



The Rattler



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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.

November/December 2014



Hello Friends,

Fall is here and Halloween will arrive at the same time that you are reading this Rattler. I wish you some scary fun and many candies. This marks the beginning of the holiday season and we hope your Thanksgiving will be a time to be grateful for this beautiful nature around us. We hope you will have a chance to spend all the holidays with family or friends, sharing joyful meals and maybe coming to the center for a stroll in the crisp fall air. The light in the fall is especially pretty in the afternoon when it gets a golden cast and walking in crackling leaves is one of the joys of the season. We want to thank you for your interest in the Nature Center and your support and we want to send you all our best wishes for the holiday season.

Placerita Canyon Nature Center is in the middle of a major renovation and many projects are planned for the coming year. The new interpretive center will be installed in December, all the new construction on the patio will be finished in November, and there is even more to come for 2015 (see article.)

This year, the Craft faire will take place inside a large tent in the parking lot. The usual space will be under construction but we wanted to make sure to accommodate our all visitors who come faithfully each year to make holiday wreaths and decorations with fresh greenery, seeds and pods. This is a tradition in this valley and we do not want to disappoint anyone. (Check the flyer.)

You are reading this Rattler and are starting to wonder about this docent organization. They seem to have a lot of fun, are involved with so many projects and seem to know a lot about our environment. How do they do that? How did they learn? Could I be become one of them? Those are very wise questions and if you have a little free time, like nature, and want to work with children, I want to make sure that you know that our docent training starts on January 13. (Check the flyer.) I can honestly say in all humility that every docent who has followed the training and became active at Placerita, can tell you it changed their lives for the better and they gained many friends who are ready to support them in the process. Not a bad deal at all...Come and pay us a visit to ask about all the details or check our web page: placerita.org. It could be a life changing experience; you will start reading different books, look at nature programs, and walk with your eyes searching for birds. It can be the start of a wonderful adventure!



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.

Good-bye Beaver

Sometimes people move to smaller houses, sometimes they redecorate their living rooms and their prized taxidermy is looking for a new home.

Placerita Canyon Nature Center is usually extremely grateful to take those donations on the condition that we can obtain the special permit from Fish and Game. It gives our visitors a very special opportunity to be able to study an animal that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to observe casually in the natural environment.

However, our objective at Placerita is to be an illustration of the world that you see surrounding the building. The beaver was a donation that was appreciated but there are no beavers in Placerita Canyon.

Our museum is being renovated so we were trying to find a place where this animal could be useful as a teaching tool. We were delighted to find out that the curator at Humboldt University could use it for this purpose.

Jessica Nikolai, a former county employee who is now a student there, will take the beaver to its new home after the Christmas break.

Thank you Jessica.



The Rattler

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

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19152 Placerita Canyon Road
Newhall, CA 91321-3213

or you can email it to Evelyne at evandersande@gmail.com.

Please email your article in MS Word if possible.

Visit our Internet site at 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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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.



On its way to the spa?

Even if you are a mountain lion, there are times when you need a beauty treatment. Our mountain lion is on its way to the taxidermist to look its best. The mountain lion is going to be part of the new exhibits at the Interpretive Center which is going to take the place of our old museum. Many brand new taxidermy animals are going to be installed and the mountain lion needed a "make over" to make sure that it is going to look great. It will come back with a shiny coat, no bugs and fresh lip colors. Jim Southwell, president from PCNCA, is on his way to accompany the great big beast with help from Agustin Hernandez, ground maintenance worker at Placerita.

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



Herpetology Nature Education Program

This presentation was on Herpetology and was given by Chris Mowry and Chris Sapovchak. While there were a few open seats, the room was generally packed. Chris had so much material that he got through amphibians, turtles and snakes and this was just on the animals that are or can be found in Placerita Canyon. There were lots of children and lots of questions. At the end, both Chris' had multiple animals (in cases) set out on the tables in the Docent room for everyone to look at. His style was very animated and kept everyone's interest.



FALL/WINTER 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
- 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. Sunday November 16 at 2pm – Mountain lions by Robin Parks from the Mountain Lion Foundation. Sunday January 18, 2015 – Introduction to Birding by Judy Bass from Eaton Canyon Nature Center
- WALKING MEDITATION** Meditation 3rd Thursday of each month except Nov/Dec, because of the holidays, the walk will be the 2nd Thursday
- SPECIAL EVENTS** Craft Faire : December 6 and 7 (see flyer) Docent training : Tuesday January 13, 2015 (see flyer)



On the road with the Rattler

Nikki Dail took the Rattler to Bavaria, Germany. This was taken following a hike to the pilgrimage Maria Ettenburg church, built in 1723, near Berchtesgaden.

Evelyne Vandersande took the Rattler to the ancient Bristlecone pine forest in the Eastern Sierra.



