

## Wanted: Landscape Literacy

*Find a teacher, read a book, follow a child to achieve a sense of wonder*

*by Michael Plotkin*

One fall I brought a group of graduate students from UC Davis to the Effie Yeaw Nature Center. We walked down to the river, where salmon were spawning. As a prelude to our activities, I asked participants to find a place they liked, observe the environment for half an hour, and record their impressions. A few were bored, but most were stirred by the beauty of the place. Some wrote poetry for the first time in years. Others were fascinated with the beauty of individual leaves, the light on the rippling water or the charisma of large fish.

For those who didn't wish to be elsewhere, the American River seemed to offer a pleasant idyll. I, on the other hand, was peculiarly dispirited by the students' observations. They were decidedly not experiencing the American River in the ways I had thought they might. In particular, few seemed to derive any more significance than ennui or awe. Now awe, of course, is significant and wonderful, and tedium can be the thicket behind which engagement lurks. "A sense of wonder," in Rachel Carson's famous phrase, may be one of our noblest moods. I wondered though if, like love, a sense of wonder is enough. I have come to believe it is not. A sense of wonder is a good beginning, but it may not be a good goal.

My minor epiphany at the river resolved into a metaphor. Consider this: while the woes of nature spurred by the relentless advance of civilization have become cliché, it is less well appreciated that those vanishing species and landscapes represent not only sovereign creatures and communities laid waste, but also a unique language. Landscapes comprise a sort of text, an idiom the existence of which implies a corresponding literacy. It is a literacy inarguably in serious decline, for who knows how

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**"Losing, or failing to  
hear and read, the  
language of landscape  
threatens body and spirit"**

*Anne Whiston Spira*

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to read a landscape anymore?

Today, we hire nature interpreters, where once upon a time, we boasted not only fluency but a nearly preternatural eloquence. As wild places retreat from us (or we from them), this expertise, an essential attribute of our humanity, atrophies. In a larger sense than we are used to thinking, without landscape literacy we will flounder, as debilitated as the more conventional sort of illiterate

is in the microcosm of our society. Ultimately, we could become marginal citizens on our own planet.

If this seems far-fetched, here is an experiment you can try. Ask your friends and neighbors (especially if they are children) to name three native plants that would have grown in their yard before European settlement. Or three native birds. Birds and plants are prominent landscape features and should be easy, as compared with, say, spiders, lichens or mushrooms.

A few years ago, as part of some work I did for a local environmental education program, I surveyed Sacramento area high school students on such matters. Fewer than 10 percent could name three native plants, and a mere 16 percent could name two. The birds fared somewhat better: 15 percent could name three and 38 percent could name two. These lapses in general knowledge were not surprising to the kids themselves; nearly 75 percent self-reported that they felt ignorant about the local environment, and a full 20 percent admitted to engaging with the out-of-doors not at all.

The most troubling finding, though, to my mind, was that the vast majority (essentially all) of these children had

*see EYNC Students, page 3*

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# Letter from the President

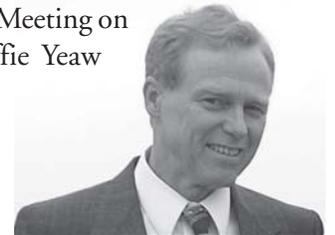
ARNHA plays a vital roll in support of the Effie Yeaw Nature Center. Over the twenty-six years of its existence, ARNHA has helped to bring over half a million dollars to the Nature Center and its programs.

In my short tenure as a board member, I am continually amazed at all the talented people that contribute to ARNHA to put out great publications such as *The Outdoor World* and this newsletter. We have talented graphic designers and artists like Molly Keller, and wonderful writers like Peter Hayes, Peggy Kennedy, and Greg Voelm, and dedicated accountants like Roberta Wilner. We have dedicated stewards of the Nature Center like Lee Wilner, Linda Thomas, Bruce Kennedy, and Claudia Hulbe. We also have the talented director of the Nature Center, Marilee Flannery and staff member, Jamie Washington, as official board members.

