

Conejo Open Space Trails Education Days



2026 Writing Contest

**GRAND PRIZE
WINNERS**

Sponsored by the Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency

Wednesday, April 22, 2026

Dear Brian Stark,

I've been on many hikes before, but I have never gone to Wildwood Park. I have gone hiking behind my house. Those hikes were very peaceful, fun, and fascinating. Wildwood Park is a very interesting ecosystem where you can learn about the plants, animals, and the food chain.

There are many interesting animals in the park. One animal in the park is a rattlesnake, which is a very venomous snake that can usually be found in tall grass. To stay safe from rattlesnakes, you should stay on the trail to avoid getting bitten. Another interesting animal at the park is a tick, which can also bite you, but instead of poisoning you, they suck your blood. Because they have eight legs, they are considered arachnids and are related to spiders. Again, to avoid them, you should stay on the trail. There are so many more interesting animals that live in the park.

Along with animals, there are a wide variety of plants at Wildwood Park. One of the plants that you can find there is poison oak. When you start to walk through a bush of poison oak, it usually gives you a big rash. To avoid it, you just have to know what it looks like. Poison oak usually has three leaves and are normally red colored. Another interesting plant in Wildwood Park is the yucca plant. Surprisingly, yucca was actually used by the indigenous people who used to live in the park. They made shoes, medicine, and soap out of yucca. These are just a few of the plants that make their home in the park.

Plants and animals also have an important role in helping the ecosystem in the park. This important role is called the "food chain." The first part of the food chain is called the producers. Producers are plants or anything that produces energy from the sun. Second comes the herbivores. The word "herb" means plant, and the word "ivore" means eat. So herbivores are animals that only eat plants. Next, there are apex predators, or carnivores. The word "carn" means meat, and the word "ivore" means eat. So carnivores are animals that eat only meat. An apex predator is an animal that kills their prey first, and then eats it. Basically the same thing as a carnivore. Finally, there is the F.B.I (fungus, bacteria, and insects). These creatures are called decomposers. They are called decomposers because they eat dead animals and turn them back into nutrients for the soil. I said that the food chain was important because the ecosystem is like a house, where everything is fully functioning and has food to survive. But if you remove part of the house, then it could destroy the entire ecosystem and everything that lives there won't survive because they don't have enough food.

In conclusion, these are some of the things that make Wildwood Park a very interesting ecosystem with its large variety of plants and animals that keep the food chain steady and balanced to make a healthy and happy park.

Sincerely,
A.M.

The Interesting Wildwood Hike

Dear Susan,

The fun time you gave my group and I on our hike will be a memory that I will never forget. You taught us so much about the science in Wildwood's backyard.

To start off, you taught us how the environment of the trail was made by volcanic activity. This happened thousands of years ago. Weathering and erosion were apparent on our hike. In science class, we learned that weathering is the process of decomposing or breaking down rocks and erosion is the process of moving rocks or sediment that has been broken down by the process of weathering. Water, wind, and movement are the top causes of weathering and erosion. On the hike, my group and I saw lots of weathering like broken rocks and small material. Erosion was seen in the form of curved creeks and piles of rocks and soil at the bottom of hills. Using chicken wire on hillsides and planting organisms with strong roots are good ways to prevent erosion. Preventing erosion and weathering is a good way to keep people safe on the trail so nobody gets hurt.

Another thing you taught us was how to stay safe on the trail. One way to stay safe is to follow the right of way. The right of way is where hikers and bikers both yield to horses and bikers yield to hikers. It is also important that you are not looking at an electronic device while hiking or listening to music with your headphones. The reason for this is because when you are using an electronic of any sort, your attention is on the electronic and not what is around you. You can wander into danger without even knowing it. One more thing to be aware of on this topic is poison oak. Poison oak has three leaves and can come in many colors like green, red, or no color at all. Poison oak releases a toxic oil that makes your skin itchy with a red rash. Thankfully, a plant called mugwort grows next to poison oak and if you rub it on your rash, it helps the rash feel better. Looking out for these things while hiking will help everyone stay safe and happy on the Wildwood trail.

