

The Rattler

Sponsored by the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates
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www.placerita.org (661) 259-7721

Placerita Canyon Nature Center
Over 50 Years of Nature Education

May-June 2025

Editor: Evelyn Vandersande Publisher: Heidi Webber

Dear Nature Friends,

Summer will be here soon, and we are happy to let you know that the Nature Center is doing very well.

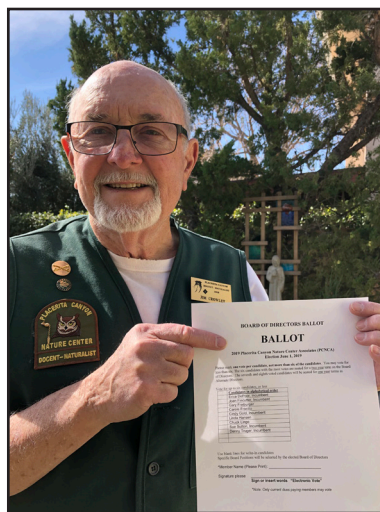
After the many years of Covid restrictions, the school tours are back in full force, and it is a delight to work with all the children. After a long winter without enough rain, suddenly (with the little we did get) the vegetation is exploding, and the hills are covered with ceanothus in bloom. The docents have been dedicated, enthusiastic and have started many very well-attended programs. The park is filled with lots of visitors every weekend enjoying Placerita, and it is a joy to see. The Open House is coming soon, so more fun times will be happening. Things look very good indeed!



Open House 2025!

By Cindy Gold

Save the date – Saturday, May 10th, 10:00AM – 2:00PM! We're busy planning a wonderful day of fun in the park for all ages at our annual Open House. There will be exhibitors, clubs, activities, and free crafts and games for the kids. Come see live animal demonstrations, learn about reptiles, bugs, and birds. Find out about nature clubs and conservation organizations. There will be food trucks and plenty of places to picnic. We hope to see you there! (Cindy Gold again graciously accepted to be Chairperson for this year's Open House. Thank you so much for your hard work and thorough planning!)



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

By Jim Crowley

PCNCA will conduct the Board of Directors election in May. It is time for the people interested in running for a Board position to seriously consider it. You have a chance to express your thoughts on how we can improve the park and our programs. In the April/May 2025 time frame, all members will receive voting instructions. If you are at all interested, let one of the board members know you are interested in being added to the ballot.

Please contact Jim Crowley about the responsibilities involved. Here are some Board of Director (BoD) basics: Elected board members serve a two-year term, with half the BoD up for re-election each year. Additionally, two alternate directors are elected to a one-year term. Consider running for a board position to help make decisions and plans for our Docent organization.

Eligibility requirements are simple...be a member in good standing (paid dues) and willing to attend a monthly board meeting. Remember that all members have an ongoing open invitation to attend any or all Board of Directors' meetings on the first Tuesday of the month, at 1:00PM to participate, watch, and see how it all works. We highly encourage this

Thank You. The voting result will be finalized on May 31, and the results will be announced at the first board meeting in June as well as at the Welcome Summer Dinner.



The Nature Tots Alumni

Nature Tots is a very successful program for the little ones at Placerita. It takes place on the 2nd Saturday of the month at 9:30AM, and is designed for children 3 to 6 years old. Check the Summer Schedule to learn how to register.

However, what happens when you grow up a little or when your parents are bringing your younger siblings? A program was started for older siblings and alumni beyond Nature Tots age. Maria Elena Christensen and Brieanne Kelly are the leaders. Domino, Brianne's daughter, is always very enthusiastic and ready to help, and parents are welcome to join. As you can see, there are many happy faces!

The group hikes for about one hour. There are several objectives: to feel safe and comfortable hiking, connect with friends and nature, and enjoy Placerita Canyon trails while having a fun time. Being an alumnus at age 7 at Placerita brings another level of appreciation for nature, while growing up a little bit and becoming more mature.

Blooms of the Season

by RuthAnne Murthy

It is March, and Spring is finally here. The last few rain showers vastly improved the situation for the wildflowers.

