



# The Rattler



## In This Issue:

- Volunteer of the Year 2015
- Open House--May 9
- Meet Gini Lomerson
- Bees in the Classroom!

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## *Placerita Canyon Nature Center*

**Over 50 Years of Nature Education**

### *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.*

**May/June 2015**

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### **Hello Nature Friends,**

Spring came early this year with warm days and the blooming season was gorgeous because we had some light welcomed rains just when so many plants were in bud.

The new class of 2015 just graduated (see article.) They have taken over the trails and the school groups with enthusiasm and dedication, ready to impart their new knowledge and it is a joy to see them in action.

Many new programs and projects were started by a few teams of Docents to help visitors better appreciate our new Interpretive Center and their weekend visits. The training for those programs is just starting but in a month or two, we should be ready with 5 new Nature Boxes, interpretive guides in the new Interpretive Center and a brand new Tataviam ki'j (house) on the Ecology trail.

We sure hope you will be able to visit Placerita Nature Center on May 9th from 10am to 3pm for our Open House. That is our way to give back to the community and it is a free event where the whole family can enjoy animal presentations, panning for fools gold, guided hikes, face painting, and a scavenger hunt. It is always a day filled up with fun activities and much to see and do. Do not miss it! I can assure you that you will have a good time and if you can bring children, they will enjoy every minute of their day at Placerita.

This is our last issue of the season. We hope that you will have a very happy and safe summer and we will see you in August.

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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.**



### The Bees Have Arrived at Placerita

We have a live beehive at Placerita and it is going to be such a wonderful teaching tool. As you can well imagine, it took a pretty long time to have the permit and receive authorization to be able to do that. Every safety aspect of the situation has been carefully studied for months and this was the reason for the long delays but we need to be responsible for the public visiting the Nature Center.

Their Queen comes from Hawaii because there are no African bees on that island and it came from a reliable source. To be able to recognize her quickly, the queen has a touch of blue coloring on her thorax.

The bees are now getting used to their new home and that should take about 2 weeks. They are being fed a solution with a high sugar concentration. The bonding is done and if they were taken away now, they would fly right back where the food and the queen are.

We are very excited to be able to have an active honeycomb with hundreds of bees working inside. All this will be seen from the classroom so we know the school children visiting Placerita will enjoy such a rare experience.

We give many thanks to Jack Levenberg who supported this project from the start, who made sure it was approved and brought to completion. He showed much patience and dedication.

## 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 [evandersande@gmail.com](mailto:evandersande@gmail.com).

Please email your article in MS Word if possible.

Visit our Internet site at [www.placerita.org](http://www.placerita.org)--Ron Kraus is the webmaster.

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

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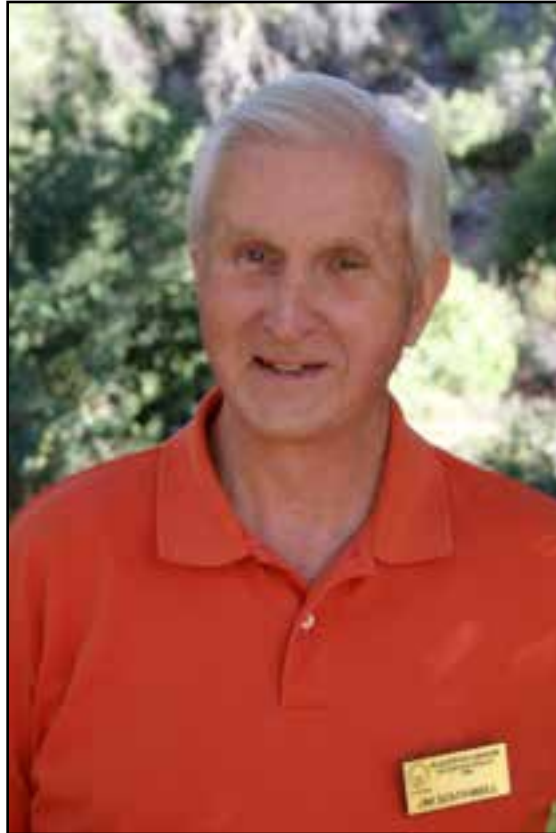
**Jack Levenberg**

### 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.



### **MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT**

March 26, 2015

I have been blessed with your support and encouragement for the last sixteen years as President of the Placerita Canyon Nature Center.

Many changes to the volunteer organization have occurred since I was first asked to lead the PCNCA in 1999. Starting from a small group of about fifteen dedicated docents and a Board of Directors of five or six in 1999, we have grown into a very large and talented volunteer organization equal to or better than any other in the Los Angeles County Parks Natural Areas.

From operating the Placerita Canyon Nature Center on our own during a brief financial crisis to saving Walker Ranch from developer encroachment, I have enjoyed the challenge of leadership. Our latest joint achievement with County Parks, for which we are all very proud, is the new Interpretive Center replacing the old museum.

Now, I believe is the right time for me to pass-on the leadership to our very talented docents.

My wife Diane has been the behind the scene partner in all that I do. Now we are on a tragic journey with our 49 year old son Todd, since he was diagnosed last fall with ALS (better known as Lou Gehrig's Disease) a progressive neurodegenerative condition. We now spend parts of every week at his home in San Marcos helping the family get through Todd's fight to the end.

Thank you all for allowing me to experience such wonderful relationships which I look forward to continuing as a volunteer docent.

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
- I can pledge \_\_\_\_\_ monthly
- Please contact me about the Adopt-an-Animal Program

Your tax-deductible donations are needed to help fund programs provided by volunteers.  
Send your donation to:

PCNCA  
19152 Placerita Canyon Road  
Newhall, CA 91321-3213



**Open House**  
by Deb Clem

Please join us for our annual Open House and Family Festival! May 9th 10am - 3pm  
The theme this year is "One Family- One World". We are interconnected as humans and with the earth. Just as touching any part of a spider web, it is felt throughout the whole web, so does everything we do impact the whole on some level. It is my goal to help others be a good steward of the earth. Come Discover and Play with us to celebrate our Great Big Beautiful Family! What better way to celebrate our mothers and Mother EARTH!



