



# The Rattler



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## *Placerita Canyon Nature Center* Over 50 Years of Nature Education

### *PCNCA's Mission Statement*

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

**November-December 2013**

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### **Dear Nature Friends,**

Fall is here, the nights are colder, the sky is crisp blue and we have dew in the morning. Even in California, the foliage take on golden and reddish tints which stand out in the golden light at the end of the afternoon. Fall is here but this issue of the Rattler is for November and December and soon all the holidays are going to tumble down so I want to take this opportunity to send all of you, our best wishes for the Holidays.

We want to thank you for your support and your interest through the year and we hope you will be able to enjoy the holidays with your family and friends. Best wishes for fun times, good health and we remind you the park is always open for a stroll to clear your head and gain some peace when the pace becomes too hectic. Enjoy the beauty around you, take off those ear phones and listen to the birds, the wind in the leaves and I sure hope, the sound of the rain falling soon!

Check out the flyer inside the rattler and get ready to make decorations for your home on the first week end of December, at the craft faire. This is the only place in this valley where you will find a large assortment of fresh greenery, seeds and pods, to make spectacular decorations with. They will smell delicious in your home. It is fun for the whole family so bring the little ones along, we have some special crafts for them to do too.

Another flyer is about docent training starting on January 7. If you are intrigued about all our programs from reading the Rattler, you might be interested in becoming a volunteer. The training is offered once a year in January so do not let this chance pass you by. Read details in the flyer and call the center to sign up. It will change your life forever, you will meet a fantastic group of docents who are very warm and welcoming; you will learn a lot more that you ever thought possible and you will have fun in the process! It might bring many changes in your life: the books you read, the movies you see might change, even the food you eat but you won't ever regret it and it will only be the start of a new adventure into the world of Nature for you. Think about it!



East Walker Ranch  
*Photo by Ron Kraus*

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**The Rattler is a bi-monthly publication sponsored by the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates to promote the preservation and enjoyment of the Placerita Canyon Natural Area. Please come, enjoy, learn...and volunteer.**



### A Trip with Dan

Dan Kott gave an overview at the ruins of the St. Francis Dam to the Los Angeles Historical Society and a few Placerita docents joined in. Abraham Hoffman author of the book "Vision or Villainy" about the "Origins of the Owens Valley-Los Angeles Water Controversy" was a participant in the tour. Mr. Hoffman's book includes information on the Los Angeles Aqueduct, William Mulholland, and the deadly 1928 dam failure which occurred in San Francisquito Canyon. Dan lived near the dam site for much of his life and has studied the topic. He has given tours to Placerita docents in the past. On the last photo, he explained where the 700 foot long concrete dam tied into the East Ridge of San Francisquito Canyon



### New Brochures

We greatly needed new brochures that were more up-to-date as many of the plants and features have changed through the years. It is a difficult task as all the scientific names and locations of the plants have to be checked and all the text has to be proofread to a few peoples' satisfaction.

We are happy to report that part is done and they will be printed very soon. We will be able to have a fresh batch in about a month, just in time for the Craft Faire.

### Marietta Ewing

All the time you spent handling the animals did not go unnoticed and that is why you were offered a part-time job at Placerita doing animal care.

Marietta is not going to become a county employee but will be a county contractor which allows her to still hold her volunteer position. What a relief and all our warmest congratulations, Marietta.



### The Rattler

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

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

or you can email it to Evelyne at [evandersande@gmail.com](mailto:evandersande@gmail.com).

Please email your article in MS Word if possible.

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

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



### Board Members

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**Ray Orloff**

NCA Vice president

**Jack Levenberg**

NCA Corresponding Secretary

**Lanita Algeyer**

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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.



The Placerita Canyon Nature Center  
Presents its Annual

# Holiday Craft Fair

Saturday and Sunday, December 7 & 8, 2013

10:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

at

Placerita Canyon Nature Center

19152 Placerita Canyon Road, Newhall

1 1/2 miles east of the 14 freeway

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

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

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

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







Vasquez Rocks Nature Center held their first Community Day on Sunday, October 13. It was similar to Placerita Canyon Nature Center's Open House. They also were able to showcase their new Interpretative Center. It was a beautiful sunny day with temperatures in the comfortable range of 75 degrees. Many local organizations had exhibits and similar to PCNC's Open House, there were hikes led by docents, in this case Gerard Cohen and Tana Lampton who were in the PCNCA Docent Class of 2013 and lots of activities for children. Placerita Canyon was also represented with a table organized by Sandy Balaram with assistance by Paul Levine and Rick Brammer. Earlier in the day, Jack Levenberg and Fred Seeley also showed up to help set up, not only the PCNCA table but to help wherever assistance was required.



### Outreaches by Placerita

Placerita Canyon Nature Center has always done outreaches, but for the last 15 or so years this has become the bailiwick of the docents. We go to schools and other institutions and various community events. The purpose is education and to also get our name out there into the community.

After a long and lazy summer, fall always kicks in with outreach requests coming in almost daily. We do several community events such as the River Rally, the Sheriff's Chili Cook-off and the Sheriff's Haunted House. This is in addition to the school outreaches we normally do.

As the Outreach Coordinator I am so proud of the dedicated team of docents that has developed. It not only saves me and Bill a lot of time, but they also get the thrill of enlightening the children and adults of our community. If this is something a you would like to get your teeth into, drop me a line, we can always use another good man or woman—or two!



