



Nature Notes

Pajarito
Environmental
Education
Center
Volume 7, Number 3

Your Nature Center in Los Alamos
Summer 2008

PEEC, Mail: PO Box 547
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President's Message

by Randy Rytí

Our Los Alamos nature center has been open for four years; we have offered dozens of programs each year and hosted thousands of people at the center. Over the years, PEEC has been known for our programs. Before PEEC operated the nature center we were known for coordinating the annual Earth Day celebration. Next April will be our tenth Earth Day celebration.

Our programs are developed to appeal to children, adults, and families. As we enter the summer, PEEC will have just completed an expanded set of nature-education day camps. Nature Odyssey and Living Earth Adventure Program provide outdoor experiential educational experiences for children that will be entering the 4th through 8th grades. Another popular program has been the plant identification class taught by Terry Foxx and Dorothy Hoard.

So many people know PEEC by having selected one or two of our educational and adventurous programs or by participating in Earth Day or summer day camps, but PEEC offers a wealth of talks and programs throughout the year. This summer, PEEC has a series of sunset hikes offered local experts and enthusiasts to learn about the natural world around us; these hikes are suitable for the entire family. You can also learn about the birds and bees this summer at PEEC by taking the basic beekeeping or bird identification classes. We also have programs for toddlers and preschoolers and our children's gardening programs.

Please help us celebrate four years of operating Los Alamos' first Nature Center by attending some of our varied selection of programs this summer. Please send me an e-mail at rryti@mac.com if you have any questions or comments on my column. ⚙

Wildlife Habitat Yard Tour

Saturday, August 9th 9am – 4pm

August is the perfect time for you to start planning and planting your own wildlife-friendly garden. Come get all the tips from six Los Alamos and White Rock gardeners who have used landscaping to attract local birds, butterflies and other wildlife to their yards.

Discover simple techniques for:

1. providing the essential elements wildlife needs to survive: food, water, cover and places to raise young,
2. wildlife watching,
3. planting,
4. composting,
5. conserving water,
6. reducing chemical use.

Each of the six gardens is certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a “Backyard Wildlife Habitat” through a simple on-line process at <http://www.nwf.org/backyard/>. By becoming certified, these gardeners have joined a network of wildlife enthusiasts who are dedicated to turning their yards into havens of life.

Tour Stops:

- Pajarito Environmental Education Center
- 3540 Orange Street, LA
Randy Ryti and Wendy Swanson
- 1874 Camino Manzanita, LA
Chick and Yvonne Keller
- 4470 Ridgeway Drive, LA
Bart and Colleen Olinger
- 1964 Juniper Street, LA
Ian and Cathy Strong
- 229 Rio Bravo Drive, WR
John and Barbara Ramsay
- 6 Erie Lane, WR

Planting a wildlife-friendly garden is a fun, relaxing, and rewarding activity. You are sure to come away from the tour inspired and PEEC wishes to thank these welcoming hosts.

Tickets: \$10/one person, \$15 /couple, families .

Purchase tickets at PEEC Nature Center or on line at www.PajaritoEEC.org

Summer sunset hikes, birds, wild flowers, rocks. Give special attention to the summer program schedule inserted into this issue, also on line at PEEC's web site www.PajaritoEEC.org



Find birds and native plants in the wildlife habitat at PEEC, a good place to buy tour tickets and get started on August 9.

Wild Flowers

Online now is one of the nature center's features: “What’s Blooming Now?” There’s a choice: go on line (www.PajaritoEEC.org) come to PEEC’s nature exhibits.

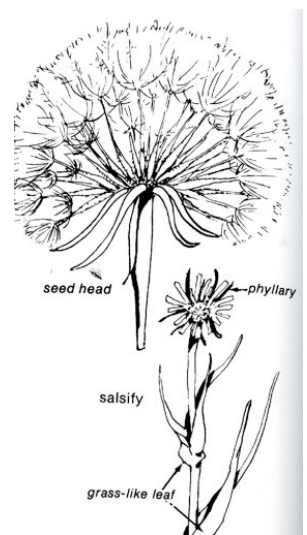
Using plates from the Jemez Mountains Herbarium, which is housed at PEEC, current blooms are identified for all to see. In addition, if you visit on Tuesdays or Thursdays from noon to 4:00, you can talk with botanists Chick Keller (Tuesdays) and Dorothy Hoard (Thursdays).