## 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 8 to 10am. For all levels of birders. Bring binoculars, water and field guide.
- BIRD WALK, CASTAIC** The Placerita Canyon Natural Area docents lead a monthly bird walk at **Castaic Lake Recreation Area** on the first Saturday of the month at 8:00AM.
- BLOOMS OF THE SEASON** Learn about native plants and what is blooming along the trails. Meet in the patio at 9:30 for a one-hour stroll on the fourth Saturday of every month. Bring your camera and questions. For more information about this free program, call 661.259.7721 or 259.7832.
- COMMUNITY HIKING CLUB** A non-profit organization that invites all members of the SCV and community at large to: Join weekly planned hikes; Attend monthly nature series educational presentations; Participate in community outreach programs such as Calif Condor micro-trash clean-ups and maintenance of trails and native garden; Partner with groups such as Boys and Girls Club to introduce youth to nature. For more information, go to the website at [communityhikingclub.org](http://communityhikingclub.org)
- NATURE EDUCATION** An exciting new program at Placerita in conjunction with the Community Hiking Club. Every 3rd Sunday of the month at 2pm the PCNCA and CHC will provide a free educational program open to the public. Changes may be made, so please contact the center at 661.259.7721 to verify.  
May 17, California's Rattlesnakes.
- OPEN HOUSE** May 9--See Flyer
- EOY POTLUCK and ELECTIONS** June 6 at 6pm at Placerita

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





### **The Pond is Ready!**

The clean up was done in February and was planned by Fred Seeley, but the article was not published in the last Rattler. I apologize for the delay. The people who helped were Sue and Allan Wallander, Jack Levenberg, Joan Fincutter, and Connie Viola. We were extremely pleased with their hard work!

They took out all the leaves, cut back the cattails, did a partial water change, took out the rocks and sticks that the public throws in, and basically spiffed up the area. The loose moss was removed but since the frog and toad tadpoles need moss to thrive, we did not overdue moss removal. We also put in some expensive special bacteria to improve water quality for the wildlife in a non-filtered pond.

It was quite an adventure digging out the various irrigation control boxes trying to locate a working hose bib. Gophers or squirrels had filled them all completely full of dirt. Allan finally found one that worked, after digging out 2 others that didn't work, so we could quickly refill the pond.

Assuming the drought has left us some potential parents, we are now ready for the egg and tadpole season to begin. Thanks to everyone who helped!



### **Weeding and Trail Enhancement**

Robert Grzesiak has a dream and he is not going to give up. Too many non native plants can be seen around the Nature Center and his team is trying to control the situation. Here is his message:

“Well it's that time again for brave souls to tackle the Wild Garden. We will revisit the Hillside trail and pull out invasive grasses. The grasses have gone to seed and they will need to be bagged out. We will evaluate our previous efforts. Our effort may not seem significant now, but

next spring, we will see very little regrowth of the grasses, since the seeds are viable for only about one year.”

Many docents responded to his call and bags were filled up by Ingrid Brown, Maria Elena Christensen, Roger and Judy McClure, Andrea Donner, Dan Kott, Fred Seeley, Denny Truger, Clarissa Greene and Karen Gubert. Thank you all so much for your help.



### **From a Tree Hugger**

My name is Colleen Kite, docent, class of 2010.

When I first became a docent in 2010 I was excited about taking kids on hikes and enjoying the animal shows with them. Participating in the Open Houses at Walker Cabin, demonstrating my quilt making and showing them how they did it back then and all by hand. Sitting in the rocking chair showing the kids how to quilt and letting them try it themselves.

The past couple of years I haven't been as involved because I just let too many other things get in the way. I've been coming around more lately, mostly doing hikes on my own. I've either been hiking the Canyon Trail and sitting by the oak tree up at marker six or the oak tree over by the pond. I find such peace there as I meditate. (By the way, I enjoyed going on the meditation walk with Deb Clem back in 2014).

Recently, I injured my leg and am doing a lot of healing at my favorite oak trees. If you see someone hugging a tree, it's me!

Yes, I'm a tree hugger. It has helped me heal, not just my leg but my entire being. Sometimes when I'm sitting there I watch the other docents taking the kids on their hikes. That gives me a lot of joy as I watch and I see they have added some new things that look interesting and I'd like to try. Looking forward to seeing more of you on the trail soon.



## Pale Swallowtail and Western Tiger Swallowtail

by Paul A. Levine

Here are 2 photos, one of a Pale Swallowtail (*Papilio eurymedon*) and a Western Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio rutulus*) that I took a couple of years ago in April. All the butterflies are nectaring on Blue Dick.

The key field marks to differentiate the two butterflies are the Pale Swallowtail has a cream color for the background compared to the bright yellow of the Western Tiger Swallowtail. The Pale Swallowtail also has broader stripes than the Western Tiger Swallowtail. When I am hiking with the school children visiting Placerita Canyon Nature Center and we see one of these butterflies, I simply call them all Tiger Swallowtails as one needs to see them side-by-side to be able to clearly differentiate them.



### Not Flower but Bridget

Do you remember when Bambi saw his first skunk and called it flower? Our first skunk was called Ferguson and our second skunk is named Bridget.

We have a brand new female one year old, healthy but still a little too skittish to be shown to the public.

However, when you want to handle a skunk, there is a pressing issue that needs to be dealt with first. The scent glands are a very effective defense mechanism which strongly limits the number of animals who are going to attack a skunk. Most of them stay away and the only natural enemy of a skunk is the great horned owl because they do not have a sense of smell.

Frank McDaniel, a previous docent at Placerita, ran over a skunk by accident. His car was detailed but he never could get rid of the skunk's smell and had to sell his car. It is very strong and persistent. Dogs are curious animals and they get sprayed by skunks if they come too close. That is never pleasant and can be a big problem if the owner lives in an apartment.

Finding a veterinarian willing to descent a skunk was not easy. If a small mistake is done during surgery or even while disposing of the scent glands, the practice will have to close its doors and spend the rest of the day cleaning, hoping to get rid of the smell for the next day.

Using our connection at Placerita, we are happy to announce that the veterinarian who descented Bridget did a good job and the surgery was successful. Bridget has recovered and is in great shape.

I hope you will enjoy the first official look at her in the Rattler.



