

# The Rattler



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## *Placerita Canyon Nature Center*

### **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.*

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## **September/October 2011**

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### **Hello Dear Nature Friends**

The children are back to school and the docents and volunteers are back at the center. Our schedule works hand in hand. Our visitors still come during the summer but more of them will come in the fall when the temperatures drop down. The days are becoming shorter and while September can be one of our warmest months, you can feel fall is in the air. There is more dew on the plants in the morning, leaves are starting to turn different colors and squirrels and wood peckers are busy amassing food. Because the spring brought so much rain, we have seen more rodents and rabbits this year because the food and foliage for cover was plentiful. Each season brings its special delight and Placerita is a good place to discover that fall exists also in South California. The mornings are cooler and some fall flowers are starting to blossom. Come and enjoy the change of the season.



Poison Oak



Cottonwood leaves



October Sunset



Sycamore leaves

Photos by Ron Kraus

**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.**

## Around the Center

**Wellness Event:** On Saturday October 8<sup>th</sup>, the Nature Center is again going to host a wellness event for the county employees. Last year, 800 people participated in this event and they loved it so much that they will be back this year. It is part of their “get in shape” campaign and walking on our many trails is a very pleasant way to do it.

Animal presentations and the Herpetology Society will help our visitors get some education at the same time.

**NCAPRO Award:** The Nature Center was awarded the NCAPRO award which is a national recognition for being a LEED building, or a Green building if that makes it easier to understand the concept. This time it is recognition at the national level, so that is very rewarding.

**New Signage Coming to Placerita:** Many of our visitors look aimlessly for the Oak of the Golden Dream before they figure out where it is. The sign was not clear and the placement did not help in this search. This is going to change and we are going to have a new sign at the beginning of the Heritage trail with an explanation about the tree and directions. That should be an improvement.

New signs are also coming up on the Canyon Trail showing that the trail is for dual use: pedestrians and equestrians but no mountain bikes are allowed.

**The Last Container is Gone!** The parking lot is wide open: the last container was loaded on a truck and the date was May 23rd. Big event ! It takes much effort to empty such a large container and find a spot for each item that was buried inside. Much of the work was done by Agustin Hernandez. Thank you so much Agustin and I won't ask you how you did it but that was quite an achievement.



## Oops!

A mistake was made in the last Rattler and we apologize to Fred Seeley who was the narrator at the living history of the Oak of the Golden Dream.

## 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 10<sup>th</sup> of every other month. Mail your article to:

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

or you can email it to Evelyne at [evelynvandersande@gmail.com](mailto:evelynvandersande@gmail.com). Please email your article in MS Word if possible.

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

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



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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.

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

**Small Lives**

the small lives,  
tied into each other;  
life within life, their reality  
neither harsh nor cruel –  
necessity.  
wasting not, working against want;  
united, spirit and flesh.

we stand before this,  
it is ours to know  
and to pass on to those  
who know it not;  
it is ours only to become one with;  
to protect, to shelter with reason  
from the oblivions  
of thoughtlessness;  
the disasters of the unaware.

This summer I was leading a troop of girl scouts on the Botany Tail for a bird walk. Before we set out, I instructed them to keep as quiet as possible but to keep ears and eyes wide open for birds and snakes.

About half way through our walk one of the girls yelled “snake.” I quickly turned and saw a small two-foot snake approaching the path on our right side. I had the rest of the girls back up and the front ones come forward to give the snake the right of way. We all held our breath as it continued on across the path without incident.

The girls were a little shook up and excited that they had just experienced nature first hand and did not panic but did the right thing! I did not tell them it was a rattler until it was totally out of view. From then on you can bet we were all watching each step and all around us. I recommended that the spotter get a medal and was reassured that she would....

I must say, on all my bird walks I have never had that close of an encounter with a rattle snake--most likely because the walk was in the mid afternoon and all other bird walks are in the morning.

So please don't be afraid of joining me on our Bird Walks each 2nd Saturday of the Month at 9:00 a.m.

Maybe you'll get to see a grey fox as we once did!  
*Rosemarie Sanchez Frasier*

it is ours to understand with respect,  
to perpetuate for eternity  
through those who would inherit our  
place;  
to our children,  
and to all children who will come;  
to all who care –  
share this canyon of cool beauty;  
look to the future with a peaceful  
hope:

the message of life which spoke to you  
here  
will forever speak  
to those who follow and would listen

F.T.H.  
*(Frank Hovore)*

## FALL PROGRAMS

**FAMILY NATURE WALK**

Every Saturday from 11 to noon.  
An easy 1-hour walk exploring the area's natural and cultural history.

**ANIMAL PRESENTATION**

Every Saturday from 1 to 2 pm.  
See, learn and ask questions about live native animals of the area.

**BIRD WALK**

Second Saturday of the month from 8 to 10am. For all levels of birders. Bring binoculars, water and field guide.

**BLOOMS OF THE SEASON**

Learn about native plants and what is blooming along the trails. Meet in the patio at 9:30 for 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](http://communityhikingclub.org)

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

## Memories of Hopi



I remember when Hopi was first brought to the center; she was 5 days old and in pretty bad shape. Somebody said “I hope he makes it” Hope? He? Her name was found and she was called “Hopi”. (As she matured, he was found to be a she.) She fought to stay alive and Frank Hoffman cared for her day and night. She started to get stronger and after a few meals she was able to eject her first owl pellet. Frank was like a very proud father and we all heard the news with great relief. To this day, Frank still have this pellet that was telling us that Hopi was indeed going to make it.