### If not Dancing, at least Learning about Wolves

A special Community Nature Series presentation on wolves was given on Sunday, October 13 at the Placerita Canyon Nature Center. While the event was scheduled to be held in the outdoor learning center for the benefit of the two wolves who participated, it was good that it was held there as there was an overflow crowd that simple could not fit in the Frank Hovore Classroom. In addition, to learning all about wolves, participants had an opportunity to pet the wolves who were led in and out of the seats prior to the beginning of the presentation. We were taught that wolves are very timid animals and will do almost anything to avoid people but they are apex predators and absolutely essential for the health and survival of the local deer and elk population where they live. We also learned that the wolf cubs are the focus of the entire pack just like the children are the focus of most families. The Community Nature Series is proving to be a very popular activity initiated earlier this year and usually held on the third Sunday of each month except when there are special circumstances or opportunities.

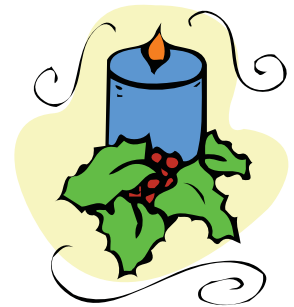
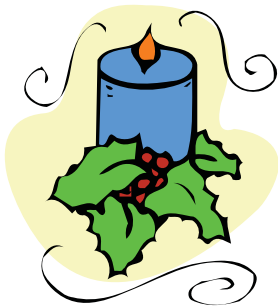


Deb Clem and Rick Brammer at the Sheriff's Chili Cook-off

Fred Seeley: Jack Levenberg was elected vice president for NCA so obviously he could not be the NCA representative any more. Fred Seeley volunteered for the position during the board meeting on October 1st. Thank you so much Fred, we appreciate that you will bring us the news monthly from the NCA meeting and that you will keep us up to date..



## Faces of Craft Faires Past Join us on December 7 and 8 for our present!



### Recent Capital Projects:

In May 2009, we had the nature Center re-opening ceremony and we obtained a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification because the construction project was done in accordance with the U.S. Green Building Council guidelines.

On October 3, 2012 The County of LA announced that the Trail Assessment recommendation was to allow mountain bikes on the Canyon Trail.

On February 21, 2013 the canyon trail project which includes trail improvements and upgrade to accommodate mountain bikers was completed. The trail was graded, split rail fencing was installed, some vegetation was trimmed to provide better visibility and pinch points with large bolder rocks were added to slow down the mountain bikes.

On April 2013: Walker Ranch trailhead was upgraded to be more equestrian friendly. New picnic table were installed and a split rail fencing was installed

Those are the projects that have been completed but many more are in the making and in the planning phase:

You learned in the last Rattler that the new interpretative center will replace our old museum and the completion of this project will be done in the fall of 2014. This project is the result of "never done before" close cooperation between the County and PCNCA and our hopes are high that it will be a great success that we will be very proud for many years.

There are a few other large projects that we will see taking shape in the coming years, one is The Placerita Canyon Riparian Habitat Restoration Project. This project will include the installation of two bridges, raising the trail, removal of non-species of plants and planting of native species. Placerita Canyon Natural Areas was awarded two CA State Parks Habitat Conservation Fund Grants.

The second grant project is called the Golden Braille Trail Project.

For both of those projects, we received a grant and a match from Supervisor Mike Antonovich to be able to complete the project.

The Golden Braille Trail Project involves improvements and upgrades on an existing handicap trail called the Heritage Trail. The improvements to accommodate the seeing-impaired include: installation of an orientation area, Braille interpretive signage, audio electronics, curb walking cane guides, planting fragrant and bright colored native flora.

The community of Santa Clarita is excited to hear that this project is focused on the visually impaired.

This natural area is going through many changes to accommodate the visitors who are coming to Placerita in increasing number each month and we are happy to report that most of them come back very pleased from their visit to Placerita.





### An Important Visit

I do not speak often enough about our administration, and on Wednesday, October 2<sup>nd</sup> we had a very important visit: Major General Anthony L. Jackson, our California State Park Director came to Placerita. He is the top guy, the boss of all these operations, so you can well imagine we were extremely honored, pleased and...well, yes, nervous and curious. He was appointed by Governor Edmund G. Brown on November 13, 2012 so he is rather new on his job and this trip was an introduction to different county parks:

Some of us were checking our facts before his visit and this is what we could find on Google:

From 1998 to 2000, Major General Jackson was Assistant Chief of Staff, G-7, 1st Marine Expeditionary Force.

From 2000 to 2002, Major General Jackson served as the Commanding Officer, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. In 2003, he concurrently served as Chief of Staff of Joint Task Force-555, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines, and 3rd Marine Division, Okinawa, Japan.

From 2003 to 2005, he was Assistant Chief of Staff, G-5, First Marine Expeditionary Force, deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom II.

In 2005, Major General Jackson served as Deputy Commanding General of U.S. Marine Forces Central Command until his deployment to Stuttgart, Germany in 2007, where he was named Director of Operations and Logistics for the U.S. Africa Command until 2009.

Before his retirement from the Marine Corps in 2012, Major General Jackson served as Commanding General Marine Corps; he managed seven bases on 160,000 acres and supervised 118 ecologists and other scientists.

You have to admit this is very impressive!

How were we going to show him what Placerita is all about? We had a school group of 2<sup>nd</sup> graders coming on that morning. That was perfect, and even if you can resist the face of a second grader full of awe, you cannot resist Lanita Algeyer showing a tarantula! He was interested and started to ask questions about the animals. We knew he was hooked! This was Placerita's magic in action.