It is with great pleasure that I offer an invitation to you to join us at our February Meeting. We are inviting any ARNHA member who might be interested in contributing some of their time and talent in the coming year, to come to our February Board Meeting and get to know the board members and learn what makes this organization tick. There are wonderful opportunities to help with the publications, to help with special events, and to plan and implement fund-raising programs to further ARNHA's mission of bringing "Nature to People and People to Nature." There are plenty of events and programs that need your help!

If *you* are interested in meeting the ARNHA Board and learning how you can make a difference, please come to our February Meeting on Wednesday, February 13<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 PM at the Effie Yeaw Nature Center!

Sincerely,  
Larry Washington



*Members of ARNHA team in Great American River Cleanup view a fraction of trash collected at Ancil Hoffman Park Sept. 15. L to R.: Brian Hong, coordinator Pete Hayes, Ben Fortson, Hamed Hossen, asst. coordinator Laurie Blazich, Colleen Flannery. Brian, Ben and Hamed are Mira Loma H.S. students. Sixty volunteers turned out at Ancil Hoffman. Photo by Marilee Flannery.*



## *EYNC Students, from page 1*

passionately inaccurate conceptions of the Sacramento Valley before Europeans. Some felt the Valley was choked with impenetrable forest; others felt it was all barren dirt. Dirt was a recurrent theme. Many children suspected there was more of it, or that it was more prominent and vexatious primevally, bringing forth hordes of suffocating weeds and transforming into ravenous mud. One child charmingly asserted the region was more hilly prior to the fortunate (and apparently leveling) intervention of intrepid Caucasian settlers.

These data concur with a recent Roper poll, which found that a mere 32 percent of American adults could answer 9 out of 12 questions on the environment correctly. If natural landscapes embody a language, it is a language so dusty with disuse that it may be on the verge of extinction.

Now, even if you accept the reality of widespread landscape illiteracy, you may not buy the dire consequences. Anne Whiston Spirn, a landscape architect who studies the benefits of nature in urban settings (and the consequences of landscape illiteracy) says, “losing, or failing to hear and read, the language of

landscape threatens body and spirit, for the pragmatic and the imaginative aspects of landscape language have always coexisted.” We risk catastrophe in both realms, if we end up living in a world we can no longer understand. On the pragmatic side, everything from the health and persistence of our local flora and fauna to the dangers of regional flooding to global climate change depends on understanding more than on awe. Spirn makes the case that our pervasive failure to understand local ecology results in failure of our infrastructure to “sustain health, safety and welfare”.

On the imaginative side, it may be that the worst consequence of landscape illiteracy is not ecological at all. It is expedient. We have as urgent and inescapable a desire for contact with nature as we do for sex or communication or appetizing food. This primal drive has been called biophilia; we will rarely be happy if it is forestalled; not as adults and most certainly not as children. The loss of nature is, whatever else, a great personal tragedy.

I sensed that the students who came with me to the river were not interpreting it on attempted comprehension.

Every place has profuse significance: a present tense bursting with dimensions, echoes of a vivid history, facts too numerous to absorb and sort out; metaphors, allusions, intolerable mystery, inexhaustible intricacy.

All of this I felt keenly as the students misinterpreted the activities of the salmon, encompassed the profuse Spanish broom (*Spartina junceum*—a noxious weed) in their wonder, did not notice that the same species of live oak has both spiny and smooth leaves, and all the while failed to notice the perfectly placid black-bellied plover, newly arrived from the arctic, among the flock of gulls.

