

Friends of Tecolote Canyon

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Nearby Reptile Nursery

by Joan Brosnan



Last spring we enjoyed the population of Western Fence Lizards dashing, sunning and posturing in our yard. On July 30, we noticed one digging a hole deeper and deeper until the body disappeared completely. We discovered that the females lay approximately 3-8 eggs between April and July in pits they have dug in damp well aerated soil. The eggs hatch after two months. We are now enjoying another generation of Western Fence lizards darting, sunning and possibly being caught for further observation.



Rare Sighting: Red Diamondback Rattlesnake

by Ranger Cameron Engelhart



On Sunday afternoon, October 11th, Ranger staff was informed of a rattlesnake in front of the Tecolote Nature Center. Both Ranger Erika and I went out to investigate the report and discovered that there was a very large Red Diamond Rattlesnake hidden in a pile of sycamore leaves next to the entrance of the main trail. This discovery was odd due to the habitat range of a Red Diamond Rattlesnake. The vast majority of Red Diamond Rattlesnakes are found in east San Diego County as well as Imperial County, Orange County, Riverside County and Baja California. It was rather odd that a very large and healthy Red Diamond would make its way west so close to the beach. The Red Diamond is typically one of the larger rattlesnakes, and it is less aggressive than the more common Southern Pacific Rattlesnake.

Hiking in Tecolote Canyon, visitors might have a chance to see a rattlesnake; typically those snakes are the Southern Pacific Rattlesnake. They are smaller in size and communicate if you are too close to them by shaking their tail and making a robust rattle sound. These snakes might be scary to some visitors, but they just don't want to be bothered. We ask that all visitors who do see any wildlife please keep a safe distance and observe their beauty from afar.

On the other hand, when there's a rattlesnake next to or near a commonly used walkway such as the Tecolote Nature Center, these snakes will have to be relocated for the safety of park visitors, pets, and the snake itself.

In the case of our mysterious Red Diamondback, Ranger Erika obtained the rattlesnake relocation container while I waited and made sure no one came too close to the area at the time. Once the container was set, I used specialized snake tongs in order to safely pick up the snake and place it into the container. This was a large snake with quite a bit of weight on him or her, so we had to make sure we had a larger container. Once our red friend was secured, it was ready to be moved to a less trafficked area of the park. The Red Diamond was released, and we wish nothing but a full belly and a nice sunny area to bask in.

P.S. Their camouflage skills are very good. See if you can spot our Red Diamond friend within this pile of leaves.



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Improvements in Tecolote Canyon

By Ranger Erika Weikel



Volunteer events are still on hold this month. But rangers and staff are still working diligently to improve the parks for the native plants and animals that live here and for the visitors who come to experience nature.

Senior Ranger Steve clearing fallen trees from trails.



Ranger Cameron on patrol at Mission Valley Preserve.



Nature Center Director, Marla, out improving the park by doing a trash cleanup.



Ranger Erika clearing trails in Marion Bear Park.



Ranger Steve & Marla installing new signs



Watering the revegetation sites has been a priority. We are making sure the plants that volunteers planted survive until the fall rains begin.



Whip it Good, Belding's Orange-throated Whiptail

by Jerry Jacobs

One of our Tecolote Canyon lizards is Belding's Orange-throated Whiptail ([Aspidoscelis hyperythra beldingi](#)).

Juveniles have blue tails; you can make out a bit of the blue in the shaded tail in the picture below. He's in the process of eating a mealworm snack (a darkling beetle larva, [Tenebrio molitor](#)). Unlike the Western Fence Lizards, which pretty much just gobble up the worms, this whiptail kept biting the worm and letting go, until the worm stopped struggling; it took nearly a minute to subdue the worm. The full length of the mealworm was about 0.75" (19mm).



Unlike the Western Fence Lizards, which are "lounging lizards", spending most of their time sitting perched on something and basking, these whiptails are very active, moving about looking for prey with an almost twitchy motion (like maybe they had too many cups of coffee). Their tail can reach up to two times the length of their body.