She started to grow little bit by little bit. She had a very funny look when her feathers started to grow because she still had down on her head. It looks like she had a funny fluffy hat on. That awkward time of adolescence....Her diet had to be carefully watched and studied. At some point her legs were not strong as they should have been but Frank made sure she got the proper medical care and her health became steadily better, but she could not be released as she had to be carefully monitored for a long time.

Then Frank was able to bring her to the center but it took a while before she was shown to the public to make sure she was comfortable with a handler. At first, only Frank would handle her but she became more used to different handlers as the months went by. You cannot rush a wild animal and you have to study their behavior very carefully not to stress them.

The years have come and gone and Hopi was 14 years old, had become a regular at our animal show and was at ease in front of the public. We were always in awe of such a beautiful bird. Those eyes surrounded by white

feathers on a large, flat face were mesmerizing and we were grateful to be able to be close to her and show her to the public. She was truly magnificent in an unusual way because the barn owl features are so unique.

She is gone now and this is very painful for all of us as we became attached to this superb creature.

Frank Hoffman was on vacation when she escaped about two months ago and that makes it even more difficult and sad. What happened? The county employees had seen and heard a male barn owl courting Hopi days before she escaped. She was 14 years old at the time and during the night, she squeezed through the bars of her enclosure and through a hole she chewed out of its screen. It is hard to resist the call from a male and she chose freedom to follow her instinct. Will she be able to survive in the wild? That is hard to know but maybe the male can help. She never learned to hunt for herself.

In a way we are happy for her if it all works out but we miss her. She was gentle and quiet bird and she introduced many of our visitors to the idea of owls being important in the food chain because they consume so many rodents.

Since her escape, the enclosures of the six other birds have been reinforced to prevent another escape. If birds are kept at the center, it is always because the bird cannot be released in the wild.

Good bye Hopi, we are very grateful for the time that you shared with us.

Evelyne

*Reference: The Signal by Nathalie Everett*

*Photos by Dianne Erskine-Hellrigel*



## Docent Trip to Hearst Castle

A group of docents went to San Simeon on the weekend of June 24. Russ Kimura arranged for group camping at a wonderful campground just a couple miles from Hearst Castle and across the road from the ocean. He also arranged for a tour of Hearst Castle. About 30 of us had a great time visiting the castle, the elephant seals and wandering through the quaint town of Cambria. Thanks so much for an amazing weekend Russ! It was greatly appreciated.

## Adopt an Animal

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

The Peterson Kids of Castaic - Turbo, the desert tortoise  
Kimberly Villeda - Cricket, the American kestrel  
Santa Clarita Valley International Charter School, Second Grade Class - Squirt, the western pond turtle and Cricket, the American kestrel  
Tyler and Brandon Hodge - Owl Junior, the great horned owl

Many thanks for your support and generosity!

We hope there are others of you who could support our Adopt-An-Animal Program. Adoptions begin at just \$25.00. This program is a major source of revenue for the care of our live animals and we need YOU! Please call the Nature Center at 259-7721 for more information. Thank you.

## Who was Ferguson?



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

Fergie was bought by a Texas family with two young children when he was 6 weeks old. From Texas, where owning a skunk is legal, the family moved to California where they found out that owning a skunk as a pet is illegal. They heard about the Nature Center and came to ask for our help. Fergie was born in captivity and could not be released. We kept him at the Center and Dave Stives,

with Pam Koch's' help, contacted Fish and Game so we could obtain a permit to legally take care of him.

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

We had Fergie for about 8.5 years and the life-span in captivity is 8 to 9 years.

Problems for Fergie started at the end of last year when he stopped eating. Everything possible was tried to get him to eat but he refused. Finally after a few months and the loss of weight Dave took him to the Vet. for an evaluation. The diagnosis came back as Congestive Heart Failure and appropriate medication was prescribed. He started eating and did perk up some but not to the level that we had come to expect of Ferguson. He always enjoyed meeting the Docents in the Docent Room before a presentation and could be seen waiting at the classroom door for his turn to go see the children.

We have enjoyed his friendly and shy personality and wish that he could still be with us. He had his favorite meal in the morning, a fruit salad, and later when he was checked on, he had passed away peacefully.

His presentation was always a delight for the audience; he is missed by all of us at the nature Center.



*Is Ron looking for inspiration for questions at the Breakfast of Champions?*

## Breakfast of Champions

Who are the champions? The docents and volunteers at Placerita. What did they do? Years ago Phil Rizzo felt the summer was too long without meeting his fellow docents so he invited us for a breakfast pot luck at the Nature Center. We all enjoyed the idea very much and have kept with this tradition ever since. The pot luck breakfast was on August 20 and Ron Kraus never misses an opportunity to refresh the knowledge that we have acquired about Placerita. It is a game based on "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader" and we are separated in teams trying to answer all the questions. This year, the teams gave themselves names such as "Scats" and "Stinkers" (In honor of Fergie—and maybe the dead skunk just down the road.), The competition is fierce but in a very friendly way and the winners are always ecstatic to receive the prize designed by Jill Goddard, a talented artist. This year it was beetle-enhanced cloth grocery bag art.

Thank you for all the help in setting up and cleaning up. You really are the Champions.



