The Western Gray Squirrel
A conversation with researchers Chris DeMarco,
Dan Cooper & Dr. Alan Muchlinski

Building Bridges – Saving Species
Urban Wildlife Week & P-22 Day in Griffith Park
thoughts from the president

Griffith Park’s mountain lion P-22 has gained world attention as the “poster child” bringing attention to man’s continued co-existence with animals in wildlife-rich urban areas such as our own. For Griffith Park, it’s a good time to reflect on what the value of its natural assets means for us now, and what we will lose if we are not vigilant with our priorities.

Even Colonel Griffith J. Griffith struggled to keep the park natural back in 1902, just six years after he bequeathed over 3,000 acres. Griffith criticized the mining of sand and gravel near the Los Angeles River for private gain, and when park trees were being cut for firewood and sold by opportunists, he sought help from the local press to leverage the City to become more responsible in caring for the park.

Griffith was known to do outreach to City brass and Parks Commissioners by transporting them via a six-horse-drawn “tally-ho” wagon into the Park. This time, though, he escorted a wagon load of reporters to see the damage first hand. The results were productive, as the editorial page of the Los Angeles Times opined on the “city’s apparent indifference to the great benefaction bestowed upon it in the gift of Griffith Park.”

History does have a way of repeating itself. Perhaps now is the time, again, for City leaders to board the wagon not only to see the problems in Griffith Park, but to see and appreciate its real value to the people of Los Angeles. This time, though, our twenty-first century “tally-ho” tour will be escorted by a team of naturalists, scientists, public health and recreation experts – along with residents of all backgrounds for whom the Park has provided a natural respite from urbanism for decades. They all understand and appreciate the value and powers of nature.

The City itself, and we, its residents, need to be the advocates for this natural jewel of “open space, rustic and available to all.” The reasons are plentiful.

Friends of Griffith Park makes a strong impression through the work and the support it provides the City which makes critical decisions about the park. An example of this is the nearly ten years of privately-funded scientific surveys and studies which on their own merit prove Griffith Park is worth saving as an incredibly biodiverse ecological hotspot in the middle of the City.

With our core work continuing, FoGP remains focused on the Park’s natural and historic resources. We do this through preservation, volunteerism, education, science and more. During 2016, I am very proud of the strong volunteer efforts which were led by boardmember Laura Howe and also the consistent role boardmember Felix Martinez has played in arranging and leading our school kid hikes. I am also pleased with new scientific understandings we have gained due to a genetics study on one of the Park’s most prized native species, the Western gray squirrel (See page 3).

Over the past year we’ve forged stronger partnerships with other organizations who share common goals, especially the National Wildlife Federation (NWF). Their presence in Griffith Park for both our Greek Theatre Nordic Noir benefit concert and the Urban Wildlife Week/P-22 Day Festival reinforces the message FoGP consistently makes – that Los Angeles has an amazing natural oasis – Griffith Park – which needs protections in order to survive.

So, at the end of another productive year, we ask that you join with us in protecting the values we hold most important for the park through your support as a volunteer, your membership or through your donation.

Please stay safe as you enjoy the upcoming holiday season.
The Western Gray Squirrel – Will They Survive in Griffith Park?  

Gerry Hans

The results of the first genetics study on Western gray squirrel (gray) in California were recently released, and according to the study, this species should not be taken for granted. In fact, an article outlining the proposed research was published by Friends of Griffith Park in the Fall, 2014 Griffith Reporter.

The study conducted by CSULA biology grad student Chris DeMarco was underwritten by FoGP because of the importance of the “gray” in Griffith Park, but may provide a lot of value toward the survival of the species over all.

The study was published by Friends of Griffith Park and only one of those species can be seen in the Fern Dell area. For the study, genetic material was collected using harmless “hair tubes,” which are plastic tubes baited with walnuts that had tape inside to catch hair as the squirrels went in and out of the tube. The hair follicles contained the DNA used for DeMarco’s research project. Native species gray hairs are easily distinguished from Eastern fox and ground squirrel hairs by color patterns of the hair shaft. These samples were collected over a seventeen-month period from three different gray population pockets within Griffith Park, as well as two outlying areas.