We stepped into the docent room and the table was lined with documents about our future interpretive Center but he went straight to the point in a confident and forthright manner that won our respect right away "What is your draw in this park?" Director Russ Guiney, Deputy Director Hayden Sohm and Park Superintendent Russ Kimura explained the numerous school groups coming each Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday to the Center and all the programs offered by the volunteers, the trails being opened to equestrians, bicycles and hikers.

Ron Krauss received some well-earned praise to have been the "go between" the bicycles organization and the PCNCA Docents and Trails rehabilitation team to accommodate everybody and at the same time to preserve the environment of the Canyon trail so that those changes were made in a smooth manner.

Our State Park Director told us that when he retired, he just wanted to take off in his camper to check all the State parks, but the Governor and the Secretary of the Interior called him to take this job. His wife is the "greeny" in his family and she pushed him too. He listened to us, took his time, was very friendly and personable and showed a great sense of humor. He was also self-assured, direct, confident, and for you ladies...I can tell you that he is still a Marine, complete with bulging muscles!

He was introduced to a few docents, Jim Southwell President of PCNCA, Ron Krauss, Vice President, Deb Clem, Suzie Hermann handling the king snake and me.

I blurted out that I had been a docent for 27 years. He picked up on my French accent and we had a few pleasant words, meanwhile he asked one of his assistants to go to pick up his bag from the car. Suddenly Anthony Jackson was standing in front of me with a gold coin in his hand, explaining to me the tradition behind the Challenge coin, the special handshake we were going to have and told all of us that it was something he would rarely do but for 27 years, he was going to make an exception.

I was surprised, honored, moved...and a little bit uncertain. "A challenge coin"? What challenge would I have to perform? He was very sweet, said a few words in French and I protested gently that this honor should be directed to all the docents, because our work is always a group effort.

All the officials left for lunch and the docents surrounded me to explain what this coin was all about as they could plainly see I was a little dazzled by all that just happened. Ron Krauss who also was given a challenge coin by an Army General friend of his, told us: it is a very special recognition done by high ranking members of the military.

Following is a brief description of why it is done:

"Challenge coins are presented by unit commanders in recognition of special achievement by a member of the unit. They are also exchanged in recognition of visits to an organization."

So, yes, it was a very special visit and I think our park is in good hands with our new State Park Director, Major General Anthony Jackson. It is a good feeling to get this kind of support for Placerita.



### President's Message--On Recognition

Recently Placerita Nature Center was honored by a visit from California State Parks Director Major General Anthony L. Jackson, USMC (Ret). The Director was on a tour of the three state owned parks operated by the County of Los Angeles Parks and Recreation. Yes, Placerita Park is owed by the State of California and has been operated and developed by the County Parks and Recreation Department for over 40 years.

After inspecting the park facilities and observing a classroom of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students being shown our live animals, the Director inquired about our docent program and the background of some of those present. When asking who had been a docent the longest at Placerita, Evelyne Vandersande admitted to 27 years of service where upon the Director went to his briefcase and extracted a special medallion called the "Challenge Coin". After explaining the military tradition and significance of the coin, much to her surprise he presented it to Evelyne for her 27 year contribution to the docent program. After realizing his "challenge" did not involve giving the General "twenty" (push-ups), but only to present the coin next time they should meet, she relaxed and accepted the "challenge" to the applause of everyone present!

The significance of this recognition is that unknown to the Director, Evelyne is behind the selection and purchase of almost every recognition award given to our docents at our dinner events. Yes, the President hands you the award and mispronounces your name, but Evelyne looks out for our outstanding docents and sees to it they receive the recognition they deserve. Of course she herself is not new to being recognized, having received the coveted Countrywide Volunteer of the Year Award from County Supervisor Michael Antonovich. As Evelyne modestly stated in regards to the Challenge Coin, "this is a team effort!" But isn't it nice to know that your contributions are sometimes noticed?

*Jim Southwell, President*

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### Kimel Conway Retires

After 37 years in the county, Kimel Conway retired on August 30, 2013

Eaton Canyon hosted a retirement luncheon for him on August 26. He was presented with a gift card tree and a bag of children's books to use in his retirement avocation of reading to elementary age schoolchildren. He was also gifted with a work of art; a painting of an owl done in pastels and watercolor by Pauline Numer, wife of Dave Numer at Devil's Punchbowl. The painting took 2<sup>nd</sup> place in an art contest.

Instead of taking well-deserved time off, he has a very busy schedule already. He has co-written a play called *Merge the Musical* and is now in search of a producer, and he is actively promoting his own sisters artwork, as well as being a reader to elementary school children. We wish him great success and happiness in retirement.

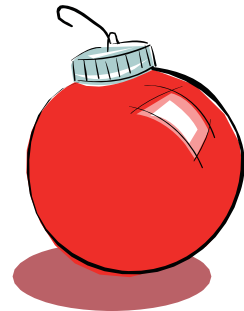
He guided the natural areas in projects and went into the job with a background in contracts. We are pleased he helped us with our contracts for our new museum and for the first time in the history of the department, we were able to have a single source supplier thereby saving money and keeping the integrity of the museum design in tact.

Kimel was the Regional Operations Officer for the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation.

### Trip with Lanita Algeyer

Lanita organized a trip to the Ronald Reagan library and here is her report about this interesting visit. "Just a few words about our trip to the Reagan Library. There were only six of us who went to the Library. We spent the entire day there enjoying the exhibits and the great company. The Lincoln exhibit was a once in a life time experience since this is not a traveling exhibit. This exhibit was a collection of artifacts from many different personal collections assembled for this one time only. All the items are being returned to the private collections when the exhibit ends on September 30."

