



Nico the Gnatcatcher
and the

Upside Down River



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“The face of the river, in time, became a wonderful book . . . which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it had uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day.”

~ Mark Twain







In a nest near Julian lived a family of California gnatcatcher birds. There was a mommy gnatcatcher, a daddy gnatcatcher, and newborn Nico.



These gnatcatchers were very happy. They lived in a nest hidden in a bush, next to a big river.



Then one cloudy day they heard the frightening sound of a chainsaw. Vroooooooooo Vroooooooooo.



"Oh no," Mommy gnatcatcher cried, "Danger is near! Stay in the nest, Nico!"

"Timber!" yelled a voice. Then a moment later a nearby tree fell.



"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" yelled Mommy, Daddy, and Nico.



Nico fell into the river but to his surprise he did not drown. When he looked down he saw that he was floating on an oak leaf. It was rushing down the river.





"Mommy, Daddy! Where are you?" He began to cry. He looked around and could not see them anywhere.

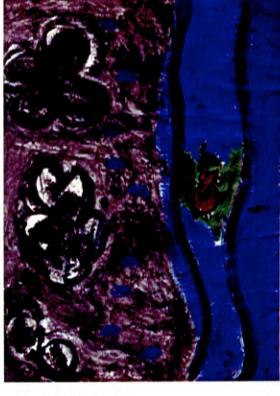
He realized that he could not get off his leaf, for he didn't know how to swim or fly because he was only three days old. His oak leaf twirled in the terrible current, and Nico felt very frightened.

Splash! As Nico sat, terrified, it started to rain. More raindrops started to fall. The sky grew darker and river water soaked through Nico's layers of feathers.

Nico tried to hold back tears, but he couldn't. He had lost his family, he was all alone and cold, and he couldn't hold back his tears. Everything was going horribly. He eventually cried himself to sleep.

When Nico woke up, the rain had stopped. It was nice and dry now. However, the current was picking up. He knew instinctively that he had to get out of the river water to survive. He looked for something to hop onto – a branch or a rock.

Suddenly a long pink thing darted out in front of him. Nico thought, "Maybe this will take me to land!" So he jumped on the pink thing. It felt sticky!





"He.. yu ge oh ma ptong..." an Arroyo Toad croaked.

"Oh my goodness," said Nico. He realized that he had been standing on this creature's tongue. Nico stepped off of the sticky pink tongue but left a feather behind. Nico looked up at the Arroyo Toad.

"Hello, little fella! What are you doing here all alone, without your family?"

"I am lost. I don't know where my parents are. There was a loud sound, and then the giant tree that stood behind our nest fell down and knocked me into the water," Nico answered sadly.

"Well, I'll help you then. My name is Tim the Arroyo Toad, and I am an endangered species!"

"My parents say that we are an endangered species too, but they've never told me what that is."

"An endangered species is a plant or animal that is close to dying out. This means that there are very few left in the world and they are in danger of disappearing forever."

"How could that happen?"
"Many ways. Habitat loss. Food loss. Pollution."

Nico looked around at their surroundings. He saw wild shrubs and tree covered mountains. "This looks like a nice place to live. I don't see any pollution here. Where are we?"

"We're in the Cleveland National Forest," said Tim the Arroyo Toad with his chest puffed proudly.

"It seems very safe here," sighed Nico.

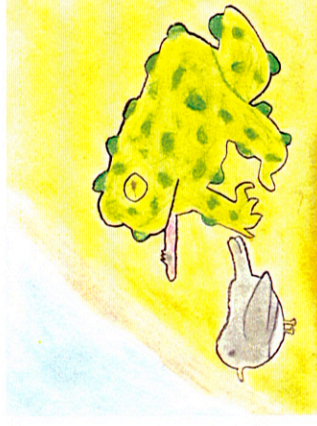
"Thank goodness!" A new voice, small and silvery, rang out.

A beautiful Pygmy Blue butterfly landed on a shrub near where Nico stood.

"Gentle humans once lived here in this forest. Several tribes shared the territory – Kumeyaay, Luisenos, Cahuilla and Cupeo. They loved the land, and lived lightly upon it, eating acorns and wild game."

"Hello, Azura!" Tim smiled.

"What happened to the gentle humans?" asked Nico. "Are they still here today?"





"Their children's children are still here today, but they no longer live in the forest. Now, they live in modern houses in cities and towns."

"Don't they miss the trees and river?"
"I don't know, Nico. Perhaps they do."

After Nico talked with Tim and Azura, his new friends could tell that he was very tired.

"Nico, you have had a long journey. Would you like to stay with us for a while?" asked Tim.

"Thank you, but I want to keep going. I need to find my family. I just don't know where to start."

"I think I know a creature who can help you. Follow the river until you reach a reservoir. There you will meet a catfish named Whiskers. She will help you."

"What is a reservoir?"

"Well Nico, a reservoir is a natural or artificial pond or lake used to store water so that humans can use it."

"If the water is for humans, why does your friend Whiskers live there?"

"Whiskers is just one of many catfish and bass that have been placed in the reservoir to fish. Someday, she may provide dinner for a human or another large predator!"

"You mean they'll kill her?"
"Sadly, yes."

"Oh no! Then I had better hurry to speak with her, before something happens. I have to find my parents. Thank you, Tim! Goodbye, Azura!"

"Good luck, Nico!" With that, Nico was on his way.

Nico hopped onto another leaf floating by and started to travel down the river again. As he floated, he passed several smaller creeks.

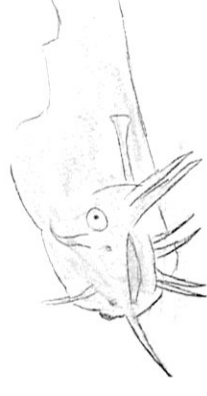
He also spotted many small animals near the banks of the river.

Finally, he arrived at the El Capitan Reservoir. It was very large, and looked to Nico like an endless pond.

Nico hopped to the edge of the reservoir and chirped loudly. "Excuse me, I'm looking for a Channel catfish named Whiskers! Can anyone help me?"

