



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 2023

Editor: Evelyn Vandersande Publisher: Heidi Webber

Hello Nature Friends,

For 25 years, this is the way the Rattler has started. For 25 years, Heidi Webber and Evelyn Vandersande have joined their efforts to bring you all the news from Placerita. It has been a labor of love, and we are both thankful for this opportunity.

There are many reasons to be grateful at Placerita. We have had a wonderful celebration for the Opening of “Know your Nature Center.” It was extremely well attended by many officials, visitors and docents (see Cindy Gold article). An important day in Placerita history!

After a few years of Covid restrictions, we finally had a Docent training with 21 students (see Ron Krauss article). That is pretty fantastic...

There is water in the stream, and visitors of all ages are enjoying Placerita. They're bringing a picnic, playing in the water or just enjoying the peaceful sound of the water.

The wildflowers are starting to bloom along the trails and on the hill, and it is a wonderful sight.

Enjoy springtime.



Come and Enjoy Our New “Know Your NATURE Center!”

By Cindy Gold

The “Know Your NATURE Center” is truly a labor of love. Over thirty-five docents, family members and friends worked on the project. We raised money through a grant from the City of Santa Clarita. We produced three short videos that teach visitors about the park and inspire love and respect for nature: Let's Go Birdwatching, Wild About Wildflowers and Choose a Trail. We installed a 55” TV, media player and buttons so people can watch the videos during park hours. After viewing a video, visitors can take a handout, choose a trail, and discover the birds and wildflowers as they hike through the park.

Our Grand Opening was a huge success, with many local dignitaries, docents, staff, family, and park visitors attending. As docents, we are dedicated to nature education. But we're not finished yet – we're planning to produce more videos in the future. Come and check it out!





Dear Friends,

One of my favorite aspects of the Fifth District is how many beautiful outdoor areas we have to enjoy. Through the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, residents can learn about plants and animals close to home. This week, we celebrated the opening of the brand new Placerita Canyon Know Your Nature Center in the Santa Clarita Valley. The center, which was spearheaded by dedicated local volunteers with support from the City of Santa Clarita, makes learning about the outdoors accessible and fun for residents of all ages. The center includes a renovated bird observation deck, a new exhibit, and an educational video series. In addition to these new features, volunteers and docents will continue to invite visitors to learn about nature with hands-on activities like family hikes, bird and nature walks, museum tours, animal presentations, and so much more. I encourage community members to stop by the new Know Your Nature Center or find another nature center near your community to explore all resources and fun!

Best wishes,
 Kathryn Barger
 Supervisor, Fifth District



The Challengers Went to the Rattlesnake Rock!

by Pat Coskran

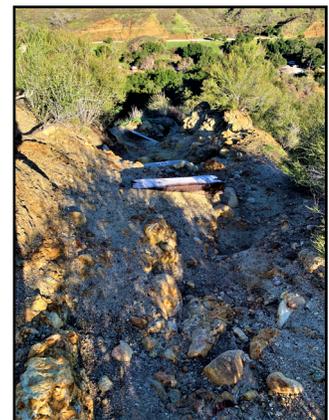
So, there I was, pacing in the parking lot outside the Nature Center on the first Saturday morning of 2023. I had sent out an invitation to my Challengers Hiking Group a couple of days before, saying that although the weather was forecast to be iffy, I was hiking anyway—not expecting a great response.

Well, to my surprise, 9 hikers showed up by 9:00 looking bright eyed, bushy tailed and ready to roll. I had awakened that morning feeling kind of bushy eyed, having recovered from back-to-back bouts with Covid, but seeing the looks of excited anticipation on the faces of my hikers gave me the infusion of energy and enthusi-

asm I needed.

We hiked up the hillside trail to rattlesnake rock (where this photo was taken), down the hidden trail, and up the Canyon Trail until we ran into a swollen, swift moving creek—not fit for crossing that day.

What a lucky guy I am to be able to share time with these extraordinary folks!



“My impression”

The Manzanita Trail Survives Heavy Rain
 by Barb Heinzel

The steep sections of the Manzanita Trail fared well through the latest storms. Though the heavy rains in recent weeks could have caused severe erosion, the railroad ties and wood steps along the trail prevented disastrous washouts. Always good to see hard work paying off! Manzanita trail is a real workout, with very pretty views - so give it a try.