As many of us know, the long term viability of all species populations is closely tied to a sufficient level of gene flow. The goal of the study was to evaluate the genetic diversity of three subpopulations of grays within Griffith Park. Two populations outside of the park (Western Santa Monica Mountains and Bonelli Park) were also looked at in order to establish a basis for comparing the genetic diversity within the three park subpopulations. Two genetic methods were used: One examined how many maternal lineages were present in Griffith Park and how they compared to the other populations outside Griffith Park. The other used twelve locations in the gray’s genome to characterize the level of genetic diversity. Various metrics of genetic diversity were used, such as relatedness, gene flow, population structure, and bottlenecks.

I sat down with the researcher, Chris DeMarco, his academic advisor, Dr. Alan Muchlinski, and Dan Cooper of Cooper Ecological Monitoring, who has been FoGP’s scientific director, completing about ten surveys and studies in the last ten years. Filtering out a lot of the technical lingo, the two hour interview is summarized:

Gerry Hans: Can you summarize the results of the study?

Chris DeMarco: According to data, grays, whether considered as a whole population within Griffith Park or as the smaller subpopulations, are impacted by genetic factors of endangerment and extinction. Their genetic status is the result of isolation, lack of genetic richness, and high relatedness within the subpopulations. These factors limit the ability for grays in Griffith Park to maintain a viable population and to adapt to environmental change. This lower level of fitness makes them vulnerable to extinction.

Hans: So the pockets of grays even within the park are isolated? (The population pockets chosen for the study were Fern Dell, Vermont Canyon, and the Boys’ Camp.)

DeMarco: Yes, the relatedness of squirrels within each subpopulation is high. The relatedness between the subpopulations is much lower. What’s interesting is that squirrels in Fern Dell and Vermont Canyon are located near each other, yet there is a low level of relatedness. Fern Dell squirrels were more closely related to Boys’ Camp squirrels, even though it is on the other side of the park.

Dan Cooper: That leads to a question of how these squirrels move to other areas. Hans and I have seen them well outside of established pockets, but repeated sightings in those spots aren’t regular. Yes, to some extent they are moving but we don’t know what it takes to establish new pockets or how those squirrels that move are received into other established pockets. Are pines important and if so, is it because of a food source, cover or what? We know the species move through chaparral, as well. So maybe they won’t even mind that all the pines are dying along park roads.

Dr. Alan Muchlinski: The pines may be more important for staying power in the established pockets than for movement.

Hans: Where does the competing Eastern fox squirrel species...

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DeMarco: Why are there some areas that have grays and some that don’t? And why are there areas with both grays and fox squirrels and some areas with just grays? Maybe there are not enough resources or maybe there just aren’t enough individuals dispersing to establish new areas.

Cooper: Right. There are places where we see only fox squirrels where you might otherwise expect grays. Oak Canyon is an example of that. What’s even more interesting are the areas where neither species seems to be active, such as remote Royce Canyon. We don’t know why. We may have some grays in places we just haven’t noticed, too. These animals aren’t dumb. Over time, factors work together to keep populations in certain areas, such as food, canopy, shelter and more. Humans become part of that equation, too.

Hans: What is your sense of grays in Griffith Park historically?

Cooper: I expect you could show that grays peaked in the 1960-70s prior to the widespread saturation of fox squirrels and after the significant tree planting in the park produced mature trees.

Muchlinski: Griffith Park has some things going for it. You are looking at 50-60 years already of co-existence of the two species in the park! And grays’ numbers are not tiny by any means. Some of the reason may lie in the food sources here, but also in the fact that Griffith Park is large, although mostly isolated. If it is possible to manage the fragmentation in the park to assure diversified food sources they may stay here for hundreds of years to come.