Suddenly the waters parted in front of Nico. A large brownish grey spotted fish rose from the water, revealing its lighter colored belly.

The first thing Nico noticed about this fish were long thick whiskers hanging from the sides of its mouth.





"Are you looking for me?" the mustachioed creature asked.

"Yes, I think so. Is your name Whiskers?"

"It is. Can I help you..."

"I'm Nico. Your friend Tim the Arroyo Toad sent me here to ask you for advice about how to find my family. There was a loud sound, and then the giant tree that stood behind our nest fell down and knocked me into the water. Have you seen my parents?" Nico asked hopefully.

"No, I'm sorry. I've never met your parents. I spend more time with fish than gnatcatchers. I am hardly ever out of the depths of the reservoir."

"Oh," said Nico disappointedly. "Is it deep down there?"

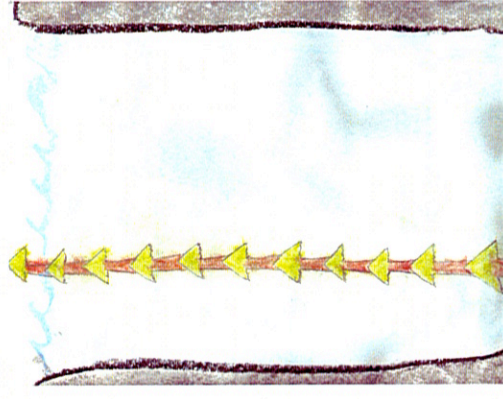
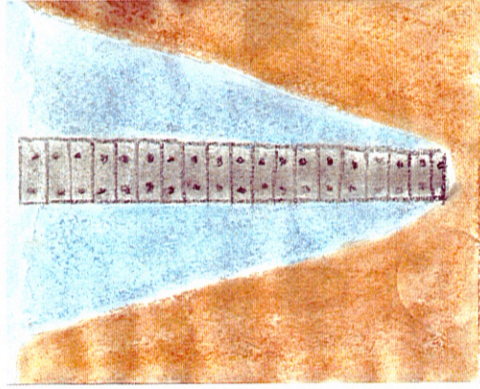
"Well, it's deep enough to fit a nineteen story human building!"

"Wow! How big is that?" asked Nico.

"Imagine fifteen tall trees stacked on top of each other."

"That's really deep! How do you know all of this?"

"I've heard about it from the other fish. Sometimes we tell each other the story of our spirit friends beneath the water."





"Spirit friends? Who are they?"

"Well, I've heard that at the bottom of the El Capitan Reservoir, you can find the homes of the ancient Kumeyaay Indians that once lived in this valley."

"Tim and Azura told me about the Kumeyaay. Aren't they the gentle humans who lived in the Cleveland National Forest?"

"Yes, Nico. They also lived and farmed where our Reservoir is today."

"But how did they live underwater?"

"They didn't. You see, where this reservoir stands was once a village."

"What happened to it?"

"That is an interesting story! A long time ago in the year 1934, when my grandfather's grandfather was just a small catfish, the city of San Diego needed to find a way to store water for all of its people.

The Kumeyaay people lived in the perfect spot to store this water! So, a special act of Congress was passed.

The United States government asked the Kumeyaay to leave their Capitan Grande Reservation.

They were given money to buy other lands, including what are now known as the Barona and Viejas Reservations!

Tribal members had to rebuild their homes, schools, farms and everything else that is now covered by the water of the El Capitan Reservoir."

"Gosh, that sounds like a lot of work, Whiskers!"

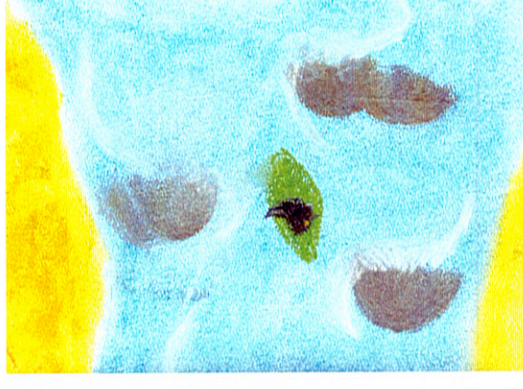
"Yes, Nico. I'm sure it took a lot of work to rebuild their villages. However, the Kumeyaay people are strong and brave. They made the most out of this challenge, and are now very successful!"

"That was a good story," said Nico. "I wish I could stay and talk with you longer, but it is getting dark again and I must keep trying to find my family."

"Alright. I will tell my friends around this reservoir to look for your parents."

"Thanks, Whiskers! See you later!"

"Goodbye, little friend. As you are floating through the reservoir, watch out for the rapids and the big pipe that siphons off the water! Make sure that you don't get caught in the rough waters that flow out to be treated at the La Mesa Water Treatment facility!"



Nico hopped on a branch and floated through the reservoir. He kept his eyes peeled for the rapids and the pipe that Whiskers had warned him about.

When the water got choppy and the rapids came into view, Nico made sure that he stayed on the left side of the river so that he would not go through the water treatment facility.

"Wahoo!!! I made it!" Nico floated until the river water began to disappear. For a while, there was only a small amount of water. After a few hours, though, the river grew full again and his branch traveled more quickly.

Nico looked around. He saw more human buildings in this new area. Then, he saw something hop closer to the river.

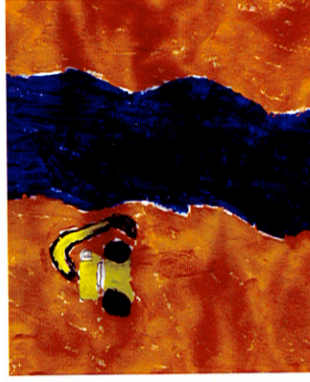
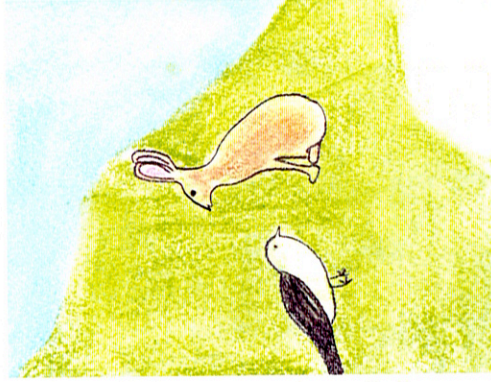
"Whoa, what is that big furry thing hopping around?"

