

Albuquerque Chapter Newsletter

Native Plant Society of New Mexico

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Valles Caldera Forum Draws Large Crowd

by Jim McGrath

Some 80 people attended the first environmental forum sponsored by the Albuquerque Chapter of NPSNM on Wednesday, June 3 at the Natural History Museum. “Public Access and Future Management of the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP)” was the topic. It had been selected because some members of our chapter had been disappointed by a VCNP van tour that did not allow much exploration of the preserve.

Virginia Burris set the tone for the forum by pointing out that people must experience the Valles Caldera first-hand in order to learn what a treasure it is. She also reminded us that it belongs to all of us.

Four distinguished panelists intimately familiar with VCNP each brought a different perspective to share with the audience. Dr. Bob Parmenter, chief scientist for the Valles Caldera Trust, provided a brief history of the preserve and pointed out that it must become self-sustaining by 2014. Financial support was expected to come from livestock grazing, logging, and elk hunting, but to-date revenues from these activities have been inadequate. Recreation holds the greatest potential for increasing revenue, but even so, VCNP will be able to generate at best about 50% of the needed revenue.

Tom Ribe, president of Caldera Action, hopes to have legislation introduced that would turn management of the VCNP over to the National Park Service. Tom pointed out the flaws of the Valles Caldera Trust concept of management: 1) public land is managed by a private Board of Trustees that meets in closed session; 2) VCNP cannot become self-sustaining; and 3) the features we value most on the preserve—wildlife, habitat, waterways, quiet—have no monetary value. Tom’s vision of VCNP management is one of low impact recreation, and instilling a public land ethic through outdoor education and interpretation of the preserve’s natural history to the public.

Dorothy Hoard, long-time citizen activist for wildlands in the Los Alamos area, elaborated on her frustration with how the Trust has managed the preserve. She mentioned that Board members are political appointees that reflect the philosophy of the Presidential administration that is in office. Board members change every two years. By the time Board members figure out what they are doing their term is up. Hoard added that there is no continuity under this system, so no long range planning can take place.



The Valles Caldera National Preserve was the theme of a forum sponsored by the Albuquerque chapter of NPSNM on June 3. Photo: Monique Schoustra.

Dr. Chick Keller, a retired physicist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and who has explored VCNP as a volunteer collecting plants and performing bird surveys, believes that the self-sustainability requirement of the Valles Caldera Act of 2000 should be dropped. Otherwise, the preserve will become accessible only to the rich (e.g., high-priced lodges, elk hunting licenses, etc.). He believes the preserve should be divided into sections to accommodate “competing interests.” There would be separate areas for livestock grazing, hiking and backpacking, elk hunting, scientific research, and auto-based recreation. However, he emphasized that a majority of the preserve would remain inaccessible by vehicles to minimize impacts on habitat.

During the question-and-answer session that followed the panelists’ presentations, on a show of hands all but two persons indicated they preferred that management of VCNP be turned over to the National Park Service. Tom Ribe said he believes the opportunity to change the VCNP management regime has arrived, because New Mexico’s recently elected congressional delegation is oriented towards conservation and protection of public lands.

At the close of the forum it seemed clear that it had succeeded in achieving its purpose—to increase awareness among Albuquerque area residents of the problems and possible solutions associated with management of the Valles Caldera National Preserve.

Jim McGrath is vice-president of the Albuquerque chapter, and a field botanist/consultant specializing in wetland plants.

From Your Co-Presidents

On Friday, June 19, three of us showed up to go on the field forum that I was leading to Old Las Huertas Trail in the Sandia Mountains. Although we were a little disappointed that more NPS members didn't show up, we drove to Capulin Snowplay Area and were rewarded with an amazing array of plants in flower.

There were New Mexico locusts in all shades of violet and pink, bright orange paintbrush, snowberry with its diminutive tubular pale pink flowers, two species of geranium, bright purple penstemon—a total of 34 species in all!

As we walked up the trail we kept referring to Ivey's flora to help us identify those plants we didn't recognize right away. Then, during the course of identifying one shrub that was covered in white flower clusters and had gooseberry-like leaves but no thorns, I said, "Oh, maybe it's wolf current." But Gary said, "No, Ivey would have drawn the flower clusters as they are and the flower clusters do not look like that." Then as we scanned the rose family, we found a drawing that looked just like our shrub, and it was ninebark (*Physocarpus monogynus*). The flower clusters were exactly right.