The body is covered by fine granular scales, which give the lizard a smooth appearance. An orange throat patch is visible in adults, becoming brighter during the breeding season. There are six or fewer stripes along the back, and no spots (as you'd find in the San Diegan Tiger Whiptail, [Aspidoscelis tigris stejnegeri](#)).

Eggs are laid from June to July and take about 2 months to hatch. Both males and females are present, males defending a territory against other males (it's eastern cousins, the New Mexican Whiptails, *Aspidoscelis neomexicana*, are [all females and reproduce parthenogenically](#)).

This subspecies is found along the coast in San Diego county (to about 2000ft elevation), and south to about 3/4 of the way down Baja California.

Owl Be Your Tecolote Neighbor

by Polina Sisman



My owl story starts with a house showing. Our realtor showed us a home on the Tecolote Canyon rim on a February morning in 2004. The house had been on the market for less than an hour and had eleven offers. Inside the furnished home hung a huge crystal chandelier above a dining table.

I learned that Suzie, the original owner, was from Hiroshima and had survived the nuclear attack. Suzie had met her first husband, an American officer, whom she accompanied to San Diego. I also learned that Suzie owned a chandelier

store in North County and that she'd passed away.

From the wooden patio outside, I saw the spectacular view with massive California oak trees below and coyote trails in a grassy meadow to the south. As I listened to glorious silence and birds, a breeze blew and a gentle energy relaxed my shoulders and calmed my mind and body.

Back inside the house, I noticed a shrine filled with Japanese dishes with fruits, tea pots, and cups. Then I found the piano. Without hesitation, I opened it and my hands played. In that very moment, I felt the sky open above my head and I knew it was my home. I felt welcomed and happy among black and white photos of Suzie and her second husband Joseph beaming with smiles and the warmest love. I sensed their blessings, and the house became ours.

With the house came owls.

Within a few years, we replaced the roof. Roofers removed Suzie's large antenna atop the house. This antenna had not only allowed her to view Japanese channels, it was also a watch post for owls in the canyon. With the antenna gone, we didn't hear owls anymore. *Continued, page 4*

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe. -John Muir



"Aren't the clouds beautiful? They look like big balls of cotton... I could just lie here all day, and watch them drift by... If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations... What do you think you see, Linus?" -Charles M. Schulz



I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in. -John Muir



Senior Ranger Steven Smith swinging away to help you find your way, installing directional trail signs.



When I spied a rat climbing on an old bougainvillea tree near the house, we brainstormed. We missed owls! We had an owl box installed on a chain, but its dangling kept it vacant for years until our tree trimmers made it stationary. The following spring, we heard owl activity. And owlets! Grey owls had moved in.

The rest of my owl story is full of fascination, gratitude, love and pride.

Last spring, I started to notice different owls coming to our jacaranda. They were big and white barn owls. Soon there were chicks inside the box, and I was very curious to see more of them.

Very gradually, I started to let the owls know who I was. I played piano every night with doors wide open. I would go to the patio not silently, but with my voice "OOking" my best to imitate their voices. First, they would leave the tree as soon as they heard my footsteps. Then, they would not leave right away, but waited for a few minutes to be sure it was only me. Eventually they would not leave at all. I would stay on the deck looking into the dark and keep talking to them. The WOW moments for me were when they would make circles in front of my face when I was on the deck. It was a spectacular scene!! **I felt a mysterious attachment with those mysterious birds.**

That spring was unusually long and wet. Because of storms and rain, the bottom of the owl box started to deteriorate. I looked at the almost detached left corner of it and I started to lose sleep. There were growing chicks inside that box! That was the first time I called the Humane Society to seek help. The woman said that whatever was going to happen was going to happen and chose not to intervene.

First thing in the morning, I looked at the box to check if the bottom was still there. One Sunday, late in the afternoon, I could not explain my restless mood, and surely enough, when I looked at the box it was hanging without the bottom! I ran to the garden and found the most beautiful light beige chick on the ground looking at me. A few yards away was a sibling and farther on the right I found the second sibling.



I was desperate. I called the Humane Society again, and another woman said to me that they could not help me with anything. If the parents came that very night then they might take care of the chicks. She also mentioned they were under the protection of federal law and nobody could touch or take them away. I tried to offer them frozen chicken liver, but they would not eat it.

