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Nature Notes

Pajarito Environmental Education Center Volume 9, Number 1

Your Nature Center in Los Alamos Winter 2010

President's Message

by Chick Keller

Winter is upon us. It takes the pure white of the snow to show off the varied colors of last summer's grasses--golds, orange, yellows and pinks. The low winter sun accentuates these thin straws standing at odd angles above the carpet of white. Most else is resting excepting for small birds ever active in search of seeds.

PEEC also seems to be resting, but a closer look will show this isn't the case. Winter Wednesday lectures on fascinating subjects--there's a neat one on archeo-astronomy sites near Los Alamos. Come and hear about the newest marker found by PEEC people last month as well as the most complex one ever found hereabouts. Kinnikinnick Club is meeting, and other classes are involving school students. Meanwhile PEEC is planning for next year. The first meeting of the Earth Day committee has taken place.

This year is PEEC's 10th anniversary (has it really been that long?), and Earth Day's 40th. It is also the 10th anniversary of the Cerro Grande Fire. PEEC will be highlighting all these. Generous grants from Moms in Motion and a private donor will allow PEEC to offer both Nature Odyssey and LEAP next summer at affordable prices. Finally PEEC's greenhouse will soon be home to native plant seedlings which will be available in May for all you gardeners. There are also changes at the Center both in animals and exhibits, and we're planning to put our newly donated short-focus telescope to use with its ability to show faint astronomical objects. The herbarium team is hard at work data-basing and mounting last summer's collections. Of note were two sedges collected in the Jemez Mountains. that are new to the State!

Come in and see what new birds and animals have been sighted around town. Someone photographed an albino junco, never before recorded here. You may have seen something new and different and can add it to our white board. Or just stop by with the kids to enjoy the variety of natural wonders we've been able to collect and display with your help.

So, yes, winter is a time of rest and taking stock (PEEC's annual planning retreat is coming up), but there always seems to be something going on. Stop by and enjoy the fun.



The Importance of Long-termData Collectionby Terry Foxx

As I sit reading about studies I did over 30 years ago, I realize how important longterm data sets are in ecology. Changes in the ecosystem are sometimes imperceptibly slow and can only be realized when years upon years of observations and data



gathering are done. Long-term data sets are few and far between because funding is usually only for the immediate or crisis period.

From my experience as an ecologist I would like to give two examples of how we can't see, in one or two points of time, all the variabilities or changes in the ecosystem.

In 1977 I stood in a blackened forest that had just been burned by a conflagration called the La Mesa Fire. In that moment, in that place, if that had been the only observation I recorded, I would have viewed fire in the ecosystem in a completely different light than I do after watching 30 years and more of a landscape molded by the fire, drought, and human actions. The 30 years of observation have helped me better understand both the resilience and the fragility of the ecosystem.

One of the most amazing experiences that showed me the importance of long-term data sets came when I studied amphibians. Amphibians have been found to be good environmental indicators. So over several years when I was working at the Laboratory, we conducted studies on reptiles and amphibians in the Pajarito Canyon wetland. Generally, day after day, we caught the same species of chorus frogs, canyon tree frogs, and Woodhouse's toads. However, in a uniquely timed dry/wet period, our pit traps were filled to the brim with tiny recently metamorphosed spadefoot toads. Everywhere we stepped, in both wet and dry locations, small emergent spadefoots were seen. It reminded me of the Biblical plague of frogs. Yet in over a seven-year period, we had collected only one adult toad. Spadefoots are adapted to arid conditions; they are explosive breeders with short-duration, high-density aggregations. They can survive buried for years, waiting for the right condition to reproduce.

That was an amazing experience, but it made me wonder what our conclusions would have been if we had not had that data to substantiate the presence of the toads in numbers greater than what the other six years of data indicated.

Tiny germinated seeds of pine trees planted in burned areas over 25 years ago are now 30 feet tall. When I planted that seedling, it was hard to imagine what would happen over time. It has been nearly 33 years since I stood in that blackened forest and I have a sense that changes in the ecosystem are so much greater than I can predict from my mere glimmer of a changing ecosystem..