### The Ki'j

This is a promise of better things to come! Denny H. Truger has taken on the project to redo the ki'j, which means traditional dwelling in Tataviam. Great project Denny and thank you in advance.



### San Diegan Tiger Whiptail

We have a new addition to the Placerita collection. We added a San Diegan tiger whiptail. The whiptail won't be handled, it is a new static display. It is a very active lizard. It is slim-bodied with a long slender tail, a thin snout, and large symmetrical head plates.

The tail can reach up to two times the length of the body.

How do you come up with such a name? The markings should give us a clue--the back and sides are gray, tan, or brown, marked with dark spots or bars, which is often very sharply defined. Dark marks on the side don't form vertical bars.

The throat is pale with large black spots. Often there are reddish patches on the sides of the belly. The tail tip is dark or bluish. A very handsome lizard!







## A Very Popular Plant

A popularity contest for a native plant? If such a thing existed, I am pretty sure the wild cucumber would win first place very easily. This plant seems innocent enough, and always takes visitors on the trails by surprise. The schoolchildren coming to Placerita have many comments each time we take them walking on the trails. The fruit offers a particular fascination “What is that? Is that a nest?” When the fruit is nice and green it looks especially scary with all those sharp points, and you have to take it gingerly between your fingers to avoid being stabbed. When it is summer and the fruit is dried out, it looks very strange indeed. The sharp points are dried out but very large seed chambers have opened up. Each entrance to the chambers are opened up large, curved upward, and look like nothing else around. The seeds are very large and brown and also seem disproportionate to the gentle and innocent light green vine that appeared in the winter.

However, even in the winter, this vine has an attitude of its own. The wild cucumber becomes all dried out during the summer and only the presence of those dried out but very spiky fruit on it are striking and cannot be ignored. After the first rain, the wild cucumber starts to grow. I would not say it does that mildly. The vine grows extremely rapidly with an exuberance that is not matched by another plant in the middle of the winter. I am pretty sure growth could be monitored from day to day to see a remarkable increase. As the vine is lightweight and grabs at any nearby branches for support, it is a sign that spring will be here again, even if we are in the middle of the winter.

The wild cucumber (*Marah macrocarpus*) is also known as Manroot or Bigroot. It is not related to the cucumber that we eat. It tastes bitter, and this is how it found its name. Marah means bitter in Hebrew.

“And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah; for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah.”

However, when people start speaking about the wild cucumber, it is all the little side stories that they are excited about...and there are many of them. The Californian Indians used the wild cucumber for many purposes. One interesting story is how they used to fish with the wild cucumber seeds and tubers. It was not really fishing, but more a way of stupefying the fish and then being able to pick them up out of the water when they would float to the surface. They would mash the fruit and the root and add it to the water, the fish would float to the surface, and this is how the fishing was done. Of course, the fish was not poisoned, otherwise it would have been inedible, it was just a temporary effect but very useful.

Which, of course, brings us to the point “Do the seeds contain a hallucinogen?” If you start a sentence like this in a presentation, you can see your audience perking up, becoming alert and suddenly very interested!

In the 1960's, several children in Ojai showed symptoms of severe hallucination and it was learned they had been nibbling on seeds of the wild cucumber. At this time, there is no information of the exact chemical nature of the hallucinogens (similar components to LSD). Right away, I want to warn you strongly not to try anything foolish. In a normal year, it is almost impossible to determine what somebody could tolerate and what would kill him. This year, the danger is even greater as increased effects are related to the drought we are experiencing. We have found many plants that can be eaten without any problems during years with a normal amount of rainfall, but they simply must be left alone this year. Otherwise, you could end up with very strong GI tract distress and maybe even more dangerous problems. This is noticed even for plants that are not poisonous, so you can only imagine the concentration in the flesh of a seed that starts out being a hallucinogen!

The seeds (roasted and ground) were used to make pigments for rock art by the Native Indians and might have been used from time to time by the ladies as eyeliner.

The dried spiky fruit can be soaked in water so all the spikes fall off and then it can be useful as a loofa. The tuber contains saponins which is a natural soap so this was a very useful plant for the Chumash.

Then there is this name that makes your imagination run wild: manroot, Old man in the ground? Where is that coming from? What does it mean? The root is large, very large and shaped vaguely like a human. Some large tubers can weight up to 100 pounds! Sometimes, newly exposed tubers can be seen along road cuts or eroded slopes and they have a tan colored surface with a vague resemblance to a mummy shape that strikes the imagination.

Much gentler are the flowers that emerge soon after the vine grows, making them really the very first bloom of the season.

They are small and white, and yet again, very interesting. The male flower is part of a cluster of blossoms on a long stem (with pollen) and the female flower is a single flower (with an ovary). Individual flowers can be male or female, but both sexes can be found on the same plant. The pollen of the male flower can fertilize the female flower on the same plant. That is a fantastic advantage for reproduction done by insects or wind. Since both flowers are close together on the same plant, Marah are termed “self-fertile.”

We already talked about the fruit covered with prickles, bright green in the spring turning yellow in the summer. But how do the seeds germinate? The fruit usually holds at least 4 large, smooth brown seeds. They will fall to the ground and animals will eat many of them, but some will remain there until the first rain comes. The initial shoot emerges from the seed and grows down in the ground, holding the seed in a favorable environment. That same shoot will then divide in half, one part going down in the ground, and the other part reaching for the sun and becoming the very first vine.

There is so much to learn about the wild cucumber. It is such a lovely, crazy and wild plant, it always makes me joyful when I discover this tender new vine covered in blossoms in the dark days of winter!



Charitha Eragoda was in Sri Lanka. He did not have the Rattler but a Placerita shirt! What happened? "We wanted to cross badly to see some leopards. Got pulled out by another jeep that arrived after one and half hours."



The "Rattler" made it on the Pacific Crest Trail! — with Dan Kott, Helen Walker, Maikel Summy, Jan N Ron Nichols, Maria Helena Christensen and Denny H Truger.



Linda and Bill Kopatz went to Egypt and sent us some terrific pictures from all the places they visited (even one with the Rattler)



Rosemary Regis went to Anza Borrego to see the Swainsom Hawks migration : "Sorry, I thought I would make a better sign later on but there are just too many things going on ! We had a wonderful time!"



