

The Clear Print
The San Diego Tracking Team Newsletter



SDTT Welcomes Karen Larsen Gordon as Executive Director

We are thrilled to announce that effective September 15th, Karen Larsen Gordon has taken on the roll of the San Diego Tracking Team's first paid Executive Director.

Last fall when the SDTT Board agreed to bring Karen Larsen Gordon on as Interim Director of Development, it was with the strong desire to have her work into the Executive Director position. Her first challenge in that regard (along with all other Fund Raising goals) was to obtain a source of funding to pay the Executive Director as a half-time position. In the spring of 2005, Lani and Karen crafted a grant request to the San Diego Foundation to do just that. SDTT's request made the SDF short list and a site visit with the SDF Grant team was scheduled. During that site visit we did say that if we got the funds we would conduct a search for the best candidate, although we thought we had an excellent candidate already on board: Karen Larsen Gordon. In fact, Karen was at the site visit and presented the grant along with her own credentials. The search process began in August, a Search Committee was formed of Board Members and staff, and in September, the Executive Committee made the decision official.

This is an SDTT milestone for many reasons—being able to have a paid Executive Director is a long held vision of Barry's and SDTT. To quote Barry Martin, “It is a great thing to see such progress! May the future hold many rewards for us all as a result of the commitment and dedication we've all displayed, especially Karen as she embarks on the challenging path ahead. Let us all pull together as a team in the truest sense to help ensure the realization of the SDTT vision and mission as we go forward.”

Mule Deer Survey Resumes

By Rick Botta

In 1997, the Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve Tracking Team began a Mule Deer survey, designed to provide data on the deer population within the Preserve and, over time, help us identify trends within that population. Specifically, the study hopes to answer questions such as:

- How many deer are estimated to be in the Preserve?
- What is an approximate ratio of bucks to does and fawns to does?
- Where are the primary use areas at different times of the year?
- Is the deer population being impacted by the surrounding development?

After a multi-year hiatus period and with four years of baseline data for comparison, the survey resumed this July. Since we last performed our survey, there has been significant build-out of the Del Mar Mesa area, significant habitat restoration in various locations within the Preserve and alteration of the flow of Peñasquitos Creek due to flooding and erosion. Whether these

events have had an effect on the Mule Deer population will require several more years of data collection to determine.

Based upon an initial analysis, the data collected during the July survey period appears to be relatively consistent with data collected previously. The most observed Mule Deer on any one night during the recent July 2005 survey was 49. This is less than our previously observed one night high of 63 in July 2000, but is more than were observed during other nights in July surveys in the past. Fawn sightings did not appear to be drastically different than in the past. In fact, the wet weather of last fall and winter may have helped the fawning rate for this year. Besides continuing to look at the population trend over time, the July 2005 survey did identify a few areas to keep an eye on in the future:

- At least two areas in the Preserve where deer were previously observed were devoid of sightings during the most recent survey. Whether this continues to be a trend (and if so why), or was simply an anomaly will be determined as we collect more data.
- Very few bucks were observed this period as compared to the past, resulting in a lower buck-to-doe ratio. It is likely that this is an anomaly specific to this period since recent remote sensing camera photos indicate there are bucks in numerous areas of the Preserve.

So, what's on the horizon for the Mule Deer Study in the near future? Our next survey period will be in the fall. At this time, we will introduce hand-held computers and GPS receivers as the primary means of data collection. Many thanks to Doug Hansen who modified the CyberTracker program used in the San Diego Tracking Team's wildlife surveys for use in our deer survey. Use of the modified CyberTracker software will greatly simplify the entry of the survey data into our database. We are also looking into grant sources to help us expand these surveys to areas outside Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve and to assist in a more detailed data analysis.

Many Trails to Travel, Many Tales to Tell: Tracking Time

By Barbara Baker

One of the prettiest and shortest trails in the San Dieguito River Park is the Highland Valley Trail, also known as the Ruth Merrill Children's Interpretive Walk. Located just south of Lake Hodges in northern Rancho Bernardo, the elevated trail is on a wooded hillside offering sweeping views of East Lake Hodges and the beautiful San Pasqual Valley. Named for and dedicated to Ruth Merrill, a San Dieguito River Valley Land Conservancy volunteer and advocate of preserved open space, the trail offers Discovery Points along the two mile path – numbered posts with corresponding numbers in the guidebook, located at the trailhead; these describe how the river benefits and influences the environment. The trail, however, is conducive to other activities. On any given day, walkers and joggers use the one and a half mile trail with a two-mile option to just get away or exercise.

When the San Diego Tracking Team agreed to a session on tracking and basic awareness, they determined the Highland Valley Trail would be most suitable. Not a loop trail, we could easily go in and come back out, tracing both our steps and the animals' tracks over a short period

of time. I have to admit that I thought we would only find paw prints! This is a scenic trail after all, overlooking a Christmas tree farm and running through shady areas that include a little bridge over a creek and sun-dappled meadows. What could be out here besides dogs, on leashes of course, and shoes that we could probably track by the tread as Nike Air or Adidas? I was sure that this was going to be disappointing. I thought the exciting art of tracking was best done in exciting out of the way places. Attractive and inspiring are words I would use to describe this trail, but not necessarily exciting.

