



# NEWSLETTER

## Pajarito Environmental Education Center

60 Barranca Rd., Los Alamos, NM 87544

Volume 1, Number 3

Fall 2002

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## PEECnic and Annual Meeting October 6

Mark your calendars for the first annual PEECNic and general meeting on Sunday, October 6 from 12 to 4 p.m. at the Betty Ehart Center. We will have a potluck lunch with beverages and table service provided by the PEEC board, so bring a favorite dish to share. After lunch we'll have a meeting for:

- introduction and election of nominees
- a presentation by Ken and Jeanette Barras, architects
- a brainstorming session "Create your own nature center"

Don't miss it!

## President's Message

from Claudia Lewis

Since the founding of PEEC, a primary goal of the board of directors has been to build a facility for environmental education on the Pajarito Plateau. In our first newsletter in Winter 2002, we proposed criteria for selection of a site and listed five potential sites in Los Alamos and White Rock. One of those sites was the

abandoned wastewater treatment plant on Olive Street in Pueblo Canyon. One of this year's PEEC-sponsored Earth Day activities was a tour of that site, organized by the PEEC Site Selection Committee, to discuss its possible use as a home for PEEC. More than 25 people attended, including several enthusiastic members of the County Council. We are working to encourage the County to allow PEEC to use the site for an interpretive center, classroom, and demonstration native-plant garden, among the many possibilities for the site. We are aware that there is considerable support on the County Comprehensive Plan committees for a nature center and hope that it might be an element of the final plan.

Since our site visit on April 20, the PEEC board returned in May with Jeanette and Ken Barras of Barras Architecture, who kindly offered to draft conceptual plans of an environmental education center on that site. At our annual membership meeting and PEECNic on October 6th, we will present those plans to the members. To try to imagine what PEEC might become, I searched the web for other environmental education centers whose vision and goals seemed similar to ours. I found four beautiful sites that demonstrate what dedication can achieve.

*Ogden Nature Center* in Ogden, Utah is a 127-acre wildlife sanctuary and education center. Their mission is "to unite people with nature in mutually enriching experiences and to nurture appreciation and

concern for the environment." Each year the Ogden Nature Center brings more than 15,000 children, teachers, and adults together with nature through hands-on field classes. This center includes a visitor center that is a demonstration of environmentally sensitive building design. It features hands-on exhibits, an observation beehive, non-releasable birds of prey, and demonstration gardens. Peruse their web site at <http://www.ogdennaturecenter.org/index.shtml> to find out what PEEC could be in 25 years.

*River Bend Nature Center* in Faribault, Minnesota serves over 18,000 people a year with a wide variety of programming on their 700-acre site. In 1975, the Faribault Bicentennial Steering Committee took on the task of making a nature center a reality. They built a trailside center in 1978 and an interpretive center in 1991. Their web site at <http://www.rbnc.org/>, containing extensive curriculum material, reveals their dedication to education. They sponsor numerous adult and school programs and special events throughout the year.

*Spencer Crest Nature Center* in Corning, New York comprises 250 acres with 7 miles of trails, two ponds, a stream, two distinct fire zones, and a museum of natural systems that features changing displays, an apiary, and an environmentally sensitive building design. The center is visited annually by 11,000 people. The original master plan for the center was drawn up in 1976 with a grant from the Corning Glass Works Foundation. A 1979 DOE grant and a Corning Glass Works challenge grant led to the Corning Rotary taking on a successful community fund drive as their 75th anniversary project. The building was dedicated two years later and has since been augmented with organic environmentally friendly toilets, a cistern for water collection, a masonry stove to provide building heat along with passive solar energy, and a trail for the physically challenged. See their web site at <http://www.spencercrest.org/html2/index.asp> to read about their curious mix of annual events.

