



# The Rattler

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(a little history)**
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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.*

**September/October 2010**

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Hello Nature Friends,

Do you remember this picture? It was one year ago last June that our beautiful building was rededicated and we have been enjoying so much one year of hard work with clean and solid walls, bathrooms that work, a welcoming patio with a new observation deck. The attendance of visitors to our natural area has been increasing steadily so we are pleased to see that the community is sharing our pleasure in all the improvements made to the Nature Center. We also are very proud to have had the largest docent class ever and they are all getting involved and starting different projects. I want to remind you that the next class will start in the beginning of January so mention it to your friends if you think they might be interested.

Fall is here again and the morning air is having a new crispness, schools are back in session and we are going to welcome the school groups coming to visit and take part in our in our programs.

Change is in the air with fall. It comes slowly and you have to keep your eyes open on the trail to notice the season is changing but suddenly the poison oak leaves turn bright red and that is a sure sign that summer is behind us. There is more dew on the ground early in the morning and many plants are going to start a growth spurt. Come and walk on the trails, the days are getting shorter, the light is sharp: enjoy and embrace this new season.



**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.**

## Nature Center Haiku

by Pamela Koch

Inner city kids  
New to hiking trails in woods.  
Wild things together

Some yearn, some resist  
Nature's classroom. Life and death  
Lessons of childhood.

Perplexed expressions  
Quivering with bravado  
"This ain't so scary"

Law of the jungle  
Applies to woods and city  
Survival issues

Cement lined rivers  
Civilized, controlled water  
Kids parched in buildings

You pave paradise  
And put up a parking lot  
Sings Joni Mitchell

Inner city kids  
Look at the tree museum  
Fewer owls look back

### Time Warner Features Placerita

Check our website [Placerita.org](http://Placerita.org) and click on "news" to see some good videos from our natural area

### Bob Fischer is Into Plants

Bob Fischer has been in charge of the bird walk for many, many years, held on the second Saturday of each month from 9am until 11am. Those bird walks will still continue, but Bob would like to branch out towards some botany walks which will start in the fall.

Thank you Bob, for the education you gave us and all the joy you brought to so many visitors with binoculars trying to learn the plumage difference, flight patterns and behavior of our feathered friends. We know you will bring the same interest to the new botany walks.

Do not miss Bobs article about the crow. The bird walks will continue on the same schedule as before as there are a few docents who have become very knowledgeable.

## Eagle Scouts

The Eagle Scouts have always been warmly welcomed to Placerita to do their projects. Right now we are slowing down on new projects. As we are a natural area, we don't want to become too built up. The Eagle Scouts we will always welcome to do trail maintenance; that is the kind of help that the Nature Center needs on a regular basis. Please always check with Frank Hoffman before starting any work so that he can be aware of your plans.

## 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  
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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.

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**Fred Seeley**



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

### Publicity

Millie Bonazolli has accepted our request to be in charge of publicity for the different events at Placerita. Phil Rizzo had been in charge for many years and did a splendid job of introducing the Nature Center to many visitors in the Santa Clarita Valley. We are very appreciative of all his work and effort and his great connections at the Signal and Daily News. Thank you Phil for all that you did to make the Nature Center better known to our public, and thank you Millie for all that you will be doing.

### LEED Certification

When the building was built, all the construction material and the way it was handled was done with a LEED certification in mind. Recycling, non-toxic paints, etc...what needs to be certified is also the way the building is run, water conservation, non-toxic chemicals, and recycling of course. We are getting very close to the final decision on August 20—we would be the very first LEED-certified county building, so this is an honor that we all worked hard for.

### Screamin' Coupons:

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates has joined with Screamin' Coupons. It is a free service to join and the PCNCA gets a bit of the action. When you sign up and when you buy a coupon, a percentage will be allocated to PCNCA. Just make sure to click on the Placerita name when you are asked which non-profit you wish to get the credit. They have some really great deals, so go to [Screamingcoupons.com](http://Screamingcoupons.com) and sign up. Support Placerita painlessly at the same time you get a great deal.

## 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.
- JUNIOR RANGERS** For children ages 8-14 is conducted on the fourth Saturday of each month from 9:30AM to 11AM. Call the office at 259.7721 for more information **Time Warner Features Placerita**
- 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)
- MOONLIGHT HIKE** Call the Nature Center for up-to-date Moonlight Hike information. Docent help is requested to enable smaller groups.

