



# The Rattler

## In This Issue:

- ♦ Craft Faire
- ♦ A Trip With Jim Crowley
- ♦ Docent Training
- ♦ A Tiger in the Sky

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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.*

**November/December 2010**

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#### **Hello Nature Friends**

The bird migration is well under way at this time and Monarch butterflies are gathering for the winter. For all of us it is the beginning of the holiday season and I will wish you loads of fun for Halloween, not too stuffed for Thanksgiving and a very merry Christmas. A prosperous New Year is included in these wishes.

With Christmas coming soon, I will ask you to have a look at the flyer about the holiday Craft Faire. It is always the first weekend of December, just in time to decorate your home with greenery.

Docents, mark your calendar for the Holiday Dinner on Saturday, December 11; we would love to see you and your families on that special evening.

For all of you, we want to make sure that you are well aware that Docent Training starts on January 11, 2011—an easy date to remember (11+11). It is a program that we are extremely proud of and with good reason. It is a complete education about the fauna, flora, history of our natural area and a requirement to become a docent at Placerita.

Check the flyer inside and pass along the news to anyone who could be interested to join; they will thank you for years to come.

#### **Holiday Craft Faire**

This year Holiday Craft Faire will be held on Saturday December 4 and Sunday December 5 from 10am to 3pm. It is always a big event in our community and people are already calling to inquire about it.

We are very happy to keep up this tradition and to see the following of families and generations coming to do their holiday decorations at the center. The wreath-making is very popular because the results are always so spectacular. You buy a straw wreath and you approach the tables covered with greenery, pinecones, seeds, pods, etc. With the help of a glue gun and floral pins, it soon becomes a work of art. It is very easy but you would not know when you see the finished product.

If you have seeds, pods, dried berries and other evergreen-type trimming from your yard, bring them in as close to Saturday as possible so they are fresh. The more variety we have, the more creative we can be. We all have a fun time and the rooms smell so nice with all those evergreen branches. This is our main fund-raiser of the year so spread the word: the first week end of December.

Teresa Jacobs, a new docent from the class 2010 is the chairperson for the event. This is a lot of work and we are very grateful for her help. Thank you Teresa and you will get much help from all the docents. If you have never been to this event, you will be amazed- that's a promise.

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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.**

## A Recipe for Ants

By Helen Sweany

*"I have a house as well as apartments and this is what I do to avoid nasty chemical sprays and the high cost of exterminators":*

Buy: 1 box 20 mule team borax soap (found in SuperWalmart, Vons, etc. for under \$3)

1 box powdered sugar  
creamy peanut butter

lids. This could be the plastic lids that juice comes in if no pets are a concern OR if pets are a concern, the containers should be such as individual apple sauce.

Mix: 3 cups powdered sugar to 1 cup borax soap. Add a little peanut butter. Add some water. The water is important. This stuff needs to not dry out.

Place: Some of this goop onto a lid and set directly on an ant trail. If there are pets, put it in the more closed container (i.e. applesauce) and punch holes along the bottom so ants can get in but pets can't eat it.

The ants will soon swarm as the invasive Argentine ants, (the ones you find in kitchens, not the native ants) are gluttonous to the sweet/protein combo. In a day or two the trail gets less and less to next to nothing. The ants are bringing this stuff to their nest. The borax powder gives them gas. Ants can't pass gas, so they explode. No more ant problem.

This is a very impressive and cheap way to control ants indoors. Educational too. This recipe has been tested in the kitchen at Placerita and received our seal of approval. It really works and we had plenty of ants to test this project with.



## 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.

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.

The Rattler is printed by  
Valencia Printers on Recycled Paper

### 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.

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### A Trip with Jim (Crowley) and Bob Moss

On Monday September 20, Bob Moss organized an unusual trip to a special place in the heart of LA. The docents from Placerita went in a group of 15 to visit a taxidermist who explained to the docents how his work of art is done. He demonstrated some of the techniques that are employed and spoke of the material and chemicals that are used.

He showed us how the choice and the placement of the eyes is so important to make the animal come to life once the work with positioning the body to the right angle is done. He explained to us how to take care of the pelt so that the beauty of the animal can be enjoyed for years.

The taxidermist was working on a wolf and was choosing the tongue so it had a

natural feel to it.

New tongs are made of soft rubber and no hard plastic as it was previously done. Muscles need to be created under the skin to give a more life-like appearance and wrinkles in the skin for angry facial expression are done with ropes placed under the skin. All this takes years of study, trials and experimentation.

He allowed the docents to view 4 full rooms of a private collection belonging to the late owner. Mr Frank Carlisi who was a world class hunter and is recognized as such. His desire was for his collection to be preserved and shared by children and group of visitors. The docents were more than pleased to be able to admire this collection. It certainly was a first class educational opportunity, the sort of thing that you need a special connection to be able to go to and we thank you Bob to have planned this trip. Many of the taxidermy animals from the nature center were done by the same taxidermist that we have known for years and whose work we have admired. Thank you also goes to Jim Crowley who coordinated this trip and it was his first one since he agreed to this new job.



