



The Rattler



In This Issue:

- ◆ Donations Listings
- ◆ Mitchell Caverns Trip
- ◆ Dave and Apollo
- ◆ Docent Graduation

Placerita Canyon Nature Center

Over 50 Years of Nature Education

PCNCA's Mission Statement

To inspire a passion, awareness and respect for the environment, and to preserve and protect for future generations the history and ecosystem of Placerita Canyon.

May/June 2013

Hello Nature Friends,

Placerita is busier than ever: the weather is beautiful; all the wild flowers are in bloom so it is the perfect time to come and visit. We are finding out that the resurfacing of the Canyon Trail to accommodate the mountain bikers, has brought to the park a new group of "athlete in training", joggers who enjoy running on the smoother surface and many families with children on little bike or parents with strollers. We are delighted to be able to accommodate so many more visitors to enjoy our beautiful natural area.

The class of 2013 have completed their docent training, we had a lovely evening to celebrate their graduation (see article) and now we are getting ready for Open House which is always a big event at



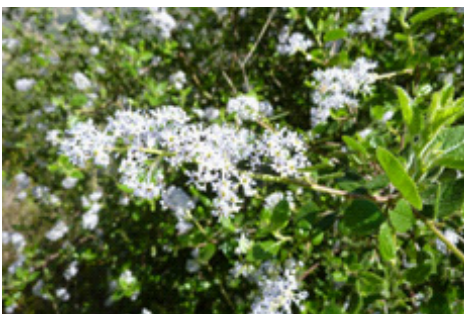
Placerita. The big day is May 11, mark this date on your calendar and come to share the fun. There will be a big treasure hunt and snakes will be the theme of the event. I can assure you that you will have a good time with many activities to partake and if you can bring children, they will enjoy every minute of their day at Placerita.

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.



Spring is Here

There was not much rain last winter but that is not preventing all the wild flowers blooming as fast as possible along the Los Pinetos trail where these photos were taken. Plants are programmed to blossom at this time of the year to be able to produce fruits (their seeds) and to reproduce. Survival of the species is always the main purpose on hand for the flowers like for the animals. This is the mating season and we see many birds building nests. It is also migration time: many birds spend the winter in warmer climates and we are starting to be able to observe some species that we only see passing through and staying a few weeks at this time of the year (the beautiful western tanager comes to mind and I eagerly wait for the first one of the season).... They will go to colder climates where the insects are plentiful and they won't be seen in the summer. Some of them go all the way up to Alaska and they won't linger around Santa Clarita because they want to be able to nest and raise their young before the long trip in the fall. The resurfacing of the Canyon trail was a little bit disturbing for many docents but we are finding that many people with walking disabilities are enjoying the smooth surface as well as many parents with babies in strollers who are delighted to be able to take the very little ones on the trail and escape the house. It is really the best time of the year to take a hike, not too hot, not too cold and the air smells delightful with all the blossoms everywhere. Come and enjoy Placerita.



The Bridge is not for Horses

Maybe you remember the photos in the last Rattler describing an accident where the horse got caught under the railing. There was a previous accident and a new sign was posted next to the bridge to make clear that this bridge is not to be used by equestrians who will have to cross the stream.

We hope it will make everybody safe.

The Rattler

Editor:

Evelyne Vandersande

661 254-2972

Publisher:

Heidi Webber

661 251-7978

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:

Placerita Canyon Nature Center
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.



Board Members

President:

Jim Southwell

Vice-President:

Ron Kraus

Recording Secretary:

Debra Barroso

Corresponding Secretary:

Fred Seeley

Treasurer:

Heidi Webber

Directors:

Bob Moss

Evelyne Vandersande, PR Chair

Bill Webber

Rick Brammer

Teresa Jacobs

Jack Levenberg NCA Rep

Sandra Balaram

Alternate Directors:

Deb Clem

Jim Harris

The Rattler is printed by
Valencia Printers on Recycled Paper

Disclaimer

Because there is often limited space on various field trips, we find that we need to enforce the following: All trips and dinner celebrations are open only to Placerita Canyon docents and volunteers who have paid their yearly dues. Many trips can be open to family and friends but only with previous authorization from the person planning the trip. Thank you for your understanding.

The Placerita Canyon Nature Center and Natural Area Park are located within the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County in the Supervisorial District of Michael D. Antonovich. The Natural Area and Nature Center are operated by the County of Los Angeles, Department of Parks and Recreation, in partnership with the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates

Pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the County of Los Angeles, Department of Parks and Recreation, has designated an ADA Coordinator to carry out this Department's compliance with the non-discriminatory provisions of the ADA.. For more information you may contact the ADA Coordinator's Office at TEL 213-738-2970 TDY 213-427-6118 FAX 213-487-0380; Upon 3-day request notice, sign language interpreters and related materials in alternative formats (Braille-transcript, large print, audio-record, video-captioning, live-description) or any other reasonable accommodations are available to the public for County-sponsored activities and events.

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



Los Pinetos Canyon Trail Cleanup

Spring is all around us and spring cleaning is also in the air. Los Pinetos is steep and long but this did not discourage this courageous team who cleaned up part of the trail. Thank you Ron Kraus who supervised the effort and thank you all for your help: Robert Grzesiak, Vicki Cunningham, Helen Walker, Irene Heerlein and Deb Clem.



