



Nature Notes



PEEC Garden Club members prepare to process ears of dried popcorn, while learning about historic growing practices of Native people and of farmers today. Members brought popcorn kernels home to share with their family! (Photo by Denise Matthews)

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PAJARITO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER, LOS ALAMOS, NM

Thank You for Being a Nature Fan!

By Katherine Bruell, Executive Director

Welcome 2021! It feels like it took both forever and also no time for 2021 to arrive. I know many of us are glad to see the end of 2020. Despite all the distressing events that happened in our country and around the world in 2020, a silver lining is how many more people became connected with nature.

While official research is scant at this point, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that people are much more eager to spend time outside than they were a year ago. RVs are sold out all over the country, with dealers reporting, "Our slow season this year is busier than our usual busy season." People who have never hiked before and people who have only hiked a little are taking to the trails in record numbers. AllTrails data shows people hitting the trails at three times the rate of previous years. On May 23 AllTrails had the most people using the app in company history, up 163 percent compared to last year. The American Hiking Society found a 200 percent increase in trail usage in cities across the country during the pandemic, starting in the late spring (Statistics from *The Cut*). PEEC has seen an over 30% increase in the number of people using our online Nature Guides, as more people want to identify what they're seeing when they're outside. It's great to see nature's fan base expanding all over the world.

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Members of our small group Forest Explorers Club took to the trails every month starting in June 2020 to explore our canyons, build forts, make fairy houses, meet new friends, and more! (Photos by Ashleigh Lusher)



A Forest Explorer reaches new heights (literally!) while testing his limits and building confidence by climbing into a rock hollow in Acid Canyon. (Photo by Ashleigh Lusher)

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Thank you for being one of nature's greatest fans. You're reading this newsletter because you know how necessary nature is to everyone, and you're already out there enjoying it. Whether it's seeing a sky full of stars on a clear, moonless night at the Valles Caldera, or hiking a backcountry trail in Bandelier in the snow, or exploring the canyon behind your house to find new wildflowers, or identifying and enjoying the antics of the many birds that come to your feeder — you know we need nature in our lives. And hundreds of you made a year-end gift to PEEC in 2020 to make sure that everyone can enjoy these same kinds of experiences.

Thank you for valuing nature, and for helping ensure that everyone can access it when they most need it. Everything in this newsletter is made possible by you. Thank you. PEEC will continue going strong in 2021, because of you. 🌱

2020 PHOTO HIGHLIGHTS



We teamed up with Los Luceros Historic Site to distribute summer camp materials to children through Moving Arts Española and the Embudo Valley Public Library. (Photo by Carly Stewart)



Families continued to hit the trails with the Passports to the Pajarito Plateau. We've continued to make booklets and prizes available through curbside pickup so as many people as possible can get outdoors! (Photo by Maggie Moore)



We partnered with the Fuller Lodge Art Center to offer an Art in Nature Club! Participants got to be creative with natural materials while getting outside. (Photo by Christa Tyson)

Down the Rabbit Hole!

By Marilyn Lisowski

Behind a leaning rock ledge in Upper Bayo Canyon, a fluffy, gray-brown mound stirs in a soft nest lined with light gray belly fur. A Mountain Cottontail rabbit, weighing two pounds, lifts her head, as yet free of a killing virus plaguing wild rabbits. Her hole is too small to extend her two-inch long gray ears. Her stomach aches with hunger, like all Mountain Cottontails in winter who live throughout the Rockies, even into Canada. She nudges her companion, a much smaller male, one of her offspring who never left the nest. She let him stay, knowing he was a runt and could not survive alone. He helped her keep warm and followed her to food until the snows came. He stopped emerging to forage and now he's weak. He sleeps on.

The mother cottontail climbs out and pokes a furry paw and then her soft, brown nose through thin ice covering the opening in the rock ledge. Bitterly cold wind off the snow slaps her long ears down. She peers out into the gray dawn at nearby junipers on North Mesa knowing she will only find bark and twigs to eat. She finished all the wild rose hips weeks ago. She dares not venture farther. A sudden shadow rips among the junipers — a coyote or bobcat, maybe even a fox. Was it waiting for her? A Cooper's Hawk soars high overhead, searching. It's too dangerous now. At dark, she will try again, listening for owls.

A young male cottontail chased her last evening wanting to mate. If she were to mate now, she'd bear her young in a month's time. Still deep cold, there would be no food beyond bark. She knows how hard it would be to eat enough to nurse her babies. She'd have to nudge last year's bunny outside, as there would be no room for him. If she can put off this male for a month, the air will be growing warm with plentiful spring grass shoots when she gives birth. Maybe she'll have four or five babies, blind and hairless, helpless for weeks until weaned after a month and encouraged to leave. She bore three litters last year. Did they survive? She knows that many do not, since predators, including snakes, abound on the Pajarito Plateau.

