CITIZEN NATURALISTS FLOCK TOGETHER
Richard Louv
Columnist, The San Diego Union-Tribune—February 8, 2005

In a collection room of San Diego Natural History Museum, slim drawers hold neat rows of exquisite birds, their smooth feathers iridescent in late afternoon light.

Some of these creatures can no longer be found in our region. Their tags, scrawled in archaic penmanship, read: 1882, 1890, 1922. A wren collected in the nineteenth century appears as fresh as another preserved in 1959. They sleep in these drawers as if they flew hard against a window pane only yesterday. Such collections were once common, often assembled by amateur scientists. In fact, when the first birds were collected for the museum, that word -- amateur -- had more status, because most scientists then were amateurs.

In recent decades, however, basic natural history has faded from our schools, from science, and from daily life. But, just in time, a citizen naturalist movement may yet revive natural history - and with it, the idea that we cannot value what we cannot name.

Case in point: The San Diego Natural History Museum has just published a gargantuan hardback book -- well, you could call it a book, it's more like a small house -- called San Diego County Bird Atlas. The significance of this book, sold for $80 a copy at the museum, is magnified by the fact that the San Diego region, blessed by a wide variety of geographies and micro-climates, offers habitat to more bird species than any other county in the United States - including Hawaii and Alaska. To compile the atlas, the museum staff organized some 400 volunteers - most of them amateur scientists ranging from teen-agers to octogenarians.

For eight years, these San Diegans painstakingly recorded bird activity in the county, collecting statistics, rather than carcasses. The result: this five-pound tome, the biggest regional bird atlas of its kind in the nation, one that will serve as a Southern California benchmark for decades, perhaps centuries. Its chief compiler and author, Phil Unitt, a museum ornithologist and a lifelong San Diegan, worries that the atlas may be the last of its kind. "Twenty or fifty years from now, will there be enough people with the interest and skills necessary to replicate this atlas?" he asks.

Unitt is not the only scientist worried about such things. Paul Dayton, a world-renowned oceanographer at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla warns about what he calls "the death of natural history" in public schools and universities.

Such skills have been fading in other countries, too. In 2003, a British House of Lords Select Committee report that year painted "a gloomy picture of our chronic shortage of skilled naturalists and taxonomists," according to the BBC. The report noted that the average age of amateur naturalists is rising, undermining Britain's long tradition of amateur field studies.

Last month, in response, the BBC launched an unprecedented project called Springwatch, inviting viewers and listeners to help map climate changes of the British Isles: "Focusing on six key signs that spring has arrived, the BBC will collect data sent in by the public and use it to create its first televised seasonal event -- a comprehensive study of a British spring." Participants are encouraged to record their findings online at www.bbc.co.uk/springwatch. In May, the BBC will examine viewers' discoveries.
Meanwhile, a Springwatch partner, the Woodland Trust, the UK’s leading woodland conservation charity, is working hard to expand its network of 11,000 registered nature "recorders."

Some U.S. conservation and nature-education organizations are moving in a similar direction. For example, the California Academy of Sciences organized the Bay Area Ant Survey, recruiting citizen naturalists to help document more than 100 distinct types of ant species in the 11-county Bay Area. On a larger scale, the National Wildlife Federation, with over 4 million members, is expanding its efforts to train young people to become NWF-certified citizen naturalists.

Citizen naturalists are especially valuable in a region like San Diego, a hot zone physically larger and more biologically diverse than Yellowstone National Park, Jamaica, Lebanon, or the big island of Hawaii.

Fortuitously, volunteers helped compile the San Diego Bird Atlas before last year's great firestorms, which burned 20 percent of the county’s land surface, possibly wiping out entire bird populations. The volunteers expanded our knowledge of the nearly 500 species of birds that live, vacation or loiter here, from geographically-confused parrots to a bushtit that builds its nest from spider webs. They detected changes in bird ranges, and discovered a few avian species not previously known to live in the county. Unitt calls these citizen naturalists the book's backbone, its spine.

The term citizen naturalist does have an attractive ring. To be a citizen naturalist suggests a more hands-on, grassroots connection to one's home turf. This approach gives joy and catastrophe equal billing. "Our focus isn't only on endangered species, but on all the other birds that live around us," says Unitt. In short, he wants to keep common birds common -- iridescent in late afternoon light, and alive.

Louv's column appears on Tuesdays. He can be reached by email at rlouv@cts.com. He is the author of "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder" (Algonquin). For more information go to www.thefuturesedge.com.