

## Learning to Obey Mother Nature

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The National Audubon Society—named after the famous U.S. ornithologist and wildlife artist John James Audubon—began its preservation efforts a little over century ago. In 1900, Frank Chapman, the publisher of *Bird-Lore*, suggested a novel idea: instead of participating in the traditional Christmas bird hunt, people should participate in a Christmas bird count. Today, that Christmas Bird Count is the longest running bird survey in the world. Even before this, members of the American Ornithologists Union had begun to see the detrimental effects the sport of bird hunting was having on what they considered precious bird populations. Bird watchers all over the country equally felt those concerns. With that, it is no surprise that by 1905 the National Association of Audubon Societies was officially incorporated into the state of New York. Thirty-four years later, with the goal to educate urban areas about the importance of nature and the environment, the Audubon Society founded The San Gabriel River Wildlife Sanctuary in Southern California.

Hidden where the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo rivers converge is about 419 acres of protected land currently designated as Natural Area. While this may seem like a vast amount of land, it is nothing compared to its surroundings. The county, in attempts to expand, turned the area into an industrial heartland—after all the sanctuary lies less than five minutes away from the City of Industry. In 1970, the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation took over management of the natural habitat, ensuring its preservation and protection. Now in its seventieth year and under lease to the Department of Parks and Recreation by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, many revere the area known as Whittier Narrows as an important bird sanctuary. As a riparian woodland, or riverside ecosystem, Whittier Narrows serves as home to at least 300 species of birds. Sadly, officials have designated many of these species as threatened and endangered. This gives the County of Los Angeles even more of a reason to preserve what little green areas we have left. Or so you would think.

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Perched for hours on a nearby telephone pole, the Red-tailed Hawk finally started to glide in a wide orbit over the riparian woodland. Its belly, whitish-tan with slivers of russet-red feathers, tells its two menacing eyes to search the ground below. With amazing precision, and hunger on its mind, the raptor spots its next meal, an unlucky and oblivious target scurrying into a nearby bush.

The Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) has abundant receptor cells in its retinas that provide it with tremendously precise vision, much clearer than what any human can see with the naked eye. Colored oil droplets, which are found in the inner segments of photoreceptors in their retinas, enhance the contrast and the detail of the environment by refracting certain wavelengths of light. This enables the birds to easily spot objects against green or blue backgrounds, making their hunting skills particularly effective.

At the exact moment it decides to seize the animal roaming on the ground, perhaps today it is a shrew or a squirrel, the hawk folds its elongated wings inward showing the dark browns of its top wings. Four razor sharp talons are extended forward as he vertically dives through the air to the ground. With this stoop comes a battle cry unlike any other. It can be heard in the distance; it is a shrill and raspy *KREE-EEE-AR*, which aggressively warns others that this is *its* territory.

As part of the larger Whittier Narrows Significant Ecological Area, the Whittier Narrows natural area functions as a rare hunting ground for hawks and owls. Known as a coastal alluvial fan sage habitat, which includes shrubs like Scale Broom and Mule Fat (which do not require a lot of water to flourish) the Red-tailed Hawk is accustomed to hunting in this area. Other birds too, like the endangered but hopeful Least Bell's Vireo, rely on this riparian woodland for survival. Although the Red-tailed Hawk is definitely not a rare sight in North America, or at Whittier Narrows Natural Area, it is always a special sight to see. "I mean that's what thrills me," a volunteer and docent at the center named Grace Allen says with admiration in her voice, "hearing that Red-tailed hawk."

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As Grace rested her back against a lone gray bench, she pointed to the ground. About a foot in front of the bench was a small, slanted hole in the earth, still damp from the previous night's rain. "A ground squirrel!" she said, leaning forward and looking down through her glasses at the perfectly constructed burrow. In the background, two wooden buildings were visible through an array of hanging branches and crunchy brown leaves. The white and dark

green paint, chipping and decaying, added to the already rustic atmosphere. Her avocado-green turtleneck sweater, plaid long sleeve shirt, and hiking vest protected against the crisp winter air. They also gave her the ability to peacefully blend in with the rich greens and browns of the surrounding plants and trees—some of which are over fifty years old. Her white sneakers showed signs of wear. There were traces of brown dirt still visible, lingering in the crevices of the soles and on the sides of her shoes, *refusing* to be washed away.