A Grand Partnership The Story of a Quarter-Century Program at Placerita

By Heidi Webber

Twenty-five years ago, I was attending a board meeting at Placerita in my position as treasurer. On the agenda was the newsletter, *The Rattler*. At that time, Frank Hoffman and Ian Swift, supervisor at the time, let it be known that someone had to take over the *Rattler* as they didn't have time or staff to do it. Somehow, Evelyne Vandersande ended up with the job. I was sitting behind her, but her voice alone conveyed to me "deer in the headlights". I leaned forward and whispered in her ear "I can help".

The reason I could help was that I had just completed Desktop Publishing 101 at College of the Canyons, had the program, and absolutely loved it. I had been wondering how on earth I'd ever use this knowledge.

That was the beginning of a 25-year partnership with Evelyne as Editor and me as Publisher of the *Rattler*. There has been so much growth in the mechanics. Originally it was a monthly publication. Originally, Evelyne

wrote the articles in longhand, taped photos to the papers and left the packet at the center for me to pick up or I went to her home and got it. Then it was my turn. I still consider myself a novice after all these years, but I still learned so much about manipulating the program that has also evolved over the years from PageMaker 6.0 to CS6.

After picking up the packet, I transcribed all the articles to Word and then built the newsletter in the desktop program. After a few years, Evelyne became computer knowledgeable enough to write all her articles on the computer on her Word program, email a neighbor for proofing and email it to me. What a change that was! Faster and more efficient.

We had around 350 copies printed, Judy McClure labeled and mailed those copies to PNC members, staff and others on the mailing list. As printing and mailing costs rose, we successfully went to all email. Linda Kopatz kept the mailing list up-to-date and emailed the *Rattler*, which became a huge job as our mailing list grew. Now the *Rattler* is sent to our members via Trails and Nuggets, another method of communication that was developed by Evelyne for quick news and announcements as it developed and that the membership should know. It all works wonderfully!

This past October, we realized we were about to hit our 25-year milestone. We will continue this partnership as long as we have breath in our bodies.

"Hello Nature Friends" --25 years of the Rattler

by Evelyne Vandersande

You might have noticed that the newsletters from other Nature Centers are written by the supervisors or County employees.

From the very beginning, I wanted to take the *Rattler* in a different direction. We were a smaller organization back then, but the few docents were working hard as a team, and it was clear to me that this teamwork was the backbone of the Nature Center. I decided that I wanted to strengthen this family feeling any way I could. I wanted the *Rattler* to feel like a letter to a family member, telling them what was going on at home.

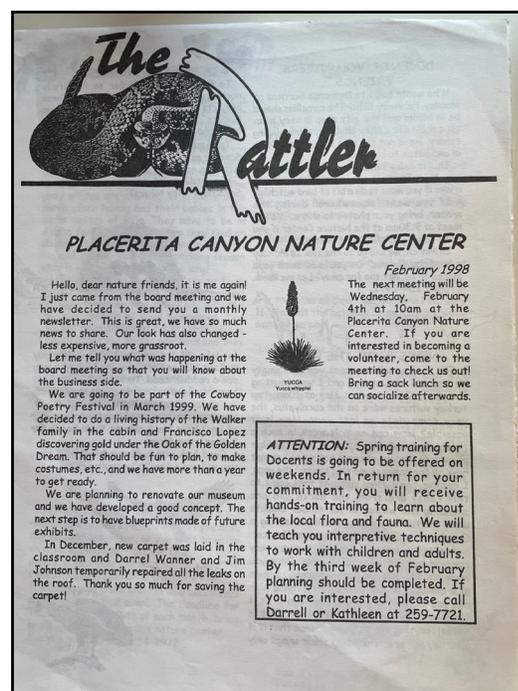
I included birth announcements and eulogies. When a docent went on a trip, they were encouraged to write an article about their nature discoveries. An interview in each issue became one of the favorite features, allowing docents and staff to learn more about one other.

After Google became part of our daily life, long scientific articles were discontinued, but docents were asked to write short articles about a project they did at the Center or something new they discovered in the park. The idea is always to give recognition to the docents, make their efforts noticed so they can feel "part of the family," and participating in the *Rattler* content gives them ownership, or so I dearly hope.