Denny Truger took the Rattler with him while visiting the Grand Canyon. He went down on mule back, was the only tourist there as it was a cold winter day but that made it very special.



Irene Heerlein and Denny H Truger went to check the first blooms of the season with the Rattler



Mike Elling hiked at the Ventura Botanical Gardens and took the Rattler with him. Those gardens were planted 2 years ago and now are beautiful. There are located in Downtown Ventura, in the back of City Hall and the view of the Ocean is incredible.



Mona Rubbery celebrated her birthday in Yosemite. She brought along her husband Will, her Bernese Mountain dog "Tucker" and the



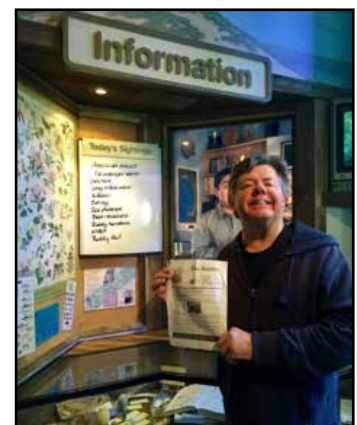
Denny Truger, Robert Grzesiak and Ron Nichols took the Rattler on their expedition, trekking the entire course of the Santa Clara river from the high desert to the Ocean.



Paul Levine was waiting for important medical tests when he discovered in front of the hospital a garden where Tropical Milkweed were growing, then he found a sign identifying this as the Chrysalis Garden, a place for transformation and renewal. ...Serendipity...



The Rattler made it to the Western Antelope Valley Wildflowers with Robert Grzesiak , Maria Elena Franicevich Christensen and Denny Truger.



So what does a docent do on vacation ? Visit a Nature Center. Ron Kraus took the Rattler to the Monterey Bay Aquarium.



## Graduation Party – Saturday, March 28, 2015

I had my suspicions... We had 16 students, very enthusiastic and many docents charmed by their passion and very willing to help them throughout the training. I had sent the invitation for the graduation party and I had mentioned that the graduates could bring their family to share their big day. We had not had a party since the holidays and at Placerita, we are always ready to party!

So, I followed my suspicion and asked every body to RSVP to tell me how many chairs and tables we should have ready. I got 70 RSVP's and that sounded about normal so I started to relax. 96 guests showed up for the graduation party and there was some last minute panic pulling the very last chairs and tables from the closet. Thank you Chris Mowry for all your help at this crucial moment and I was pleased that I had bought extra table cloths. Like Ron said: "It was busy, friendly, sort of crazy but very much fun!" The buffet was plentiful and delicious. Thank you to all the cooks.

The ceremony started by a special recognition for Shirley Morano. Shirley is going to celebrate her 93rd birthday and as a young woman, she participated at the beginning of Placerita being used as a teaching environment. This was started in 1961 by the San Fernando Valley chapter of the American Association of University Women and was called the San Fernando Valley Junior Museum. Shirley still comes a few times a week to Placerita to answer the phone and help the county employees. She received, from Jim Southwell President of PCNCA, the Founders Cup. Shirley is very much loved by all at Placerita and she received very warm applause.

The graduation ceremony started by recognition from Ron Kraus with a donation from the students to PCNCA and a gift certificate to Ron. All the new graduates received their diploma, their name tags from PCNCA and the official tag from the County (I think it was the first time both could be given at the same time,) their trail guide and some, with perfect attendance, were given a Placerita cap.

There were big smiles on all the faces as you can see on the photos below.

Lanita Algeyer is in charge of Docent recognition and these docents received a gift certificate:

- Rick Brammer - He is at PCNC greeting the students with the birds several days a week, and takes the students on hikes when we need that extra docent. He is now the PCNCA treasurer.
- Linda Ioerger- At PCNC 5 days a week working with Chester and educating the kids about him and the birds. The kids love being met with a wild bird that they have never seen before.
- Denny Truger - Worked on the box project, always there to help with set-up and helping wherever he is needed, he also did some electrical work for the center and saved us a lot of money and time by doing it for us. Shy around the kids, however he finds things he can do for the good of PCNC.
- Suzy Hermann- A docent who always signs up for the school field trips, showing the snakes, and hiking with kids. She has signed up for 11 or the 13 school trips for the month of April. Really a true docent who cares about educating the kids.
- Jim Hazard - Always one of the first docents to volunteer for the school field trip. He comes to the park and hikes all the trails before 9:00 a.m. to be all warmed up for when the school bus arrives.

Suzy and Jim could not be at the party but received warm applause too. At the close of the ceremony, Jim Southwell announced that Ron was selected as Volunteer of the Year for LA County, the highest distinction possible. Ron was visibly moved as the whole crowd cheered hearing the good news. He had to admit that for the first time all evening he was very briefly speechless but he was truly honored and appreciates this award.

Thank you to all the docents who came early to help with set up and thank you to every one of you who helped to clean up the place so efficiently and so fast.

Another great party and so many reasons to celebrate.

Again, congratulations to the class of 2015!



## DOCENT TRAINING 2015

### Synopsis's of the Class of 2015 Reports



#### **Tataviam Indians by Kathie Hovore**

This is a brief overview of the Native American tribe of Tataviam Indians who inhabited the area in and around Placerita Canyon from about 450AD. Kathie points out that almost no information was recorded about their language and life customs of these peaceful Indians. She provided a map of the known and presumed locations they inhabited, and many other interesting concepts about them.

#### **Visual Identification of Rocks in Road Cuts , Creekside and along Hillside Trail by Daniel M. Lorsch**

Daniel provides a useful document to be used by docents to identify the common rock formations in the Placerita Canyon Nature Center. He has pointed out and describes the three most common classified rocks, Igneous, Sedimentary, and Metamorphic. Most usefully he has provided photographs of rock formations and the locations for easy identification with in the trail areas visited by children and hikers.

#### **Life in the Leaf Litter by Erica de Poor**

Erica presents a strong argument that we should leave the leaf litter where it is and let nature do its job in our yard. She states, "The Earth keeps itself clean and picks up ...". The leaf litter goes through a cycle of decomposition to provide an environment promoting new life benefiting insects, animals, birds, numerous creatures in the ground and plants which can take years to accomplish.

