

# Mt. SAC Wildlife Sanctuary reaches 50- year milestone, preserves habitat for rare birds

SAN GABRIEL VALLEY  
TRIBUNE



Craig Petersen, a professor of Biology of Environmental Science at Mt. San Antonio College, picks a wildflower at the college's wildlife sanctuary in Walnut. PHOTO BY JAMES CARBONE

By [Steve Scauzillo](#), San Gabriel Valley Tribune 5/28/17

WALNUT >> The sound of helicopters reverberated violently inside the Mt. SAC wildlife sanctuary. Professor Craig Petersen thought that's what it was until a student raised in the Midwest told him that's not a helicopter, it's a tornado. Hail, then sheets of rain fell from darkened skies, overflowing the creek and lake. Cars on nearby Grand Avenue slid sideways off the roadway. Runoff levels rose, plunging 80 percent of the sanctuary trails in knee-deep water.

Petersen put some students under a bridge but, they soon ran toward him because the creek was rising. He led his class under a shelter where they waited out the freak storm, one of many that inundated the region during the wet El Niño winter of 1997-98.

"That was the first time I ever canceled lab. The first and last time," said Petersen, a professor of biological and environmental sciences at Mt. SAC who has been taking care of the college's 25-acre sanctuary at the northeast corner of Grand and Temple avenues for 37 years.

Last month, the wildlife sanctuary celebrated its 50th anniversary, a remarkable milestone considering it has survived the widening of Grand Avenue in 2009, floods, sinkholes, a chlorine spill and development pressures from the largest single-campus community college in the state. "It is the best kept secret in Mt. SAC," he said.

The green oasis consists of a meandering creek, a swamp, a lake and a pond — all three encircled by tall cattails and home to mallards, egrets, mergansers and the occasional great blue heron and belted kingfisher. On the eastern side, the forest canopy of eucalyptus, live oak and sycamores open up to a rare coastal sage scrub habitat, home to the federally threatened California gnatcatcher and the coastal cactus wren, a species of special concern, he said.

Last month, the college named the new amphitheater after Petersen. Otherwise, there are very few names or human markings within the woody sanctuary located across the street from the main campus. It's visited by about 12,000 students and community members annually.

For instance, a dirt-lined creek, fed by runoff from the San Jose Hills and nearby streets, runs diagonally across the property to the Snow Creek housing tract. It has no name. "We call it a blue line stream," he said. "You know, after those blue lines on the topographical maps where water flows year-round."

Amid winding dirt trails and raised walkways made of faux lumber manufactured from recycled plastic, exists a murky swamp filled with mosquito fish and crayfish, a lake encircled by tall cattails or bulrushes and a circular pond fed by pumped ground water. They are simply called: swamp, lake and pond.

The place acts as a living classroom for Mt. SAC biology, photography and environmental studies students. "We even have math classes that come here to discuss the Fibonacci Sequence, which is repetitive in nature," he said. (The math progression demonstrates the fact that every number after the first two is the sum of the two preceding numbers.)

During a tour Tuesday, Petersen often stopped for a teaching moment. At the pond, he pulled a stalk of bulrush (*scirpus californicus*) out of the ground and rubbed it between his hands until the stem separated into strands of fiber. "The Indians would weave it into mats and this would be the covering for their huts," he explained. He's not shy in presenting the harsh side of nature. "We have bullfrogs that eat the ducklings. We had a mother duck who had eight ducklings. Now, we've seen her with just one." Great-horned owls, red-tailed hawks and egrets can also eat ducklings, he said.

To emphasize the circle of life, he brought in some sheep and cow bones from the college farm. Young students are most impressed by the skeletal remains, he said.

He frankly talks about the planet's demise to high school and college students, quoting a philosopher who said: "We are now living in a biological holocaust. We need an emotional and ethical attitude toward preserving life on this planet," Petersen said.

He said today's students suffer from what he calls Nature Deficit Disorder, or NDD for short. Too much video games and indoor time can skew their worldview. At first, they are bored. It takes time for the student to forget about the car noise coming from Grand Avenue or the buzzing of new texts on their phones. "We get them involved in maintaining the habitat," he said.

The student body is working to create a desert habitat display on the eastern side, near where the college filled in two sinkholes and erected a steel bridge, reinforcing the banks of the creek, he said. One day he hopes to see a nature center built. Until then, he's thankful the sanctuary has remained relatively intact for five decades, giving urban students a glimpse of nature before it goes away.

"Other colleges, even four-year universities are like: 'What? You have a 25-acre wildlife sanctuary?'" he said, saying the sanctuary as a teaching space is most important. He goes by a simple mantra: "Our philosophy is to try to keep the trails open."

It has worked for 50 years.