We ate at the cafe overlooking the rolling hills below. What a beautiful location. The grounds are also very pretty and relaxing. Thank you so much Lanita for planning this trip.



### The Urban Black Bear.

Sunday November 17, 2013 2:00pm

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Classroom.

The Community Hiking Club, PCNCA and the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation are pleased to present "The Urban Black Bear" as the November Community Nature Series.

American Black Bears (*Ursus americanus*) are captured throughout the summer in photos and video roaming through neighborhoods and down trash lined streets and are often the lead story on the nightly news. This is the urban black bear, bears that are second and third generation who have been born and raised within city limits. These opportunistic creatures are mastering the technique of "Living with Humans".

Kim Bosell spent 3 years with the California Department of Fish and Game as a scientific aide on an urban bear study which trapped and radio-collared bears to determine how much time the bears were spending in urban areas, what they were eating and where they were sleeping while there. Later she worked for the City of Monrovia Parks and Police dept. handling all Black bear and Mountain lion calls and running a Bear-Be-Gone Program for 5 years.

Come and learn about bear behavior and what you need to know if you encounter a bear.

Join us for a real treat and children are welcome too. It is fun and it is free!





### The Countdown has Started

In the last issue of the Rattler, I announced the fantastic news that we have a completion date for our new interpretative center which is going to be finished in the fall of 2014.

We can see the first steps being taken toward the final look of the displays. In October an important meeting took place where the likely candidates for the display were taken out of the freezer.

Let me explain: we have a freezer full of road kill that are preciously brought to Placerita and saved for future use. The most beautiful specimens are preserved for taxidermy and will take place in the display of our future interpretative center.

Size of the animal, sex, fur quality, all this had to be carefully studied thinking about the final result we want to obtain for the display

before those animals will be brought to the taxidermist who will preserve them.

Their positions in the display have to be decided before hand to have a cohesive result. Taxidermy is a long process that requires technique, a strong artistic sense and a complete knowledge of animal behavior to be able to recreate natural expressions and positions. It takes many months to achieve a good result but we will be ready on time.

We are on our way!



### Lost Dog

This dog was found in a tiny crate in the brush on Placerita Canyon Road. He was found by some hikers who



brought him to the center. It was apparently thrown from a car based on the condition of the crate. He showed some signs of being abused but he was very friendly. He was brought to the Castaic animal shelter.

His picture was published on face book and I am happy to report that he right away got much attention and was adopted in a matter of days.

It is a good time to remind you that if you have a dog or a cat it is always a good idea (and the law in Los Angeles County) to have a microchip injected so you can always trace them in case they escape.

*"You are responsible for what you tame"*  
Antoine de Saint-Exupery



### NCA Election Results

**Jack Levenberg** is the newly-elected Vice President of NCA. Jack will serve a two-year term along with also newly-elected **Lanita Algeyer** serving as Corresponding Secretary. The terms for the President, Recording Secretary, and Treasurer are at the mid-way point and there will be elections for those posts next year. Those posts are held by **Cliff McLean** and **Marge Mayotte-Hirn** of Eaton Canyon, and **Nikki Dail** of Placerita Canyon, respectively.

NCA is the holder of our 501c3 corporate status with the State of California and all the nature centers are chapters. NCA also holds the Operating Agreement with the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation. NCA,

or Nature Center Associates, is responsible for filing tax returns for its chapters, overseeing uniform application of docent training, and providing board insurance to members serving on the chapter and NCA boards. NCA also hosts the annual volunteer recognition ceremony which was just held at Eaton Canyon this past September.

Although each nature center operates pretty much autonomously, there are certain things all chapters have in common such as similar mission statements and goals. To that end, each center appoints a representative to the NCA board to serve as a director. We congratulate **Fred Seeley** for accepting the post of Director representing PCNCA on the NCA board.

Here's a bit of trivia – NCA started in 1961 by the American Association of University Women, San Fernando Valley chapter, who were looking to create a nature education program for children. It was called the San Fernando Valley Junior Museum. The name was changed to Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates in 1975, and then changed to Nature Center Associates in 1980 with Placerita becoming a chapter.





Anna's Hummingbird

## The Hummingbird

by Bob Fischer

I see them on my morning walks almost every day; sometimes several of them with one chasing another. My neighborhood has many homes with hummingbird feeders, plus the lawns and trees, water and tiny flying insects, all of which make the area inviting for hummers. I think most of the ones I see are Anna's hummingbirds because they are the most abundant in this region of California. But there are others, Allen's and Black-chinned that are year around and Calliope, Costa's and Rufous that are seasonal. Besides the Anna's the one I have identified most often is the Costa's because of its unique throat feathers.

There are between 325 and 340 species of hummingbird, depending on taxonomic viewpoint, divided into two subfamilies. The hummingbird family has the second greatest number of species of any bird family on earth after the tyrant flycatchers and are found only in the Americas.

For such a tiny little creature, the information about hummingbirds seems to be endless. They are among the smallest of all birds, most species measuring in the 3–5 inch range. And the tiniest of all bird species is a hummingbird, the 2 inch Bee hummingbird. Individuals from some species of hummingbirds weigh less than a penny.