We all have these gaps in our landscape literacy. For example, I have noticed that when I go birding with an avid birder, we frequently see unusual birds. Curiously, when I go out on my own, I only occasionally find something noteworthy. Are the rarities unaccountably attracted to experts (or repelled by me), or (more likely) am I simply missing them when I go alone? After years of birding, I am beginning to see interesting birds on my own. Nothing conscious has changed, but somehow I have become more sensitive to the nuances of birds than I was. But even now, I have a better shot at seeing rare birds if I go with a serious birder. In the mean time, I have noticed that when I take out novice birders, they are amazed at what we see.

This suggests the key to basic landscape literacy is within all of our grasps. Simply spend more time. Literacy perforce involves exposure to text. This is not hard to do. Most likely, your own backyard has species in it unknown to science, let alone to you. And the American River Parkway is a wonderland of opportunity for exploration. Noticing what is out there, leads to asking questions, which leads to looking for answers and then perhaps to seeing patterns, and on to new questions. Mysteriously, one day we are literate.

*continued next page*

*Children explore their environment with Effie Yeaw Nature Center naturalists like Brian Gilmore, below. Because children ask questions they are role models for adults.*





## Parks Passport Is Ideal Gift

What better holiday gift for anyone who loves the American River Parkway than a 12-month Parks Passport?

The newly-increased \$50 one-year pass pays for itself in 10 daily visits at the new \$5 fee. Besides convenient vehicle parking, parks users are rewarded with the knowledge that the full cost of the pass goes directly to help cope with the costs of maintaining and operating the parks system. A 2006 updated study of parkway financial needs by a committee of citizens and agency officials said annual parkway funding is \$1.5 million short.

Parks Passports can be purchased at the Effie Yeaw Nature Center, Park Rangers office, 4040 Bradshaw Road, American River Parkway Foundation Office in William B. Pond Recreation Area, REI stores, or online at [www.sacparks.net](http://www.sacparks.net)

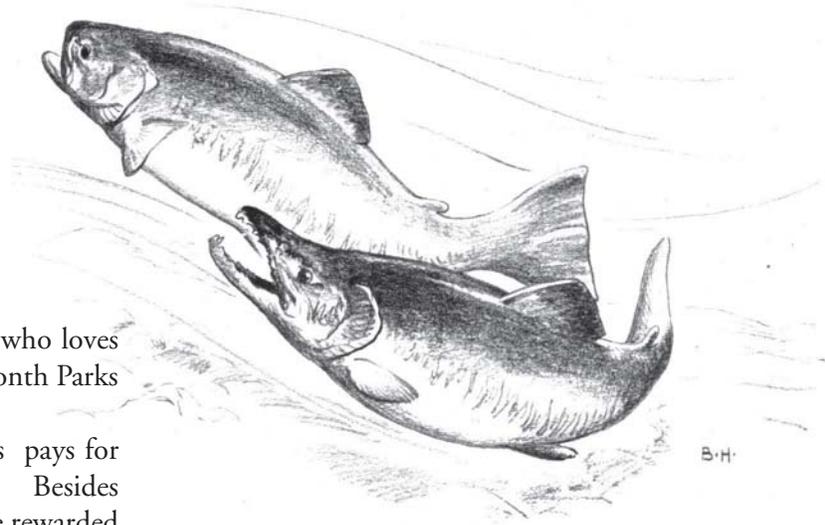


## Nature Center Exhibit Returns

The Effie Yeaw Nature Center's popular exhibit, "Endangered Species of California's Central Valley," has returned from its California tour to educate and entertain visitors of all ages and abilities at the center in Ancil Hoffman Park.

Come and try on a pair of life-sized California condor wings and listen to grandma condor's lesson on how to be a safe and successful condor. Climb through the kit fox burrow and learn about the success stories of the bald eagle and peregrine falcon. This exhibit is jam packed with interactives and multi-sensory displays. It's a perfect way to spend a rainy afternoon!

The nature center is open every day except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's. Hours are from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., changing to 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. after Feb. 1.