Grace, along with the other volunteers at Whittier Narrows Nature Center, has been fighting to save this area for ten years now.

“I’ve been teaching, [students and visitors alike], for about seventeen or eighteen years,” she says, every once and a while glancing back up at the soaring Red-tailed Hawk. “I came from another nature center, Earthside Nature Center in Pasadena. When they locked the gates up there, I had a little hole in the pit of my stomach.” She had to find a new sanctuary, and when she came to Whittier Narrows Nature Center in July of 1999 she had found a new home.

“This place . . . I’m going to fight for this,” she says ambitiously.

However, that fight has proven to be difficult. Starting in early 2000 the Upper San Gabriel Water District initiated discussions on a “multi-objective educational facility within the San Gabriel watershed” that would “provide comprehensive information regarding” the watershed and the importance of conservation and protection of California’s water supply. By the middle of the year, Whittier Narrows Nature Center was chosen as the selected site for a Discovery Center because of the area’s close proximity to the river; this would provide them with the ability to provide both inside and outside education. Over the next five years, different groups started wanting in on the project. Four parties joined together to form a Joint Powers Agreement, which would theoretically provide more efficient services to the public—these parties include Los Angeles County, the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, the Upper San Gabriel Valley Water District, and the Central Basin Municipal Water District. Originally, the Friends at the center—what the volunteers and docents refer to themselves as—didn’t object to the project, in fact, they saw it as “beneficial and necessary.”

“Parts of the building, the wood is so decayed that you can stick your fist through it. And the electrical system is terrible,” Grace says. “You can’t use the coffee pot and microwave at the same time or you’ll blow a fuse. And you can barely hear on the phones. You might as well use

two tin cans! The building needs replacing.” Everyone seems to agree on that last point, yet the JPA has a greater project in mind.

Needing to project their authoritative position, those in the JPA named themselves the San Gabriel River Discover Center Authority (SGRDCA). They started working under the impression that bigger is better. The most sensible way to educate inner-city children about water conservation and the San Gabriel watershed would be to demolish the current quaint and insufficient nature center and build a new museum—a 18,230-square-foot, \$30 million dollar museum. “It’s important to get context learning as well as have the outside experience,” Belinda Faustinos, the Interim Executive Officer of the SGRDCA for the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, recites into the phone. “The San Gabriel Valley needs environmental education. The current center has excellent programs but they are obviously limited in what they can do. Hopefully we can start construction in two years.” If any threat to the natural habitat appeared strong enough to halt the building of the project, she seemed to say, without saying it, it would be easily dealt with.

The Discovery Center would teach children from all over Los Angeles the importance of water conservation, particularly important considering that California is currently in its third year of drought. The museum would have classrooms, a meeting area, and exhibits. Some would teach about the river’s ecology, others conservation, and still others about the watershed. The SGRDCA envisions “a healthy and vibrant natural area and center where people gain the knowledge and desire to improve the San Gabriel River region.” Yet, one has to ask, isn’t that what is already being done?

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Pulling around the circular bend of the 40-car parking lot, which was steadily filling up, watchers prepared themselves for a bird walk to one of the reopened lakes in the natural area. They pulled together their hats, backpacks, cameras, binoculars, and notepads and walked up the cement pathway to the nature center. A large hand-written sign read, “Anniversary Walk. Saturday February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009.” Meeting in the cramped and cluttered classroom, groups of men and women, some wearing the type of khaki pants with pockets and zippers on almost every inch of the pant leg, and almost all with binoculars hanging around their necks, gathered around the refreshments table. Sipping coffee and eating bagels and an assortment of other light breakfast snacks—the type we’ve all become accustomed to including in our “well-balanced meals”—the

bird-watchers started to become anxious. They all wanted to get out there, in the wild that is, see some birds, and experience the beauty of nature.

“I’ve never been to anything like this before,” Carroll, a participant mentions. “But, I’ve been coming to the trail for a long time. I actually have about fifty humming birds in my backyard! I started feeding one and then more and more kept coming.” Another watcher, Michael Barba, says he’s been coming to the nature center for a couple of decades now. He, like the Friends, can’t comprehend why anyone would want to spend millions of dollars on a “so-called” museum when there are plenty of alternatives.