We saw both hoary and hairy ceanothus on the Canyon Trail. We also saw purple night shade and some beautiful golden currants. There were a lot of lance-leaf dudleyas. The little annuals are absent so far. The poison oak is shiny with urushiol, the oil on the plant that will give you a strong skin reaction if you touch it. So, remember "leaves of 3, let it be!"

Blooms of the Season is on the 4th Saturday of every month. Meet on the patio at 9am for a one-hour stroll with RuthAnne Murthy. Bring your camera and your questions, and enjoy springtime in Placerita.



Downhill Sliders in Towsley

The Downhill Sliders meet for a gentle hike on the 2nd Monday of the month at 9AM, and enjoy lunch together in a restaurant after the hike. Everyone is invited, and it is very pleasant. We talk, laugh and enjoy the outdoors.

That morning was on the second day after the start of daylight savings time. It was cool, and we were a little bit sleepy but the sun came out and we enjoyed our walk toward the Narrows.

Darla, RuthAnne dog's, gave it a good try and went on the trail for a little while, enjoying all the attention.

Check your Trails and Nuggets to find out the next location.



A New Sign for Walker Ranch Trailhead

by Denny Truger

On Judy McClure's Saturday family hikes, Judy was constantly asked about the Walker Ranch trailhead location. So, she asked if there could be a Walker Ranch sign at the trailhead off Placerita Canyon Road. This was three years ago.

Unfortunately, it was forgotten after many discussions, thoughts from the County and others about how to do this. Two months ago, I suggested that PNC pay for our own sign and simply put it on the gate of the trailhead. So now we can tell people to go up Placerita Canyon about 1-1/2 miles, and they will see the trailhead sign.



Nature Education About Mushrooms

by Helen Sweany.

Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates and Field Mycology did present a Mushroom Foray and Talk on March 16.

What an incredible day at Placerita! Over 100 enthusiastic mushroomers joined us for an unforgettable mushroom hunt led by the amazing Bat Vardeh, mycologist extraordinaire. Just days after the rain, we were blown away by the sheer variety of fungi - sometimes every few feet they were hiding, and we learned how and where to find them.

Before this program, we were lucky to find two or three. Not anymore!

From teeny tiny to vibrantly colored pink, burgundy, blue, purple, brown, yellow, white - some were brittle and dry, while others wobbled like jelly. Bat identified them all and shared memorable tips along the way.

Who knew a mushroom hunt with such a large crowd could feel like an epic egg hunt? But it did! We are so grateful for Bat's knowledge and the joy she brought to Placerita. What a day to remember!

Nature Education is given every 3rd Sunday of the month at 2PM. PCNCA provides a free educational program open to the public. Check the web page on Placerita.org to learn about the topic. Helen Sweany is in charge of the program, with the help of the technical team. Thank you all for making this possible.

We were very grateful to have the event covered by Maya Morales from THE SIGNAL with an article and some wonderful photos. Thank you for your publicity and your support.





Rosemarie Regis, the Bird Lady!

Rosemarie has done the bird walk once a month for 20 years, that is certainly a record! She is gentle and soft spoken, but has a sharp knowledge of the bird population at Placerita and lots of experience. Through the years, she has made many friends who became avid birders. Each season she brings new visitors out for some fun, who decide to come back on a regular basis, and who enjoy her explanations and her enthusiasm.

Rosemarie and her husband Don moved to Santa Paula, and it is a long drive early in the morning to get to Placerita. She is going to have to give up leading Bird Walks. As much as she loves it, the time has come for her to pass the torch to someone else.

Thank you so much Rosemarie for your 20 years of dedication to the bird walk. You are a very precious docent, and we are extremely grateful for the many hours of joy and excitement you provided all the birders at Placerita.

We are delighted that Ellen Coleman has accepted replacing Rosemarie for the bird walk. Good luck to all.



More Storage Space for the Docents

By Heidi Webber

Some time back, the docents realized that we really need a larger storage space, one that is more rodent and weather proof. We had use of the shed in the parking lot, but if there was much rain (yes, we do get that on occasion), mud would enter and create a mess. Also, mice just loved the nice sheltered space, which wasn't very nice to anyone who needed to dig for anything inside.