## Salmon Festival a Hit

Attendance at the 11th annual American River Salmon Festival Oct. 13 and 14 appears to have nearly tied the turnout for the 2004 festival, which may have been the biggest ever.

"You never know how the weather's going to treat us, and it was kind of cool and cloudy early Saturday or we'd have done even better," said Bruce Forman, director of the affair. He said turnout in 2004 was estimated at 22,000

ARNHA's two booths of salmon-themed merchandise, plus the parking and salmon barbecue operations, took in a total of \$39,397, said ARNHA Vice President Lee Wilner. Wilner agreed that the turnout was substantial, although he said festivals from back in the '90s were probably even larger.

Nevertheless, the teeming crowds were most heartening to watch, Forman said. "They were really engaged. In fact, our salmon barbecue was all sold out at 10 minutes to two on Sunday afternoon."

ARNHA teams with the state Department of Fish and Game, Parks & Recreation, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Save the American River Association to put on the affair with the support of a host of sponsors.

Proceeds go to pay for local wildlife and conservation education programs, including a new ARNHA-sponsored river-creek conservation puppetry video. In its first 10 years, the festival raised a total of \$52,000 for such efforts, Forman said.



## Ed Harper to Present at ARNHA Program January 24 at 7:00 pm

Ed Harper, popular birding trip leader and wildlife photographer, will present a program on “Birds of the American River Parkway” at an ARNHA free public forum at 7 p.m., Thursday, Jan. 24 in the Assembly Building of the Effie Yeaw Nature Center in Ancil Hoffman Park.

The retired American River College mathematics and field ornithology instructor has birded every continent, amassing thousands of wildlife photos. With their firm “Sandpiper Journeys,” he and his wife Susan have led numerous wildlife trips to Africa.

A past president of the Sacramento Audubon Society, Ed accompanies his striking bird images with humorous commentary about bird behavior and “how I got that picture.” Light refreshments will be served.

## A Bird’s-eye View of the Parkway

Marilee and Steve Flannery know the American River Parkway better than most people, and they can assure you that it’s a community treasure to be cherished and handled with care.

Marilee, Effie Yeaw Nature Center Director, and her husband, Steve, Parkway Chief Ranger, presented an absorbing program, “Exploring the American River Parkway,” as part of ARNHA’s public forum series Sept. 20. With dramatic aerial photographs, they carried the audience from the mouth of the deep blue American from where it meets the pale blue waters of the Sacramento River, 23-miles to Lake Natoma.

Stops along the way included: the site of the Nisenan Indian Village of Pujune, the Jibboom Street Bridge, center of a problem area for rangers who must cope with teen-age bridge jumpers and rope-swingers who sometimes land disastrously, and Urrutia Pond, a 60-acre pit that was mined in a sand and gravel operation and is the largest property in private hands on the parkway. Negotiations are underway by local government to acquire it.

Continuing upstream, Marilee and Steve described the outstanding wildlife and recreational opportunities at such sites as William B. Pond Park honoring the first County Parks Director, Goethe Park with its nature study area, and Ancil Hoffman Park, home of the Effie Yeaw Nature Center with its wide-ranging exhibits and programs for school groups and visitors of all ages.

Steve pointed out “Gilligan’s Island” in Rancho Cordova, which he said was “the bane of our existence” in past years with drunkenness and brawling among rafting occupants on summer holiday weekends. An alcohol ban on the river on the Fourth of July and Labor Day was imposed this year.

It was noted that when Mountain Man Jedediah Smith explored the region in 1827, he called the American the “Wild River.” Marilee and Steve stressed that besides enjoying the many natural amenities of the parkway, visitors must use common sense and wear life jackets on the river, forego jumping off bridges, and not try to pick up a rattlesnake, among other bad choices some parkway users have been known to make.



## Maidu Day Record Turnout

A record crowd of enthusiastic visitors and participants turned out Oct. 6 for this year’s Maidu Indian Day at the Effie Yeaw Nature Center.