Hummingbirds hover in mid-air by rapidly flapping their wings 12–80 times per second, depending on the species, beating their wings in a figure eight pattern. They are known as hummingbirds because of the humming sound created by their beating wings, which sometimes sounds like bees or other insects. They can fly at speeds up to 40 mph and can dive-bomb at 60 mph. As they pull out of their dive you may hear a loud chirp made by the air rushing through the extended tail feathers. They are also the only group of birds with the ability to fly backwards. To conserve energy while they sleep or when food is scarce, they have the ability to go into a hibernation-like state (torpor) where their metabolic rate is slowed to 1/15th of its normal rate. As the night gets colder, their body temperature can drop significantly and thus slows down their heart and breathing rate, thus burning much less energy overnight. As the day heats back up, the hummingbirds' body temperature will come back up and they resume their normal activity.

Hummingbirds drink nectar, a sweet liquid inside certain flowers. Like bees, they are able to assess the amount of sugar in the nectar they eat; they reject flower types that produce nectar that is less than 10% sugar, preferring those whose sugar content is higher. Nectar is a poor source of all nutrients, so hummingbirds meet their needs for protein, amino acids, vitamins and minerals, etc. by preying on insects, spiders and other tiny creatures.

Hummingbirds do not spend all day flying, as the energy cost would be prohibitive; the majority of their activity consists simply of sitting or perching. Hummingbirds eat many small meals and consume as much as twelve times their body weight in nectar each day. Hummingbirds digest their food rapidly due to their small size and high metabolism. Hummingbirds spend an average of 10–15% of their time feeding and 75–80% sitting and digesting. Hummingbirds are typically very territorial when it comes to food; once a hummingbird finds a consistent source of food such as an artificial feeder, it will fight off other hummingbirds to maintain complete dominance over the food source.

Because hummingbirds are willing to take so much of their food from feeders, this allows people to observe and enjoy hummingbirds up close while providing the birds with a reliable source of energy, especially when flower blossoms are less abundant. White granulated sugar is the best sweetener to use in hummingbird feeders. A ratio of 1 cup sugar to 4 cups water is a common recipe. Boiling and then cooling this mixture before use has been recommended to help deter the growth of bacteria and yeasts.

Hummingbirds have long lifespans for organisms with such rapid metabolisms. Though many die during their first year of life, especially in the vulnerable period between hatching and leaving the nest (fledging), those that survive may live a decade or more. Among the better-known North American species, the average lifespan is 3 to 5 years.

Many of the hummingbird species have bright plumage with exotic coloration. In many species, the coloring does not come from pigmentation in the feather structure, but instead from prism-like cells within the top layers of the feathers. When light hits these cells, it is split into wavelengths that reflect to the observer in varying degrees of intensity. The Hummingbird feather structure acts as a diffraction grating. The result is that, merely by shifting position, a muted-looking bird will suddenly become fiery red or vivid green. However, not all hummingbird colors are due to the prism feather structure. The rusty browns of Allen's and Rufous Hummingbirds come from pigmentation. The iridescence of hummingbird colors actually result from a combination of refraction and pigmentation, since the diffraction structures themselves are made of melanin, a pigment.

As far as is known, male hummingbirds do not take part in nesting. Most species build a cup-shaped nest on the branch of a tree or shrub, though a few tropical species normally attach their nests to leaves. The nest varies in size relative to species, from smaller than half a walnut shell to as much as two inches in diameter. In many hummingbird species, spider silk is used to bind the nest material together and secure the structure to its support. The unique properties of silk allow the nest to expand with the growing young. Two white eggs are laid, which, despite being the smallest of all bird eggs, are in fact large relative to the hummingbird's adult size. Incubation lasts 14 to 23 days, depending on species, ambient temperature, and female attentiveness to the nest. The mother feeds her nestlings on small insects and other small creatures and nectar by inserting her bill into the open mouth of a nestling and regurgitating the food into its crop.

Hummingbirds truly are amazing and wonderful creatures.

References: Google search for hummingbird. Many articles and sources including Wikipedia, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, [hummingbirds.net](http://hummingbirds.net), [wbu.com](http://wbu.com) and the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America.



O.J. in his heyday

*Why did we choose the great horned owl as our logo for the Placerita Canyon Nature Center? Owl Junior, who quickly became OJ, was our resident owl for 29 years. He was a beautiful bird that everybody admired, but he was very cranky with people who fed the snakes in front of him and did not let them handle him. He was quiet for many years but, out of the blue, one day he figured how to hoot and kept on going with gusto until the end of his life. When he died, we were all shocked and very upset but by looking at our logo, his presence will always remain with us.*

*The great horned owl is a bird of prey that commands respect.*

### **Great-horned Owl**

The most striking feature of a great horned owl is its eyes: very large and yellow, often staring at you, and placed in a facial disk that also helps to bring more sound to the ear openings. Great horned owls have perfect auditory anatomy to help them hunt. The ear openings are on each side of the facial disk, this dish directs all the sounds to the ears. The placement of the ears is asymmetric: the right ear is set higher up in the skull and the left one is lower. By tilting its head, the owl can tell exactly the location of prey simply by sound. Experiments have been done in a totally dark room, and the great horned owl was able to catch a mouse even in that absolute darkness.

Great-horned owl? Does it have horns? It has tuft of feathers on its head that move up or down according to the owl's mood. They are not horns, or even ears, but they give the great horned its distinctive appearance and a certain panache!