Hans: That’s what I like to hear! Back to the study itself, how many individual squirrels actually participated in your study, Chris?

DeMarco: We started with 87 samples collected from grays in Griffith Park, but reduced that sample size to 57 Griffith Park individuals after samples were eliminated due to duplicative squirrels and other reasons. Of course, not every squirrel was sampled. Well, except possibly the Boys’ Camp subpopulation where there are very low numbers.

Cooper: That is really important information in itself. So now we can say with some certainty there are more than 50 grays and probably less than 100 in Griffith Park.

Hans: Yeah, we haven’t even been able to put any kind of number on our deer population yet! Chris, what will be the straw that breaks the camel’s back? Your study indicates a high likelihood of a local extinction at Boys’ Camp. How long until that happens since the bottleneck effect is already present there?

DeMarco: There are different models which could predict time to extinction, but the factors are genetic richness, in-breeding, low gene-flow… All these estimates of genetic diversity are significantly below adequate levels for the Boys’ Camp population. The Vermont Canyon and Fern Dell populations are not as dire, but still below ideal levels.

Cooper: What makes any species go extinct is the question, really.

DeMarco: You can ultimately look at a population’s ability to sustain itself as the population’s fitness. It’s called the extinction vortex when factors work against fitness, including in-breeding, genetic drift, and small population size which makes environmental challenges more difficult to overcome.

(Hint: in layman’s terms, “genetic drift” is randomness that occurs without there necessarily being a natural selection reason behind it.)

Hans: One of those environmental stressors is likely rodenticides. How could we study this, short of finding a dead squirrel like I did last year and having toxicology testing done?

DeMarco: With proper regulatory permitting, blood samples could be taken from squirrels, similar to what was done with the bobcats studied by scientist Laurel Seriex, who found anticoagulant rodenticides in 95% of them.

Hans: What I really like about this study is that it points to management concepts to improve the genetic health of the park’s grays. The first possibility is genetically mixing grays between the park subpopulations, since they seem to be fairly isolated themselves. The other is more radical by bringing individuals that have more genetic diversity from outlying areas. What are the pros and cons?

DeMarco: That depends on what the ultimate goal is, but if habitat continues to be fragmented, in the end you will also continue to see these isolated populations not being able to sustain themselves. Ideally, improving habitat corridors in the park would enhance movement and improve the genetics. If that can’t be done, then there is the possibility of creating “artificial corridors” by translocating individuals among the subpopulations.

Cooper: It’s one thing to transplant animals when a species as a whole is critically endangered. There are risks and so this might be a last resort, especially bringing in individuals from outside the park. Even moving animals within the park you need to consider these animals have family bonds and reintroversion has risks due to stress. And would the missing animal have impacts on the population it came from? Would they attempt to “home” back to their original population?

DeMarco: Barring introducing disease or other problems, bringing genes from outside park populations would provide more of a genetic rescue than from the subpopulations within the park. Both have their risks, though.

Muchlinski: Translocating within the park may be more reasonable, but we do need to realize that it may not be enough genetic rescue by itself. Making decisions like this lies more in the hands of the conservation biologists, such as Julie King and others who worked on the Island Fox rescue in the Channel Islands.

Hans: As usual, one study seems to lead to the next but now we know something needs to be done. In Griffith Park, better connectivity is what we should strive for in the short-term. But grays are declining all along their distribution area. The state of Washington lists them as a sensitive and threatened species, and Oregon has them listed as a conservation strategy species. Why doesn’t California have them on a list?

DeMarco: Really good – and tough – question. There are different ways of categorizing and there are different lists. The real problem, though, is that California is huge and there still are a lot
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of grays. However, as previous work by Cooper and Muchlinski shows, their numbers are diminishing in the lowland areas of Southern California with extirpation events in some areas.

Cooper: At the state level some species seem to fall through the cracks since they may be abundant in other parts of the state. You may be onto something here. We pulled together a scientific panel in Los Angeles County to put a group of bird species on the county’s special concern species list.

