



PAW PRINTS

Happy New Year!

Volume 43, Number 1

Newsletter of the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates

January 2025

PUBLIC CALENDAR

Park Winter Hours: Nov. 1, 2024 – February 28, 2025

Gate Hours: 8:00 am - 5:00 pm

Nature Center Hours: 9:00 am - 5:00 pm

Park closed on Mondays

Contact: ECNC 626.398.5420

Docent-Led Family Nature Walk

Every Saturday at 9 am. Meet in front of the Nature Center. No dogs please.

Nature Tails Story Hour

Every Saturday at 10:30 am on the Outdoor Patio. Stories and activities for children.

Nature Center Discovery

Sat. mornings on the Outdoor Patio.
Canyon Chats: 10 am and 12 pm
Nature Discovery: 10 am - 12 pm

Conservation Group Work Day

Second Saturdays from 9 am-12 pm
Sign-up to receive notifications:
<https://tinyurl.com/eatoncanyonconservation>

Audubon Bird Walks

1st Sat. of the month - 8 am-10 am
Meet at the Outdoor Classroom

CNPS Plant Walks at Eaton - 3rd

Sunday of the month 10-11:30 am

Meetings:

Pasadena Audubon Society

Meetings are held on the third Wednesday of the month at 7:30 pm in the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Auditorium.
<https://www.pasadenaaudubon.org>

California Native Plant Society

Meetings are held in the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Auditorium, the fourth Thursday of the month at 7:30 pm. <https://www.cnps-sgm.org>

Pasadena Group Sierra Club

Monthly program meetings in ECNC auditorium, Feb.-May & Sep.-Nov. 2025. See website for more info:
<https://www.sierraclub.org/angeles/pasadena>

Plant of the Month: Wild Cucumber

By Trina Jaconi Biery

Botanical Name: *Marah macrocarpa*

Family: Cucurbitaceae

Blooms: January to April

Lifeform: Perennial...but complicated

Habitat: chaparral, sage scrub, oak woodlands below 5000 feet

The tender, vibrantly green leaves of the wild cucumber seem out of place when you come across them in our tough, dry chaparral, sage scrub, or oak woodlands. Even more befuddling can be the plant's staggering height. With the help of long curling tendrils, that are modified leaves, it can approach the crown of a coast live oak seemingly overnight.

This is the unlikely survival strategy of one of the weirdest plants in the canyon. The wild cucumber lurks underground during the hottest months, storing its energy in a giant tuber. This overgrown jicama can be as big as a human, hence one of its common names, manroot. The California Botanic Garden in Claremont has documented one root that grew to be 467 pounds. (A backhoe was required to get those measurements.)

Right now, you can see its dainty white flowers, smaller than a dime. Each plant contains clusters of male flowers and solitary female flowers, pollinated by insects. Pretty soon you will see its namesake "cucumbers," spiky green fruit that don't entice many. Our California ground squirrel has been reported to carefully nibble on the very young fruit, but the whole plant contains the bitter terpenoid cucurbitacin.

This is not a plant that relies on an animal's digestive system to make new plants. When it's ready, it shoots its seeds right out. Though helping in its dispersal, the California deer mouse, kangaroo rat, and scrub jay have all been known to cache the seeds.

All parts of the plant are mildly toxic. And yet, there is evidence of the widespread human use of this plant in California. Carbonized seed coats have consistently been found at archaeological sites, and there are many accounts of this plant being used medicinally and ceremonially.

When the winter rain ends, *Marah macrocarpa* will stop sending precious water to its leaves and stems. The vine will shrivel and brown, the now hollow fruit will become a cozy insect nursery or possibly a handy scrubbing sponge, and the plant will conserve its resources in its giant root, enjoying our hot, dry summer safely underground. ■

Read more: Journal of Ethnobotany: *The Use of Marah Macrocarpus by the Prehistoric Indians of Coastal Southern California*

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.2993/0278-0771-29.177>



Marah macrocarpa

Photo: Brenda Hurst

that grew to be 467 pounds. (A backhoe was required to get those measurements.)



Paw Prints is a bi-monthly publication of the ECNCA. Articles and photographs are welcome on topics related to natural history and Nature Center activities. If you see something interesting in the canyon, please share it with us! The deadline for submissions to the February/March 2025 issue is January 15, 2025. Send submissions to Brenda Hurst eatonmember@gmail.com.