Let's go back to their eyes. Owls have binocular vision, allowing them to pinpoint prey and see in very low light. Its eyes are almost as large as human eyes, but they cannot move left and right, they are fixed in its head. Would that be a problem if you tried to hunt? A human neck has 7 vertebrae and this is why we can turn our head just over our shoulder and no further. The owl has 14 vertebrae, so it can turn its head almost all the way around. We would have to turn our body around to be able to do that. Many kids ask "can it turn its head all the way around?" No, but it can turn its head a long way to the left, then it can turn its head around to the right. With those two motions, it has seen all the way around.

On the other hand, the Great-horned owl has no sense of smell. This is very beneficial if you want to eat something that doesn't smell so nice – like a skunk, which they do without the slightest discomfort. They are actually the only regular predator of skunks, most other animals choose to stay away. They are ferocious hunters and can easily kill prey 2 to 3 times heavier than they are. In addition to birds that they catch sleeping and small mammals coming out at night, they can catch squirrels, chicken, fish, rabbits and even cats and small dogs. If the prey is large, it will start eating it on the ground, but smaller prey is killed while taking off and then swallowed whole. Its talons have 500 pounds of pressure so no prey can escape. This is far more pressure than the human hand can exert. It has 4 toes on each foot and can rotate 2 toes to the front and 2 toward the back, which is a perfect position to squeeze prey to death.

How does it hunt at night? The great horned owl has a wing span of 4 feet, and its wings have stiff feathers. Even its feet are covered with feathers so they fly without making a sound. It is always so special to demonstrate that at the nature center when we make the owl presentation. We ask the audience to be quiet, and we move our hand up and down so that the owl perched on it has to move its wings to keep balanced. Not a sound can be heard, and that is always astonishing to everyone.

An owl hunts at night by observing from a concealed perch and dives down on the prey, talons extended and often with wings folded. The small prey is swallowed whole and about 6 to 8 hours later, the owl will regurgitate a pellet with all the parts that could not be digested, like bones and fur. It is always a very interesting science project to dissect an owl pellet to find out what the owl diet was on that day.

Great-horned owls mate for life but they stay together only during the breeding season. They need a territory of about 2.5 acres and they breed very early in the year. Because they do their hunting during the night, it is appropriate that they take advantage of the longest nights in the winter when they can hunt for an extended period of time. They breed in January and February, but they call for a mate in the fall and make a decision by December. During courtship the male will puff up and hoot loudly. The female will hoot back, and they rub beaks and preen each other. They do not build their own nests but take over the nest of a large bird like a raven or a hawk. Sometimes, they use a cavity in a tree or an empty building. The females will lay between 1 to 5 eggs and the incubation lasts about 33 days. The female is in charge of incubation and is fed by the male. When the babies are 2 weeks old, they are fed by both parents. The babies are very curious and adventurous and start to check out the nearby branches when they are 6 weeks old, but they are not good fliers until they are 12 weeks old. They stay close to their parents even until the next October, when the parents are about to think about starting the new clutch. Parent's jobs never stop, I guess, even among birds!

For years, the great horned owl was considered a threat to small domestic fowl, and bounties were given for a dead owl. Education has changed this sad perception. Public opinion has shifted, since we learned they keep the rodent population under control and have an important role in our environment. Trapping or hunting owls is now illegal.

The eggs, nestlings and fledglings can be eaten by coyotes or cats, but the adults have almost no predators and the population remains stable.

October is here and with it, the beginning of the courtship season. I hope that, lying in your bed in the quiet of the night, you can hear the hooting in a tree nearby. It is comforting to know that wildlife is so close by, even if the Great-horned owl is well hidden and difficult to see in the dark shadows.



## Cow Killer

By Evelyne Vandersande

Red velvet ant: such a lovely name. And reading this I'm sure you have a multitude of bucolic images that come to mind. The problem is that every single word from this description is erroneous. Naming an animal is not an exact science: the koala bear is not a bear but a marsupial; crayfish and jelly fish have one particular fact in common, neither of them are fish.

First things first: the red velvet ant is not an ant at all, but a wasp... How do we know that? They have a slight constriction between their thorax and abdomen (perhaps where the term wasp waist comes from?) and they have straight antenna. Ants have elbow-shaped antenna.

Red velvet? I would not dare you to stroke them to find out, and even the word red is misapplied as this ant is part of the Mutillidae family composed of more than 3000 species - so they are just called velvet ants. At Placerita, they can be found in a beautiful array of colors - red, white, grey and orange.

In the insect world, bright coloration usually means "danger" do not come close by. That's called an aposematic signal. The reason it's a not good idea to feel them to see how velvety those ants are is indicated by their other nickname: cow killers.

How did they get this name? Adult velvet ants feed on nectar and water, so they are often found in pastures, gardens and fields where cows typically graze. In this environment, there must have been some cattle being stung at some point, and showing signs of the agonizing pain from the sting, even if it is short lived reaction. I found a personal testimony from a scientist, Don Manley, professor emeritus at Clemson University. He studied these insects for years, and was finally stung one day. This is a man who had worked with bees, ants, and wasps his whole life and had been stung many times before. But nothing ever came even close to the pain he experienced with the velvet ant sting. "For 20 minutes, I just wanted to die and get it over with. I had worked with them for 20 years before I finally was stung. And I will not be stung by one again!"

Only the female can sting. The stinger is a sex organ called an ovipositor; it is very long, like a needle, concealed at the tip of the abdomen and can be moved easily in all directions. They are not aggressive insects but if they are threatened, this weapon is very effective.