Dorothy Hoard and Terry Foxx teach their popular classes about wild flowers yearly. They co-authored the guide, *Flowering Plants of the Southwestern Woodlands*. One of the wild flower plates on display (and a plant quite widespread this year) in June was Salsify. We took the liberty of lifting information and drawings from page 76 in the book.

“SALSIFY, Goatsbeard, *Tragopogon* spp. Greek: *tragos*, goat; *pogon*, beard

There are two species found in the area, both introduced from Europe by early settlers. The roots are edible and taste like oysters; a common name is ‘oyster plant.’”

The white seed heads look like enormous dandelions. Earlier, the yellow blossoms with their spikey phyllaries are brilliant yellow yard decorations that open in full sun. Never mind that they can be called “weeds.” Dorothy Hoard says, “A weed is just a plant in a different place.”



What the Hummingbird Feeder Brings

Birder Selvi Viswanathan writes, “Look who is visiting our hummingbird feeder at night. He's very pretty. A Ringtail at a Hummingbird feeder is very unique.”



Photo by Hari Viswanathan.

Ringtail Cat Facts

The “ringtail” cat is also called “Coon Cat,” and “Civet Cat.” Though they are called “cats,” the ringtail cat is one of the smallest members of the raccoon family (*Bassariscus astutus*).

A ringtail’s body is about the size of a small domestic cat, 12 to 15 inches when fully grown, with a raccoon-like tail, and a face resembling a fox. The body is buff to dark brown in color with white underparts. The flashy black and white striped tail is longer than the rest of its body. The eyes are large and purple, each surrounded by a patch of light fur. Ringtails have occasionally been hunted for their pelts, but the fur is not especially valuable. Ringtails are meticulous groomers. After eating or sleeping they’ll sit catlike on their haunches, cleaning their fur with tongue and forepaws. Have a look at ringtail fur and posture in PEEC, where a taxidermied group poses.

They are found throughout the Southwest and parts of northern Mexico, where they nest in the hollows of trees or abandoned wooden structures. The ringtail is the state mammal of Arizona.

The ankle joint is flexible and able to rotate over 180 degrees, a trait helping make it an agile climber. This agility also is derived from sharp, semi-retractile claws, a long, heavy tail that aids in balance, and hind feet that rotate 180 degrees. The considerable tail provides balance for negotiating narrow ledges. Ringtails are arboreal, leaping nimbly among branches, instantly reversing direction, even performing cartwheels. Ringtails also can ascend narrow passages by stemming (pressing all feet on one wall and their back against the other or pressing both right feet on one wall and both left feet on the other), and wider cracks or openings by ricocheting between the walls.

Male ringtail cats rub urine into the ground and onto raised objects. While such scent-post marking is standard behavior throughout the year, in summer it becomes a method of attracting prospective mates as well as deterring competing males.

Ringtails are nocturnal, solitary, timid, and rarely seen. They are omnivorous, eating fruits, berries, insects, lizards, small rodents, and birds. Owls, coyotes, raccoons and bobcats prey on ringtails. Ringtails make a variety of sounds, including clicks and chatters reminiscent of raccoons. The call is a very loud, plaintive bark. As adults they lead solitary lives, except when a male and female come together to mate. Capture a ringtail, and it will scream loudly and douse you with vile-smelling musk from its anal glands.

Even so, the ringtail is said to be easily tamed, and can make an affectionate pet (where that’s legal) and an effective mouser. Miners and settlers once kept pet ringtails to keep their cabins free of vermin. A hole was cut in a small box and placed near a wood-burning stove as a dark, warm place for the ringtail to sleep during the day. The animal would come out at night to prey on mice.