Paul and Susan took the Rattler on their honeymoon but it usually stayed in a stateroom drawer. Paul remembered to take it on their visit to Aruba.

The Rattler sort of went to Point Lobos State Reserve with Ron Kraus. The rules have changed! Sometimes you are traveling but you forgot the Rattler at home. Be creative and we will know your heart was in the right place and you thought about the nature Center.



The Old Museum Exhibits

We are starting to feel the winds of change! We are starting with a new floor in the old museum. We had hoped it could simply be covered with linoleum but to our dismay, we discovered that under the recent concrete floor was a wood support that was collapsing so all needed to be removed. For all this renovation to happen, the old museum exhibits had to be transported to the docent room to clear the way. An inventory had to be done quickly to keep track of all the items and exhibits. RuthAnne Murthy, Suzy Hermann, Sue Sutton, Jim Crowley and Evelyne Vandersande took care of the inventory. Thank you for being so thorough, you are a great team. Many pictures were taken of the exhibits so when all was taken out of the room it will be an easy task to place it back after the new floor is installed. That was a little trick learned from the movie industry from previous experience (we are not so far away from Hollywood!)

We do not want to leave the museum as an empty space and we want our visitors to still be able to enjoy the last few weeks of our current exhibits. The new interpretive center should be installed some time in December and we are getting ready.

Robert Grzesiak says “Weeds are plants that grow where they are not wanted. Weeds are also non-native and Robert is starting a committee to remove those non-native plants from around the Nature Center where they are not welcomed. Well done Robert.



Walking meditation with Deb Clem



Life has been getting more complex and stressful. One way to deal with the realities of life’s stresses and increasingly busy times is to connect with nature or take on the practice of meditation. You don’t have to sit and be still to meditate. Why not combine the benefits of meditation and connecting with nature!!!

Walking meditation is an ancient practice where you are in a meditative state while your eyes are open (aware of surroundings while relaxed and focused on the present moment) while doing a very conscious slow walk. It will open up all of your senses and awareness. Deb will guide

you in this process while experiencing the benefits of Nature.

Deb will give brief instructions at the start and then lead the walk in silence (hikers and cyclists may pass by but we stay in meditation just noticing them and stepping to the side if needed. If other hikers say “Good morning”, you can acknowledge them with a smile but please remain silent during the meditation part.).

You will stop at a bench on the trail to sit for a moment to reflect and observe the surrounding area with noticing a new way of seeing, hearing and feeling. We will then share any experiences we wish to share and answer any questions. After that point you can then continue on your own hiking or slow walking to continue the experience or return to the nature center and Deb will offer some beneficial exercises that can be done while walking.

Walking meditation is a new program offered by Deb Clem, every Thursday at 9am. The walking meditation will last up to one hour and take place on the Canyon Trail. Deb is going to bring us back to what is important and can bring us peace in this turbulent world. Come and join her, it is free and open to all who want to share this peaceful experience.



Los Angeles County once again chose Placerita as the site for their **County Wide Fitness Challenge**. We have become quite popular for this event, with more people attending and staying around after the hike to explore the center. Of course, it didn't hurt that The Local Group (astronomy), the Herpetology Society and Animal Tracks were all set up to engage weary hikers upon their return.



The Last Wild River

James Walton Harris



Hiking over rough terrain, sometimes crawling on hands and knees, three local men recently trekked the entire course of the Santa Clara River, from the high desert to the sea.

Denny Truger, Robert Grzesiak, and Ron Nichols scrambled over rocks, boulders, and dry river beds, plunged through knee-deep water and crawled and pushed through thick forests of invasive and native plants.

In the process, they hiked through two counties and over 100 miles. After 19 days, the Pacific Ocean's vast blue horizon and turquoise waters suddenly opened before them. Last month the voyagers finally completed their homage to this vanishing natural inheritance.

Docent-naturalists from Santa Clarita's Placerita Canyon Nature Center, the voyagers wanted to see the "Last Wild River" before it disappeared. They feared the

natural heritage of the second largest river in Southern California was vanishing.

Charita Eragoda and Dan Knot, fellow naturalists from the Nature Center, joined them intermittently. Eragoda is also a naturalist from Sri Lanka who spent five days on the walk.

They walked parallel to State Route 126 with its farms, orchards, and towns. But, the travelers were unaware of those settlements because they were enveloped in a world apart, yet immediately next to that world we take for granted.

"From the bed of the river it was sometimes very difficult to identify geographical landmarks that seemed so distinct from the roadside. Other times, because of dense plant growth, we could not see out of the river to get our bearings," said Ron Nichols, who retired from Nestle in Glendale as a project manager.

Known as the only natural watercourse left in Los Angeles County, the Santa Clara River is threatened by rapid development. Housing projects are fast compromising the river's ancient passage.