The Bear Craps

*Yes, they named themselves that and look happy about it!*

## Summer Memories

*I had asked the docents to send me their "Nature Moment" from this summer and here are some answers.*

### The Bear Who Saved My Life

*By Ron Kraus*

One of the best books I've read in recent years is, "Off the Wall: Death in Yosemite." It documents every death that has occurred in Yosemite National Park since records have been kept in the 1800's to the present (well, 2006.) It was written by two park rangers who did an amazing amount of research to dig out the facts concerning every fatality.

And the facts are surprising. Can you guess the greatest cause of death in Yosemite? Animal attacks? Falling off of waterfalls? Rock climbing? No—car accidents. Do you know the most dangerous animal in the park? Bears? Coyotes? Rattlesnakes? No—horses. Horses have killed 11 people over the years (horse-related deaths include wagon wrecks.) Most park visitors are afraid of bear attacks, but there has never been a fatality in Yosemite caused by a bear. A deer killed a child in the 1970's. A rattlesnake killed a woman in the 1930's. And an unknown critter (maybe a black widow spider) caused the death of a Fresno school teacher in 1915. But that's it—only 3 native animal related deaths in over 150 years.

I wasn't aware of these facts in the summer of 1960 while on vacation with my parents in Yosemite. Every year we went to Yosemite for our summer vacation, and by the time I was 10-years old in 1960 I was quite the park veteran. My mom and dad took me along on their treks up to Glacier Point, Yosemite Falls, Vernal and Nevada Falls, and even Half Dome.

That particular summer, my dad had heard some of the park old timers talk about the "Ledge Trail" up to the top of Glacier Point. It started somewhere behind Curry Village (Camp Curry in those days), and worked it's way up a narrow ledge along the face of the sheer granite wall until it hooked up with a steep gully that led to the summit of Glacier Point. It had been closed years ago because of the danger factor and had fallen into disrepair.

So one afternoon we were taking about trying to find it and the three of us sauntered over to Curry Village from our campsite in Camp 15 (a place that doesn't exist anymore.) We walked up behind the wooden cabins through the forest and up onto the rocky slope at the base of Glacier Point. It was tough going and we weren't having much luck finding anything that looked like a trail. So we fanned out across the forested talus to widen our search. My dad and I got up ahead of mom on the slope, turned a corner, and almost stepped on a bear. Dad turned to me, yelled "bear," and we took off down the hill, grabbing on to branches and bushes to steady our descent.

Unfortunately, my mom was on a different track up the slope and we didn't pass her on the way down. So when we got back down to the cabin area and civilization, we noticed she wasn't with us. We started back up the hill to look for her. It didn't take long to find her—she was running down slope yelling at us for leaving her to deal with the bear. Well, we all survived the incident, and went back to camp to have dinner and go watch the Firefall later on. The whole thing became one of our family stories to laugh about as time passed.

In all the years I have been back to Yosemite, I never have attempted to find the Ledge Trail again. And after reading "Off the Wall: Death in Yosemite," I'm glad I didn't. The Ledge Trail remains to this day the most dangerous of all Yosemite Trails. Fourteen people have been killed on it, making it the third most fatal geographic entity in the park after El Capitan and the Merced River.

So maybe that bear all those years ago saved my life (and my parents.) If he hadn't scared us off that slope we might have found the infamous Ledge Trail and who knows what our fate might have been.

For a good photo journal of a climb up the Ledge Trail go to this link: [http://continuum-hypothesis.com/yosemite\\_6\\_05.php](http://continuum-hypothesis.com/yosemite_6_05.php)



The Ledge Trail is the green ledge running across the middle of the picture.

### Ventura Nursery



I was in Ventura when my husband told me to come right now. There was an urgency in his voice that made me hurry and that was a good thing too as he was looking through the kitchen window at a mother deer and two little ones. My camera was on the kitchen table and I had time to take a few photos through the window screen; this is the reason why the photo is not too sharp.

This mother comes down from the hill every year with two young ones to eat greenery from my garden when the top of the hill starts to dry out. It is fine with me, I have stopped fighting back and it will grow again with the winter rain. Two babies each year? That makes for many deer in a few years....but there are also mountain lions on the hills so there will be balance in nature.

## **MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK**

*By Shirley Morano*



*Photo by Evelyne*

I took a wonderful vacation trip this summer during the month of July. I stayed a week in Vancouver. During that time I took a tour to Victoria and was able to have lunch with a cousin. I rode the Peak2Peak gondola from Whistler Mountain to Blackcomb Mountain and saw lots of snow. Then I left Vancouver and went to Lacey, Washington to visit friends. One of the highlights of my time there was a chance to spend the day in Mount Rainer National Park.

Mount Rainer is a special landmark in the state of Washington. It is so tall that it can be seen for miles before you ever arrive at the park. It is always covered with snow and that is because 690 inches of snow falls each winter. The mountain is 14,410 feet high. The highest I've gone is to the visitor's center in Paradise, a height of 5400 feet.

The Park brochure provides the following information. "As an active volcano Mount Rainer stands as a reminder of the beauty and power of nature. The Cascade Range has been volcanically active for millions of years, thanks to its location close to the western edge of the North American tectonic plate. The mountain that we see today is relatively young in geologic terms: it formed about 500,000 years ago. Like Mount St. Helens and other Cascade volcanoes, Mount Rainer has the potential to erupt again at some unknown time. Volcanologists expect the mountain to give ample warning before entering an eruptive period."