Vasquez Rocks

Congratulations to our friendly neighbor Nature Center, their museum is unofficially already opened and you can see their new facility, very modern and very interesting Nature Center. The official opening ceremony will be done in April. The docents did their official training session in Placerita and will have additional instruction to cover the different topics of Vasquez Rocks. Congratulations and good luck to all.



SPRING/SUMMER 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

For more information, please call 661.259.7721 or visit our website at Placerita.org.

The American Robin by Bob Fischer

The Robin is the one bird that everyone can identify. With its totally red-orange breast and large size, its lack of shyness and its common presence on our lawns with a worm dangling from its beak we have all been aware of the «American» Robin since we were children. Though they're a familiar town and city bird, American Robins are at home in wilder areas, too, including mountain forests and Alaskan wilderness. The American Robin is widely distributed throughout North America, wintering south of Canada from Florida to central Mexico and along the Pacific Coast. It has been called the quintessential American bird, and is the third most abundant bird species in North America. Its scientific name is *Turdus migratorus*, meaning migrating thrush, and there are seven subspecies. It has the distinction of being the state bird of Connecticut, Michigan and Wisconsin. It is named after the European Robin because of its reddish-orange breast, though the two species are not closely related, with the European Robin belonging to the flycatcher family.

The American Robin is active mostly during the day and assembles in large flocks at night. Its diet consists of around 40% invertebrates (such as beetle grubs, earthworms and caterpillars) and 60% fruits and berries. It is one of the earliest North American bird species to lay eggs, beginning to breed shortly after returning to its summer range from its winter range. Its nest consists of long coarse grass, twigs, paper, and feathers, and is smeared with mud and often cushioned with grass or other soft materials. Nestlings are fed mainly on worms and other soft-bodied animal prey. A clutch consists of three to five light blue eggs and is incubated by the female alone. The eggs hatch after 14 days, and the chicks leave the nest a further two weeks later. The newborn chicks are naked and have their eyes closed for the first few days after hatching. While the chicks are still young, the mother broods them continuously. When they are older, the mother will brood them only at night or during bad weather. The adult male and female both are active in protecting and feeding the fledged chicks until they learn to forage on their own. The adult Robin gives alarm calls and dive-bombs predators, including domestic cats, dogs and humans that come near the young birds. The fledglings are able to fly short distances after leaving the nest. The wings of juvenile birds develop rapidly, and it only takes a couple of weeks for them to become proficient at flying.



are repeated. The adult robin is preyed upon by hawks, cats and larger snakes, but when feeding in flocks, it can be vigilant and watch other birds for reactions to predators. Brown-headed Cowbirds lay eggs in robin nests but robins usually reject the cowbird eggs. Bird banders have found that only 25% of young Robins survive the first year. The longest known lifespan in the wild of an American Robin is 14 years; the average lifespan is about 2 years. I don't know why but I see many more male Robins than female, (the female have much paler breasts than the males). Maybe the females are just much shyer than the males. Enjoy them whenever you see them.

References for this article include Wikipedia and the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology web pages.

Photos by Wikipedia



The Robin uses auditory, visual, olfactory and possibly vibrotactile cues to find prey, but vision is the predominant mode of prey detection. It is frequently seen running across lawns, picking up earthworms and its running and stopping behavior is a distinguishing characteristic.

Experiments have discovered that it can find worms underground by simply using its listening skills. It typically will take several short hops and then cock its head left, right or forward as a means to detect movement of its prey. In urban areas, robins will gather in numbers soon after lawns are mowed or where sprinklers are in use. It is among the first birds to sing at dawn, and its song consists of several discrete units that

Special Presentation □ Sunday □ May 26

It is not Halloween ☐ indeed it is Spring and soon to be Summer. We spend more and more time out-of-doors and hopefully in the Placerita Canyon Natural Area. While here, you will see lots of local residents ☐ birds, reptiles, some mammals but mostly, insects. No one is frightened by butterflies ☐ in fact, most people like to look at butterflies as they are so beautiful and seem to be carefree flying from one flower to the next. The same cannot be said about bees, wasps, beetles and other bugs that share the world with the butterflies and with us. But they can also be beautiful and elegant ☐ it is just that most people do not want to get up close and personal. Now you will have an opportunity and we guarantee you absolutely none of these insects will bite, sting, scratch or do anything else that might be noxious or obnoxious. Come to a presentation on



An Introduction to
the Creepy Crawlies
of the Natural World
Sunday, May 26, 2013



at 2 p.m.

Placerita Canyon Nature
Center Classroom



Made available to you by the Community Hiking Club, the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates and the staff at the Placerita Canyon Nature Center.

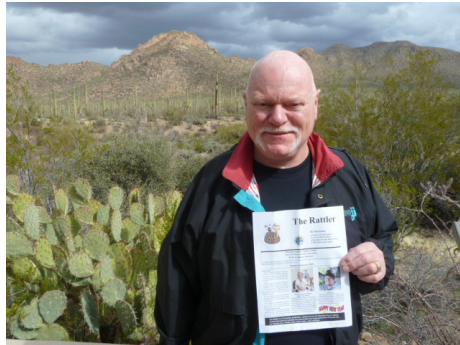
Presenter: Paul A. Levine, Docent-Naturalist with the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates



On the Road With the Rattler

Mike Elling took the Rattler to School

I recently visited my family in Tucson and while there I read to the children in my sister's 3rd grade classroom (it was Love of Reading week. I am holding the Rattler and the book I read- «Bedhead!») and told them about Placerita, then I went to Saguaro National Park. Had the Rattler this time!