### Don and Rosemarie's Experience on the Trails

#### From Rosemarie:



One of my favorite parts of leading Nature Walks at Placerita Nature Center is when I have a group of "City Folks" who are not acquainted with being out in nature. Today I had such a group who were very skittish about everything, but were will-

ing to learn. I showed them the poison oak and gave them all the no touch, leaves of three, let it be information. They were fascinated with the Sycamore trees and Yerba Santa and how the use of their leaves were used by the Tatavian Indians.. Even more amazement ensued during our visit to the Walker cabin and thoughts of how all twelve children, mom and dad lived without electricity and modern appliances.

They all have a greater appreciation for inventions we take for granted today. I always incorporate a bird sighting and our wonderful acorn woodpeckers never let me down. Folks love to see the red heads of these wonderful noisy park inhabitants.

#### From Don:

Most of the time I really enjoy leading the walks. When the people are interested and pay attention and ask questions it is a great experience. But, sometimes when some of the people are noisy and disrupt the group it can be somewhat of a pain.

I was leading part of a County group and some of the young adults were obviously doing Community Service and could not care less about Nature. They just wanted to joke around and goof off. At least the disruptive kids stayed in the back and did not disturb the people that wanted to learn something. Sometimes when you are leading a group and some of the kids are "Challenged" it can be hard.

Sometimes when they try to ask a question and cannot speak properly my heart goes out to them; they are trying so hard to express themselves. I wish I knew more of the names of the plants so that when I get asked what is this I would know what it is. I still don't see the Monkey face even though I try to see it. But, that will come with more time and experience.





**Outreach--  
Another Program at Placerita**

Many times teachers and other organizations don't have the funds or ability to transport their group to the Nature Center for our educational programs. In that case, they end up contacting me and Bill to arrange for us to come to them.

We do many schools throughout the year, some day care and preschools, libraries, and so on. We ask for a \$200 donation. We also do community events like the River Rally, or the Heritage Haunt and Chili Cook-off in October. There are now 6 of us on the team and it wouldn't hurt to have a few more persons.

You should be certified to man the raptors, show the mammals and handle the snakes. Rules away from the center are slightly different, so you would learn about transportation, etc. If this is anything you think you would like to do, let me know and we can arrange for you to come with us on these outings, eventually to do them yourselves as a team. Bill and I have been doing this around 13 years now, and many times we have had to turn down requests because of conflicts. We are developing a great team and would like to expand on it a bit, maybe 3 or 4 more people.



Thanks

Bill and Heidi Webber  
Outreach Coordinators  
PCNCA

**Home School Plant Camp  
by Pam Koch**

I picked up a book with the encouraging title of Botany in a Day, by Thomas J. Eipel. This book claims to teach you how to recognize some 45,000 plants in a day. Ha! I thought—I can pretty much look at something and already recognize if it is a plant or not. Still, intrigued, I settled into an anticipated one-day course in plant identification.

Eipel teaches related plants have similar patterns, and often similar uses, and instead of learning one plant at a time, you can learn them by the hundreds. That's quite a boast and worth investigating. I thought I could absorb all this material and present a thumbnail version of plant identification out on the trail. I thought wrong.

This is a beautiful book with drawings and a field guide. I learned the names of the seven plant families and leafed through the book stopping here and there to look at some drawings. What's this? This page talks about plants in some other family. Confused, I found more information about plants NOT in the seven families. Just how many families are there? The book doesn't say. I consulted the internet and soon learned there are about 100 plant families worldwide. These particular seven are "the major families across the frost belt of the country and the majority of families further south."

I needed to back up. Just how are plants classified? The major divisions in the Plant Kingdom are: 1. Non-vascular spore; 2. Vascular spore; 3. Naked seeds; 4. Seeds totally enclosed inside the ovary. It breaks down from there and I need a dictionary to understand what I just read. How am I going to understand any of this?

The answer is, one plant family at a time. Just so I don't leave you in suspense, the seven plant families addressed in this book are:

Aster	Composite flowers in disc-like head
Lily	Flower parts are in 3's. Sepals and petals usually identical.
Mallow	5 separate petals with a column of stamens. Mucilaginous.
Mint	Square stalks and opposite leaves, often aromatic.
Mustard Flower	has 4 petals and 6 stamens (4 tall, 2 short).
Parsley	Compound umbels, usually hollow flower stalks
Pea	Pea-like pods; flowers have banner, wings and keel.