Back in the classroom, Barbara Courtois, a senior docent who began her training after she retired in 1996, stands near a wall. A beige bag, on which dangles a key chain displaying the temperature, is strung across her chest. She smiles as she talks with Grace Allen, steadily holding a pen and notepad in her hand. As the group makes their way outside and onto the trail, Barbara, like a student conducting research, quickly takes out the notepad and begins writing down the names of all the birds she spots. “My brother and I started keeping lists when we were kids,” she says while stepping over a branch on the trail. “Now every time I go out on the trail I keep a log of what I’ve seen.” She finishes writing down the name of the egret perched on a distant leafless tree and puts the notepad into her satchel.

The group makes its way onto the trail, stopping every other second to learn more about the woodpecker who nested in that tree about ten times. They are told about the two species of hummingbirds that are competing for territory. Trail leader and docent Ed Barajas points out the cement lines of a swimming pool, flat and covered with dirt, saying, “Before the area flooded in the sixties, there were houses here.” Others stop to look and learn about the flowerings of the mule fat plant.

“Try to keep up,” Ed calls out, insisting that the group get to the lake in timely fashion.

“We try to keep up but the dang birds keep getting in the way,” chirps one of the watchers.

“You know what that sound is? [referring to the sound made by a hummingbird diving in a display intended to lure a mate] That’s the sound of their brain hitting the inside of their cranium!” another Friend, and the chair of the organization, named James “Jim” Odling chimed in jokingly. The group laughed, some still looking around through their binoculars as they continued walking along the trail.

Jim smiles through a neatly trimmed grey and white beard as he talks with other watchers. Exactly five years ago he retired from the LA County Fire Department. With that he decided to return to his “first true love, so to speak,” and teach children about natural history. “The docent work is for me all enjoyable,” he says. “There are many special moments. One opportunity I take is to be a bit of a career counselor to the children. I lead . . . really they lead me . . . on field trips. About a month ago I was leading a group of third graders to explore what decomposition looks like by showing them decaying logs. One girl became fascinated with the fungus and mushrooms she found. At the end of the trip she had learned a new word, mycologist, and declared she wanted to be a mycologist. Pretty good, hey!?”

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Further down the trail, one could smell the odor of dirt, leaves, and medicinal plants. The Gabrielino-Tongva Indians, the “people of the earth,” used to occupy the area and found that surrounding plants were extremely effective for medicinal purposes. The bark of willows had analgesic properties, the reason for which they chewed it to relieve headaches, Jim says enthusiastically to some watchers. Even horehound, a short bushy plant with seasonal white flowerings, was used to make cough medicine. They would boil it and at the bottom would form a candy like substance that they would use to make cough drops.

After about thirty minutes they arrive at the lake. Filled with wild plants that seem to form an island in the middle, mallards and ruddy ducks dip their heads in to the water, searching for a delicate morsel to fill their stomachs. Others in the water move from place to place, long ripples of water treading behind them. Less than year ago this lake was empty. With their dedication and admiration for the natural area, the Friends finally see the lake filled. “This is the kind of stuff we need more of,” Jim says as he looks around, still, after so many trips down the trail, continuing to discover new things.

Another Friend crouches down to show a small boy hemlock. It is a poisonous biennial herb that is often mistaken for the slender leaflets of carrots. Like a teacher he explains, “You see this. This is dangerous.” The young boy stares down at the plant, with a curious wonder in his eyes. Finally, Jim’s idea that “we all learn from nature” sinks in. It is irreplaceable, and as he says, “needs to be conserved for all species, including ours.”

Quietly walking back to the nature center, a serene spirit took over the group. The sun, peaking through the gloomy clouds, lit up the trail and warmed the cool winter wind. The group

has formed a bond and a dependency on nature. Not the type of dependency that inflicts harm and destruction on earth. This is something different. It is unbreakable. As they walk between the bushes, kicking up dust, and inhaling the fresh air, there is no place they'd rather be. Getting lost along the trails and hearing the songs of different birds provide an escape from reality. It is as if they have entered into a different world. A world where all men respect the gifts of nature and do not abuse them; a world where all men work to preserve nature.

Sitting back on the bench across the entrance from the nature center, Grace, marvel in her eyes, glances once more into the sky. The Red-tailed hawk is still soaring high above the sanctuary. It—like the Friends—hasn't left yet. This is *its* territory.