A courageous group of hikers took the Rattler to Fish Canyon for a hike. You can see Maria Elena Franicevich Christensen, Irene Heerlein, Dan Kott , Denny H. Truger and Robert Grzesiak. There was plenty of water in the stream and they saw the first Blue Dicks in bloom.



A very gorgeous waterfall and this time, they brought the “Rattler” — with Irene Heerlein, Robert Grzesiak, Denny Truger and Laura Skorich at Canyon Trail Waterfall



A whole bunch of docents took the Rattler to Providence Mountains to camp and clean up the area around Mitchell Caverns.



Mike Elling took a cruise from LA to Ft. Lauderdale and passed through the Panama Canal.



In search of the wildlife on board the ship (at a bar, oops!).



On a whale watching trip off Cabo San Lucas,



Graduation of the Class of 2013

Their names have been published twice in the Rattler and we are starting to become familiar with their faces and personality, nice group, great people, with strong ideas and very decided to make a change, some young, some a little more mature: all very lovable and we welcome them to the nature center with open arms. They are the new blood and we are delighted by their energy.

I was not too sure if it was going to be a big celebration: many people sent me an email that they could not come; it was the day before Easter so I had removed one row of tables before the



party...76 people showed up and we spread gladly through the 2 rooms. The buffet was spectacular, we had a good number of family members who came with little children to give support to our new docents and that is always such a pleasure to see. A new docent made this beautiful cake with the Oak of the Golden Dream surrounded by the names of the new docents.

After dinner, Jim Southwell made a small presentation about PCNCA's message and gave us an update on the status of the new museum.



The ceremony started with Ron giving special credit to the committee who planned the docent training. Irene Heerlein was badly missed. She was in charge of the administration and Marnye Summers was in charge of the food to the great enjoyment of all who attended the docent training. We were also missing Fred Seeley and Janet Kubler.

Heidi Webber received a PCNCA apron, a well-deserved gift to thank her for the delicious kick off lunch she prepares each year to welcome the new docents and all the "older docents" coming to greet them.

All the members of the docent training committee received a special bag designed by Jill Goddard. Jill is extremely talented and is very gracious in sharing her talent, creating all that requires some creative ability at the center. Thank you Jill.



The new docent class received their certificates and name tags. Many docents now have name tags for both Vasquez Rocks and Placerita and they plan to work in both parks. Some new docents who had perfect attendance during class received a special cap.

A few docents shared a few words about up coming projects but the evening was over too soon.

We had such a good time that Pam Koch brought the idea of an evening of camping at Walker Ranch for the month of June... We will keep you posted!



Horse Peak

Sometimes the docents decide to have an adventure with a small group. Snow fell on the mountains on March 8, but that did not slow down this intrepid group to climb Horse peak, the highest mountain around Santa Clarita at 2,391 ft.. Their shoes were much heavier with mud on the way back.



Dan Kott, Maria Elena Franicevich Christensen, Irene Heerlein, Helen Sweany, Vicki Cunningham and Ron Kraus

Biodiversity Hunt

Photos and article by Paul A. Levine

On Friday and Saturday, March 22 and 23, I participated in a BioDiversity Hunt at Cottonwood Springs in Joshua Tree National Park. This is a little over 200 miles from my home in Santa Clarita and I had an added impediment of having to first stop at Loma Linda University Medical Center to take Part II of a training program on their new Electronic Medical Record system. That started at 8 a.m. but while I expected it to go until noon, I was done by 9:30 so I got to Cottonwood Springs by 11:00 a.m. and had a goodly amount of time in along the trails. There were some individuals and families like me, pure amateurs but others who were truly expert in plants, insects, reptiles.... Some of the UC colleges sent teams from their biology department and they had permits to actively collect. I brought my net, not to collect but rather capture, transfer to a plastic bag and photograph. I can proudly state that every insect that I caught was able to be successfully released and fly away. I was a little over-optimistic in my subsequent ability to identify them from the books that I had. For example, I thought I might have captured a “long-horned bee” but the book that I had indicated that there were a 120 different species so I will submit all my photos on a disc but allow the experts among the Park Rangers and other experts who are working with them to identify the specific insects (except for the butterflies – I could do those). Unfortunately, I saw only 6 different species of butterflies.



Sagebrush Checkerspot



Mojave Yucca



Bee

Apollo and Dave

Dave made a wonderful video for the county with Apollo. Here is the article included with the video.

That is really is a bird of another feather.

For starters, she’s got a masculine name—Apollo. But that’s nothing compared to this: She’s got a serious turkey vulture crush on a bearded, soft-spoken Los Angeles County worker named Dave Stives.

Stives, the county’s regional animal keeper, has become accustomed to Apollo working herself into a hormonal tizzy when he nears her enclosure at the Placerita Canyon Nature Center in the Antelope Valley, especially during spring mating season. Among other things, she spins in circles and flaunts her tale. “A courtship dance,” says Stives.