Contributors: Trina Jaconi Biery, Brenda Hurst, Diane Lang

Paw Prints Production
Content Editor: Brenda Hurst
Layout: Carole Scurlock
Copy Editor: Laura Joseph

DOCENT AND MEMBER CALENDAR

Bag Lunch Mini-Inservice
No bag lunch in January.

Eaton Canyon Gardening Group
Every Wednesday at 9:30 am and second Sundays of the month at 10 am. Current volunteers only. Meet by Nature Center garage door.

Guided School Tours
School tours are conducted from October to the end of the school season. For reservations call the office 626-398-5420.

ECNCA Board Meetings
The ECNCA board meetings are held on the second Wednesday of the month at 6:30 pm in the Nature Center. If you are interested in joining a meeting, please send an email to eatonmember@gmail.com, at least 2 days prior to the meeting.



Darkling Beetles

By Brenda Hurst

During our recent Dia de Los Muertos event at the nature center, Docent Naturalist Madeline Schleimer held up a live darkling beetle for me to see crawling over the fingers of her hand (see photo). I realized I had seen these insects many times while hiking but didn't know much about them, other than I had always called them stink bugs. Here's a little bit of information I discovered about them via Wikipedia. Also, our Docent Naturalist, Diane Lang, has sent along a delightful poem about them.

Eleodes (pinacate beetle or desert stink beetle) is a genus of darkling beetles, in the family Tenebrionidae. They are endemic to western North America ranging from southern Canada to central Mexico, with many species found along the Mexico-United States border. The name pinacate, Mexican Spanish, is derived from the Nahuatl (Aztec) name for the insect, pinacatl, which translates as "black beetle."

Due to the number of species and their large range, these beetles have a fairly varied appearance throughout the many species. Beetles within *Eleodes* exhibit a "head-standing" defense behavior, and can exude a foul smelling odor and a very distasteful liquid from glands. This liquid is most commonly a form of quinone, which is not poisonous. The smell, taste, and even the "head-standing" posture do usually deter predators. However, they are still preyed upon by many species, such as owls, foxes, coyotes, skunks, bats, and turtles.

They are typically found in the arid desert regions of their range but can also be found in forests and grasslands. All *Eleodes* species are flightless due to fused protective flight wing cases and their second pair of wings is very reduced and vestigial. The word vestigiality means the retention, during the process of evolution, of genetically determined structures or attributes that have lost some or all of an ancestral function in a given species.

Eleodes are usually much larger than what is expected for most insects. This is due to the lack of water in the area leading to these beetles evolving larger bodies in order to hold more of it.

Eleodes are generally more active at night; some species are strictly nocturnal while others can and will be active during the day. As these beetles are fairly long lived for insects they must adapt to the different seasons. During the fall they are diurnal as it is warmest during the day. When winter comes they take shelter and become inactive so as to not freeze in the cold. When spring arrives they go back to being active in the day until the summer when they switch to being active at night to survive the deadly high temperatures of the desert. *Eleodes* take shelter almost anywhere that can protect them from the heat and cold; this can be wood or rocks but is often rodent burrows. Every night when these beetles scavenge for food they pick a new shelter for the day which if not suitable for protection against the elements, will be abandoned in search of a new one.

For further reading, see a Science Daily article from August 20, 2024 entitled: "Masters of shape-shifting: How darkling beetles conquered the world," where they state: "Large-scale genomic analysis of darkling beetles, a hyper-diverse insect group of more than 30,000 species worldwide, rolls back the



Eleodes

Photo: Brenda Hurst

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curtain on a 150-million-year evolutionary tale of one of Earth's most ecologically important yet inconspicuous creatures, according to new research from The Australian National University (ANU) and CSIRO." For the full article see <https://www.scienc-daily.com/releases/2024/08/240820124537.htm>. ■

Pasadena Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count

Thanks to our friends at the Pasadena Audubon Society (Dave Weeshoff, Jon Fisher, & Jared Nigro), I just received the following preliminary recap of the Eaton Canyon bird count that was part of the larger Pasadena area annual Christmas Bird Count on December 14, 2024. Make sure you check out the list of birds spotted on that day in Eaton Canyon via the eBird link: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S205564889>

John Fisher's report:

"They had 34 species on count day, about what I'd expect. They did have four American White Pelicans fly over, which is always cool. The total Pasadena Audubon CBC count as a whole stands at 151 species right now. We will add at least a few more by the time all is said and done.