San Diego Tracking Team members Doug Schanzenbach, Bryan Webber and Karen Larsen-Gordon greeted us – about a dozen amateurs in attendance – in the small seating area at the staging area. They explained that before we got out on the trail to begin tracking we would need some basic information such as how to move in nature in order to discover patterns of awareness within common San Diego habitats, and the techniques for recognizing associated flora and fauna. Technical sounding, but as it turned out, very low tech. Bryan stressed that in nature there is no yesterday or tomorrow, only now. “Don’t let anything distract you from the Now” – which could be a life philosophy as well. “Be quiet,” he said, pointing out that we live in a world of noise – the traffic, the airplanes, noise from machinery, cell phones, constant conversation, and in effect, daily life.

The last exercise we were shown before hitting the trail was how to keep a journal and record signs, patterns, and tracks. For such an exciting field of study this was beginning to seem like a lot of detailed and mundane work, particularly when they talked about collecting scat. We didn’t have to do this, but the trackers showed how this knowledge was useful when we came upon droppings on or nearby the trail. Observing what was in the digestive tract of an animal is a sure way of knowing whether that animal is domestic or wild. In fact, as it turned out, observation skills are essential. How many of us see without actually observing? The bank around the stream looked like a seafood buffet at the end of the day – raccoons like crayfish! There were beehives in two of the trees! Poison oak is growing off trail! These were just the peripheral things we were learning about tracking.

I guess I was most surprised by the number of snakes that had crossed the path both coming and going. The lizards and rabbits were also plentiful. We were given pictures of animal tracks to aid us in studying and describing the gait, footfall, size, and shape of a track. We learned how to spot a wood rat’s nest and the type of vegetation most suited to certain species. Tracking takes time, more time than I realized, which means patience. Tracking is as much a science as it is an art. By the time the session ended, I had to confess, if only to myself, that there is no such thing as exciting out-of-the-way places. There’s excitement everywhere! This short and very pretty trail in our own backyard certainly contains a lot of action. The next time I go out there just to escape from my world for awhile, I’ll think about what’s around me in this natural world and know that I am never really alone.

Upcoming Events

Thursday, September 22 and Saturday, September 24: Beginning Tracker Naturalist Class, 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm Friday and 8:00 am to 6:00 pm Saturday at the Peñasquitos Ranch House. Contact Rick Botta (858-672-0584, rmbotta@earthlink.net) to sign up as a student or to help out.

Saturday, October 2: Volunteers needed to host an aid station for the Century Ride/Tour de Poway. Two shifts available: 11:00 am to 1:00 pm and 1:00 to 3:00 pm at the west end of Highway 56 in Carmel Valley. This is an opportunity for the SDTT to raise money as the organizers donate to the groups who provide labor. Please contact Karen at 760-715-4102 to volunteer.

Saturday, October 8: Monthly tracking walks, 8:00 am to 10:00 at the Peñasquitos Preserve Ranch House. Beginning and Intermediate/Advanced levels offered.

Saturday, November 12: Monthly tracking walks, 8:00 am to 10:00 at the Peñasquitos Preserve Ranch House. Beginning and Intermediate/Advanced levels offered.

Save the Date! Saturday, November 12: Speaker's Series: Michael Puzzo (Wildlife Health Center at UC Davis) on Mountain Lion Study, 2:00 to 4:00 pm at Joan Embery's Pillsbury Ranch in Lakeside. More info to come.

Fall Wildlife Survey period starts **October 15th** with the volunteer training (at the Ranch House 9:45 AM to 4 PM). The transect schedule will be available by October 15th (though probably not much sooner) through our e-group, SDTTLIST. If you have any questions, would like to be an assistant for the volunteer training, or sign up for a transect, call Lani at 858-513-0359.

Sunday, October 16: Batiquitos Lagoon Nature's Magic Extravaganza, Noon to 6:00 pm. SDTT will have a table there, and **volunteers are needed**. Please contact Karen at 760-715-4102 if you'd like to help. Please see batiquitosfoundation.org for more info.

Thursday, November 17 and Saturday, November 19: Beginning Tracker Naturalist Class, 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm Friday and 8:00 am to 6:00 pm Saturday at the Peñasquitos Ranch House. Contact Rick Botta (858-672-0584, rmbotta@earthlink.net) to sign up as a student or to help out.

Don't forget, you can help support SDTT in two important ways—volunteer your time and/or contribute financially by becoming a donor member. Call our new number 760-715-4102 to volunteer and go to www.sdtt.org for a membership form.

Please send submissions to the Clear Print to Lani Noreke at noreke@sbcglobal.net.