Apollo and Stives first met nearly a decade ago. Apollo had been hit by a vehicle in Virginia and was shipped west for treatment at a private facility in the Antelope Valley. A tendon in Apollo’s wing had been damaged, thus bringing her flying days to an end. In those early days, Stives had helped in her care and training. Two years later, when the private facility went under, Apollo was moved to the county’s Placerita Canyon center. It was love at second sight.

“She remembered me and trusted me,” Stives says. That was seven years ago, he says, and the relationship is still going strong. “She follows me around like a puppy dog,” Stives says affectionately of the black-feathered, red-headed vulture.

Stives, 48, has worked as an animal keeper for the county’s Department of Parks and Recreation for some 14 years. He’s responsible for the seven nature centers and parks that house a menagerie of animals, including birds, possums, raccoons, rattlesnakes—“probably anything that is indigenous in the state,” he says. He travels from one facility to the next making sure all are in compliance with state and federal laws governing everything from the diet of the animals to their educational use, a requirement for the county to keep them. “We make sure they have the best possible life under our care,” Stives says.

At home, Stives also has some feathered and furry friends—two dogs, two cats, three falcons, plus a snake. As a “master falconer,” he takes his birds into the wild, where he’s “conditioned” them to circle overhead as he beats the bushes for rabbits. The falcons then swoop in.

As for Apollo, she now spends her weekends with Stives at educational animal shows, dispelling myths of vultures as the creepy outcasts of the bird world. “She’s actually quite pretty,” he says. “In her own way.”



Butterflies You Can See in Spring at Placerita
Photos by Paul A. Levin

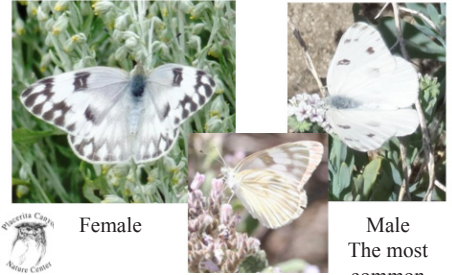
California Sister



Variable Checkerspot



Checkered White



Female

Male
 The most common
 "white" in the
 Santa Clarita
 Valley

Orange Sulphur



Very skittish and difficult to approach

Lorquin's Admiral



Acmon Blue



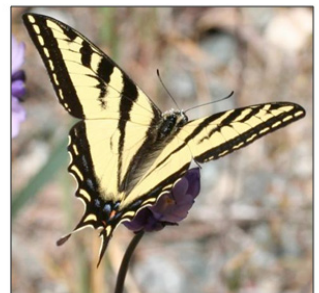
Gray Hairstreak



Mournful Duskywing



Western Tiger Swallowtail





Open House: Deb Clem is in Charge!

Last year, Deb Clem was chairperson for Open house, she was a pirate and the Nature Center was the place where all those Nature treasures were hidden. It was a fantastic success and she came up with many fun ideas and new games. We were all delighted and enthusiastic at the new outlook that Open House took for this occasion. On our tippy toes, at the board meeting we brought up the topic of Open house coming soon and the fact that we needed a chairperson to take charge. Deb sort of grumbled that she had spent so much time behind the computer trying to make spread sheets that took so much of her time that she would not like to repeat the experience. Then, Fred Seeley proposed his help to do any computer work for her and told Deb that he was the pro of spreadsheets.



Very smart move Fred and just in time too. With Fred's help, Deb very nicely decided to be chairperson of the event again and decided it would be "The year of the Snake!" We are so grateful that Deb Clem is willing to take again this responsibly and we cannot wait to find out all the great ideas that she has. Thank you so much Deb, you are a very special lady and Fred, we really appreciate all the help you are going to give Deb. Thanks so much to both of you.



Adopt an Animal

PCNCA gratefully acknowledges Santa Clarita Fun for Fours preschool for their adoption of Orion, the Great Horned Owl. Many thanks to all the children for their support of this program.



Friday March 8, 2013

That was the official date for the opening of the Canyon Trail to bikers.

We are trying to have an official mountain bike volunteer unit (MBU) to patrol the trail to make sure the rules are observed by all. They have direct communication to a Sheriff's Unit and it could be useful to have supervision during this adaptation period. As a pedestrian you have right of way on the trail. However, we would recommend that you do not turn your back to oncoming traffic and that you do not let young children ahead of



you on the trail. You should be aware that you are sharing the trail with mountain bikers who might not see you if you are behind bushes or stepping in the middle of the trail suddenly.

If you are involved in an accident, you should go to the office to fill out a form to make sure this was recorded. Having the mountain bikes on the trail is an experiment that could be revisited if too many accidents occur but they need to be documented.

The mountain bikers have been trained to observe etiquette on the trail by their organizations and we hope this transition will be done smoothly.

On the plus side, it has been very nice to see families with young children on their bicycles using the trail; they all go slow and look out for each other.

The pinch points were built so that the bikers would have to slow down their speed or even to have to dismount their bicycle to be able to pass through the rocks. However, we are not convinced that those pinch points will be such a strong deterrent when it is so much easier to go around the rocks and to enlarge the trail slightly in doing so. The problem is that some plants of interest can stand in the way like a Manzanita that the docents had tried to protect in marking it with yellow tape. The rocks are small and the branches trying to block the traffic are too easily moved around to be successful. The mountain bikers have been somewhat dismayed by the amount of hikers with young children on the trail who act in an unpredictable manner as young children will do. May be they will use the Canyon Trail mostly during the week... we will see how the situation develops in the future and we will keep you posted.