(Sources: //en.wikipedia.com, //magazine.audubon.org)

Remember, Nature Notes (including photos) is on PEEC’s web site *in color*. ✨

She Was Amazing

Sadly we must write an “In Memoriam” for Zoe, the plateau whiptail lizard who lived at PEEC. She recently had become lethargic and had a cut on her tail, but the true cause of her death is unknown. Attention by a veterinarian couldn’t solve the puzzle. Her beauty and liveliness enhanced the exhibits area inside PEEC. The natural history of her species kept us reading, researching, and wondering, especially when she laid eggs regularly (all whiptails are female). Zoe was found obviously starving on a construction site south of Santa Fe in 2006; no one knew how old she was. We miss her. ✨

Family Nature Connection :

Prickly Pear

by Michele Altherr

Cacti are a part of our local landscape that I, like an animal forager, do my best to avoid. Yet it was this fact that sparked my curiosity and prompted me to investigate the *Opuntia*, a common cactus species native to our area. It goes by several fun common names: prickly pear, beaver tail, bunny ears and Indian fig. Like other cactus species, *Opuntia* is a marvel of adaptation to arid environments and has many uses.

Opuntia's pads, which look like beaver tails, are actually flattened stems. In the produce department of the grocery store they are sold as nopales. Cleaned of spines, sliced and sautéed, they taste a bit like green beans. The *Opuntia*'s pads are its main organ for photosynthesis and water storage. Photosynthesis is a tricky business for a desert plant despite the abundant sunshine. Familiar broadleaf plants lose a great deal of water through the stomata, or leaf pores. Just try tying a plastic bag around the leaves of a potted plant and you'll see the water vapor condense inside the bag. This would be devastating to a desert plant where water is scarce. Therefore, *Opuntia*, as well as other cacti, do not use the same photosynthetic process as your potted plant. They have evolved a unique water-saving method of photosynthesis called Crassulacean Acid Metabolism (CAM). Unlike broadleaf plants, the stomata of a cactus remain closed during the day. Only at night, when the air is cooler and there is less possibility of water loss, do the stomata open. Carbon dioxide is taken in and converted into an acid which is stored until daylight at which time photosynthesis begins. In the end photosynthetic efficiency and rapid growth is sacrificed for desert survival.

Prickly pear has many uses, especially as a food which you can try. The nopales are best picked in the spring when they are young and succulent. These can be added to omelets, soups, and vegetable dishes. The fruits are called "tunas" and develop after the spring/summer blooms fade. Tunas are good to eat either raw, chilled with lemon juice, or cooked into jam and syrups. One tuna contains the vitamin C equivalent of 1 1/2 oranges. While you can buy nopales and tunas in our grocery store, you might want to try harvesting them yourself. If you do, wear heavy gloves and use a long barbecue fork to help you with the harvest. Many recipes can be found on line.

You might like to grow a prickly pear cactus of your own. The quickest way to start is to cut off a pad that is at least six months old. Then set the pad upright and let

it form a callus at the cut end (one to two weeks). When the callus is well formed, plant the pad one inch deep in equal parts soils and sand. Anchor the pad in place with rocks to keep it upright. The pad has sufficient moisture, so do not water it. [Ed. note: the web site MexGrocer.com has this graphic and a recipe.]



After about a month, the pad will develop roots and be able to stand on its own. You can now water it. Watch your prickly pear grow and be sure to let your cactus dry out between waterings.

This summer you and your family you can harvest prickly pear pads and fruits, eat them and grow them. You'll most likely find yourself wanting to learn more about these amazing plants. ✨

PEEC Very Active in April/ May

The nature center's visitors book shows 1052 people came during the two months, not including more than 600 at Earth Day activities. Classes and programs were attended by 639 people. Volunteers gave 1189 hours to PEEC projects, programs, and everyday operations.

PEEC is a great place to visit and to volunteer. Come on along. ✨

Woodhouse's Toads Named

There were 63 entries in our contest to name the three Woodhouse's toads living at PEEC. The judges met just after Earth Day. Prizes were toad "Beenie Babies" donated by Snakes Conservation organization, and the game "King Toad" for the winner.