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

Save the date for our upcoming Holiday Craft Fair – December 4 and 5.

## US Air Force Bombs Placerita Canyon: 100 Acres Burned, Oak of the Golden Dream Threatened!

By Ron Kraus

That may seem like a tabloid headline, but it actually happened 51 years ago. On Thursday morning, August 16, 1956, the Navy launched a World War II era Hellcat fighter plane drone from Point Mugu to do some missile testing. It was painted red and yellow for maximum visibility and headed out over the Pacific Ocean to the target area just before noon.

Something malfunctioned and the ground controllers lost contact with the plane before it reached the target area. No reason to panic, as the plane had thousands of miles of ocean into which it could crash. Except the old plane had different plans—it made a climbing turn to the southeast and headed directly for the City of Los Angeles. The Navy personnel called for help and the Oxnard Air Force Base (now the Oxnard Airport) scrambled two F-89 Scorpion twin-jet interceptors to shoot down the drone before it it could do any harm.

The Scorpions were equipped with the latest in Cold War era, air-to-air missile technology--"Mighty Mouse" wingtip pods containing 52, 2.75 inch unguided rockets each. The two F-89's caught up with the Hellcat at 30,000 feet, northeast of Los Angeles. The drone then turned northwest, heading towards the sparsely populated Antelope Valley. But then it turned again, heading back to LA. As it crossed over Castaic, the pilots began their attack. Both fighters launched salvos that completely missed the target. The rockets instead landed in dry brush seven miles north of Castaic and burned 150 acres above the Old Ridge Route.

As the drone flew over Newhall a second salvo was launched, again missing the target and raining down rockets between the Oak of the Golden Dream and the Placerita Canyon Oil Fields. Mrs. H. E. Boyes watched a rocket spin across the oil fields and loaded her boxer dog, Bob; her bulldog, Susie; and her daughter, Betty, into the family station wagon and sped away. More brush fires were ignited, blazing out of control and threatening the Bermite Munitions Company on Soledad Canyon Road. Over 100 acres were burned.

The running battle continued over the Angeles National Forest and 350 acres were burned in Soledad Canyon, west of Mount Gleason, ignited by the "Mighty Mouse" salvos. Rockets fell on Palmdale as the pilots fired the last of the missiles. Houses, garages, and cars were hit and damaged but fortunately no one was injured. The drone finally ran out of gas and crashed into a patch of unpopulated desert east of the Palmdale Airport. In all, 208 rockets were fired on an obsolete, unpiloted, unguided, unarmed, propeller-driven drone without scoring a single hit. After the crash, explosive ordnance disposal teams recovered 13 unexploded duds in and around Palmdale. It took 500 firefighters two days to bring all the fires under control.

Residents were angry and complained. The County Supervisor of the time, Roger Jessup, promised a detailed investigation and introduced a resolution urging the "utmost care" by the Navy in sending "robotic planes skyward."

Four decades after the incident, Peter Merlin of the X-Hunters Aerospace Archeology Team and a friend located the crash site using military records, old photos, and details from a LA Times article entitled, "208 Rockets Fired at Runaway Plane: Missiles Spray Southland Area in Effort to Halt Wild Drone."

More information about this incident can be found at:[http://www.thexhunters.com/xpeditions/f6f-5k\\_accident.html](http://www.thexhunters.com/xpeditions/f6f-5k_accident.html)  
<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/11/local/me-then11>



### A New Work Assignment for Chris Mowry

I wanted to let everyone know that I have been offered and accepted a new work assignment. I will be temporarily working out of class as the Acting Superintendent I of Wildlife Sanctuaries. There are 12 sanctuaries totaling 2026.5 acres of land. They stretch from Sunland to Edwards Air Force base at the Kern

County line to Quail Lake. My new office will be at Devil's Punchbowl. It has been wonderful working with all of you.

I will miss you at Placerita Chris but we hope to see you there from time to time. Thank you for all the work you did at Placerita Nature Center.

### Breakfast of Champions

Who are the Champions? The docents and volunteers at Placerita. What did they do? Well, years ago Phil Rizzo felt the summer was too long without seeing his fellow docents, so he invited us for a breakfast pot luck at the Nature Center. Always ready to party, we embraced the idea and have done it every year.