Providence Mountain State Recreation Area and Mitchell Caverns Natural Preserve Maintenance Trip



After months of planning and coordination between the State Department of Parks and Recreation and the National Parks Service several Placerita Docents along with a couple County employees, one State Parks employee and many spouses, friends and relatives, made the long journey out to Providence Mountain State Recreation Area and Mitchell Caverns Natural Preserve. This was a rare opportunity because this park was closed due to budget cuts a few years back. With the planning of the event by Fellow docent and State Park employee, Bryan Miller, the support of two public agencies, and many volunteers our group took the opportunity



to show our support to help preserve the park by doing some maintenance at the park including trail work and landscaping.

What started out for some of us as a very wet and snowy day in Santa Clarita turned into a very wet and snowy night out at Providence. Thanks to the generosity of the National Park Service, we enjoyed two free nights at the nearby Hole-in-the-Wall group campground. That first night tested our endurance with wind and snow and prepared us for facing the elements the next day. While the snow did not stick, the wind helped to make some of us in tents wish we had stayed in a hotel. Those of us in trailers, Lanita Algeyer and Husband along with Beverly Browe, and Bryan Miller fared better.

The next morning dawned cold, windy, and overcast. After a hearty breakfast, we met up with others that came up just for the day and after brief introductions, for those new to our group, all twenty-three of us headed up to the Park stopping only to take our requisite “Rattler” photo (which took awhile with three cameras) in front of the Park sign before being escorted into the park.



Once behind the gates we proceeded up to the closed visitors center and other historic structures. Since the park is officially closed all the buildings including the visitors center were boarded up. Along with the local vegetation slowly encroaching on the buildings and walkways the park had a very neglected look but that is why we were there. Although the park buildings were closed, we did have full restroom facilities.

After a brief introduction and tour of the Park facilities, historic structures, and what needed to be done we gathered up our tools and each member of our group set upon their own tasks depending on what they felt like doing. Some set to clearing weeds out of planters filled with very large cactus. Others worked on trail maintenance while others tackled the pruning needs. even though there was a cold wind blowing down from the snow dusted peaks and periods of overcast skies, we worked up a sweat.

Throughout the morning everyone became intimate with the local desert flora including the especially nasty “Cats Claw” Acacia. This bush has small but deadly “claws” the seemed to catch on every bit of clothing and exposed skin it could latch onto. One other unusual plant that was found throughout the park was the Turpentine Broome. This deep purple flower had a very strong smell and we found out later, can cause a rash if handled, similar to poison oak. Particularly challenging was cleaning the vegetation

from around the many barrel cactus that are found in abundance throughout the park.

After a few hours of work including a brief lunch break, which included some very good soup provided by Sue Wallender, we met up with the park caretaker, Mike, who led us on the quarter mile trail out to Mitchell Caverns. Mitchell Caverns is made up of two caves, Tecopa and El Pakiva caves. which together make up the namesake of the park. These caves are known for their “Shields” which are found in only a couple of other cave in the US. After a full tour of the caves (unfortunately we did not see any bats) we made our way back to the visitors center for a last tour of some of the historic grounds before saying goodbye and parting ways. those of us staying at the campground were treated to more generosity by the National Parks when they agreed to let us dispose of the ten plus bags of clippings we produced that day in their facilities.



While some headed back to civilization, a few of us stayed one more night at Hole-in-the-Wall campground waking up to a wonderful sunny day which we spent exploring petroglyphs and slot canyons. next to the campground. We met the next caretaker for Providence, Greg, and watched a movie on the Mojave National Preserve. After a full morning of exploring Hole-in-the-Wall, some headed out into the preserve to explore the great dunes and other points of interest.



Working for the State Parks Department I get to experience this park on monthly trips to help restore the water system. Each time I visit the park it is a completely new experience. While our group trip was cold with no flowers blooming, I was out at the park two days later and flowers were starting to emerge and the temperature was in the 70s. In closing I am proud to report that the park is slated to reopen by the end of summer. Hopefully we can organize another trip out either as volunteers helping to reopen the park or as tourists for the grand reopening



This is just a reminder.

We are and will be continuing to look for great pictures for the 2014 Calendar (Native wild flowers) and virtually every other topics which we will file and hold on to for future calendars. While the Committee also encourages you to share such as via Friends of PCNCA on Facebook, for the calendar we need the pictures in high resolution. Attached are two pictures that I took today when out hiking. Both of these are found in Placerita Canyon. So please send them to me with the location where you photographed them (if not photographed in Placerita Canyon, we will double check the list of wild flowers that are found in Placerita Canyon to make sure that they are found here if the members of the Committee are not otherwise certain. In addition to the two pictures that I took today, I am also attaching a picture submitted by Denny Truger and although this picture was taken in Pico Canyon, the Chaparral Currant has been found on the Manzanita Trail.

Paul
Paul A. Levine
Calendar Committee - PCNCA
Email: paul.cele.levine@sbcglobal.net



Some of the comments about their wonderful weekend at Mitchell Caverns:

Dolores Olson: I had a fun, exciting & wonderful time at Mitchell Caverns State Park. Cleaning & working w/the “others” was so much fun & rewarding. The cave, caverns, were breathtaking. I’m so fortunate for the opportunity of this experience. (Thank you Bryan!)