As soon as my husband came home we went to our friends' house and they built a temporary house from a cardboard box. We put it between the two chicks hoping they would come inside.

People I spoke to worried the owlets would not survive even one night. I didn't sleep well that night. As soon as we woke up, we went to the garden and saw **four** beautiful chicks bound together next to the cardboard box! They were alive! My husband left to go work, and I called our gardener who knew about owls and admired them. He came and helped put the chicks inside of the box, and then he put the box on top of a ladder under the jacaranda tree. For one week they were inside of that shelter, but then another big storm came and blew the box so it was tilted, and the opening of the box was facing the sky. I made another call to the Humane Society, and another woman on the phone suggested putting the owls into a plastic bucket. I was home alone, and had very little time to relocate those birds.

I went for a walk on our street looking for any ideas for the new home. My neighbor, Leroy, came up with a brilliant solution; he made an opening in his cooler. He put the screaming chicks into the cooler and hung it on a tree.

The cooler with chicks inside now was much lower than the original broken house. The chicks were facing us and we could see, hear and smell them 24/7.

My piano students had a ball. Their parents said that instead of going to the wild animal park they could just go to piano lessons. *Continued, Page 6*



Polina with her piano students

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Kids Corner

A Sensory Treasure Hunt!

One fun activity in nature is to go on a Sensory Treasure Hunt. Use your senses to notice as many things as you can.

What do you hear? See? Smell?

You can even go in alphabetical order.

A: acorns on oak trees

B: Black Sage aromas

C: "caw" of crows flying overhead

Play this game together or keep a journal, the sky's the limit!

How do your observations change with the seasons?

About Friends of Tecolote Canyon



Friends of Tecolote Canyon is a non-profit community organization committed to sponsoring nature education and restoration activities in Tecolote Canyon Natural Park. Our education program, supported by SDGE's "Environmental Champions Initiative", is dedicated to bringing children into Tecolote Canyon and fostering connection through enjoyable, memorable, and meaningful experiences in our unique and precious local habitat.

Like us on Facebook/Friends of Tecolote Canyon
www.friendsoftecolotecanyon.org

Your donations are always appreciated and make our programs possible.

You can donate to Friends of Tecolote Canyon at Tecolote Nature Center, or at our website:

www.friendsoftecolotecanyon.org/donate

Tecolote Trail Work

by Marla Gilmore

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the canyon has become more popular for hikers and bikers. With the rise in trail use, there has also been a rise in illegal trails and habitat destruction. In order to minimize habitat loss, Park Rangers and Open Space Support Crews are working together to block off illegal trails.



Closing off redundant and illegal trails is the first step in implementing the new trails plan for Tecolote Canyon. Please be respectful of the habitat, the law (Destruction of Plants [San Diego Municipal Code 63.0102 (b)(4)]: It is unlawful to injure, destroy, cut or remove any tree, shrub, plant, wood or rock), and the various individuals and agencies who are working hard to maintain this Coastal Sage habitat while still providing safe trails for the community.

Irene (Wolt) Syson January 11, 1940 - July 29, 2020

by Marla Gilmore, Center Director



Sadly, this summer we had to say goodbye to a wonderful dedicated volunteer and friend, Irene Syson. Irene passed away peacefully in her sleep on July 29, 2020. I heard the news from her son, James who called me and invited myself and Ranger Erika to come to Irene's home to take a few of her owl and garden collection items to bring to the Tecolote Nature Center. We were extremely honored that James thought of us during this difficult time for his family. James and his wife Ora were so welcoming and kind. They knew that Irene would have wanted her precious collection to find a home at Tecolote as Irene and her husband John did through volunteering for many years.