I attend every board meeting to hear all the news in order to report it properly or jump on the person involved so they can write an article! (They sometimes run away when they see me coming!) I have learned to take many, many photos during our outings, classes, or projects to be able to highlight them in the *Rattler*. The articles must be written with the knowledge that the *Rattler* is published on our web page.

Writing the *Rattler* has been a labor of love for 25 years, and working with Heidi Webber has been a wonderful experience. We check each other's work and help each other in so many ways.

I am extremely grateful and honored I have been able to serve the Nature Center to the best of my ability that way. Remember we are the best Nature Center! That does not happen by accident; it is because of all of you - so I thank you from the bottom of my heart.





Docent Training 2023

by Ron Kraus

After a two-year break resulting from pandemic related issues, Placerita's Docent Training program started up again on January 10th, 2023. When we opened the doors to the nature center that morning we were greeted with a large group of enthusiastic students. Over 20 public volunteers and 5 County Parks employees signed up for the classes.

It was somewhat challenging to put together the class schedule this year, given the 2-year hiatus in Docent Training. Some of our regular instructors had moved away from the area or had retired from teaching activities in the intervening time. However, we were able to find replacements from our talented cadre of senior docents and County Parks staff. A big thank you is due to Olivia Miseroy for stepping in to cover Arthropods and Herpetology and Ken Yasukawa for teaching the Bird class. Our continuing

gratitude goes out to all the returning instructors—Janet Kubler, Cliff & Gabi McLean, Russ Kimura, Frank Hoffman, Cindy Gold, Helen Sweany, Kim Brosnan, Jim Crowley, Teresa Jacobs, Herb Broutt, Gary Freiburger, Irene Heerlein, RuthAnne Murthy and Jack Levenberg. Other docents have helped out in the classroom instruction and I apologize to those I may have overlooked.

Also, a big thanks to Glenda Perl and Sandra Cattell for handling the class administration duties. A lot of work goes into preparing and maintaining the student roster, daily attendance records, instructor handouts and the myriad of other details required to keep the class functioning properly. Linette Brammer deserves a big pat on the back for keeping the refreshment calendar filled so that no one goes hungry during the breaks. Ditto Henry Cuaz, who comes in and makes the coffee every morning. Also, thanks to all who have brought in the goodies.

Our mentor program is being coordinated by Cindy Gold this year and all of our new students have been paired up with senior docents to help guide them through the training process. Placerita County Parks staff members have been helpful and supportive of Docent Training—Russ and Frank in providing instruction on several topics and Rene and Monica for set up and other services. In addition, many senior docents have attended the classes on a regular basis to lend a helping hand.

As I'm writing this, we have 24 students enrolled and all appear to be on track to complete the training. Classes will end in March and docent graduation is scheduled for Saturday, April 1st. So, mark your calendar and plan on attending the graduation ceremony. It's open to all docents and a good opportunity to meet the new class!

Tuesday/Thursday Morning

by Lori Wolfe

Need an extra boost in the morning? Hiking the Manzanita Trail is a great way to wake up and raise your heart rate if you are already used to hiking. This hike is best done with hiking poles and sturdy, grippy hiking shoes as the trail is rough and slippery - but the view from the top is well worth the effort!

Meet me at the steps to the Nature Center to leave by 8 am for this 45-minute strenuous hike. If a less vigorous wake up is what you need, the Ecology Trail is open for an easy walk and is just perfect for strolling with your morning coffee. You can enjoy the sights and sounds of nature before another interesting and informative class. Looking forward to seeing you on the trails, Class of 2023!

This hike is reserved for the students before Docent training as well as any current docent who would like to join the group.



Downhill Sliders

by RuthAnne Murthy

The night had been very cold, and snow could be seen on the Grapevine. We usually hike along the Canyon Trail, but having to cross the stream six times in frigid water did not sound like a pleasant idea.

Ruthanne quickly adjusted to the situation, was very flexible and proposed instead to meet at Towsley Canyon to walk to the Narrows. It was a lovely walk! We saw a few wildflowers and we had a great time with friends - it was nice to see a few of the new trainees join the group.

Jack Levenberg chose where to have lunch, a good final to a great morning.



Open House Saturday, May 13

We are in good hands! We have three fearless leaders for the Open House: Joan Fintcutter, Cindy Gold and Sue Murachanian. Thank you so much in advance for your dedication.

Just to be clear about what these three great docents will do: they will be facilitators for the event, they will plan meetings and make sure that the event goes smoothly. But each individual area will be responsible for their own activities. That worked very nicely last year.