This year we met on August 21 and after eating, Ron Kraus challenged us to a competition to test our knowledge. The winning team got gorgeous caps designed by Jill Goddard, a talented artist.

It was great fun to see all of you and thank you for all the help setting up and cleaning up. You really are The Champions!







### Jack Levenberg

1. Where were you born and where did you spend your childhood? I was born in San Francisco, California. I spent most of my childhood in Santa Rosa, Ca.
2. How did your love of nature start? My family (Mom, Dad, brother and sister) were always camping or taking road trips to the coast. We always had many animals as pets; which included dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, horses, cows, pigs and a skunk.
3. What was your education? I attended St. Rose Grammar school in Santa Rosa, St. Vincent High in Petaluma, Santa Rosa JC and USC.
4. What is your work experience? I graduated from USC with a Doctorate in Pharmacy. Worked in Long Term Care, Acute Care, and Retail pharmacy. I had my own practice in Burbank (Burbank Tower Pharmacy) which I sold in 2005.
5. What is your family life? My wife and I live in Newhall. I have a son, John, and a daughter, Karen. My son and daughter-in-law Lea, have just informed us we are to be grandparents. My daughter teaches math at Calabasas High School.
6. When did you come to Placerita for the first time and why? What do you remember about this place? I came to Placerita about 12 years ago when we moved to the Santa Clarita Valley. I was just curious about the nature center and what it had to offer. The park reminded me of where I grew up in Santa Rosa with the oaks and stream.
7. What are the titles you have held at the Nature Center? Docent and Board

Member.

8. What did or do you like most about your job at the Nature Center? I like the family community and being able to show the animals to the children.
9. What do you do or do not like about the job? I have not found anything that I dislike yet.
10. At Placerita, is there some special accomplishment that makes you feel proud? Becoming a Docent and being able to communicate to the children about nature and animals.
11. What is your favorite food? Mexican.
12. What is your favorite color? Cardinal and Gold.
13. What is your favorite TV show? Or music? Or pastime? Two and a Half Men, 50's music and making wine with my son.
14. Is there anything else that describes you that we should know? Is there any passion or special event in your life that you would like to tell us about? Since I have retired from Pharmacy, I have jumped into another career—winemaking. I have been making wine with my son since 2005. He has taught me everything he knows about winemaking. The first wine that I made on my own was a Chardonnay 2007 which won a gold medal in the state of New York. We do not have the winery as it has been sold, but still continue with consulting in winemaking. Special Events would include my marriage to Doreen and the birth of my son and daughter.



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### Adopt-An-Animal

PCNCA gratefully acknowledges the following special guardians who are helping in the care and feeding of their adopted animals:

- Girl Scout Troop 6872—Kia, the Red-tailed hawk
- Tutor Time Child Care Learning Center—Hopi, the Barn owl
- The King Family (In memory of Chuck Schroepel)—Moon Shadow, the kingsnake
- Nani Pinker—Sandy, the alligator lizard
- Kirshna Miranda Labayna—Wee-bit, the American kestrel
- Demetri Pinker (a gift from Linda Daniels)—Miss Muffet, the tarantula
- Nancy and Larry Nikolai—Apollo, the turkey vulture
- “Grammie” Walsh (a gift from Christopher Wood)—Miss Muffet, the tarantula

We thank you all for your generosity and support!



Bighorn sheep are limited by distances to water resources, however will drink enough for several days within a short period of time.

## Desert Adaptations of Animals

Desert animals are more susceptible to temperature extremes than are desert plants. Animals receive heat directly by radiation from the sun, and indirectly by conduction from the substrate (rocks and soil) and convection from the air. The biological processes of animal tissue can function within a relatively narrow temperature range called the range of thermoneutrality, so in the Mojave animals must employ strategies not only to obtain water but also to avoid or moderate the heat. Luckily, animals have an advantage over plants in that animals can move.

Some animals, such as owls and bats, are active only at night (nocturnal) when temperatures are lowest. Animals that are active in early morning or at dusk, such as lizards, snakes, rodents, and insects, seek shelter in cool, moist burrows during the heat of the day or hide themselves under rocks or bushes. Birds such as the golden eagle, can literally rise above the heat, finding cooler temperatures by flying high above the surface. Still other species, most often birds, migrate to cooler climates for the hottest portions of the year, returning to breed in the Mojave when temperatures are lower.