The big furry creature was actually a black-tailed jackrabbit. Nico decided to ask the jackrabbit for directions. He steered his branch over to the riverbank.

"Hello, who are you?" Nico asked.

"My name is Fufu. I am a black-tailed jackrabbit."

"Hi! I'm Nico. Can you tell me where I am?"



"This is Lakeside. It is my home!" Fufu said proudly. "We're known around these parts for our great sand!"

"Sand?" asked Nico. "What do you mean?"

"Sand is a very important part of local construction! Sand and gravel are used to construct roads and buildings." Fufu looked around the sides of the river. "Our sand in Lakeside has been used to build much of the city of San Diego!"

"I didn't know that," said Nico. "The river must like being helpful!"

"I'm sure that she does. The humans have to work very hard though, because mining sand is not easy. If they don't mine the sand correctly, it can sometimes really hurt the river."

"What do you mean?" asked Nico.

"Well, when there is too much in-stream sand and gravel mining, the stream bottom is lowered. That can cause the river banks to erode. When there isn't enough sand in the stream bed, the river and its estuary get deeper, and the river mouth widens."

"Is that a problem?"

"It can sometimes be a problem, because when the water mouth widens, salt water from the nearby sea gets into the river bed.

When the ocean tide comes in, it comes further into the river. When the tide pulls back, it takes sand from the streambed.

All of this can damage aquatic and riparian habitat. It can also hurt human structures like bridges. This means that it is important for the river, plants, animals and humans to make sure that sand mining is done correctly."

"Oh! Well, how is everything going around here?"

"Just fine! There aren't too many sand mines in Lakeside any more, and most mine operators are really careful. This part of the river has a lot of potential to be a great place for creatures like you and I to live in!"

Nico told Fufu why he had come to Lakeside, but Fufu had not seen his parents.

"You know," said Fufu, "Your parents may have gone to the Santee Nature Preserve! My friends tell me that it is a great place. I've been thinking of checking it out, myself."

"Okay, I'll try that. Thanks!" Nico said.

"Goodbye Nico, it was nice to meet you. I hope to see you again someday."

"Thanks for teaching me about sand mining!" chirped Nico.

He found a leaf, pushed it into the water, and floated downstream once again.

After a while, he saw a beautiful clearing ahead with many trees and shrubs. "What a great place," he thought. "I'll bet that is the preserve Fufu told me about!"

As Nico floated down the river, he noticed a powerful looking bird with beautiful reddish feathers. When the bird saw him, it dove down and landed at his side.

"Hello! Who are you?" asked Nico.

"I'm Rory, the Red-Tailed Hawk."

"Oh! I'm Nico the Gnatcatcher!"

"Well Nico, you're on my turf now. Welcome to the Santee Preserve."

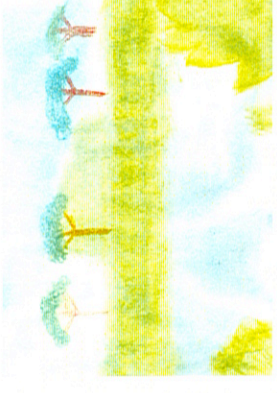
"Thanks!" Nico looked around. "That's really nice of you."

"I'm not always nice," smirked Rory.

"You're lucky that I've already eaten lunch, or I would have attacked you by now."

"Me? I'm a bird, just like you!"

"Hawks make short work of tiny balls of fluff like you, Nico. When I'm hunting in my preserve, I don't have time for feelings."



"Is this your preserve?" asked Nico, changing the subject quickly. "It's beautiful!"

"Well technically, the land doesn't belong to me. My home is the property of the government.

Humans purchased it to create a place where both the San Diego River and the animals that live near it could be safe and not have to worry about pollution and other things that could hurt us."

"But don't get me wrong," said Rory, flapping his wings impressively. "I run this place. I'm in charge here."

"Wow, you seem to know a lot. Do you think you could teach me a thing or two?" Rory puffed out his chest. "Of course. What would you like to know?"

"Well," whispered Nico, embarrassed, "Could you teach me how to fly?"

"You mean you don't know how to fly?"

"Yeah," said Nico softly.

Rory looked at him closely for a moment, and then boomed, "Of course I can teach you. In fact, I have taught many of my own children to fly. It is one of my hobbies. When would you like to start?" "How about now?"



So Rory took Nico to the top of a tall tree. Just when he least expected it, Rory pushed Nico off of his branch. "Hey!" called Nico, as he fell.

"Use your wings!" shouted Rory.

Nico flapped his wings up and down like he had seen the other birds do. He knew that he had to fly or he would hit the ground after a long drop. When he plopped on the ground, Rory carried him right back up to the top of the tree.

"Again!" commanded Rory, pushing Nico off the branch once more. This continued all afternoon. By the end of that day, Nico's tail feathers were bruised but he could fly pretty well.

The next day while Nico was practicing flying throughout the Santee Preserve, an amazing thing happened. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a very familiar looking face. As he flew toward it, he realized that it was a fellow California Gnatcatcher. This wasn't just any Gnatcatcher, though. It happened to be a very good-looking female gnatcatcher!

Nico flew straight down toward the female gnatcatcher, thinking of what to say. Finally, he got to her and introduced himself as Nico. She responded, "I'm Natalie." Nico and Natalie flew around, chirping and chirping and chirping.



"Yes, they've made a lot of progress around here! My mother told me that a long time ago, in 1984, nice humans decided to clean up this area and make it a paradise for wild creatures and plants. First, they created Mast Park, where we are flying now."

"Wow, it's really big!"