It was suggested after this year's Craft Fair that we see about getting a sea/land container for storage. Bill started researching and found that we could buy a nice, used, weatherproof (and presumably rodent proof) container fairly cheap. He got board approval and a budget.

On March 14, our new 20-foot container was delivered and set next to the shed in the parking lot. It is on blocks so water and mud can flow under as necessary. He built a set of steps for ease of entry. We spent the entire weekend emptying the shed, breaking down shelves, rebuilding those shelves in the container and moving all the totes into the new space. It was so nice to have room to store everything, from Craft Fair supplies, to Open House totes and Walker Cabin items and with some room to spare.

We still have things to do, like Denny installing LED utility lights and of course electricity. A ceiling vent for ventilation with a screen over the opening to deter rodents will also be installed.

It will be such a pleasure to have a roomier place to store our supplies for various events.

Many thanks to Russ and the Board for supporting this endeavor.



A New Bird Walk Leader

"Hi! I'm Ellen Coleman

Beginning in May, I'll be leading the PCNC-Bird Walk once a month!

I started "birding" the year before I retired. I've always loved birds, and I wanted to pursue a bird watching hobby more seriously, but work and life got in the way... there just wasn't enough time.

Finally, at the end of 2019, after 23 years with the State of California, I submitted my retirement package AND attended my first Bird Walk at PCNC. I loved it! I've been a regular participant since then and it was Rosemarie who encouraged me to become a PCNC Docent. When she announced her retirement, I gladly stepped in to take her place, although I can never fill her shoes. She's amazing!

The PCNC Bird Walk is so fun! The first two Saturdays of the month we "Birders" stage up at the PCNC parking lot and look for birds; then we walk around the Nature Center. As we're walking, we log the birds that we see or hear (if you hear the bird-song, it still counts as a sighting) in our notebooks. In a 2-hour period, we may see as many as 30 birds!

I think everyone should attend a Bird Walk at least once...you'll love it."





Books and Hikes

by Ellen Coleman

We introduced a fascinating novel under the new and quickly emerging genre called "Cli-Fi" or Climate Fiction.

Greenwood, by Michael Christie, was our featured book for March. This novel spans four generations of the Greenwood family, over the course of 100+ years [1908-2038]. The family history reflects how each generation carries experiences from their ancestors, adapted to the current environment - and, in this case, the passage of time is marked by the width and color of tree rings and how each member of the Greenwood family is drawn to trees in a meaningful way with wildly different approaches to 'conservation'!

In March, 21 members arrived to discuss Greenwood. Our hike began with the Heritage Trail, in honor of the visually impaired Harris character, taking in the historical mural and Oak of the Golden Dream, and then moved to the Lyons Oak and lower portions of the Ecology Trail.

Using the rings from the tree trunk as a guide, we compared the Greenwood generations from the novel to the Walker Family and the impact the Walkers have had on PCNA. We hunted unsuccessfully for mushrooms, and ended the hike with "Snack Time", which consisted of super tasty Greenwood Cheese Trees, that our B&H members enjoyed.

A great time was had by all! Remember, Books and Hikes takes place on the 4th Sunday of the month from 9AM to 10.30AM- check the calendar section to register.



Fun with Friends

by Pat Coskran

On Sunday, March 16th, Docents Lori, Maria Elena, Dave, Dan D., Jack, Denny, Sandy, Judie D., and I had the pleasure of entertaining and educating a special group of young visitors to Placerita.

A young man, named Sammy, started a club that he named "Fun with Friends", because he told his mom that he was going to miss his friends when he turned 22 and "aged out" of Special Education services.



Bill examining an orphan during intake.

Nature Tots: Squirrels

By Heidi Webber

On March 8, Bill and I took some baby squirrels to the Placerita Nature Tots program on squirrels. We are licensed rehabbers and our purpose was to educate the Tots and their families on squirrels and their rehabilitation when they become orphans until they are released back into the wild.