At this time, it is a little early to create a flyer for the event because many of the activities are just in the planning stage, but we will have family hikes, crafts for the children, panning for "fool's gold," displays by Local Nature Clubs and Organizations, maybe a raffle and much more.

It will be a very fun day for the whole family so keep this date in mind: Open House May 13 from 10 am to 2 pm.



Photo by Gary Park garyparktookthese.com

Cooper's Hawk

By Ken Yasukawa

The Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) is a crow-sized raptor with short, rounded wings and long, rounded tail. It breeds in deciduous and mixed-deciduous forests throughout the United States, including in Placerita Canyon, where its distinctive "cak-cak-cak" alarm call can be heard. In some years a pair will build a nest in the trees above the picnic area of the park.

The species was named for William C. Cooper, a New York ornithologist and father of James C. Cooper, after whom the Cooper Ornithological Society is named.

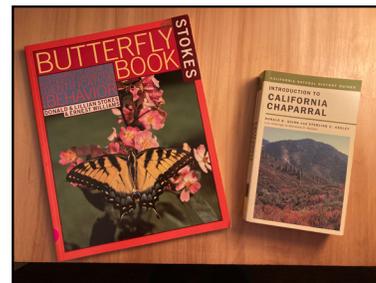
This raptor's back and wings are brown to blue gray in adults, but medium brown with some white mottling and rufous feather edging in immatures. Adults also have barred rufous underparts, whereas immatures are streaked brownish underneath. In adults, the dark blue-gray crown contrasts with a lighter-colored nape. The tail usually shows three straight, alternating bands of dark and light brown or blue gray in adults, brown tail bands in immatures.

The female is about one-third larger than the male, which makes her relative size advantage one of the largest of any of the world's hawks. Cooper's Hawks capture a variety of prey, mostly live ground-dwelling, and shrub-dwelling species, especially small to medium-sized songbirds and doves, but also small mammals.

The Cooper's Hawk, which is sometimes used by falconers, is a stealthy predator that uses a series of brief perch-and-scan positions and a final sudden burst of speed to find and capture prey. Cooper's Hawks also fly close to ground, using bushes and buildings to hide their approach. In open habitat they are known to fly at height and stoop (dive) on prey, and even occasionally to pursue prey on foot. During the breeding season, both males and females cache uneaten prey on horizontal branches and retrieve these stores for themselves and their young.

Since the 1970s, Cooper's Hawks have commonly nested in suburban and urban landscapes including in Santa Clarita. Cooper's Hawks are so tolerant of human activity that they are the most common diurnal raptor in urban backyards.

I have some personal experience with Cooper's Hawks. During my graduate research at Indiana University nearly 50 years ago, a Cooper's Hawk captured a male Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) as I observed him. The hawk made its stealthy approach through the surrounding woods, then flew at top speed from behind to capture my unsuspecting subject. He barely had time to gasp before he became breakfast. More recently, three Beloit College undergraduates and I used playbacks of Cooper's Hawk cak-cak-cak calls to determine how nestling Red-winged Blackbirds would react. As soon as they heard the call, the nestlings tried to become invisible by hunkering down in the nest and ceasing to utter their begging calls. Here in Santa Clarita, an immature Cooper's Hawk tried to capture a House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*), then perched on a wicker chair in my backyard about 5 feet from me as a sat quietly.



New Books in the Library

by Gary Freiburger

Thanks to Denny Truger and some anonymous donors for several new titles added to the PCNCA Library.

For hikers we have two books of interest: Day Hikes in the Santa Monica Mountains, and The Definitive Guide to the Waterfalls of Southern and Central California. Butterfly enthusiasts will find Butterfly Book by Donald and Lillian Stokes and Ernest Williams a very useful guide to identification and gardening tips. Finally, Introduction to California Chaparral is a complete reference to all aspects of chaparral: plants, animals, fire, climate, etc.

If you don't see a title on the shelf, check the complete library inventory in the white notebook shelved in the bookcase. The inventory will tell you which category the book is shelved in. It will also tell you if the book is checked out.

All books are available for loan (except for our facsimile copy of Audubon's Birds of North America which can be used in the building.) Be sure to enter your name and book you are checking out in the white notebook.