Lastly, you taught us about the vegetation and wildlife in the Wildwood canyon. The first thing you taught my group on this topic was how a predator's eyes point forward and a prey's eyes point to the side. A predator's eyes point forward because it can see its prey better. Prey have eyes that point to the side so the prey can look for predators that are hunting for food. Another thing you taught us about was the yucca moth. The yucca moth pollinates the plant called yucca. We also learned about this plant in science class. When the yucca moth pollinates the yucca, a new plant grows and makes strong fibers that can be used for making baskets, shoes, and more. The final thing you taught me on this topic was about a food chain. The food chain always starts with the sun, then a producer, next a herbivore, after that a carnivore, and then it ends with a decomposer. Energy is passed from one organism to the next in a food chain. The animals and plants make Wildwood Canyon a beautiful place!

Therefore, this hike was very interesting! I can't wait to learn more about our environment and the animals that live in it. I hope to come back with my family and show them all of the things you taught me.

Your friend,

CI

GRAND PRIZE WINNER
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Dear Ranger Sarah Dillion,

Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to witness the most magnificent field trip ever. I learned so much on my hike at Wildwood Park, but there are three things in particular that I enjoyed the most. This was by far my favorite hike I have ever gone on, thanks to your knowledge of nature.

Our hike started in the classroom when we watched the engaging video that you and the other rangers created for us. First, you told us what to do if we got bitten by a rattlesnake. If you panic, it only gets worse. This is because the venom will spread quickly throughout your body. The best thing to do if you get bitten is to stay calm and call 911. There are two things you can do to prevent yourself from getting into this dangerous situation. First, you can learn how to identify a rattle snake. All rattlesnakes have a triangular head. They have vertical, slit-shaped pupils, like a cat. Rattlesnakes also have rattles. Another safety idea to not get bit by a snake is to stay on the trail at ALL TIMES. In addition, snakes aren't the only thing off the trail. Ticks are happy to hitch a ride on you if you stay off the trail. Ticks have a barbed projectile that goes into your skin to suck blood from you. Next, the video taught us how to identify a herbivore and a carnivore head just by the skull. A carnivore eats meat, so its teeth are sharp, and its eyes go forward to see prey. An herbivore's eyes go out to its side to see predators. An herbivore eats plants, so it has flat teeth.

Sarah, you taught me a lot about geology and got me interested in the study of earth on this hike. First, I learned what erosion was from the vocabulary words we were required to study. Erosion is the geological process where earthen materials like soil, rock, and sediment are torn away and transported by forces like water, wind, ice, and gravity. When I thought of erosion, all I thought about was the Grand Canyon. However, when we saw the creek pushing and chipping the rock away, I felt like I had enough knowledge to become a geologist. It was like the word "erosion" came to life. Next, you taught me that the Conejo Valley was made from volcanic rock. You even showed us some volcanic rock. When you told us about that, it blew my mind. I told myself that I had to learn more about this, so I did more research at home after the hike. I found out that about 15 million years ago, Conejo Valley used to be a sea! However, when the Conejo Volcanics erupted, the lava melted into rocks, resulting in the land we walk on today.

Lastly, the hike was an unforgettable experience, even though we had to hike in the rain. The rain made the hike better than if it were sunny. My previous experience at Wildwood park was on a hot, sunny, summer day, and I got to experience an extraordinary sunset. Hiking when the sun is shining can be breathtaking, especially if animals like the Monarch Butterfly and the Honey Bee come out. If it is sunny, going on top of a hill can be pleasurable. However, the rain makes the smell of nature better. In addition, hiking in the rain can be breathtaking, too, because of the droplets, a funnel web spider's web is very noticeable, since the fine mist glistens on the web. Furthermore, if it's rainy, plants like Deerweed stick out because of their bright colors.

All in all, I had the most wonderful field trip ever. Once again, thank you for leading and making my day at Wildwood Park extra memorable!

Sincerely,

T.A

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Dear Hike Leader Jill,

Have you ever seen cottony balls of fluff flying through the sunny air? Well, I did when hiking through Wildwood Canyon. I was amazed at the beautiful sight I had just seen. During this wonderful hike I learned lots and lots of cool facts about the vegetation, Indigenous wildlife, and the presentations I saw there.