There is also a desert equivalent to hibernation, called estivation. For example, during hot dry spells, the spade-foot toad (*Scaphiopus* sp.) covers itself with a substance to stay moist and then enters an underground burrow, where it can survive for many months until heavy rains signal it to wake. After mating and laying eggs in temporary pools, the toads return to their burrows and resume estivation until the next heavy rains. The desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) also estivates; it eats cacti, grasses, and wildflowers from March until June, and then retreats to an underground burrow for the heat of the summer. In the cooler fall, the tortoise emerges to eat and drink. Some desert squirrels and spiders also estivate in response to food scarcity.

Owls often gape open-mouthed and flutter their throat area to cool themselves by evaporating water from the mouth cavity, and vultures sometimes expel urine onto their legs to cool themselves through evaporation; however, these two approaches are only practical for animals that receive plentiful supplies of water from the prey they consume.

Some Mojave animals have developed special physiological structures to enable them to regulate body heat. Mule deer and jackrabbits, for example, have large ears that are densely lined with shallow blood vessels, allowing air to cool their blood as it circulates. Some small creatures, such as beetles and lizards, reduce the amount of heat they absorb from the desert surface by having long legs to keep them high up and to disperse heat. Pale-colored fur and feathers help others to keep cool by reflecting sunlight.



Owls will sleep during the day

Mojave animals also have many different approaches to obtaining and conserving water. Some rodents and insects get water by consuming cacti and other plants, and bats obtain it by eating insects. Snakes ingest water when they consume prey animals such as rodents and conserve it by excreting metabolic wastes as solid uric acid rather than liquid urine. When there is no outside water available, desert tortoises are able to reabsorb the water stored in their bladders.

It is even possible for some animals, such as kangaroo rats (*Dipodomys* sp.) and pocket mice (*Perognathus* sp. and *Chaetodipus*, sp.) to get water by using dry seeds. They store the seeds in their burrows, where the seeds absorb moisture from the air; the animals then receive that moisture when they eat the seeds. Kangaroo rats are even able to manufacture water as a byproduct of chemical processes involved in their digestion of seeds, and they seal their burrows to recycle the moisture released during breathing. These creatures are so efficient in their use and conservation of water that even in captivity they will not drink water when offered it.

The desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) is an example of a Mojave animal that is somewhat reliant on springs, rivers, puddles, and other outside sources of water, since it receives limited moisture from the food it eats and has developed no special accommodations in this regard. This is especially true in winter when vegetation is dormant and dry. Reliance on outside sources of water means that the bighorn's territory, and that of most other large desert mammals, is limited by distance from such water sources.



Lizards may seek shelter in cool, moist burrows

To the physiological, anatomical, and morphological adaptations of plants, animals can add adaptive behavior. Many birds and most large mammals, like pronghorn antelopes or wild sheep, can evade critical spells by migrating along the desert plains or up into the mountains. Smaller animals cannot migrate such long distances, but regulate their environment by seeking out cool or shady places. In addition to flying to other habitats during the dry season, birds can reduce heat loads by soaring. Many rodents, invertebrates, and snakes avoid heat by spending the day in caves and burrows, and procuring food during the night. Even diurnal animals may reduce their activities by resting in the shade during the hotter hours of the day. Fossoriality, a lifestyle based in burrows, is the norm for small animals in all deserts, as it





Large ears help keep the jackrabbit cool



Chuckwalla rarely, if ever, drink free-standing water and receive moisture from the wildflower blossoms they eat.

I just wanted to mention this fact in passing as I was quite moved and shaken up when she told me that she was certain that observing the animals behavior and imitating them saved her life.

allows them to stay away from the grueling heat during the hotter part of the day and it also provides them a warm refuge during the cold desert nights. Additionally, humidity inside burrows (ca. 30-50 per cent) allows desert animals to preserve water. When the normal mechanisms to keep body temperature within acceptable limits fail, many small rodents and some desert tortoises (Testudo) salivate to wet the chin and throat and allow evaporative cooling. Such mechanisms have a high cost in water and are used only as emergency measures to prevent death.