#### **Yucca – Yucca Moth – Native Americans by Alfred Hofstatter**

This was an excellent overview of the Yucca plant and the symbiotic relationship with the Yucca Moth. Al provides a detailed description of the common species we see locally, "The Lords Candle", Hesperoyucca Whipplei and the Yucca Moth, Tegeticella Yuccasella, and he explains how this pairing is an example of symbiotic mutualism and its complex workings in the natural world.

#### **Mistletoe: The Good; The Bad; The Truth by Glenda Perl**

Glenda's research found some interesting facts about our local mistletoe and shared them in a very pleasant, and humorous writing style. You'll even find out where the traditional "Kissing under the mistletoe" came from!

#### **Pepsis Wasp AKA "Tarantula Hawk Wasp" by Koreen O'Connell**

Once you have read this paper, you will definitely not want to be stung by a Tarantula Hawk! This species has a very fascinating life cycle that is a little gruesome from the tarantula's standpoint. Nicely written and very informative.

#### **Mazanitas by Clarissa Greene**

Did you know the name "Manzanita" is Spanish for "little apples" which their seed fruit resembles. They are indeed edible by wildlife and man. Several of California species are detailed.

#### **Transpiration in Chaparral Plants by Mark Hershey**

Transpiration, or loss of water by plants occurs in all land plants, and Mark has written a detailed but easily read description of the methods plants of the Chaparral use to survive in their ecosystem. This is an interesting and informative document.

#### **The History of Placerita Canyon by Tom Schmidt**

Starting with the native American tribes in Southern California through the Walker family selling land for the PCNC, Tom provides the pertinent facts of Placerita Canyon history. And if you want to see a great photo of a "Fancy Rock" fireplace, this report is the place to look.

#### **Oaks in Distress by Sandra Cattell**

The name says it all; Sandra points out the separate and combined causes of stress and deterioration of our native oaks in Placerita Canyon and through Southern California. Especially significant is a fungus that seems to have appeared in 1995 that causes what is called "Sudden Oak Death".

#### **Bats--Friend or Foe? Mammal or Bird? by Barry Schmitt**

Barry provides a well written and informative paper about bats with a focus on Placerita Canyon and Southern California. For example, the largest bat in the USA has a two-foot wingspan and the smallest weighs less than a penny! Bats are very beneficial for our environment. Very much worth the read.

#### **Plant Adaptions by Gini Lomerson**

A very informative paper that outlines many of the ways plants adapt to their environment, including leaf structure, root adaptions, behavior modifications and fire response adaptions. Gini then specifically discusses the adaptions of 9 very significant plants found right here in Placerita Canyon. Tour-leading Docents would benefit from reviewing the details of these plants.



### **Placerita Canyon Rock Identification by Sara Vincelli**

This report is a pleasant read about the types of rock commonly found in Placerita Canyon and how to identify them. And, did you know that the Walker's "fancy rock" is a "schist" and that its greenish color come from its chlorite content?

### **Good Bugs vs. Bad Bugs by Brian de la Torre**

This report is a general discussion of both good and bad bugs in our environment. It includes thoughts on pesticides and biological controls.

### **Pros and Cons of non-native weed control by Robert Starks**

This paper is a general discussion of the history of non-native grasses and about whether or not an effort to remove non-native grasses makes sense. Robert points out that non-native grasses do have some benefits to the environment.

### **Placerita Canyon: A Geologic Overview by Lola Camacho Micu**

Who would guessed that just 2 to 2.5 million years ago, our beloved Placerita Canyon was under an ocean...!? That and several other interesting facts are included in this report. It also includes the general locations of several examples of the three basic types of rock found in the PCNC.

### **Snakes of Placerita by Jake McCoy**

This report gives an overview of the 3 most common snakes in Placerita Canyon: the Gopher snake, the Kingsnake and the Rattlesnake and some interesting facts about snakes in general.



#### **Trail Treasures**

RuthAnne Murthy  
Mexican Elderberry,  
*Sambucus mexicana*

As you drive into the parking lot of Placerita Canyon Nature Center, you may notice a lovely shrub with clusters of creamy white flowers on the left of the driveway. It seems to be greeting visitors and beckoning nature lovers to come in and enjoy.

Mexican Elderberry is a native shrub that can grow to about 25

feet tall. It is part of the honeysuckle family. The bright green leaves are compound which means that there multiple leaflets on a single stem or petiole. In the case of Mexican Elderberry, there can be 3 to 9 toothed-margined leaflets on each petiole. The stems, leaves, roots, and green berries are all poisonous. The Elderberry is late summer deciduous which is an adaptation to the Mediterranean Climate. The plant has multiple stems or trunks. After a fire, the plant will crown from the roots very quickly.

The compact clusters of tiny cream-colored flowers produce blue to black berries called drupes. The drupes have a whitish film when ripe. Elderberries are a source of food for the animals that live in the park. Many of the birds that live in Placerita Canyon depend on the berries. A few of these include Spotted Towhee, Western Scrub Jays, Lesser Goldfinch, and Western Bluebirds. Often the insects that the berries attract are just as important of a food source as the berries themselves.

California Indians brewed tea made of dried Mexican Elderberry flowers to reduce fever and used the tea externally to reduce itching. They also hollowed out the stems to make flutes and clappers. The wood was also used to make bows for hunting. In modern times the berries are used to make into pies, jellies, cough syrup, and wine.

Enjoy the flowers from April to August each year.



#### **A Journey Down the Santa Clara River.**

L.A. County's Last wild river

On Sunday, March 15, do- cents gave a presentation about their adventure in front of a large and very interested audience. Calling themselves "The River Walkers" Robert

Gresiak, Ron Nichols and Denny Truger explained how they decided to follow the river from the start in Acton to the end in Ventura and all the different adventures they encountered.

The adventure began in January until August, 2014, when they made it to the end of the river. They cut their trip into 7 parts, and showed the different plants, animals and people they met in each different area and how they had to plan their expedition. They even experienced a different climate walking in the river then climbing out of the river bed to go back to their car. The photos were fascinating and they got shots of endangered species along the way.