California Fuchsia



Coyote Gourd

## Happy Holidays—And Keep it that Way!

### Decorations

Holidays bring special cards, gifts decorated with ribbons, tinsel or yarn, and special decorations like Christmas trees. Unfortunately, animals appreciate these items, as well -- and many of them can cause serious damage.

### Christmas trees

- Anchor trees securely. Climbing cats and dogs with wagging tails can knock over your tree.
- Hang breakable, glass ornaments well out of reach. The small glass and metal fastenings can be stepped on or even swallowed by your pet.
- Keep tinsel, ribbons and garland out of pets' reach, especially cats that are intrigued by them. These can become lodged in their intestines, cause obstructions and lead to surgery or death.
- Clean up pine needles frequently. They can be toxic when eaten by your pet.
- Prevent your pet from drinking water in the tree stand if you have added preservative chemicals. These can be poisonous to pets. Also, stagnant water can contain bacteria, which may lead to vomiting and diarrhea if ingested.

### Holiday house plants

Although they add a warm touch, many plants can harm your pets. Keep these potentially dangerous bloomers well out of reach.

- Lilies can be deadly to cats, and many types can cause cats to have kidney failure.
- Poinsettias, although not as toxic as people often think, can upset your pet's digestive system.
- Mistletoe, especially the berries, is highly toxic, can cause stomach upset and has the potential to cause fatal heart problems.
- Holly can cause vomiting, diarrhea, nausea and lethargy.
- Certain types of ivy, such as English ivy, can also cause severe harm.
- Amaryllis can cause vomiting and diarrhea.
- Hibiscus can cause diarrhea.

To keep your pet safe year-round, view a list of toxic and non-toxic plants.

### Lights, candles and fragrance

- Keep lights and extension cords safely secured or covered to deter chewing, which can lead to electric shock or even electrocution. Better yet, invest in pet-proof extension cords, or spray with products such as Bitter Apple or Chew Stop.
- Candles can be fragrant and enticing to pets. But they can be a fire hazard if knocked over by an exuberant pet, and the fumes can be harmful to birds.
- Liquid potpourri and sachets, popular during the holidays, can be very dangerous. Exposure can cause skin or oral damage to your pet and may cause illness or death.

### Colleen's Quilt

Colleen Kite quilts in her spare time and has generously donated this gorgeous "Nature" quilt to raffle during the Craft Faire. It measures 43 ½" by 35", which is perfect for a wall hanging or lap quilt. Raffle tickets are already on sale in the Gift Shop. Thank you so much Colleen, this is a beautiful work of art and will be a great addition to some lucky person's home.



### Reptile Festival

*By Chris Sapovchak,  
Recreation Services Leader*

On September 18<sup>th</sup>, we had our annual reptile festival. This year it was combined with County of Los Angeles "Be One with Nature" program, part of the county health and wellness campaign. Presenters for the reptile festival included the Southwestern Herpetologists Society, and Animal Tracks. This year was a smaller version of the festival. In previous years we have had children bring their own pet reptiles and compete in various contests such as most knowledgeable owner and most colorful reptile. We also have had many more presenters in past years.

The reptile festival has always been a good way to introduce people to different reptiles and amphibians and provide some education about these animals. Many people have a negative view of reptiles, especially snakes, but these animals do have their fans and the festival is for them. It also is a fundraiser for our junior ranger program. The Southwestern Herpetologists Society has always been one of our biggest supporters. They attend our reptile festival and open house every year and always bring interesting animals and information for the public. This year we also had Animal Tracks bring some of their reptiles, including an American Alligator, and a large albino Burmese python. Overall it was a good event and next year will be bigger and better.

## Adopt-An-Animal For the Holidays

The holidays will be here before we know it, and if you have a nature lover on your list let us help you. Our animal adoptions are perfect gifts for those that love animals and they are tax-deductible too! Packages begin at \$25.00 and include a certificate of appreciation, photograph, fact sheet and other perks. Check out our website at [www.placerita.org](http://www.placerita.org) and then call the Nature Center for more information at (661) 259-7721. Happy Holidays made easy!

PCNCA is most appreciative of **Abigail Pina** for her recent adoption of Miss Muffet, our lovable tarantula. Thanks Abigail!



### Larry and Nancy Nikolai Special Guardians of our Animals



In 2006, an Adopt-An-Animal Program began at the Nature Center, designed to raise funds to help in the care and feeding of our live animals. The details of this program can be found on our website. To date we have had 94 adoptions and we thank all of you who have supported this program these past years. Support for this program is essential if we are to continue to have live animals as part of our educational programs.

We must, however, recognize two very special people – Nancy and Larry Nikolai – who have not only adopted one of our animals, but who have supported our program each and **every** year since 2006. They have adopted every animal available for adoption and some of them more than once. This year, Nancy and Larry have adopted Owl Junior, Ferguson, Wee-bit, Rosie, Sandy and Apollo.

