

The Rattler

Sponsored by the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates
19152 Placerita Canyon Road, Newhall, CA 91321
www.placerita.org (661) 259-7721

Placerita Canyon Nature Center
Over 50 Years of Nature Education

March-April 2022

Editor: Evelyn Vandersande Publisher: Heidi Webber

Hello Nature Friends,

Spring is a wonderful time at Placerita. The park is covered in wonderful fresh grass poking up all over, and we even have some water in the stream. We will have frogs! The wildflowers are bursting open everywhere and it is a fantastic time of the year to take colorful photos on the different trails. It is true that we were hoping for more rain, and many of the wildflowers are smaller than they should be, but they are there. Nature makes sure that reproduction is taking place! The CCC has done a great job on our trails, filling up some dangerous holes and putting in water bars to prevent future erosion. The trails are much safer, and it is nice to discover all the work they have done.

The very big news is that Placerita is going to have an Open House on May 14. All the docents are very actively and happily planning all the activities for the big day. Due to the Covid restrictions, it has been far too long since we've been together handling a fun project like this one.

Come to the park, walk on the trails, maybe even get your feet wet in the stream and enjoy all the colors and smells that Spring has to offer! It is a special time of the year, and you should take advantage of all those treasures.



No Docent Training for 2022

As soon as NCA was created, it became necessary to train docents in order to provide clear and correct information to the visitors and handle school tours. At that time the Nature Centers giving Docent training were Placerita Canyon Nature Center, Eaton Canyon, Charmlee and Whittier Narrows. Information was gathered and "Window of the Wild" was created. Frank Hovore, supervisor at Placerita, included some of his illustrations and reviewed much of the information. Through the years, many classes were updated to better serve the docents. Most classes are planned in two parts. The first part in the classroom establishing the facts of the topic, and second part being hands-on work on the trail seeing examples that can be useful in a personal presentation.

The Docent training committee makes yearly improvements to those classes, under Ron Kraus dedicated expertise, so they have become very high-quality instructional materials and presentations. They are attended by volunteers wanting to become docents, but also by county employees and college students getting credit.

Finding the best teachers is a work in progress that was made even harder during Covid time, and the planning for the 2022 training was started months ago.

You can only imagine our deep disappointment and frustration when on January 10, only one day before we were to start, we found out that the Nature Center as well as other County parks were closing because of the new Covid surge.

We want to thank the Docent training committee and all those who were involved in the months-long planning and preparation. Your efforts do not go unnoticed, and you did a great job.

Make up classes might be given at different times of the year; ideas are in the planning stage.



Placerita Canyon Nature Center

Open House

May 14, 2022

10AM to 2PM

- Free Admission & Parking
- Family Hikes
- Crafts & Games
- Panning for "Fools" Gold
- Animal Presentations
- Caricatures by Jill
- Gift Shop
- Musical Entertainment
- Displays by Local Nature Clubs & Organizations

Many more fun activities for the whole family! Bring a lunch & enjoy our picnic grounds. Activities & displays are subject to change at any time.

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Placerita
Canyon
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Associates



The Placerita Canyon Nature Center and Natural Area are located within the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County in the Supervisorial District of Kathryn Barger. 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.





**New Video Information Center
in the Works!**

By Cindy Gold

We're proud to announce that the PCNCA has been awarded a grant from the City of Santa Clarita to create a video information center. We will install a big screen TV in the Observation Deck where our visitors can select from a series of short videos about the park, its animals and features, and activities.

The first three videos we'll produce will highlight the birds in Placerita that visitors may see on a hike, the flowering plants along the trails, and a demonstration of the animals we house at the center.

Our hope is this will enhance visitors' experiences in the park and help fill the gap when docents are not available to interact with the public. It will also be an effective way to inform the public about the hikes and other activities offered in the park. Volunteers will be busy this year producing the videos and creating the center – another labor of love.

Stay tuned for updates about when the Video Center is up and running!



**Sepulveda Wildlife Refuge
Docent Enrichment Trip for January
Planned by RuthAnne Murphy**

Muriel was our tour guide that morning, and it was heartwarming to find out that she had worked with Reg Fear and Bob Moss, Placerita docents from the class of 2000. She also sees Robert Grzesiak, Placerita docent from the class of 2012 coming to Sepulveda each week to do weed abatement. Volunteers in Nature are one big family.