Denny with his GoPro documented the journey and was very funny relating an encounter with wild dogs. He was "terribly scared...but maybe not as scared as in talking in public today" he told us! The public was really interested in this adventure and our explorers got much support and questions that day.

If you want more details about their adventure, please have a look at the Rattler November/December 2014 issue in our web page: [Placerita.org](http://Placerita.org)





### **Ron Kraus –Los Angeles County Volunteer of the Year for 2014**

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates are very proud of Ron Kraus. Getting a commendation of the highest distinction for volunteer of the year for LA County is an honor we gratefully acknowledge is well-deserved. We are pleased and proud to announce that he received his commendation on April 13, 2015.

At Placerita, we are delighted to have had two other docents who have achieved this rare distinction and it says a lot about PCNCA: Evelyne Vandersande received hers on April 19, 1999 and Jim Southwell on April 19, 2004.

Most of us who were lucky enough to grow up appreciating nature had a greatly enriched childhood. If we are really lucky, we carry these feelings we cherished into adulthood and seek to find a place we can relive those experiences as an adult. Here at the Placerita Canyon Natural Area, we are fortunate enough to have more than 100 volunteers who find this park the perfect place to explore, learn, and rekindle those feelings.

Ron Kraus, after retiring from the L.A. City Department of Recreation and Parks, came to Placerita in 2002 to take a docent training class. He has boyhood memories of the Walker Ranch fireplace and Placerita Creek, as his mother allowed him to join his friends on hikes over from his home in Sylmar. Ron is very involved at Placerita. He has held the position of vice president of the PCNCA board for 10 years and, in that capacity he coordinates the docent training program, arranging the lectures, hikes, and materials. Along with those official duties, he acts as the park's unofficial historian and in-service coordinator and has taken a keen interest in all plants in the park. He educates the docents at different time of the year with a special in-service called "Blooms of the Season" so that there is ongoing education.

Ron makes movies for our docent parties, revisiting events that happened during the year. They are loaded with great photos of the docents and staff and bring strong reactions from the crowd each time when he brings back to mind those happy or sad memories. He also hosts a contest called "Are You Smarter than a Placerita Fifth Grader?" for the docent's summer 'Breakfast of Champions'. Where does Ron go for his daily walk? Placerita, of course. Every evening he comes for his daily exercise in or around the park. He takes pictures of plants to post on the website that he keeps updated with events and park information. A photo Ron shot at Walker Ranch graced the cover of one of the local phone books. His fellow docents awarded him volunteer of the year in 2005. Placerita is lucky to have Ron. The volunteers and staff appreciate and enjoy his interest and enthusiasm. It may be said that Ron is lucky to have Placerita, too – it appears he really loves this park. We are delighted to see that the county officials have noticed the great value from our vice president and gave him the highest distinction that a volunteer can achieve.



### **We have a Gorgeous New Gecko!**

Desert Banded Gecko (*Coleonyx v. variegatus*, order Squamata)

Geckos are a type of terrestrial lizard. Generally geckos are nocturnal, have fat short tails, and have adhesive toe pads and don't have eyelids.

A similar looking species is the Mediterranean gecko. It was introduced in the U.S. through shipping routes and can be seen in the Santa Clarita Valley and much of the United States.

Our desert banded gecko is one of 1500 species of geckos. They live locally in the Mo-have and Sonoran Deserts. They can be found in sandy arroyos, dunes, and rocky areas to seek cover. They lack adhesive toe pads, and have eyelids. Most geckos lacking eyelids, clean and moisten their eye with their flat tongue. Adult DBG geckos are about 6" fully grown and live 5-8 years. They have a granular scaly skin. They lay 1-2 soft shelled eggs

per clutch up to 3 times a year. After 45 days they hatch and are about 1" long

They are insectivores. They eat insects including beetles, spiders, grasshoppers, sowbugs, and termites. They love to eat scorpions.

They are vocal (squeaks) and wave their tail upwards in a defensive manner like a scorpion to draw attention away from their head. The tail can be lost easily due to predation or stress, but does rapidly re-grow. The tail is larger because it stores food and water for lean times including winter dormancy. The tail has break away points built in and will twitch as a distraction for the predator if dropped by the gecko.

Many lizards and day geckos have preanal and femoral pores on the underside near the tail connection that are used as a scent gland and helpful to determine the sex. Most Geckos don't have femoral pores. They do have cone-shaped spurs located at the base of their tail. That identifies a male. It technically is a scale.







### Meet Gini Lomerson- Class of 2015

I was born in a small rural town in New England. Just down the street was our playground; the woods, our term for the forest. This large, heavily wooded area was unencumbered by homes or civilization and went on forever, which fueled our imagination each time we went there.

We would find small streams where we would look for and play with the salamanders – always putting them back in the stream after we finished, or find boulder piles to climb and explore. Our favorite was the largest pile famously named by us as ‘Evil Eye’. We would find different ways to scale to the top of the boulder, playing ‘king of the mountain’. The woods was always a special place for me; I loved to explore, to see mushrooms popping through the leaf clutter, to see the fern slowly pop their heads out of the ground and slowly unfurl into a fern, to hear the squirrels chatter, to know where to find the wild berries each year, to imagine what it must

have been like before towns and cities were constructed. I loved to find old farmer’s walls, which were rocks stacked into 2 foot walls, and follow them. I was always amazed how the forest would reclaim the wall; bushes, ferns and trees would start growing out of the very wall that provided protection to the seeds, allowing it to grow. As the plant grew larger, the wall would topple, dispersing the rocks back to the ground.