First of all, I learned so many things about the vegetation that was growing in the Wildwood Canyon. One pretty cool thing I learned was the difference between the Sugarbush plant and the Lemonade berry. To be honest, I didn't even know what those plants were until my instructor Ranger Jill told my group. To start, the Sugarbush has some key differences. The Sugarbushes leaves are green and have more of a taco shape. To my group it kind of looked like a sugar scooper. However the Lemonade berry has more flat leaves. Also, these plants both have pretty cool looking flowers. They look kind of like red fuzzy caterpillars. By the way, in science I learned that different plants have different structures to tell them apart.

My group also learned about some interesting facts about some of the Indigenous wildlife in Wildwood. One thing I learned was that a certain kind of duck has a really interesting feature. When this kind of duck is male it has a green head with more of a dark brown color. When it is female it is more light brown with some yellow. During the hike I spotted a male and female duck in the pond. It was really cool to look at. Another thing that I found out was that a racoon has one of the most sensitive hands in the animal kingdom. Their hands can grab things or hold things like we can. Speaking of that, in science I learned that some animals have different features to help them survive. For example, a frog has a really long tongue because that is the only way that it can catch buzzing flies easily and quickly.

Last but not least, I learned a lot from the presentations they showed us. At the animal actors presentation I learned that an opossum is Nocturnal. Nocturnal means that an animal sleeps during the day and is active during the night. Also, actually only baby opossums can hang from branches. Adults can't do this because they have too much body weight. However a baby can because it is so light weight. At the hike safety presentation I learned a lot of important things. First, I learned that you should always keep your dog on a leash. For example, what happens when your dog goes off the trail and into poison oak. Then, your dog comes back and you are petting him and loving him so much. So, you get poison oak! It is as simple as that. I learned this from the skit and from Ranger Dorothy. Also, a fun fact I learned from science is that animals are built differently if they are a carnivore, herbivore, or an omnivore. If an animal is a carnivore its eyes face forward to look for prey. When an animal is a herbivore it's eyes face to the side to look for predators.

During the Wildwood Canyon hike I learned about the vegetation, Indigenous wildlife, and the presentations I had observed there as well as the amazing ecosystems at wildwood. At the beginning I thought the hike was going to be boring, but it actually surprised me by being so much fun! To learn more, you can go on the same hike I went on and look for the things I pointed out and so much more!

Your admirer,
IFH

GRAND PRIZE WINNER

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Dear Wildwood Park Rangers and Docent Sarah,

Thank you all for everything you did. I loved my hike at Wildwood. The fresh herby plant smells in the air, and so much wild life! So many interesting plants and animals. There were wonderful plants and animals. What I liked the most was sage, the butterflies, and my docent, Sarah and park rangers. Everything there is amazing.

I liked my docent Sarah for all she did. She taught us about different types of plants including sages, cacti, deerweed, and many more plants. The Park Rangers were kind too. They taught us about how important trail safety is and the wonderful animals in the park. I think it was amazing how we got to touch real animal skulls and pelts. I also got to meet several animals in a show, a fluffy and adorable corgi and a beautiful horse. On the other hand we got to meet real animals, actors of Hollywood. I liked every animal, ranger, and docent at Wildwood.

Secondly, I loved the smell of sages. My docent taught my group about black sage, purple sage, and sage brush. I learned that sage brush is nicknamed "cowboy's calone". But, overall I think purple sage smelled the best between the more herby smell of black sage and waxy smell of sage brush. I think purple sage smelled very sweet and had pretty purple flowers in dazzling full bloom. But black sage also have their unforgettable influence. They smelled very much of herbs and seemed to bring me into a garden. I liked their yellow tips shimmering in sunlight. Lastly, the sage brush. They had their own waxy aroma that was unforgettable in their own way. Overall sages were my favorite plant, each type of sage is unique.

Lastly, I loved all the different butterflies fluttering in the sky. They make me think of dancers, dancers of the sky. They added so much beauty to the skies by their glimmering wings. Later on Ranger Eavan told us the white butterflies are called cabbage white butterflies. White butterflies are the one I saw the most but I think their plain white looked very pretty. Butterfly's glorious wings dapple the park in colorful dots. I think they were the prettiest animal in the park.

Now that I went to Wildwood, I understand why you want to protect Wildwood. It was a truly pleasant experience and I hope to come back one day. I'd like to see the beautiful park and the wonderful plants and animals. I really loved my trip to Wildwood.

Sincerely, CF