Glenda Perl described our morning perfectly; "A group of about 15 PCNC docents were treated to a guided tour of Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Refuge today. It was beautiful! So many different birds! We saw soaring Turkey Vultures, Canadian geese honking as they flew by, Great Egrets, Double-Crested Cormorants, little coots, Mallard ducks, an Osprey catching a big fish from the lake and landing in a tree to eat it, and even a flock of American White Pelicans swimming and fishing in a surprising, synchronized dance! An amazing natural habitat open space in the middle of urban San Fernando Valley!"

Ken Yasukawa, one of our bird experts at Placerita, sent his bird list. He saw 26 birds that morning, so he was very busy. All the docents were able to borrow binoculars for our tour, so we were all watching the birds closely with great interest. It is really a good place for bird watching because of the lake, the many little streams, the large trees and bushes providing the birds food and habitat. The park suffered last year from a fire on one side of the lake, but regrowth could be seen everywhere.

Thank you so much RuthAnne for planning those trips, especially during the Nature Center closure. It gives us a unique opportunity to see each other and to keep learning.

We were in the open air, so we felt safe, and we had fun!

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates
present

LET'S GO ON A HIKE

Screenings available for schools and groups.
For more information visit our website: placerita.org



Treasures From the Past
by Herb Broutt

Some of the docents took a field trip to Bob Walker's Avocado and Olive Oil Farm in December. Bob is the keeper of all the family's treasures, including Frank Walker's (Papa's) 1935 Ford Flatbed. There is also an old tractor that was used at Placerita Canyon. He had a copy of Frank and Hortense's marriage certificate from June 19th, 1907! There were also owner's certificates of some of Papa's cars from the 20's. He had a scale that was used to weigh gold. Many of the Walker boys were in the army during World War II, and he showed us pictures as well as some of the medals that his dad received. He also had some old guns. One was a Winchester rifle that was used for hunting at Placerita Canyon.

Bob has offered to donate Papa's Flatbed truck and the old tractor, to put on display by the Walker Cabin.

We all had a great day!

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates
and
The County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation
Present:

Animal Show
Placerita Canyon Nature Center
19152 Placerita Canyon Road
Newhall, CA 91321
(661) 259-7721

Come to Placerita Nature Center and meet the Animal Ambassadors who live in the canyon. Learn what the animals eat, where they live, their physical attributes and much more! Placerita Canyon Nature Docents/ Naturalists and staff will lead the discussion and answer all of your questions.



Where: The outdoor patio at the Nature Center
When: The first and third Saturdays of each month at 10:00



It is free and will be great fun for the entire family.
For more information, contact info@placerita.org





Hello from Ken Yasukawa, Docent Class of 2020

It has been a strange time since I finished my docent training just a day before CoViD-19 shut down the Nature Center in March 2020. Although PCNC activities have been limited since then, I have been able to lead monthly bird walks and I am proud to serve as a member of the PCNC Board.

I was born and raised in New York City, where my love of nature began as a Boy Scout. I went to college at the State University of New York at Stony Brook (now Stony Brook University), then studied computer science for a year at Binghamton University and zoology at Indiana University (IU) in Bloomington. After earning my Ph.D. in 1977, I was a post-doctoral fellow at The Rockefeller University Center for Field Research in Millbrook, New York. In 1980 I joined the faculty at Beloit College in Wisconsin, where I taught biology for 39 years. Following my retirement in 2019, my wife Sondra Fox (also a docent in the class of 2020) and I moved to Valencia, where we happened to attend a PCNC Blooms of the Season walk with RuthAnne Murthy. We noticed a big banner advertising docent training starting January 7, 2020 (our son's birthday), so we signed up and, voilà, three months later we became docent-naturalists.

In graduate school at IU I took a course in advanced ornithology, which led me to specialize in ornithology and to begin my 46-year-long study of Red-winged Blackbirds.

Among other topics, I have studied aggressive behavior, territory establishment and defense, male quality and female choice of mates, male and female vocal behavior, parental care, parent-offspring communication, and brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds, which lay their eggs in nests of other birds. Like Horton the Elephant, these "host" birds then care for the cowbird eggs and young. Red-winged Blackbirds are one of the most-commonly-used host species. Ironically, there are no Red-winged Blackbirds at Placerita, although I do see them at Walmart parking lots in Santa Clarita.