At dawn, the dry desert ground may approach freezing temperatures and at midday it may heat up into an 80°C inferno. A few inches above the ground, variations in air temperature are much less pronounced, and, just a few inches below the surface, underground temperatures are almost constant between day and night. For this reason, thermoregulation is a particularly challenging problem for small surface-dwellers and especially for reptiles, which cannot regulate their body temperature metabolically. Most desert reptiles have developed peculiar ways of travelling over hot sandy surfaces. Side-winding, a form of lateral movement in which only a small part of the body is in contact with the surface, is employed by many sand snakes (Figure 1.13). Many lizards and some ground birds avoid overheating by running rapidly over the hot desert surface while maintaining their bodies well separated from the ground (Safriel 1990). Some lizards assume an erect, bipedal position when running, while others regulate their contact with the hot desert pavement by doing “push-ups” with their forelegs.

This all seem rather dry information and how does it relate to you? Well, sometimes it can be a matter of survival. Take the example of a former docent who found herself lost and stranded in a side canyon from the Grand Canyon for many days. She wanted to survive and when help did not come, she observed the animals. Like them she dug a sort of burrow where she would lay down during the day to stay cool and retreat at night to keep warm. She learned to eat the fruits of the cactus to get food and moisture.

References: [www.squidoo.com/wild-animal-list-of-lenses](http://www.squidoo.com/wild-animal-list-of-lenses) and <http://digital-desert.com/wildlife/>; <http://digital-desert.com/wildlife/>

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### Rattlesnake Time

August and September are often the warmest months of the year and the best time for rattlesnakes to be active. Be aware of your surroundings. If you live in the Santa Clarita Valley, you are in a rattlesnake habitat. If you go hiking in SoCal, you are in a rattlesnake area. Keep these precautions in mind and be safe:

- Hike on well-used trails. Do not hike alone and wear ankle-boots and loose-fitting long pants.
- Be aware of your surroundings; do not step or put your hands where you cannot see.
- Be careful when stepping over doorsteps; snakes like to crawl along the edge of buildings.
- Do not handle freshly-killed snakes—they can still bite and inject venom.
- The best protection against rattlesnakes in your yard is a snake-proof fence. It should be at least 3 feet high and buried a few inches into the ground. Keep the area around the fence free from shrubbery the snakes can climb on.
- Make sure there are several inches of ground clearance under shrubs.
- Keep your yard free of mice or rats.
- If you find a rattlesnake in your yard, call the LS County Department of Animal Care and Control and remain calm.
- If you, a child or a pet is bitten, call 911 or go to a hospital immediately.

Rattlesnakes are an important part of the food chain. They are eaten by hawks, coyotes, and foxes. Rattlesnakes, in turn, prey on rodents, rabbits and birds. If a rattlesnake feels a need to defend itself from larger creatures, it will strike. Please keep your dogs on leash and fully under your control when you go hiking; leashes are required on our trails at Placerita.



Dianne Erskine-Hellrigel makes miracles happen: We have beautiful new signs directing the visitors to the Oak of the Golden dream and we have Diane to thank. How did you do this Diane?

“During our January Community Hiking Club meeting, I asked Jim Southwell what we could do to interface with Placerita. He said the only thing he could think of were signs for the



Oak of the Golden Dream, because visitors complained that they could

not find it. As it happened, one of my hikers is a supervisor for CalTrans and her name is Sheila Hopkins.

I said I would see what I could do. I requested signs be installed in January. Sheila went out to visit the site, and indeed, she agreed that it would be nice to have signs. In February and March, sign locations were determined. In April the signs were actually ordered. In June 2010, the signs were delivered and scheduled to be installed. On July 1, the signs were installed.

Sheila Hopkins was a ton of help at CalTrans. Without her, I would not have gotten it done and she kept pushing it through. Thank you Sheila for your help.

I have also been working to try to get a sign at the Placerita Natural Area driveway. Public Works is the organization I am trying to deal with but I do not know any hiker from this group...too bad...but I am still pursuing this!”

*Publisher’s Note: The first weekend these signs were up, at least a dozen people came into the center and stated to me that they were on their way to somewhere else when they saw the signs and came to Placerita instead. Thank you Diane!!! Heidi*



### Who is Ferguson?

Ferguson is a Striped skunk. He has a bushy black tail and can be seen during the animal presentation on Saturday or during the program given to the schools coming to visit.

