

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend



WITH THE KIDS

Families and fun: here, a natural fit

The new \$5-million Audubon Nature Center is set to serve schoolkids with year-round nature programs.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

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High atop a lone hill, tranquillity reigns. Overhead, a hawk majestically circles. Nearby, ground squirrels scurry about the open spaces and swallowtail butterflies gracefully sail by. A gopher snake slithers through the tall native grasses as cottontail rabbits hop into a shaded area under a grove of black walnut trees.

This isn't a scene from the High Sierra or some other faraway wilderness area. It's a common occurrence at Ernest E. Debs Regional Park in East Los Angeles, an often overlooked park whose profile is bound to be raised when the \$5-million Audubon Nature Center opens Friday.

A family festival Saturday highlights the opening weekend, offering parents and children the chance to explore the new nature center, get dirty as they learn about gardening, grab binoculars for some bird-watching and investigate the wilderness of this urban area.

In addition, the public is invited to participate in a park wildlife survey by hiking the area and then sharing their animal observations on a huge tote board. The survey will be ongoing.

"Nature in your own backyard' is really the theme of this center," says Elsa Lopez, director of the facility, which leases 17 acres of the 282-acre Debs Park. "All our programs and activities are geared for education, community and fun."

More than six years in the planning, the Audubon Center is set to serve schoolkids with an innovative curriculum as well as after-school and year-round nature programs. Families can also participate in a variety of planned weekend workshops — or simply hike the many trails in the area. There are almost two miles of maintained trails within the center and about 8 1/2 in the entire park.

To help families with their explorations, the center supplies free "themed" backpacks stocked with magnifying glasses, bug traps, sketch pads, books, weather instruments and nature guides.

"These backpacks are rather unique for nature centers," says education director Darryl Ramos-Young. "We're letting the families be responsible for their own exploration. They get to decide what to do and where to go."

It's hoped that after using the backpacks, families will return to the center full of questions, observations and ideas for themed backpacks.

"We want to get their curiosity piqued and then have them come back hungry for more," Ramos-Young says.

Visitors will note that while the center is officially opened, there is ongoing construction. One of the more highly anticipated components is a children's garden that, when finished early next year, will feature a variety of activity areas.

Underneath the shade of grandparent pepper trees, kids will be able to put on puppet shows, paint and draw. At a nearby stream, kids can experiment with water and soil, float leaves and sticks and make mud pies.

At a playhouse, children can practice taking care of plants as well as work with seeds and garden tools. A meadow area will be reserved for quiet investigations and wildlife observation. And finally, kids can play tag and king of the hill and build forts in the oak walnut area that will feature a huge climbing boulder.

Indeed, the decision to build a nature center in a working-class area of Highland Park and Montecito Heights was motivated by the Audubon's desire to make nature more accessible to inner-city residents, Ramos-Young says.

"We hope that when families come here to play and learn, they will become more vested in their neighborhoods, schools and other parks," Ramos says. "We are encouraging residents to make this park their own by caring [for] and nurturing it."

Debs Park has always been a part of residents' lives. Michael Perez of El Sereno, who played in the park as a young boy, calls it "an island in the middle of the city. Our treehouse is still up there in the hills. We used to play hide and seek, build forts and all that. We loved it there."

Today, Perez routinely hikes the hills of Debs Park with his family. Three years ago, he and wife Camille and infant daughter Marissa were out exploring when they happened onto the groundbreaking of the Audubon Center. "We just jumped right in and starting digging and planting," Perez says. "We've been volunteering ever since."

Perez has been helping out with the reptile census and trail restoration while his wife has been volunteering for special children's events.

"I hope this center brings this community closer together," he says. "It's peaceful here. It's a piece of serenity surrounded by a noisy city."

Brenda Rees can be contacted at weekend@latimes.com.

Family Festival

Where: Audubon Nature Center at Ernest E. Debs Regional Park, 4700 N. Griffin Ave., L.A.

When: Saturday, 1-4 p.m.

Info: (323) 221-2255

Note: Until construction is complete, the center will be open only on weekends, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

SIDEBAR

Wildlife in the park

With 137 species of birds, Ernest E. Debs Regional Park in East Los Angeles is also home to a variety of reptiles, amphibians, fish, mammals and butterflies — some native and others that have been introduced into the area. Here's a partial list of the creatures that can be found in and around the new Audubon Center.

Birds

- Red-tail hawk
- American kestrel
- Barn owl
- White-throated swift
- Downy woodpecker
- Black phoebe
- Cassin's kingbird
- Bewick's wren
- Blue-gray gnatcatcher
- Brewer's blackbird
- Lesser goldfinch

Reptiles

- Western fence-lizard
- Western skink
- Southern alligator lizard
- Ringneck snake

Amphibians

- Western toad
- Black-bellied slender-salamander

Fish

- Largemouth bass
- Bluegill
- Black bullhead

Mammals

- Virginia opossum
- Raccoon
- Coyote
- Striped skunk
- Botta's pocket gopher
- Eastern fox-squirrel
- California harvest mouse
- Broad-handed mole
- Audubon's cottontail