"Channelization" has created concrete banks in Santa Clarita. Along State Route 126, near Magic Mountain, a major housing development is encroaching on the river.

The men observed, took pictures, and noted the plants, wildlife and near extinct animals of the river. At the end of their sojourn they faced undergrowth so dense that they couldn't move at times.

The thick foliage often forced them to crawl on their stomachs to inch forward. Much of the way there were dense patches of 30 foot high bamboo-like invasive plants. It took them almost six hours to finish the last three miles to the beach in Ventura.

On the way, the naturalists identified two threatened species, the Stickleback Fish and the Southwestern Pond Turtle.

Nichols, trained as a naturalist at the Nature Center, had a knack for finding unusual objects and animals in the river. Once he spotted a huge blue eyed bull frog under water. "It was dead and laying on its stomach looking up at me," he said.

"Each segment of our river walk brought surprising discoveries and unexpected wildlife sightings, diverse plants and interesting people," added Nichols.

Interesting people, indeed. The explorers stumbled upon homeless encampments up and down the stream. The destitute lived individually and in small villages hidden in the brush along the river.

Denny Truger thought the dispossessed people living in the river were "...friendly, clean, helpful and talkative. Very articulate, expressing themselves well."

Truger, a project manager for Building Computer Electric in Los Angeles, added "The larger camps were like subdivisions. Tents had space around them, with an infrastructure of paths—like streets," he added.

Truger was trained at the Nature Center as well. He reported that some of the dwellings were made of natural materials found in the river. In Santa Clarita the hikers located a large, abandoned camp near a reclamation facility on Bouquet Canyon Road.

The naturalists concentrated most of their efforts on flora and fauna. They noted and took pictures of plants and wildlife. Truger took close to 2,000 photos, some of which are pictured in this article.

Placerita Canyon Naturalist Robert Grzesiak, a retired clinical scientist, took extensive field notes. Grzesiak, whose professional stints included UCLA and the VA was concerned about invasive plants.

"It's hard to see the non-native tamarisk and arundo, a giant reed, taking over the river. The invasive plant growth is out of control," he said.

"Non-native" and "Invasive" plants and animals are introduced into an environment by humans or animals. They have no enemies and therefore thrive, sometimes crowding out or killing off native species.

Still, there were countless original plants in the river. The men spotted native mule fat, willow and water cress where water flowed (the river is mostly a dry wash). In parched areas, they noted the huge flowers of the blue tinged white sacred datura plant.

"Starting at 4000 feet above sea level, we saw high elevation plants: white thorn ceanothus, big cone Douglas fir, junipers, manzanitas, mountain mahogany," said Grzesiak.

From the onset, the hikers observed and researched the history of the watercourse. Truger said they found a ranch near the headwaters that was diverting half the water from Aliso





Creek in accordance with an agreement drawn up in the last century.

“That was the best part of the hike—the beginning,” added Truger. “It was a just little stream that got bigger. At the headwaters we noticed the foundation of an old homestead. There remained artifacts of people who once ranched on the river; a water tank, a trash dump with old corroded cans from the 1930s. It really hooked me,” said Truger, smiling. “I would have loved to have lived back then.”

Near the Fish Hatchery on State Route 126, the explorers encountered a 90-year-old man who farmed watercress from his own ponds near the river.

Still actively working his watercress plantation, the aged man was vigorous and sharp witted. He recalled a

time when he, his dad and his uncle harvested watercress directly from the Santa Clara River.

When the trio finally reached the mouth of the Santa Clara, they were exuberant. Walking out of the crowded riverbed onto the open beach near Ventura Harbor, they slap-handed one another, smiled broadly, turned, and waded into the ocean.



Annual 2014 NCA Recognition event Highlights:

- Hayden Sohm, Deputy Director for Regional Facilities Agency gave the opening remarks.
- Mari Carbajal received her one-year certificate from Placerita as well as from Vasquez Rocks.
- Dick and Linette Brammer received their 5-year badges.
- Janet Kubler received her 10-year badge.
- Nikki Dail received her 15-year badge
- Donna Fagan received her 25-year badge.
- Lanita Algeyer received the Volunteer of the year Award from PCNCA presented by Jim Southwell and Russ Kimura.
- Russ Kimura presented the Youth Volunteer of the Year to Tony Bazan along with a special plaque from PCNCA for all the work he does around the Nature Center.

Congratulations to these wonderful volunteers!