Our lifetimes are short in comparison to the lifetime of an ecosystem. As ecologists, scientists, and concerned citizens we often make decisions based on one or two years of information. Yet we cannot predict all the variables that will take place over time. If we base our conclusions on a short span of time, we may miss an element very important to the survival of a species or the sustainability of our planet.

We need to educate the young to continue the studies so that the bigger picture can emerge. The professor I worked with in the La Mesa fire is now in his 90s and I am 30 years older! We need to share with others so that the legacy of our observations can help influence the future long after we are gone.

Multiple Celebrations for Earth Day in April

The ecology of the mountains, the recovery of the community, and the importance of volunteerism come together as the theme for Earth Day 2010. PEEC is joining with organizations throughout the community for Earth Day. We will celebrate volunteerism in the community, educate ourselves about the ecology of our mountains as related to the fire, and enjoy the entertainment of the vaudeville-style troupe, Clan Tynker.

We will experience the role of education as we listen to students report their ten years of data collection in a Kids' Symposium sponsored by the Volunteer Task Force. We will have the opportunity to view the landscape through the eyes of artists in a show at Mesa Public Library. A "wall of volunteers" will help us understand the importance of volunteerism in the community. Throughout the week we'll have special speakers and activities such as hikes to help us understand our environment.

We will celebrate the first ten years of the Pajarito Environmental Education Center and its contribution to the education of children and adults about the environment.

It is amazing to realize that we are in the second decade of this century. Our Earth Day activities will help us learn from the past decade and gain confidence for the next one as we come to understand our environment, our community, and ourselves.

If you want to contribute as volunteers, artists, scientists, or citizens, please contact Terry Foxx, Chairperson of the Earth Day Committee at PEEC, 662-0460.

Winter Skies: Stars, Planets, Nebulae, Clusters and More by Chick Keller

As the Earth goes around the Sun, there are times when we can look straight up and see sideways into our own Milky Way galaxy. These times occur in summer and winter. By contrast, during spring and fall we look out of the top or bottom of our galaxy into the vast dark depths of space to to other galaxies that are unimaginably far away.

Everyone knows that during late summer the Milky Way

is bright and dramatic when there are no lights to hide it. That's because we're looking from pretty far out toward the center of the galaxy. In winter we're again looking sideways through our galaxy but now we're looking from the inside out and, since we're already pretty far from the center, there isn't much left beyond us.

Still, on a particularly dark and transparent New Mexico night, one can see an amazing amount of stuff--glowing gas, star clusters that may have just a few hundred stars or over 100,000. These

latter are the great globular clusters (they look like large spheres), which are perhaps the most mysterious objects in the universe--as old as the universe itself but associated with galaxies that are younger!

The most famous constellation outside of the Big Dipper is now up all night. It's Orion, the hunter, with its two star shoulders, two star knees and a three star belt between. The top left shoulder star is a huge red one, Betelguese, while the right knee is a fiercely-burning blue one, Rigel. These are two of the brightest stars in the galaxy.

To the left and below Orion is the brightest star in the sky, Sirius, (the so-called dog star because it's the shoulder of Canis Major--Orion's bigger hunting dog- yes, there's a Canis Minor too). Sirius is very bright, but that is mainly because it's one of our closest neighbors--a paltry 8 light years away. Compare it with Rigel at 350 light years. Were Rigel to be only at Sirius' distance it would cast a shadow and be nearly as bright as the Moon!

The winter sky has other great constellations, Gemini (the twins) with its two bright stars Castor and Pollux, and Taurus the Bull with its bright red "eye" Aldebaran. The



"face" of the bull is a V of stars which is actually the nearby star cluster, the Hyades. It's so close we can see its stars moving and thus it has been used to determine the most accurate distances to all the stars.

Note that most of the stars were named by Arabs or Egyptians, explaining their Arabian names. But the constellations come from Greek mythology. So a look at the sky is a look at history and culture. Near the Hyades is the very small dipper-like constellation called the Pleiades. These are the seven sisters (are your eyes good enough to see them all?) who, when fleeing Zeus, were turned into doves who flew up into the night sky.

Actually they are the brightest stars in a rather close star cluster and were very important in helping astronomers to determine how stars aged. They are gorgeous seen through binoculars or a small telescope.