"Yes, Mast Park is 45 full acres!" agreed Natalie. "Since then, a lot of other great things have happened.

As portions of the local sand mine have closed, humans have reclaimed a lot of land where they have planted native kinds of vegetation. The humans have even made their walking trails and paths far away from our nesting areas!"

"It seems like you have a great life here," said Nico.

"I do!"

Nico and Natalie flew around Mast Park for hours. When they got tired, they returned to her nest. She asked him to stay for something to eat.

"I wish I could stay with you but I am on a mission to find my family. I will try to come back and see you again another time!"



Nico continued his journey downstream. As he flew, he began to feel the effects of the long week that he'd had. He realized that he was growing tired and needed to find a place to rest.

Nico landed on top of a sign that read "Mission Trails Regional Park: Site of the Old Mission Dam." Hopping down to the ground, he began to hunt for insects. Suddenly, he heard a strange rattling sound. "Sssssssssssssssssss nice of you to drop by....."

Nico turned to see a big rattlesnake. Petrified, he stared into the deep green eyes of the snake as it slowly advanced on him. Nico stood frozen, unable to move.

"Watch out!" A grayish figure ran out from the nearby grasses and charged toward Nico, hitting him and tossing him into the tall grasses away from the snake.

The snake paused for a moment, as though considering whether to pursue him. Then, it quietly glided down the hill, in search of bigger prey.

Shaken, Nico looked at his attacker. To his surprise, it was a little gray mouse.

"Who are you?" asked Nico.
"I'm Marty," said the mouse.

"What was that thing?" asked Nico.
 "That was a rattlesnake! You have to be careful. Snakes are dangerous!" Marty said.

"Why do you live here, then?" Nico asked.
 "Well first off, this is where I was raised. Secondly, this is nature."

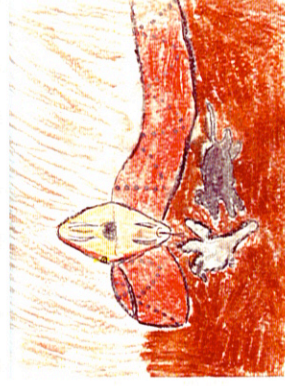
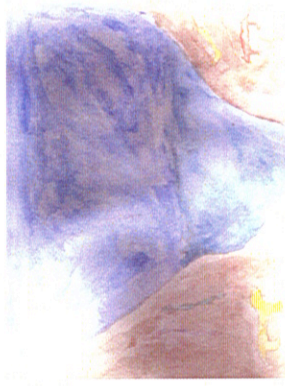
"So you don't mind if you get eaten?"
 "Someday my time may come, but that will be alright. If that happens, it will be nature's way of making a balance," Marty answered.

"Are there a lot of snakes around here?" asked Nico.

"Yes, I think there are. The white mice and rats say that Southern Pacific and Southwestern Speckled rattlesnakes breed in Mission Trails Regional Park. It's a great place to live for a lot of reasons, only one of which is that we are pretty close right now to the reservoir at Lake Murray.

A lot of different creatures live around here, including higher-level predators like bobcats, cougars, foxes, coyotes and snakes. Having the snake here is actually a sign that this area is a healthy habitat capable of sustaining wildlife."

"I just came from another reservoir," said Nico. "I have a catfish friend named Whiskers who lives in the El Capitan Reservoir!"



"Really? We have a lot of fish in our reservoir as well! Last I heard, we had large mouth bass, bluegill and trout as well as catfish. From what I've heard though, Lake Murray isn't as big as El Capitan. Our reservoir is only 95 feet deep."

"Sssssssssssssssssssssss sounds deep to me."
 "Oh no!" squeaked Marty. "That snake is back! Fly, Nico! Fly!" Marty darted off into the nearby chaparral.

"Okay!" Nico took off.

"Sssssshucks!" said the snake as he rattled on his way.

"I'm alive! I'm out of the predator region! Yippee!" Nico yelled to the world as he was flying. Nico looked down and saw big eyes in a black mask looking up at him.

He decided to land and ask for directions. Once Nico landed, the masked animal came up to him. "Hello, I'm Rocky. I'm a ring-tailed raccoon!"

"Wow, I've never met a raccoon before! I'm Nico!"

"Well, Nico, I'm on my way downstream right now to catch some crayfish for my dinner. Why don't you join me?"

"Okay!" Nico hopped on Rocky's shoulder.

Rocky and Nico made their way toward Mission Valley. Nico noticed that the smell of the river had grown a lot stronger, and that there were a lot of small green plants on top of the river water.

"Rocky, what is all of that green stuff in the water?"

"That is algae, Nico."

"What is algae?"

"Algae are very small plants without true stems, roots or leaves. They usually live in the water, need light to grow, and contain chlorophyll. Fish and other small aquatic animals eat them."

"Algae can be good. They produce oxygen during sunlight hours, and use oxygen during the night hours. However, there should not be that much algae in the river water. When too much algae grows, it can be a real problem for water sources like the San Diego River."

"I didn't know that," said Nico. "Doesn't Nature make a balance? My friend Marty was telling me about that when I was visiting Mission Trails Regional Park!"

"Nature does make a balance, but sometimes humans can throw that balance out of whack," explained Rocky. "Here in Mission Valley, we have a big human meadow that humans play in called a 'golf course'."



When it rains, nutrients from the golf course and trash, concrete, dirt, chemicals and wood from local construction sites occasionally run into the river. Also, humans sometime forget to throw away their trash in the right places and so it washes into the river as well!"

"The golf course is so much like a meadow and it looks so pretty though! I see a lot of grass and trees over there! How could its nutrients hurt the river water?" asked Nico. "I don't understand."

"Well, Nico, if too much fertilizer is used on the grass to keep it green year-round, when it rains, the extra fertilizer goes into the river, and this creates algae. The algae plants grow too thickly on the top of the water, and the aquatic life below dies from lack of sunlight."

"Oh no! That's awful! Why don't the humans stop using fertilizer?"

