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PAJARITO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER, LOS ALAMOS, NM

Growing Together: The Early History of PEEC

By Michele Altherr, PEEC Founder

The Pajarito Environmental Education Center (PEEC) was organized by residents of Los Alamos County to promote place-based environmental education opportunities for all ages and to build support for the construction of a premier nature center. The organization began in 2000. Within the first two years, PEEC had established a board of directors, a set of bylaws, a paying membership base, and a network of partnerships with other community organizations and government entities. PEEC's earliest marketing strategies involved both paid and free print media and word-of-mouth. Diverse programs were offered free of charge by expert volunteers for school-age children, families, and adults. Also early on, PEEC collaborated with other organizations to host a community-wide Earth Day celebration, which would become its signature event.

In January 2001, PEEC was incorporated as a 501(c)3 non-profit. In the same year, PEEC was awarded its first two grants, a LANL Foundation grant and a National Park Foundation grant, both of which funded programming for northern New Mexico school children by combining classroom and field experiences. In 2002, PEEC's first quarterly newsletter was published, a website was established, and the first PEECnic for membership was held. The group continued to operate as an all-volunteer organization with a growing network of partnerships, including: local businesses, LANB, LACDC, Randall Davey Audubon Center, Bandelier National Monument, and Valles Caldera National Preserve.

By 2004, PEEC negotiated a rental agreement with Los Alamos Public Schools for space in the unused Little Valley School building at 3540 Orange Street in exchange for providing educational services to LAPS students. PEEC moved in and volunteers

hammered, painted, and collected items for a new nature center with a meeting room, library, office, gift shop, herbarium, live critters, interactive exhibits, and a children's area. Four rooms of Little Valley School were transformed into a nature center. Along with a start-up grant from the McCune Foundation, the Board was ready to open the center's doors to the public by Earth Day 2005.

With the opening of a building, the group began to offer a few fee-based programs and fundraise in earnest. As a result of fees, donations, grants, and a growing membership base, PEEC hired an office administrator and an education team. By 2007, PEEC hired a part-time program director to manage its diverse programs, which included school field trips to the center, summer adventure programs, hikes, workshops, speakers, and garden tours. In 2008, PEEC contracted with Los Alamos County's Department of Public Utilities to develop curriculum and teach school children about energy conservation and to conduct a "Watt Swap." Residents could exchange incandescent light bulbs for more energy-efficient compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs.

In 2012, the County approved the capital improvement project for the building of Los Alamos Nature Center at 2600 Canyon Road. The cost was \$4.3 million, and as PEEC's part of the arrangement, they agreed that PEEC would design and raise \$1.2 million for indoor and outdoor exhibits. The board split into two working groups: those who would raise the money for the exhibits and those who would create an Interpretive Plan, summarizing the underpinnings for both the PEEC organization and the exhibits themselves. PEEC held many public forums on the building design and the Interpretive Plan, which helped

define PEEC's future direction. After 10 years at the old building, in 2015, they were able to move into the award-winning, purpose-built nature center here today.

PEEC continues to innovate and generate new programs, build collaborations, and tap new funding opportunities. The organization has been awarded many grants and contracts. PEEC serves not only the residents of Los Alamos County but also those of neighboring communities and tourists to the area. PEEC's marketing strategies have expanded to include not only print media but also electronic media and social networking. Members of the PEEC Board of Directors and volunteers continue to be actively engaged in the functioning of the organization while its staff manages the day-to-day operations of the center. PEEC's early success stemmed from a combination of strong community support, effective organization, and a commitment to providing accessible environmental education.

After 25 years, PEEC has successfully transitioned from a grassroots initiative to a well-established and thriving organization, while maintaining its core values and adapting to the evolving needs of its community. 🌱

Generations of PEEC

By Selvi and Hari Viswanathan, PEEC Volunteers

Through three generations, the Viswanathan family has helped shape PEEC's story—one that continues to inspire and grow.

Selvi Viswanathan joined PEEC in 2005 as a member, and later joined the PEEC Board of Directors. At the time, the organization was beginning to dream of a place where the community could connect with nature. As a team of passionate volunteers, they worked diligently to support creation of the beautiful Los Alamos Nature Center. It was an exciting time. Selvi's husband, VK (Nathan), has also been a big PEEC supporter!

