

THE OAK GROVE NATURE CENTER—PAST. . .AND FUTURE?

Brief History of the Nature Center

The Nature Center is described this thus in the recent David Taussig & Associates *Parks & Recreation Benchmarking/Assessment Report (released 5/21/18)*

Oak Grove also operates a Nature Center, which is a featured attraction with seasonal event programming and consistent educational programming. These programs, which are run in cooperation with the Oak Grove Docents, a non-profit organization, draw in over 5,000 annual visitors to the Nature Center, *and leads to positive marketing and word-of-mouth for the Oak Grove Regional Park.*

In 1968, San Joaquin County purchased the property that is now Oak Grove Regional Park. Early on, the decision was made to split the park into a modern, “developed” recreational park, and a large portion to remain in its natural state.

In the late 1970s, the County requested a docent group be developed for the new park under development to give tours to interested parties, *to focus on the natural environment of the park.* The parks Ranger Division trained the early volunteers. In time, docents assumed responsibility for training and recruiting trainers to develop their skills and information base on their own. Initially, all tours were provided free of charge.

In 1981, the present Nature Center opened.

In about 1989 or 1990, the County (BOS or Parks Admin) insisted the docents become a 501(c)3 group. It appears they may have wanted the docents to become a fund-raising group to support the development and operation of the Center. Docent Kathy Schick did the primary work on this and non-profit status was granted on July 23rd, 1990. There were some arguments in the group about their function: was it supposed to be leading tours or fundraising?

Initially, there were no charges for tours, but by 2000, a \$25.00/tour charges was in place. Title I schools are not charged for tours.

What's the Nature Center About?

Short answer: educating young people about their natural environment and the native peoples who first lived here.

1. The Nature Center, a function-designed building, provides a small zoo space, mineral exhibits, a learning center for young children, and a very good diorama of current and past species of birds and mammals in our area. The building also has a meeting room used for school tours for art projects and programs such as Nature Nights. There is also an office/work room reconfigured from a storage area.
2. Behind the Nature Center is a native plant garden and some structures representing Miwok life in our area. These are part of our tours and are maintained by the docents.
3. Oak Grove tours include a guided walk on the Yokuts Trail. This habitat is an old growth oak savannah/oak woodland. Such woodlands once covered much of the Central Valley and surrounding foothills, but now are rare in California. There are only two of these woodlands in San Joaquin County, and ours is the only one easily accessible (the other one isn't even on Google Earth.) Oak Grove has two trails through the woodland, including the only handicap-accessible woodland trail in the area. For 37 years, the Yokuts Trail has provided the only venue for local schoolchildren to nature walk in this kind of habitat.
4. The Docents program is *environmental education*, and it requires the environment of the Nature Center inside and outside, and the Yokuts Trail. The Oak Grove Nature Center program would not exist without the resources of the Nature Center.

Philosophy—Purpose of the Docent Program.

- We believe a central purpose of a park such as Oak Grove is to instill in children a love of nature and knowledge of the natural world.
- In his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv described the individual and social consequences for children increasingly isolated from contact with the natural world. What was once summer camp at the lake or in the mountains has morphed into soccer camp, basketball camp, with the television or smart phone never out of reach. The resources of the Nature Center are a partial *antidote* to this “disorder.”
- Conservation organizations such as Audubon and Sierra Club recognize that the future of conservation lies in exposing children and youth to the natural world via outdoor education. However, few youth are involved in camping or other outdoor programs any more, and long-distance school field trips are a thing of the past.
- The Oak Grove Nature Center is one of only three remaining programs in San Joaquin County committed to exposing our youth to their natural environment. Children from the Stockton metropolitan area take school trips to Oak Grove, where they are introduced to the natural and native history of their community. The Alice Hunter Fund pays for bus transportation for children from Title I schools, children who would otherwise be unable to make such trips.

Volunteers/Docents—Who Are They?

Oak Grove docents are unpaid volunteers. Some are retired science or other school teachers, others are individuals from other backgrounds, but all are deeply committed to providing young children an experience in nature.

