the Tatavium and Tongava Indians used in their daily life. She showed the plants they used for healing and the plants they used for tools.

During the three months of classes the senior docents take turns bringing snacks for the new docents each week. Helen and Bethany Sweany prepared a very special for the class when they had the Ethno-Botany Class. They prepared dandelion cookies, nettle soup, acorn bars, and dried fruit. Everyone agreed it was special food for the day of that class. Thank you, Helen, for the special care you took to fit your food to the class subject.



## Congratulations to Jan and Reg Fear

They have a brand-new granddaughter and her name is Kaela, born on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December to their son Jon and his wife Bahia. Jan and Reg now have 10 grandchildren: 4 girls and 6 boys ranging in age from the newborn to having 2 in college.

Best Wishes to all!





## Eric Indermill

**Where were you born and where did you spend your childhood?** I was born in Hobbs, New Mexico. We lived in Kansas City MO and moved to the San Fernando Valley when I was 4. I count that as home although we lived in North Dakota for a year while I was in Jr. High. The summer camp there made a big impression on me. My brother and I were able to join a group canoeing down the Missouri River.

**How did your love of Nature get started?** Our family camped each summer. I really liked the Sequoias. I wanted to be a Ranger like Lassie's owner (after Timmy) and work outdoors doing cool stuff like fire fighting and search and rescue. My family did some back packing in the 60's and I was hooked on granite cliffs mirrored in the clear alpine lakes. I've had a High Sierra prejudice ever since. I worked three years as a seasonal firefighter for the US Forest Service to help pay for school and loved working in the woods.

**What was your education?** I have a BS in Geology. I taught in a wilderness school out of Big Pine Creek one summer and decided to take some geology to be better prepared to share that part of Natural History with my students. Plate Tectonics was just being accepted and it wove an endless mass of unrelated, dead and dreary facts and names into a wonderfully complex tapestry. The forces of time, evolution, mountain building, erosion and deposition all left clues to be uncovered, recognized and understood. Today we'd say geologists are CSI technicians who's puzzles are eons old rather than just days.

**What is your work experience?** After a year working as a Geologist I realized I was just too immature for a real job. I went back to firefighting and was lucky enough to work for 23 years with the Glendale Fire Department.

**What is your family life?** My wife of twenty years and I have two girls ages 12 and 14. Both take after their Mom in being cute, athletic and intelligent.

**When did you come to Placerita for the first time and why? What do you remember about this place?** The first visit I remember was a picnic with my brother's family one summer weekend. It was hot, buggy, and crowded with lots of people leaving trash scattered around. It left me even more convinced that any canyon less than 5000 feet was just too close to too many people. (The staff here does a remarkable job of keeping the canyon clean in spite of the thoughtless visitors.)

**What are the titles you have held at the Nature center?** Docent.

**What did or do you like most about your job at the Nature Center?** At first glance it may seem to be nothing more than dirt, bushes, and bugs, but a closer look with clear eyes will see much more. So much of the variety and adaptation here is subtle that you may need some help to know where to look--and what you are looking at. That is where the staff and docents come in. The challenge of drawing out what students are interested in and then being able to point out how that aspect is present in the park is what keeps each hike exciting.

**What did you or do you not like about the job?** I am frustrated by guests that don't give the park a chance and adults that let their students treat the hike as a "Brains and Manners-Free Day."

**At Placerita, is there some special accomplishment that makes you feel proud?** Being a Docent and getting over my fear of snakes to show them to the kids.

**What is your favorite food?** Homemade ice cream.

**What is your favorite color?** Red, although the color blindness tests say I've never really seen it.

**What is your favorite TV show? Or music? Or pastime?** Favorite Movies- Princess Bride, Rustler's Rhapsody, It's A Wonderful Life. Favorite Music- Folk Rock and Celtic (yes Marge- Bag Pipes!!!) Favorite Pastime- Listening to my children laugh.

**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?** Everyone should have some element of mystery.

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### The Little Mysteries of Our Natural Area

A few weeks ago, a hiker inexperienced with the Canyon Trail called 911 because of a strong smell on the trail and thought there was a gas leak somewhere close by. The fire truck came full speed to the Center to take care of the emergency.