The sexes look very different, the male is much larger and has 2 pairs of transparent wings, where females do not. Very often, it is impossible to identify both male and female as belonging to the same species except when they are caught while mating. The male seeks a mate by looking for one, and pheromones are also believed to play a role. The male is much larger, he grabs the female and carries her in the air while mating and drops her off when he is finished. One interesting little detail: both sexes squeak during the mating process.

Both sexes have a stidulitum on the metasoma and that helps them to produce this squeaky noise when alarmed. That is another defense mechanism to tell you to stay away. That must work very well as this insect does not have any known predators. They are not seen in very large numbers but it is better to put on shoes and not step on one accidentally. Do not think you can easily swat them away, their exoskeleton is unusually hard and entomologists have had problems trying to pierce them with metal pins to be able to put them in displays. This hard shell protects them during the digging they have to do at nesting time. The female looks for a bumble bee nest in the ground. She digs through the soil and breaks through the nest wall to the nesting chamber made of wax cups. There she deposits an egg on the bumble bee larvae which will soon develop as a white legless grub and will feed on the larvae. It will go through a few phases before forming a pupa. At this point, the bumble bee will die.



I love the world of insects, it is always full of hair raising details, and very graphic and horrible pictures come to mind when you read those details. What is especially interesting is that you are rarely able to witness such actions, so learning about them opens a world of wonder and sick fascination! There is so much to learn and discover...

This is an unusual insect perhaps, but very striking. We seem to see more of them in July, August and September and there are still plenty of those warm days in the next few weeks. Cow killer, donkey killer? Just observe them with respect (and some distance!) and nobody will get hurt.



**On the Road with the Rattler**



Mike Elling took the Rattler and got a nice shot in front of the iconic Yosemite Valley.



Lanita Algeyer and friends took the Rattler to the Ronald Regan Library in Simi Valley.



Jack took the Rattler all the way up north.



Evelyne took the Rattler on the subway going downtown in NYC.



**S.M.O.R.E.S.**

Paul A. Levine

I suspect that the majority of readers of the Rattler have enjoyed s'mores over an open campfire or at a picnic filled with many happy memories. The s'mores that we all know is a variation of graham crackers to sandwich chocolate and marshmallow – gooey, messy but delicious (and definitely fattening).

Docents and Volunteers from the Placerita Nature Center participated in a different form of SMORES on the weekend of September 14 and 15. SMORES is the abbreviation for Start Mentoring Outgoing Resourceful Environmental Stewards and it was organized by the LA County Parks and Recreation Department with participation by many volunteer groups including the docents of PCNCA. It was directed towards inner city children starting at 4 to 5 years to the mid-teens. They spent two days at Castaic Lake Park. The first day, Saturday – after initially signing in, they were divided into groups with special colored badges and named after a local animal.

On the first day, they went to a variety of stations including hikes (approximately 1 mile and learned to use a compass), birds (another hike), entomology (bugs), animals (with participation by Buddy, Catori and others) and fishing. They stayed in tents overnight and some went on a nighttime hike, others had a session on astronomy while others talked about snakes and lizards. Sunday was more hiking, kayaking and multiple other activities to give these children a better appreciation for our natural environment to stimulate their interest and hopefully, some will become resourceful environmental stewards in the years to come.



Camping out overnight.



Jim Crowley is dutifully recording the details of a fish caught in Castaic Lake by one of the participants.



Paul Levine, Dianne Erskine-Hellrigel, Sylvia Altamirano and Ron Nichols were all there.





### NCA Recognition Ceremony

After several years of holding the Nature Center's Association Volunteer Recognition Ceremony in the spring, 2013's ceremony was held on September 7<sup>th</sup>. The date was moved back to the fall in an effort to minimize scheduling conflicts with spring holidays, breaks and sports schedules. Although there will still be sport schedule conflicts there are fewer other activities to claim our attention.



As usual, our hosts at Eaton Canyon Nature Center were gracious in welcoming all the volunteers from all the centers to present dedicated volunteers with well-earned recognition. Our Placerita 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year docents received silver and gold (respectively) certificates to mark their service with sincere appreciation.

The day also recognized additional years of service. Five-year badges were awarded to Eric Indermill, Linda Kopatz, and Helen Walker. Ten-year badges were awarded to Silvia Altamirano, Roger Gibson, Bill Kopatz, Ron Kraus, and Judy McClure. Fifteen-year badges went to Millie Bonazzoli, Jim Southwell, and Gordon Uppman. All of these people contribute their talents and energy to making Placerita Canyon Nature Center a professional and joyful place to volunteer. A grateful congratulation to you all.



The Recognition Ceremony was topped off by awarding Volunteers of the Year. Each center presented the award to their outstanding volunteers whose efforts have contributed to improvements and excellence as an organization. Placerita had a tie vote for Jack Levenberg and Ray Orloff. Russ Kimura recounted the many and varied contributions of Ray and Jim Southwell spoke about Jack's initiative and leadership. Congratulations to Jack and Ray who set a level of dedication we can all appreciate and admire.

This year's NCA ceremony was followed by the yearly NCA membership board meeting and all members were invited to attend. The meeting was brief with most business deferred to November's meeting while this day was set aside to count the votes for two seats on the NCA board. Outgoing Vice President Pam Koch was replaced by incoming Vice President Jack Levenberg and Outgoing Corresponding Secretary Bryan Miller was replaced by incoming Corresponding Secretary Lanita Algeyer. President Cliff McLean's, Recording Secretary Marge Mayotte-Hirn's (both from Eaton Canyon) and Treasurer Nikki Dail's (Placerita Canyon) terms expire in 2014. The board also consists of one director from each nature center.