*Rio Bravo Nature Center* in Eagle

Pass, Texas, in the Middle Rio Grande region, was founded in 2000. Their goal is to assist the community in bringing their children to the forefront of scientific literacy. Discovery lessons offered by the center draw on biology, geometry, algebra, and applied technology in an outdoor, field laboratory maintained specifically for that purpose. Until now the center has not had a facility and yet they sponsor elementary school programs and innovative camping/environmental learning trips, the latter primarily for young women in the community who might not otherwise consider careers in outdoor recreation and education. On August 7, 2002 the Eagle Pass City Council voted unanimously to award to the Nature Center the Fort Duncan Commissary building and its grounds for a classroom, interpretive center, and botanical garden. In many ways, their efforts and interests parallel ours. They have begun a fund raising drive to make the commissary building habitable. Their web site at <http://www.riobronaturecenter.org/home.html> contains lots of photographs.

In 25 years, we can achieve a lot together. Although some of the nature centers I have cited here command large acreages, PEEC does not need hundreds of acres. The canyons and mesas we have will serve as the "site" for environmental education. We invite you to come to the first annual membership meeting and PEECnic on October 6 to elect members of the board of directors and brainstorm with us ideas for what a nature center on the Pajarito Plateau should be.

## Meet the PEEC Board Candidates

**President: Michael G. Smith.** When I arrived in Los Alamos in 1989 I wondered why the community did not have an entity devoted to the enjoyment and edification of its tremendous landscape, ecology, geology, and skies. Since then I have worked with many others to achieve such

an entity. Our work culminated in the formation of PEEC, of which I have had the good fortune to serve in the capacity as a director. My visions, as president, are to forge a commitment by the community for a home for PEEC, to secure funds for such a home, to begin its construction, to broaden PEEC's outreach and educational programs, and to increase its membership and financial base.

**Vice-president: Michele Altherr.** I am a founding member of PEEC and a teacher at Mountain Elementary School. As vice-president I will be an advocate for programs, technology, and facilities that will increase the environmental literacy of our youth.

**Secretary: Tom Jervis** will continue his term.

**Treasurer: Gordon Spingler.** I am a founding member of PEEC and have always had a desire to help save our environment. As treasurer, I have had and will have an opportunity to contribute to an organization that shares my goals.

**Members-at-large: Claudia Lewis, Chick Keller, and Becky Shankland will continue as board members. New members to be elected are:**

**Hedy Dunn:** Having been Director of the Historical Museum for 23 years, I have developed some skills which might be of use to the PEEC community. These include my familiarity with bookkeeping via Quicken software, grant-writing and administration, newsletter writing, editing and publishing, publicity releases, and working for a non-profit organization and volunteer boards. I'm also eager to see the activities and facilities for an environmental group flourish in Los Alamos. I'd be happy to contribute to a group that includes many friends.

**Sarah Meyer:** I have been editor of the *Los Alamos Monitor* for three years. I came to Los Alamos in December 1998 as assistant editor. I also have a background in education. My love for this region dates

back to my childhood, when my dad would take us to the mountains or on some other outdoor excursion almost every weekend during the summers. I love the outdoors and believe a nature center would be a great asset for our community.

**Dick Opsahl:** New to Los Alamos, I was active in environmental issues and organizations on Long Island, NY, where I lived most of my life. I was vice-president of the Huntington Audubon Society, which operated a small wildlife sanctuary and environmental education center, vice-chairman of the Huntington Town Conservation Board, and a board member of the Greenbelt Trail Association. I was also Sierra Club and Appalachian Mountain Club hike leader. My wife Judy and I moved here in 1999 after retirement. Since arriving, we served as tour guides in the Valles Caldera and have worked on trail maintenance in Los Alamos, Bandelier, and on the Colorado Trail.

**Randall Ryti.** I am a biologist who has lived in Los Alamos for the last ten years. I am a partner in an environmental consulting company headquartered in Los Alamos. I am interested in using education to help raise awareness of environment issues and to encourage people to become more involved in solving environmental problems. I would like to see effective collaboration between the environmental education center and other local entities like the Valles Caldera Preserve and LANL.

## Birding in the Valles Caldera

Chick and Yvonne Keller

Early this spring we took part in a bird song workshop given by Jim Travis in Bandelier to prepare volunteers in the New Mexico Breeding Bird Atlas Project. This project began in 1999 under the leadership of Stephen Fetting, Jim Travis, and Jim

Place. The atlas will provide a wealth of information about bird demographics. A second effort is planned for 20-50 years from now to see what changes are taking place in breeding. This atlas differs from bird counts in that it is interested only in the birds that breed in the designated area.