The 930 paid attendance is the most ever for the celebration.

The day-long affair was blessed with balmy weather, blue skies and an eager crowd that encompassed young and old, Indian and non-Indian, said center director Marilee Flannery.

“It’s really been a great day,” Flannery said. “And this is our only big event of the year, only big fund raiser. The whole staff participates, and of course we have support from a lot of Maidu people.”

The funds support the center’s Maidu Cultural Heritage Program.

The event took place in the center’s Nisenan Maidu village area, where practitioners of the ancient arts demonstrated such skills as fire-starting, flintknapping, basketweaving, acorn preparation, and storytelling.

Highlight of the day was the Maidu Dancers and Traditionalists, who performed age-old tribal rituals.

The gate netted \$2,258.60 for the program.

## FURTHER READING

*The Language of Landscape* Anne Whiston Spirn.

*The California Landscape Garden: Ecology, Culture, and Design* Mark Francis and Andreas Reimann.

*Ecological Literacy* David Orr.

*Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* Richard Louv.

*Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* David Sobel.

*The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places* Gary Nabhan and Stephen Trimble.

The Center for Ecoliteracy [www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org) "The Center for Ecoliteracy is dedicated to education for sustainable living." ■



## FROM THE ALMANAC

### Success story

It hovers 70 feet over the valley grassland, a graceful white bird with pointed wings that beat with metronomic rhythm until it pauses. By its color and contour, it resembles a gull—but a gull doesn't hover like that, does it?

Its kite-like silhouette and its long white tail are clues to its identity. It is a White-tailed Kite, whose classic whiteness belies the fact it is a bird of prey. This handsome member of the hawk family has made an encouraging comeback in California after having dwindled to an estimated 50 pairs early in the last century.

Kites threatened to follow the dodo into extinction as the result of the thankfully bygone hobby of collecting their eggs (whitish, spotted red and blackish brown). And the bad reputation, often unwarranted, that all hawks were "chicken hawks." The kite's distinctive color and hovering, trusting behavior made it an easy target for marksmen.

Full protection under state law and greatly increased irrigation and cultivation of farmland reversed the trend of diminishing kite numbers. The birds have returned the favor and are now considered good friends of farmers, especially grain-growers.

Hovering over a field, the kite spots a meadow mouse moving along a runway between entrances to an underground burrow. The hawk sideslips to the ground, seizes the mouse in its talons, and soars skyward. Since a meadow mouse eats the equivalent of its weight in vegetation each day, and if left alone would multiply at a prodigious pace, the White-tailed Kite makes a key contribution to the balance of nature.

After a day of hunting, the kite returns at dusk to a communal roost in a tree, where 40 or more spend the night. Later in the spring they pair up and build nests high in the trees. They don't migrate.

Fortunate is Sacramento to be one of the centers of California's kite population — an all-too rare success story of wildlife that graduated from the rare and endangered list.

Reprinted from ARNHA's "An American River Almanac: Reflections on nature throughout the year," with essays by Peter J. Hayes and color photographs by Tom Myers and George Turner. This book of photographs and essays can be purchased at the Effie Yeaw Nature Center and selected book stores. ■

# Hearings due on parkway plan EIR

By Bill Dillinger

ARNHA members should be alert for upcoming hearings on the draft environmental impact report for the updated American River Parkway Plan. The draft is scheduled for completion early in 2008, with hearings soon to follow.

Sacramento County planners have proudly announced that the parkway plan process has received the Outstanding Focused Issue Planning Award from the California chapter of the American Planning Association. In an effort coordinated by project manager Sunny Williams, representatives of local government and stakeholder organizations labored for 2 ½ years to come up with the new plan.

Local environmentalists are less happy with the process, however, as it tended to overload the update committee with representatives of recreational interests and made it difficult to resist proposals compromising the Parkway as a dedicated natural area.

