



VOLUME 25, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2023

PAJARITO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER, LOS ALAMOS, NM

### Join Local Birders in the 123rd Annual Christmas Bird Count

By Mouser Williams

In the 1800s, many people in North America participated in a common holiday tradition of going out on Christmas Day and competing to kill as many birds as possible. At the turn of the 20th century, American ornithologist Frank Chapman suggested that perhaps it would be a better idea to simply count the birds rather than shoot them. Chapman enlisted the help of 26 like-minded bird enthusiasts and in December of 1900, held the first Christmas Bird Count (CBC).

For the last 122 years, the National Audubon Society has been conducting Christmas Bird Counts every winter. Volunteers gather to count and identify every bird they can find in a fixed 15-mile diameter circle over the course of one calendar day. Every year has attracted more volunteers than the last, as well as more count circles. This past holiday season drew approximately 73,000 people to counts in over 2,400 circles from the Arctic Circle to the southern tip of South America, including 39 counts throughout New Mexico. The CBC is now the nation's longest-running citizen science project and the data from the CBC archives have proven invaluable to ecologists and ornithologists studying changes in bird populations and ranges over the last century.

The Los Alamos CBC circle has been an annual event since 2015. This year, there will be a core

group of experienced birders leading field teams to various locations throughout Los Alamos County and surrounding locales for a full day of birdwatching. The event is open to all experience levels; even if you don't know how to identify local birds, CBC field team leaders can assist. Every volunteer will be assigned to a team that includes at least one expert. There is no better way to learn how to recognize the local winter resident birds than to spend a day out amongst them. Some teams will be hiking up in the mountains or down to the river, others will take leisurely strolls in town. We tailor the amount of physical effort required to match your tolerance for physical exertion. Even if you don't want to hike at all, we need feeder watchers! If you have bird feeders in your yard and prefer to contribute from the comfort of your home, that's great! Or, come to the nature center and count in the excellent wildlife viewing room. The more people we can get watching birds on December 17th, the better.

The count technically begins at midnight on Saturday, December 17th, and will go through 11:59 that evening (so if you hear owls in the middle of the night, take note!). However, most groups will begin counting around sunrise and finish well before sunset.

Anyone interested in taking part in the Christmas Bird Count, either on a field team or as a feeder watcher, should contact Mouser Williams at [mouser@mouser.org](mailto:mouser@mouser.org) for details. 📧

# Building Beautiful Wildlife Habitats in Los Alamos: A Letter to the Community

By Selvi Viswanathan

In 2016, Los Alamos received the honor of becoming the first National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Community Wildlife Habitat in New Mexico. Luisa Grant from NWF Washington came in person to PEEC's annual Earth Day Festival to celebrate the occasion. This means that our community is a place where people understand the habitat needs of native wildlife and intentionally provide for them through environmentally friendly gardening practices and community service.

Residents are improving their gardening practices by using the NWF guidelines for providing wildlife with food, shelter, water, and places to raise young. Not only are Los Alamos residents creating habitats that help wildlife survive, but they are also enjoying a garden that is truly alive with the comings and goings of hummingbirds, bees, butterflies, chipmunks, and lizards.

At the 2016 event, we unveiled a sign that marks Los Alamos as a community habitat and installed it on a post at the entrance of the Los Alamos Nature Center. Unfortunately, the unusually heavy winds this spring that resulted in terrible fires also destroyed the sign. We worked with NWF to get a new sign that is an improved version with a New Mexico logo to show that our community will keep moving forward as good stewards

of our environment. Despite the amazing monsoon rains this summer, New Mexico is still in a major drought and is vulnerable to an increasing number of fires. Drought-tolerant yards have become more important than ever. Native plants are ideal since they take little water and are beneficial to wildlife without letting wildlife become a nuisance.

The NWF Backyard Wildlife certification program helps wildlife by responsibly providing the four essential needs: food, water, cover, and places to raise young.

To become certified, go to:

[www.nwf.org/CertifiedWildlifeHabitat](http://www.nwf.org/CertifiedWildlifeHabitat). It takes less than 15 minutes and is a fun and educational experience for children.

