



NEWSLETTER

Pajarito Environmental Education Center

60 Barranca Rd., Los Alamos, NM 87544

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President's Message from Claudia Lewis

Pajarito Plateau--Bottom to Top. Every morning as I drive up the hill to work, I experience the wonder of the Pajarito Plateau rising over the Rio Grande. At Otowi Crossing, I see the river entering White Rock Canyon, having carved a gorge through thick black basalts of the Cerros del Rio volcanic field into the fine-grained orange sandstones that filled the Española basin before there was a Rio Grande. At Totavi, I pass the ancient Rio Grande gravels and climb up through Cerros del Rio basalt to the base of the Bandelier Tuff. Above me rise the banded orange and white cliffs of the million-year-old ash flow tuff sequence that underlies the plateau. I see the white Tsankawi pumice beds at the base, the cliffy exposures of compacted and welded ash, and, at the top of the talus, the ashy nonwelded tuff favored by the Anasazi for their cliff dwellings. I cross Pueblo and Los Alamos Canyons and head up Sandia Canyon, through much of the entire sequence of ash flows visible in spectacular natural exposures and roadcuts to arrive at the pine-forested top, 1000 vertical feet above the river. Not only is the Pajarito Plateau physically impressive, it is home to diverse flora and fauna that take advantage of the variety of habitats afforded by the range in elevation from canyon bottoms to mesa tops and the nearby presence of the mountains and the Rio

Grande, connected by the canyons that have served for millennia as corridors for people and animals in search of food, water, and shelter and, more recently, relaxation and renewal. This plateau will one day be home to the Pajarito Environmental Education Center.

Pajaritos y Mariposas--Educational Programs. PEEC is not just something in the future, however. We are actively running programs on birds and butterflies and planning Earth Day (April 20) activities around the theme of *water*. We recently received \$10,000 from the LANL Foundation for *Birds for a Purpose* educational programs being offered in conjunction with the Randall Davey Audubon Center at schools in Jemez Springs, Cochiti, San Juan, and Santa Clara Pueblos. We received funding for a *Neotropical Migratory Birds* project (in collaboration with the *NM Breeding Bird Atlas Project* and *Hawks Aloft* and funded by the National Park Foundation's *Park Flight Program*) for field trips into national parks for 1800 rural New Mexico students. We have also received funding from the National Park Foundation for a butterfly project. PEEC will be assisting Steve Fettig (Bandelier N. M.) and Paula Kleintjes (University of Wisconsin) in creating an annotated checklist of 100 butterfly species in Bandelier.

Ustedes--Membership. This fall we ran our first membership drive. As I write this, we

are an organization of 88 families! Many of you wrote to express your ideas of what our nature center should be. And many volunteered to assist with educational programs, grant writing, publicity, organizing events, and making a physical nature center a reality. Some of your comments follow:

Tom Fairbanks and Beth West think it should provide "programs for children, specific to the Pajarito Plateau."

Suellen Bowersock and Gerald Reisz wrote that a nature center should be a "resource for learning, activities, hikes, interpretation of the unique surroundings, flora, fauna, and geology." They see it as "a dynamic interactive center where learners are teachers and teachers are learners, exploration is encouraged, and observation of birds, mammals, & amphibians in natural surroundings [is possible]--similar to Albuquerque's Rio Grande Nature Center." Chuck and Barbara Calef think it should provide "natural history exhibits and a gathering place for nature talks and lessons."

Your ideas are as varied as the flora and fauna of the Plateau. But one thing ties them all together--your desire to build a nature center here where residents and visitors to the region can enjoy the rich natural and cultural resources of this amazing place. We have a lot to discover together. Thanks for your financial support, encouragement, and participation.

Nature Center Sites: A Home for PEEC

Michael G. Smith

While PEEC is up and functioning, it is generally agreed that it cannot reach its full potential for the community without a site and building. A Site Selection Committee has been formed and has been looking at potential sites based on site criteria.

Site Criteria. The most critical aspect of a nature center site is that it be representative of the local natural environment. It should be

a setting in which it is possible for the nature center to fulfill its primary functions of bringing people of all ages into contact with the natural resources of the Jemez Mountain region, providing educational programs that increase understanding and appreciation of our natural surroundings, and fostering environmental stewardship. With this in mind the following major criteria were chosen:

- Access to a variety of natural habitats (mountains, mesas, and canyons) and the county trail network by various modes of transportation
- Immediately available buildable space within Los Alamos County whose development will not degrade the environment nor impact neighbors and with the potential for expansion
- Available parking and protection from noise and light pollution
- Scenic quality and the ability to attract wildlife
- Financial feasibility

The Committee is also taking into consideration zoning, ease of building, utility access, and the use of sustainable building techniques.

Potential Sites. Sites thus far being considered are

- the abandoned wastewater treatment facility on Olive Street/Pueblo Canyon;
- county land on North Mesa near the stables and trailer park;
- Bayo Canyon near the Diamond Drive roundabout;
- Overlook Park in White Rock; and
- county land at the top of the Red Dot Trailhead in La Senda.

If you have ideas about other potential sites please contact Michael Smith, Chick Keller, or Gordon Spingler.

INCLUDE A NATURE CENTER IN YOUR VISION FOR LOS ALAMOS!

As the county embarks on a new comprehensive plan, we all have a rare chance to express our vision for an ideal Los Alamos. If a nature center is part of your

vision, be sure to let the planners know.