The new plan does adopt essentially the same goals and objectives as in the old one, and permits the same compatible recreation activities. But a proposal to allow dogs to run off-leash at Paradise Beach was denied only after much discussion. And another to allow mountain bikers to use some of the Parkway's dirt roads was actually approved.

Plans by Rancho Cordova to use some of the parkway for city park-type facilities were largely headed off, and one of their proposals — to convert the unsightly Rancho Cordova Drain into a meandering wetland — was welcomed by all.

It's still important to monitor the EIR process, however, to assure that protection of the Parkway as a natural area is strengthened, not weakened, by the final document.

Constant vigilance is also needed to defend the Plan against the continual bombardment by developers and others requesting exceptions to the Plan's provisions.

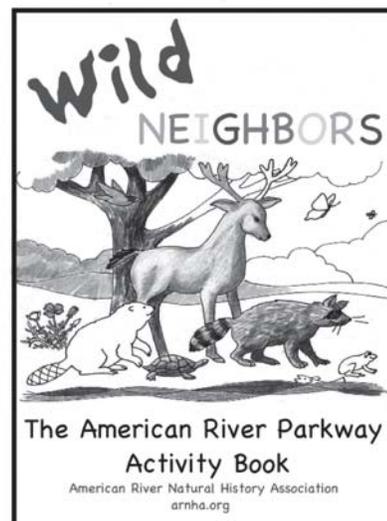
Typical is the long-standing controversy over the Markis-Lien request to reduce the required 70-foot set back to allow two large houses to be built closer to the edge of bluffs overlooking the river in Carmichael.

The Save the American River Association and other environmental groups have opposed the request, not only for the effect the big houses would have on the immediate viewshed, but also for the cumulative effect of such inroads on the entire Parkway.

*Bill Dillinger is an ARNHA Associate Board member and former Acorn Editor. ■*

## Welcome new members

- Walter Bennet / Stephene Cavender
- Ella Blake
- Mary Jane Calvo
- Brad Carlton
- The Chador Family
- Susan and Keith DeVore
- Sally V. Faubion
- Guy Galante
- Frederick Simpson
- Julie & Mike Snolke
- Carl Stillman



### Just Released!

Created by Jo Smith and Gail Mackenroth, this inspiring children's book of puzzles, crafts, coloring, pathway lore and activities is designed to teach American River Parkway ecology.  
**\$3.50**

at the Discovery Shop inside the Effie Yeaw Nature Center

Published by the American River Natural History Association

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# ARNHA Calendar of Events

- **Discovery Shop Annual Holiday Sale**  
December 1, 9:30 a.m.-2 p.m. at EYNC
- **American River Parkway Wildlife Count**  
December 1 at EYNC
- **Save the American River Association Annual Meeting**  
December 1 at EYNC
- **Salmon Viewing and Salmon/Steelhead Spawning**  
Month of December at the Lower American River  
and Fish & Game Dept. Hatchery
- **Volunteer Holiday Party**  
December 6, 3-5 p.m. at EYNC
- **Winter Fun Days**  
December 26-28 and January 2-4 at EYNC
- **ARNHA Evening Forum with Ed Harper**  
January 24, 7 p.m. at EYNC (story page 5)
- **Spring Fun Days**  
March 17-21  
EYNC: Effie Yeaw Nature Center

## Thank you Donors!

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- Mooretown Rancheria
- Pacific Fresh Seafood
- Raley's (*Walnut & Fair Oaks Blvd.*)
- Marjorie J. Reid
- David H. Rogers
- SaveMart (*Winding Way & Manzanita*)
- Sub Depot (*Fair Oaks Blvd., Carmichael*)
- Supporters of Maidu Indian Day
- Togo's Eatery (*Marconi & Eastern*)
- Trader Joe's (*Marconi & Fulton*)
- Mary Wilkinson
- Lee & Roberta Wilner (*'Have A Heart' trap*)
- Cheryl Wong

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