Mentors for Our New Docent Trainees

By Cindy Gold

It's great to start up our Docent Training Program again after a hiatus because of Covid. To help our new trainees feel at home and confident, a group of "veteran" docents have volunteered to act as their mentors. These mentors will be available to answer questions, introduce them to our community, and offer encouragement and direction as they find ways to get involved in the PCNCA. We're excited to welcome our new trainees!



“We are a Team During Docent Training”
by Sandra Cattell

Glenda Perl and I both welcome students, answer questions, and make sure they sign in and have name tags (and now badges, which Ron supplied but we put together). We both do the administrative work, like monitoring sign-in of attendees, keeping track of attendance, printing and handing out materials and whatever Ron Kraus, in charge of the training, needs at the moment. We both set up/clean-up for snacks, with Glenda monitoring the coffees.

Glenda does more of all the above work than me, including compiling workbooks. She also keeps track of the dues, and the t-shirts. I did the purchasing of kitchen supplies for the training. I (Sandra) do the gathering and labeling of the plant cuttings of our common plants, often pairing them with other plants that look similar.

We are delighted that Henry Cuaz has been faithfully coming twice a week very early to prepare the coffee. This first cup of coffee is often the first thing the students grab before going to class.

We are very grateful to all the docents who are so nice to bring snacks for break time. A well-fed student listens better and is in a better mood!

Thank you also to Linette Brammer who took care of the sign-up sheet for those



March 12, 2023



Meeting with a Bobcat

by Rene Rojas, Grounds Maintenance Worker at Placerita.

On January 24, we had a busy morning with docent training covering County regulations, as well as many visitors coming to see the stream. The afternoon was much quieter, it was beautiful and sunny with a 55 degree temperature.

Monica Chocooj (Recreation Services Leader) and I were working outside, and I was turning to go back inside when Monica silently pointed for me to look in a particular direction.

There was a very beautiful Bobcat approximately 100 feet from where we were standing. It seemed to just be out getting some Vitamin D. He was right adjacent to the Butterfly Garden. Shortly after, he started walking in a motion that seemed to indicate he was getting ready to Stalk-n-Pounce on some prey for a mid-day snack.

I started taking photos nonstop!



Weekend Volunteering

by Irene Heerlein

Placerita Canyon Nature Center welcomes many visitors on weekends. To make their park experience even more memorable, the docents assist the county employees to provide information, education and support.

There are numerous possibilities for volunteering on weekends. Here are a few to think about: show an animal in the courtyard, staff the interpretive center and Walker cabin to answer any questions, guide through the park videos for the public to "Know your Nature Center," sell items in the gift shop, or display one of the nature boxes.

We have introduced an online sign-up tool to make it easier for docents to coordinate activities on weekends so that we can provide the best service to our visitors.



Cleaning up the Pond

by Fred Seeley

As you can see in the photo, the annual pond cleaning to get ready for the early spring spawn of frogs and toads was very successful. Working on the project this year were Joe Morelli (a pond cleaning MACHINE!), Pat Coskran, Barbara Marxmiller, and yours truly. It was a fun project. Start checking for pollywogs any day now!

Olivia Miseroy, Teacher Extraordinaire!

Olivia has been teaching Arthropods and Herpetology for Docent Training.

What you might not realize is that Olivia was also responsible for advising us about our displays and some of the taxidermy animals.

Olivia keeps large collection of tarantulas and other spiders in her home because she loves them so much, and wants to study them on a regular basis. She even developed a connection with the tarantula who waits impatiently for feeding time!

Olivia is a very amazing young lady and her enthusiasm and in-depth knowledge is incredible to see... also she is a lot of fun!

Olivia says:

I've been coming to Placerita Canyon ever since I was a little kid. I started volunteering in my early 20's doing animal care. Later I worked part-time on weekends as a Recreation Leader between being a freelance model maker in the film industry. In 2015, I left that career to work full time for the parks department at the Wildlife and Wildflower Sanctuaries and Devil's Punchbowl. Two years ago, I became the Superintendent of the Sanctuaries and now oversee desert open space primarily in the Antelope Valley.

Aside from working for parks, I also have combined my love of nature education with my previous job making models, to create exhibit displays for museums and nature centers. I've done everything from bone cleaning to taxidermy and have gotten to work with some of the best wildlife artists in the world. My main focus now is on reptile replicas, botanical models and taxidermy restoration. And if dead animals weren't weird enough, I also keep tarantulas, spiders and other arthropods.