When we decided to join the project we had little idea what it entailed. But when we found we'd been assigned a block 5- km on a side in the Valles Caldera National Preserve, we were hooked.

We were sent a detailed Atlas Handbook and maps of our block ruled into 25 1- km squares. We were supposed to get a fairly comprehensive idea of what was there and what was possibly breeding. Looking at the map it was obvious that this was not a one- or two-trip undertaking. We needed to observe the birds at their most active--from before sunrise till 9 a.m. when activity decreased markedly, although we always kept on till after 10 "just in case."

We were given special forms for reporting. Some 20 different habitats were clearly defined--such as Rocky Mountain Subalpine Grassland and Rocky Mountain Upper Montane Conifer Forest. A stylized format for reporting bird behavior broke into categories from only Observed through Possible, Probable, and up to the "holy grail," Confirmed.

Each category had its own codified behaviors. For instance, Possible could be checked if the male was heard singing. If a week later the male was there and still singing, you could move up to Probable. Curiously, nest building by certain species was only a Probable since males sometime build the nest to attract the female. But all this was only preparatory to getting the birds to a Confirmed status. The easiest way was to observe adults carrying food, or better yet, feeding young. Problems arose, however, when the birds left the nest but were still being fed since they might have flown into our area from another.

We were anxious to get started but permission to enter the Preserve didn't come until the first week in June, well after some breeding would have started. Our first trip was like a dream, partly because it started with awakening at 4 a.m. We arrived at the gate at dawn, dialed the

combination on the lock, opened the gate and drove into the "forbidden" Preserve.



At that hour hundreds of elk, some with racks that looked too large to support, lined the road into the preserve all the way to the old ranch cabins. A bumpy half-hour drive took us past the sign-in place at the ranch buildings to our block, still before sunrise. Our block included open hilly forest, dense mountain forest, broad open grassland--some with wetlands and riparian areas. All of it was dry as parchment and, at first, there were no birds in evidence. But we became more attuned and began checking them off. Almost immediately we found (from the bird songs we'd been taught) one of the Valles Caldera's curiosities, Eastern Meadowlarks! In addition, there were the expected mountain and western bluebirds, nuthatches, violet-green swallows, Brewer's backbirds, and robins--lots of them! Then we came across what was to be a constant of our trips, the rollicking song of the ruby-crowned kinglet. This little songster was everywhere that there were trees. Our first trip passed very quickly and included an unidentified warbler that just wouldn't give us a good look. We quickly established a routine with me out ahead and Yvonne trying to keep up while writing down times and locations of what we were seeing. This had the effect of separating us somewhat, which helped because we were seeing different birds.

Back home we filled out our forms, post-mortemed the trip and planned the

next. We had only been in 3 of our 25 1-km squares. The huge scope of our task was sinking in, although we knew we didn't have to visit every square, only each habitat. We looked at the calendar, noted that by early July breeding would slow considerably, and realized that we would be very busy for the month of June. We also realized that we had already been up for nearly 8 hours and were soon found napping away the afternoon.

The next trip was to overlap the first (all planned out on USGS quad maps of the region), adding new ground. A topo map was all we needed to find our way around but we had another crutch. Nearly every obvious way to go--up large drainages, over low divides separating drainages, etc.-- was marked by faint roads, fences, and trails. This place has indeed been used. Dammed streams for stock ponds were additional check points on the maps, but only the major roads were marked. The rest we "discovered."

The third trip was to be special--a great expanse of grassland into which a meager, drought-dwindled stream spread out into a grassy wetland. Our bird song training stood us in good stead as we tallied two savannah sparrows on the dry hillsides. From the wetlands came calls of redwinged blackbirds, but as we approached them, out flew a common snipe! Farther away we could hear a strange bird call and wondered if it was the snipe. Listening to our bird song CD at home confirmed our guess. Strange cries on the dry hillsides beyond turned out to be prairie dogs! One wonders how such animals ever got up through the forests and over the rim into the Valles.