Generally, especially in winter, Eaton Canyon is pretty predictable (i.e. no rarities, no migrants). Lack of habitat diversity, a general absence of non-native plantings and wetland habitat are the main reasons for this, though odd stuff can always turn up. From 2001-2003 a Brown Thrasher wintered near the Nature Center and we got it for the count in 2002. On the 2021 count, a Zone-tailed Hawk flew over the canyon. Off the top of my head, I can't recall anything else too unusual at Eaton Canyon, other than a few White-throated Sparrows over the years.

That said, this great natural oak woodland and chaparral habitat supports a set of unique birds, including Wrentit, Oak Titmouse, California Thrasher.

As far as non-coastal CBCs go, we usually do quite well with counts in the mid 160s." ■

Virginia Gail Johnson Heringer

June 20, 1945 – December 15, 2024



Photo of Ginny by her daughter Annie

With deep sadness from all who knew her here at Eaton Canyon, one of our ECNCA long-time volunteers, Virginia ("Ginny") Heringer, passed away on December 15th. She graduated from our docent training class in 1980 and not only continued as a volunteer docent but she was the co-editor of our Paw Prints newsletter with Chuck Haznedl during 2007. She then took the reins completely, and became the newsletter's sole editor from 2008 until 2021. When I became the editor, I was lucky to have had such a dedicated, creative, and beautiful person to follow. We have included some photos and remembrances of Ginny with this issue.

Brenda Hurst, Paw Prints Editor

Darkling Beetle

By Diane Lang

"Skunk beetle" you're sometimes named
Because of your aroma aimed
At any threat that comes your way;
Your spray soon sends it far away.
And so you often can be found
With rear end up and topside down,
Giving you a better aim,
And with your smell, your claim to fame.
Then you're free to go ahead,
Scavenging those plants long dead.

2025 1st Thursdays at
ECNCA Nature Journal Meetup


Feb 6. Mar 6. Apr 3. May 1. Jun 5.
9:30 AM - 11:30 AM

Meet at the Nature Center's Flagpole

Bring your supplies, a lightweight portable stool (or use picnic tables surrounding Nature Center) and your curiosity.

In the event of rain: if the classroom is available, we'll meet in the classroom. If classroom is not available, the meetup will be cancelled.

Suggest emailing to be placed on the ECNCA nature journal meetup notification list (in the event of rain or other cancellation):
Terri Mando, ShadowHillsNJC@gmail.com



Remembrances of Virginia Gail Johnson Heringer

June 20, 1945 – December 15, 2024

Gabi McLean - I was so saddened by the news of Ginny's passing. We had known her since our docent training in Eaton Canyon back in 1993. She was one of our "senior" docents from whom we could learn not only about all things natural but also where and how to hike. As a Sierra Club member, a board member of the Natural Science Section and an active member of the SC 100 Peaks Section, Ginny was not only super fit but also focused on the natural history of the places she hiked. She was an enthusiastic ESL teacher and even took a sabbatical to go to China and learned Chinese! With such a well-rounded and friendly personality, she was well liked and respected everywhere.

My fondest memories are from our hike across the Alps in 2001. Cliff and I had trained for this long distance hike at Ginny's weekly conditioning hikes to Henninger Flats. And so, after one year of training, Ginny and her husband Jim joined Cliff and I, together with my son and his friend, on our hike across the Alps for two weeks: starting in Germany, hiking through Austria, and ending up in Tirol, the German speaking area in Italy. It is from this most extraordinary time that I can share some photos. Ginny and Jim were always ahead of us, getting first to our planned destination for the day, We crossed a glacier, slept in alpine huts, carried our belongings on our backs, and in the evening, always managed to find a place to rest and, better yet, enjoy a satisfying meal and a beer! We were tired after navigating steep slopes up and down but it was a good tiredness, one that drives away depressing thoughts and worries. It was a glorious time and our accomplishment crossing the Alps hiking, was one of the highlights of our lives.

Later, Ginny became very interested in botany and that interest also brought us closer together. After Bob Muns no longer led his botany walks, Ginny organized and led some walks herself, and also became more involved in CNPS. It was her who first drew my attention to the rare lemon lilies in our San Gabriel Mountains.

Ginny left her mark not only at Eaton Canyon but also at the Sierra Club Pasadena Group and the Natural Science Section, in the conservation community and with her many students. She will surely be missed by many, many people. I am grateful to have shared so many gratifying experiences with her, and also heartbroken at her passing.