Our docents have included:

- Alice Hunter, UOP Biology Professor and science educator, who first established the fund that bears her name;
- Kathy Schick, Entomologist and Adjunct Biology professor at UOP and Delta College, and former employee of UC Berkeley's Essig Museum of Entomology;
- Verna Johnston, well-known California naturalist and Biology professor at San Joaquin Delta College for 37 years;
- Steve Stocking, Botanist and long-time professor at San Joaquin Delta College;
- Dick Filson, Science teacher at Edison High School and past president of the California Science Teachers Association;
- Martha Mallory, native plant enthusiast and Oak Grove docent for 25+ years;
- Stan Carlson, Lincoln High School Science teacher.

The Nature Center depends on the support of our docent council. Currently comprised of roughly 15 active members, the council decides on events, necessary maintenance to the center, the budget and funds from the docent council and how to spend them, maintenance of native plant garden, how to bring in and retain visitors, weekend staffing, and other related matters.

We have about 5 members who are active tour guides for our center, 5-7 who actively staff the center on weekends, and about 10 that regularly attend our monthly docent council meetings. The individual docents volunteer four-hour blocks of time to staff the Museum on weekends, and typically three hours for each school trip. For the twenty-two school trips in Spring 2018, docents contributed 198 hours of their time (3 docents x 3 hours x 22 trips = 198 hours). Additionally, docents often spend their own, unreimbursed money toward making Center programs successful.

- 2017: 1,081.5 total hours were donated by our volunteers for all programs
- 2016: 1,783.5 total hours were donated by our volunteers for all programs

The Public We Have Served

In the 37 years the Nature Center has operated, we've introduced tens of thousands to the wonders of nature. Some of our visitors are now third generation, the children and grandchildren of students who visited years before.

During the 2017-2018 school (and fiscal) year:

- Public Access to the Nature Center The Nature Center has been staffed 39 weekend afternoons thus far in 2018
 - Visitor Count 2017: Adults 809 + Children 766 = 1575 total
 - Visitor Count 2016: Adults 751 + Children 606 = 1357 total
- During the 2017-2018 school year we hosted 262 adults and 1286 children on school day tours. In this *calendar* year, we've led 22 individual school tours, for classes K-5, from 10 schools and four school districts: Lincoln (14), Stockton Unified (5), Lodi (1) and Manteca (1). Twenty of the twenty-two school trips were Title I schools, and many of these would not have been able to visit Oak Grove without their buses being paid for by the Alice Hunter Fund.
- The Nature Center hosted Bug Fest in May. 1200 attended. In some years we've had as many as 2000 attendees.
- In 2017, we hosted Raptor Day, attended by 45 children and adults,
- Nature Nights are monthly Friday evening events. These have introduced both children and adults to varied nature topics, taught by experts in their field.
- Astronomy Nights, a collaboration with the Stockton Astronomy Club, allowed children and adults to explore the night sky.

Partner to Oak Grove Nature Center

- The California State Indian Museum (Sacramento) has lent native artifacts to the Center for display.

Stakeholders in Oak Grove Nature Center

- San Joaquin Audubon Society has long supported the Nature Center. Early on, Audubon contributed \$1000 toward construction of the Nature Center, and they later donated for the Verna Johnston Bird Oasis on the Yokuts Trail. In 2017, Audubon rebuilt two memorials on the Yokuts trail. In recent years, the Audubon Board has recently made \$500 and \$1000 contributions to help replenish the Alice Hunter Fund. The chapter has also made periodic bird censuses in the Park.
- The Sierra Club (Delta-Sierra Group) has made financial contributions and participated in tree-plantings.
- The Stockton Astronomical Society conducts monthly star parties, using the Nature Center as a base.
- California Native Plant Society has over the years contributed expertise and labor to maintaining the Nature Center's Native Plant Garden
- Boy Scouts of America. Local troops have over the years completed five Eagle Scout projects in and around the Nature Center.
- Delta Fly Fishers participate annually in the Bug Fest.
- Local School Districts
 - Stockton, Lincoln, Lodi and Manteca Unified School Districts count on the Nature Center staff to guide field trips for their 2nd-5th graders. Because these school districts no longer have funds for out-of-area field trips, they bring their children here for both natural history and native peoples history. *Without the Hunter Fund, these children would miss these opportunities entirely.*
 - San Joaquin County Office of Education (SJCOE) has responsibility for providing support services for home-schooled children. Through SJCOE auspices, groups of home-schooled children visit Oak Grove.