Their financial support has been overwhelming generous, and it was an honor for us to recognize them at our recent *Breakfast of Champions*.

We hope after reading this you'll want to learn more about this program as well. If you have questions, just call the Nature Center at (661) 259-7721.

### Board Meeting October 5

The agenda was full, we had one important presentation and many difficult decisions needed to be made; some of those were expensive choices we needed to take to make the Nature center a safer place or more interesting place to visit so we were deep discussion.

Arguments were going back and forth until Collette Lash, a docent at Placerita, walked in with a horned lizard or horned toad (genus *Phrynosoma*) on her hand. It had come inside the building and she was bringing it back outside. It is a very interesting creature and the meeting came to a stop until our president, Jim Southwell, cracked the whip and brought us back to order. It was a refreshing break, reminding us about the passion we all share for the natural area around us.

### Hats Off to All Docents

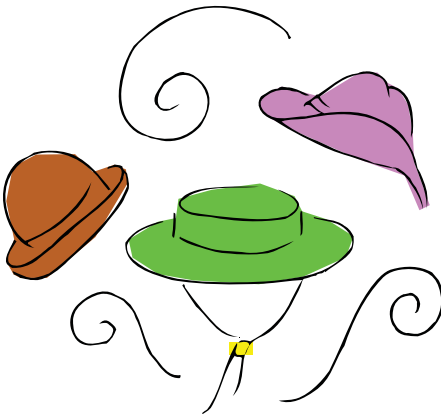
What do the docents do at the center? There are many tasks, duties and jobs that are performed by the docents always trying to improve the experience of visiting Placerita Nature Center. However, our core program is to welcome school groups and to give them an education in the classroom and hopefully, a pleasant experience on the trail.

The schools make reservation for specific dates, the docent make a presentation the group in the classroom, show some animals and explain what they are and take the children and teachers on the trail to discover what they have been talking about in the classroom.

In the past, Angel Macdonald, our school coordinator, always had a hard time juggling enough docents to cover each group. Many docents were getting older and could not come as often to walk on the trail.

Then the class of 2010 graduated and they jumped into their new duties with great enthusiasm. Now we have plenty of volunteers on the trail for each school group and we want to thank all of you for this turn of events.

The school children are the one who benefit from your attention and I am sure that all the docents are pleased to be able to do a better job, having smaller group to educate.



### Three Events in ONE Day!

September 18 was a very successful day at Placerita Canyon nature center but very busy too. We had just a few weeks to prepare but somehow it all flowed together and was a lovely and very successful day. The county employees and the docents worked hard together to make sure of the result would be satisfying for all our visitors so it is always nice when we see such a result.

What happened: The Reptile Festival was planned for Saturday September 18. It is an event we do every year with many proud owners from the Southwestern Herpetologists Society. Our visitor enjoys seeing all the creatures that are brought to the center: many different snakes, lizards and reptiles of all kinds. It is a good opportunity for public education as the owners are there so the visitors can ask all the questions they want about the way a reptile should be fed, conditions to keep them at home, which ones are good pets, how do they behave in the wild. Children and adults have a good time and learn a thing or two on the way so it is an event that we enjoy having every year.

We used to have this event in March and we found out that in September, with the warm weather, many reptiles are more alert and seem to better accept the attention they are getting than in the cold weather when they prefer to be left alone.

Then, we found out that our park had been selected by the county to be the place of excellence to have the fitness challenge of 2010 for Saturday September 18 and we should expect a large crowd.

We were very proud to have been selected and we were decided to rise to the challenge. The parking problem found a solution with the help of our neighbor the Disney ranch and we were very grateful for that. Drivers were found and 2 vehicles too so the parking problem was taken care off.

What is a fitness challenge? The county employees were invited to take hikes of different difficulty levels in the park, have healthy food for the day, see an animal show and take a bird walk and they had to register... which they did in large number to our great pride ! 571 actually registered that day in addition to our Reptile Festival visitors for a total of around 800 in attendance.

The Countywide Fitness Challenge here was the concluding event to a six month program throughout the department. Two others included an Open Air Farmers Market and free swimming at one of the county facilities downtown. Management was very happy to see the success of our program and were thoroughly impressed with how well organized we were.

Many docents were willing to lead the hikes, work in the kitchen to prepare the food, show the animals in different presentation and it all went without any problems...we are still amazed at our success. Many county employees got to discover our natural area, enjoyed visiting the reptile festival, went to the Walker cabin and

learned how this family of pioneers lived there and they seemed to have a very good time.

It was a long day but it was not the end yet. A moonlight hike event had been planned for the evening and four of the same docents who were doing hikes all day, still had to perform in the evening with Frank's wife Mary – Thanks to Rose Marie, Don, Ron and Jim Crowley for coming back out. Some of them told me they took a nap the next day but it was all worthwhile and they had a good time seeing everybody so happy from their visit.