Don't forget the planets. Still high in the west is dazzling Jupiter. In binoculars (steadied on a car top) you can make out its four satellites. Mars is the very bright red star coming up in the east as it makes a close approach to earth.

But I've saved the best for last. Below Orion's belt is his sword,

three stars in a vertical alignment. Look closely at them. One is not a star so much as a fuzzy glow. In binoculars you can easily see that it's a nebula, in fact, the famous Orion Nebula, swirling birthplace of stars, as fine a sight as you'll see in the winter sky.

The PEEC lending library has some good books on stars for the beginner and the intermediate star gazer. Also, it now is getting the amateur astronomer's magazine, *Sky & Telescope*, with useful articles and star charts. Enjoy.

Image credit: NASA/JPLCaltech. NASA.gov/images

This is a spiral structure, our galaxy, the Milky Way. "Using infrared images from NASA's Spitzer Space Telescope, scientists have discovered that the Milky Way's elegant spiral structure is dominated by just two arms wrapping off the ends of a central bar of stars. Previously, our galaxy was thought to possess four major arms." See this beautiful image in color in this issue of *Nature Notes* on PEEC's web site, www.PajaritoEEC.org \Leftrightarrow



Family Nature Connection: Heat Loss from Your House by Michele Altherr

It is nice to stay warm and cozy in our homes when temperatures outside drop below freezing. We can turn up the heat, put another log on the fire, and dress with an extra layer of clothing. Yet while our furnace is doing its job, the heat produced is making its way outside. Some buildings are insulated and resist heat loss through the ceilings, walls, floors, windows, and doors. Yet many buildings and homes in Los Alamos were built before 1975, when adequate home insulation wasn't installed. For example, Mountain School is made of cinder blocks, which do not provide insulation for the classrooms. The rooms get cold in the winter and hot in the summer.

PEEC is located in part of a school building that was built for kindergarten classes. About two years ago, we received a grant to add insulation to our ceiling. After adding the insulation, our part of the building stayed much warmer in the winter. Then one day Matthew Dickens, the Los Alamos County Energy and Water Conservation Director, pointed out something interesting to me. He told me to watch PEEC's roof after a snowstorm. I did. What I saw was that the roof on PEEC's end of the building was covered in snow, while the other uninsulated end was snow-free. The difference was the result of the installed roof insulation and subsequent diminished heat loss through our roof. The insulated portion of the roof was colder and the snow didn't melt, while the other end was losing enough heat to melt the snow off the roof much quicker.

Ever since then, I have been looking at roofs in my neighborhood and thinking about which homes are losing more heat through their roofs than others. You can do this too. You would want to pick a few roofs facing about the same direction, having the same amount of shade, and made of similar materials such as metal or asphalt shingles. Then after the next snowfall, keep track of the rate of snowmelt on the roofs. You'll be able to make a good prediction of which homes have better insulation.

Visit the Los Alamos Public Utilities web site to see a history of your home's energy and water use. Remember

that roof insulation plays an important role in reducing the amount of energy you consume for heating and cooling. The cost of insulation will pay for itself in reduced energy bills.

Why Are We Seeing That Critter HERE?

Whether walking or flying, wildlife has brought some surprises this fall. The "white board" at PEEC lists birds and mammals reported locally. Wondering why, we rummaged through some web sites to get reasons.

Rare Birds reported to PEEC in December:

Eastern blue jay	Long-tailed duck
A nearly all-white junco	Wood duck

Birders from the Randall Davey Center in Santa Fe Canyon, Espanola, and Dixon reported more rarities during their annual Christmas counts, and Los Alamos birders might watch for some of them here. These include American goldfinch, belted kingfisher, a flock of dozens of horned larks, long-tailed duck, and Ross's goose.

Quoted in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* this month, Robert Templeton of Dixon said 3,672 birds were counted by volunteers there, which included 65 species, and those figures are above average. The count on robins was 502, up from the usual 254; 94 is usual for mountain bluebirds but this year the tally was 490.

Templeton said the drastic increases might have been caused by an "eruption phenomenon" in which birds are forced to migrate from one area to another in search of food. Over the years, the number of birds in Dixon has been seen to decrease. Steady decreases might happen because of poor habitat, urbanization, land and water management issues (www.santafenewmexican.com).

