

WHAT IF WE HAD A FIELD TRIP AND NOBODY COULD ATTEND?

By Cindy Hardin, Director of Outdoor Education | Photos by the author

As we know all too well, the pandemic events of the last year and a half have caused myriad activities to be curtailed or cancelled altogether. Our formerly robust field trip programs actually saw mass cancellations even before the schools closed in March, 2020.

Obviously, all school children have been profoundly affected by school closures, and close to 3,000 students saw the loss of the opportunity to explore Ballona and Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area under the guidance of our fabulous trained Naturalists. On a personal level, I had to teach myself to deliver nature programming online. This remote learning approach turned out to be more successful than I had hoped, and enabled me to keep in touch and partnered with many of the fabulous teachers that we see every year. Electronic learning also kept me in a job!

But we also have a group of around 30 volunteers that work to create positive nature experiences for the children of Los Angeles through “real life” trips in nature. I had concerns that with so much time off, the fervor and dedication these folks give to our programs might diminish. Happily, my fears were unfounded!

Most notably, our own Dorothy Steinicke developed an on-

line Nature Journaling course that we presented to two different schools, along with the help of volunteers Martine Tomczyk and Joyce Karel. We met weekly over an eight week period with students, with great results, first at Walnut Park Middle School and then with 186th Elementary School. In fact, one of our partner teachers in the project is planning on duplicating the course for her class during the 2021-2022 school year! You might have read about this endeavor in a previous issue of the Western Tanager.

Throughout the last year and a half I have kept in touch with our docent crew via email updates, and a recurring theme amongst the crowd was how much they missed the work and seeing each other. I could not have agreed more. By April, as things were starting to improve with the international health crisis, I decided that it would be possible to gather outside once again as small groups in the great outdoors. The positive response warmed my heart!

Our first foray was a trip to my beloved Bolsa Chica Wetlands. I chose this spot because the wide trails allow for proper social distancing, and Spring Migration time allows the chance to see lots of birds and a huge diversity of species. It was a huge success, and a wonderful feeling to see everyone after such a long hiatus.



Our gracious and fascinating host, Robert “Bob” Ramirez, and the very impressive ki’iy at Kuruvungna.



The Kuruvunga Springs.



Red Flame Skimmer hanging out with us at Kuruvungna Springs.

Encouraged by the positive response, another trip was organized in May, this time to Franklin Canyon. We again had an impressive turnout of volunteers, and the canyon was just lovely. Highlights of the day: a young Gopher Snake and the native Western Pond Turtle.

By now I was emboldened! Every June we celebrate the end of a busy school year with a Docent Thank You Luncheon. This is a chance for everyone to relax, share some good food and revel in another successful year of creating excitement and awareness of nature for our budding young naturalists. Even though there were no field trip successes to celebrate, I wanted to celebrate the mere fact that we were still engaged and together as a group in spite of all the challenges. So, in June I hosted a scaled down version of this event on the patio of my home. All attendees were vaccinated (we have a smart crowd, as you know!), and we had our own outdoor dining experience, similar to what most of our local restaurants have been doing to survive!

It was clear that the desire to stay engaged and to continue learning was high amongst the crowd, so it was decided that a July get together should be planned as well. This was a really special excursion—we all met on July 21st at Kuruvungna Springs, which are on the grounds of University High in West Los Angeles. This ancient spring, used for thousands of years by our local tribe, the Tongva (or Gabrielinos), continues to flow with waters held by

the Santa Monica Mountains. We were treated to a fabulous tour by our guide, Robert Ramirez, who taught us about the Springs, the restoration work being done there with increased planting of native flora, and the farming area that features New World Crops, especially the “Three Sisters” of corn, beans and squash.

I had never been to the Springs, as their public Open House conflicts with our monthly Open Wetlands at Ballona. Both occur on the first Saturday of the month. But for those of you who do have that day free, I highly recommend a visit. The Springs are open the first Saturday of the month from 9 am to 3 pm, and are located at 141 South Barrington in West LA. Do take the time to make a visit, and please tell Bob that “Cindy sent you”.

Open Wetlands was another casualty of the pandemic, but as things started looking up, we returned to staging this very popular event in July, albeit in a slightly different format. Normally Open Wetlands is done on a drop-in basis, and guests are free to come by and stay for as little or long a time as they want. For our maiden return we operated on a scheduled basis, with small, socially distanced groups going out hourly. But even with this limited approach, we had 51 attendees. The desire to be outside is strong amongst the general public!

Open Wetlands usually goes dark in August, due to high temperatures and the fact that so many folks take this time of year to



A rattlesnake youngster was a special treat to see at Franklin Canyon.



Franklin Canyon - an oasis of wilderness surrounded by Beverly Hills.

vacation. However, the momentum was building amongst our group, and we saw August as a perfect opportunity to make that first Saturday a docent day! The event was open to docents, friends and family, and once again, many of our group gathered to be together in nature. Special treat: a bird walk led by expert and encouraging birder Walter Lamb, and we were rewarded by seeing some notable species, including a Wilson's Phalarope bobbing on the creek, and a White Shouldered Kite perched in a snag.

At the end of the morning, we had a brief meeting about what things will look like for our programs going forward. At this time of year I am usually in the midst of planning multi-week training programs at both Kenneth Hahn and Ballona. And by September we are usually almost entirely booked with field trips for the coming school year. That is not the case this year. Although school is now back in session, at this point, our usual constituency, children under 12 years old, are not eligible for vaccination. There is still a lot of desire to participate in our programs from local educators, but in the interest of caution, we are holding off on booking trips on a regular basis. Due to this uncertainty, our docent training will be more casual for the

Fall. I will be planning monthly Docent Enrichment Programs going forward. This might be an on-site lecture, or a field trip to one of our local nature spots. Since we are lucky enough to live in a place that is full of natural beauty and dedicated nature educators, the possibilities are many. And in this way we can continue to expand our knowledge and sharpen our skills as we wait for the green light to get back to what we really love-working with the kids!

The real takeaway of all that I have described is the fact that our group has the good fortune to be composed of a truly wonderful roster of environmental educators. Their desire to stay engaged and remain a part of what we do to inspire interest and understanding of the natural world far surpassed my expectations. I am beyond grateful to have a job that allows me to work with such wonderful people, who refuse to give up on our mission!

It has also been announced that the education wing of Los Angeles Audubon has been folded into a brand new non-profit, the Nature Nexus Institute. We are excited about this development! In establishing a new organization completely devoted to education and access to nature for all people and all age groups, we will be able to continue the very successful programs that have been under the umbrella of LA Audubon for all these years, and expand our reach to even more residents of our region. There is also talk of our own newsletter, so that means you will soon have two sources to keep you updated on all things wild in Los Angeles. I can hardly contain my excitement with thoughts of both new adventures and a return to doing the things that have made our group so special over the last two decades. I will be sure to keep you posted! 🐦



Docent Crew at Ballona