There are 26 glaciers on the sides of Mount Rainer. I have made several trips there over the past ten or twelve years. What I am told is that the glaciers that can be viewed with the naked eye and are further down the mountain are gradually melting and will one day disappear.

A day with no clouds and a bright blue sky is a rare treat in Mount Rainer National Park and we got some fantastic pictures. I have picked one to share with you.

*Shirley has been involved with the Nature Center from the start 40 years ago and celebrated her 90th birthday this year. While I cannot promise you the same result, being interested in nature, keeping learning about it and being involved with other people sharing your interest, does keep you young. I also will add that the Docent training start the first week of January.....so think about it.*



*Photo by Shirley*

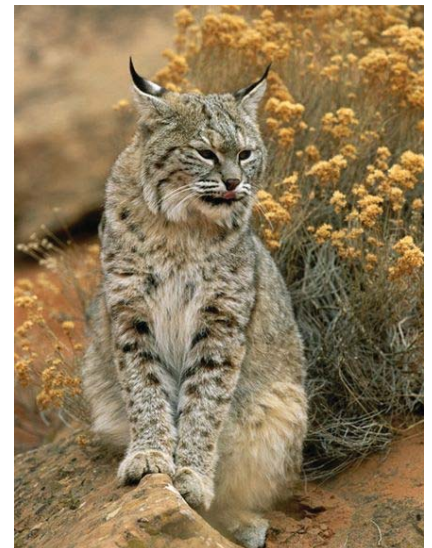
## **Stevenson Ranch Adventure**

*By Bill Kahl*

Living in the Santa Clarita area allows for many, close-by and interesting hikes into undeveloped and sometimes wilderness areas. The trails of Placerita, Whitney, East, Rice and Towsley canyons allow one to get away from it all without driving great distances. But as interesting as these places are, the most unexpected surprises can sometimes be found in the least expected places.

I take lots of walks throughout my neighborhood on the western edge of Santa Clarita and one of my favorites is to proceed south on Stevenson Ranch Parkway and then west onto Pico Canyon Road and into the historic oil community of Mentryville. This summer, along that route, I had the chance to observe the development of two raven hatchlings, very visible in their large nest, constructed in a hollowed-out pocket of a vertical cliff, not 30 yards from the sidewalk along Pico Canyon Road at Whispering Oaks Drive. Each time I hiked by the nest, maybe weekly, I looked upon their increasing size, appetites and noisy calls to mom and dad. Often the adult ravens would fly over and check me out but rarely seemed to be bothered. The hatchlings grew quite large, as big as the parents, it seemed. A couple of weeks ago, as I passed by the nest, the birds were gone; off into their new, expanded universe. It was a very satisfying feeling.

More recently, while almost back in my neighborhood, I decided to leave the sidewalk and check out a small area of undeveloped riparian, chaparral and oak woodland situated between Pico Canyon Road and Poe Parkway. Carefully stepping through sticker bushes, sagebrush and mule fat, I came upon a large Coast Live Oak whose canopy spread clear to the ground. I heard a rustle within the canopy. No bird could make such a noise and this was far louder than a small mammal could produce, so probably a coyote. As I walked into the canopy I was no more than 50 yards from the street and to my utter surprise I almost stumbled over a beautiful, healthy looking bobcat. It was unmistakable: bobbed tail, large, pointed ears, long whiskers, feline facial features, about the size of a small coyote. As it turned toward me, very nonchalantly, I could see a large rodent-like animal secured in its jaws...much too large to be consumed in any one gulp but to be consumed for sure. The cat saw me and, not with a panicky exit, casually strolled into the deeper brush. Can't wait to check things out some more.



Summer Memories, continued



The Rattler went on a river trip from Amsterdam to Budapest by docents and volunteers Bob and Linda Moss, Jim and Dianne Southwell and Reg and Jan Fear.



Gary Bennett at the beautiful Shelby Park (in Nashville) with the Rattler and his Gibson guitar (Photo by Collette Lash)



This past June I was fortunate enough to enjoy a girl's weekend in Santa Barbra. We stayed at El Capitan canyon (Nature lodging on the California coast). Upon our arrival, the first thing I noticed was the large Sycamore trees growing along the creek. The Sycamores of El Capitan campground take a considerable amount of abuse by the Acorn woodpeckers which reside there. These woodpeckers were very used to the company of humans, and along with the Scrub Jays they would perch in the tree above our picnic table waiting for an opportunity to dive in for a snack. It was interesting for me to observe these woodpeckers enjoying their environment.

-Debbra Barroso



Evelyne took the Rattler to Cyprus. While visiting a 12 century abbey with icons, she found an angel reading something too.



Ron enjoying the view at Tofino, Canada



Collette Lash saw this rattle snake on the Los Pinetos trail in early summer. He was fat and sunbathing and not going anywhere! He liked his spot!



Ron is ready to board the Seattle Monorail



## ***Interns and Rattlesnakes***

*By Chris Sapovchak*

This past spring a small research project was conducted by College of the Canyons interns Rebekah Shore and Christina Baello. The goal of the project was to keep a record of the number of Southern Pacific Rattlesnakes (*Crotalus helleri*) found within Placerita Canyon Natural Area. The Southern Pacific is the only species of rattlesnake found within Placerita Canyon and in the Santa Clarita Valley. The focus of the project was the area surrounding the nature center. Other factors that were recorded included the time of day and temperature at each time a rattlesnake was found. The study began in March 2011 and ended May 12<sup>th</sup> 2011.