The staff was very surprised then had a good chuckle. It was not a gas leak but oil has been seeping from the ground for centuries, before the park even existed. However, it is a strong smell and if you are not a native Californian, used to those little miracle of nature, it can take you by surprise.

Placerita Canyon Nature Center has something even more special, we have white oil. This is very rare, is found at Placerita and another place in China. If you follow our audio tour, this is the information you will hear on stop 19 of the Canyon Trail.

This information was researched and recorded by our delightful and talented Jessica Nikolai. We are so lucky to have her as a Recreation Service leader:

*That kerosene-like scent you smell is from a pool of bubbling white oil. This oil is completely natural, but it's very rare for oil to be rising straight from the ground. White oil from the canyon was first showcased in the 1876 Philadelphia World's Fair, and it was as clear as kerosene and able to burn 100 times longer than conventional oil. Many original Newhall residents would actually fill buckets with white oil and pour it into their Model A Fords without first being refined. Of course, this kind of oil would not work well with our modern day cars, so we leave it be at the park in hopes of keeping this place natural and undisturbed.*

## The Great-tailed Grackle

By Richard Norton

A few weeks ago I was visiting Phoenix, Arizona and was very surprised by the number of Great-tailed Grackles that appeared in the area. It seemed that everywhere I went the characteristically loud chatters, squeaks, gurgles, shrieks, piercing whistles, and high-pitched squeals were heard. At parks, in open fields with scattered trees, riparian thickets, cultivated areas, and around areas of human habitation this bird was present. Naturally, I had to find out more about them, so I researched for info and decided to write an article about them.

In the family *Icteridae*, *Quiscalus mexicanus* as its name implies was unknown in the California prior to 1964. The intensifying of irrigation in agricultural areas and population growth in the southwest brought water to the arid regions and helped to expand their range from Mexico well into California and as far north as Iowa. Their closest relative, the Boat-tailed Grackle (once thought to be the same species), inhabits coastal marshes from New Jersey to the Texas Gulf Coast, and though they nest closely as far east as the Louisiana coast they never interbreed. The family includes the Common Grackle, all blackbirds, cowbirds, and orioles, all meadowlarks, and even the Bobolink found in northern areas. I mention this because recently, while at the gym, I walked near a tree full of roosting Brewer's Blackbirds and heard the same breathy, creaky, whistling noises. In winter, both birds share similar behaviors, and roost in noisy gregarious flocks and foraging groups.

The diet of the Great-tailed Grackle is varied. Besides insects, seeds, and berries it (unfortunately) includes frogs, small birds, nestlings and eggs. They often remove cowbird eggs from nests and steal food from other birds. Their breeding behavior is also varied, ranging from polygamous to promiscuous. The larger males claim territory within the colony, display and sing before groups of females until the female chooses, or not. Male disputes are low key while females squabble over nesting sites and rob nesting material from each other. After breeding, the female lays 3 or 4 gray to light blue oval eggs with reddish purple markings sometimes twice a year. After 2 weeks of incubation the eggs hatch. The altricial (naked, blind, needing care) young, brooded and fed by the female, remain in the nest for about 3 more weeks.

Great-tailed Grackles are dimorphic between sexes. The larger males can reach nearly 20 inches in length with a wingspan of over 25 inches. They are in appearance iridescent purple on head, back, and underparts, black overall, with golden yellow eyes and a very long keel-shaped tail. The females are smaller, dark brown on head and upperparts, cinnamon buff on breast, throat, supercilium and auriculars (above the eye and around ear), faint iridescent purple on plumage, with yellowish white eyes. Juveniles are similar to females, but with a grayish brown belly, streaked underparts, and dark eyes. The length of the male compares to that of the American Crow except that the crow is far more robust and requires a wingspan of over 40 inches for lift.