Thank you all of you for your help and thank you Frank Hoffman, for doing such a great job putting our natural area in the spotlight.

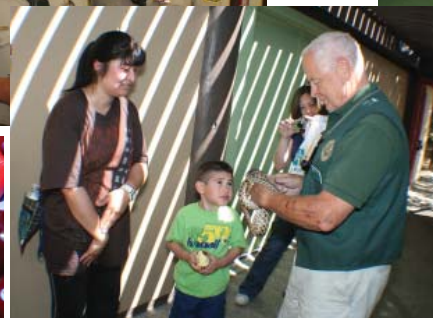






# September 18, 2010 A VERY Busy Day!

Photos by  
Evelyne Vandersande  
And Collette Lash





# Volunteer-Naturalist Training Placerita Canyon Natural Area



## Become a Volunteer-Naturalist!

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

No special background needed,  
just a willingness to attend training and to volunteer at least twice a month.

Training Starts Tuesday, January 11th, 2011  
**Classes meet Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9AM to 12 Noon**

Volunteer-Naturalists attend a 9-week training program. Topics include native plants, ecology, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, geology, history, and interpretive techniques. Instructors include noted professionals in the various fields. The cost of the training is \$45, which includes County insurance and all training materials (instruction manual, field guide, T-shirt, and related items.)

Other volunteer opportunities are also available at Placerita Canyon Natural Area that don't require the 9-week training program, such as office helper and trail maintenance team member. Bilingual (English/Spanish) volunteers are especially needed.

For further information call or visit:  
Placerita Canyon Natural Area  
19152 Placerita Canyon Road, Newhall CA 91321  
(661) 259-7721  
Email: [ron.kraus@placerita.org](mailto:ron.kraus@placerita.org)



The Placerita Canyon  
Nature Center  
Presents its Annual

# Holiday Craft Fair

Saturday and Sunday, December 4 & 5  
10:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

at

Placerita Canyon Nature Center

19152 Placerita Canyon Road, Newhall  
1 1/2 miles east of the 14 freeway

Create and decorate your own holiday wreaths,  
centerpieces, candles and ornaments using a  
large assortment of fresh-cut greenery, pine  
cones and other beautiful natural treasures.

*Supervised candle dipping for the kids*

**The Nature Center Gift Shop  
will be open to help you finish off that  
holiday shopping list**

(661) 259-7721 • [www.placerita.org](http://www.placerita.org)

**Mysteries That Howl and Hunt**  
**By CAROL KAESUK YOON**  
**Published: September 27, 2010**  
**New York Times**

With a chorus of howls and yips wild enough to fill a vast night sky, the coyote has ignited the imagination of one culture after another. In many American Indian mythologies, it is celebrated as the Trickster, a figure by turns godlike, idiotic and astoundingly sexually perverse. In the Navajo tradition the coyote is revered as God's dog. When European colonists encountered the species, they were of two minds, heralding it as an icon of the expansive West and vilifying it as the ultimate varmint, the bloodthirsty bane of sheep and cattle ranchers.



**Jonathan Way**

Animals in the Northeast thought to be coyotes actually carry wolf and coyote DNA, studies have found.

Mark Twain was so struck when he first saw that “long, slim, sick and sorry-looking skeleton, with a gray wolfskin stretched over it” that he called it “a living, breathing allegory of Want.” And Twain’s description itself was so vivid, it inspired the animator Chuck Jones to create that perennial failure known to cartoon-loving children everywhere, Wile E. Coyote of Road Runner-hating fame.

Yet as familiar as the coyote seems, these animals remain remarkably poorly understood. They have remained elusive despite fantastic ecological success that has been described as “a story of unparalleled range expansion,” as they have moved over the last century from the constrictions of their prairie haunts to colonize every habitat from wild to urban, from coast to coast. And they have retained their mystery even as interest has intensified with increasing coyote-human interactions — including incidents of coyotes dragging off small dogs and cats, and even (extremely rarely) attacks on people, from Los Angeles to the northern suburbs of New York City, where four children were attacked in separate incidents this summer.

Coyotes have managed to elude much serious scrutiny by being exquisitely wary, so much so that even dedicated coyote scientists can struggle to find ways to lay eyes on them, not to mention hands.

Dr. Laura Prugh, a wildlife ecologist at the University of California, Berkeley, said trying to survey a population of coyotes in Alaska was “like working with a ghost species.” To even have a chance of catching a coyote, she said, traps must be boiled to wash away human scent, handled with gloves and then hidden extremely carefully with all traces of human footprints brushed away. Even then, the trap is likely to catch only the youngest and most inexperienced of animals.

Coyotes have remained so much in possession of their own secrets that it was not until this year that the real identity of the coyotes living in the eastern part of the country was revealed. Two separate teams of researchers studying the genes of coyotes in the Northeast reported evidence that these animals that have for decades upon decades been thought of as coyotes are in fact coyote-wolf hybrids.