Fergie was bought by a Texas family with two young children when he was 6 weeks old. From Texas, where owning a skunk is legal, the family moved to California

where they found out that owning a skunk as a pet is illegal. They heard about the Nature Center and came to ask for our help. Fergie was born in captivity and could not be released. We kept him at the Center and Dave Stives, with Pam Koch’s help, contacted Fish and Game so we could obtain a permit to legally take care of him.

However, Ferguson started to earn his other name “Stinky” as he was growing up. He was getting more mature and needed to be descented and castrated. At this point he had never sprayed anyone or anything, but we didn’t want to take any chances! It took about a year to finally find a vet who would accept the job. I was told that the person bringing Ferguson to the surgery had to dispose of the glands too. Not something that you easily hide in your purse!!!

We have had Fergie for about 5 years with a life-span in captivity of 8 to 9 years. We are enjoying his friendly and shy personality and we wish him a long and happy life at the center. His presentation is always a delight for the audience.



### Trip with Gordon

Gordon took the docents on a private tour to Rancho Camulos, a place he knows very well as he is a docent there also. That turned out to be a great opportunity as we were not shy in bombarding him with questions. We found out that there are many historical links between Placerita Canyon and Rancho Camulos. Rancho Camulos is a beautiful place where the history, myth and romance of Old California still linger. The main abode was built in 1853 and is the “home of Ramona”. Check their web page if you want to know more. The garden was splendid and we had a very interesting morning visiting the old hacienda. We were pleased to see the visit was well-attended with many new docents taking advantage of this special opportunity. Thank you Gordon for taking us to this beautiful place and giving us so many interesting details about the kind of life that was happening in those buildings through the years.





### **Fred Seeley**

To begin at the beginning.... I was born in Ogden, Utah, in 1947, and my parents moved to Tooele, Utah, in 1950 where I grew up, more or less. I'm a classic "Baby Boomer". Tooele is in the next valley west of the Salt Lake Valley and was a small town of about 5,000 and one traffic light when I lived there. Tooele County has 8,000 square miles and includes the Bonneville Salt Flats Speedway and now the Miller Motorsports Park; it is bigger than Rhode Island, Delaware, and Connecticut combined and had 12,500 inhabitants in those days.

My love of Nature began in that small town as we were on the edge of town and had lots of interesting critters around. It was a wonderful time and place to be a child! In that part of the world, outdoor recreation is the way of life so hunting and fishing come very naturally. Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts and Boy's Life magazine all helped focus my love of Nature. The Friday before Deer Season is a school holiday in Utah!

Tooele is one of those places that water is pretty scarce and I think I developed a "water fetish" at a young age as I got my first aquarium at age 11 and have had aquariums, ponds, pools, and hot tubs ever since! I currently have 4 aquariums in the house and four ponds of varying sizes and uses outside, not to mention the pool and spa. My "Varsity" koi pond holds 7,500 gallons and has about 25 BIG Koi.

My other hobbies are Corvettes, LeMons car racing, bonsai trees, and of course, PCNC.

After graduating from Toole High, (45<sup>th</sup> Class Reunion this year), I went to the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and graduated with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. There was a recession in the early 1970's and I ended up getting a job as a Safety Engineer with The Hartford Insurance Company. One thing led to another and I got interested in the business side of property and casualty insurance and I moved through the chairs and eventually ran a fairly large profit center for The Hartford. An opportunity to move to the brokerage side led me to Alexander & Alexander (now Aon) and subsequently to Willis. Willis is the world's third largest Insurance Brokerage and I retired from Willis at the end of 2007. I still do some consulting and relationship work for Willis.

My wonderful and understanding-of-all-my-hobbies wife, Sara, and I met at The Hartford on the company co-ed softball team and have now been married 33 years. We have one wonderful son, Paul, who has been the light of our lives and who is now a successful young lawyer in downtown L.A. with Sheppard, Mullin, Richter and Hampton.

In 1990, I accepted a position in Connecticut that required our moving from La Canada-Flintridge. Two years later a terrific opportunity back here in CA led to us moving back to SoCal. During our house hunting project, we discovered the Sand Canyon area of Canyon Country and bought a home there. This is a long way of saying that I then commuted on Placerita Canyon Road to the "14" for about 16 years – driving past PCNC twice a day, most days. Well, now retired, I saw the Docent Training banner in January of this year and finally stopped by to see what it was all about. Sounded great to me and I signed up!!! And the rest is recent history...