The Viswanathan family's involvement with PEEC didn't stop there. Selvi's son, Hari, also played a crucial role in gathering support for the nature center. The Board asked Hari to give a talk to the County Council on why the nature center would be important for the community. A little while later, Hari joined the Board himself, contributing to strategic planning and ensuring that PEEC's mission thrived.

Hari and Gowri's son, Aditya, became a familiar face at PEEC's Earth Day Festivals—even when he was just a few months old! As he grew, so did his passion for the environment. When Aditya was 10 years old, he gave a presentation on wildlife in the planetarium.

In 2023, Aditya's journey took an exciting turn when he joined the PEEC Nature Youth Group (PNYG). Alongside PEEC's previous

Visitor Services Manager, Ryan Ramaker, the group set out to make a real-world impact. Their goal was ambitious: for high schoolers to address societal problems pertaining to the environment using science. Hari and Gowri continued their support by helping to guide the group.

Using AI technology, PNYG developed a system to detect an approaching mountain lion and deploy lights and sounds to scare it away. Their innovation earned them international recognition. At the prestigious NeurIPS AI conference, their project was one of just four selected from 330 entries to win an award and a \$1,500 prize. In December 2024, Aditya traveled to Vancouver to accept the award and present the team's groundbreaking work.

The Viswanathan Family looks forward to the many educational opportunities PEEC provides. 🌱



Viswanathan Family at Aditya's Wildlife Talk in 2018
Left to Right: Hari, Nathan, Srinivasan, Aditya, Selvi, and Gowri
Photo Credit: Gowri Viswanathan

Bird Strikes

By Noelle Maryann Mason, Graduate Intern with LANL

This time of year, you may have noticed some new visitors to your bird feeder at home. After their enviable migration to warmer winter homes down south, migratory birds are making their way back to their northern summer homes. An estimated 3.5 million birds are taking flight to breed at their home territories.

Piñon-pine forests, ponderosa forests, and high desert upland shrub lands dominate the Northern New Mexico landscape, as well as riparian cottonwood galleries along the Rio Grande. These create breeding and stopover habitat for a wide variety of both resident and migratory bird populations.

In fact, many of these migrants call Los Alamos home, and they need your help to travel safely.

It is estimated that between one million and one billion birds die after window or building collisions annually (Klem et al. 2009,

Loss et al. 2014). It is difficult for birds to distinguish reflected trees and landscapes in glass from real ones. Additionally, artificial light on buildings at night can disorient night-migrating species (Bird-Safe Building Guidelines). By day, birds perceive reflections in glass as habitat they can fly into. By night, migratory birds that are drawn in by city lights are at high risk of colliding with buildings. Nighttime architectural illumination can attract migrating birds, causing them to lower their flight altitude and follow what they think is a celestial cue.

The majority of avian building collisions are due to either reflectivity of windows, transparency of windows, or a 'beacon effect' at night. Because windows often act as a mirror reflecting the environment outside, birds do not recognize the glass as a barrier and will not change their flight pattern to avoid it. Windows that are not reflecting the outside environment may instead appear transparent to birds and again they do not recognize the obstacle. In foggy, rainy or heavy moisture conditions, the illuminated area around a building is increased. Birds become disoriented in these conditions and can become trapped in the area of illumination, often exhausting themselves, striking windows or buildings, or being preyed upon (Bird-Safe Building Guidelines).

How can you help migrating birds? You can reduce the exterior reflectivity of your windows by applying window film or otherwise utilizing a pattern to break up reflective surfaces (Riggs 2022) or by installing a permanent sunscreen over the window. Studies suggest that UV patterned film reduces avian collisions by up to 90% (Swaddle 2020). Installing light colored blinds inside buildings can also help to reduce collision risk (Bird-Safe Building Guidelines).

Additionally, there are many companies (Guardian Glass, Walker Glass, Viracon®, GlasPro, Pilkington AviSafe™, BirdSafe®, etc.) that now sell "bird-friendly glass" or "bird-safe glass" rated by the American Bird Conservancy as having acceptable Threat Factor scores and by the LEED® Innovation Credit for Bird Collision Deterrence qualification.

To reduce the impact of illumination on birds at your home or business, the following measures are suggested:

Turn off, dim, or install motion activated lights near windows at night.

Program building lighting systems to achieve a measurable reduction in night-lighting from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m., or—ideally—ensure that all lights are switched off during that period.