Winner is Nolan Bell (Hip, Hop and Bop). Runners-up are Rachel Norman (Huey, Dewey and Luey), Zoe Bell (Spreckle, Freckle and Spot), Justin (Yoda, Luke and Darth), Jake Steinwart (Lumpy, Jumpy and Lazy), and Ciara Carter (Lumpy, Muddie and Eddie).

We're not sure which toads have which names, as the above names seem to describe any of them. A truly appealing photograph of the toads by Jennifer Macke adorns the heading of PEEC's new web presence on the site for the New Mexico Tourism Department: [//newmexico.org/learn/wildlife/pajarito.php](http://newmexico.org/learn/wildlife/pajarito.php) ✨

Geocaching and Treasure-hunting

Geocaching skills are halfway between orienteering and treasure hunting. Learn more at the web site www.geocaching.com. Since April, PEEC has had a geocache with environmental flavor, celebrating our nature center. This is from the web posting:

❖ Hide and Go Peek Hidden 4/21/08

Size:  (Small) Difficulty: ★★★★★

Terrain: ★★★★★ (1 is easiest, 5 is hardest)

N 35° 53.269 W 106° 18.915

This 2-part cache is on easy paved sidewalk and packed dirt walking areas. Both parts are placed to be easy to find, and both are within a very short walk from parking areas. Coordinates for cache #2 are to be found in cache #1. Hint:

Native trees and shrubs are beautiful to see and worthwhile to plant. Near the parking lot, find water-wise lawn and garden demonstrations at one point, then wild lands native trees and shrubs. Los Alamos straddles the “pinon-juniper woodland” (6 - 7000 ft. elevation) and the “ponderosa pine forest” (beginning at 7000 ft).

Please do not walk on cultivated areas.

The PEEC Board approves placement of this geocache along with public access to the grounds for educational purposes when the nature center is open or closed.❖

To begin, you would set your GPS and find the first stage. The hint is supposed to help you; it also suggests some of our nature center’s informational ability.

Inside the first stage of the cache is a new GPS reading and another hint, this time for finding the second stage, which looks quite different.

During the past three months we have had 12 seekers visiting PEEC’s geocache, including adults and children. Their responses via the online log have been very positive. It gladdens us that they also have found PEEC.

Here are quotes from the online log, plus a photo of seven happy geocachers at PEEC:

“Great cache idea. Creative, informative, inventive, imaginative and crafty.”

“Found today with friends, quite inventive!”

“Found this today with several friends. [Left] Prague geocoin. Very creative and clever find.”

Yes, they found the two caches and had fun. ☼



PEEC Has More Angels

In January, PEEC celebrated ‘mini-grants’ from individuals, supporting our operating expenses and educational projects while we searched around for grant opportunities. They are truly our Guardian Angels. The winter issue of the newsletter had a list of 42 donors. Below are more names of PEEC’s angels. Thank you !

Mr. and Mrs. Antonio Redondo

Kathleen Taylor

Babs Marrone

Maxime Schmidt and David Watkins

Kristine and David Coblentz

Don and Judy Crocker

Dave and Linn Collins

David and Faye Brown

Andrew Erickson and Maribeth Englert

Paul and Alice Fehlau

A donation in memory of David Mayo Peterson has been received from Leon and Rosalie Heller.

Several persons are preferring to remain anonymous.

Donations to PEEC are tax deductible and PEEC folks are even happier than your tax return.☼

BIRDS

There is nothing in which the birds differ more from man than the way in which they can build and yet leave a landscape as it was before.

—Robert Lynd, 1879-1949, *The Blue Lion and Other Essays*,
www.quotationspage.com

Inside PEEC, the nature center, is a big white board where bird sightings are listed for all to see. Drop by in the afternoons, Monday through Friday, 12 - 4, and you might ask Administrative Assistant Diane Noveroske about your own sightings. If you are there on Tuesday afternoons, you also can talk with Chick Keller about birds and/or wild flowers.