When shadows lengthen, the little cottontail awakes again, hungrier than ever. Her offspring is already awake, starving. She hops out, followed painfully by the weakened bunny. Her ball of fluffy, white tail bobbing, she



A Mountain Cottontail rabbit. (Photo by Josip Loncaric)

bounds through snow to clear patches of ground. Are there acorns shed lately by a scrub oak? No luck. The Acorn Woodpeckers have cleaned up.

Resigned, she munches the inner bark of a juniper nearest the safety of a leafless thicket. Her offspring has not followed. The bark is tough but she gnaws hungrily. It's too early for the mountain people's gardens. They try to keep her out, but she digs under fences. One gardener threw rocks at her last summer while she dined on succulent lettuce. She was too fast and he missed. She often thinks of that lettuce. She listens carefully. An owl hoots in the canyon.

Suddenly, a twig cracks! The cottontail streaks into the covering brambles and freezes as still as ice. The predator, a coyote, spots her and sprints into the thicket, jaws open. She races in semi-circles trying to confuse him. He dashes in breathless pursuit, but hesitates, then leaps to head her off. In that split second, she disappears into a rock crevice. She crouches, very still, as the coyote waits. She can hear it panting, whining. Wind buffets the rock. The coyote pauses, listening. He slinks away.

Much later, the cottontail slips out of her hiding place, bites off a twig and darts back to the safety of her rabbit hole. Her offspring is gone. She chews on the twig, and curls up dreaming of spring and lettuce. 🐰

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE WILDLIFE OF NORTHERN NEW MEXICO?

Visit our online Nature Guides at peechnature.org/learn/nature-guides to explore our local mammals, wildflowers, birds, and more!

TayTay the Tarantula

By Ian Price

Hi! My name is Ian Price. I am a 6th grader at Aspen Elementary, a PEEC volunteer, and I love spiders. I have recently started caring for the spiders at the nature center. It is a lot of fun to watch them eat, especially the Black Widow, Natasha.

This summer, I was bored during quarantine, so I thought about getting a tarantula. I asked my parents if I could get a tarantula and they said “NO!” Later, they said if I wrote a report about tarantulas, then maybe I could get one. I think they were hoping I would be discouraged from getting one. But, they were wrong. I started a new Google document on my laptop and started researching. I learned a lot of interesting things; here are a few important facts: Tarantulas eat crickets, they are considered easy to care for, the females can live 20 years, and most are safe to have as pets.

I wrote up my report, showed it to my parents, and it worked! They said I could get one, as long as I paid for it.

I ordered my first tarantula, Tonya, from a store in Florida. She came in the mail a few weeks later. At first, she was great. I could hold her and she ate her crickets. But then, she started being “grumpy” — she lost hair on her abdomen, and one time she jumped out of my hand and broke her leg.

I got a book called *The Tarantula Keepers Guide*, and learned that maybe she was getting ready to molt. Tarantulas get bald patches when they are close to molting and they also stop eating. I was worried about her broken leg, but read that tarantulas can actually stop their blood flow to various parts of their body to prevent them from bleeding to death.

After a few days, her leg seemed fine and I wasn’t as worried about it. Unfortunately, Tonya didn’t seem to be molting, and we think she was actually older than the store said she was. She died a few months after I got her. A lesson I learned from this experience is that you should buy tarantulas from a pet store with a good reputation (I recommend Jurassic Pets in Santa Fe).