"Fertilizer itself is not always a bad thing. It's only bad when too much of it is used. I think that most humans probably don't know exactly how much fertilizer to use on their land. The river doesn't know how to tell them. Even though she speaks softly to animals, I don't think that humans are able to understand her language. I'll bet that if they knew, they would stop," said Rocky.

"Besides," continued Rocky, "Humans aren't the only reason why algae blooms in the river! Forest fires can also cause the soil to be so rich in carbon that when it runs into the river, there are massive algae blooms which make the river water smell and taste very bad."

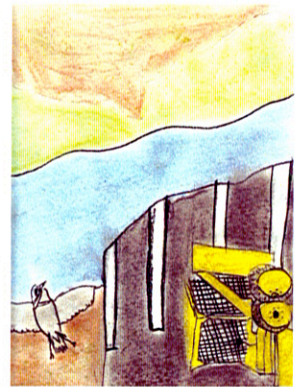
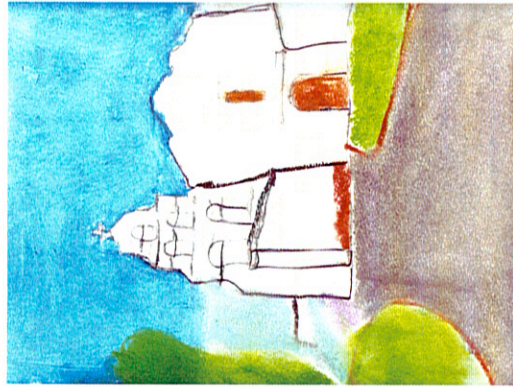
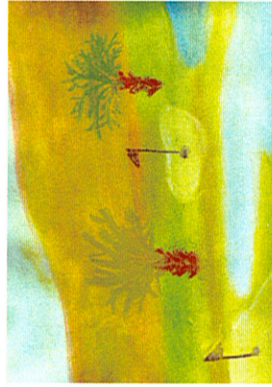
"Gosh," said Nico. "You know so much about the river! Are there any other stories that I should know?"

"I'm headed downstream. If you want to fly alongside me for a while, I will tell you the story of the Upside Down River."

"That sounds great," said Nico. "I could use a good story to cheer me up."

"The story of the Upside Down River is a fun one to tell," began Rocky. "A man named Juan Crespi came to this area long ago to build a mission with Spanish settlers, and he stumbled across our river. Most folks don't know that he actually almost fell into the river. He got his feet wet!

When he found the San Diego River, Juan wrote in his diary that the river was very useful. Ships were using it as watering station, and he himself used it to bathe in! When summer came, though, Juan and all of the people he knew watched the water just leave!



They were amazed! They couldn't figure out where the water had gone! Then somebody found out that if they dug down a couple of feet in the river bed, they could still find water.

That's why he named it the Upside Down River! During most of the warmer months, our river flows with the sand on top and the water below the ground!"

"Wow, so that's why the water in the river started to go away after I left the El Capitan Reservoir!" Nico realized. "I wondered what was happening."

Nico noticed that Rocky the raccoon had stopped in his tracks.

"I can't go any further with you today, Nico. I really hope you find your parents. If you decide to take a break from flying, though, try to land between those things."

Rocky pointed between the trees to a section of ground with orange traffic cones spread around.

"What are they?" Nico asked.

"Don't worry, they are just traffic cones. They tell humans not to walk or drive in that area. Watch out for big yellow machines though. I think you'll be okay, since normally they are not there until after dark."

"Vrooom! Vrooom!" A tractor-like machine rumbled in front of Nico. He froze, frightened in every possible way.

Nico began to remember his parents' nest, and the buzz of the chainsaw. "Go away!" he chirped at the tractor. "You are ruining my dinner with your noise!"

Nico watched in sorrow as humans began to pave over the side of the river bank. "I guess I am the one that must go away instead."

Just then, Nico heard a new sound. "Errff! Errff!" He turned around to see what was coming. A dark brown puppy bounced up through the bushes.

"Errff!!" squealed the puppy. "Have you seen my tree?"

"Your tree?"

"Yeah. My human and I are homeless, we have no home. So, I like to spend time at my tree. I was hunting for some dinner, though, and I can't find my way back!"

"We have a lot in common," said Nico. "I am lost, and I can't find my family."

"Well, if you can help me find my tree, I will try to help you, too," said the puppy.

"Okay."

As they looked for his tree, Buddy the puppy showed Nico around the river a little more, taking him under the freeway bridges.

They saw brightly painted graffiti art and a lot of human trash. It was very noisy down there, and Nico's head began to ache. He wanted to get away from this part of the river.

"Hey, Buddy, can we go over there? I'm thirsty and I see some clean looking water on that side of the street!"

"Sure, Nico. Crossing the road can be pretty dangerous, though. I don't usually do it without my human, especially in the dark. I'll go first, and you can fly over once I'm across," the puppy answered.

"Ok!" Nico said excitedly. After all, it would be his first time flying over a street full of the human driving machines called cars. Nico saw cars zoom by the puppy, barely missing him.

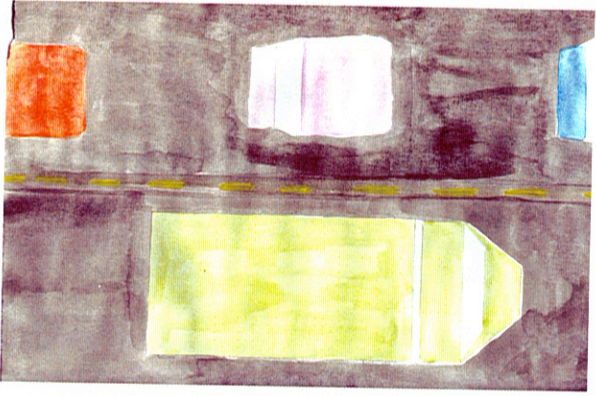
Suddenly, he heard a loud yelp. He looked back at the street and didn't see his friend.

"Buddy? Are you there?" he chirped. There was no response.

"Buddy!" Nico stood alone by the side of the street, wondering what could have happened to the puppy.