Hans: Can we do that for grays?

Cooper: Yes, there are some other mammals that should definitely be on a county list, too, such as the Pacific kangaroo rat. There would need to be county-wide input, meetings, and compiling various publications. It might take a year or so to do, but it would be great for the county to have these.

Hans: I think there could be great support for this! Talk to your colleagues and let’s do this!

While this study focused on Griffith Park’s population of grays, the concerns addressed here are applicable to many regions of Los Angeles and California. Management of the Western gray squirrel in Griffith Park can serve as a model for conservation of Western gray populations and thus helps ensure the species’ survival.

Thanks to the those taking part in the interview:

Dan Cooper Harvard University, Masters Degree at University of California, Riverside; President, Cooper Ecological Monitoring; Scientific advisor for Friends of Griffith Park.

Chris DeMarco Masters Degree Biology candidate, California State University, Los Angeles.

Dr. Alan Muchlinski Professor, California State University, Los Angeles; Ph.D., Zoology, Michigan State University.

Update… Fern Dell Pedestrian Bridge Restoration Marian Dodge

Several years ago, the Fern Dell pedestrian bridge was closed due to unsafe conditions. Pedestrians on the path frequently walk in the narrow street to get around the closure creating another safety hazard. Friends of Griffith Park’s goal is to repair the bridge so the public can once again enjoy its usage. We are pleased to inform everyone that progress on repairing the bridge is moving right along.

Our structural engineer and preservation architect have worked together to prepare drawings for the bridge repair which will bring back both the beautiful railings and the curved arch under the bridge. Given the absence of original architectural drawings, the design is based on a post card from the 1930s that shows how the wooden pedestrian bridge featured a graceful arch that matched the arch of the adjoining concrete car bridge at Red Oak Drive. The post card also shows the classic X design of the railings that was very popular in the 1930s. The new railing will recreate the look of the original but have thin cables added so that it meets current safety requirements.

The design phase is successfully completed and FoGP is now working with the city on the various approvals and processes necessary to get to construction as soon as possible.

We invite you to compare the condition of the bridge over the years. Look at the curve of the bridge in the 1930s post card. Lovely. Look at the bridge as it is today. Sob! Now compare them with the drawing of what the bridge will look like after it is repaired. What do you think?

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It Takes a Village to Bring the Plight of P-22 into Sharp Focus

Hundreds of visitors swarmed Griffith Park on Saturday, October 22 to celebrate Urban Wildlife Week and P-22 Day. They converged on Park Center to cheer hikers along the last stretch of the 50-mile trek from Agoura Hills into the Park to celebrate Griffith Park’s resident mountain lion – P-22 – who completed a similar trek in 2012. The event was hosted by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), the National Park Service (NPS), and Friends of Griffith Park to focus attention on the critical need to provide wildlife connectivity so that other species will not be trapped south of the 101 freeway. To re-establish links to the Santa Susana Mountains and Los Padres National Forest, a wildlife crossing has been proposed across ten lanes of the 101 at Liberty Canyon in Agoura Hills which would increase genetic diversity in several species.

The National Wildlife Federation is raising funds for the crossing bridge. NWF California Director Beth Pratt-Bergstrom hiked the entire trail wearing a transmitting collar like the one worn by P-22. On the final day Beth was joined by FoGP’s Gerry Hans, Mary Button, Miguel Ordeñana and a slew of reporters including New Yorker magazine. For the final stretch from Spring Canyon hikers were also joined by scores of school kids and LA Councilmember Paul Koretz.

There was a wide variety of entertainment in addition to non-profits who generously gave time and energy to make this day happen. Thanks to the National Wildlife Federation, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, City of Thousand Oaks, Grown in LA, CLAW, Keep Malibu Poison Free, Topanga Creek Watershed Committee, Save LA Cougars, Renaker Development Research, Mia Lehrer + Associates, LA Department of Recreation and Parks, Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, LAUSD, Theodore Payne Foundation, FOLAR and FoGP.

