



Cheshire Wetlands

riparian birds, raccoons and tiger salamanders
(AWWE script by Diane Hope & Rose Houk, May 2014)

Arizona Watchable Wildlife Experience
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Rose Houk: Up until the late 1950s the Rio de Flag meandered through a meadow in the Cheshire area north of Flagstaff. The Cheshire family pastured cattle and horses and built the Narrows Dam across the Rio — the dam is still there, backing up a small pond. In the 1960s, the river channel was straightened to drain the area for the housing development – turning the Rio de Flag into a less than inviting ditch and loosing of much streamside habitat.

The Flagstaff Area Stream Team stepped in and started restoring this stretch of the Rio. Long-time Cheshire resident and biologist Peter Price and his neighbors have done most of the work, along with Northern Arizona University's Tom Whitham and his students, with donations from local businesses. They've planted nearly 250 native trees and shrubs over the last 30 years – narrow leafed cottonwoods, arroyo and coyote willows, wax currants, American hop and red twig dogwood. This dedicated community effort has led to the creation of Cheshire Wetlands, an Arizona Watchable Wildlife Experience site. Now the Rio's channel looks a bit more like its pre-development state. With flow into the wetlands and the pond, more birds and other wildlife are attracted to the area. To reach the pond, go to Cheshire Park on Fremont Boulevard, park and follow the gravel path at the far edge of the park, cross a footbridge, and you'll soon come to an inviting bench and interpretive sign by the small pond (the Rio's on your left). You can also go upstream a short distance, where you'll find permanent water on both sides of Fremont.

If you sit for a while by the pond, you'll start to see things. Great blue herons, snails, beetles and black phoebes, as well as violet-green swallows use the pond in summer. And red-winged blackbirds and mallards nest here. The maturing cottonwoods also attract Bullock's orioles from late May 'til early September – these colorful birds have a black crown, nape and back, with orange to yellow head and underparts – the females are a paler streaky version without black. Acorn woodpeckers and Abert's squirrels are in the adjacent forest, along with occasional downy woodpeckers. You may also occasionally see sapsuckers in the nearby pines between the pond and the Rio canyon that begins just downstream by the Museum of Northern Arizona. There are potentially a few different species – most likely is the red-naped sapsucker - a common migrant through the area in spring and fall. In summer, broad-tailed hummingbirds arrive, followed by the more aggressive rufous hummingbirds a little later. These are just a few of the 70 some species of birds recorded here. Not bad for a small site so close to town! By mid-August, New Mexico checkermallow with its pale pink-purple flowers blooms amongst

the thick coyote willows and cattails around the pond, and bright orange rosehips have formed on the wild rose bushes.

Deer are plentiful in the area and elk can be frequent down to Fremont Boulevard. There are porcupines too – and though you may not actually see one, their signs are evident. As you walk down the trail from the pond, look up into the pines just downstream from the dam. Bare white wood high up on the trunk, stripped of bark — that’s the work of a hungry porcupine.

There are raccoons and skunks aplenty in this area too! Raccoons love the water – they probably fish for salamanders and the like along the Rio and around the pond – look for their tracks in the mud as the pond dries. Raccoon scat looks a bit like a dog’s, but it’s dark and dry with lots of insect parts. It’s often deposited in dry sites under sheds or the overhang of house roofs. On summer nights, raccoons are frequent visitors to backyards and compost piles. Wildlife biologist Tad Theimer says there’s no question that wildlife – especially raccoons and striped skunks -- have become habituated to urbanization at the Cheshire Wetlands and surrounding residential area. There’s higher densities of them here compared to the ponderosa pine forest – because there are far more den sites and a lot more food... trail cameras have shown raccoons foraging under bird feeders.

TAD THEIMER: “You’ll tend to see them in groups more often - especially in summer they will move around in family groups. So you may see two, three, four, five raccoons at a time – whereas that’s unusual with skunks - unless you see a mother with kits, skunks are almost always solitary. Raccoons tend to travel in family groups, and then separate off with brothers and sisters moving together for an extended period of time until the following year. So you will see maybe a pair of raccoons moving together for almost a year after birth – and those tend to be siblings that are travelling together. After that they become relatively solitary.”

RH: Raccoons hunt for slow moving prey like crayfish in the water -- and they like to eat fruits and greenery in the riparian area too. Still, Theimer says we don’t know a whole lot more about raccoons in Arizona, and they’re not that common here. Its encounters with another small mammal that most of us fear — and for one particular reason...

THEIMER: ...“Skunks are all about the nose and their world exists in the 4-6 feet around their nose – when you’re armed with that kind of weapon don’t have to worry looking too far away for predators. They can see probably as well as any other mammal – it’s just that their attention is directed on ground right around of their nose – and once you make a noise they’ll certainly look up and can potentially see you. I think that’s why dogs are sprayed where cats aren’t. – cats moving very quietly in the nature of cats, don’t disturb a skunk at all – the skunk never even knows the cat’s there. That’s very different from the kind of interaction they’re going to have with a dog – who will run up and suddenly appear to the skunk that’s just its just risen up out of ground. When a dog suddenly appears, two feet away, it’s not surprising that you would spray it!”

RH: The striped skunks found in Cheshire and other parts of town, will often den under people's sheds -- though you might not even know if a skunk's under your house, because they only use their repellent scent when threatened. Besides the bird seed, cat and dog food, and compost, skunks find other food in the neighborhood gardens...