Celebrate Vultures

Chick Keller

The explorers were moving slowly across the desert in the hot sun when they saw the tell-tale sign of buzzards circling in the sky ahead of them. Half an hour later they came upon the grisly scene--a man, nearly dead, crawling in the sand perhaps days without water, now surrounded by the waiting birds, ready to peck out his eyes and tear his lifeless body to shreds. With righteous revulsion, the men fired their rifles and the cowardly birds took flight, but only to a dead tree nearby where they perched, waiting patiently, hunched over in that characteristic, macabre pose of "buzzards" the world over.

This is how I first came to know vultures. This movie image is sometimes all that many people have of these timid, beautiful, but largely misunderstood creatures.

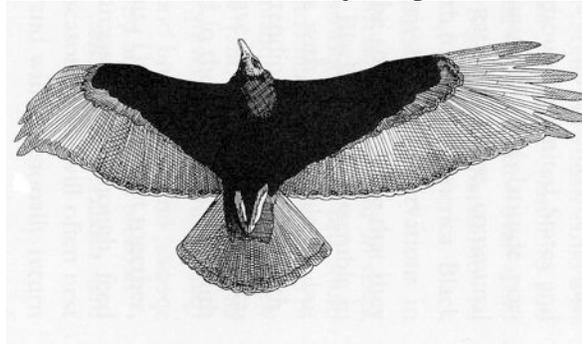
Walking up the Devaney Trail above the Skating Rink on a cool, sunny morning, I topped out on the canyon rim and rounded a bend to see a dead ponderosa pine with several Turkey Vultures sunning themselves, looking as sleepy as I was. They eyed me warily when I stopped to gaze up at them, turning their bright red heads to regard me balefully. As I watched, they seemed to take offense at having their early morning invaded. "Who is this person, impolitely staring at us? Why doesn't he have the common decency to just pass by?" They shifted their weight uncomfortably and opened one wing to the breeze. Then, since I



impertinently continued watching them, their bodies hunched over, the great black wings spread, and, with only one or two sweeping

wingflaps to get started, they launched out onto the morning air. As these great birds, most expert of nature's gliders, drifted across the canyon to catch the first rising thermals of the new day, I could easily see the characteristic V shape their wings make with their bodies and their equally characteristic tippy flight which looks so unsteady but which signals their expert sensing of every nuance in the air movement around them. They never flapped wings again but circled ever higher until they were a thousand feet above their ponderosa perch. I resumed my walk to work with heart and soul equally buoyed and soaring.

I was aware that I had just "celebrated vultures" and not just any vultures. These are Los Alamos' own. There, just up from the



skating rink stands a particularly tall white fir tree. You can see it easily from the Omega Bridge, for its limbs seem whiter than the other trees. This is because it is the night roost for 20 to 50 of these wonderful birds. After sunset the thermals that have kept them aloft all day give way to a cool river of air flowing down canyon. Against that flow they come, low over the bridge, aiming for that tree, flapping now and then against the tide until they alight for the night. The last stragglers cause a comical commotion as they try to shoulder their way onto already occupied limbs. With much flapping of wings others are displaced--literally knocked into the air--and have to find another perch, which in turn disturbs others until finally all are settled for the night.

Driving across the bridge you can sometimes see fifty vultures in a great group circling to gain altitude. Once high in the air, they drift off in all directions looking for breakfast. The recurring question of whether they find food by sight or smell has recently

been answered by a series of ingenious experiments, and it is both, for they combine excellent sight with a highly developed sense of smell. Along with ravens and coyotes these birds perform an invaluable service keeping our world clear of dead and decaying creatures--from an old elk who last night lay down to end its days to a young, energetic squirrel transformed in an instant into what we euphemistically call roadkill.

Because vultures eat carrion, their heads are devoid of feathers. This hygienic adaptation makes them look pretty ugly to us at first sight. (For this reason Kathleen Ramsey has named her vulture--unable to fly due to an injured wing--SOL, or Short On

Looks.) Maybe you'll get to see SOL on Earth Day if the Wildlife Center volunteers bring up their injured raptors.

In the fall, after gracing our airways throughout the summer, our vultures begin to drift south for the winter. But as the sun returns north and the weather warms, we begin looking for their return since it is a sure sign of spring. With the warming climate this date is moving ever earlier in the year from April well into March. It is with considerable excitement that we see the first tipsily-soaring traveler return. We feel very fortunate that these shy creatures have chosen to roost in our town and grace our air.

Calendar of Natural History Events

Early to mid-March

Let us know when you spot your first vulture of the year! We'll tally responses to see what the earliest date is and how many vultures have been seen. Call Yvonne Keller, 672-9750. Later in the season Steve Fettig, biologist at Bandelier, will lead a count of the vultures as they leave Frijoles Canyon in the morning. Steve has also volunteered to help PEEC initiate a count of the vultures that roost in Los Alamos Canyon.

Return of the Vultures

Saturday, April 20

PEEC is currently planning Earth Day talks and walks revolving around the subject of one of our most important natural resources--water. To volunteer, contact Michael Smith at 661-8405.

Earth Day 2002

Saturday, May 11

The spring songbird migration is an exciting time as birds return from their winter home. On the second Saturday in May every year, people all over North America count birds near their homes. We will walk the forests and grasslands of Los Alamos County counting all the birds we see and hear. To help with the count, contact Stephen Fettig at 662-6785.

International Migratory Bird Day

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Newsletter edited by Yvonne Keller and Becky Shankland, under the aegis of Tom Shankland, Tom Jervis, Michele Altherr, and Everett Springer.

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60 Barranca Road
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FIRST CLASS