Sondra and I are looking forward hopefully to the end of the pandemic and the resumption of full operations at PCNC. The Nature Center and the people who work and volunteer there have quickly become very special for us.

Sue Murachanian

Docent from the Class of 2020.

Sue has taken on the job of helping Teresa Jacob at the gift shop. That is an important commitment, especially at a time when the Nature Center cannot welcome school tours yet, so revenue is limited. The animals need to be fed and have medical care, so we appreciate all the help we can get. The gift shop brings a steady income...when it can be operational.

When the Nature Center is open, come and visit the gift shop and say hello to Sue. Thank you, Sue, for all your help.

My name is Sue Murachanian, my husband and I both grew up in Santa Clarita and we raised our family here as well. We have four grown children: three daughters and one son, plus five grandchildren!

My educational background is Early Childhood Development. I taught in the Saugus School District for 15 years, teaching the Pre-K program. Our field trip to the PCNC was always a highlight for the kids and teachers as well.

My interest in "Nature" began as a child. My dad loved camping, visiting National Parks and exploring. As a result, our family vacations usually revolved around being outdoors. We were the family that stopped and visited the ranger stations, went on the suggested hikes and sat through the visitor center movies at each destination. This tradition carried on with my own family and as a result my kids and grandkids also love the outdoors!

I enjoy traveling in general. When we are close to home my husband and I, along with our dog Maverick, like to hike and explore. We have spent a lot of time exploring the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range along Highway 395. It's beautiful and there is so much to see.

Having grown up in SCV, I have always loved Placerita Canyon. To now be a docent and volunteer at PCNC has been very special to me and something I hope to be a part of for many years to come!



Fording Streams

by Pat Coskran

Placerita Canyon offers me an experience and environment to teach about nature and life in a way that my classroom never could. While immersed in these sights, sounds, smells and challenges--channels for learning and growing are opened. Concepts like problem solving, personal courage, and determination become understandable instead of abstract ideas.

This especially applies to individuals who are "differently-abled" and have had lives filled with rejection and discouragement. But when mental and physical challenges are presented while their channels are open, they ford that stream like a pro.



**Docent Enrichment December 28
Santa Barbara Botanic Garden**

RuthAnne Murthy planned our guided tour at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, and Sondra Fox was our coordinator at the garden. Thank you for making this visit so enjoyable.

The Santa Barbara Botanic Garden was the nation's first botanic garden focused exclusively on native plants. Over the last 94 years, they have grown to span 78 acres with 5 miles of walking trails. There is an herbarium, seed bank, research labs, library, nursery, and gift shop. Our guide took the group on the trail and explained how each plant species has its own role to play, and by conserving all of them they make sure that their ecosystems are resilient to change, and that plants and the habitats they form continue to keep the animals healthy. Santa Barbara's climate gets more moisture than Placerita because they are close to the ocean, and their elevation is lower, so their blooming season is earlier. We were delighted to see our first poppy in bloom as well as many manzanitas, lupins, lemonade berries and coreopsis also in bloom. It was a very clear, crisp winter day and the docents who crossed the street to another part of the Botanic Garden were able to see a very sharp view of all the Channel Islands including San Miguel, which is rarely seen.

After the main tour, some of us decided to take a longer walk on the trail along the stream, some went to the Goleta Elwood open space to see the Monarch preserve and some finished the day in Santa Barbara. Whatever we concluded with, we all very much enjoyed our time together, and it was a lovely way to finish the year 2021.

It's a Jay That's Blue, But It's Not a Blue Jay

By Ken Yasukawa

Photo by Gary Park (www.garyparktookthese.com)

The California Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*) is one of the most common birds of the Placerita Canyon. Its range extends from Washington, through California, to the southern tip of Baja California. Formerly the Western Scrub-Jay, ornithologists split that species into the California and the Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay (*A. woodhouseii*) because of differences in ecology, morphology, genetics, and behavior. California Scrub-Jays live in shrubland, chaparral, riparian, and oak-pine habitats as well as in gardens and orchards.