Los Alamos has done an amazing job with 120 yards certified as backyard habitats in 2016 and 230 today! We hope that more of our community will consider doing so as well. Many of our large County buildings (for example, the visitor centers, senior centers, and golf course) could plant more native plants and become NWF certified. NWF certification handouts can be found at the nature center. PEEC has been a great champion for this process and we look forward to finding even more ways to help Los Alamos continue to be an excellent Community Wildlife Habitat! 🌱

## Book Review: *World of Wonders*

By Ed Santiago

Nature books often have a unifying theme: Life Forms With Something Geographical/Biological/Cultural in Common. *World of Wonders*, an unusual new book by Aimee Nezhukumatathil (neh-ZOO/KOO-mah/tah-TILL), opts instead for topics she felt like writing about; peacock, narwhal, dragon fruit, firefly, and twenty-four other short essays, each centering around one animal, vegetable, or even natural phenomenon ("monsoon").

I learned so much about life forms I knew nothing about: potoo, catalpa tree. About ones I thought I knew: octopus, and, to my delight, touch-me-not, *Mimosa pudica*, a small plant that always fascinated me as a child in Puerto Rico. Now I know how and why it folds in when tickled. None of what I learned about cassowaries, monarch butterflies and vampire squid was meaningless trivia: each essay provided a mix of overview and



*A newly installed sign at the nature center, marking Los Alamos as a Community Wildlife Habitat.  
Photo Credit: Beth Cortright*

specific details, in a way that offered thought-provoking insights into each one's place in our world.

Each essay also offered glimpses into the author's life, because this is much more than a nature book, it's also a memoir. Every essay, every creature/plant/entity, is tied to one phase in her life. Often that connection is strong, as with the corpse flower, which she studied across the world for three years (and cleverly used as a screening mechanism on dates). In a few cases, the connection is Spock-eyebrow-raising tenuous, but somehow that makes these especially memorable. What's also memorable is the author's pull-no-punches frankness about the racism and cruelty she's experienced throughout her life. This commentary is at times jarring or unexpected... much like real-world racism, in fact, making it all the more effective in building the reader's understanding of what life can be like for a brown-skinned girl in the U.S.

Informative, captivating, moving, and poignant, with exquisite fine artwork by Fumi Mini Nakamura. Entirely unlike anything I've read before, in good ways. I loved it, then loved it again while re-skimming for this review.

*"One Los Alamos" is a local group promoting thoughtful, civil dialogue around our diversity of backgrounds, beliefs, and identities in order to champion shared values and interests that can strengthen our community. Heidi Rogers created the Women of Color Book Club in February 2018 as a way to foster discussion and understanding of lives different from our own. <https://linktr.ee/OneLosAlamos>. 🐾*

## Apex Predator!

By Marilyn Lisowski

A tawny-colored female mountain lion peers around a snow-capped boulder in Bayo Canyon. The dimming light reflects off rising hairs on the back of her neck as a massive male black bear ambles below her. He's fat from stuffing himself for winter with berries, fallen apples, acorns, and mice. The bear's paws crunch on the snow-covered path, while in the canyon, the mountain lion is aware at all times of where he is. The bear stops and looks up sniffing, knowing she's there. She's not afraid. She knows it's time for him to lie down and sink into torpor for winter, and she also knows his hidden cave.



*A tawny-colored mountain lion perches on a branch and peers into the distance. Photo Credit: Marilyn Lisowski*

He's no danger now to her, or to her kittens. He plods on. At last, he's gone, and she's the new apex predator.

Like a silken scarf, the mountain lion slips down between boulders, silent as falling snow, and leaps across the bear's trail without touching it. She ascends a ponderosa pine off the trail, one with low branches, and in the twilight, she hungrily watches and waits for dinner. What happens next is historic, formed in her brain twenty million years ago, after the last Ice Age. Her ancestors grew to be the huge, terrifying *Smilodon fatalis*, also known as the sabre-toothed cat, with deadly razor-sharp teeth. Like our mountain lion, they were ambush predators and not pursuit predators, and they ruled North America for two million years.

The lion waits, motionless, camouflaged in pine boughs. She listens intently, ignoring the dim shouts of children playing above the canyon on Barranca Mesa. Hours later, her patience is rewarded. Five female mule deer and two half-grown fawns tread silently down the bear's path toward a grove of leafless, skeletal aspen to feed on the bark. They will pass close by. They are usually easier to catch when feeding, but she knows she cannot waste this opportunity. She crouches as they stop short, catching her scent. She quickly leaps onto the back of one of the grown females. She sinks her fangs into the nape of its neck, breaking the spinal cord and killing it instantly. The others flee.

The ice pick-like fangs of her ancestors and their larger, muscular build allowed them to grab prey

by the front in a death hug, and plunge their teeth into the neck in a killing throat bite. Those big cats hunted larger game: the North American megafauna of millions of years ago. Camels, bison, sloths, and mammoths are now largely extinct here. Their predators evolved to be smaller, needing less food.