It was a great morning with videos, crafts, a hike looking for natural squirrel food, and a short presentation of babies.

The families were so interested and know that it is a lot of work to properly rehabilitate any wild animal and that they aren't good pets.



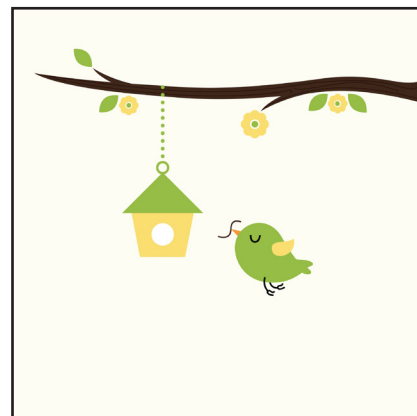
Cesar Chavez Volunteer Appreciation Banquet

by Linette Brammer

The Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation presented the annual Volunteer Banquet on Saturday March 22, at the Castaic Regional Sports Complex. The theme was "Western." There were old-style games like bean bag toss, some country dancing and rope twirling. My favorite was cowboy hat decorating. The food was delicious and served by polite and helpful staff.

It was a beautiful day. Russ Kimura, Regional Park Superintendent 1, gave heartfelt recognition to many docents. Placerita introduced the largest docent group of all the Nature Centers. Here are the docents who were recognized: Denny Truger, Rick Brammer, Teresa Jacobs, Robert Grzesiak, Lori Wolf, Denise Allen, Sandy Corkle, Rose Krueger, Jennie Marsh, Barbara Marxmiller, Dave Taylor, Marc Alva and Ray Orloff. Russ said some very encouraging and kind words about our volunteers. He said how each one was appreciated, and outlined what they had done for Placerita.

Everyone was very touched by the way Russ talked about his volunteers, they really felt valued and recognized. Congratulations and thank you again for all you do at Placerita.





Cobwebby Thistle
Cirsium occidentale

Trail Treasures

By RuthAnne Murthy

Cobwebby thistle is a biennial herb that grows in the chaparral and coastal sage scrub. Biennial means that it blooms in its second season. The first season it is developing its root system and the basal leaves that form a rosette that is usually 1 foot tall. The second season a tall spike grows up to 10 feet tall. Then the plant is ready to produce flowers. All parts of the plant have white prickles that can be irritating to the skin.

The leaves grow alternately; one this way, the next the other way. The wavy margins (edges) are heavily toothed with a spine at the tip. The leaves grow up to 12 inches long. These spines and prickles discourage deer from eating them.

The plant belongs to the sunflower family even though it doesn't have petals (rays). It grows in full sun in sandy or clay soil from April to July. The flowers range in color from deep red to plum rose. The plant can produce more than one flower on 5–7-inch stems. The pollen is white. The flowers are about 2 inches across. The bracts are very sharp when they dry. The seeds are wind dispersed.

Cobwebby thistles are a larval food for the Painted Lady butterfly. The butterflies lay their eggs on the plant, and when the eggs hatch, the plant provides the larva their first food. The flower produces pollen and nectar for native bees and several butterfly species. Cobwebby thistle is a showy plant that brings texture and color to the summer landscape making it a true Trail Treasure.



Photos by Gary Park

Climate Change and Wildfire Smoke Affect Nestling Birds

By Ken Yasukawa

We know that climate change affects life on earth, but we know little about how heat affects animals in the wild, especially during early life. My colleague Kim Rosvall and six other ornithologists studied behavioral and physiological responses of 12-day-old, wild Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) to a 4-hour heat challenge, like at the beginning of a heatwave. This study is potentially important because Tree Swallows are expanding their breeding range into warmer environments and are thriving there.

In addition to expected changes in behavior, elevated heat also increased expression of the gene for Heat Shock Protein (HSP) and changes related to antioxidant defenses and inflammation. All nestlings survived the challenge in the short term, but control nestlings were more likely to return to breed as adults. Early-life exposure to heat may, therefore, influence which nestlings survive the first year of life.