The board has the following list for the first two weeks of June. Diane says it's nowhere near all the birds to be seen but it's a selection.

Red Crossbill	Pine Siskin
Bushtit	Say's Phoebe
Olive-sided Flycatcher	Lesser Goldfinch
White-breasted Nuthatch	Acorn Woodpecker
Williamson's Sapsucker	Evening Grosbeak
White-crowned Sparrow	
Black-headed Grosbeak	

✧

Bird Behavior in the Yard + A Recipe

by Robin McLean of North Mesa, overlooking Pueblo Canyon

I had an interesting sighting a couple of days ago. A first for me. A Hairy Woodpecker was eating the aphids off the yucca flowers. This time of year the aphids are thick on those flowers and the woodpecker seemed to think they were delicious. He went from flower to flower until his bill was thick with aphids. I have seen him doing this only once.



Today I had 4 female Western Tanagers and 2 males coming to the marvel meal (I will call it mm) at my feeder. Never before have I had so many of these beautiful tanagers and they have been coming to the feeders all day along with starlings, nuthatches, Scrub and Stellar jays, House finches, flickers and Acorn

Go to www.PajaritoEEC.org, click on "Nature Guides" and "Birds" for a beautiful web section on birds, including local lists. Writer Michele Altherr and photographer Hari Viswanathan have created a treat for our brains and our eyes.

Woodpeckers. The mm goes down fast. Even the ravens have figured how to eat some. One raven was breaking off branches that he decided got in his way to the feeder.

I also saw some very interesting behavior that I have never seen before. A nuthatch was eating mm when a tanager came along and booted him off. The nuthatch perched on a branch just above the feeder and proceeded to open his wings as far as he could and tried to act many times his size. I think he was trying to get the tanager to go away by making himself look large and formidable. When he was back eating mm, a tanager came back on a nearby branch and the nut hatch, while hanging upside down on the suet holder, again spread his wings to look large. I love watching the different behaviors birds have.

NO MELT SUET OR MARVEL MEAL

MELT: 1 cup lard and 1 cup peanut butter.

STIR IN: 2 cups oats, 2 cups corn meal, 1 cup flour, 1/3 cup sugar .

Pour into a loaf pan and refrigerate. Slice and place in a suet holder. Robin usually doubles the recipe and says, "Given the choice, birds will eat it over the commercial suet any time. I make a double batch and store it in a bread pan in the refrigerator. One of my vegetarian friends uses vegetable fat (such as Crisco) instead of lard. I don't think the birds care."

A web search finds many variations of this recipe from Audubon Society and various bird clubs. Some urge using only lard, and some recommend brown sugar. We made it with Crisco and without sugar. That was a success with the birds, too, so there's room for your best judgment.

(Goldfinch graphic by ClipArt Etc. //etc.usf.edu)

✧

New Plants in PEEC's Front Garden

PEEC's front garden has both demonstration grass plots and a garden with drought-tolerant plants. Both are doing well and are open for inspection. The new garden of "natives" near the front door is being planted. The color and the varieties of shapes and foliage are truly eye-catching. The kids' vegetable garden is also flourishing.

✧

PEEC Receives LANL Foundation

Grants

by Branden Willman-Kozimer

PEEC was recently awarded \$11,000 from the Los Alamos National Laboratory Foundation to provide Northern New Mexico students the opportunity to work with innovative environmental educators and scientists, learn fundamental scientific thinking skills, and use current technology-based field science methods to understand earth systems. The funding will allow PEEC to continue operating the nature center and offering innovative programs for students of all ages.

The \$11,000 grant is in addition to a "Small Educational Outreach Grant" for \$1000 given by the LANL Foundation at the end of 2007 to support spring LAPS field trips to the nature center. The field trips, led by PEEC educator Rachel Cowan, brought over 300 K-3rd grade students to the nature center to learn about local agriculture, geology, life science, and math through hands-on activities.