During the course of the project, thirty Southern Pacific Rattlesnakes were recorded. It was found that the snakes were spotted most often with an average temperature of 79

degrees and between 12:00pm and 3:00pm. This is also one of the most active times for hikers in the park as well. It is likely that the snakes are active throughout the day and into the evening but are observed by people most often during these times. Although most of the snakes were found on the canyon trail, the snakes did not seem to prefer one habitat in the park over another. They were found in chaparral, oak woodlands and riparian areas of the canyon. Snakes usually go where there is food. With an abundance of rodents in the canyon, snakes will be found in all areas of the park. Since the project was conducted in the spring, snakes have just started to become active again with the weather warming up. During this time of year they are focused on looking for food and water, and also looking for a mate, while hoping to avoid interacting with potential predators, including people.

The snakes encountered during this project were not at all aggressive when approached. Some would coil up into a strike position or rattle their tail, but this is defensive behavior to protect themselves if necessary. The snakes always preferred to get away from people when they had a clear escape route. None of the snakes showed any sign of wanting to bite. While rattlesnakes are venomous and can be intimidating to some people, they play an important role in the ecosystem and should be treated with respect as any wild animal should. Hikers that see rattlesnakes on the trail should leave the snake plenty of space to get away and feel lucky that they got to see one of these fascinating animals in their natural habitat.

*\*Thanks to Rebekah Shore and Christina Baello for their work on this project*



## **50 Years of Nature Education**

*Trivia: The San Fernando Valley Junior Museum - Nature Center became a California non-profit corporation on March 24, 1961. It's name was changed to Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates on December 3, 1975. It's name was changed again on August 14, 1980 to Nature Center Associates of Los Angeles County. Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates became a chapter of Nature Center Associates of Los Angeles County.*

Back in the 1960's, the founding docents (Diane Klein, Patricia Goodrich, Margaret Myers, Betty Senf, Gloria Van Gieson, Diane Kreyenhagen and Ruth McCorquodale) would work out of the trunks of their cars in the parking lot. They would have pelts and acorns, etc. to teach the children that came to learn about nature. It took them ten years to raise funds and develop an operating agreement with the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation and build the nature study center. The City of Santa Clarita didn't exist back then and all the local communities were in unincorporated L.A. County.

Ruth McCorquodale developed the docent program and worked on creating the county-wide Nature Center Associates headquartered at Placerita Canyon. She was joined in her efforts by two naturalists, Dr. Elizabeth Hone from Cal State Northridge and Barbara Hopper, biologist from Pierce College. Once the building was up and ready for the public, the first Nature Center Superintendent was Nick Anderson who helped to further develop programs and field trips with Los Angeles City Schools.

Nick was followed by world renowned biologist and naturalist Frank Hovore who spent the next 23 years with the County before starting his own biology consulting company. Frank continued to be a docent, teacher and PCNCA board member until his death in 2006. We have named the classroom in his honor and are planning a formal dedication.

We are inspired by and enjoy the legacy left by these nature center pioneers and we hope to adhere to their high standards and inspire a passion, awareness and respect for the environment and preserve and protect the history and ecosystem of Placerita Canyon nature center and natural area for future generations.

*Pamela Koch*

*Docent Naturalist*

Here are a few photos of your new PCNCA board and awards given at the Docent Dinner in June.



You have to add to those friendly faces: Heidi and Bill Webber and Sandra Balam who could not be there that night.. Debra Barroso took the position of recording secretary. Fred Seeley took the position of corresponding secretary.

Sue Wallander, Angel Macdonald and Paula Parr decided not to seek a board member position this year. We are deeply grateful for the work they did on the board all these many years and we will miss seeing them at the board meeting but we respect their decision. Thank you again for all your help.

The board is there to work hard for you and the Nature Center. Please contact them with any suggestions or questions.

We remind you that the board meetings are each first Tuesday of the month at 1pm and are open to any PCNCA member who is interested.

Jim Southwell explained the plans and the founding for the new museum and the improvements planned for the patio area.

Sue Wallander did a nice job of planning the party. Thank you Sue and we hope you enjoyed your vacation in Iceland...

The Silver and Gold certificates were given to the one year and two years docents who could not attend the previous ceremony at Eaton Canyon. Bob Moss and Reg Fear got recognition for 10 years of service and Evelyne Vandersande for 25 years.

Special recognition scrolls were given to Olivia Miseroy, Jim Southwell and Ron Kraus.

Frank Hoffman told us the sad news that Hopi, the barn owl, escaped from her cage a week before the party. She was his baby for 14 years so that was difficult news for him and for us but we think she was attracted by a male barn owl and looked for her freedom.

This was a pot luck dinner and as usual, the food was delicious and plentiful and the company was even better. It is always a good opportunity to spend some time together before the summer comes and our school programs slow down. Thank you for all who could attend and we hope you had a great summer.