James F. Crowley : A very special shout out THANKS to Bryan Miller for making this all possible. He pulled the strings and made it happen ! Saturday Morning...after a few people nearly blew away and or froze . Saturday night was a lot better...clear, some breeze, a gazillion stars. The morning proved a bit more windy with Beverly Browe rescuing our tent before it became a flying balloon like object....

Janet Kubler : Saturday night was lovely, no wind, desert sky full of stars. Thanks for the fire wood!



Even on a Saturday

The docents were expecting this school to come on a Wednesday but they were mistaken and thought their school trip to the Nature Center was on a Saturday. The docents do not usually have a program on Saturday but they rose to the occasion. Thank you Paul Levine, Sue Wallander, William Sutton and Jim Crowley.

Here is their report:

The kids were great. They were from a very focused science class and have been on several other hiking trips. The so called ‘fast’ group, who was also getting ready for a marathon run never made it to the waterfall. Go figure. All in all the four docents had fun and so did the kids. We also had an animal show in the amphitheater. Olivia Miseroy helped us out with birds.

Coyote: A Friend, or not so Much?

Article by Evelyne Vandersande as printed in SCV.com



I have often seen coyotes on my street early in the morning or even in the late afternoon, and I always thought it was a gift to be able to observe nature in action so close by.

The thought crossed my mind also that it was unusual to see this animal in daylight, and that food or water must be scarce. Poor little coyote!

That was until I started to do research for this article.

The attacks on dogs and cats have increased tremendously – even dogs that are on a leash. This is becoming frequent, especially in California. There was even a child who was killed, and it seems that the coyotes are becoming less wary of humans in our suburban environment.

They have been chasing joggers and bicyclists, clearly losing their fear of humans. That is never a good sign with wildlife, as they can be unpredictable. They follow the river bed in Valencia as well as the paseo system, so they have easy access to all neighborhoods. They can jump or climb over high fences and do so in broad daylight.

When a species is making all those changes, we have to understand the underlying

reasons.

We are making their life too easy. They do not have to hunt, as they can empty our garbage cans; eat the cat food – and even the cat. They eat all of the fallen fruit under the trees and the berries under the bushes.

I did not think the bird feeder could be a problem, but it is. Coyotes eat birds, squirrels and even the mice and rats that are attracted to the bird feeder at night. They can drink from the bird bath or the fountain and have been known to chew on irrigation lines.

So please avoid feeding them, because it changes their behavior and brings them too close to our homes and pets. Avoid leaving cat and dog food outside, and keep the materials from bird feeders off of the ground as best you can.

Coyotes have adapted well in densely populated areas, while avoiding contact with humans. One coyote even took up residence in New York City's Central Park for a few days; how got there is a mystery to me.

It is important to take some precautions. Do not leave your pets unattended outside. A large dog will be OK, but a cat will never be, even during the day.

It is easy to recognize a coyote kill compared to killing by a dog, because the coyote only consumes part of the body. Often it eats the soft belly tissues and leaves the rest.

What do they eat? They are carnivores, so any animal with meat on its bones will do – even carrion, although they prefer fresh meat. Fruits and vegetables are also important in their diet.

Exactly what is a coyote? The coyote looks like a skinny German shepherd, but the tail is bushier with a black tip, and it is held horizontal or down, not up like a flag.

Their hearing is acute and the position of the ears is used to communicate mood and rank in the pack. They also have a good sense of smell, and they mark their territory with their urine.

Coyotes are not gregarious animals. When food is scarce, their territory can be 15 square miles wide. In area where food is plentiful, like suburbia, they can form a pack of up to 10 coyotes and don't behave as territorially. A territory can become as small as one-quarter of a square mile in the suburbs of Los Angeles – and this is where we are living.

If you have never seen a coyote close up, I am pretty sure you have seen its scat on the trail. Coyotes are canids and use their droppings to mark the area where they have been. The scat, or dropping, is usually displayed right in the middle of the path. (A cat, on the other hand, hides its scat.) The scat often has a pointed end and can contain hair, berries and grass, revealing the coyote's diet. Scats are brown to light grey and become bleached out by the sun after a few days.

Breeding happens in late January or February. The pups are born in March or April, and the mated pair remains monogamous. The parents dig a den away from human activity and have four to seven pups. The pups come out of the den at about three weeks, and at 35 days they are totally weaned.

The pups are fed by both parents for the first few months. When they are juveniles, the males will be the first ones to leave the pack at six to nine months of age. The females can remain with the parents longer and will form the pack. They usually hunt in pairs.

One of the special sounds of the night in California is the howl and yipping of the coyote. Many nights, I have lain in bed trying to follow what I imagined was a run for the kill, listening to the yipping grow very shrill. Actually, it could have been simply the calling for the pack, and when the pack is together, the howls get higher and higher. I was not right there, but it sounded like the Wild West was knocking at my door.

We are lucky to be able to experience this, so close to home.

Evelyne Vandersande has been a docent at Placerita Canyon Nature Center for 27 years. She lives in Newhall.



Apollo and Dave Stives

Jim Harris

Animal keeper David Stives wears his heart on his sleeve, and his heart belongs to Apollo — a five-pound turkey vulture.