Owls

By Bob Fischer

There is so much to say about owls I hardly know where to begin. Where I live in Friendly Valley I used to hear Great Horned Owls call almost nightly and occasionally see them in the daytime sitting high in a tree behind my house. Then most of the tall trees behind my house were cut down and the owls disappeared even though there were still tall trees nearby. One day years ago I was driving south on Beverly Drive past Mulholland and a Great Horned Owl was walking down the road causing cars to slow and drive around it. Another unexpected owl sighting was here in Friendly Valley where one morning while walking I saw a Barn Owl sitting on a lamppost on a street corner. I watched it for a long time and it just sat there so eventually I walked on. Another frequent sighting was in one of the city parks on the north edge of the San Fernando Valley where I went often to watch birds, I frequently saw a Great Horned Owl sitting in a certain tree along the trail in mid morning. Placerita Canyon has its share of Great Horned Owls and they can be seen or at least heard on most evenings. Placerita Canyon is also the home of the California Spotted Owl which is found in the upper part of the canyon and is considered a species of special concern by the state of California and United States Forest Service.



There are about 200 species of owls world wide. In California there are about 15 species. Owls are usually alone except in winter when the males seek out females. Burrowing Owls are the exception. Owls are birds of prey that hunt at night for small mammals, insects, and other birds. They frequently raid the nests of other birds to eat the young. A few species of owls hunt fish. Owls are found in all regions of the earth except Antarctica.

Owls are distinguished by their upright stance, large round head, forward facing, disproportionately large eyes, binocular vision and specialized hearing which enables them to hunt without seeing their prey. Their ears are offset allowing minute differences in sound arrival providing the means to track prey in total darkness. Owls large, forward facing eyes cannot turn, so they must turn their whole head to follow movement or look at something else. Owls have fourteen neck vertebrae as compared to 7 in humans which makes their necks more flexible and they can rotate their heads and necks as much as 270 degrees. Owls vary in size, the smallest being the Elf Owl weighing 1 oz to the largest, the Eagle Owl weighing 10 pounds and having a wingspan of 6.6 feet.

Much of the owls' hunting strategy depends on stealth and surprise. Owls have at least two adaptations that aid them in achieving stealth. First, the dull coloration of their feathers can render them almost invisible at night when most owls hunt. Secondly, serrated edges on the leading edge of owls' wing feathers muffle an owl's wing beats, allowing an owl's flight to be practically silent. Some fish-eating owls, for which silence has no evolutionary advantage, lack this adaptation. Quoting Wikipedia "Most owls live a mainly nocturnal lifestyle and being able to fly without making any noise gives them a strong advantage over their prey that are listening for any sign of noise in the dark night."

Again quoting Wikipedia "Owls exhibit specialized hearing functions and ear shapes that also aid in hunting. They are noted for asymmetrical ear placements on the skull in some genera. Owls can have either internal or external ears with both asymmetrical. Asymmetrical ear placement on the skull allows the owl to pinpoint the location of its prey. This is especially true for strictly nocturnal species such as the barn owls. With ears set at different places on its skull, a Barn Owl is able to determine the direction from which the sound is coming by the minute difference in time that it takes for the sound waves to penetrate the left and right ears. The owl turns its head until the sound reaches both ears at the same time, at which point it is directly facing the source of the sound. This time difference between ears is a matter of about 0.00003 seconds, or 30 millionths of a second."

Exceptions to the dark coloration of most owls are the Snowy Owl and the Barn Owl. It's easy to see why Snowy Owls are white. For the same reason much of their prey is also white. The Barn Owl's coloration is a puzzle. It hunts at night but it has a white face, light brown top and white underside. Also it doesn't making some kind of a hooting call like most owls, it make a call that can best be described as a shriek. The Barn Owl is so different from other owls it deserves its own article. A Barn Owl is displayed regularly at the Nature Center on Saturday Mornings.



Owls kill their prey with their sharp beak and powerful talons. If not too big, they swallow their prey whole. Scientists studying the diets of owls are helped by their habit of regurgitating the indigestible parts of their prey such as bones, scales, and fur in the form of pellets. These "owl pellets" are plentiful and often accumulate where the owl roosts during the day. Opening the pellets it's easy to see what the owl has been eating. These pellets are displayed in our museum in the Nature Center and shown to the children on our school children walks.

Culturally, historically, because of their uniqueness, owls have been assigned many attributes and roles. Quoting one source, "Owls have been both feared and venerated, despised and admired, considered wise and foolish, and associated with witchcraft and medicine, the weather, birth and death". In many other Native American cultures, owls are a very bad omen. In modern times as well as in ancient times the Owl is associated with wisdom.

References: Wikipedia and David Lucas



Manning Catori Linda Ioerger

This beautiful bird with the heart-shaped face is the barn owl that lives at the Nature Center. Her name is Catori, a Hopi Indian name meaning “Spirit.” Catori seemed a particularly appropriate name for her, since the barn owl that lived at the Nature Center before her was named Hopi. I think of Catori as Hopi’s spirit!