Why, then, does this species of grackle have such a long tail? Like Oklahoma's state bird, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, whose tail can reach over 9 inches, the Great-tailed Grackle's tail is a substantial part of its length. Appearance of size has a competitive edge and a long tail might have flight advantages, working much like a kite tail to stabilize and add lift. These speculations were dismissed when I observed a male walking in an open field turn like a weathervane when a strong gust of wind struck its large tail. Obviously, many things in nature remain a mystery. (Reference: Fred J. Alsop III in assoc. with the Smithsonian Institute, *Birds of North America*, 2001)

Editor's note: The San Fernando Valley Audubon Society's 2008 Christmas Bird Count on 12/27/08 reported 108 Great-tailed Grackles.

### Mountain Lions at Placerita

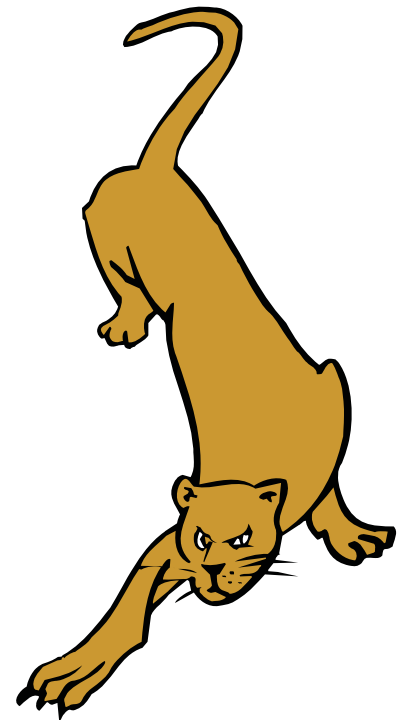
*Mountain lion paw prints have been seen recently around our building. While it is very rare to see a mountain lion during the day in the park, it is a good time to read the safety recommendations from the California State Parks.*

To reduce the chances of an encounter with a mountain lion:

- Avoid hiking alone, especially between dusk and dawn when lions normally hunt. Make noise while you hike to reduce the chances of surprising a lion.
- Always keep children in sight and within arm's reach while hiking in areas that can conceal a lion. Mountain lions seem to be drawn to children because of their small size.

To reduce the chances of an attack when encountering a mountain lion:

- Do not attempt to approach a lion. Most lions will avoid confrontation. Give them a way to escape.
- Stay calm and face the lion. Do not run, because this may trigger the lion's instinct to attack. Try to appear larger by raising your arms and opening your jacket.
- Pick up small children so they don't panic and run. Avoid bending over or crouching.
- If the lion approaches or acts aggressively, shout and throw branches or whatever can be obtained without turning your back or bending over.
- Fight back if attacked. A good walking stick can be useful in warding off a lion. Because a mountain lion usually tries to bite the head or neck, try to remain standing and face the attacking animal.



**Report any mountain lion sightings to park staff!**



## CLASS OF 2009

David Gold  
Deborah Barroso  
Donna Fernholtz  
Frances Bojorquez  
Heather Poffenberger  
Jamie Chavez  
Jim Owens

Joanna Blades  
Keirsten Fernandez  
Kendra Geiger  
Lainey White  
Linette Brammer  
Molly Roberts  
Norm Schweitzer

Rick Bardwell  
Rick Brammer  
Shana Radecki  
Sima Bernstein  
Sue Mayhew  
Yobany Herrera

These students have been attending classes, learning and showing great interest. They still have to audit the trails, do their reports and pass the exam.

We are impressed by their commitment and wish them good luck. It is the largest class we have had in many years and we are very proud for such an enthusiastic response to our high quality docent training classes.

We wish them all good luck and we want to honor them with a graduation party on Saturday March 28 at 6pm. It will be held at Phil Rizzo's club house at Old Orchard 1, 25051 N Ave. Rotella, Newhall CA 91355.

Thank you very much Phil for providing us with a roof while the Nature Center is still in construction. Good parking is found either in the parking lot or on Rotella or Lyons Avenue. All the docents and volunteers are invited.

Please RSVP to Evelyne : 254-2972 so I can order enough food from the Rattler (the restaurant, not the newsletter.)