Irene had an interesting life. After graduating from Pearl River High School in New York, she married an Army Servicemember and moved to Kentucky. She traveled to Asmara, Ethiopia with her husband and 10-month-old son Bryan. Her youngest child, James, was born on the Army base there. The family returned to the United States and settled in Texas, but the marriage didn't last, and she moved to San Diego with her two young boys to raise them as a single mother. Irene worked at the Library for the City of San Diego for 20 years before retiring. She met John Syson in San Diego and in 1986 they were married. John and Irene lived on the rim of Marian Bear Park and became active environmentalists, volunteering on the Marian Bear Recreation Council and in Tecolote Canyon. Irene volunteered at the front desk of the nature center one Sunday every month for as long as I can remember. She loved birding, gardening, reading, and crafting, and enjoyed sharing her passion for nature with visitors and other volunteers.



When you see the new owl (from her collection) atop the trail sign near the nature center entrance, take a moment to smile and think of Irene. She will be missed but never forgotten.

Owl Be Your Tecolote Neighbor

From Page 4



Owls sheltering in an owl box cooler

The owls were happy too, a room with a canyon view, a fresh rat every night provided by their caring parents, room service (my husband cleaned the leftovers of their dinner), and, on top of it, live piano music at night! I thought they would never leave. We got used to the noise they made, but the stench and the deadly flies were unbearable.

The days got warmer. We wanted to get some air and open the windows in our house, but we couldn't. Again, with the help of our gardener, we relocated the cooler with the four chicks down to the middle part of our garden. It was great to know they were safe, but not too close.

One day I decided to check if the owls were still there or had left. I came down and looked inside of the box. There was not one face that I could see, but suddenly, yet gently, a big bird above my head took off. It was the youngest owl who was waiting for me to say "Goodbye". I knew it was him and I felt sweet sadness.

Yet, my husband and I, and our neighbors heard the owls every night. They would come a few times each evening to make big circles in front of our deck. It was heartwarming and exciting to see them.

My story does not stop here; with the help of our friend who brought us a new owl box, we installed it right outside of our property on a lemonadeberry tree. Our owls have their chicks now, and we can hear them every night. We can see their caring parents providing as all parents do.

As one of my students said coming to her piano lesson: "Ms. Polina, owls have a very good memory: they will come back."
They are back!



Owls sheltering in an owl box cooler

We are grateful to Polina for sharing her heartwarming story. If you encounter wildlife that appears to be in distress, please contact Project Wildlife with the San Diego Humane Society for advisory.

www.sdhumane.org/programs/project-wildlife/coexist.html

I Found a Wildlife Baby! What Should I do?



BIRDS

- **Little to no feathers?** Create a makeshift nest using a berry basket or small box, line with tissue and place securely in a nearby tree with the baby inside. As scent is not their strongest sense, the parents won't reject the baby. Watch from afar to see if the parents return; if parents don't return within a couple hours, keep the baby warm and bring it to Project Wildlife.
- **Mostly feathered?** This bird is a young fledgling that is learning to fly and it's normal for it to be on the ground. If left alone, the parents will continue to feed the bird and it will graduate to flying within days. You may also see the parents "attacking" the baby, but don't worry, this is normal and how the parents teach the baby to hide from predators.
- **Injured or in danger?** If visibly injured or in danger from a predator or neighborhood cat or dog, bring the baby to Project Wildlife. If the bird is injured, or has no feathers, it is very important to keep it warm.

MAMMALS

- **Watch and wait.** The absence of a parent doesn't necessarily mean a wildlife baby has been abandoned. To deter predators, some mammals (like deer and rabbits) only visit their young every 12 hours. If you've found a nest, place an "X" of sticks over the entrance and check back later to see if the sticks were disturbed (meaning the parents returned to feed the babies).
- **Warmth and isolation.** If the baby is confirmed abandoned or orphaned, place inside a box in a quiet, dark place away from pets and children until you can bring it to Project Wildlife for treatment. Keep the baby warm by placing the box on a heating pad set on low. Place half the container on the heat source and the other half off to avoid overheating the baby.
- **Injured or in danger?** If the baby mammal is visibly injured or in danger from a predator or neighborhood cat or dog, keep warm and bring to Project Wildlife for treatment.

Note: For safety, always wear gloves when rescuing a wild animal. Also, never feed a wildlife baby, as this can often do more harm than good.



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Tecolote Trivia

The Nahuatl word for *owl* is *Tecolote*