First of all, I really enjoyed the Docent Training course material; learning about our eco-systems so close to home is fascinating. Secondly, I really enjoy the kids, parents and teachers on our hikes. I love trying to explain the interdependence of species and species' strategies for reproduction/survival and I really love the interesting questions the kids come up with. The hiking part is personally satisfying because I had both knees replaced in 2009 and until then I virtually couldn't walk from the car to the Docent Room.

I have really enjoyed meeting so many interesting and quality people through PCNCA so far and I am VERY flattered to be elected to the Board of Directors. Thanks!

Hopefully, I'll be able to use whatever life experiences and skills and energy I have to become an asset to the Board and be able to add to the treasure that Placerita Nature Center is.

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### **New Board Members**

We welcome two new board members and wish them an interesting term and the opportunity to work hard for Placerita: Jack Levenberg and Fred Seeley.

They are both new docents, Class of 2010. If you want to learn more about Jack and Fred, please read their interviews in this Rattler.

We are also saying goodbye to Dianne Henry, Paula Parr and Richard Norton and we want to thank them for their time and efforts on the board. We will miss them at the board meetings.





Open House 2010

The construction is long over and we were able to resume our annual Open House. Once again all the docents manned their area of interest and we had a fabulous day and welcomed the community with open arms. The Open House is our THANK YOU to the community for their support during the year; support for our native educational animals and our popular school programs. We are very grateful.

This event is one of my favorites. It's a day to step back in time to a simpler way of life. We hosted our usual gold-panning activities, face painting, kid's crafts and show-cased pioneer skills at Walker Cabin. There were ecology hikes, history hikes and wildflower hikes. We had wonderful vendors and invited other very special nature-oriented nonprofits to share the day.

Stay tuned for our Open House in 2011 which marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nature Center. We are planning a spectacular THANK YOU celebration.

### The Museum is Still Alive!

The museum is not empty; it is still very much worth having a look and we have some live exhibits so you might want to check it out. However, the docents are working toward a new Interpretive Center. The designer recently gave us a Conceptual Design Package, and then they will make color renderings after all the details have been approved. Our supervisor is working hard on a grant to help fund the museum. So, as you can see, we have big plans and much hope for an exciting Interpretive Center in the not-too-distant future.



### End of School Dinner

We marked the occasion with a party; a great opportunity to get together and reflect on our achievements. Sue Wallender was in charge of planning this pot luck and we thank her.

A few awards were given after dinner: Linda Ioerger and Rick Brammer received a plaque with an owl laser cutting for being Volunteer of the Year 2010 for the Nature Center.

Shirley Morano received the same plaque to thank her for being an active volunteer for so many years.

Roger McClure was recognized as Volunteer of the Year 2010 by the Park and Recreation Department for the County of Los Angeles. The PCNCA wanted to share this honor and we gave him a book about Shakespeare--another passion of his, signed by most of the docents.

The team in charge of sending the Rattler was thanked by a pen set engraved with their names: Angel MacDonald is in charge of the labels and mailing lists. Judy McClure is responsible for the tabs. Janet Kubler has done the physical mailing for many years and even trained her husband and daughters on affixing the labels to make the post office happy. Linda Kopatz helps keep the PDF list up to date.

Thank you all for doing such a fantastic job!





## The American Crow

By Bob Fischer

We see crows so often everywhere and know instantly what species they are, we usually give them little thought except perhaps to find them annoying. But the American crow is quite a remarkable bird and deserves thoughtful attention. The American crow, *Corvus brachyrhynchos*, is a large passerine (perching bird) belonging to the family Corvidae (crows and jays), and, along with a few primates, has made us re-think our own species' so-called uniqueness within the animal kingdom as the only toolmakers and problems solvers. Jet-black to purplish in color, sleek and nimble in the air, crows have a special place in human history. They communicate about perceived danger so well that successful study of them frustrates all but the most dogged of scientists.

American Crows are familiar over much of the continent. They are common birds of fields, open woodlands, and forests. They thrive around people, and are found in agricultural fields, lawns, parking lots, athletic fields, roadsides, towns, and city garbage dumps. They usually feed on the ground and eat almost anything – typically earthworms, insects and other small animals, seeds, and fruit but also garbage, carrion, and chicks they rob from nests. Their flight style is unique, a patient, methodical flapping that is rarely broken up with glides. Ravens resemble crows but are larger, longer winged, and heavier beaked than crows. Ravens' tails are tapered at the end, giving them a diamond or wedge shape compared to a crow's shorter, squarer tail. This is most notable during flight.