In addition to showing Catori to school groups, I particularly enjoy hanging out on the steps of the Nature Center with her and talking to visitors about her. This gives her a chance to feel the breeze in her feathers and gives people the rare opportunity to see such a wonderful creature up close, with no barriers between bird and human. I have literally seen jaws

drop when someone sees her for the first time. Sometimes people can be a problem in their enthusiasm. She doesn’t really like having people behind her, and kids will often come running up to her, which can be a little scary. Noises and the wind don’t seem to bother her too much though. Of course, everyone wants to pet her, and I have to explain that I can’t let them. (Pointing out the sharpness of her talons usually takes care of that request!) Other frequent questions are the basics: How old is she (about three years), How long do barn owls live (about three to four years in the wild, longer in captivity). What do they eat (small rodents), How did we get her (from raptor rehab).

Manning her like this (holding her on my hand) is also important for maintaining my relationship with her. She is still a wild bird. Handling her is less stressful for her if she is comfortable with me, if she trusts me. During the school year, when I’m already handling her several times a week, I’ll take her out for an extra hour or so on the front steps on Saturday mornings. During the summer, I’ll do this at least twice a week.

Training to handle the birds has gotten a lot more rigorous since I started seven years ago. But I did have to learn to tie the dreaded falconer’s knot, the knot that can be tied and untied with one hand while you’re holding a bird on the other hand. I was having a terrible time learning to do it until one day I realized the knot is just a form of crocheting!

I’ve worked with Catori since she first came to live at the Nature Center about two and a half years ago; it’s been a continuing privilege and pleasure.



Fall In Service

Back to school! The school groups are coming back to the center and the docents always find a need to do some reviewing before hitting the trails with the children to refresh their memory.

As usual, Ron Kraus did a fantastic job planning this class. He came well organized with the list of plants and their location on each trail. That makes it so easy to come back on a cool morning and do some personal review.



We started the day by singing happy birthday to Ron who celebrated his big day two days earlier. Russ Kimura, Park Superintendent, came to explain all the exciting changes planned for the center (see article).

The class was very well attended in spite of the heat and we found many plants in bloom, even in this time of severe drought. The morning ended nicely by a lunch prepared by Teresa Jacobs and Lanita Algeyer to feed the crowd. Thank you all.



Outreaches

During the weekend, docents go on outreaches to many events in our valley and during the week, docents go to schools that are eager to see our program but do not have the chance to come to the Nature Center for an organized visit. Here you can see the Placerita Canyon Nature Center table during the Pow-Wow at Hart Park. Our table always receives many visits from the public interested to see the animals close up and to get answers to their many questions about local wildlife.



Andrea Donner

1. Where were you born and where did you spend your childhood? Elizabeth, New Jersey
 2. How did your love of Nature start? My father was a veterinarian, and he taught me to love animals. From a very young age he would take me horseback riding in Pennsylvania while my mother sat in the car.
 3. What was your education? Masters Degree in Education
 4. What is your work experience? 38 years teaching special education
 5. What is your family life? We enjoy hiking, eating at Chinese restaurants, going to museums and traveling locally.
 6. When did you come to Placerita for the first time and why? What do you remember about this place? We had several birthday parties for my daughter at Placerita, and I remember what a wonderful job Frank did in inspiring the children a love of nature. I will always remember when he showed them a trap door spider and the children's reaction. After that I helped out when my daughter participated in Junior Rangers. I always wanted to attend the docent training, but I was always working. The first year of my retirement I signed up for the training. It was the first thing to check off on my retirement bucket list.
 7. What are the titles you have held at the Nature center? I am excited to be a board member this year. I know I will learn a lot and hopefully make a positive contribution to the Center. I have helped out with the Outreach Program. Since I don't work with the birds and snakes, my job is poop clean up, which I am very good at and proud of my work. I was also in charge of Children's crafts at the Open House. I was also a speaker at one of the Docent Training In-Services.
 8. What did or do you like most about your job at the Nature Center? The best part of working at the Nature Center is working with the children. When I was working in special education I always tried to incorporate a little love of nature into the curriculum, but it was difficult. Now I can try to inspire children in a natural environment.
 9. What did you or do you not like about the job? I don't like hiking in hot weather, and I'm not thrilled about rattlesnakes.
 10. At Placerita, is there some special accomplishment that makes you feel proud? My biggest and proudest accomplishment so far, is bringing Paul and Susan together. It makes me thrilled to see them so happy together.
 11. What is your favorite food? Chocolate and pasta
 12. What is your favorite color? Red
 13. What is your favorite TV show? Or music? or pastime? Seinfeld, pop music, reading, playing with my golden, Maddy, playing mah-jong
 14. Is there anything else that describes you that we should know? Is there any passion or special events in your life that you would like to tell us about?
- I love working with animals. I volunteered for 2 years at the Gentle Barn with the farm animals. I also volunteered at Heads Up with Horses with special needs children. Presently I work each week with Rachael at the Hart Park Barnyard. I really enjoy my time there.