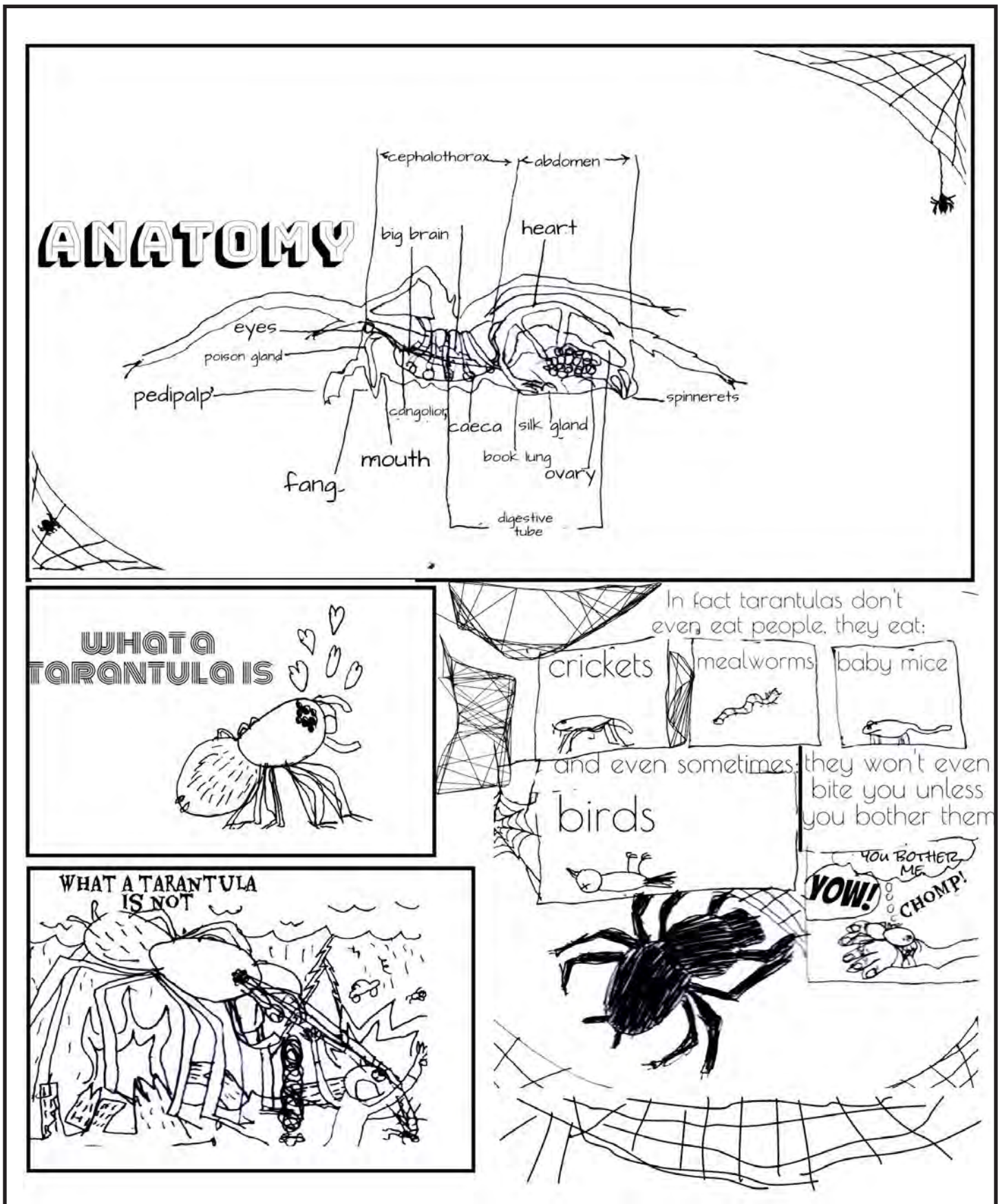
Now, I have a curly haired tarantula that is almost a



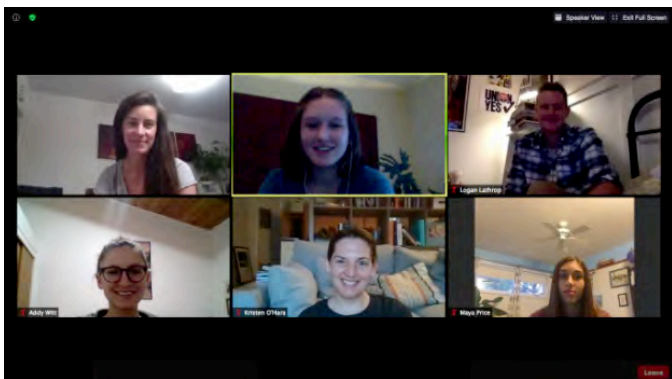
Author Ian Price poses with his tarantula, TayTay. Ian is a PEEC volunteer in our critter care department and helps us care for our spiders! He especially enjoys Natasha the Black Widow at the nature center. (Photo by Aimee Price)

year old. Her name is Taylor (TayTay for short). She appears to be much healthier than Tonya was. I like holding her; she is almost as soft as my dog. When she crawls on my hand, her claws are a little poky, but she’s really gentle. One time, I took her out of her terrarium during a school Google Meeting. She was sitting on my desk, looking at the screen like it was a movie. She started cleaning her feet and it looked like she was eating popcorn!