And so our trips and experiences accumulated, and our wonder at the beauty of the preserve increased. We have many memories and images--foggy mornings across the grasslands, idyllic climbs up onto the dome-like peaks that dot the center of the Caldera. A male Williamson's sapsucker feeding young at a hole in a snag--the soft churring of the young as he arrived. A fierce goshawk passing overhead with powerful wing beats. An eastern meadowlark dragging one wing in a "distraction display" to make me follow her and miss the nest (I never could find it). A

kestrel dive-bombing a red-tailed hawk who finally flew off disgusted. Swallows flying full speed into holes in aspen trunks without knocking themselves silly.

In e-mail exchanges with others who were working other blocks in the Valles, we found that, while we had the most species (approaching 60), we had the least number of species in the coveted Confirmed category (only 11). We simply weren't finding evidence of breeding. On one of the last visits I tried something new. I headed out of the pines and fir trees and climbed up above a large aspen grove.



Jackpot! That's where they were feeding fledglings among the leaves which were full of insects. Within an hour of feverish,

non-stop observing we doubled our list of Confirmed. This was a fascinating time as we were seeing the adults with their fledglings. Some just sat there and regarded the recalcitrant youngster as the kestrel pair did. Others kept flying back and forth trying to fill up the little feather ball that was fluttering its wings so pitifully. Others, the downy woodpeckers for instance, looked like they were traveling with miniature copies of themselves. The snipes (there were at least ten of them) never seemed to breed or nest or whatever,

and we never Confirmed the omnipresent kinglets. By mid-July the woods, formerly a chorus of varied singers, had fallen silent excepting for the occasional western wood peewee's plaintive two-note call. And, what luck! We weren't finished! We'll just have to go back next year.

The Atlas project could use more volunteers--if you've a mind to spend several days in May and June getting up at 4 a.m. to spend the morning walking, listening, and recording.

**Thanks to Jody Benson for chairing the nominating committee and Becky Shankland for assisting. Cary Neeper graciously scanned and formatted our photos for this issue.**

## **Calendar of Natural History Events**

Stephen M. Fettig

September 22-October 5 is the peak period for the raptor migration through New Mexico. During this period watch for hawks, which are normally more secretive, flying over both forested areas and towns. Perhaps the best place to see the autumn migration is in the Manzanos at the end of the Gavilán Trail near Capilla Peak. Gavilán is Spanish for hawk. At the peak of the migration 200 to 300 hawks can be seen in one day. For more information contact Stephen Fettig at 662-6785.

Late September is the time to watch for the last Turkey Vultures and Hummingbirds before they leave for warmer areas to the south. If you see one in the last week of September or early October, it's special enough to mark on your calendar. In approximately half of the years for which we have records, Turkey Vultures have left the Los Alamos area by October 1.

Early November is the time to starting looking for Bald Eagles. In winter they can mostly be found along the Rio Grande, but they are also found in upland areas throughout the Jemez Mountains and near water in any part of New Mexico. The influx of Bald Eagles adds to the year-round resident Golden Eagle population which makes identification challenging.

### **PEEC Board of Directors**

Claudia Lewis, President  
Michele Altherr, Vice-President  
Tom Jervis, Secretary  
Gordon Spingler, Treasurer  
Sarah Gustafson

Michael Smith  
Rebecca Shankland, newsletter  
Chick Keller  
Yvonne Keller, newsletter

# Membership Form

Membership valid through Earth Day (April) 2003

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Membership dues \$20 (Please make checks payable to PEEC): \_\_\_\_\_

Optional contribution: \_\_\_\_\_

## Check the ways you could be involved:

- Develop programs
- Lead educational activities
- Help with site selection
- Give a guest lecture
- Support one-time events (e.g., Earth Day)
- Raise funds/write grants
- Edit newsletter
- Manage membership database
- Design or maintain Web page
- Help develop PEEC as an organization
- Just be a member

Would you like to offer any special interests and skills? Please specify.

What would you like a community environmental education center to be?

Please return this form and your check to: PEEC  
60 Barranca Road  
Los Alamos, NM 87544.

Pajarito Environmental Education Center  
60 Barranca Road  
Los Alamos, NM 87544

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