The team headed by Roland W. Kays, curator of mammals at the New York State Museum, studied coyotes from New Jersey to Maine. Jonathan Way, wildlife biologist with the Eastern Coyote Research consulting firm, and colleagues examined coyotes around Cape Cod and Boston. Both teams found that the animals carry wolf and coyote DNA. The paper by Dr. Kays and his colleagues was published in *Biology Letters*; the paper by Dr. Way and his colleagues was published in *Northeastern Naturalist*.

Based on the wolf DNA found in the Eastern coyotes, Dr. Kays and colleagues hypothesize in their paper that Western coyotes dispersing eastward north of the Great Lakes across Canada during the last century mated with wolves along the way, bringing that wolf DNA along with them to the Northeast.

The findings may explain why coyotes in the East are generally larger than their Western counterparts — that is, more wolf-like in size — and why they are so much more varied in coat color, as might be expected from a creature with a more diverse genome. It may also explain why Eastern coyotes appear to be more adept as deer hunters than their Western forebears, which tend toward smaller prey, like voles and rabbits.

What the finding does not settle is how to define exactly what these animals are, or for that matter, what to call them. Dr. Way favors the term “coywolf” to denote the animals’ hybrid heritage. He said because these animals are part wolf — species that enjoy protected status — they deserve some benefits not available to coyotes, which are typically freely hunted.

Dr. Kays, however, says that he is not a fan of the name, in part because the animals are “mostly coyote and a little bit of wolf,” but also because the Eastern coyote may be less a finished product deserving of a name and more an evolutionary work in progress.

There are even hints that the traveling coyotes may have been up to more than just dawdling with a wolf or two. Dr. Kays’s team also found one coyote carrying something similar to domestic dog DNA, suggesting that the question of what exactly an Eastern coyote is may become even more complicated as scientists learn more.

One major complication is that all the species in the genus *Canis*, to which the coyote belongs, can successfully interbreed. In other words, coyotes (or *Canis latrans*, meaning “barking dog”) and domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*) and every kind of wolf,



*continued from previous page:*

from the red wolf to the Eastern wolf (*Canis lupus*), can mate and produce perfectly healthy pups. No wonder, then, that interactions among these species have led to a genetic mess that researchers sometimes refer to as “Canis soupus.”

That coyotes will consider a wide variety of species as mates may be a reflection of their adaptability, also evident in their catholic tastes in food. Stephen DeStefano, a wildlife biologist with the United States Geological Survey’s Massachusetts Cooperative Research Unit and author of “Coyote at the Kitchen Door” (Harvard University Press, 2010), explains that coyotes will feast on things as diverse as beetles, bird eggs, garbage, pocket gophers, raspberries, pigs, wild plums, porcupines, apples, flying squirrels and watermelons.

But while such broad tastes have mostly made villains of coyotes as they happily expand their diet to take in the family pet when they can get it, they have also, at least once, made them the hero. Dr. Stanley D. Gehrt, a wildlife ecologist at Ohio State University who has studied coyotes in the Chicago area for the past decade, found that coyotes have a taste for Canada goose eggs. Rather than just dining at a single nest, the coyotes will plunder multiple nests in a night, gathering what eggs they can’t eat and burying them for later. The result has put a significant dent in what had been fast increasing numbers of geese, considerably noisier and messier urban creatures than the coyote.

Flexibility is also a hallmark of coyotes’ hunting. Not only do coyotes hunt singly and in packs, they have even been observed hunting cooperatively with other species. In Wyoming, scientists have seen coyotes hunting with badgers, large burrowing creatures that enjoy a nice bit of ground squirrel. As badgers dig toward squirrels in their tunnels, coyotes wait above for the squirrels to pop up for a quick escape, or perhaps to be chased back down to be eaten by a badger. Teams may work together often for an hour or more, the coyote mock-chasing or otherwise playfully inviting the lethargic badger to activity when it pauses, and to good purpose. Coyotes hunting with badgers had to work less and ate more than solitary coyotes in the same area. These teams were so effective that researchers reported often seeing the same pairs working together again and again.

Despite such charming intelligence, the coyote has found itself almost universally despised, feared and hunted. Ranchers hate coyotes for killing millions of dollars in livestock each year. These thefts have been answered with many millions of tax dollars spent over the years on programs to kill coyotes through the deployment of cyanide, strychnine, baited sheep collars and guns of many kinds. It is a war that has been as unrelenting and intense as, some researchers say, it is useless.

“Killing coyotes is kind of like mowing the lawn,” said Dr. Prugh. “It stimulates vigorous new growth.”