On a drizzly day at the Placerita Canyon Nature Center last week, as she sat quietly perched on Stives' arm tethered to his wrist, he reflected on a compelling seven-year relationship between man and bird.

As he talked, he turned his head to look at her, and she turned her head as if listening. Beak faced lips.

Stives and his unlikely feathered friend became celebrities of a sort recently when Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky posted a video of the pair on his website.

Thousands visited the website to learn about the silent, massive and mysterious bird with the six-foot wing span. Some TV news vans flocked to the center for the story.

Apollo is all a-flutter with her sudden celebrity status, Stives says. "She likes the attention," he adds with a smile.

Nearly killed

Seven years ago, on an isolated highway in Virginia, Apollo was doing what vultures do best — eating roadkill. She was hit by a vehicle and almost killed, Stives said. Animal caregivers nursed her back to life. One of them named her Apollo, and the name stuck.

Due to injuries, Apollo would never fly again. The crash shattered bones in her wings and left her with irreparable tendon damage, Stives said. When the healing was complete, there were no hollow bone joints left by which to anchor the tendons required for flying.

"And, even if it could be repaired, she wouldn't able to handle the anesthesia it would take for the surgery," Stives said.

The crash bound Apollo to the ground. She found a home, however, at an educational facility in Virginia.

She was transferred to a similar facility in California, but when that firm went out of business, officials with the Placerita Nature Center stepped up to adopt her. After all, the turkey vulture is California's second-biggest bird, behind only the California condor.

When she came to the Santa Clarita Valley, Apollo found Dave, climbed onto his arm and has stuck with her human friend ever since.

Master falconer

David Stives is a master falconer, practicing the ancient art of training hawks to come and go from a leather-protected forearm.

As a nature area animal keeper for the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, he starts work at Placerita Canyon at 5:30 a.m. every work day. He has a lot of animals to attend to and visits them all daily at seven county parks.

Closest to his heart, however, is Apollo.

When other center workers feed her, Apollo cowers if she does not know them. She remains attached to Stives.

"There are only two or three people we have for backup (care giving) who she accepts," Stives said. "They can sense a person," he said. "They get a vibe and they know if the person is going to hurt them."

Myths dispelled

One of the myths Stives likes to dispel about turkey vultures is that they eat only rancid, decaying meat.

Apollo eats one-and-a-half dead rats — fresh, not rotten meat — every day on average. Her diet includes rabbits and squirrels and is augmented by multi-vitamins pushed into the meat, Stives said.

Before her life-altering accident, Apollo would join a group — called a "kettle" — of vultures soaring 1,000 feet above the ground, sniffing out methane emitted from decomposing flesh. The hollowed-out portions on top of her nose equip her with super-sniffing abilities. She would descend on an animal's carcass with other turkey vultures and begin sharing in the feast as a "safety in numbers" way of protection.

Turkey vultures have no voice box and make no sound. They communicate with body language. "Those old Westerns where you see the vultures circling in the sky and they do that sound," Stives said, making a soft whistling sound with his teeth, "that's the sound of a red-tailed hawk. Vultures don't make a sound."

Characteristics

Once turkey vultures start feeding, they gulp down food quickly and store it in their "crop" — a thin-walled, expanded portion of the bird's throat used for the storage of food prior to digestion.

"They have to eat really fast when they're on the ground," Stives says. "They eat as much as they can, filling their crop, because a coyote or bobcat or domestic dog could attack them.

"They have a defense mechanism," Stives says. "They will actually regurgitate all the undigested food — and that smells very, very terrible — so that when a dog gets close, it would just go 'Whoa' and leave."

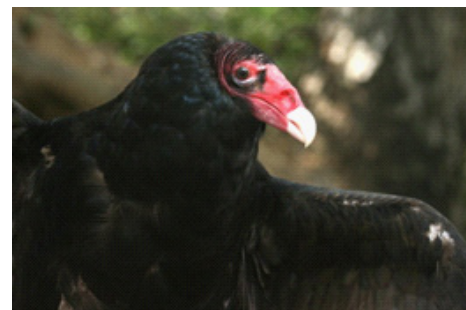
Has Stives smelled that defensive scent?

"It's been on me," he said. "It's very intense."

But it's all part of being together, day after day.



Park Animal Keeper Dave Stives and 10-year-old female turkey vulture Apollo at Placerita Canyon Nature Center on Thursday. (Dan Watson/The Signal)





Placerita Canyon Nature Center

Open House

and Family Festival

May 11, 2013
10AM to 3PM

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

Many fun activities for the whole family!

19152 Placerita Canyon Road, Newhall

(661)259-7721

www.placerita.org

sponsored by

Placerita
Canyon
Nature Center
Associates



The Placerita Canyon Nature Center and Natural Area are located within the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County in the Supervisorial District of Michael D. Antonovich. The Natural Area and Nature Center are operated by the County of Los Angeles, Department of Parks and Recreation, in partnership with the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates.

A Furry Collector

by Evelyne Vandersande

If you could visit the nest of a Dusky-footed wood rat, you would find many surprises. Let's start with the treasure room; they are not called packrats in vain. They store items totally useless to them but which seem to have had a certain attraction at one time. Pens, bottle caps, disposable lighters and shiny pieces of foil wrappers are just a few items found when opening such a nest. The items are carefully assembled in one special collecting room.