American crows are very social, sometimes forming huge flocks and are rarely seen alone. They are inquisitive and sometimes mischievous and are good learners and problem-solvers. They're also aggressive and often chase away larger birds including hawks, owls and herons. Crows are consummate opportunists. As scavengers, they most likely evolved a close association with wolves and other hunting animals that killed prey and left carcass remains unguarded or abandoned. We can imagine crows hanging around the campsites or settlements of North America's early inhabitants, exploiting the spoils of hunting or fishing expeditions whenever the opportunity arose. As humans fine-tuned agriculture and settled into larger, more complex landscapes, crows adapted. Obviously, the human-altered environments of North America are well-suited to the crow's way of making a living. Agricultural lands, urban and suburban areas, and all the interfaces between rural and urban, field and forest provide crows with a host of different ways to find food and thrive. And, in fact, American crow populations across the country have generally increased size and geographic range over the last several decades.

Crows are tool users, but they are also toolmakers and problem solvers. Their behavior and apparent ingenuity make them a fascinating group. Brain size increases with body weight, a relationship observed across nearly all animal groups. A corvid's brain size, however, is more in line with that of mammals than birds—and more in line with primates when graphed against its body mass. It's a relationship that undoubtedly figures into what many researchers consider the bird's intelligence in getting along in the world. Like some other birds, crows will drop food items, such as shells and nuts, from the air onto hard surfaces in order to crack them open and get access to whatever is inside. But crows have taken it to another level, placing hard-to-crack nuts on roads in front of passing vehicles, then retrieving the crushed-open nut.

The same attributes that lend crows their keen intelligence undoubtedly figure in their status as one of the more able predators of songbirds nests—robbing both eggs and nestlings for food. In some studies done in Maryland and the Great Smokey Mountains in the 1980s, American crows emerged as important players in predation of songbirds' nests, especially where the woodlot or forest stands are relatively small. As crows easily adapt to human-induced changes in the landscape, and tend to be highly associated with forest edges, forest-dwelling birds in small tracts of wooded land might face higher densities of crows—and therefore higher nest predation by them—than birds in larger forested areas. As with other long-lived, social animals, crows exhibit behavior that can only be described as play. Reports of crows grabbing an object like a foam toy from a backyard or something as simple as a piece of paper and creating a game-like play of shaking, dropping, and repeatedly retrieving it are common from researchers and birders alike. And the play does not always require such objects; crows are quite content to make use of natural conditions. They've been seen flying hard against a stiff wind, climbing to a certain height, only to let themselves be taken by its currents as they fall Earthward in a series of rolls and tumbles before catching themselves and doing it all over again.

A lifelong, monogamous relationship between mates plays off against competition with other mated pairs and offspring for resources and territory. Younger individuals will likely spend much of their time with siblings of their own or another related brood, and even help their parents raise young from subsequent clutches. Seasonally, crows tend to associate with family during spring and summer, only to go off and join large aggregations in fall and winter. Some of these big groups of roosting crows can harbor thousands of individuals.

Both members of a breeding pair help build the nest. Young birds from the previous year sometimes help as well. Three to nine pale bluish-green to olive green with blotches of brown and gray toward the large end. eggs are laid hatching in 16 to 18 days. The babies are ready to fly in 20 to 40 days. The nest is made largely of medium-sized twigs with an inner cup lined with pine needles, weeds, soft bark, or animal hair. Crows typically hide their nests in a crotch near the trunk of a tree or on a horizontal branch, generally towards the top third or quarter of the tree. They prefer to nest in evergreens, but will nest in deciduous trees when evergreens are less available.

Sources: This was adapted from an article by Robert Rice in the Migratory Bird Center of the Smithsonian National Zoological Park. The entire article can be seen at the web page below. Additional material from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

[http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Featured\\_Birds/default.cfm?bird=American\\_Crow](http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Featured_Birds/default.cfm?bird=American_Crow)



### Donations

We would like to thank those generous souls who thought of Placerita. The residents of the park also thank you for helping to house and feed them.

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