PEEC is grateful to the LANL Foundation for their generosity and look forward to continue partnering with the foundation to provide innovative programs in 2008-09. ✧

Nature Odyssey and LEAP Summer Science Programs a Success

by Branden Willman-Kozimer

Many thanks to all of the community members, teachers, organizations, businesses and volunteers who contributed to the success of the Nature Odyssey and LEAP programs this summer. The programs that ran throughout the month of June would not have been possible without the assistance of many people and groups.

The **Living Earth Adventure Program (LEAP)** saw middle school students to explore the **Valles Caldera National Preserve** with local scientists and environmental educators from the Volunteer Task Force and PEEC. Students gained an intimate and informed understanding of our local ecology and acquired the tools they'll need to explore their own interests in the natural world.

The **Nature Odyssey** Summer Science program is a three-stage opportunity for children entering grades 4-6 to become immersed in nature and learn with talented

and enthusiastic environmental educators. One week each featured the **Rio Grande Valley, the Pajarito Plateau and Valles Caldera.**

A huge thank you to Los Alamos National Bank and the TSAY Corporation for donating funds to help cover scholarships and multicultural education expenses for the Rio Grande Valley program; the Central Avenue Grill and Laughing Lizard Cafe in Jemez Springs for donating supplies for the Valles Caldera programs; the McCurdy School for the use of buses and vans; Norma Smith for driving; Diane Noveroske for administering all the necessary forms; the Santa Fe Mountain Center including Beverly Billie; the Española Wildlife Center; Ghost Ranch; Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo; Santa Clara Pueblo; Bandelier National Monument including Chris Judson, Jamie Civitello and Rory Gauthier; John Hogan; Armand Groffman; Explorer Troop 22; Los Alamos Historical Society including Hedy Dunn; Valles Caldera National Preserve including Dennis Trujillo, Bob Parmenter, John Swigart, Molly Padgett, Mark Peyton, Marc Chipault, Suzanne Gifford, Jeremy Decker, Misty Blue, and Zoe Ann Durran; Rachel Cowan; Don Usner; Bill Carson; Chick Keller; and Craig Martin.

Special thanks to the teachers who went over and beyond expectations to make the programs a wonderful learning experience. This year's amazing staff included Andrea Spence, Judy Chaddick, Kirby Goforth, Chrissy Schmit, Kati Steinberg, Michele Altherr, Sarah Gustafson, John Hogan, and Branden Willman-Kozimer. Our wonderful counselors were Nuria Clodius, Lindy Jacobs, Francisco Vigil, Kelly Steinberg, and Adam Hahn. PEEC board members who gave countless hours to the program include Bob Dryja, Natali Steinberg, and Becky Shankland. ✧



Hiking into the Valles Caldera with Nature Odyssey, June 2008
by Branden Willman-Kozimer

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Nature Notes - Summer

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Visit the Center.
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 Check the website often:
www.PajaritoEEC.org

Read PEEC This Week:

If you have an e-mail account and when you are a member in good standing, you can receive "PEEC This Week." Send a message to Randy Ryti: rryti@mac.com . Weekly e-mail alerts about classes, events, science and the environment will reach you. You can contribute appropriate notices by sending them to Randy. 'PEEC This Week' always includes PEEC activities !

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Members receive Nature Notes, electronic updates (PEEC This Week), library check-out privileges, discounts on classes and gift shop.

General Membership	\$35
Living Lightly	\$20
Non-Profit Sponsor	\$75
<i>1 Newsletter and PEEC This Week for up to 3 organizational members.</i>	
Penstemon	\$60
<i>Benefits of membership plus t-shirt or canvas shopping bag.</i>	
Sunflower	\$100
<i>Benefits above plus additional t-shirt or canvas shopping bag.</i>	
Wild Iris Donor	\$250
<i>Benefits above plus Muench coffee table book.</i>	
Skyrocket Gilia Donor	\$500
<i>We will contact you to determine how to recognize this generous level of donation.</i>	
Wood Lily Donor	\$1000
<i>We will contact you to determine how to recognize this generous level of donation.</i>	

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Tear off this form, fill it out, and mail it in with your check.
Do it today! Thank you.

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