I felt at home in the woods as a kid and as an adult. I believe that is mainly due to my parents. They loved to take us for walks, whether in the woods or on the beach. Both my parents would point out cool stuff. For instance, my Mom would show us where hermit crabs lived by finding a shell and, like magic, there was a crab hiding in that shell with only a small portion of the crab’s claw showing. Or my Dad would talk about how the mountains in the East were much higher but due to erosion over millions of years, they slowly shrank or how the rivers would change its course due to various reasons. I was excited to see what was around every bend, hoping to get a quick glimpse of any animal or getting to the top of a mountain just to see what was there on top of the mountain – and to see the view too! But, mostly, just to see as much as I could, to try to be a part of the this whole thing of beauty – to experience the solitude, the hear the singing of the wind through the trees or rock and to smell all the different aromas – I never grew tired of it all and always wanted to see and experience more. But, I always had questions wherever I went – like why was Evil Eye the only huge set of boulders out in the middle of the woods? Or, why did some places in the woods have a shallow hole with mostly grass growing and not trees or bushes. It wasn’t until college did I get some of my questions answered. I had the fortune of taking an Ecology class with one of the finest teachers I had ever had. She loved the subject and loved to teach and made each class a memorable. We would go on hikes, one of which was in the dunes. This was a magical place for me. I was able to hear about and see the succession of the eco-systems, and the adaptations of plants and animals. I was amazed and wanted to learn more.

After graduating from college, I moved to the Mohave Desert in CA. What a change it was for me. I left a green, moist environment and arrived to a brown and very dry environment – one that I couldn’t believe anything could survive. I couldn’t have been more wrong!! Here, I could see the actual rock formations, the layers of history embedded in the rocks. They were not hidden like they were back East by lichen, moss, bushes, and ferns. Unobstructed by the thick forest I was used to, could see for as far as my vision allowed. Yes, from the car, the desert can look ugly and monotonous. But, once I stepped onto the desert floor, I saw different plants blooming at different times of the year. I saw lizards, humming birds, large-eared Jack Rabbits, coyotes, an occasional tortoise, and Road Runners – the only time I saw a road runner back East was as a cartoon!! In the desert I had seen more animals in the wild then I had ever seen growing up back East. The Joshua tree is one of my favorite plants because of its unusual beauty and its ability to survive by employing different tactics – to adapt to the heat and lack of water. The longer I live out here, the more I am amazed by the wonders of desert

No matter where I go in the world, I am always amazed by the absolute beauty of nature - there are hidden treasures that always amaze me and all I have to do is to use my senses to find them; I listen, look, smell and sometimes touch or feel.

I belong to the Santa Clarita Hiking Group where I heard about a talk on the Cougars of this area. I was definitely interested in the subject and came to listen. Afterwards, I was talking to someone who was very friendly and informative about Placerita Canyon so I asked her how she knew so much. She told me she was a docent and that if I were interested there was a docent class starting in Feb. I would learn all about Placerita; about the history, geology, plant life, animals, birds, reptiles and bugs. This sounded like a class made for me so I signed up. The docent was the very warm and personable Mari. I am very grateful that I met Mari.

**Placerita Canyon Nature Center**

# Open House

and Family Festival

**May 9, 2015**  
10AM to 3PM

- Animal Presentations
- Panning for fools gold
- Guided Hikes
- Face Painting
- Food & Drink
- Free Parking & Admission

Many fun activities for the whole family!

19152 Placerita Canyon Road, Newhall  
(661)259-7721  
[www.placerita.org](http://www.placerita.org)

sponsored by

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates

The Placerita Canyon Nature Center and Natural Area 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.

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates would like to thank those thoughtful people and schools who donated to the center over the last quarter. Your donation is gratefully appreciated and will be well used on behalf of the centers' residents.

- 3rd St ES
- Amida Jenner
- Barry Schmitt
- Brightwood ES
- Canterberry ES
- Darby ES
- Docent Class of 2015
- Emalita Academy Charter
- Emanuel Lutheran Childhood Center
- Emek Hebrew Academy
- Highland ES
- James Foster ES
- John Freemont ES
- Linda Ioerger
- Live Oak ES
- Mitchell ES
- Mt. Washington ES
- Nestle Ave ES
- Nikolai Family
- Palmdale Learning Plaza
- Patricia Lisi
- Robert Brooks
- SCV Home Study
- Shirley Morano
- Skyblue Mesa ES
- Sue and Allan Wallander
- Sulphur Springs ES
- Sunland ES
- Tesoro Del Valle ES
- Walt Fischer



### Spring is Here

Our Mohave desert tortoises Speedy and Turbo have awakened and are out and about enjoying springtime. They like their new enclosure and Turbo is showing off his climbing ability.

### Artichoke Green

A new color can be found around the building at Placerita and after some searching, the docents called it "Artichoke Green".

Thomas Goodley had new trash barrels donated as part of his Eagle Scout project and had them painted. The cans match the doors of the Nature Center so it is a pleasant design touch, especially if you know that they were six different colors at the start of the project.

We were pleased to see some new benches appearing on the patio, also painted in this fresh artichoke green, which blended nicely with the rest of the environment. We hope our visitors will enjoy them to rest and enjoy the view.

The name artichoke green provoked a flurry of comments. California produces nearly 100% of the US production of artichokes and in 1947, in Castroville (near Monterey), Marilyn Monroe was the first honorary Artichoke Queen. Those newly painted cans and benches are conversation starters for sure!







## We do not have to be Perfect

by Michael Elling.

I haven't led any hikes in a long time! I am a horrible example of a docent! Ha ha ha, some people may wonder why I am writing about leading hikes, but I will write this so you may use it if you want to.

I do trail maintenance and weed abatement as often as I can. I also took the museum training and will stand shifts there when I can! But, my wife retired and she is making me travel all over the world so that I can provide you with Rattler photos (well maybe not as many as you would like?).

So, I finally had some time in March to spend at Placerita.

An old friend of mine from work has three daughters in elementary school. He has brought them all to Placerita for our program when each of them was in second grade. His oldest child was at the Nature Center before I was a docent, so I didn't lead her class on a hike. His second child visited in 2012, but it was raining very heavily and they spent the entire visit in the classroom!

This was my first chance to fulfill the promise that I made to him to provide a personal, educational and special hike for his daughter and her classmates.

He notified me by email on Monday that they would be at PCNA on Wednesday. Like I said, I haven't led any hikes in a while and I became nervous, hoping I would remember at least a little of my training so that I could answer their questions with some accuracy! I reread some of my notes I have taken over the years and rehearsed my usual routine a few times in my mind.