Some challenges that I’ve had with a tarantula as a pet is keeping the temperature and humidity just right. Another challenge has been learning how to keep crickets alive! Jurassic Pets helped me a lot with both of these things and I hope to have TayTay for many years. 🕷️



Ian created this comic to accompany his article to teach us all bit more about tarantulas! Learn about their anatomy, diet, and more! He loves spiders and learned more about them by volunteering with PEEC's critter care team. This experience helped inspire him to adopt a tarantula of his own! (Comic by Ian Price)



PEEC's new Young Adult Advisory Group has been meeting via Zoom over the past few months to plan programming and offerings from PEEC geared at reaching younger audiences and connecting young adults around a love of the environment and nature.

Introducing the Young Adult Advisory Group

By Elizabeth Frost

Like most teenagers in Los Alamos and the rest of the world, my life completely flipped upside down over one weekend last March. I went from seven-hour school days, daily two-hour sports practices, and in-person clubs meetings to the complete lack of activities, including school. I found myself struggling to find meaningful ways to occupy my time, since almost every event and activity was transferred online or canceled completely.

Then, a few weeks before school started, I received an email asking if I would be willing to participate in the Young Adult Advisory Group (YAAG) starting at PEEC. I immediately agreed to join, and found myself welcomed into a group of like-minded individuals who are just as passionate about leaving a positive environmental impact on the world.

Throughout the past few months, I have been amazed by the work we have been able to accomplish despite the limitations of COVID-19 and never meeting in person. We have been able to host live-streamed events, plan future offerings, and work with other local and youth-led movements, such as the Los Alamos Mountaineers and the Sunrise Movement, to form ideas for programming. I am excited to be a part of this amazing group and look forward to seeing the impact it will continue to have on the community. 🌀

We're looking for more members to join our Young Adult Advisory Group! Interested? Email Christa at visitorservices@peecnature.org to learn more.



Stopping at Anderson Overlook or hiking the Anniversary Trail offers one of the best views in Northern New Mexico! Take some time this winter to enjoy looking out at snow-covered mesas from this vantage point. (Photo by Rick Wallace)

Twenty Views to Enjoy in 2021

By Beth Cortright, Adventure Programs Manager

Are you looking for some inspiration to get outside in the New Year? Here are twenty great views that you can enjoy in and around the Pajarito Plateau. We hope this list helps you plan some local adventures and take in the nearby beauty of the nearby outdoors.

1. Anderson Overlook
2. "The Overlook" at Overlook Park
3. Kwage Mesa Trail
4. Deer Trap Mesa Trail
5. Mitchell Trail
6. Top of Pajarito Mountain
7. Cerro Grande
8. Tsankawi Loop Trail
9. Upper Crossing Trail
10. Valle de Los Posos Overlook
11. Guaje Canyon Overlook
12. Quemazon Trail
13. Cabra Loop
14. Los Alamos Nature Center

15. Tyuonyi Overlook
16. Knife Edge Trail
17. White Rock Canyon Rim Trail
18. Canyon Rim Trail (Los Alamos)
19. Pueblo Canyon Rim Trail
20. The view from your own backyard

What are your favorite views or hikes in Northern New Mexico? We'd love to see your photos and hear your stories! Tag us on social media (@peechnature) or email publicity@peechnature.org to let us know! We may share your submissions with the PEEC community! 📸

EXPLORE YOUR LOVE FOR NEW MEXICO!

Join PEEC and three other nature centers from across the country for our upcoming Sense of Place reading series! We'll explore our connections with the land, learn about different places, and connect with other nature lovers near and far.

Learn more and register at peechnature.org/events.



Our Mission: Enriching people's lives by strengthening their connections to our canyons, mesas, mountains, and skies.

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Keeping the Focus on Nature

"I absolutely love your presentations! You have it so together as an organization. You are keeping me and others involved in the topics we love. Thank you."

— Barbara Kruse, Program Participant

Nature Center Hours:

The Los Alamos Nature Center is currently closed due to COVID-19. Visit us online to connect with us virtually and for updates on our re-opening.

Visit us online!

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Leave us a review on Trip Advisor, Google, or Yelp



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Families got outside in small groups to explore the gorgeous fall colors at Leonora Curtin Wetlands Preserve with PEEC volunteer Natali Steinberg in October! (Photo by Sue Watts)

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UPCOMING EVENTS

The Night Sky in January **JANUARY 8**

Trivia Tuesday **JANUARY 12**

Backcountry Film Festival **JANUARY 21**

Why Do Stars Pulsate? **JANUARY 22**

Sense of Place Reading Series **FEBRUARY 11**