Even in their new habitat of the great metropolises, with nary a sheep in sight, the coyote finds itself, at best, a nervously tolerated visitor. In recent years, urbanites have been simultaneously charmed and disturbed by coyotes strolling in Central Park, trotting into a Quiznos restaurant in downtown Chicago and taking a dash around a federal courthouse in Detroit. Such news is, more often than not, soon followed by the news that the coyote has been rounded up and removed. It doesn’t seem to matter that coyotes are relatively harmless, as researchers point out, as any person or pet is much more likely to be injured or even killed by a domestic dog.

Neither does it seem to matter that the removal of a single showy coyote is unlikely to leave a city clear of these animals, or even give any sense of just how many coyotes a given city harbors. Dr. Gehrt said that when he began his research he would have guessed there were some 50 to 100 coyotes in the Chicago metropolitan area. After a decade of radio tracking and genetic analyses, he knows better. Dr. Gehrt said he conservatively estimates the number of these rarely seen creatures at more than 2,000.

The coyote is out there, and it is here to stay. For most people (as long as they are not very unlucky and they and their neighbors refrain from feeding coyotes — the No. 1 reason coyotes end up hurting someone), the coyote offers a bit of wildness to anyone willing to listen to the gift it has shared for millennia — its unforgettable voice.

The moniker “barking dog” just doesn’t cut it. The coyote has a bountiful lexicon that includes growls, huffs, woofs, whines, yelps, howls, “wow-oo-wow” sounds and more. Each serves its purpose in the coyote business of giving greetings or disseminating alarms.

But perhaps the sound that listeners know best, the one that makes us stop what we’re doing and look up into the night sky, is that mad cacophony of mournful howls and maniacal yips. That, scientists say, is the coyote’s territorial declaration, an effort to make a few coyotes sound like 10 or 100, to insist on their unassailable presence.

Dr. DeStefano writes in his book of the legends that coyotes are talking to us, that they can tell us things like where to find water, whether danger is approaching and whether today is the day that death will come, that the coyote has learned Comanche, Apache and many other languages, but not English.

But even we English speakers know what the coyote is telling us when we hear those calls, shrill and fierce as they bounce along canyons of rock or concrete or just down the cul-de-sac. The coyote is saying to everyone, fellow barking dogs or otherwise, “We are here.”



### Meet Jim Crowley

I am a native of Los Angeles, growing up in the Silverlake area. I lived in a “mansion” of a house, at least in my mind...all 900 sq ft. of it. My grammar school was St. Francis of Assisi (Don Regis also attended) and then on to St. John Vianney High School and eventually received a B.S Degree in Police Science Administration from California State University, L.A.

More about the “Mansion” ....it came with a great yard. It was large by most standards. The previous owner was a gardener and the yard had numerous fruit and citrus trees along with a lawn for playing croquet. It was a great place for me and my friends to discover the wonders of such things as trap door spiders. We also had a small dug out basement I used for many projects and tinkering. For years I learned how to construct things without power tools, thanks to my dad, who also worked as an engineer at Lockheed; and was a person who could fix anything. And my Mother, a farmer from Wisconsin, and knew how to make things grow. My love for nature began there in that yard...lots of exploring with clay soil, bugs and birds, a desert tortoise, the dog, fresh fruit on demand and amazing ferns in a lath house and poinsettias that grew 20 feet in the air. It gave me an appreciation for nature that I have had ever since.

In college I met my wife Toni, of 44 years, while riding horses near the L.A. Zoo. We were married in June 1966 and eventually moved to Saugus in 1971. Toni worked for 35 years as a pre-school teacher. Our two sons were born in 1968 and 1970 and now have careers in Atlanta, GA and Austin, TX. As our children grew we exposed them to camping, fishing and hiking, and a variety of crafts and hobbies. Placerita Canyon Park was one of our places to visit and enjoy. Presently, we are active members of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha Catholic Church.

My work career included 20 years with Sears Roebuck & Co. Later, I applied at Lockheed, was hired, and worked there 23 years in the Skunk Works before retirement. My career in Subcontract Administration included buying expensive new “goezintas” for the military. Lockheed Martin was a great place and provided opportunities to work and travel with designers on unique projects bringing new aircraft and systems to the market.

My hobbies include a lifetime of fixing and tinkering with things....get things to humm and buzz correctly! My passion is wood working and some wood carving on the side. Fishing has also been a life long activity.

What do I like about being a Docent at Placerita Canyon Nature Park? PCNC provides a place where a Docent can motivate children and in turn, their future. For me, it's a wonderful place to pass on things I learned over the years. Now I am beginning to understand from the experts at PCNC what I thought I already knew. The children are wonderful and trying to spark an interest in the natural world is my goal. Many of the children have fears of the animals but they all show interest in nature and my goal is to add knowledge and comfort that the critters are all working together with us. Not to fear them.....and the ants in the PCNC kitchen seem to be the busiest.