## The Northern Mockingbird

by Bob Fischer



One of my neighbors complained recently she had to get ear plugs because the mockingbird outside her bedroom kept her awake all night. This bird's official name is Northern Mockingbird. It's easy to understand how it got its scientific name, *Mimus Polyglottos* since it sings all day and frequently all night during nesting season, often imitating the calls and songs of other birds. It is sometimes called the American nightingale. But why is it called the Northern Mockingbird? It turns out that most mockingbird species reside in the tropics. Its closest living relative is the Tropical Mockingbird, a resident breeding bird from southern Mexico south to northern Brazil, and in the Lesser Antilles and other Caribbean islands. In addition, there are 15 other species including the Patagonian Mockingbird and the Galapagos Mockingbird. But let's concentrate on our local species

Noted for their continuous singing, most nocturnal singers are unmated males, which sing more than mated males. Interestingly, nighttime singing is more common during the full moon. Mocking birds are two-toned gray, darker on top, lighter underneath, have black wings with two narrow white bars and a long black tail. They are good sized, 10 inches long, almost as big as a robin. When flying, a prominent white wing patch is displayed in the middle of the wing. If you see a gray bird that shows big white patches on its wings when it flies, it is almost certainly a mockingbird. Mockingbirds are very assertive and vigorously defend their territories and nests against other birds and will attack crows, ravens, hawks and even humans. Though Mockingbirds seem unafraid of humans, they do not come and feed from your hand the way Scrub Jays will.



Mockingbirds may be seen in Placerita Canyon at any time of the year though they are not common. You are more likely to see one in your backyard, city park or any tree lined city street. Near my home in Friendly Valley I see them almost daily often high in a tree or on a roof top singing incessantly. While singing on a high perch they will often bolt several feet into the air in a looping motion, with wings outstretched to display their white underside, and then land back on the perch without breaking a note. This has been studied and thought to be a courtship display. They also sing while flying from one prominent perch to another. But you'll see them also on lawns and in low shrubbery looking for insects which are a large part of their diet. Mockingbirds are partial to the warmer parts of the United States, especially the southern states but they can be found everywhere in the U.S. except at higher elevations and colder regions in winter. "Mockers", as most birders call them, are grouped with thrashers in the Mimidae family, and quoting Kenn Kaufman "all have noteworthy voices." You can listen to the variety of their songs and calls at this web page: [http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern\\_Mockingbird/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Mockingbird/sounds)

Foraging for food is done mainly on the ground and in low shrubbery. About half their diet consists of insects and other small bugs, grubs and earthworms plus fruit, especially in the summer and fall. Young are fed insects and small bugs and grubs. Nesting begins very early in the spring with males singing to defend a territory and attract a mate. In early courtship male and female chase each other rapidly around their territory. Mockingbirds build their nest in dense shrubbery or low tree limb. The nest is a cup built over a heavy base of twigs and is lined with fine grasses, rootlets, moss, animal hair and down. Usually three to four but as many as six very pale greenish or blueish eggs with brown blotches are laid. The female incubates the eggs about 12 -13 days and both parents feed the nestlings who are



ready to leave the nest after about 12 days but are not ready to fly for another week. Wow! They sure grow up fast. The parents are very aggressive in defending the nest and young. Mockingbirds can have two to three broods in a season and make a new nest each time. With all that breeding activity one would think mocking birds would be very common. Keep an eye out for them. You may be seeing them very often. A mystery to me is that my neighborhood Mockers disappeared about the middle of July when I began researching this article, and as of early August are still missing. Mockers are supposed to be found year around in this region. But obviously my local birds have moved somewhere else. I'll track when they reappear.

References for this article include the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, "Lives Of North American Birds" by Kenn Kaufman, *The Cornell University Lab of Ornithology web page* and "The Birder's Handbook" by Paul R Ehrlich, David S. Dobkin and Darryl Wheye and several other pages on the internet.

## So You Think We Just “Docent”??

### Trip to Santa Paula

On April 11, 2011 a group of Placerita Canyon Docent made a trip out to Santa Paula’s California Oil Museum. From fossils to fill ‘er up, the California Oil Museum tells the story of the black bonanza that created wealth, work, and prosperity for generations of Californians. We had a self guided tour which highlighted the inner workings of the state’s black gold industry through interactive displays, videos, working models, games, photographs, restored gas station memorabilia, and an authentic turn of the century cable tool drilling rig. After touring the museum we then had a guided tour of the upstairs offices of the oil company. Following the tours all gathered at the local Irish pub for food and drink.

*Jack Levevenberg—*



### Los Encinos State Historical Park

*By Shirley Morano*

On May 11<sup>th</sup> a small group of docents and volunteers paid a visit to this State Historic Park at the corner of Balboa and Ventura Blvd. in Encino. Russ Kimura, who had once been in charge of this park, was the leader of this field trip.

The park includes the nine room de la Ossa Adobe, the two-story limestone Garnier, building, a blacksmith shop, a natural spring, and a pond. The natural spring provided a year round source of water for the ancient village of Siutcanga, home of the Tongva people, for thousands of years. The Portola expedition passed that way in 1769. By the 1840’s and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the park passed through many hands including Mission Indian, Mexican Californio, French, and French Basque families. It now remains a visible link to our past.

In 1940 my grandparents lived in Tarzana. My grandfather worked as a cook at the Adohr Dairy located at Ventura Blvd. and Lindley Avenue. His job was to cook for the men who lived and worked at the dairy. One time we had a family picnic at the Los Encinos Park. At that time Ventura Blvd. was a two lane road. There were no buildings across from the park. There were no sidewalks. The park was an oasis in an open area with no commercial buildings, tract houses, etc. nearby. It was hard for me to imagine that there was a time like that as our group stood on the side walk along side of the six lanes of traffic on Ventura Blvd. and looked at the buildings across the street.

We had an opportunity to hear about the Adobe and the Garnier Building not only from Russ but from Lil Bauer, a volunteer for 40 years at the park. She was dressed all in red including a wide-brimmed hat. It was an enjoyable outing but we were sad to learn that this historic state park was slated to be closed soon due to California’s financial problems.



### A Trip to the Devil’s Punchbowl

PCNCA group lead by our own Frank Hoffman and Jonathan Numer, Gound Maintenance Worker, took us on a lovely loop hike at Devil’s Punchbowl. We enjoyed the fascinating rock formations, a multitude of wildflowers, a very cold mountain creek and a few high desert critters...or evidence of. Jonathan shared his vast knowledge of the area collected from the years of growing up as a child there. The experience sparked several of us to plan a return trip to explore more of the park!

*Deb Clem*

### Vista Del Lago

A few of us broke away from our heavy schedules and went to the Vista Del Lago Visitors Center on April 18. The center is located on I-5 at Lake Pyramid. It was informative to learn about how and where we get our water in California. The center is part of the California Department of Water Resources. Interestingly, the center is paid for by the numerous water providers and is not a tax funded operation. Candace Arney, PCNCA Docent, provided a tour of the visual displays and ran a video on the history of our water system in California and showed how we need to be keenly aware of how fragile our state is when it comes to water. Historically, we are very thankful to the likes of William Mulholland who had the foresight to develop the system. Those attending were: Bess Barber, Sandy Belaram, Bev Browe, Jim Crowley, Bill Kahl, Ana Renfro and Fred Seeley.

*Jim Crowley*





Kathryn Kazmer

1. Where were you born and where did you spend your childhood? I was born in Denver, CO but my family moved to Northern California right after WWII. My father was in construction so we moved around a lot. It has been a family joke that my parents picked up my brother and I on the way home after school and that was the end of that school, home, and neighborhood. We laugh about it but it really did happen. We moved to Southern California in the mid 50's. In fact, the night we arrived my father drove us through downtown Los Angeles so we could see the four-level interchange because it had recently opened and it was such an engineering feat.

2. How did your love of Nature start? I suppose following my brother around while he was in the Boy Scouts. He was in a wonderful troop in Northern California and he spent summer vacations at Camp Wolfboro in the Sierra's. I have no idea where that is. I was too young to pay attention but the troop's families would drive there for an overnight stay with the scouts. In the winter they had another campout, in cabins in the snow. He is also the one who introduced me to astronomy and showed me the stars and constellations as he needed to get his merit badge. I still enjoy camping and my husband and I have tried to go once a year, but it is getting harder to camp as we age. We usually go to the McCloud River near Mt. Shasta for fishing with friends.

3. What was your education? I went to a lot of schools but graduated from John Marshall High School in the Los Felix area (Go Barristers!). I attended Glendale College but was finished with schooling and went job hunting where I started as a key punch operator at the Los Angeles Times. I find it interesting that the Times constructed an entire floor for a computer the size of which I now carry in my pocket.

4. What is your work experience? I stayed with computers working as a service representative assisting people working on their computers, until I retired from Princess Cruises. Boy, did the jobs change and evolve over the years. I worked at many places but really tried to stay with a company once hired. I stayed with The Times for 7 years until moving to Japan. I stayed with Host International 10 years until they moved to Bethesda VA. I was with U.S. Sales for 5 years and they went out of business. I was with Princess Cruises 5 years until the opportunity to retire came along.

5. What is your family life? I have been married to David for 20 years and it took him 12 years to ask me to marry him. I did some slow running for a time until he got the idea that he was to chase me. Neither of us ever had children but we have had many pets over the years. All of our cats and dogs have lived long happy lives and we currently have a "dog" in cats clothing. Spats is a tuxedo cat that comes when called, greets us at the door and sleeps between us on the couch while watching TV. We adopted him from a rescue at PetSmart.

6. When did you come to Placerita for the first time and why? What do you remember about this place? I first came to Placerita Nature Center as a member of The Local Group Astronomy Club when we had our meetings here in the "old" building. It was always interesting to look at the taxidermy and at that time they had spider nests along with the turtles (no, not the tortoises) along with the rattlesnakes on display. As it was an astronomy club it was always night and I didn't wander around much. In 2010 when I read about the Docent Class in the Signal I jumped at the chance. The classes were very informative and I like sharing this knowledge with the children. The breakfasts were the best part for a good time with good food and good friends.

7. What are the titles you have held at the Nature center? I am only a Docent - Naturalist (so says my name badge). I have helped out with various functions and really enjoy anything I can do to help. I am a complete follower and will do as told, but I am not a leader.

8. What did or do you like most about your job at the Nature Center? I love showing the kids the Ecology Trail. I feel this is the best trail we have. I have seen lizards, snakes (gopher and rattler), birds and insects on this trail. The ins and outs along with the ups and downs of this trail make it very interesting. I love it when we come out on the highest point and the kids look out at the view across the Valley and exclaim surprise and delight. Most of them make sure they take a picture of this view. I have also hiked the Hillside and Heritage but the Ecology is my favorite. I keep saying I'm going to do the Canyon trail to the waterfall but then its summer and I haven't done it again.

9. What did you or do you not like about the job? What don't I like about my job? Hmmm can't think of anything.

10. At Placerita, is there some special accomplishment that makes you feel proud? I like the fact that I can show the snakes. I really like showing Moonshadow and Sylvester. I haven't gotten the courage up for the tarantula, although during training I held one. I have also shown the tortoise (Speedy) and he was quite the showman.