Wild mammals reported during the fall months:

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Red squirrel	Abert's squirrel
Coyote	Mountain lion
Black bear	Bobcat
Red fox	Long-tailed weasel
Raccoons with babies	Pika

The number of black bears sighted in town has been unusual. Three in one day were either scared back into a canyon or removed to the mountains by Game and Fish staff. Reasons vary and may include range alterations, mast production (acorns), and bear populations.

Game and Fish conducted field investigations in two study

areas (Sangre de Cristo Mountains and Mogollon Mountains) from 1992-2000. They found acorn crop failure had the greatest influence on reproduction, followed by juniper berry failure. Los Alamos abounds in this possible autumn attraction for bears that will give birth in dens in winter. Bears' long-range movements increased during the mast season, and during years of oak failure the distance traveled increased. Always, sightings in town and nuisance behavior were associated with availability of human-related foods, especially garbage. Los Alamos residents also cite fruit tree production and, at PEEC, ready availability of bird feeders!

A habitat model in the study estimated suitable black bear habitat crossed about 14.5 million acres. Bear density led to population estimates of 5,947 bears, which may be an increase, though earlier estimates were deemed less reliable.

(Black Bear Study in New Mexico, Final Report, 2001)

Sub-adult male bears disperse widely. When habitat becomes limited or degraded, sub-adult males may encroach on the territory of sub-adult females and force them into marginal areas near human populations. In 1990, for instance, 23 bears came to Albuquerque, all subadult females.

(Special Publication, *Black Bears of NM*, n.d.) ♀

Bird Lists: Los Alamos in December

Selvi Viswanathan on Barranca Mesa adds comments to her bird observation lists:

"With a lot of snow this time of year, I see that the feeders are visited by two acorn woodpeckers (always together), bush tits in a flock of a dozen often during a day, two white-winged doves, a dozen juncos even during the snowfall, a pair of canyon towhees, flickers, both whitebreasted and pygmy nuthatches, mountain chickadees, and hairy woodpeckers. A male downy woodpecker comes once or twice a week to the suet feeder, with a cute red spot on its head."

The "white board" at PEEC lists birds at the feeders outside the nature center, as well as sightings from White Rock and other parts of town:

Greater roadrunner Downy woodpecker Slate-colored junco Canyon towhee (pair) Brown creeper (2) Spotted towhee Golden eye duck Wood duck Eurasian collared dove

Cedar waxwing Cooper's hawk Hairy woodpecker Acorn woodpecker Bush tit Hooded merganser Long-tailed duck Eastern blue jay Common merganser

Bushtit notes:

Probably the smallest bird at our feeders, at 4.5" long with 6" wingspan, bushtits catch our attention because they come in close flocks and because they are so conversational: uttering soft "tsit" calls.

Fluttering around the suet or peanut butter slabs in winter, they seem to be comfortable near chickadees, pygmy nuthatches, even people. They also eat small insects and spiders.

Psaltriparus minimus is the only species in the bushtit family found in the New World, and the only member of the genus Psaltriparus. Breeding in our county, bushtits build a conical nest of lichens and spiderwebs with a side opening. Both parents are known to warm the eggs, sometimes at the same time.

One sighting and we know why they are called "adorable." (www.squidoo.com) (Drawing: www.clker.com/clipart) ♥



Herbarium Notes By Chick Keller A Utah Composite Discovered in NM?

Last summer was a very good one for finding new and interesting plants in the Jemez Mountains. The San Pedro Parks Wilderness was particularly productive with finds of three species new to the state. One of these doesn't occur again until Wyoming!

PEEC has also been able to study the mysteries of some of those darned little yellow composite flowers. These are small plants, usually less than two feet tall, sporting ten or so middle-sized flowers. They are named after Mr. Packer--*Packera*. PEEC has been attempting to figure out if some of the rarer species of this genus from Colorado are present in the Jemez Mountains. It's quite a detective story since many of these species look very much alike. But, of course, that's what makes it fun.