He had a sick feeling in his small stomach, and suddenly he wished to get as far away from Mission Valley and all of the human driving machines as he possibly could.

Flapping his wings, he rose into the air and began to fly.

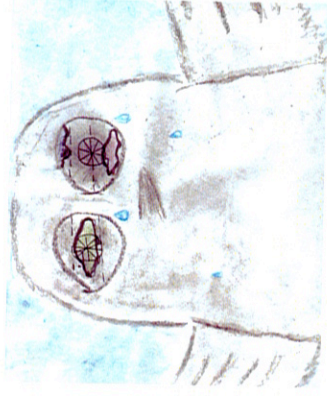
Nico's heart raced as he flew as fast as he could away from Mission Valley. He wanted to find his mother. He knew that she could explain what had happened to Buddy.

He flew until the sun began to rise. Exhausted and out of breath, Nico looked for the nearest place to land in safety. When he touched down, though, he realized immediately that something was wrong. "Agg! That hurt! And now I can't move my foot!"

Trembling and chirping rapidly, Nico tried to get up and fly away. It was of no use, though. He had somehow caught his foot in human fishing line.

"Awawawawww," Nico chirped. "Can anybody hear me? HELP!"

"My goodness, what's all of this racket about?" asked a female voice. "You're ruining my peace and quiet! I'm trying to hatch these eggs, and you're going to frighten them to death!"



"My goodness, what's all of this racket about?" asked a female voice. "You're ruining my peace and quiet! I'm trying to hatch these eggs, and you're going to frighten them to death!"

Nico looked around to see who was talking to him. He saw a long necked, short legged brown bird sitting on her nest a few feet away.

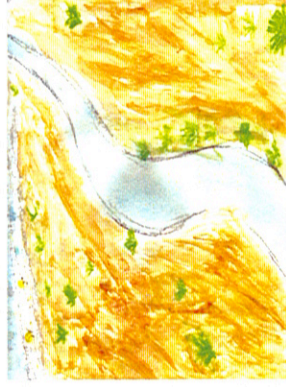
"Sorry," said Nico. "I'm stuck in this fishing wire."

"Oh dear," said the bird. "As you can see, I am not much help to you right now. I cannot leave my nest because I am trying to hatch these eggs. It is very important for me to do so, as the future of my species depends upon their survival. We are highly endangered, you see!"

"I understand," said Nico sadly.

"Don't worry," said the bird. "I will think of something. I'm a California Clapper Rail, after all. We're tough and smart. I've already survived years of being hunted for sport and also poisoned by my arch enemy, the horse-ribbed mussel."

"Thanks. My name is Nico. I got lost, and I've been trying to find my parents for a long time now. I don't feel very tough or smart."



"Nonsense," snapped the Clapper Rail. Then she chirped more nicely, "I'm Clementine."

"It's nice to meet you, Clementine. Thank you for trying to help me."

Nico waited patiently. He didn't want to bother Clementine while she was thinking, so he looked at her nest. It was hidden among pickleweed and cord grass.

As he watched Clementine sitting on her nest, Nico thought about his own endangered mother. He began to weep silently. "What's wrong?" snapped Clementine.

"I miss my mother. I am trapped here and I may never see her again."

"Well I can tell you one thing," chirped Clementine, "If you do get free, you've got to turn around! From what you've told me, you're heading the wrong way! There are no tall trees around the estuary that would fall on bushes. You need to head back east, toward the mountains! Your parents are probably waiting for you at your old nest!"

As a parent myself, I know that I would never leave my eggs or hatchlings. I think your mother is waiting for you at your own nest."

Clementine stretched her neck a bit, settled down on her eggs, and sat quietly. Suddenly, she screeched: "Nico! I've got it!!!"

My friend Blue might be able to pull some strings to get you out of here. He's a fairly important creature around the estuary. Famous."

"Do you think he would help me?" snuffled Nico.

"Why don't we ask him?" Clementine chirped. "He's landing a few feet away from you right now!"

At that moment, a large blue heron landed near Clementine. After exchanging a few whispered words with her, Blue hopped over to where Nico was caught. Blue bent down and spoke in a low voice, so that Nico wouldn't be frightened.

"Don't worry, little one – everything is going to be okay."

The giant blue heron spread his wings wide. Nico was amazed. Blue's wingspan stretched for nearly six feet!

Then, with his beak and majestic wings, Blue pointed toward Nico and stood very still.



"What are you doing, Blue?"

"Didn't you hear all of that noise a little while ago? There are humans here at the river, bird watching. I'm trying to get their attention!"

"Humans! Will they help me?"

"Yes, Nico. Most humans on our planet are good and kind, and want to do the right thing for animals and the environment.

Besides, these are small humans, still just hatchlings. They will help you, I feel sure of it."

Blue continued to point his wings toward little Nico, who stood up as tall as he could with his leg caught in the fishing wire.

The group of birdwatchers were actually some students on a field trip. Two scientists named River Rob and Jim were teaching them about the ecology of the San Diego River.

"Hey, look at that big blue bird!" a student yelled.

"That bird is called a Blue Heron," said Jim. "Blue Herons like to eat fish and can fly up to twenty-three miles per hour," added River Rob.

"Wow!" said the students.

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"Hey look! There is a really small bird next to the Heron," said a student, looking through his binoculars.

"Why yes, that looks like a California Gnatcatcher," said Jim.

The students studied the gnatcatcher with their binoculars. Suddenly one of the boys yelled out, "That gnatcatcher is caught in a fishing line!"