Cara Krieg was interested in the effects of wildfire smoke on nestling health, but unlike other studies that focused on nearby fires, Krieg studied the effects Canadian wildfires on House Wrens (*Troglodytes aedon*) in Pennsylvania. The distant wildfires temporarily elevated particulate matter pollution for 3 days. By comparing the weights and leg lengths on days 6 and 10 after hatching for nestlings measured before, during, and after the pollution spike, Krieg was able to show that even brief exposure resulted in reduced weight and smaller size.

Both studies show that birds are sensitive to even small and brief changes in environmental conditions. In other words, wild birds are our “canaries in coal mines.”

Woodruff, MJ, Tsueda, SN, Cutrell, TS, Guardado, EA, Rusch, DB, Buechlein, A, Rosvall, KA. (2024). Heat alters diverse thermal tolerance mechanisms: An organismal framework for studying climate change effects in a wild bird. *Functional Ecology* 39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2435.14704>

Krieg, CA. (2025). Depressed nestling growth during exposure to smoke from distant wildfires. *Scientific Reports* 15. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-93101-6>





Congratulations Mickey Long

Mickey Long was the Director of Eaton Canyon Nature Center and worked in the Los Angeles County Natural Areas system, particularly at Eaton Canyon, for over 39 years. Mickey Long is a major bird guy. He shared his passion with many of us through the years and taught us well at Placerita.

And adding a birdwatching term, “lifer”, used to describe the first time they saw a specific species of bird - Mickey experienced many “lifers”, but this one was very special. Read on for the story about this recent event.

Los Angeles County Arboretum & Botanic Garden

A rare male Rose-breasted Grosbeak was spotted at the #LAArboretum for the second consecutive year, much to the delight of local birdwatchers.

The bird, typically found in the Eastern U.S. during summer, was first seen by long-time birders Lou and Chris Orr in the Meadowbrook area on March 20, 2024.

The next day, Jan and Mickey Long, avid birding enthusiasts, were able to track down the bird and capture their own stunning photographs.

This year, the bird made its return on February 15, once again in the Meadowbrook area. Three birders reported the sighting, prompting the Longs to head back to the location. They were able to get a good look at the bird, which was still in winter plumage, more subdued compared to the previous year's vibrant colors. It appears that the Grosbeak, like last year, only stayed for about two days before continuing its journey.

The Rose-breasted Grosbeak typically nests in the Eastern U.S. during the summer and winters in southern Mexico and South America. Its return to the same spot for two consecutive years has intrigued local birders, who are fascinated by the bird's journey across the Rockies to make its stop at the Arboretum.

With its rare appearance and the fact that it follows the same migratory route, birdwatchers are keeping an eye out for the Grosbeak's potential return next winter.

Docent Enrichment

by Dennis Cain

Many of you are aware that a Tree Assessment project has been underway for the last several months with the goal of documenting the health of the woodlands near the picnic area and nature center buildings. This is the first project that will contribute to the development of a Resource Management Plan (RMP) for PCNA. The March Docent Enrichment session, led by LA County Natural Areas Biologist Cristhian Mace, provided an overview of the upcoming RMP and an opportunity for docent feedback on the findings of the Tree Assessment project.

The goal of this initial project is to establish a baseline against which we can develop a plan to maintain and grow our forests in the face of potential threats (e.g., GSOB, harmful fungus, erosion). Over 200 trees were surveyed, and the data have already been used to inform maintenance actions to reduce risk from dead tree branches and serve as ‘ground truth’ for a project at Claremont Graduate School focused on developing remote sensing methods (using drones and satellite data).

The PCNA RMP will include sections that describe the current state of the park, including geologic, recreational, hydrologic, historical, vegetation, wildlife, educational, and interpretive elements. The data collected for each section will be summarized to contribute to the development of a realistic future state, then strategies and projects will be identified to achieve that vision. Given that PCNA has been in existence for nearly 75 years, there are many sources that will be researched to amass and organize the data. Cristhian showed outlines, examples, and initial detailed data about PCNA as a starting point for the effort. The presentation is available for anyone who wants to review it.