I asked Bill what people used before Ivey published his book. He said they carried around several small books that contained good illustrations but that lacked the number of plants in Ivey's flora. So native plant lovers were much more limited in what they could do in the field.

Flowering Plants of New Mexico by Robert Dewitt Ivey is such an invaluable resource for the majority of us who want to know at a glance what the characteristics are of plants we don't immediately recognize on the trail, and when and where Ivey observed them in bloom. The ninebark illustrated in the book was in bloom in June in the Sandia Mountains—imagine that! So thanks, Dewitt: We always appreciate your accurate and informative book. And for those who don't already own a copy, I highly recommend you get one.

**Pam McBride
Co-President**

Report on White Sands Trip

The trip to White Sands Missile Range began, for most of us, on Friday night at Aguirre Springs Campground east of Las Cruces. The campground is

beautiful with large alligator junipers providing shade, and lovely grasses and wildflowers as understory.

However, this year, because of the drought, even the hedgehog cacti weren't in bloom. But there were great views of the Tularosa Basin and the backdrop of the Organ Mountain "needles" provided opportunities for spectacular sunset photos. And, of course, the company of fellow NPSNM folks was very enjoyable.

On Saturday, 20 of us headed up to Bear Canyon with Dave Anderson (range ecologist) and Cammi Montoya (public affairs officer) in hopes of seeing large clumps of strawberry cactus in bloom. This was not to be, but we did see about 34 species, including San Andres cross rock daisy (*Perityle staurophylla*), Trans Pecos poreleaf (*Porophyllum scoparium*), California trixis (*Trixis californica*), Engleman's prickly pear (*Opuntia engelmannii*), and tobacco (*Nicotiana trigonophylla*) in bloom.

Then we went on to another portion of the missile range to search out the rare candelilla (*Euphorbia antisiphilitica*) clone that Dave is monitoring. After hiking through what Dave calls the cactus belt (at least 15 cacti species live here), we arrived at the large clone. We marveled at how it seemed to emerge out of nowhere and at how healthy it seemed. Everyone had a great time, and afterwards we headed over to Caliche's local ice cream parlor for a treat.

The next day a few of us hiked up Pine Tree Trail that begins in the campground and encountered several riparian species growing along the seeps, including fragrant ash, cottonwood, and willow, along with giant specimens of mountain mahogany. About halfway up the trail is a small waterfall with monkey flower (*Mimulus guttatus*) tucked in among the moss and rocks. The trail eventually ascends into ponderosa pine (thus its name) and back down to the campground.

**Pam McBride
Co-President**



Hikers got to see the rare candelilla (*Euphorbia antisiphilitica*) during the chapter's overnight near White Sands Missile Range. Shown are the reed-like stalks and a close-up of the flower. Photos: Courtesy of Texas Natural Science Center (left); Nancy Hudson (right).

Musings of a Habitat Gardener

by Virginia Burris

No longer am I interested in the usual style of gardening. My passion has become habitat gardening, where I can connect my love of the natural world with my love of plants and gardening. Here I can make a difference, slight as it may be, in rectifying the continuing loss of habitat and helping to heal the Earth. I accomplish this by planting my yard full of native plants which then provide food and shelter for the remnants of wildlife—bees, butterflies, moths, lizards, birds—that are left in my urban area.

It has turned out that habitat gardening raises more questions in my mind than answers when I am paying close attention to what is happening in my garden. But this is OK and I am not complaining. The questions redirect my thinking, and I use them in designing my ever-changing habitat garden.

Consider the following scenario that I observed recently. Six bushtits are clinging on one very tall flower stem of a beargrass (*Nolina microcarpa*). What are they eating with such glutinous speed? Flower buds? Insects? Suddenly synchronized by some unknown signal, they speed away. Maybe I should add a group of beargrass to my one existing plant so the bushtits will spend more time in my garden. Now, before buying bird books, I check to see how specific they are as to food and habitat requirements. Do they just say “Food: Insects” or do they say more specifically, “Food: ants, spiders, moths, etc?”

I woke up early yesterday morning and as I often do, sat down on the wooden slat swing just outside my back door which overlooks the garden. All was still and beautiful. I calmly contemplated the meadow in the yard, which includes the most native plants and uses the least water in my garden—and is by far the most interesting area. It contains a diversity of plant shapes, sizes, textures, and colors, mixing oranges with reds, yellows with fuchsia, and contrasting shades of green (bright, dark, blue-green). Adding interest is the cool season Indian Rice grass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*) that is ending its growing season, so dainty and yet tough enough to grow without help in our arid Southwest grassland climate.