Thanks to all participants for a successful event.
Who can resist the cheerful sound of a merry-go-round? The enthusiastic melodies have been attracting both children and adults for decades. Its siren call lures us back to childhoods full of carefree fun and play.

The unmistakable voice of the merry-go-round comes from its band organ concealed behind the beautifully carved hand-painted wooden cabinet in the back. The images of nature, goddesses, and angels hide the magnificent machine that makes the music. The organ could be considered an early example of musical technology. Violins, horns, drums, xylophones, and bells are played by pneumatics where individual bellows operated by a central air pump play the instruments. The melody is controlled by a big piano roll like a player piano. Griffith Park’s Stinson 165 Military Band Organ is said to be the largest carousel band organ in the West with a repertoire of more than 1500 marches and waltzes.

The first Griffith Park merry-go-round was a three-abreast merry-go-round which was erected in the park in 1935.

The current four-abreast merry-go-round arrived in 1937. It’s one of the largest Spillman merry-go-rounds with 68 horses and two chariots and a seating capacity of 80. It came with an impressive résumé. Manufactured by the well known company Spillman, it was purchased by the Spreckels family (of Spreckels Sugar fame) in 1926 for Mission Beach Park in San Diego. It enchanted children in San Diego Expo from 1933-1935. Then Ross Davis, an agent for the Spillman company, bought it for himself and moved it to Griffith Park in 1937.

From the outside row you could reach out and grab rings alongside the merry-go-round. If you grabbed a lead ring, you tossed it into a basket. But if you grabbed a gold ring, you got a free ride on the merry-go-round.

Originally only protected from the elements and vandals by heavy canvas, the merry-go-round began to suffer. After the death of Ross Davis it was operated by Don Rand and Ed Openshaw in 1976. They painted and varnished and added wrought iron fencing. In 1980 they added the pillars and wrought iron fencing that surround the merry-go-round today. They reconditioned the old band organ to restore its hearty sound.

The years have not been kind to the merry-go-round. It was looking faded and forlorn until Jeff Brown, a teacher and merry-go-round aficionado, stepped in to help. Jeff registered as an official park volunteer and with the blessing of the Office of Historic Resources has been painting the structure around the merry-go-round. The wrought iron fencing now has a fresh coat of black paint. The finials shine with a coat of gold leaf. Thank you, Jeff!

Today children and adults alike are still drawn to the enticing sounds of the merry-go-round. You’ll find them lining up to get in and racing to find their favorite horse. Alas, inflation has hit here too. The ticket that used to cost a nickel jumped to a quarter in 1951; by the 1980s it was 50 cents. Now a ride costs $2.00, well worth it to be a blissful child again for a few minutes.

This article is based on The Griffith Park Merry-Go-Round by retired Griffith Park Ranger Bill Eckert in the Griffith Park Quarterly, May, 1982, a publication of the Griffith Park Historical Society and information on band organs provided by Jean Clyde Mason.
Abandoned Water Tanks – Creating Eyesores and Liability Factors

In August, Friends of Griffith Park launched a challenge to the City for removal of all unnecessary and abandoned water tanks in Griffith Park. FoGP will fund the first of five tanks proposed to be removed. Most of these tanks have been unused for as many as four or more decades.

Unfortunately, Department of Recreation and Parks is responsible for maintenance or removal of abandoned water tanks, not the Department of Water and Power (DWP). This is according to a formal arrangement made between the departments in 2003. In the future, DWP will abandon yet another five tanks which are currently operational and assign the sole responsibility to the Parks Department for deciding their disposition.

The cost of regular re-painting to cover graffiti is significant. The liability risk for the City seems enormous, with kids “hanging out” on top of abandoned tanks by climbing up ladders still attached. In fact, at least one tank has a “soft” top which should present even higher safety concerns.