I got to PCNA a little early so I could practice and perhaps be of some help to Bill, Ruth Anne, Suzy, Mari, and Claudette. Linda showed Catori, Jack Levenberg showed our kestrel. However, I was totally inept, confused and disorganized. I did manage to get the boys to the bathroom before they visited the museum and classroom, but Bill and the others handled these duties very well- Ruth Anne spoke about our birds and the new mews to the kids, Bill showed off the new interpretive center.

The classroom went well (Ruth Anne can handle kids well during the food web presentation), Suzy and Bill brought out a couple of snakes and discussed them making sure none of the children were frightened by the reptiles. My favorite grade is 3rd grade. They seem to be more knowledgeable, receptive and interested than the younger (and even older kids) but these second graders were pretty sharp!

Bill made sure I would take my friend's daughter and her group out and then we started our hike.

I was nervous but only because I wanted to do a great job, but having him along was very reassuring and, unbeknownst to me (but heartily welcome) Denny Truger came along! He was there for a rehearsal of his River Walk presentation on March 15 and he hung out till we started hiking and he graciously helped me inform, educate and entertain the kids. It was a very pleasant experience as the kids were bright and easy to talk to, one of the parents was an old friend and colleague and my classmate, Denny, would pick up the slack when my presentation and memory was lacking.

We started at the creek, riparian area. Riparian is a big word for second graders, it seems. I pointed out the plants (mostly sycamores and mule fat) that grow in this habitat and that they liked a lot of water. The kids asked where the water was and I told them it was underground. A couple of them started digging to try to find it. I told them they would be digging for a long time. We talked about how mule fat got its name and told the kids there would be a quiz. I asked them a few times during the hike, what the name of that plant was. They almost got the name correct. Some remembered mule or donkey, others remembered it made them fat, so we put it together and came up with the right answer. Luckily many of the plants were in bloom and we had some pretty flowers to discuss (Denny is a good "plant guy" and knows many of the plants and their uses, especially by the Tatavians). I took them to the oak woodlands habitat to look at the Ravens' nests but a couple of the girls still wanted to dig for water.

We then headed towards Hidden Trail along the Canyon Trail looking for the dead sycamore that the Acorn Woodpeckers used as a granary and had made nests in. It was gone! The existing sycamore leaves were very small but I asked the kids what the Indians used the sycamore leaves for anyway. One little girl knew they used them for toilet paper (to wipe themselves, as she said).

We continued up Hidden Trail where we showed them the fire damage to the oak trees and how thick and fire-resistant oak bark is. The parents were more interested in this than the children. I pointed out the FBI in progress on the trail and several of them knew what the acronym, FBI, stood for!

We climbed to the water tower, Denny pointing out wild cucumber and popcorn plants along the way, when one of my charges decided she was bored and tired and ready to eat. We told her to hang in there as we would be done soon.

We banged on the empty water tank (they thought it was full) then discussed earthquake faults and south facing slopes (which went over their heads) then headed down Hillside Trail towards the poison oak exhibit near the meadow. My 'complainer' kept up a constant monologue about hating to walk, but the others seemed to be having fun. She thought we were almost done when she spotted Walker cabin and asked if they could go inside. Of course.

They loved the cabin! They were so excited by the old things on display, many guessing (or knowing) what the typewriter, iron, bathtub, clothes laundry and other items were! It was gratifying that they knew so much and were so excited about these 'ancient artifacts.'

They were all girls and not so interested in the Placerita Fancy Rock chimney but they did like guessing about the farm implements scattered around the cabin.

We were running late by then, so we hurried to the nature center so they could use the rest rooms and we said goodbye. They thanked me and my friend was very pleased with the information Denny and I presented.

I think the new 'buddy system' of leading hikes; will be very helpful in re-energizing some out-of-practice docents, like me. This was a very rewarding experience and it has inspired me to volunteer to lead more hikes soon.

### What is NCA?

Nature Center Associates of Los Angeles County is organized under the California Nonprofit Public Benefit corporation law, set forth in California Corporations Code Sections 5110 and 6910. It was incorporated on March 24, 1961 by the San Fernando Valley chapter of the American Association of University Women and operated right here at Placerita. It was originally called the San Fernando Valley Junior Museum. It's name was changed in 1975 to Placerita Canyon Nature Associates and finally, in 1980, to Nature Center Associates of Los Angeles County.

That still does not tell you anything about what NCA is about. NCA is an umbrella organization that was created so that the different Nature Centers that belong to the organization would operate with the same rules and ideals in mind.

PCNCA was the original Associates organization and got the original Federal Tax Code Section 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation designation. When other Nature Centers in Los Angeles County were formed (or existing ones such as San Dimas) it was decided to make them chapters of one entity. PCNCA assigned our non-profit designation to the new Nature Center Associates overall umbrella organization and PCNCA and the various Nature Centers became "Chapters" of the NCA.

NCA is very important to the Nature Centers because they handle all the Federal, State and local tax filings, overall accounting, an insurance policy, and interface with the County on issues on our behalf via an Operating Agreement Contract. NCA is also responsible in overseeing the docent training program for uniform application of our outstanding nature studies classes.

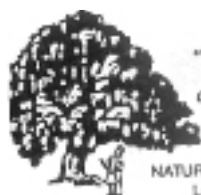
NCA is an all-volunteer organization, working cooperatively with the County of Los Angeles Parks and Recreation Department to provide a variety of natural science programs and services. All the different Nature Centers have site-tailored educational programs to promote a deeper understanding and love of Nature. Placerita Canyon Nature Center, Eaton Canyon, San Dimas, Whittier Narrows, Vasquez Rocks and Deane Dana Friendship Park are part of NCA. Every other month, meetings are held in those different Nature Centers on a rotation basis so the volunteers meet and talk about their different issues. There are other Natural Areas that will join NCA once they form a docent organization and we welcome them warmly.

At Placerita, we are honored to have Jack Levenberg as President, Teresa Jacobs as Vice President, Fred Seeley as representative; Lanita Algeyer is corresponding secretary and Nikki Dail is treasurer. We really appreciate your work and your updates about the other Nature Centers. Thank you, each of you, for your hard work.



## The Rattler

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



*"We exist so children  
and oaks  
can grow together."*

NATURE CENTER ASSOCIATES OF  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY