



# The Rattler

Sponsored by the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates  
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**Placerita Canyon Nature Center**  
**Over 50 Years of Nature Education**

March-April 2021

Editor: Evelyn Vandersande Publisher: Heidi Webber

## Hello Nature Friends,

Spring is not quite here, but the mating and nesting season for the birds is in full swing. Birds are on our minds, and we start searching for the special migrants that appear only at this time of the year. You will notice a few articles about birds in this issue, and we are delighted to welcome a new writer to the Rattler team. We have a new bird guy!

Ken Yasukawa, docent of the class of 2020, has accepted the assignment of writing a bird article for each issue. Because he is an ornithologist, we are in exceptionally good hands! Thank you so much Ken, we are here to learn from you.

We have received very good news, but I hardly dare to write these words: The Nature Center might reopen in July, with a lot of "ifs." If the number of Covid-19 cases keeps going down, if there are no setbacks, and if the County feels it could be safe with all the current precautions: wearing a mask and social distancing.

We all know that news can change very quickly but maybe, we can start hoping for a brighter future. We have learned to be cautious since last March, so let us wait and see.

We miss you all dearly, be safe and we will meet again. The park is open every day of the week; and the spring flowers are starting to blossom. There is fresh green grass poking up and a little bit of water in the stream. We still hope for more rain in the coming two months.

It is a wonderful time of the year to take a hike in Placerita, take photos, even paint a landscape and get some fresh air. Give it a try and enjoy!

## Our Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates (PCNCA) Board of Directors Voting Season is Upon Us! by Jim Crowley

PCNCA members will conduct the Board of Directors election at the end of the school year in the first week of June. Aside from the Covid 19 restrictions we will still have our election for directors utilizing electronic methods.

First, WE NEED CANDIDATES FOR THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS. It is time for the people interested in running for the Board to seriously consider it. The board of directors are always wanting new people to get involved. You have a chance to have your ideas considered how we can improve the park and our programs. Hopefully by some miracle we will have a Covid safer park by Summer.

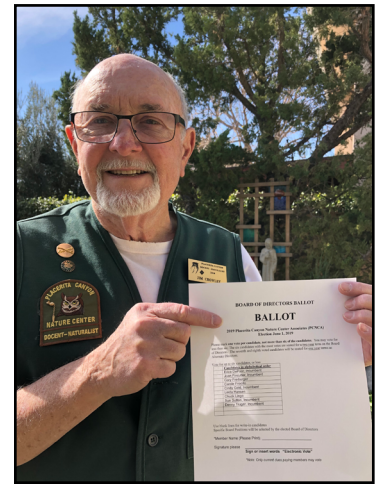
In April/May 2021 time frame all members will receive voting instructions. If you are at all interested, let one of the board members know you are interested or contact Jim Crowley. He will lead a non-board of directors' election committee. Please contact one of the board members or Jim to ask about the responsibilities involved. We especially want to invite any 2020 class members to consider running. They got a bum deal last year.

Let me explain some Board of Director (BOD) basics: Elected board members serve a two-year term, with half the BOD up for reelection each year (six positions this year). Additionally, two alternate directors will be elected to a one-year term. Consider being a BOD as a golden opportunity to participate and have your voice heard in making decisions for our Docent operations and the organization. All Docents and members in good standing (paid dues) are welcome and encouraged to seek a position on the board.

The board of directors up for re-election in June are as follows: Sue Sutton, Joan Fincutter, Denny Truger, Chuck Lingo, Cindy Gold, Erica dePooor, and Gary Freiburger.

The voting process.... You will receive detailed voting information, including a ballot, in May. More information will be forthcoming.

You are cordially invited to attend and view a ZOOM board meeting on the first Tuesday of the month (1:00 PM). You have March 2, April 6, and May 4 to see how it all works. Please let Gary Freiburger know and he can add you to the ZOOM distribution list.





### Chuck Lingo, Class of 2019

My wife and I are both native Southern Californians and grew up in the San Fernando Valley. We had lived in Tennessee for 10 years in connection with our jobs and moved back in October 2017 in order to live closer to our daughter and our grandchildren. The following spring my wife was going on a tour at Placerita Canyon with an organization she belongs to, and I tagged along.

I have always been an avid hiker and interested in nature wherever we have been. Also, I am extremely interested in the history of my native Southern California. After the tour I went on, it seemed that Placerita Canyon gave me an opportunity!

Docent training beginning in January 2019 was great. Ron Kraus does a great job organizing this, and the docents from previous Classes were extremely helpful. I found myself handling snakes for school tours, and leading groups on hikes before I knew it.

Whenever I lead a school tour, I do it by trying to ground everything in how the Tataviam people would have interacted with the environment at Placerita Canyon. All the plants, and animals you see can be made more interesting if you can talk about how they affected people there 1000 years ago.

For over 30 years I worked in the automotive industry, mostly in vehicle processing and logistics. This is a pressure packed, and precise business. You do well there if you are organized and process driven. That helps with school tours!

I soon found myself as a part of the PCNCA board, joining as an alternate in 2019. There are many ways someone can help to bring nature, and the history of the area closer to kids and adults alike. Once we are past the pandemic, I look forward to seeing everyone there!

My wife and I also enjoy travel. We have been to several places, most recently in 2019 to Peru. Once again, able to learn about the local culture. Of course, in Peru you are at altitude, so you do have to pace yourself! I cannot wait to be able to travel again, and Peru is right at the top of my list for a return trip.

I cannot wait to see all my fellow docents back at the Nature Center, and soon!



### Docents to Star on the “Silver Screen”

by Cindy Gold

We’ve been working hard and moving forward with our virtual hike video. Our target audience is elementary children, and the video will be available to the Sierra Club, local schools and other groups interested in Nature Education. We will also screen it during rainy days when schools have booked fieldtrips. Docents have been cast to appear on camera and the script is almost finished. The focus is on the

animals that live in Placerita Canyon, and what it would have been like to live here as a child.

Herb Broutt will lead the hike and several docents will talk about our animals. Out on the trail, the audience will meet snakes, birds and toads that live in Placerita Canyon. Glenda Perl and Erica de Poor will show a gopher snake and king snake. Jack Levenberg will present Sierra, our Great-horned owl, and Dan Duncan will show Aiyana, our Red-tailed hawk. RuthAnne Murthy will introduce the virtual hikers to Western toads. Cindy Gold will take them on a short tour of some of the exhibits in the Nature Center and show our rattlesnakes. We’ll highlight nine locations including the Walker Cabin, the Tataviam Village, and the Oak of the Golden Dream. Ron Kraus will shoot and edit the video, aided by producer Cindy Gold and a crew of volunteers including Gary Freiburger, Jim Crowley, Dave Taylor, Fred Seeley, Chuck Lingo, Brian Broders and John Whittaker. It is totally a Placerita Canyon Nature Center Association production, created by our dedicated and talented docents.

We hope to shoot the 20-to-30-minute video in the next few months with a release date that accommodates school in the fall. Docents will be working on distribution strategies and we will ask for donations per screening to raise funds to feed and care for our animals. And in the process, we intend to roll the camera, discover some new “stars” and have a lot of fun!



### Docent Enrichment

RuthAnne Murthy oversees this program, with help from docents who want to share their knowledge about different topics of interest.

It has proven to be extremely helpful in different ways. Because it is aimed at docents who cannot use their expertise at the Nature Center which remains closed, it has pushed them to sharpen their skills and make presentations on Zoom for their fellow docents. That is a less intimidating crowd! It has also given the docents a chance to see each other and learn the names of the more recent docents.

The Docent Enrichment program topics are provided in the Trails and Nuggets sent by Nikki Dail. It is extremely important for the docents to read all their email to be aware of what is going on at Placerita. We cannot send this information by text!

Docent enrichment will take place on March 22 and April 26 at 10 am, is for docents only, and you will be sent a Zoom link regarding the topics.

We look forward to seeing you on Zoom!



### Problems with Baby Birds?

Springtime brings lots of activity in the life of birds. Most of them have gone through the courtship, nest building, mating and egg laying in just a few short weeks.

It is especially important to understand the nestling and fledging phases, because each year so many baby birds are brought to the Nature Center by well-intended visitors who are trying to help the baby bird who has “fallen from the nest.” The fledging phase is not very obvious but it is important to learn a little bit more about it.

Of course, if a bird is injured, the situation is very different and finding a bird rehab is the proper course of action.

#### Nestling Phase

Once the eggs have hatched, things get busy in the nest, for the young calls from the nest and the parents must make repeated trips with food. The young are called nestlings because they remain in the nest and are fed by the parents. For the first few days of the nestling phase, the young birds need to be “brooded.” This is essentially having an adult sit over them, since they have no feathers and cannot keep warm. Soon they develop feathers and no longer need to be brooded. The nestling phase lasts about ten days.

#### Fledgling Phase

Most birds cannot immediately master the ability to fly. Some spend as long as two weeks in this stage. They hop around on the ground or in low vegetation, exercising their wings and learning to fly. Their parents continue to feed them throughout this period.

If you find a down-covering nestling on the ground, the best thing is to locate the nest and return the baby to it. The adult won't reject the baby because of human scent, as most birds have poor sense of smell.

If you find a feathered fledgling on the ground, leave it alone. Raising baby birds by hand is difficult and it results in failure most of the time (OK, that was my soap box moment!)

Fledglings often sit and call continuously, and the adults might feed them less frequently than when they were nestlings but with larger pieces of food. Gradually, the fledglings will begin to find food on their own. This phase may end abruptly with the parents becoming aggressive to their young and chasing them away. The fledgling phase lasts from one to several weeks. For humans, this phase may last a few years.... but this is another story. Enjoy the wonders of Spring!

Reference: “The Birdfeeder Book” by Donald and Lillian Stokes



### Spring Cleaning of the Pond

by Fred Seeley

With all the Covid restrictions, this year I just asked a few people who had helped with cleaning the pond for spawning season in the past to help this year. The crew consisted of Joe Morelli, Pat Coskran and his son Sean, Denny Truger, Jack Levenberg, and yours truly.

Joe was kind enough to bring his gas-powered pump so we were able to change a lot of the water, which makes the water quality better for the Mommy and Daddy frogs and toads. The pond is one of the locations for the video being done through the Education Committee, so we did not cut down all the cat tails, but we will once the Producers give us the go ahead.

Hopefully, next Spring we can get together and make the project into a party! Stay safe, everyone.



### The Granary is Standing Up...for Good!

by Denny Truger

My first attempt failed at securing the woodpecker granary tree. I was able to talk Pat Coskran and his son Sean into helping me re-secure the tree.

This time we dug a hole 3-feet deep by 3-feet wide. Then I drilled the tree's base so I could install rebar to firmly secure the tree to the concrete. We used 18 60-pound bags of concrete to fill in the hole.

It should last many years for the kids and adults to see up-close a woodpecker granary tree.

Mission accomplished!



### Facts to Keep in Mind

Starting February 1st, the closing time for Placerita is 6:00 pm.

The park is open every day of the week, but the gate will close at 6:00pm. So do not be locked inside the parking lot!

Because of Covid-19, we have many visitors to the park, and we are pleased that they can get some relief at Placerita. But there has been an increase in trash around the parking lot and the picnic ground.

Also, many dogs are visiting with their owners. Please be responsible to pick up after your dog. There are metal barrels in those areas.

Any help that you can give in this respect would be very much appreciated. Many docents have been giving a helping hand in those areas and we are very grateful. We are truly short of maintenance personnel right now.



# Placerita Nature Tots

## Exploring Nature with Young Children

Placerita Nature Tots is a free program.

Registration opens the 1<sup>st</sup> of each month and ends 2 days before the actual program.

Please email your registration to: [nature\\_tots@placerita.org](mailto:nature_tots@placerita.org)

Please include your child's and your name and email address.

You will receive a confirmation and on the day of the program you will get a Zoom invitation

Nature Tots meets on the second Saturday of each month at 10:00.

There is no age limit, but it is appropriate for young children

This program is online using Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic.

April 10: Native Americans

May 8: Wild Flowers of Placerita

June 12: Mountain Lions



*Pam Koch, a much-loved late docent at Placerita, wrote this article several years ago. It behooves us to re-print it every so often to remind us what the NCA is all about and maybe introduce some of the newer docents to the importance of this overarching organization to Placerita.*



### **What is NCA?**

by Pam Koch

The Nature Center Associates of Los Angeles is a volunteer nonprofit corporation, organized and founded for educational and scientific purposes, whose primary concern is to develop in children and adults an awareness and appreciation of the natural world.

The NCA, through its chapters, creates and operates interpretive programs at nature centers and natural areas administered by Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation.

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates (PCNCA) is a chapter of NCA and we docents are, therefore, members of NCA. Other chapters are Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates (ECNCA) San Dimas Nature Center Associates (SDNCA) Vasquez Rocks Nature Center Associates (VRNCA) Whittier Narrows Nature Center Associates (WNNCA) and Stoneview Nature Center (SNC)

NCA has a board just like PCNCA has a board. The board officers are voted into office by you, its members. The NCA officers must be members of any of the various nature centers plus each nature center has a representative to NCA.

The NCA board meets once every other month. They are responsible for proper handling of financial records and filing of taxes for all chapters. They host the annual Docent and Volunteer Recognition ceremony, usually held at Eaton Canyon since it is the most centrally located center. They interface with the County management issues of concern to all the chapters. They are responsible for the uniform application of docent training. That means they assist each other with access and updates to our "Windows into the Wild" training program. NCA provides Directors and Officer's insurance for all the boards. Since the treasuries of a couple of the nature centers have received sizeable endowments, insurance has now become necessary along with increased tax return reports.

### **Nikki Dail, NCA Treasurer Since 1998**

I have been the longest serving member of the NCA Board, having served as NCA Treasurer since 1998. I answered an Ad in the newspaper from Eaton Canyon for someone with accounting experience to help at the Nature Center. They explained what NCA was and that the former NCA Treasurer had resigned a few months before. While no one really knew exactly what all he did, they did know that a tax filing would be due. They gave me a box of files and a checkbook, and I took it home to go through it to try to figure it all out for myself. While I am a CPA, this was my first experience preparing any tax filings for a non-profit entity and I have learned a lot over the years.



Of course, I was also there to learn about Nature, so I took the docent training in 1999.

I have enjoyed the opportunity tremendously to give my time to make a difference for the LA County Nature Centers. However, after such a long time, it has started to feel more like a job and obligation. I still feel very torn about giving it up, as I will really miss it, but knowing that I will not have to manually prepare the 30-page IRS Form 990 and all its supplemental schedules for NCA again this March, it sure feels like a weight has been lifted off of tired shoulders. Even so, I will continue to help NCA complete the transition as long as I am needed.

Highlights of my time as Treasurer include getting to know and helping many docents from different Chapters, creating an MS Excel workbook to consolidate the financials for NCA and its chapters, streamlining the reporting categories used by the Chapters, and receiving the one and only special NCA volunteer of the year award at the Eaton Canyon recognition ceremony in 2011 or 2012, thanks to Pam Koch!



### **NCA Changes**

by Jack Levenberg

Two years ago, I told the board members that this would be my last term as president. At the last election, which was held in September 2020, I reluctantly allowed my name to be on the ballot for president again. I have held this office for 6 years, but since no one stepped up, I was elected again.

In November 2020, a docent from Eaton Canyon, Laura Nicholson expressed a desire to be president. I verbally resigned as president at the January board meeting, and after sending the resignation in writing to our Secretary, that change will be effective at our March board meeting. At that time, Laura will be appointed Interim President.

Also up for reelection was Nikki Dail, our Treasurer, who has held the office for 20-plus years. She did not want her name to be on the ballot even though she continued to do the work as treasurer. About the same time Laura came forward, Nikki and I discussed splitting the responsibilities of the treasurer between a CPA firm and a volunteer. The CPA firm would consolidate the Chapter financials and complete the non-profit tax filings, and the volunteer would be responsible for the NCA bookkeeping and communication with the Chapters. After we contacted a CPA firm, Angela Meyers, from Placerita, volunteered to be our treasurer. So, at the January Board meeting of the NCA, we voted to accept a CPA firm to do the books, as well as a new interim treasurer, our very own Angela Myers.

Thanks to both Laura and Angela for your willingness to hold these offices!





### Improvements to the Lyons Avenue Oak Log

by Jim Crowley.

Several Docents brought to our attention that the Lyons Avenue Oak near the pond was in poor shape.

Approximately a year ago, I worked with Joe Morelli to resurface the log with a mix of what I thought would be a reliable surface coating ... it did not work. We needed to devise a better plan. Several people provided ideas, and Denny Truger and I took the best ideas to resurface the log.

Jack Levenberg brought his nuclear portable power supply to the park, and Denny and I belt-sanded the surface. Old markers were drilled out. Larger new visibility dot markers were installed to coincide with the nearby ledger information sign, and then we coated the entire log surface with linseed oil. End of story.

... Well, not quite. We discovered our trusty stump was weathering inside and rather hollow in spots. But it was homey for spiders and termites for sure... not good for its longevity.

On the upside, Docent Joe Morelli is working to further improve the display site, making it accessible to the blind by adding Braille enhancements.

At one point Monica Chocooj, Recreations Services Leader, stopped by asking what we were doing? I told her we were stealing the log...I did not initially recognize her or anyone else, as everyone was incognito behind masks. She left us.

Also, thanks go to Herb Broutt for his hard work as our resident curbside supervisor.

Stop by to see the improvements!



### Armchair Detectives in Action

by Helen Sweany

Have you noticed an increase in rats since Stay-at-Home has become our new normal?

Let us play detective:

A) A friend, who lives by a (now popular) hiking trail told me there are a lot more rats around his home and blamed it on his neighbor's bird feeder. His neighbor has had the same feeder for years yet was sure the bird feeding was to blame.

B) I live in an upstairs apartment of a large complex. I also maintain a small hummingbird feeder. The ports have bee guards, so only birds visit.

C) I have one small finch feeder. It hangs on a hook which is attached to a baffle. I use shelled sunflower seeds mixed with hot pepper flakes or cayenne pepper. Birds can't taste the pepper, but it repels rodents. A huge, basket-like metal plate with screening is under the feeder. The seeds stay on the plate, even on windy days. I bring the feeder in at night most of the time. I clean the droppings about once a week.

D) My complex's barbecue grill (meat still caked on) had a large rat dining on well-done food.

E) Rats eat dog poop by our dumpster and in the landscaping (that off-leash dogs use).

F) Rats drag away food wrappers. Rats will explore open dumpsters.

G) Rats drink water when the nightly sprinklers turn on.

From A-G, all are reasons for rats. What significantly changed in our 11 months into COV that produced the rat increase?

Armchair detectives, what do you think the main (preventable) cause of the rat increase might be? It is easy to blame the birders but. . .

If you guessed E) you are correct. Dog poop is the #1 food source for rats in developed areas.

Not only are more folks walking around, but they are bringing their pet. To clear up misconceptions: 1) dog poop can take months to decompose. It contains parasites that are bad for little junior hikers as well as other dogs and wild animals 2) "No, you're not going to come back and pick it up on the way out." If it is too gross for you to carry, there's little clippie things you can attach to the leash. 3) Forgot a bag? There are cute little holders that you can clip to your backpack, or water bottle.

We can do better. Three cheers for responsible dog owners!



### Learning About the Placerita Kiosk

by RuthAnne Murthy

If you haven't been to the Nature Center for a while, maybe you haven't seen the 3-sided kiosk that Denny and Company installed near the Butterfly Garden before Covid-19 set in. It is a beauty! Friday, February 5th, the second side content was installed.

Evelyne, Sue Sutton and RuthAnne had it all ready to go when they found out that the plastic protective coating on the plexiglass doors was baked into the doors. What to do? In steps the hero!

Fred came to supervise, and he said he had a solvent that would take off the plastic. He hustled home and came back and it worked!! Then we were able to put a poster of the life-cycle of a frog, three photographs of pond plants, three photographs of pond animals, and a plastic model of the lifecycle of a frog.

We hope that you will come to the Nature Center and check it out.







### The New Study Guides

by Brian Broders

The Nature Center docent study guides are coming soon, likely about three months from now.

They are presently in the approval stage. Once the study guides have been approved and released, it is off to the printer. The documents will be placed in the docent library, and if you want an electronic copy in PDF form, there will be jump drives available in the docent library.

These docent study guides, which can be utilized by all the docents, can be particularly helpful for the newer docents. There are various topics that can be used by the docents and the staff members at the Nature Center. All the subject material came from a website on the internet, or documentation

already released from the Nature Center.

These documents will be an enormous asset to the docent library, and a great source of information for docents to learn while they are becoming a naturalist at the Nature Center. What is nice about breaking them up by subject, you learn on what you want, subject by subject. You can become a guru on that topic, whether you are the bird lady, the bug guy, or butterfly expert.

Some of the information that you may be contemplating right now, might be: What does the Painted Lady butterfly look like? What is an Ant Lion or a doodle bug? Do rattlesnakes give live births? What plant did the miners eat for a salad? What is the State Bird? Which amphibian produces poisonous skin secretions which are the same toxin found in a pufferfish? What are the duties of the Lead Docent?

With the docent study guides, you can look up these types of questions and quickly get the answer you are looking for. Or just select a docent study guide you want to learn on a particular subject you are interested in.

The main topics of the docent documents are Botany, Ecology, Geology, Interpretive (Teaching), Tataviam Indians, Trail topics, etc. Some of the other subjects of the docent documents are wildlife found in the Placerita Canyon, like amphibians, birds, insects, mammals, mushrooms, plants, reptiles, etc. There are also many more subjects within the docent documents.



### Trail Treasures

By RuthAnne Murthy

Hollyleaf Redberry is an evergreen, perennial shrub that grows up to 10 feet tall below 4,000 feet in elevation. It resprouts after a fire and is often one of the first plants to recover. The branches are ridged and have sharp spines. It is often found along moist washes and prefers shade or partial sun. It is part of the buckthorn family. It is considered a chaparral plant. It is a larval host for the pale swallowtail butterfly.

Hollyleaf Redberry  
*Rhamnus ilicifolia*

The dark green leaves are shiny, leathery and heavily toothed. They are oval to roundish with a downy underside. The leaves are from ¾-2 inches in length.

The pale, creamy-green flowers are small and inconspicuous. They bloom from March to June. There are male and female flowers on the same plant. The female flowers produce the berries.

The berries are bright red. They are quite small, about ¼ inch in diameter. Hollyleaf Redberry plants fruit in late spring through early summer. The berries are food for many birds.

The berries are quite delicious and were a food source for the Native Californians.

There are other scrubs that are similar along the trails, but it is definitely worth looking for Hollyleaf redberry, another Trail Treasure.

### Antelope Valley Indian Museum

State Historic Park

on Zoom and More Coming Up!

by RuthAnne Murthy

If you have not joined us for a Docent Enrichment Zoom, you are missing out! On December 17th, Lori Wear, who is an Interpreter for the Antelope Valley Indian Museum, gave us a virtual tour of the exterior and interior of the museum. She did an amazing job especially because it was an extremely windy day.

The architecture of the main building is like a Swiss Chalet. Such a contrast to the desert that surrounds it! The interior of the museum is a maze. Lori gave us an overview of each of the rooms which was a challenge considering the tight quarters. We even saw a few Tataviam artifacts. Perhaps we will be able to visit in person after Covid 19 abates.

Keep your eyes open for the monthly T&N that will give the details of the next Docent Enrichment. It is our opportunity to keep in touch with each other and to keep learning. If you would like to present or have an idea for a session, please let me know.

Rosemarie Regis, did a session about birds. Rosemarie oversees the Bird Walk on the first Saturday of the month when the Nature Center is open for our different programs.

RuthAnne Murthy did a session on Early Bloomers. RuthAnne oversees "Bloom of the season" on the fourth Saturday of every month when we do not have to observe the Covid 19 restrictions.

Angela Meyer talked about Los Pinetos trail and showed us her beautiful photos.

Check it out, it is also a chance to see each other which is fun!

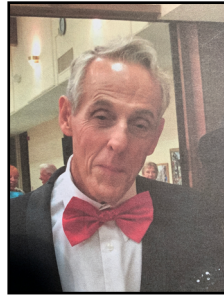


### Marietta Ewing is Back

We are delighted that Marietta is back to take care of the animals at Placerita. This was made possible by two generous donations made to Placerita.

Welcome back Marietta!





### Rest in Peace

We are deeply sorry to have the announce the deaths of a few people close to Placerita.

Deen Matthews passed away on December 8th, she was the treasurer for many years at Placerita and passed the baton to Heidi Webber during Docent Training in September 1995. Deen's daughter wrote an article about her mother. We send her our condolences.

Ronald Viersen passed away in December, after a long illness. He was the beloved husband of Erica Andrassy, who is a board member. Our deepest sympathy to Erica.

Leon Worden lost his son Jake on Christmas day. Leon is a lifetime member at Placerita and has always given great support to our events via SCVNews. Our condolences to Leon and his family. Donations can be given in Jake's name to Santa Clarita Valley Historical Society.

In this time of anxiety because of Covid 19, our heart goes out to all whose health and situation are in crisis. Stay safe, we care about you.

### In Memory of Deen Matthews 1934 - 2020 From Homemaker to Docent to Treasurer by Diane Conner, Daughter.

Placerita Nature Center has always an important part of our family's life. From yearly school field trips, family gatherings, or just nice Saturday hikes and a bagged lunch, Placerita has always been a destination we loved. My mom Deenie was a volunteer by nature, whether as a PTA member or Brownie and Girl Scout Leader. So, when she was looking for something to fill her time after raising two daughters, volunteering at Placerita was a natural fit. She and I attended a docent orientation together and she dove in quickly, attending docent classes to learn about the history, flora and fauna, and animal life of this richly diverse area. She enjoyed teaching groups of schoolchildren on nature walks, in a role she once admired as a parent on school field trips. She often spoke about the impact on children that had never been out of the city. Aside from the reward of helping others, she gained a sense of belonging to a group of volunteers that all shared a love of nature, learning and community.

After a few years she was honored and proud to be named treasurer where she could put her past bookkeeping skills to use. After a few years of rewarding work, she retired as treasurer, but continued to volunteer at fundraisers, provide a guided nature walk here and there, and attend potlucks.

And although I did not have the time to be a regular docent, I tagged along to help with fundraisers, animal shows, award ceremonies and join potlucks and campouts. It was like having a backstage pass to the best show in town! Working animal shows was the best because you had a chance to interact and learn about all kinds of animals such as a tarantula, hawk and great horned owl. The volunteer campouts at Placerita and Vasquez were a cherished privilege. Her work at the Nature Center was a unique and rewarding experience that I am grateful to have shared. She was a great example of community service that I try to emulate in my life. Thank you, mom, for including me in your adventures!

### Mars Helicopter Ingenuity

Bob and Sandra Balarum

Bob Balarum is the Chief Engineer for the Mars Helicopter Ingenuity. The last seven years of his life has been devoted to building a very lightweight, durable spacecraft that can not only fly in the very thin atmosphere of Mars which is 1% of Earth's density, but also survive the extreme cold of -130 F.

So far, so good. Ingenuity has landed, now they need to check out the systems to make sure the violent shaking and extreme heat of entry has not damaged anything. Right now, the team is finding a good place to fly from and planning the five flights that will begin toward the end of March or beginning of April.

Sandra Balarum is a Placerita Docent from the class of 2010. She is well known at JPL for baking wonderful goodies, supporting the team when they must work extra-long hours...or days!

All of us at Placerita are so extremely proud of both of you!

There is a PBS Nova program about Mars Perseverance and Ingenuity to be aired February 24th.



## Birds of the Season

by Rosemarie Regis

There have been so many dark days for many of us this past year, with so many losses of family and friends. My own coping mechanisms have been challenging to maintain. If it was not for our wonderful birds, it would have been worse. Of course, a little bird seed and nectar does entice these magical creatures.

I have become much more aware of the smaller, plain and plentiful little seed eaters. Also, each day may bring a new visitor to our hummingbird feeders. I have had to multiply them, in order to keep the hummers (Anna's, Allen's and Rufus Hummingbirds) happy.

A Nuttall's Woodpecker has discovered our nectar feeders and announces itself upon arriving. Ironically, whenever I hear them in the trees while walking, it can be difficult to spot them and now, I am enjoying it close. Other nectar lovers are House Finches. A bird I am ashamed to say, I have taken for granted for too long. It is now one of my favorites because of their varied luminous colors from light yellows, orange-golds and bright red highlights. The beautiful males are such gentlemen allowing their mates to drink first while waiting patiently and protectively until she has had her fill.

At this very moment, with the winds so ferocious, I have had to bring down some of the feeders. However, in no time White and Gold-crowned Sparrows found the bowl of seeds. Alongside waiting their turn, are some Dark-eyed Junco's, Berwick's Wren and an Oak Titmouse. I think I am becoming fickle, changing my favorite birds from one moment to another.

I now need to pull myself away from my observation area, at my dual plate glass sliding doors, or I shall never finish or even start some projects. I will return to this spot at 4PM to look for the Cedar-waxwings and American Robin that have been coming to catch the last rays of the sun on my neighbors bare-limbed tree. They will soon be leaving on their migration route to their next location. I almost forgot to mention a Red-shouldered and Swanson's Hawk that stopped by last week. Today we saw a young Red-tailed Hawk sitting on a limb while being harassed by two crows.

I am very blessed to live in this beautiful area in Santa Clarita, Friendly Valley, with many trees and space for these wild miniature dinosaurs.

Well, adieu for now, until we meet sometime soon on our very missed Bird Walks. Stay safe and always enjoy the view of the birds that surround us, may they bring joy to your heart and soul if you let them.



## The Ultimate Aerial Scavenger

Ken Yasukawa

Often seen soaring over Placerita Canyon, the Turkey Vulture, *Cathartes aura*, which means "golden purifier," is the most widely distributed vulture in the New World, breeding from southern Canada to southernmost South America. It is a large, long-winged vulture with a mostly blackish-brown adult plumage and gray feathers on its underwings and tail. Males and females are similar in appearance, but females are slightly larger.

Turkey Vultures are scavengers and rarely kill their prey. They prefer to feed on dead animals, thus ridding the landscape of deteriorating carcasses and helping to curb the spread of dangerous diseases. Turkey Vultures have several adaptations to make them effective scavengers.

They have a well-developed sense of smell, which they use to find carrion over a mile away. Curiously, in 1938, employees of the Union Oil Company of California reported that Turkey Vultures gathered at gas leaks. After finding that the vultures were attracted by traces of ethyl mercaptan (ethanethiol) in the gas, ethanethiol was intentionally added to otherwise odorless gas to make leak detection easier.

Because they often insert their heads completely inside the carcasses they are eating, Turkey Vultures lack feathers on their heads to make it easier to stay clean, although the lack of feathers might also help them to regulate their body temperatures. They have hooked beaks designed for tearing pieces of food, but they are not able to tear into the thick skin of a fresh kill.

They are able to eat putrid meat because their stomachs have strong enzymes to handle dangerous toxins and microorganisms.

Their legs are usually coated with dried uric acid from their excrement to kill bacteria they get by touching contaminated flesh. It also helps to cool them in hot weather.

Turkey Vultures are tolerant of human activity and adaptable in what they eat and where they nest, so this species has fared well in our changing landscapes. Unlike many songbirds in North America, Turkey Vulture populations are generally stable or increasing.



## What About the Waterfall Trail?

The Canyon trail and the Los Pinetos trail has been reopened so what is happening with the Waterfall trail? It used to be an exceptionally beautiful trail, with a path created between large boulders. It has lots of shade and quite different vegetation because of the additional moisture.

All those boulders tumbled down in the very heavy storms in 2018. After many years of work, and money from different organizations, the other trails were reopened. The Waterfall trail presents a significant challenge, and has been closed to prevent people from getting injured on the heavily damaged trail. Access is difficult, so it is going to be an expensive project. However, we just found out that the Waterfall trail is being considered for cleanup, and efforts are being made to obtain a grant to fund the work.

We will let you know of any developments happening in that direction. It would be wonderful to have that trail opened again!