FoGP sees no reason why the City should not eliminate all tanks once it is determined they have no further use. Joe Salaices, Superintendent of Griffith Region, agrees and strongly supports FoGP’s leadership in bringing attention to the necessity of eliminating these eyesores in Griffith Park.

While the not-so-insignificant cost for the removal of the first tank through funds provided by FoGP is already determined, Mr. Salaices is currently getting bids on the other four removals, as well. At the time of this printing, a date for removal of the first one, the tank off Mt. Hollywood Drive just west of Western Canyon Road is not yet set.

Volunteer Activity Continues in Fern Canyon

Volunteer coordinator Laura Howe is constantly looking for volunteers to help with various projects in Griffith Park – and Fern Canyon is just one of them. Fern Canyon was one of the areas destroyed in the 2007 fire but due to efforts of Marshall High instructor Jay Benoit and students enrolled in the School for Environmental Studies, native plantings are prospering.

However, it’s one of the many areas in the Park without a water source and must be hand-watered in order to survive the drought. This is where we can all help to make a difference and an impact. FoGP sends out notifications when we’re holding a volunteer activity, but if you’re hiking or recreating somewhere in the vicinity, you’re always welcome to join in. In fact, we encourage dropping in because this is “The People’s Park.” The only requirement – a willingness to pitch in, and get dirty!
Fern Dell Trees Get Heaps of Help

Mary Proteau

Shortly before 8 o’clock on a Saturday morning in August I arrived at Griffith Park’s famed Fern Dell. Friends of Griffith Park had put out a call for volunteers to help mulch the Dell’s trees.

I found my way to the meeting spot on Fern Dell Drive and was greeted by president Gerry Hans, sporting a FoGP cap and T-shirt. “You must be here to help with the mulching,” he said with a welcoming smile. “Thanks for coming.” Others arrived and soon 15 or 20 volunteers had gathered—cheerful, friendly and wide awake despite the early hour: FoGP regulars, board members, newcomers (like me), a group of kids from Marshall High; seniors; mothers with young children.

Laura Howe, FoGP vice president, volunteer services, thanked us for coming out early on a Saturday, and gave us an overview of the project. The sycamores, redwoods and other trees in the Dell were—like so many in the park—severely stressed because of several years of drought, and many of the park’s trees have already died. Lack of water stresses trees and weakens their ability to fight off harmful insects, parasites and disease and puts them on the edge of survival. The trees—some of them 100 or more years old and hundreds of feet tall—that populate the Dell’s tranquil grove needed saving.

Laura pointed out the heaping mounds of wood-chip mulch that had been provided by Recreation and Parks and suggested we split into groups of 3 or 4 to a mound. We were given gardening gloves and masks to protect against dust from the mulch. Laura told us how to apply the mulch, being careful to leave a few inches between the trunk’s base and the mulch. She answered my question before I asked it: too much mulch on the trunk can cause moisture to build up, which creates an ideal environment for insect pests, diseases and decay.

Brightly colored pails and shovels and rakes were provided. We were to create a 3- to 4-inch-thick blanket of mulch around the trees and throughout the area, which would be watered when the mulching was done. This would provide a protective blanket, enabling the trees’ roots to absorb and hold the water—and giving them a chance to survive.

Time to get to it. I got a pail and shovel and headed down the path. As I entered the Dell, a wonderful woody, earthy scent filled the air. I took a deep breath. Heaven!

The heaping mounds of mulch were quickly reduced as we spread the mulch around the trees and on the dry, hard ground. Before long I relinquished my shovel to a newly arrived volunteer and used my hands to fill pail after pail of the dusty, aromatic stuff and deposit it at a nearby tree. I soon found it easier to sit on the ground and spread the mulch around the tree’s base remembering to leave a few inches between the trunk and the mulch. Besides, sitting on the ground made me feel more connected to the trees. I was having a ball. Bits of wood-chip stuck to the gardening gloves, adorned my socks and decorated my hair. “Ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille!”