I am incredibly fortunate to live in Juniper Hills surrounded by nature with my boyfriend who is also a park naturalist. We spend our little free time outdoors hiking and sharing our plant and animal sightings on iNaturalist. I blame volunteering at Placerita for all of this, in the best way possible.



Visit to the Autry Museum.

The Autry Museum of the American West is a museum in Los Angeles, dedicated to exploring an inclusive history of the American West. Their collections contain art, firearms, saddles, Hollywood Western memorabilia and Native American baskets, ceramics, jewelry, and textiles covering these themes:

- California History
- Native America
- Environment and Western Resources
- Ranching and Cowboys
- Archaeology and Anthropology
- Popular Culture

This museum was the brainchild of Gene Autry, the famed singing cowboy of film, radio, and television. The museum went through a complete renovation in 2013 and we were very impressed with the changes. If you have not gone there in a few years, you will be pleasantly surprised. Even the small garden was lovely with a tall waterfall and planted only with Californian natives.

Herb Broutt planned this visit for the docents as part of our ongoing education, and it was very well received. There were 25 people that went to the Autry including six new docent trainees. That is always a very good sign that they are starting to feel at home with the Placerita family.

Afterward we went to lunch. All the new docents went with RuthAnne Murthy to a Cuban Restaurant. The other docents went to Tam O'Shanter.



A Tricky ADA Walkway

We were so excited when the ADA walkway construction finally started. The walkway will extend from the handicapped parking spaces to the ADA restroom. That is so important for everyone to be able to attend the events in the amphitheater.

The installation of the restroom was fast, but the walkway proved to be a little bit trickier. It can't have much of an incline, to facilitate wheelchair access. With the recent heavy rain and numerous mud slides, the heavy digging equipment was in short supply. Hopefully as Spring progresses, the walkway will be ready soon. We will keep you posted!



April 22, 2023



Placerita Bird's Nest Display
by Sue Sutton

Our Displays and Exhibits Committee works to develop projects that contribute to our visitors' understanding and appreciation of Placerita Canyon.

Our latest project is a wonderful new exhibit that was finished just in time for the Grand Opening of the "Know Your NATURE Center". Our new "Placerita Bird's Nest" exhibit is a beautiful work of art as well as a display of local bird's nests in a woodland setting.

Many talented individuals contributed to this endeavor. Chelsea Morel created a beautiful mural for the backdrop. She spent countless hours in the heat and cold to bring this exhibit to life. Jim Crowley, a docent of amazing talents, installed the elements in the exhibit as well as constructing the transparent doors to protect our nests. Denny Truger, docent electrician extraordinaire, took care of lighting the space. Many other individuals contributed nests and design ideas. A thank you also, to the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology for the loan of nests.

Frank Hoffman and His Rattlesnake Seminar

Educating the public about Nature is one of the most important goals of Placerita Canyon Nature Center. We are very proud that Frank Hoffman, Recreation Services Supervisor, gives a seminar 3 times a year at Henry Mayo Hospital on venomous snake bite prevention and treatment.

His class is very successful and always very well attended. His class starts with a description of the common rattlesnake found in the Santa Clarita Valley, the Southern Pacific Rattlesnake, in the hope that people will be able to properly identify one if they find it in their back yard or see it on the trail. Rattlesnakes play a role in the food chain, so Frank shows the different prey of the rattlesnake. They eat birds, lizards, other snakes, frogs, insects, mice, rabbits and ground squirrels. He points out why killing a rattlesnake should not be the first reaction taken. Relocation to a different area is always the better answer, but should be done only by a trained handler.

Frank debunks myths and urban legends and teaches what to do when a rattlesnake encounter occurs, plus what not to do in the event of a bite to you or to your animal. First aid after envenomation is extremely important and should take place very soon after the bite.

There are between 7,000 to 8,000 people bitten annually in the United States by venomous snakes; of those very few are fatal.

We are very lucky in this valley to have Henry Mayo Hospital carrying antivenom, and some nurses are trained to handle this emergency. Not many hospitals are equipped that way.

Because of warmer year-round temperatures here in SCV, rattlesnake encounters can happen any time of year, so be aware and always keep your dog on a leash on the trail, they are curious and so often are the first victim of a bite.

Do not miss the Community Nature Education where Frank will talk about rattlesnakes in March.