The mountain lion drags the deer carcass through snow, no longer afraid the aroma will attract a bear. She pulls her victim deep into the canyon and then rips the juicy meat, her first real meal in several weeks. Snacks of mice and squirrels have barely kept her and her kittens alive until now. She jumps up at a stray sound and then lowers her body once again. The kittens, still spotted and braving their first winter, toddle towards her through the snow. She growls, and they keep their distance until their mother's deep hunger is satisfied. Then, carefully, they approach the kill. She guards her feasting kittens until their little tummies bulge and then buries the partially consumed deer in the snow to mask the scent, saving the rest for later. No bears will bother it now, only hawks and ravens. She doesn't begrudge them a meal.

Soundlessly leading the kittens back to her den, she considers the danger of a larger, solitary male she smelled a few nights ago. She knows he wants to mate or he wants her territory. Maybe both. She won't give him either one. She has kittens to protect for another year and if she lets him mate with her, he will kill them. And, she needs all the land she can defend, for herself and those kittens when they're adults. She marks a juniper with urine to reinforce her claim. Maybe he was just passing through, looking for food. If he finds her deer, she won't be able to defend it. But now, she's tired and full of meat. As the sky lightens with the dawn, our apex predator curls around her kittens in her soft, sequestered den in the rocks for a well-earned sleep through the comfort of the day. 🦁

## Why PEEC Membership Matters

Becoming a member of PEEC is about being a part of a community of nature lovers. With an annual membership to PEEC, your support enables our organization to operate the Los Alamos Nature Center and share the amazing natural beauty of our unique environment with people from all over the world. It also allows PEEC to offer a regular schedule of events on a variety of nature topics for all ages. All PEEC members receive reciprocal benefits at other nature centers, special member pricing for events, discounts at the gift shop, a quarterly newsletter, and much more.

Becoming a PEEC Member can be a great way to learn about how wonderful our community is; it links you to volunteer opportunities and connects you to people who share your same passions and interests. We have such an inclusive and rare knowledge base here at PEEC and the ability to share that knowledge is directly connected to membership.

We cannot say thank you enough to our existing members. If you are not a member we hope you will consider supporting PEEC through membership. 🦋

Become a member by going to the following link:  
<https://peecnature.org/support/membership/>



*Ryan and Natali bringing in new members at PEECnic.  
Photo Credit: Jillian Rubio*

# The Hushed Colors of Autumn

By Sue Watts

One overnight frost, a scattering of snow, and the vivid color of high early autumn drained from the landscape. Gone were the brilliant, stained glass reds of the woodbine/Virginia creeper and the neighbor's scarlet maples. Aspen no longer dazzled on the mountain slopes. The phrase from the Mamas and the Papas' "California Dreamin'" kept running through my head..."All the leaves are brown"....

But wait.

As I sat at my perching place, I realized there was plenty of color left, although the intensity had disappeared. The mood was not effervescent, but more subdued. The aspen retained a muted golden cast and still trembled in the breeze. LA Mountain sported the green of mountain mahogany on the south-facing slope and a patchwork of burnished russets, tans, and oranges of the oaks on the north-facing slope. The front oak patch had subsided from a rich mahogany to a lustrous saddle brown. The three-leaved sumac shrub still held onto its gentle reds. The lavender and sage still put out purple blooms. Sunflower heads displayed both yellow disc flowers as well as mature seeds in a kaleidoscopic pattern that changed daily. Late blooming asters dotted the tawny buffalo grama with purple.

Written a week later:

Cold nights with frost and another scattering of snow have further calmed the colors, but bright spots remain. My chamisa still glows a bright lemony yellow from its sunny, but protected space between two houses. During the "snow," it sported white caps over the yellow. My little aspen, planted against all wisdom, is a bright yellow flame. Pear trees are a delightful mixture of reds and oranges. Red berries outline branches with dots of color, and the everpresent heron's bill provides pinpoint spots of bright pink in unexpected places. Even the dull white seeds of the Russian olive are evident and will draw in the cedar waxwings, who will consume most of them within an hour.



*Upper Pueblo Canyon in the autumn. Photo Credit: Sue Watts*

As trees drop their leaves, their buds become more apparent. Each tree and shrub species sports buds that provide clues to their identification. I'll talk more about them in January.

My point is to suggest that you beware of generalizations. STOP...and really look around you. Don't let your head keep your eyes from seeing what's in front of you. Listen to the wind in the trees. I'm addressing myself as much as I'm addressing anyone.