Compared to the Florida Scrub-Jay (*A. coerulescens*), the California Scrub-Jay is less social and breeds without helpers (only the parents care for young). Its behavioral evolution, foraging behavior, and cognitive abilities have been studied by ornithologists. The California Scrub-Jay is especially known for its spatial memory, which allows it to locate and select food, and for its ability to deal with competition from other jays. Their territories are defended by breeding pairs year-round, although territories may be abandoned during winter following failure of the acorn crop

Omnivorous and opportunistic, this jay's diet is predominately arthropods and fruit in spring and summer, and seeds of masting trees, especially oaks and pines, in autumn and winter. It is common to see one holding an acorn in its bill at this time of year (see photo).

California Scrub-Jays are known for their scolding calls and for the number of different calls in their repertoire, but surprisingly little is known about what the calls mean or whether they are learned.

This jay is bold and confident around humans and largely unaffected by human activities or habitat alteration—it thrives in residential and urban areas. However, California Scrub-Jay populations are potentially vulnerable to loss of oaks from infestation by Sudden Oak Death (*Phytophthora ramorum*). This pathogen affects Coast Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) and other acorn-bearing species on which the jays depend heavily. The cognitive abilities of California Scrub-Jays are frequently studied using controlled experiments with captive birds, but no one knows how California Scrub-Jays select, store, and retrieve nuts in the wild. Results from such studies could help clarify the species' relative dependence on various resources, such as acorns, and further contribute to our understanding of the evolution of cognitive abilities in animals.



Spring Cleaning at the Pond

by Fred Seeley

Mother Nature provided a cool, but beautiful day for the annual Butterfly Garden educational pond cleaning. We remove the invasive cattails every year to provide the Western Toad and Baja Pacific Tree frog parents with a nice, refreshed place to spawn. During our many recent drought years, it is about the only place in the Natural Area for them to produce the next generation of these wonderful amphibians.

Joan Fincutter, Barbara Marxmiller, Sean and Pat Coskran, Joe Morelli, and I met at the pond on January 31, 2022, to tackle the task this year. Hopefully Joe's back will recover from all the heavy lifting he did getting very large root masses up and out of the depths! With such a hard-working crew, the job was completed in about an hour and a half.

Thanks to all for your hard work!!!





Placerita Nature Tots

Exploring Nature with Young Children

We are happy to announce that the Nature Tots program is
back on Zoom.

We look forward to seeing our friends who live nearby, and also those who visit our program
from great distances across the country.

Nature Tots is a free program geared for children 3 to 6 years old. Older or younger siblings are
welcomed. It meets on Zoom, on the second Saturday of each month, at 10:00 am.

We do ask you to register your child for each month's program, at

nature_tots@placerita.org

Registration begins on the 1st of each month for that month's program.

Our next programs will be

March 12th, 2022-Skunks

April 9th, 2022-Celebrating Earth Day

May 14th, 2022-Zoom Nature Tots cancelled due to Open House

Come visit us at Placerita Nature Center

June 11th, 2022-Butterflies



Basket Bush
Rhus trilobata

Trail Treasures

by RuthAnne Murthy

Basket bush is a 2- to 7-foot-tall shrub in the sumac family which also includes poison oak and sugar bush. It grows in the canyons and on slopes of the coastal sage scrub, the southern oak woodland and occasionally, in open areas of chaparral below 3500 feet in elevation.

The botanical name means “three leaves”. The compound three leaves grow on a short stem on hairy branches. The leaf clusters are different from poison oak in that the terminal (ending) leaflet doesn’t have a distinct stock like poison oak. Often the leaves are smaller than poison oak, but not always. The plant is summer deciduous allowing the plant to retain water in its stems and roots in the summer heat.

The flowers bloom in March and April before the leaves bud. They grow in yellow-green clusters and are very small, often less than ½ inch on the ends of the branches.

The flowers give away to small fruits. They are sticky, fuzzy and red. (Poison oak berries are white.)

Basket bush was very useful for the California native people. The leaves were boiled to make a medicine for cancers. They also powdered the berries to put on open sores and small pox pustules. The fruit was used as food and for making a sweet drink. They used the same compound for tanning leather. And, as the name implies, stems were stripped of their bark and split into cord to use in basketry and mat-making.