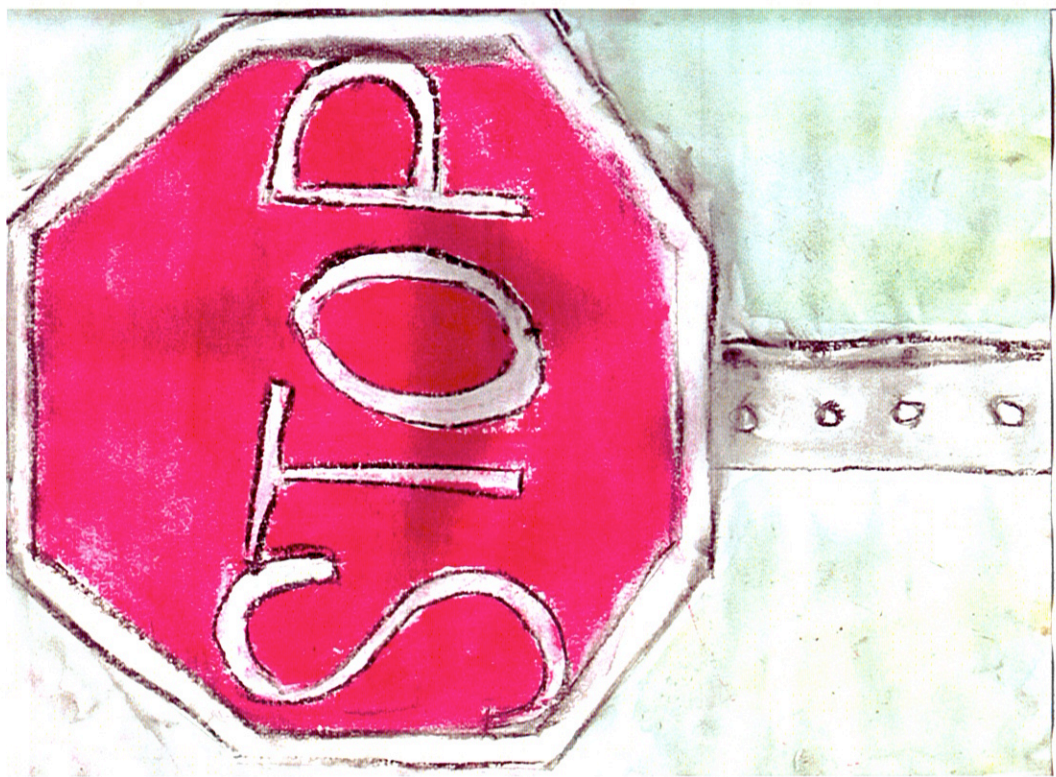
"Oh, the poor thing!"
"We've got to help it!"
"I'm going to set it free!"

The students rushed out to help the little California gnatcatcher.
"WAIT!"

They slowed down and turned around. A girl from their class was trying to get their attention. "Don't forget that a California gnatcatcher is an endangered species! No-one is allowed to touch it unless they are a trained professional! We should call Animal Rescue!"

"She's right! Where is River Rob? He has been trained to help endangered species!"

"I'm on my way." River Rob walked quickly through the river bed, stepping carefully so that he would not kill any native plants or crush any small animals or insects.





River Rob approached Nico, and gently unfangled him from the fishing line. Nico rested in his hand, trembling to be so close to a human. He wobbled on his good leg for a moment.

"It's okay, little fella! You're free!" Rob smiled.

Nico began to flap his wings, and soon he was in the air again. He looked for Blue and Clementine, but they had disappeared once the humans came to rescue him. Nico wished that he could thank Blue, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Where do you think the little gnatcatcher will go?" one of the students asked.

"I don't know Alexander," River Rob answered. "Maybe he has a nest somewhere."

"Maybe he has a family!"

Nico decided to take Clementine's advice and head back up the river. On his way, he saw the sun setting over Dog Beach. It was beautiful! The sky was filled with oranges, pinks, purples and blues.

For one brief moment, Nico wondered whether he should remain at the estuary with his new friends Clementine and Blue. Even though Clementine was sort of bossy, she was also really nice.



He thought about the school children who had rescued him, and kind River Rob.

When he remembered Clementine's nest, though, he thought about his own parents. "I have to see if they are still alive," he thought. "I miss them so much." Nico continued to fly east over the Upside Down River.

Circling over Santee, Nico searched and searched for Natalie. After awhile, he started to grow weary, not only from his search, but also from the strain of his entire journey.

Nico hit a rough air pocket, and began to fall, straight out of the sky.

He landed in a heap of leaves. Hours and hours later he woke up with Natalie's beautiful gnatcatcher face in front of him.

"What happened?" Natalie panicked.

"Rory the Red Tailed Hawk saw you fall and let me know you were here. Thank goodness you're awake!"

"I wonder why he didn't eat me," whispered Nico. "Maybe he wasn't hungry."

"Rory talks tough, but I think he really likes you," chirped Natalie. "Thank goodness you're alright. That's all that matters."

"Yes, but I cannot stay. I actually came to see if you would join me in my search for my parents."

"Alright, Nico. That sounds like a great adventure."



Nico and Natalie soared upstream. With every flap, a different memory came to his mind. Nico soon passed over Fufu's home in Lakeside.

A short while later, he recognized the El Capitan Reservoir, but he could not see Whiskers the Catfish.

"Perhaps she is visiting the lost homes of the Kumeyaay people who once lived in that valley."

After no time at all, Nico and Natalie found themselves near the Cleveland National Forest.

Nico waved to Tim and Azura, but he didn't stop because he wanted to get home. He knew that he was almost back to where he had started his journey.

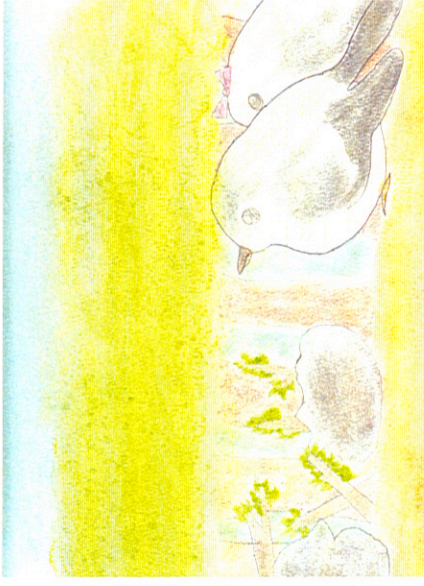
Suddenly, he spotted the pieces of his family's once cozy nest. He held back his tears and swallowed painfully, as he remembered his parents.