Extinguish all exterior vanity lighting (roof-top floods, perimeter spots, etc.) during migration periods (February 15 through May 15 and August 15 through November 30).

As our feathered friends begin to share their summer homes with us here in Los Alamos, it's important to be a good neighbor. You can help reduce window strike mortality by taking the measures above to reduce the impact of your home or business lighting and windows. They say birds of a feather flock together – and Los Alamos residents can flock together to make a difference for migrating birds. 🐦

Don't miss this! Preventing Bird-Window Collisions (In-Person & Live-Streamed) on Thursday, May 1.

Scan the QR code or visit pecnature.org/events for more information.



PEEC WORD SEARCH

Circle the Words You Find:



- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| ANNIVERSARY | DISCOVER |
| EARTH DAY | ENVIRONMENT |
| MOUNTAINS | STEWARDSHIP |
| MESAS | CONSERVATION |
| CANYONS | PEECNIC |
| SKIES | BEE CITY |
| NATURE | EXPLORATION |
| WILDLIFE | TRAILS |
| PEEC PASSPORT | SUSTAINABILITY |
| SCIENCE | OBSERVATION |
| ENRICH | CURIOSITY |
| EDUCATION | COMMUNITY |

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FOR SUPPORTING 25 YEARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Celebrate With Us!

Earth Day Festival

April 26 | 10 AM - 2 PM

- 🌻 Nature Photography Exhibit at Mesa Public Library Step-Up Art Gallery | **MARCH 22-APRIL 30**
- 🌻 Art & Nature Exhibit with LA Art Council **APRIL 4-MAY 16** | Reception **FRI, APRIL 4, 5-7 PM**
- 🌻 Limited-Run 'Into the Woods' Beer Debuts at Bathtub Row Brewing Co-op | **THURS, APRIL 10, 4-7 PM**
- 🌻 PEEC Anniversary Plant Walk with Craig Martin | **TUES, APRIL 22, 5:30 PM**
- 🌻 Los Alamos Big Band Plays Under the Stars in the LANC Planetarium | **FRI, APRIL 25, 7-8 PM**

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS



PEEC Moments Over the Last 25 Years



Community Interest Meeting at Fuller Lodge
March 2000



First PEEC Annual Membership Meeting
June 2004



Grand Opening of Orange St Nature Center
April 2005



First Summer Outdoor Adventure Program
June 2005



First PEEC This Week Newsletter "PEEC Alerts"
2006



Clan Tynker at Earth Day Festival
April 2009



Grand Opening of Los Alamos Nature Center
April 2015



PEEC Penstemon Garden Planted
2015



Los Alamos Certified as Community Wildlife Habitat
April 2016



First Bear Festival
August 2017



Los Alamos Officially Named Bee City USA Affiliate
February 2024



PEEC's Nature Youth Group Awarded Prize at Neural Information Processing Systems Conference
December 2024

A Brief History of Los Luceros Historic Site

By Rebecca Ward, Los Luceros Historic Site Instructional Coordinator

Los Luceros is located along NM Highway 68, nearly equidistant to Taos and Santa Fe in a small farming community, Alcalde. Long before the Spanish arrived on this continent, Native peoples lived along the corridor of the Río Grande. Phiogeh Pueblo was established sometime between 1200 and 1400 and can still be found underground here at *Los Luceros Historic Site*. Pot sherds and worked stone from this era are discovered throughout the 148 acre property regularly.

Not much is known about the lives of the people who lived here from 1600-1703, but we do know that both Native American peoples and Spanish peoples made their home here. Around 1700, Captain Sebastian Martín Serrano came north with the Reconquista. For his work with the Spanish Military, he was awarded the Martín Serrano Land Grant with more than 51,000 acres. He named the land *Puesto de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad del Rio del Norte Arriba* (Outpost of Our Lady of Solitude of the Upper River of the North).

For one reason or another, the main Hacienda, which you can visit on site, was passed down through the women of the family. First to Margarita Martín Serrano Padilla, then to her daughter Barbara Padilla, who married the first Lucero associated with the property in 1757. She and her husband Santiago worked the farm land and raised their six children there. Julian Lucero, nephew of Santiago, came to love the land after visiting his uncle. Julian spent the first 30 years of his life amassing as much of the original land grant as he possibly could. He purchased land from the Martín Serrano heirs and from his own Lucero cousins. In 1796, he married his wife, Barbara Sisneros, the great granddaughter of Antonio Sisneros—the man who had an original claim on the land with Sebastian Martín Serrano. This is when the property became known as *La Plaza de Los Luceros*. Their children became as far flung as the rest of the people who were born here except their youngest child, Maria Marta Lucero, who stayed home to care for her aging father.