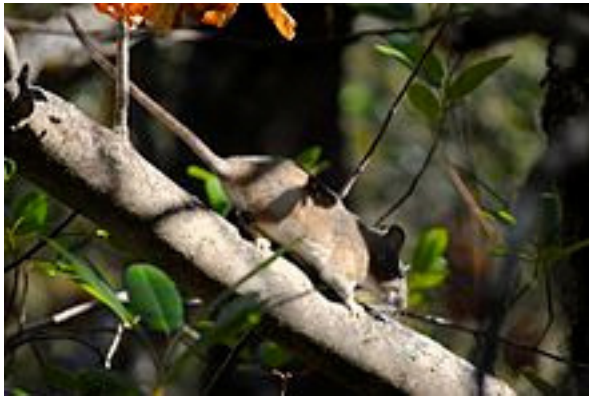
The home tour continues... There is a pantry full of acorns and twigs to ensure a steady food supply. An interesting detail: some leaves when they are fresh are toxic (like the toyon leaves) and so are stored in a separate room where they stay until the toxicity is gone and they are ready for consumption. Only then are they brought up to the pantry.

There is a toilet and it is never close to the pantry, woodrats poop about 100 pellets a day (One has to wonder who had to collect these statistics!). When the toilet is full, the pellets are pushed away from the nest where they fertilize the ground around the nest.

There is a room to sleep and it is lined with grasses and bark; often there are a few California bay leaves if they can be found in the environment, or some very pungent plants to repel fleas.

The woodrat nest looks like a large tee-pee with many sticks piled together; they can get very large and some studies have been done to look at the seeds left in those nests to find out if some changes in the botany of the area have occurred through the years.

If you see one nest, often there is another one close by. The female woodrats build the nest or take over the nest of their mother who in turn builds another nest close by. Some male woodrats are kicked out by the female after mating and often build a smaller nest in a tree.



Woodrats sometimes share their nest with other animals such as mice, lizards, and two kinds of ticks. One of them is the western black-legged tick that can spread Lyme disease so it is well that you leave woodrat nests alone.

There is very little chance of seeing a Dusky-footed wood rat as they are nocturnal and they shy away from any light, even moonlight.

They are rather large (10 to 19 inches long but that includes the tail). If you were to approach a nest a night you might hear the noise they make when swishing around their tails when they are excited or afraid, they use this as a warning device against predators.

They like to dust bathe and spread themselves in the dust; they also lick their coats to keep clean, much like a cat.

Woodrats are wary of walking on the ground and if they do they wait after each step to make sure they are safe. They are wary of making noise and becoming prey. They much prefer to travel on tree limbs and branches and make

their own trail between branches they use the most.

If you look at the photos, you can see their main color is cinnamon and they have whiskers in six parallel rows. Their ears are thin, round and hairy, they have sharp claws and females look the same as males though the male is slightly larger and heavier.

If there are many males in the same area, the younger males won't reach sexual maturity; if the male is alone, it will become sexually mature.

Dusky-footed wood rats are very well adapted the climate in Southern California. The reproductive period begins in late September and runs through mid-June. This is also the time of the year when we have the most rain and good plant growth so food is plentiful.

Females mate with one single male and the male pairs with the closest female who is sexually receptive. After gestation begins, the female rejects the male and becomes aggressive toward him so he goes to live on his own in a separate nest which he built himself. The mother has 2 to 3 babies who are dependent on her until they are weaned at about 3 weeks after birth, then the young start eating the same diet as the parents.

The Dusky-footed woodrat does not like to be in the open, they shy away from grassy meadows and prefer areas that provide good cover and screening.

At Placerita, you will find woodrat nests in areas with many shrubs where they will find both shade and plenty of branches to navigate and build their nests.

We used to have many woodrat nests; I am sad to say that some were destroyed during the last 2 large fires that happened in the park but they are making a slow come back so things are looking up.

You have to admit that it is an interesting creature with intriguing and very different habits. The treasure room is always a fascinating aspect of the woodrat and adults, like children, are always very interested to hear about it.



The Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates would like to extend their heartfelt thanks to the following persons, schools and organizations who thought of us with their generosity. Our critters thank you too.

3rd Street School
Sylvia Altamarano
Steven Baker
Eileen Blanchard
Armida Brooks
California Adventure Academy
Centers of Learning
Jeff and Kim Chorpash
Steven Colf
Renate Colvin
Darby Ave. Elementary School
Ray Davis
James DeLill
Chris and Mirissa Dunne
Bob Fischer
Gault St. Elementary School
Robert Grzesiak

Jim Harris
James Hazard
Steve and Linda Ioerger
John C Fremont Elementary School
Karen King
Colleen Kite
Dianne Klein
Knollwood Elementary School
Parklane Preschool
Jack and Doreen Levenberg
Paul A. Levine
Live Oak Elementary School
Roger and Judy McClure
Monticello Prep School
Shirley Morano
Samuel Murray
Nestle Ave Charter School

Ronald Nichols
Lawrence Nikolai
Patrick Henry Middle School
Primetime Preschool
Judith Rothman
Santa Clarita Elementary School
Santa Clarita International Charter
School
Sony Pictures Entertainment
Claudia Strock
Michael Summe
Sue Sutton
Sycamore Elementary School
The Help Group
Annette Uthe
Nickolas Valenzuela
Vineland Christian School



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