I have a junior high school student, Jack Mogler, helping me. He is tasked with learning to be very observant when peering at these plants through PEEC's excellent herbarium microscope. He has to look for hairs on the leaves and stems, tiny leaflets just under the flower head, the shape of leaves at the base and along the stem, etc. (Cont. on p.6) Then we both have to read the books that describe these plants and the web sites that show excellent pictures of them. Are those petals really orange-yellow or just golden? So far we've not been able to solve all the problems, but we think one problem can be solved by acknowledging that a Utah variety actually occurs in the Jemez Mountains. Correspondence with others in the state who study such plants shows we are making a contribution.

Thanks to all of you whose donations have allowed us to put together the equipment to allow us to learn so much about the plants near where we live. We work mostly on Tuesday afternoons and welcome anyone who would like to drop by and see what we're up to. Do you have a child who might be interested, or might you be interested yourself? We'd love to see you. ♀

A Snake, a Lizard, a Toad: New Critters at PEEC by Jennifer Macke

We have quite a few updates on the live animals at PEEC. First, we were happy to welcome a hognose snake to PEEC in October. He was purchased with a donation made in celebration of the 48th wedding anniversary of Jim and Terry Foxx. In honor of his donors, he has been named Foxxy.

In December, we took in a second fence lizard, who now lives with Flash. The new lizard was found inside a home on Barranca Mesa in December and was given to Bob Dryja, who brought it to PEEC to be Flash's companion. So far the two lizards are getting along well and are often seen basking together under their sun lamp.

Also in December, we added a Woodhouse's toad, which was accidentally dug up from his hibernating place during some construction work. We are happy have the toad again, for several reasons. It is an interesting local critter that many people never see, and it's easy to care for, so it's an excellent exhibit animal. We will be looking for suggestions for naming the new toad soon.

There is an interesting interconnection between the hognose snake and the toad. In the wild, toads are the favorite food of hognose snakes. Thus, we can use the toad to scent the food offered to Foxxy. The frozen pinkies offered to the snake are rubbed on the skin of the toad to make them smell more like the snake's natural food source. We are also very happy to report that we have many new adoptive parents for our animals for 2010! We thank them wholeheartedly for helping to defray the costs of keeping live animals at the Center. Look for their names posted on the fronts of the critters' tanks. It's never too late to sign up to be an adoptive parent, so please consider this unique way of supporting PEEC's educational mission and helping a child bond with a live creature.

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PEEC's Library

by Jennifer Macke

Everyone at PEEC would like to take this opportunity to thank Jean McClary for serving as our librarian for more than four years. She stepped aside in order to keep up with her volunteer work at the Los Alamos Medical Center. She kept everything nicely in order in the PEEC library, and we are very sorry to lose her. However, we know that she is still a great asset to the Los Alamos community in her other volunteer work.

We are happy to report that we have two new volunteers who have stepped in to fill Jean's shoes: Jane Lin and Sue Watts. Jane and her daughter visit PEEC regularly and now help out with the library on their visits. Sue is a partyear resident of Los Alamos who was looking for a local volunteer job that would fit with her schedule. Both new librarians are enthusiastic book lovers who will bring new ideas to the PEEC book collection.

The library at PEEC is free and available to the public, both for browsing and for checking out materials. It has a special section just for kids and another just for teachers. You may search the library catalog online (http://www.pajaritoeec.org/library/library.php).

New PEEC Publication: Shrubs and Trees in Their Winter Form: A Key for the Pajarito Plateau, New Mexico by Dorothy Hoard PEEC Gift Shop \$3.50

"Why would anyone care about plants in their winter form? Curiosity mostly. But in truth, they are quite beautiful and a source of never-ending delight," says author Dorothy Hoard. Three helpful keys and "Advice for Successful Identification" help with close-up observations of those dead-looking plants sticking out of the snow. Dorothy's amazingly clear drawings make the keys easy to follow. Try it ! Photography and PEEC's Trip to Bosque del Apache. Hold Still, Sandhill Crane!

The wonderful thing is that they often do! The tall, beautiful gray cranes with red head caps usually are standing still being photogenic at both Bernardo and Bosque del Apache preserves near Socorro. They are wintering there near wetlands and grain still in fields. Driving tours, blinds and overlooks offer close-up opportunities. Getting up early in the morning or hanging around till dusk may afford mind-blowing opportunities for seeing thousands of birds taking wing. Other "posing" birds, in addition to the 7000 sandhill cranes, are 48,000 ducks, and 30,000 geese, eagles, swans, coots and other water birds, as noted on Dec. 29, 2009 (friendsofthebosque.org).