An Irish trader by the name of Elias Clark found himself at Los Luceros in 1850. By December of 1850, he was married to Maria Marta Lucero. They had one child together, Eliza Clark. Unfortunately, Elias died of tuberculosis when Eliza was 9 years old. Maria Marta was left to manage an incredibly large farm on her own. As a result, Eliza married at a relatively young age. She was 16 when she married Luis M. Ortiz.

Eliza died suddenly at the age of 56. Luis lived on with their children in the area until his passing in 1925. None of the Ortiz children were interested in the farm or the bulk of the land, so Luis began selling


off parcels of land. A woman named Carol Pfaffle was one purchaser. She created and ran the San Gabriel Dude Ranch. This ranch curated “Western” experiences for wealthy people from the East Coast. One visitor, Mary Cabot Wheelwright, had become close to Carol and confided that she was looking for a home in New Mexico. Carol knew about the old Hacienda called Los Luceros and took Mary on a short trip from the Dude Ranch to the building. Despite its crumbling exterior, Mary fell in love with the building.

Extensive repairs were required, and for an entire year, Mary employed Carol Pfaffle and an architect, Ted Peabody, to complete the repairs and renovations. During Mary’s time as owner, she conducted research on Navajo religious traditions with respected Medicine Man Hastiín Klah who visited often along with other noted guests like Maria Chabot, Georgia O’Keeffe, William Penhallow Henderson, Olive Rush, and Frances Newcomb.

After Mary’s death in 1958, there were a number of owners, though no one lasted all that long. Bank repossession of the property was common. Eventually, some distant cousins of Mary Wheelwright came to visit and were sad to see the state of the property. Frank and Anne Cabot purchased the house and the 148 acres that Mary had amassed with the goal in mind of restoring the house and grounds to their former glory. In 2008, they sold the property to the State of New Mexico at the urging of Robert Redford. Governor Bill Richardson completed the transaction, and in February of that year, he signed the deed in the Hacienda.

For eleven years, the property sat unused. With only a supervisor hired to maintain the property, the Historic Site was just a Historic Property until Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed legislation that changed the designation and provided full funding for the current staff.

Today, the property is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10am to 4pm. School visits, guided tours, and self-guided experiences happen regularly. People come to Los Luceros for all sorts of reasons: to bask in nature, to fish in the Río Grande, to visit the donkeys, and to learn about the history.

Los Luceros Historic Site has been a PEEC Partner since 2017. 



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Questions? Email peec@peecnature.org or scan the QR code.



Joyce Nickols, PEEC Docent Volunteer Assisting Visitors
Photo Credit: Sarah VanHoosier

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

PEEC Board of Directors

Shelly Wiemann, President
Bonnie Klamm, Vice President
Janet Griego, Secretary
Robin Gurule, Treasurer
Directors: Kristen Dors, Galen Gisler,
Ed Santiago, Nan Sauer

PEEC Staff

Izza Bello, Early Childhood Educator
Beth Cortright, Operations Manager
Nicole Jiron, Visitor Services Manager
Casey Lundberg, Marketing & Communications Manager
Ashleigh Lusher, Gift Shop & Programs Coordinator
Kristen O'Hara, Director of Programs
Jillian Rubio, Executive Director
Beth Sanchez, Education Programs Coordinator
Sarah VanHoosier, Environmental Educator
Elizabeth Watts, Educator & Planetarium Manager

“A great little natural history museum with some interesting creatures: Rosa the New Mexico milk snake, Severus Snake the gopher snake, etc. A vinegarroon, too! And a planetarium, aquarium, great bird feeders.”

— 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

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Young Kiddos Smiling for the Camera at Earth Day Festival in 2024
Photo Credit: Jillian Rubio

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UPCOMING EVENTS

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- ⚙️ PEEC 25th Anniversary Plant Walk **APRIL 22**
- ⚙️ Music Under the Stars **APRIL 25**
- ⚙️ Earth Day Festival **APRIL 26**
- ⚙️ Preventing Bird-Window Collisions **MAY 1**

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