History lesson through the Lyon's Oak

We enjoy telling the children that trees grow by adding new growth rings each year. We also tell them that the rings are closer on the years without rain and the space between the rings grow wider if there is plenty of rain.

Talking about tree growth rings happens with each school group gathering around the stump of the Lyons Oak. Then we show them how 100 years look on a tree stump but what does 100 year old mean to a child who is 7 or 8 years old?

Those large figures have no point of reference and comparison and Jim Owens is decided to change all that and he wants to install a time line. His project is to have a sign next to the Lyons' oak with some of the important dates the tree saw in its life time.

When did the Walker's family moved to Placerita? When was Disneyland opened? When was the Nature Center constructed? Those dates will be then indicated on the trunk with a small color circle showing when it happened and the top of the trunk section will be protected with a sealer.

Nice project Jim and thank you for your efforts.



Exciting Improvements

When you enter the patio area at Placerita right now you will see fences, dust, and it might be noisier that you had hoped for but you have to be a little bit forgiving and come back on November 5 to see the result of this hard work.

The mews (the word 'cage' is obsolete) will be done in compliance with current Fish and Game regulations. They will be larger and have a more natural look with gravel at the bottom and a drainage system so they can be hosed down every day. We will have 3 mews and the one in the middle will accommodate a smaller bird.

When you enter the patio, the first area on your right will be a community or flight cage with gravel on the ground, a drainage system and maybe a tree or potted plants. Electricity will be installed in the observation deck and you will find that part of it will be a viewing area of a small mammal; plus two viewing scopes are going to be installed, including one for people with disabilities. A large aquarium will be set up and if we secure the proper permit, we are hoping to be able to show

a three-spined stickleback. This is a fish that is of much interest in this valley but that few of us have ever seen!

The museum floor has been poured and all the new exhibits should be finished by December.

The Golden Braille Trail is the next project that we are looking forward to and much research has been done to make the part of the trail before the Oak of the Golden Dream user-friendly for our blind and sight-impaired visitors. The grant is secured so we will see that work taking place in 2015. Concrete railing on the ground will be installed so somebody can "feel" the sides of the trail with a cane. There will be a staging area with Braille panels and a panel with large lettering will allow everyone to read what to expect on the trail plus a model of the Oak of the Golden Dream will allow tactile interaction. Many fragrant native plant species will be planted along the trail to help sensory satisfaction.

Last but not least, we also expect metal bridges to be installed on the Canyon Trail on the two places where the trail crosses the stream. The bridges will be assembled off-site and will be brought to Placerita by helicopter. You can anticipate many photos to follow every step of all these projects. Placerita is going to be an even more exciting place to visit. The new interpretive center is going to have an official opening in January and we warmly welcome you to come for a visit.

These improvement projects have been provided to you by

The Honorable Michael D. Antonovich
Supervisor, Fifth District – County of Los Angeles
Prop.84 Nature Education Facilities Grant
California State Parks – Office of Grants and Local Services
Regional Facilities Agency – Project Management
Department of Parks and Recreation – County of Los Angeles



Adopt-An-Animal The Perfect Holiday Gift

The holidays will be here before we know it, and if you have an animal or nature lover on your list, let us help you. Our live animal adoptions are perfect gifts - and they are tax-deductible too!

Packages begin at \$25.00 and include a certificate of adoption, photograph, fact sheet and other perks. Packages range from \$25.00 to \$250.00. We will personalize your gift as you wish, include your message, and wrap it up in holiday paper. Check out our website at www.placerita.org and scroll to "Adopt an Animal." Then call the Nature Center at (661) 259-7721 or Judy McClure at (661) 252-6187 for details. Don't wait another minute-happy holidays made easy!



A Grumpy Badger

We are so familiar with most of the animals at Placerita Canyon, that we just acknowledge them with a contented nod of recognition as they pass along: ground squirrel, hawk, woodpecker, scrub jay. We get excited and the cameras come out when a coyote is spotted or a bob cat. Those sightings are written on the bulletin board next to the entrance of the office building, and people ask questions about the time it was seen and in what area of the park. Most fascinating are the results from the infrared camera we have hidden in the park, and the first photo taken of a mountain lion was a milestone. We all pore over the photos with great pride and excitement, examining all the details even from a quick silhouette caught at night.

We know all those animals are there in Placerita Canyon Park so we know our paths will cross. It is a matter of timing, luck, patience and observing often, at different times of the day and at different seasons, and if all the elements fall in the right place, then you are so happy

when it happens.

But sometimes, you are very surprised indeed – and this was one of those times. Surely I mis-heard - there is a badger in the picnic area, just next to the Center?