We hope to enroll in the support of docents to allow broad involvement in this important endeavor. This is our opportunity to assemble our collective knowledge and documentation into a central database, and then to develop our vision and related strategies at a lower, down-to-earth level, than Cristhian will use for the final RMP. You will see announcements in the near future asking for your support, including: (1) extending tree survey to Walker Ranch area, (2) conducting canopy density measurements, (3) correlating tree history and human history (e.g., Walker management, grazing), (4) develop GSOB detection strategy with Disney, (5) making a map of hazard trees to initiate docent monitoring, and (6) get botanical surveys started to support biodiversity baselining and vegetation mapping. We look forward to your continued input and help!

Spring Showers are Welcomed

by Glenda Perl

Yay! School field trips are returning to Placerita Canyon Nature Center! On March 12 we hosted 70 2nd graders from Tesoro del Valle School. We had to adjust our usual program due to the rain, but we docents love a challenge!

Our intrepid leader Lori Wolfe herded the kids off the bus and into the classroom. Denny Truger and Jack Levenberg showed Ghost, a barn owl, and Sierra, a Great-horned owl. Next up was Judie Kerr Davis, who did a fantastic presentation on the Circle of Life. Then came the snake charmers (Marc Alva with Clarence, a king snake, and Dave Taylor with Rosie, a rosy boa). Denny and Jack also brought out Aiyana, a Red-tailed hawk, and Wheelie, a Harris hawk. We saved the best for last: Violet, our cute little striped skunk!

By now, the kids were getting restless sitting on the floor for so long. Let's Go on a Hike! The rain stopped just long enough for us to take them out for a short hike. None of the 8 kids on my hike had ever visited Placerita Nature Center. Everyone, kids and adults, had a terrific time!! Also helping out were Maria Elena Christensen, Ken Yasukawa, Pat Coskran, and Herb Broutt.



SUMMER SCHEDULE

OPEN HOUSE MAY 10 – 10AM to 2PM

Important change in Park Schedule: The park gates are open 8:00AM to 7:30PM starting March 1 to October 31.

Books and Hikes: 4th Sunday of the month from 9AM to 10:30AM. Please register at booksandhikes@placerita.org

Bird Walks: 1st Saturday of every month with Ellen Coleman. 2nd Saturday of every month with Ken Yasukawa. For all levels of birders, from 9AM to 10AM. Bring binoculars, water and a field guide. **NOTE THAT THERE WON'T BE A BIRD WALK ON MAY 10** due to the Open House.

Blooms of the Season: Learn about native plants with RuthAnne Murthy, 4th Saturday of every month. Meet on the patio at 9AM for a one-hour stroll. Bring your camera and questions.

Family Nature Walk: Every Saturday from 11AM to noon with Judy McClure. An easy 1-hour walk exploring the natural and cultural history of the area.

Hike with the Downhill Sliders: 2nd Monday of the month, check Trails and Nuggets for information.

Placerita Nature Tots: 2nd Saturday of the month at 9:30AM. For 3-to-6-year-olds. Program lasts 45 minutes to one hour and will involve learning about the environment. To register, go to Nature_tots@placerita.org

Nature Education: Every 3rd Sunday of the month at 2PM, PCNCA provides a free educational program open to the public. Check the webpage to learn about the topic.

Native Plant Renewal and Restoration: Every Thursday at 9AM, led by Robert Grzesiak. Bring garden gloves and water.

Voting for the board will be finalized on May 31, docents please vote for your board of Directors.

BACK TO THE SUMMER party for the docents and their significant others on Saturday, June 7 at 6PM. There will be a potluck dinner and results from the board election will be announced that evening.

Placerita Canyon Nature Center

Open House

May 10, 2025

10AM to 2PM

- Free Admission & Parking
- Crafts & Games
- Panning for "Fools" Gold
- Animal Presentations
- Caricatures by Jill
- Displays by Local Nature Clubs & Organizations
- Gift Shop (electronic payment available)
- Fender Guitar Raffle
- Native Plant Sale
- Food Trucks

Activities subject to change. Overflow parking and free shuttle available.

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