The old saying, “Leaves of three, let it be.” should be applied to this plant until confidence of its identity is sure. Basket bush does not have allergic properties, but its resemblance to poison oak is strong. “If in doubt, don’t” is good advice. It is an easy plant for hikers to miss because of its subtlety, but to an observant hiker, it is a trail treasure to enjoy.



Placerita Will Have an Open House on Saturday May 14!

That was the very best news we could get. After more than two years of restrictions, the docents were eager to be active again, to be with other docents and to think about fun activities for that big day. We have had our Open House for many years, so the docents have experience and were enthusiastically ready to proceed. The first meeting was very well attended. Cindy Gold will be the Facilitator for the event, Rick and Linette Brammer will be the Logistics Coordinators.

As the different stations were called out one by one: Nature Boxes, Animal presentations, Children’s Crafts and so on, volunteers stepped up to be in charge or contact other docents for help. It was very heartwarming to see so much good will. The help of all the docents will be needed to make the day fun and successful. New docents, who do not know what to expect, can contact other docents on the list to offer their help. We really need each other! Crafts and games around the cabin need many hands to be successful, and it is a lot of fun working with kids and adults. Who has ever milked a wooden cow for example, or taken photo to check a bird’s wingspan?

There will be a quilt display at the cabin and a special guest will have a little ceremony there, to keep the family history alive. Hikes, a bird walk, children’s story time, family walks, and animal presentations will be planned throughout the day. Many more activities are in the planning stages, so it is sure not going to be a boring day!

Many organizations will come to set up their tables and their displays, and be ready to give detailed information so there will be fun and interesting facts for both children and grown-ups.

The gift shop will be open throughout the day and will also sell snacks.

Bill Kahl will warm up the crowd with his music.

Open House will take place on May 14 from 10:00am to 2:00pm to give us time to set up and clean up. Mark that date on your calendar!



Upper Placerita Canyon Hike

By Herb Broutt

On January 10 2022, Bob Walker came to Placerita and we took a hike near Los Pinos Trail to search for the Clay Furnace that Frank Walker (Papa) set up.

We think we found the general area, as well the spot where the old timers had their tent cabin. We also think we found the opening where the old placer mining tunnel was. It was dug by Bob’s dad, Frank, and his uncles. It went to a depth of 85 feet!

Both Bob and Ron Kraus had pictures from years ago, and were able to match them up with the current tree lines in order to pin down the location.



Springtime in Placerita

Can you match the picture with the name? (Channel your kindergarten worksheet and draw a mental line from the photo to the correct name—have fun!)



California Poppy

Big Berry Manzanita

Hairy-leaf Ceanothus

Hoary Ceanothus

Chaparral Currant

California Peony

Sticky Monkeyflower

California Wild Rose

California Buckwheat

Sugar Bush

Elderberry

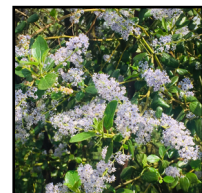
Cliff Aster

Bush Poppy

Wild Cucumber

Arroyo Lupine

Golden Currant



Spring Programs

Animal Show: First and third Saturdays of each month at 10.00am (see flyer). This program will start in March.

Bird Walks: First Saturday of every month with Rosemarie Regis Second Saturday of every month with Ken Yasukawa From 8am to 10 am. For all levels of birders. Bring binoculars, water, and field guide.

Blooms of the Season with RuthAnne Murthy: Learn about native plants. Meet in the patio at 9.30 for a one-hour stroll on the 4th Saturday of every month. Bring your camera and questions. For more information about this free program call 661-259-7721 or 259-7832

Family Nature Walk with Judy McClure: Every Saturday from 11.00am to noon. An easy 1-hour walk exploring the area's natural and cultural history.

Placerita Nature Tots: Age 3-5. The next program March 12 is Skunks and April 9 is Celebrating Earth Day. Program done on zoom so registration required, check Placerita.org. Placerita Nature Tots takes place on the 2nd Saturday of every month.

Docent Enrichment:

March 25 – Tejon Ranch – Please contact Linette and Rick Brammer right away, registration must be done by March 18.

Tuesday, March 29 – Mycology with Florence Nishida at Placerita Canyon Nature Center.

Read your Trails and Nuggets for future Docent Enrichments

OPEN HOUSE: SATURDAY, MAY 14 10.00am to 2.00pm

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