That was news we were not prepared to hear! There are a few different reasons for that. The picnic area is one of the most utilized areas of the park, many people visit and it is close to the parking lot, so why would a badger be there? Though it is a busy area for humans, it's also an area with a large population of ground squirrels - so an easy lunch for the badger might have been the answer, because they feed on rodents.

We were also surprised because the badger is listed in California as species of special concern due to reduction of their habitat, which means there are not many of them around to start with. Their habitat is usually treeless regions: prairies, parkland and cold desert areas. Placerita is not exactly prime choice badger residential area according to those standards, but there is a flat grassy area next to the picnic ground so that might have been enough. They like open grassland with sandy soil where they can dig easily to catch their prey and also riparian habitat so that was another positive hint because the stream is close by.

Another reason it was highly improbable to see a badger is that they are nocturnal; they prefer to hunt at night and this one was strolling about in the broad daylight of the morning. What about that for an unexpected photo opportunity? We kept our distance, but here we were taking its picture and I can tell you this badger did not like that one bit. The badger is an aggressive animal and has few natural enemies. The predators of the smaller individuals are Golden eagle, coyotes, mountain lions and large bob cats. That will happen only if the badger is sick or small. That was not the case with the beautiful specimen we were looking at, and who was hissing, screeching at us and making all kinds of ferocious vocalizations that had us stepping back quickly. They can also release a very musky smell similar to the skunk to protect themselves.

We noticed with some alarm the very strong and sharp 2 inch claws used to dig the burrow and attack any intruders. They eat rodents, snakes, birds and reptiles. They dig their prey out of their den and sometimes plug the entrance of the tunnel with objects. Their toes are partially webbed and their back feet have shovel-like claws. What surprised me while looking was its level of aggression and its body shape: the body looks flat and wide and the skin is loose, especially across the chest, shoulders and back. This animal was not at all pleased to be observed, and the message was loud and clear. We did not insist and backed off promptly. The badger stayed around the Nature Center for a few days but took off when it realized all those juicy ground squirrels were not worth the amount of visitors in the area.... and we have never seen it again.

Contrary to some stories told around the campfires for years, badgers and coyotes do not hunt together. Coyotes sometimes observe the badger digging and hunting, taking advantage by catching prey that escapes the badger. Coyotes are not good at digging but they are great opportunists who take advantage of the situation and get a quick meal. Badgers can also eat plants such as corn, peas and green beans. They dig burrows and farmers do not enjoy them in their fields.

They are from the family of the Mustelidae, the same family that includes the weasel, otter, ferret and wolverine.

The males are about 30 inches long and weigh up to 19 pounds. They are covered with a coat of hair of mixed colors: brown, black and white which provides great camouflage. The triangular head has very distinctive black and white patterns with a black “badge” (hence the name Badger) on the cheek and a white stripe going from the nose to the top of the head. They have a short tail. The snout is slightly upturned and the eyes are small. They have nictating membranes which is a great adaptation for an animal that is digging underground so much. That is a translucent 3rd eyelid that protects the eye but allows the animal to see.

Females can breed when they are one year old, males when they are 2. The breeding season goes from the end of the summer until the fall, but they have delayed implantation of the fetus so the pregnancy starts only in December. The 3 young are usually born in early April and are born altricial which means the mother must tend to their every need and nurse them until they are 2 to 3 months old. At 6 weeks they come out of the den but stay with their mother until July. In the wild, the life expectancy of a badger is 9 to 10 years but in captivity, they have lived as much as 26 years.

Are there more badgers in the park that we do not know about? Why would there be only one? As they are nocturnal, the chance of encountering another one is pretty remote.

So, here we are, dreaming at night of a population of badgers hunting in the park and enjoying the privacy that they are so determined to protect! Sweet dreams.

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 13th, 2015
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 all training materials (instruction manual, field guide, T-shirt, and related items.) Visit our website (placerita.org) for further information regarding the Volunteer-Naturalist program.

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: info@placerita.org**

Native vs. Non-Native

Evelyne Vandersande



The first time I went to Maui, I remember the soft ocean wind perfumed with plumeria blossoms blowing through the open walkway in the airport. That was the first welcome. Then, walking outside to pick up our suitcases, we came to a sudden stop, transfixed. Completely covering the small patch of grass in front of me were hundreds of saffron finches. These small birds with strong yellow color were all bouncy and lively.

When I returned home, I ran to the Placerita Canyon Nature Center and tried to share the wonder of seeing this flock of saffron finches. I was met with a stern face. “Do you understand the problem that Hawaii does not have native birds any more? All those are introduced birds, and their local bird population

is reduced to just a few specimens.”

I was taken aback. How I could insist on sharing the wonder I felt seeing my first red-crested cardinal on a beach, coming to eat some crumbs I was throwing to it? It is a beautiful bird, and I would never see it again, but – there it is; it was an introduced bird in 1930.

I have experienced the same approach with plants. Many people appreciate natives and think non-natives should be removed.