## Birds of a Feather

by Bob Fischer

Birds are fascinating for many reasons including their ability to fly, though some are flightless. In addition to the variety of their shapes, colors and sizes and their songs and calls, the feature that I find most intriguing are their feathers.

Feathers are considered the most complex skin covering structures found in vertebrates. They aid in flight, thermal insulation, waterproofing and coloration that helps in communication and protection. And of course feathers are what distinguish birds from all other creatures. Feathers also are among the most complex integumentary appendages, i.e., stuff that grows out of the skin, found in vertebrates and are formed in tiny follicles in the outer skin layer. Feathers are made of keratin proteins of a type tougher than that of hair, horns and hooves of mammals.

Feathers come in two basic types; vaned feathers which cover the exterior of the body, and down feathers which are underneath the vaned feathers. Vaned feathers, also called contour feathers, give the bird its shape and are the flight feathers of the wing and the tail.

A typical vaned feather features a main shaft, called the rachis. Fused to the rachis are a series of branches, or barbs; the barbs themselves are also branched and form the barbules. These barbules have minute hooks called barbicels for cross-attachment. Down feathers are fluffy because they lack barbicels, so the barbules float free of each other allowing the down to trap much air and provide excellent thermal insulation.

At the base of the feather, the rachis expands to form the hollow tubular calamus or quill which inserts into a follicle in the skin. The basal part of the quill is without vanes and is embedded within the skin follicle. Hatchling birds of some species have a special kind of natal down and these are pushed out when the normal feathers emerge.

Flight feathers are stiffened so as to work against the wind in the down stroke but yield in other directions. The pattern of orientation of keratin fibers in the feathers of flying birds differs from that in flightless birds. The fibers are better aligned in the middle of the feather and less aligned towards the tips.

Feathers insulate birds from water and cold temperatures. They may also be plucked to line the nest and provide insulation to the eggs and young.

The individual feathers in the wings and tail play important roles in controlling flight. Although feathers are light, a bird's plumage weighs two or three times more than its skeleton, since many bones are hollow and contain air sacs.

Color patterns serve as camouflage against predators. As with fish, the top and bottom colors may be different to provide camouflage during flight. Striking differences in feather patterns and colors are part of the sexual dimorphism of many bird species and are particularly important in selection of mating pairs. In some cases there are differences in the UV reflectivity of feathers across sexes even though no differences in color can be seen in the visible range.

The colors of feathers are produced by the presence of pigments such as melanins (browns, blacks, and grays), carotenoids (reds, yellows, and orange), psittacofulvins (unique red pigments found in some parrots) and porphyrins or greens and by feather structure. Structural coloration is involved in the production of most greens, blues, iridescent colors, ultraviolet reflectance and in the enhancement of pigment. The blues and greens of many parrots are produced by constructive interference of light reflecting from different layers of the structures in feathers in addition to the yellow carotenoid pigments.

A bird's feathers undergo wear and tear and are replaced periodically during its life through molting. New feathers are formed through the same follicle from which the old ones were fledged. The presence of melanin in feathers increases their resistance to abrasion.

The evolution of coloration is based on sexual selection and it has been suggested that carotenoid based pigments may have evolved since they are likely to be more honest signals of fitness since they are derived from special diets. This may be more information about the feathers of birds than you want to know, but it's only an introduction. I was astonished when I went to Google and looked up feathers. If you're curious, have fun with feathers.

Reference: Wikipedia



## An Update on Placerita's Construction Development

Our new Facility Sign out front has been completed and 90% of all the chain-link has been removed from around our parking lots, allowing full public usage of our main parking lot and new Pedestrian Bridge.

As of yesterday, a new contractor work has begun in our main building: Demolition and removal has started of all interior cabinetry throughout the building, all interior walls have been stripped to accommodate new drywall (fill framing has begun too).

Removal of the existing electrical has begun and the museum completely gutted by docents and staff. One main piece of museum furniture was saved and will be delivered to and utilized by Whittier Narrows with two of our old doors going to Deane Dana Friendship Park (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) for new bird enclosures! We still have most of the old displays and exhibits; all in storage right now on location.