11. What is your favorite food? I am a true American – hamburgers or hot dogs! Of course, there are spaghetti, chow mien and cabbage rolls. Steaks, lobster tail, etc.

12. What is your favorite color? Red – my car is red, my Placerita shirt is red, my luggage is red, and I carry a red pen. All things red.

13. What is your favorite TV show? Or music? Or pastime? I'm a fan of reality TV – Survivor, The Amazing Race, Big Brother. However, I also like the major shows on TV like all the CSI's and Castle. Why don't they bring the westerns back? I love all music (except Jazz, sorry). Also, most live stage performances with a story line. What I really love to do however is read. All books, any books - fiction, Sci-Fi, mystery, romance or fantasy.

14. Is there anything else that describes you that we should know? Is there any passion or special events in your life that you would like to tell us about? I like to travel. I am currently looking forward to our Cruise/Tour to New Zealand/Australia this winter. I haven't planned our 2012 vacation as yet. (Hey Bob, where should I go?)

I would like to say I love Placerita Nature Center. I am in awe of the people around here. The rangers are knowledgeable, helpful and friendly. Even funny, but always wonderful people. The docents that I work with are fun and delightful. I have made some great friends. I want to walk more of the trails, I would like to know ALL the flower names, and then remember them the next time I see them. Someday I would like to come to Placerita, take one of the trails (doesn't matter which) and maybe find a bench and just sit for a while.



## California ground squirrel

*By Evelyne Vandersande*

A young friend of mine took this photo on his first trip to the Grand Canyon. He was surprised that those squirrels were not shy and would accept food from the tourists. I am not certain if that was a wholesome diet but survival always comes first for any species. The snacks from the visitors coming on a regular basis to the Grand Canyon are a reliable source of food even for the ground squirrel.

Why is this a “ground” squirrel? They spend most of their time in their burrow and rarely go further than 160 feet away from it so indeed they live often under the ground.

If you have a typical Californian back yard, away from all wilderness area with a sprinkler going on every day, you will see probably squirrels which spend a major part of their time in

trees. They are “tree squirrels” and around this area they will be the Eastern Fox squirrel. It is the largest tree squirrel and it is a strong competitor for the ground squirrel whose population is declining.

Also, if you have been around for a while, like I have, you will remember the name “Beecheyi squirrel”. It is part of the Latin name; the whole name is *Ostospermophilus beecheyi*. I must admit that I am pretty pleased that the new accepted name is “Ground Squirrel”.

What do they look like? It has brown fur with cream spots on his back. A darker grey color runs from his head down to the middle of his back. It has a white underside, sometimes the tail is bushy and sometimes it is thinner.

They dig a burrow and some are occupied communally but each animal has his own entrance. They live in open areas including fields, pastures and lightly wooded areas so we have many ground squirrels in Placerita. You can observe them easily in the picnic area. The burrows are dug under a tree or a hard surface and sometimes under the concrete surface where the benches are fixed so it is easy to see the entrance to the burrow.

Mating season is in the early spring and gestation lasts a month. The female has from 5 to 8 babies in a nest on the ground or in a rock pile. The babies are ready to survive on their own when they are 8 weeks old.

The ground squirrel is active during the day and sleeps at night. As our winter is mild they are active the whole year around and they do not hibernate as they do in colder areas.

They eat plants, flowers, berries, seeds and fruits; sometimes they eat insects and small animals. They are rodents and their incisors continuously grow to compensate for the wear that comes from an herbivorous diet.

At Placerita, the good acorn crop is a great source of oil and carbohydrate in their diet.

The ground squirrel is a steady source of food for hawks and coyotes. They are also often the prey of rattlesnakes and this is where the story becomes very interesting. Ground squirrels have found many techniques to escape the rattlesnake: Female squirrels with pups will chew on the skins shed by rattlesnakes and then lick themselves and their pup to disguise their scent. Another technique: the ground squirrel quickly swishes its tail to raise its body temperature and kicks sand at the rattlesnake. For hunting, the rattlesnakes rely on their pit organ which detects infrared radiation. The message they are getting from this sand-kicking, over-heating and tail-swishing animal is “This is a big and quickly-moving creature, I should not try to hunt it”...Intimidation at its best!

Some populations of California ground squirrels have different levels of immunity to rattlesnakes but that has not yet been well researched. However the techniques used by the ground squirrels to reduce rattlesnake predation have been studied at UC Davis in 1970...

When it is very hot in the summer, most adults go into a period of inactivity called estivation. The burrow appears open at the entrance but the squirrel plugs it with soil near the nest.

Look again at this sweet little face in the photo. Should not everyone fall in love with ground squirrels? Not so, they are considered a pest by gardeners because of their burrows and the damage they do to landscaping. A major concern is bubonic plague transmitted to humans by fleas that the squirrels carry.

However, they are an interesting part of our ecosystem and I hope you will have enjoyed reviewing these facts about the ground squirrel.

*References : Wikipedia*

*NatureWorks*

*UC IPM online*



# Open House 2011

And a great time was had by all!



# Recognition Ceremony at Eaton Canyon



## Second Quarter Donations to Placerita

We wish to thank those who thought of Placerita Nature Center in giving their generous donations. It is greatly appreciated by all our nature friends who live here.

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## The Rattler

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*"We exist so children  
and oaks  
can grow together."*

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