In your garden, you have a choice to plant native or non-native plants, but as a reminder, birds will always eat the seeds of native trees, so “native” should be your first choice if feeding the wildlife is important to you. A toyon is a good addition to a garden; nice foliage and red berries.



In our California garden, many flowering plants come from Australia, and the local birds seem to have adapted to them. One example that comes to mind is the bottlebrush or Callistemon with the red blossoms that bloom for such a long part of the year. Hummingbirds use the pollen, and I think other birds might eat insects hovering around the trees because when those are in bloom in my garden, I see a wider variety of birds than at other times of the year.

Sometimes a non-native plant can really be very destructive. This is the problem with tamarisk.

Tamarisks are lovely trees with pink blossoms that are popular in Mediterranean countries – countries where the rainfall is much greater than in Santa Clarita, and therein lies the big problem.

The seeds of the tamarisk are light and fly easily in the wind. Once the tree develops, it draws a great deal of water from the ground. If it is in the middle of your lawn, it will do fine, and your water bill will increase. But what if it reproduces in the river bed?

This is what is happening in our valley. There is no water in the river bed for other plants and animals, but there are many tamarisks out of control, taking root in the river bed and drinking all of the water they can from the underground water reserve. The roots are long and efficient to do their job. That is one example of a non-native plant that is a problem for the environment.

Here is a story of a good non-native.

Eucalyptus trees are all around us, but they originally came from Australia. Should they all be removed? No – and do you know why? Because the monarch butterflies need eucalyptus groves to spend the winter. They do not use any other tree. What about that for a perfect adaptation? Monarchs are native, but they use a non-native tree to their advantage.

Eucalyptus trees have a bad reputation. They are called “widow makers” because their large branches are known to fall at the most inconvenient times. The oil in the leaves often prevents much growth of vegetation under the tree, and they burn fast, which is not ideal in California where fires are natural events about every 10 years. The bark strips on the trees might have precipitated the intensity of the Oakland firestorm in 1991.

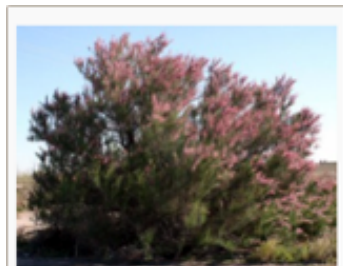
How did the eucalyptus come to California? The Gold Rush started in 1849, and there was a large demand for wood to construct buildings and provide fuel. Eucalyptus had become popular in Europe and northern Africa, and they are fast growers. The California Tree Culture Act was passed in 1868, created to encourage people to plant trees, so many farmers started to plant sycamores to protect their plantations from the wind. Ellwood Cooper became a vocal advocate for the eucalyptus and grew 200 acres of eucalyptus in Santa Barbara. Frank C. Havens was an Oakland developer who planted 8 million eucalyptus trees in a 14-mile-long strip from Berkeley through Oakland. Sadly, it was found that the wood was not suitable for building because it would break, crack, shrink or decay rapidly.

Today, millions of acres are covered by eucalyptus as forest, shade trees, in gardens, along roads and as windbreaks. Their oil is used for medical products (antiseptic, decongestant), food (cough drops), perfume and toothpaste. The eucalyptus roots can be invasive, and sprouts can grow back from a fallen tree stump.

Eucalyptus are majestic trees that have become part of the landscape in California, for better or worse. Let's face it: Eucalyptus can grow in places where not too many other trees can grow.

Although conifers grew in the mountains, the lowlands of Southern California were originally mostly treeless plains, broken up by some live oak and sycamores. I understand they are not the perfect tree for our environment, and the fire danger is definitely a big problem. However, I try to concentrate on the monarch butterflies that have adopted them to spend their winter along the coast and which decided to make the best of it.

It's an interesting adaptation between natives and non-natives.





The Placerita Canyon Nature Center
Presents its Annual

Holiday Craft Fair

December 6 and 7, 2014

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.

Please note that this is a fundraising event for the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates (a non-profit corporation) and that there is a charge for some activities. The charge for most crafts is \$2 and wreaths range from \$12 up. Cash and checks only, credit and debit cards cannot be accepted.

The Nature Center Gift Shop will be open to help you finish your holiday shopping

(661) 259-7721 • www.placerita.org





PCNCA gratefully acknowledges the following special guardians who are helping us in the care and feeding of their adopted animals at our Nature Center:

Vanessa Tomas - Alice, the tarantula
Girl Scout Brownie Troop 7192 - Alice, the tarantula
Scott and Kathryn Landry - Sandy, the alligator lizard and Squirt, the Western pond turtle
Girl Scout Daisy Troop 7852 - Turbo, the desert tortoise
!Michael Shellin - Sandy, the alligator lizard

Many thanks to all of you for your generous support



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