Mickey Long - Very sad to hear of Ginny's passing. We worked together on many projects at Eaton Canyon and she was a regular on many field trips. I think of her as most directly active in the Sierra Club and CA Native Plant Society. She was an excellent hiker and always in shape for deserts or high mountains.

Ramie Case - Ginny was a great lady to work with. She did an amazing job on the Paw Prints for so long! She will be missed even more now.

Mary Foltyn - I fondly remember her in my early years as a volunteer with Bag Lunch. Ginny helped me so much with the monthly articles for Bag Lunch/Paw Prints. She sent reminders, edited and developed a format which is currently used. She reached out to new Docents/Volunteers and was a delightful presence at Eaton Canyon. Will miss her.

BJ Ledyard - I am very sorry to hear about Ginny. I think she was active in the Sierra Club. I knew Ginny and we hiked together a few times. She was delightful and a very accomplished hiker. I will smile when I remember her.

Kenia Estrella - I am sad to hear about Ginny's passing. She was a great docent. She was at the nature center a lot more when I first started and a big part of Sierra Club too, I believe with Don Bremner. We have lost a couple of our greatest Docents/volunteers this year.

Terry Ginsberg - Ginny and her husband Jim were among Pam and my closest friends. We hiked together all over California and the world. While I will continue to miss her dearly, I will remain grateful to have had the opportunity to spend time with her. Her accomplishments were profound including teaching English at PCC, authoring a textbook, completing the Sierra Club hundred peaks list, learning Chinese, knowing the names of all the wildflowers, editing Pawprints, leading nature walks and hikes, chairing the Pasadena Sierra Club Group, and completing NY Times crossword puzzles. My fondest memory is that after traveling all day on several trains from Switzerland to Chamonix, France, the hotel clerk insisted we didn't have a reservation, but we were rescued by Ginny. Yeah, she also spoke French.

Carole Scurlock - I met Ginny in 2010 when she led the annual Introduction to Botany hike in Millard Canyon. She showed us how to identify plants by family characteristics—a skill that continues to enrich my hikes in the local mountains and high country. Thanks to Ginny's interest in natural science, I too wanted to learn more about nature and joined the ECNCA Docent Training course in 2018. Ginny and I collaborated on many projects with the Natural Science Section and the Pasadena Group of the Sierra Club. She was a friend, mentor and role model for how one person can influence so many by sharing their passion and knowledge.



Photos courtesy of Terry Ginsberg, Mickey Long, Karen Mateer, Gabi McLean, Carole Scurlock, and Nick Shaw



ECNCA EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

President: Brenda Hurst
Vice-President: Diane Marcussen
Recording Secretary: Sarah Richart
Corresponding Secretary: Mary Veselich
Treasurer: Terry Ginsberg

ECNCA APPOINTED BOARD MEMBERS:

Ramie Case
Rose Haig
Susan Hopkins
Judy Jenkins
David Kristoff
Diane Lang

Nature Center Director: Richard Smart
NCA President: Laura Nicholson

Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates (ECNCA) is a chapter of the Nature Center Associates (NCA), a non-profit support group of the natural area park system of Los Angeles County. Founded for educational and scientific purposes, its primary mission is to develop in children and adults an appreciation of the natural world and to preserve Eaton Canyon as a natural area for future generations.

The Eaton Canyon Nature Center and Natural Area Park are located within the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County in the Supervisorial district of Kathryn Barger. The Natural Area and Nature Center are operated by the County of Los Angeles, Department of Parks and Recreation, in partnership with the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates.

Become A Member of the ECNCA (Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates)

Membership benefits include the ECNCA newsletter, program announcements and a 10% discount at the gift shop. To join the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates, fill out the form below and mail with your check, payable to the ECNCA, 1750 North Altadena Drive, Pasadena, CA 91107.

Name: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____ Phone: _____

Please check appropriate box and mark return envelope "Membership"

- Individual \$30 Family \$45 Senior \$15 Senior Family \$30 Student \$15
- Friend of the Canyon \$75 Sage Saver \$100 Chaparral Contributor \$250 Riparian Guardian \$500
- Oak Woodlands Protector \$750 Wildlands Angel \$1000 NEW RENEWAL

Enclosed is my MEMBERSHIP in the amount of \$_____ Enclosed is my additional DONATION of \$_____
Please make checks payable to the ECNCA. All contributions are tax deductible.
You may also join and/or donate online at www.ecnca.org.