Lastly, all erosion control measures (water diversion walls and straw batts) have been installed in our picnic grounds and at the stream banks, mitigating any potential for bridge washout or loss.

Frank Hoffman





## California Oil Museum

The docents of Placerita try to plan outings and field trips once a month. The purpose of the field trips is to learn about the local community and perhaps enhance our presentations to children. On February 11, the docents traveled over Highway 126 to Santa Paula to visit the Oil Museum located there.

An oil museum docent who toured us through rarely seen parts of the museum met us. We had time to visit the parts of the museum open to the public. The museum is operated by the City of Santa Paula and highlights the part “black gold” played in California’s history. It has a large collection of gas station memorabilia, in particular a large display of antique gas pumps. We couldn’t help but notice the last price listed on the gas pumps. They were all less than \$1.00 and one was 13 cents. There is an authentic 1890s-drilling rig that was actually used in the nearby oilfields.

Our docent led us upstairs to the carefully restored Union Oil Company’s corporate headquarters. We admired the materials used to restore the rooms in the corporate offices. Some people remembered using the telephone exchange where the operator had to plug in the wires to complete calls.

After our oil museum tour, we strolled through the quaint town and admired the huge old fig tree and the memorial set up to recognize the heroes of the San Fransisquito Dam collapse. There are a number of huge murals set about the town that tell a story of the history of Santa Paula.

It was then lunchtime. We continued strolling down Main Street to Mupu Grill. Everyone agreed it was a perfect choice for lunch. We enjoyed sweet potato fries. The manager told us something about the history of his restaurant. The building has been there since before the 1900s and there has been a Mupu Grill about that long. The name was taken from a local Indian Tribe. The booths and photos in the restaurant came from Chasen’s Restaurant in Hollywood. There is a rumor that Ronald Regan proposed to Nancy in one of the booths.

One more stop was made at the Filmore Fish Hatchery. We saw more than 100 large birds waiting at a water outlet. We figured they were opportunists waiting for some food or fish from the hatchery. We saw Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Night-crowned Herons, Green-backed Herons, Mallards, and lots of little coots.

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## Connecting people with nature SPRING PROGRAMS

- FAMILY NATURE WALK** Every Saturday from 11 to noon.  
An easy, 1-hour walk exploring the area’s natural and cultural history.
- ANIMAL PRESENTATION** Every Saturday from 1 to 2 pm.  
See, learn and ask questions about live native animals of the area.
- BIRD WALK** Second Saturday of the month from 9 to 11 am. For all levels of birders. Bring binoculars, water and field guide.
- COMMUNITY HIKING CLUB** A monthly community event that invites organized groups and families to get into the outdoors, visit wilderness areas, and lead healthy lifestyles. For more information, or visit their website: [www.californiawild.org/santaclarita](http://www.californiawild.org/santaclarita).
- AMPITHEATER NIGHTS** 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of each month. March 21<sup>st</sup> Animal Tracks and Signs 5:30pm. April 18<sup>th</sup>: Reptile and Amphibians night at 6:30pm.
- BEGINNING BIRDERS** This program meets in 4-week sessions each Saturday at 9am, lasting 2 hours. Focus on ages 10+. Call for a reservation (first come basis) as each session will have a maximum of 20 students. The next session will start March 21 to April 11 and the following session will be April 18 to May 19..
- JUNIOR. RANGERS** Experience science in nature with our monthly program open to kids age 8 to 14.. Meetings will be held the 4<sup>th</sup> Saturday of each month from 9:30 to 11 am. Subjects vary monthly. March 28: Insects and Arachnids. April 25: What Lives in Placerita Creek.

**For more information, please call 661.259.7721 or visit our website at [Placerita.org](http://Placerita.org).**



We would like to thank those who thought of Placerita in making their very generous donations. The PCNCA, Staff and Critters all thank you.

Jane Adams  
Henrietta Babb  
Vera Bierend  
Dorothy Deiderich  
Patty Domay  
Frank Hoover  
Constance Labadie  
Brenda Melchiorre  
Hector Molina  
Shirley Morano  
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## The Rattler

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and cats  
can grow together."

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