Given the Park’s more than 4,000 acres and the many hundreds of trees that it is home to, a few hours work on a Saturday morning in a single area of the park may seem like, well, a drop in the mulch bucket. But there would be more mulch and more Saturdays. And more volunteers who would contribute to the well-being of the trees.

The work finished, we gathered our tools and trundled back up the path and over the little bridge to where we had come together a couple of hours earlier.

The FoGP folks thanked us for a job well done. It was a good feeling and I came away from that first Saturday with Friends of Griffith Park with a light heart and a feeling of hope. Good people were doing good things—fighting the good fight—and I was part of it. I was already looking forward to the next time.

Volunteers prepare for the work ahead as piles of mulch are distributed to various spots in Fern Dell. FoGP board members Mary Button and Marian Dodge were on hand to sign up volunteers. Mary Proteau (bottom, far right) joined some of the volunteers for a photo op.
In 2014, Friends of Griffith Park and Griffith Charitable Trust went on record opposing a permanent stage to be constructed in the Old Zoo Picnic Area because of its impact on habitat, wildlife and the historic grottos. Shakespeare performances have become popular during the summer months at this remote park site, but portable temporary staging was used previously. The proposed project also includes new 400-amp electrical switchboards, a backstage, storage area, lighted pathways, and a set of modular bridges leading to the Old Zoo to improve accessibility for disabled patrons. Currently, it is an estimated five million dollar project with three million dollars currently allocated from Proposition K funds.

When our objections to certain aspects of the project were not considered, we filed an appeal with the City and finally a petition in Superior Court based upon provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Both actions were taken jointly with the Griffith J. Griffith Charitable Trust. Our concern is that the use of the Old Zoo as an evening entertainment center will only increase, unabated. Special permits – not subject to a public process – are granted by the Department of Recreation and Parks for use of the Old Zoo area with little regard for wildlife or other impacts. The best example of this is the Haunted Hayride event in its seventh year, essentially renting the Old Zoo area for a small fee for a month and one-half and running until 1:00 a.m. with as many as 4,700 paying customers per evening!

Our hope was to reach an amicable settlement with the City that would set conditions of use for the proposed permanent stage and for the Old Zoo Picnic Area. They included: 1) that performances be free, 2) that sound and light be kept at a low level to minimize the impact on wildlife, 3) that performances end before the park closes (10:30 pm), and 4) that the attendance be capped at 2,500 to reduce impacts, including the risk of brush fires in this area which is completely surrounded by volatile native habitat.

We were unable to reach a settlement with the City, as the City was unwilling to set “operational limitations.” We were very disappointed and so the trial moved forward. Our strongest arguments to prove a resultant increase of significant impacts to the area lie in aesthetics, historical, and biological impacts. The Old Zoo resides within the wilderness area of the park and the artistic 1930s grottos and caves are historic elements of the park per the Historic-Cultural Monument.

Superior Court Judge Richard Fruin issued a decision in favor of the defendant, the City of Los Angeles, citing lack of evidence that the project itself will harm wildlife or impact historic resources. The judge cited a robust current baseline of events already held there, including the Haunted Hayride event. He also noted the proposed modular bridges are required to create accessibility, and therefore do not raise independent CEQA issues.

The “slippery slope” for change of use and the commercialization of the Old Zoo area began years ago and will be a difficult train to stop. We hope park management will see that the concerns raised during our settlement talks are valid. We want to protect this area for passive recreational use and minimize habitat and wildlife impacts. However, the City’s refusal to establish operational limitations makes Friends of Griffith Park even more wary that this will be difficult to accomplish.