The Rio Grande brings us to a convenient western edge of the Central Flyway. Flyways are "sky paths" and are the migratory routes of birds. They are general routes that most migrants tend to follow. Scientists have proposed that birds use the stars, the sun, and even the earth's magnetic field for guidance. At migration's end, birds need water, food and safety. The wildlife refuges along the Rio Grande are enhanced by grain left standing for the birds. Find the greatest number of "posing" birds where the grain is thickest.

PEEC is sponsoring a birding trip starting with a

morning at Bernardo and a picnic lunch at the Bosque on Saturday, Feb. 6th. Dinner with the group and overnight in Socorro makes it easy to catch those dawn and dusk flights. Participants pay their own expenses. There is a \$10 fee for non-members of PEEC; PEEC members are free.

Please let Esta Lee Albright know you're coming -- estalee@whalesail.com - or call PEEC at 662-0460.

A rare and unusual finale to the trip is a stopover atop Sandia Crest on the way home on Sunday, Feb. 7th, where a high-elevation research banding project has been in progress for several years. The seldom-seen rosy finch, all three color varieties, lands on the snowy deck of the cafeteria/shop at bird feeders. Banding staff explain the research and show details about the birds to the PEEC group. Photographers stay warm inside and have an easy time very close to the birds. Read more at www.rosyfinch.com www.friendsof the bosque.org www.wildlife.state.nm.us/conservation/...

PEEC's Nature Odyssey Summer Science Camp and Living Earth Adventure Program

The Nature Odyssey Summer Science Camp for grades 4 - 6 and the Living Earth Adventure Program for grades 7-9 are unique opportunities for young people to become immersed in nature and learn with talented and enthusiastic environmental educators. With classrooms ranging from the riverbeds and canyons of the Rio Grande Valley to the headwaters of the Jemez River on the Valles Caldera National Preserve, campers explore a wide range of ecosystems in Northern New Mexico. It is our goal that all students who participate in these programs will take an enthusiastic interest in the natural world.

For more information, please visit PajaritoEEC.org.

2010 Dates and Prices:

June 7 - 11 \$275* Nature Odyssey, Rio Grande Valley (4 - 6th grades)

June 14 - 18 \$275* Nature Odyssey, Jemez Mountains (4 - 6th grades)

June 28 - July 2 \$325* L.E.A.P. 7 - 9th grades)

*discounts and scholarships available

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Photo by Branden Willman-Kozimor Drawings pages 1,2,4 by ClipArt,Etc.

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is a weekly e-mail alert about classes, events, nature and the environment. Anyone who has an e-mail account can receive them. To start, send a message to Webmaster@PajaritoEEC.org.

PEEC This Week

These weekly e-mail alerts always include PEEC activities and local information about nature. You also can contribute appropriate notices.

PEEC's Mission Statement: To provide a nature center and outdoor education programs that allow people of all ages to explore the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Pajarito Plateau and to appreciate our connection to the natural world.

Contact PEEC:

• Attend classes, lectures,

programs, events.

- Visit the Nature Center.
- Sign up for *PEEC This Week*.
- Volunteer in many ways.
- Donate.
- Exchange light bulbs.
- Join LA Green.
- Recycle printer cartridges.
- Stop using plastic bags.
- Shop in our store.

Become a member: use the form or web site, plus much more at www.PajaritoEEC.org **General Membership** \$35 **Living Lightly** \$20 **Non-Profit Sponsor** \$75 1 Newsletter and PEEC This Week for up to 3 organization members. \$60 Penstemon Benefits of membership plus t-shirt or canvas shopping bag. \$100 Sunflower Benefits above plus additional t-shirt or canvas shopping bag. Wild Iris Donor \$250 Benefits above plus Muench coffee table book. **Skyrocket Gilia Donor** \$500 We will contact you to determine how to recognize this generous level of donation. Wood Lily Donor \$1000 We will contact you to determine how to recognize this generous level of donation.

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