"Nico, what's wrong?" Natalie asked.

"There it is. Do you see that broken nest? I once lived in it with my parents," Nico said. "I'm sure we will find them. We just have to know where to look!" Natalie encouraged him.

"I hope so," continued Nico.

Just when he had lost all hope, Nico landed on the branch of an oak tree to rest. Nico sighed, forgetting for a moment his friends, adventures and even Natalie. He felt very depressed.



"Chirp!!! Chirp Chirp Chirp!!!"

"Oh my gosh, Natalie! That sounds like..." The chirping grew louder. "Nico!!! You're alive!!!"

It was his mother!!

Nico hopped around, and his heart beat wildly as he saw both of his parents fly toward him. "Mother! Father! I searched over the entire river for you!"

"Oh Nico, you've grown so much. You're flying now! We never thought we'd see you again. Where have you been, son?"



"I've traveled the entire length of our river, father. I've seen the El Capitan Reservoir, Lakeside and Santee, the Mission Trails Regional Park, Mission Valley and the estuary near Mission Bay, and I flew through a beautiful sunset down at Dog Beach!" Natalie chirped a greeting.

"Oh! Mommy, this is my new friend, Natalie. She helped me to find you."





Nico's parents sang a welcoming song to Natalie. "We are happy to meet you, Natalie."

"I'm so glad that Nico has found you at last!"

Nico's mother nuzzled his feathers. "I'm so proud of you for finding us! You are a brave little gnatcatcher, Nico. Come, now tell us about your adventure."

And so the four California gnatcatchers chirped all night as they traded their stories by the edge of the San Diego River.

Nico and Natalie lived happily ever after. They built a nest together in a bush near where Nico's parents now lived. They felt very, very happy.



How to Help the San Diego River

Helping The San Diego River

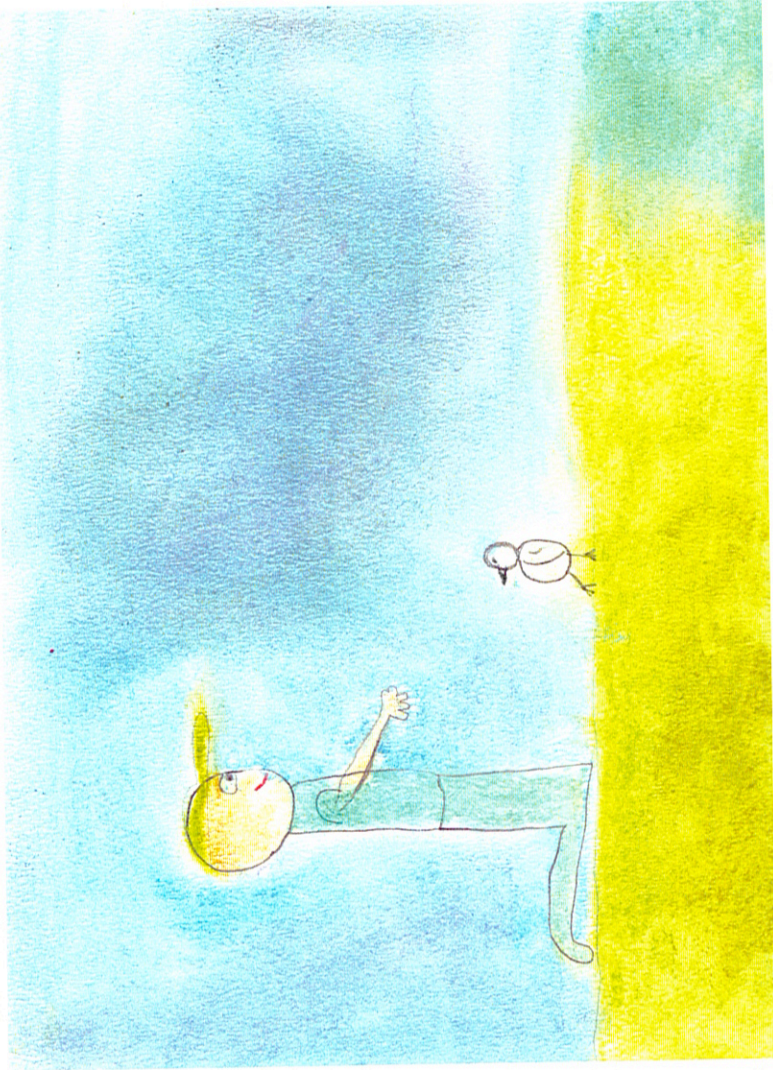
There are some incredible things about the San Diego River today. It is very majestic and quite beautiful. It plays an important role in biological diversity and wildlife movement.

However, the river still has some pollution, which can affect both animal and plant species. Here are some things that YOU can do to help make the river a great place for plants, animals and humans to enjoy:

- **volunteer to work with community organizations that protect the river**
- **clean up litter**
- **remove invasive plant species**
- **restore native plants to the region**
- **educate others about the history of the river**
- **throw your trash into cans or trash bags**
- **remind your families not to over water their lawns or gardens**



High Tech Middle Media Arts is a project-based learning environment where all students are known well and challenged to meet high expectations. As part of the growing village of High Tech High schools we show how education can be redesigned to ensure that all students graduate from high school well prepared for college, work and citizenship.



The San Diego River Park Foundation is a community-based organization endeavoring to create a 51-mile long system of parks, open spaces, and public spaces along the San Diego River for this and future generations to enjoy. SDRPF is dedicated to celebrating this historic river and promoting stewardship of its rich natural and cultural resources through volunteerism and community-focused projects.

For more information, visit www.sandiegoriver.org!



Education Foundation



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"Nico the Gnatcatcher and the Upside Down River" was researched, written and illustrated by 47 seventh grade students who attend High Tech Middle Media Arts in San Diego, California.

The purpose of our book is to bring awareness to and celebrate the San Diego River, one of Southern California's greatest natural treasures, and the rich array of flora and fauna that inhabit its watershed.

We hope you enjoy our story!