Every month, I re-read Hal Borland's *The Golden Circle* for that particular month. I have to share a paragraph from his November chapter:

"November is the evening of the year, the bedtime of the green and flowering world. Now comes the time for sleep, for rest. The coverlet is being spread. Next should come the lullaby; but the lullaby singers have all gone south. The pines [and junipers] will whisper good night instead."

Rest well. 🌙

## A Letter from the Director

### What role does the Pajarito Environmental Education Center play in your life?

We have been asking our community this question and are delighted by the responses we are hearing. As one of our program participants shared, “PEEC is one of my favorite organizations, and the staff has become like a beloved family to me. They will always have my support and interest.”

**So what about you? What role does PEEC play in your life?** Do you walk the nearby trails with your loved ones? Do you learn more about our amazing world from home through our virtual programs? Do you explore our exhibits and planetarium with your family? Does your child investigate nature with our educators? Or perhaps it's your own special place to return to season after season.

PEEC has been enriching people's lives by strengthening their connections to our canyons, mesas, mountains, and skies for over 22 years. Through COVID restrictions, fire closures, and many changes, PEEC's bonds with our volunteers, members, and donors kept us going strong.

Your gift to PEEC helps ensure that this will be a place for all to meet, learn, play, and enjoy the beauty of nature for many decades to come. If you have already given, thank you so much! If you would still like to donate, **you can make your end-of-year gift to PEEC today by visiting [peechnature.org/donate](https://peechnature.org/donate), or using the enclosed envelope.**

Thank you for your ongoing support. 🌱



- Jillian Rubio

## Meet Our New Board Members!

### Ed Santiago



Puerto Rico is known for its spectacular beaches. Ed Santiago, orthogonally inclined from an early age, always preferred its mountains. One late-twentieth-century day,

on a backpacking trip in the Jemez Mountains, he got a funny sensation: this... feels... like... home. A few short years later, it was. His drift into PEEC's orbit was at first gradual, through friends and classes and Earth Days, and has grown more stable over time. Ed spends weekdays writing Open Source software; evenings and weekends are for cooking, rock climbing, hiking or reading or crosswords or sharing. Or all of the above. Board member since October 2022.

### Bonnie Klamm



Bonnie grew up on Whidbey Island, WA where the ocean was her backyard to play in. She has always had a love for wildlife and passion for understanding the

natural world. Bonnie earned her bachelors degree in earth and planetary science from the University of New Mexico and PhD in chemistry from Florida State University. She came back to New Mexico to work at the Los Alamos National Laboratory and enjoys rock hounding and fossil collecting in her spare time. Bonnie came to PEEC as a volunteer in the summer of 2021.

# Give the gift of Nature.

Your gift to PEEC helps ensure that we will remain a place for everyone to meet, learn, play, and enjoy the beauty of nature.

**Donate today.**



**PEEC**

**Nature. Community. Support.**

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

## PEEC Board of Directors

Jennifer Macke, President

Linda Zwick, Vice President

Mouser Williams, Secretary

Bonnie Klamm, Treasurer

Directors: Galen Gisler, Janet Griego, Nan Sauer,

Shelly Tarantello, Elizabeth Allen, Ed Santiago

## PEEC Staff

Jillian Rubio, Executive Director

Kristen O'Hara, Director of Interpretation

Beth Cortright, Operations Manager

Teianna Mitchell, Marketing Manager

Ryan Ramaker, Visitor Services Manager

Ashleigh Lusher, Gift Shop & Programs Coordinator

Elizabeth Watts, Educator, Planetarium Manager

Beth Sanchez, Education Programs Coordinator

Mitsi Pair Willard, Educator

## A resource for the community.

*"This is such an amazing resource, right in town. Take your kids and visitors. They have a beautiful facility, really nice staff, great exhibits and fun special events."*

— Los Alamos Nature Center visitor

## Nature center hours:

Monday: 10 – 4

Tuesday: Closed

Wednesday: 10 – 4

Thursday: 10 – 4

Friday: 10 – 4

Saturday: 10 – 4

Sunday: Closed

## Visit us online!

[www.peecnature.org](http://www.peecnature.org)

[facebook.com/peecnature](https://facebook.com/peecnature)

[instagram.com/peecnature](https://instagram.com/peecnature)

[youtube.com/c/peecnature](https://youtube.com/c/peecnature)

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



**PEEC**  
Pajarito Environmental  
Education Center

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*Ashleigh and Tam hang out with a special guest at the nature center! Photo credit: Jillian Rubio*

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

Backcountry Film Festival **JANUARY 26**

Galentine's Movie & Brunch **FEBRUARY 12**

Beaver Reintroduction at Bandelier **MARCH 8**

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