We hope you will share your experiences related to closures of trails in and around the Old Zoo Picnic Area during the recent Haunted Hayride in Griffith Park.
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NordicNoirLA Comes to the Greek – Proceeds to Benefit Griffith Park

On September 25th, the sounds of Nordic Noir LA filled the Greek Theatre much to the delight of all who attended. Composer Jacob Groth and his Danish Film Harmonics took to the stage along with the Holman United Methodist Choir to perform works from films and TV series including “Girl With the Dragon Tattoo” Millennium Trilogy, “Unforgettable,” and “Dead Man Down” among others. Groth is a five-time Emmy winner and recipient of the 2012 ASCAP Best Score Award for “Unforgettable.” His musical scores evoke a haunting atmosphere, “rich in Nordic cool and full of melodic grace and alluring enigmas.”

As one of many neighbors within walking distance of the Park, Groth decided about a year ago the Greek would be the perfect setting for an event which would leverage his talents and at the same time benefit Griffith Park and its native wildlife.

Groth said “Performing my film music at the Greek Theatre is a dream come true… the idea of combining this artistic vision with my passion for supporting urban wildlife and Griffith Park has been on my mind for a while now. Once I met with the Friends of Griffith Park team I knew we could make it happen and I’m extremely happy that it has finally become a reality!”

Friends of Griffith Park acknowledged that events like Nordic Noir LA may lead to more concerts which would continue to benefit the Park. President Gerry Hans remarked “We are thrilled to join forces with world-class talent Jacob Groth for this incredible benefit concert. We hope this night of music and culture will inspire others to join our cause and become more active caretakers of our beloved park and its endangered biodiversity.”

FoGP Summer Lectures Continue to Entertain and Inform

Kathryn Louyse

This past summer, FoGP’s lectures at the Los Feliz Branch Library focused on bats in Southern California – and – reptiles and amphibians species in the region.

In July, FoGP boardmember Miguel Ordeñana from the Natural History Museum spoke about bats and their importance in the overall health of the ecosystem, and by the way — according to Ordeñana — bats are not scary.

Bats control insects (especially mosquitoes) and they also pollinate plants, so it’s crucial these flying mammals are protected. Ordeñana explained that bats have not radically changed over the course of evolution. He spoke about species of microbats that have been found in the La Brea Tar Pits, and how echolocation is used by bats. Echolocation is the sonar-like system bats use to detect objects by emitting high-pitched sounds that bounce off objects like prey and return to the bat’s ears or other receptors.

In August Dr. Greg Pauly took to the podium to discuss SoCal reptiles and amphibians, and the importance of accurate data gathering, especially across our increasingly-urbanized landscape. Pauly is Associate Curator of Herpetology at the Los Angeles Natural History Museum, and also co-director of the Museum’s new Urban Nature Research Center.

He began by explaining Biodiversity Hotspots – what they are, and why identifying them is important to the overall health of the community. Because humans are pushing more land conversion toward agriculture, the state of California is now considered one of 35 hotspots in the world. One difficulty Dr. Pauly and other researchers are encountering is lack of data. Data collection is becoming increasingly difficult as more land is privately owned. As was indicated in the case of collecting information about bats, Dr. Pauly noted that researchers are unable to simply walk into back yards to study whatever species they’re investigating.

Both Ordeñana and Pauly discussed how difficulties in obtaining reliable research on their individual topics led to the creation of Citizen Science as a way to engage the broader community to help with research. http://www.nhm.org/site/activities-programs/citizen-science

In the case of reptiles, individuals can upload their photos and observations online to the RASCals site (Reptiles & Amphibians of Southern California). http://www.nhm.org/site/activities-programs/citizen-science/rascals/observation-data
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In 1933 this was the view of the Los Angeles River as seen from Los Feliz Boulevard. Today, this portion within Griffith Park still retains its sandy bottom, but with concreted sides.

Happy 120th Birthday! Griffith Park

Save the Date!
Dec. 16th from 3-7 pm

The gift that keeps giving celebration will take place at the Merry-go-Round lawn in Griffith Park.
LA Rec & Parks will have music and theater in honor of this anniversary including jazz by Dodisi Komolafe as well as performances by Shakespeare in the Park.

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THE GRIFFITH REPORTER/winter 2016-17