Frank Hoffman is a Master Falconer

Frank is the treasurer for the California Hawking Club and Mary, his lovely wife, is in charge of Membership. You might have noticed that Frank was away from his desk for a few days on "vacation." That is because he was one of the officers in charge of the field meet for CHC at Visalia.

Each year the CHC holds a Field Meet where falconers come to fly their birds on wild game, attend clinics and workshops on falconry equipment and husbandry, enjoy speakers who discuss these and other topics at the nightly meetings and purchase falconry equipment and artwork.

The Field Meet culminates in a Saturday night banquet where awards are presented, and newly elected officers are congratulated. Mary Hoffman received the Vice President Award for her volunteering though the years. Well-deserved and congratulations, Mary.

It is a fundraiser for CHC, and the members enjoy meeting each other to compete in the practice of the ancient art of falconry, which is close to 5000 years old.

About 210 falconers attended the 6-day event and found lodging in the local hotels. They came with their birds to hunt and there were many falcons, hawks and even a Golden Eagle.

This club was founded in 1971 and next year will be celebrating 52 years as a nonprofit conservation and scientific based organization.

Thank you so much Frank and Mary Hoffman for providing your services to this great organization and we all benefit at Placerita from your wonderful knowledge.



Frank with Sitka

Trail Treasures
By RuthAnne Murthy



Poison Oak
Toxicodendron diversilobum

Poison Oak is a common shrub that is in the sumac family. It is usually about 2-8 feet tall. Its range extends from Baja California to British Columbia. It is found in a variety of places from mountains to the chaparral below 5000 feet. It prefers moist, shady areas especially along creeks. Poison oak can also grow as a vine sometime as long as 20 feet. It is one of the most widespread shrubs in California. It can cause contact dermatitis when skin is exposed to urushiol, a compound found in all parts of the plant. Poison oak is related to poison ivy in the eastern part of the United States. Firefighters can be exposed to urushiol when poison oak is burning. The smoke can cause the esophagus to swell making breathing difficult.

The bright green, shiny leaves are trifoliate, in groups of three. Hence the old adage, "Leaves of three, let it be!" The leaves vary in size depending on their location. Generally, they are about 2 inches long with lobed margins, wavy edges. The new spring leaves can be reddish until they mature to the bright green. The center leaf is on a petiole, short stem, about ½ inch long. In the late summer or fall the leaves turn red and then fall leaving cinnamon or gray colored stems.

The small greenish-white poison oak flowers bloom in March and April. The flowers grow in a drooping panicle, a cluster. They mature into small white berries later in the season. The berries provide food for a variety of birds.

Many of the California Native People had an immunity to urushiol. The stems were used in basketry. A decoction of leaves was used to treat warts, skin cancer and to staunch blood flow.

The roots were boiled into a tea to treat dysentery. They made a dye to color basketry and for making tattoos. When a rash developed, they would use a mugwort tea to treat it.

Poison oak grows all around Placerita Canyon, especially on Canyon Trail along the creek. It contributes food to animals and is quite beautiful. However, its presence along the trail is just one of the reasons to stay on the trail. So, look at its beauty as you hike along and enjoy this fascinating trail treasure.

SPRING PROGRAMS

Animal Show: Has been cancelled because of Avian Flu restrictions.

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.

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.

Hike with the Downhill Sliders: Canyon trail hike going downhill. The third Wednesday of the month at 10.00am. Meet at the Nature Center, then we will drive to the Walker Ranch parking lot. Program for docents and friends. Please bring water and poles.

Placerita Nature Tots: Placerita Canyon Nature Tots For 3-to-6-year-olds. Meets second Saturday of the month at 9:30 a.m. Program lasts 45 min to an hour and will involve learning about the environment. To register: Nature_tots@placerita.org

The topic for March is Wildflowers and Pollination. April: TBD

Docent Training: Graduation Ceremony and dinner Saturday April 1st at 6.00pm at Placerita Canyon Nature Center. All docents are invited to the event. (Potluck dinner)

Nature Education: Every 3rd Sunday of the month at 2pm, PCNCA provides a free educational program open to the public. March is Rattlesnakes by Ranger Frank Hoffman, Recreation Services Supervisor. April: TBD.

OPEN HOUSE; Saturday, May 13 at Placerita Canyon Nature Center from 10.00am to 2.00pm