Perhaps you would like to offer your services to NCA? The NCA was born at Placerita in 1961 and has undergone a couple of incarnations to become the non-profit corporation it is today. It is the holder of our 501c3 papers with the state of California and it's chapters consists of the Los Angeles County natural areas. "We exist so children and oaks can grow together."

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*The Docents and Volunteers at Placerita Canyon Nature Center have combined their talents and enthusiasm for the outdoors to put together a Calendar of the Wild Flowers of this canyon. All the photos are original. All the flowers can be found in Placerita Canyon. This would be a practical and beautiful gift for family and friends while helping to support the Nature Center.*

*These calendars are now on sale in the PCNCA Gift Shop. The charge is \$10 each.*



### Donations

Thank all of you who thought of our precious residents when you made your donation. They appreciated it very much!

Village Glenn Camp  
Shirley Morano  
Bob and Armida Brooks  
Caroline Lange  
Alexa Velasco

## The Value of Volunteering

by Arden Brummell

Past Chair, Volunteer Calgary

Posted with permission of Volunteer Calgary,  
from their quarterly newsletter <http://www.volunteercalgary.ab.ca>,  
Volunteers Connecting Community Summer 2001

*“Not everything that counts can be counted. And not everything that can be counted, counts.” - Albert Einstein*

In 1988, a French observer to the Calgary Olympics was impressed with the huge effort, commitment and contribution of volunteers to the games. He said the 1992 Albertville games would also use volunteers. How would he recruit them, he was asked. “We’ll pay them,” he said.

What is a volunteer? What is the value of volunteering? Is volunteering about money? Should we measure it that way? Most people would say no. Volunteering is not about money. Volunteering is about giving, contributing, and helping other individuals and the community at large. It is working with others to make a meaningful contribution to a better community.

People volunteer for an endless variety of reasons. Many people want to gain experience, acquire new skills, meet new people, or expand their network of contacts as a way to get a new job or start a career. Others just want to give back to their community, to help a friend or promote a worthwhile activity. They do it because it makes them feel good. It gives them what current Chair of Volunteer Calgary, Dan O’Grady describes as a “private smile.”

This is the intrinsic value of volunteering. It is not about money. And volunteering should not be measured that way. Ever. We can add up the hours but not a dollar value. Others would like to do so. The federal government, for example, would like to add up the billions of hours of volunteer time in Canada, multiply by an hourly rate and determine the economic value of volunteering. This is simplistic and dangerous. First, it assumes that only economic measurements are valuable and second, that volunteer time is free labor.

This is a slippery slope. It infers that volunteer work is replacing paid labor. It infers that if work is not paid for, it is not valuable. It reduces volunteerism to hours worked instead of contribution made. It ignores the value of volunteers in creating a vibrant civil society - dynamic, engaged and self-reliant.

To attempt to put a dollar figure on the value of volunteerism cheapens and undermines the basic concept. Volunteering is rich and diverse. Volunteering is not just about organizing hundreds or thousands of volunteers for large events like the Olympics, the World Petroleum Congress or The Stampede, of which Calgary is justly proud. It is thousands of volunteers in minor league sports, shelters for the homeless, giving aid to seniors, holding hands in a hospice or cleaning up a local stream bed. It is spontaneous acts of kindness like helping a neighbor shovel their walk, coming to the aid of a stranded motorist or helping an elderly person cross a busy street. These large and small acts, given freely, are what bind communities together. Volunteering is helping, not hiring; giving, not taking; contributing, not counting.

Some believe putting a dollar amount on volunteering does no harm. This is wrong. It insidiously undermines the true value of volunteerism. Like the term “mandatory volunteerism,” it distorts the meaning and spirit of volunteering. We want motivated, not mandatory volunteers. We want willing, not “paid” volunteers.

Add up the hours if you must but do not be blinded by the numbers. The value of volunteering is much deeper, much more fulfilling and much more important in contributing to a healthy and vibrant community than money can ever measure.

In the end, we cannot and should not put a dollar value on volunteering. How can we put a monetary value on ordinary people doing extraordinary things?



# **Volunteer-Naturalist Training Placerita Canyon Natural Area**



## **Become a Volunteer-Naturalist!**

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

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

**Training Starts Tuesday, January 7th, 2014**  
**Classes meet Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9AM to 12 Noon**

Volunteer-Naturalists attend a 9-week training program. Topics include native plants, ecology, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, geology, history, and interpretive techniques. Instructors include noted professionals in the various fields. The cost of the training is \$45, which includes all training materials (instruction manual, field guide, T-shirt, and related items.) Visit our website ([placerita.org](http://placerita.org)) for further information regarding the Volunteer-Naturalist program.

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

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

**Adopt-An-Animal for the Holidays  
A Perfect Gift!**

The holidays will be here before we know it, and if you have a nature lover on your list, let us help you. Our animal adoptions are perfect gifts for those that love animals, and they are tax-deductible too!

Packages begin at \$25.00 and include a certificate of adoption, photograph, fact sheet and other holiday perks. We can personalize your gift, include a message, and we'll wrap it all up in holiday paper. Check out our website at [www.placerita.org](http://www.placerita.org), and then call the Nature Center at (661) 259-7721 or Judy McClure at (661) 252-6187. Don't wait another minute - Happy Holidays made easy!



PCNCA is most appreciative of Gary Meyerson for his recent adoption of Turbo, our lovable desert tortoise. Thanks Gary!



## 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