## A TIGER IN THE SKY – The Great-horned Owl

by Linda Ioerger

Hoo-hoo hooooooo hoo-hoo. Ever hear that wonderful sound at night? That's the call of the Great-horned owl, the most common owl in North and South America. The Great-horned owl gets his name from the feather tufts on the top of his head. When he holds them erect, these plumicorns look like horns. But they're not horns at all, just feathers that the owl can use to communicate his moods and to break up his outline when he's roosting in a tree.

The Great-horned owl is also sometimes known as a "tiger in the sky" because they are both such powerful nocturnal hunters. This owl is so powerful that he can take prey that weighs two to three times as much as he does! (Great-horned owls typically weigh three to five pounds, with females being larger than the males.) On his menu are birds, reptiles or even fish, but he mostly eats mammals, from mice to rabbits and skunks and even your pet cat if you leave her out at night. This nocturnal raptor is superbly equipped to hunt at night.

He has excellent nighttime vision. His eyes are huge to take in as much light as possible. If your eyes were as big as his in relation to the size of your head, your eyes would be as big as oranges! The owl's eyes are shaped differently from human eyes. Your eyes are shaped like balls; you can move them around to look up and down or side to side. The owl's eyes are shaped more like cylinders; he can't move them. If he wants to look in another direction, he has to move his whole head. But he can do that much better than you can. You can turn your head about a quarter of the way around – to look over your shoulder. The owl can keep turning his head till he's looking over his other shoulder! He can do that because he has twice as many bones in his neck as you do. All mammals, including the giraffe with his very long neck, have only seven neck bones. The owl has fourteen bones in his neck, making it very flexible.

As excellent as his vision is, the Great-horned owl hunts as much by sound as by sight. You have flaps on the sides of your head to collect sounds. The owl uses his whole face to collect sounds. The feathers on his face are arranged to collect sounds and direct them to his ear openings. When a sound is equally loud in both ears, he is directly facing his prey.

So the owl has excellent eyesight and excellent hearing. But sense of smell? Like most birds, Great-horned owls can't really smell. This is actually an advantage for him. His lack of a sense of smell allows him to hunt the stinkiest animal of all – the skunk. The Great-horned owl is the only animal that regularly preys on skunk. That awful skunk smell just doesn't bother him.

Another hunting advantage he has is silent flight. Owls have special soft feathers on their wings that allow them to fly without making any noise, so they can sneak up on their prey. Silent flight also enhances the owl's excellent hearing because there's no wing noise to mask the sound of his prey.

Once he has caught his prey, he eats the whole thing – fur or feathers and bones and teeth. But he has rather weak stomach acid and can't digest all that stuff. It collects in his stomach and some hours after a meal, he'll cough up a pellet that contains everything he couldn't digest. You can pick these pellets apart to see what he's been eating.

Would you like to meet a Great-horned owl? Placerita Canyon Nature Center is home to three of them. Spooky will greet you on the patio on your way into the Nature Center. She looks quite stern staring down from the upper corner of her enclosure, but if you wait long enough, she just might give you a wink. Placerita's mascot, O.J., is over thirty years old now and doesn't make many public appearances any more, but you can hear him hooting from anywhere around the building. Orion is the owl who visits with kids on their school field trips and goes on outreach programs around town. He often gets taken for a walk in front of the Nature Center so visitors can get a closer look. Come say hello to a "tiger in the sky".





Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates  
Thank You!

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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



**Volunteer-Naturalist Training Starts January 11, 2011**

Our 2011 Volunteer-Naturalist (Docent) training starts Tuesday, January 11. This is one of the most important programs we do during the year so please, docents, support this effort by:

1. Talking to your friends, family and business contacts to see if there are any possible candidates for the training.
2. Making copies and posting docent training flyers (one is included with this issue of the Rattler) everywhere you can think of.
3. Helping in the welcoming and mentoring of the new trainees,
4. Making refreshments for one or more of the classes
5. Attending as many classes as possible to get some continuing education.

If you have any questions, contact Ron Kraus who is in charge of Docent training.

Thank you so much Ron for doing such a fantastic job. The docent training has become a program that has blossomed under your care and we are all very grateful for this fantastic learning opportunity.

## FALL 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 11am. For all levels of birders. Bring binoculars, water and field guide.

**BLOOMS OF THE SEASON**

Learn about native plants and what is blooming along the trails. Meet in the patio at 9.30 for 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 661-259-7832

**CRAFT FAIRE**

December 4 and 5, 10-3 See flyer in this issue for more information.

**DOCENT TRAINING**

Starting January 12, 9-12. See flyer in this issue for more information.

**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 our website at [communityhikingclub.org](http://communityhikingclub.org)

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

### Donations to Placerita

Once again we would like to thank all those generous souls who thought of Placerita when donating. All the residents and their caretakers appreciate it very much.

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