THEIMER: *"They eat a lot of insects – and so they're also digging in gardens primarily for moth & beetle larvae that are below the surface – so in that sense they're probably doing gardeners a good turn. We provide a lot of food for them. The other thing a skunk needs is a good den site – especially during the harsh cold winters that we experience here in Flagstaff. They can often get under people's houses where the residual heat that our houses give off is a boon to the skunk and probably increases their survival. So the two key elements that are much more abundant in the suburban and urban area are den sites & food sources.*

If we're going to reduce the conflicts between humans and skunks, the best way to do that is to try & lower the skunk population – not by trapping and poisoning, but by reducing the amount of resources so that populations can self-regulate. And one of the things that we know that skunks will feed on is the cat & dog food that we leave out in our back yards for our own pets. Striped skunks can't jump & they don't climb very well either – so if you need to leave cat or dog food out simply put it high up off the ground so the skunk can't get at it. If you've got dog food bring it in. When you watch skunks feeding under a bird feeder, for example, they'll often feed side by side with very little aggression, but if you add cat food to that mix suddenly the aggression will go way up, and we start seeing the kinds of behaviors – wrestling and biting – that's more likely to transmit diseases like rabies. So if you have to prioritize the foods you want to limit access to by skunks – you'd put dog and cat food right up at the top."

Tiger Salamanders

RH: These wetlands make good habitat for another interesting animal, one you might not expect to see in this mostly dry country.

MACVEAN: *"They're almost a weedy species – they're very very common."*

RH: Arizona Game and Fish biologist Susi MacVean is talking about an amphibian that's amazingly well adapted to dealing with the vagaries of our climate -- the tiger salamander. Most aquatic environments have them - and Cheshire Wetlands are no exception. There are salamander larvae in the pond on either side of Fremont Boulevard, and they spawn here too. The Tiger salamander found around Flagstaff is an Arizona native – although they're more widespread now than in the past because the larvae are used as fish bait.

Your chances of seeing an adult out wandering in the daytime are slim – unless it's rainy or very humid. They tend to dry out in the sun – so they often stay hidden, says MacVean.

MACVEAN: *"If you're looking for the terrestrial adults, they're gonna be under a log or a rock in a humid spot. You'll have to do some active looking – turn over some rocks & logs, but always put them back*

because it creates a little microclimate for whatever critter might be using that space, so you don't want to ruin that."

RH: You can find adult tiger salamanders in the water for yourself, if you want to get a closer look...

MACVEAN: *"You just need a net on the end of a handle, and you just sweep along the edges of the water and look at what comes up inside your net. Usually you're gonna have more productive netting if you net where there's some vegetation – but you don't want to do too much of it & be destructive because obviously the vegetation where you're netting his is habitat for aquatic insects as well as possibly amphibians – like these salamanders."* MACVEANT2

RH: The larvae are a pale green-brown and not terribly attractive! While the adults are a little more yellow and black, sometimes with barred tiger-like stripes, which is how they get their name, although the ones at Cheshire and around Flagstaff are usually not particularly colorful.

Tiger salamanders spawn in permanent water and temporary pools, where the females lay anywhere from 200 to 2,000 jelly-coated eggs -- in March or April when there may still be ice on the pond and very cold water! It takes about three weeks for the eggs to hatch and initially the larvae look like tadpoles, developing external gills as they grow. Some of these will metamorphose into terrestrial salamanders. Susi MacVean describes them:

MACVEAN: *"they look like a wet lizard, a slimy lizard basically – they're fatter with stubbier legs, a long tail & a mottled yellow, brown & black appearance. From then on they're mostly terrestrial – they have to stay in high humidity conditions but they don't necessarily have to be in ponds"*

RH: However if the conditions on land are dry and harsh – or if their pond dries up – tiger salamanders don't develop into terrestrial adults... they've got an alternate strategy...

MACVEAN: *"... they can attain sexual maturity in that larval phase – and so they will look kinda like a tadpole with all four legs but still have those external gills & they can reproduce in the water. So when we have drought conditions it's too arid for them to emerge from these ponds, they can stay in the water. And so in dry years that's who will maintain the population. In wet years you'll have both – salamander that reproduce staying in the water and the others that do the more normal metamorphosis."*

RH: Tiger salamanders eat insects and also other amphibians – both the eggs and tadpoles of frogs -- they'll even eat their own...

MACVEAN: *"Tiger salamanders are cannibalistic. They are known to eat each other. The terrestrial adults they're the ones that will eat lizards & mice. The aquatic ones are gonna be eating the aquatic insects, the tadpoles and the amphibian eggs. The terrestrial adults are fairly large & stocky and can be up to 6.5 inches long."*

RH: These salamanders are very susceptible to iridovirus, a disease that shows up in aquatic and moist environments. So MacVean says while it's okay to use salamanders as bait, please don't catch them at one site and use them at a different site ...

MACVEAN: “... *“They can also carry disease – and so if they get moved from a site that has iridovirus to a site that has never had it, then you’ve moved a disease around to an area that may have never been exposed. And it can affect other amphibian species as well.”*

Outro

You can easily combine a visit to Cheshire Wetlands with a walk on the Rio de Flag Nature Trail outside the Museum of Northern Arizona – where you can look for short horned lizards ... or even catch a glimpse of an endemic scorpion! And if you want another site to look for porcupines ... and maybe up to three species of skunks, take a trip out to Picture Canyon.