How I wander in my observation and reminiscing, just like I do when I walk through my garden. I notice the long, lanky flower stalk extending from the whirling butterfly (*Gaura lindheimeri*) starts to move and bob. There is no wind to cause the bobbing. None



Greek oregano and thyme (bottom, center-right) are mixed in with native plants in the author’s garden. Build in ways to draw yourself into your habitat garden. One way is to include in the landscape herbs you use in cooking. Enjoy the habitat on your walk to harvest fresh herbs. Photo: Bob Hass.

of the other flower stems are moving. There must be something out there that is moving that stem. I quickly move from the swing and enter the garden searching for an answer.

Must be a bee, but what kind? European honey bee? Native bee? Bumble bee? Carpenter bee? Pollinator fly? Caught in my own questions, I must now do some research to distinguish one bee from another. It would be good to add wasps to my research. I should also note the shape and color of the flower that has attracted the pollinator, and notice how the design/physics of the flower determines what pollinator can access the valuable pollen.

I suddenly realize I am no longer sitting passively on the swing located at the perimeter of my habitat garden, but have been drawn into the middle of my garden, pulled there by my need to find answers to the myriad of questions that fill my mind! Habitat gardening is such an active style of gardening. If I were looking out over the traditional garden I have had in the past, I would be checking the colors, patterns, and symmetry of the plant placement, and noting if any had been interrupted, since we are taught that perfection is one of the most important goals. I can do all of this from my swing. But my newer habitat gardening style encourages me to learn more, to put things together, and to marvel at the interconnectedness of the natural world, of which my backyard is a microcosm.

Habitat gardening also provides me with the satisfaction of figuring out the puzzles of what I observe in the
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Two Delightful Sojourns to Pino Canyon

Although March 29 seemed a little early for plant hunting in Pino Canyon, my concerns about people showing up that cool Sunday morning for a Chapter field forum vaporized as my wife, daughter, and I arrived to find a dozen other participants chomping at the bit. I had volunteered to lead the walk, knowing full well that I would learn as much as anyone, and was not disappointed.

As we progressed from desert grassland into the woody west flank of the Sandias, our eyes grew keener, allowing us to spot the tentative flower cluster here, the litter of baby pincushions (*Escobaria vivipara*) there. Though no water flowed that day, the riparian nature of the canyon bottom was evident by the willows in bloom and trembling aspens flourishing several thousand feet below their more typical occurrence. On the path back, we were rewarded by the appearance of some bright Easter daisies (*Townsendia exscapa*).

When we returned to the canyon exactly two months and a few light sprinkles later, the creek had reappeared and the flora was understandably showier. I stopped recording new species after we'd identified about 35. Highlights included short-flowered penstemon (*Penstemon ophiathus*), mockorange (*Philadelphus microphyllus*) on the verge of blooming, the apple-like fragrance of Wood's rose (*Rosa woodsii*), and the striking green and maroon inflorescence of antelope-horns milkweed (*Asclepias asperula*).

But in the end, it was the company of a sociable group from age 14 to beyond retirement sharing their knowledge, humor, and enthusiasm for wild things that made these two excursions extraordinary. (For a list of upcoming Field Forums, check the Albuquerque Chapter NPSNM website.)

Tom Stewart, Secretary



Easter daisies (*Townsendia exscapa*) seen in Pino Canyon. Photo: Nancy Hudson.

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garden. Each year my experiences in the garden build on past ones, and as a result the garden brings much richness and joy to my life.

[Readers are encouraged to share their gardening experiences and opinions with the author. Send comments to: vburris1@msn.com. In the next issue, Virginia will discuss a novel way of thinking about habitat gardening that can, among other things, contribute to happiness, serenity, and fulfillment.]

Virginia Burris is a past president of the Albuquerque Chapter NPSNM, and consults on habitat landscape design. She designed a wildlife habitat garden certified by the National Wildlife Federation for the First Unitarian Church in Albuquerque.



A compost pile (center) has been incorporated into this habitat garden. You can observe and enjoy your evening walk through the habitat as you take vegetable scraps to the compost pile. Photo: Bob Hass.

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