Yellow-headed Blackbirds at the San Pedro River
by R. J. Luce
November 5th, 2019

Dr. Dave Pearson: Birds Bringing Reluctant Neighbors Together (Gila River Indian Community)

Dave Pearson has been invited to survey for birds on the GRIC for a year and a half to help with their conservation efforts. These are an extension of the annual winter bird count they sponsor that Maricopa Audubon members have been assisting with for over a decade. Pearson will illustrate how birthing on the reservation adjacent to the southern county border has opened his eyes to how little most Phoenixians know about our neighbors and how much we depend on them without knowing it.

December 3rd, 2019

Margaret Dyekman: Backyard Birthing in Northern Arizona

Northern Arizona is a goldmine for backyard birders. It is home to many colorful, unique species that readily come to gardens, bird feeders, and bird baths. MAS member Margaret Dyekman discusses her new book designed for casual bird-lover residents of Northern Arizona as well as visitors. She will briefly talk about how her book published and then share some of the real-life stories that were the basis of her 10 years of newspaper articles compiled in her book.

Margaret Dyekman has watched birds in Northern Arizona from her back yard for 20 years and documented her experiences and those of other backyard birders in entertaining and informative print articles and blogs. She is an accomplished writer and speaker, published in professional magazines, and a frequent conference presenter, now delving into birding presentations versus her career presentations in human resources topics.

January 7th, 2020

Paul Landau: Nature Photography

Please check our website for further information.

February 4th, 2020

Kevin McGraw: Backyard Bird Feeding

Backyard bird feeding is now more than a billion-dollar industry nationwide, and with this activity comes many benefits, such as drawing attractive small birds to our yards and provisioning them with valued resources. However, there may be dark sides to bird feeding, including the spread of disease at our feeders that attract dense populations of avian visitors. Kevin will discuss the first field experiment of its kind to investigate the extent to which routine bird-feeder cleaning can impact disease severity and spread in a common feeder-visiting passerine (the House Finch).

Kevin McGraw is Professor and Associate Director for Facilities in the School of Life Sciences at Arizona State University. He came to ASU in 2004 and leads a research team that investigates two main areas: the evolution of exaggerated traits in animals and urban behavioral ecology. His group’s primary loci have been on the control and function of ornate colors of birds (especially finches and hummingbirds), and how birds acclimate and adapt to the many ways in which humans modify city environments. Students in his lab have also studied elaborate coloration in animals such as chameleons, butterflies, and jumping spiders. He has mentored many students in research during his 15 years at ASU, including 7 post-doctoral researchers, 8 PhD graduates, 2 current PhD students, and over 300 undergraduates.

Committees/Support

Arizona Audubon Council Rep
Position Open

Bookstore
Soccheta Ly
503 860-0370

Poet Laureate
David Cheriton
480 705-3277

Website
Laurie Nessel
602 391-4308
laurienessel@gmail.com

Maricopa Audubon Website
http://www.maricopaaudubon.org

The Earth has received the embrace of the sun and we shall see the results of that love.

Sitting Bull

An Investment in the Future

Bequests are an important source of support for the Maricopa Audubon Society. Your chapter has dedicated itself to the protection of the natural world through public education and advocacy for the wiser use and preservation of our land, water, air and other irreplaceable natural resources.

You can invest in the future of our natural world by making a bequest in your will to the Maricopa Audubon Society. Talk to your attorney for more information on how this can be accomplished.

On the Cover: Yellow-headed Blackbirds at the San Pedro River by R. J. Luce

Margaret Dyekman
President's Message

The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology recently reported that the United States has lost as many as 3 billion birds in the past fifty years. This shocking report generated a great deal of nationwide media attention, but it seems that there has been little follow-up to further explain the reasons for this dramatic decline. Habitat loss was one of the reasons cited for these losses, especially with grassland species, but declines of forest and even suburban birds were also documented. Not only have millions of acres of formerly productive habitat been lost in this country, but our Neotropical breeding birds have lost enormous swaths of their wintering habitat in the tropics, a problem that has received too little attention to date. I should mention that the principal author of this report, Ken Rosenberg, along with his brother Gary, has a Maricopa Audubon connection that goes back decades.

One of the information sources for the researchers’ conclusions was many years of Christmas Bird Count data compiled across this country, Canada, and some Latin American countries. In mid-December we will again sponsor the nearby Salt-Verde Christmas Bird Count, as we have done for many years. I urge you to participate in this or other CBCs in the Phoenix Metropolitan Area. Don’t refrain from taking part thinking that only expert birders and ornithologists are needed. If you have working eyes and ears you can contribute! Besides, it can be a wonderful experience spending a day in the field with accomplished observers from whom you will learn a great deal.

I hope that you enjoyed the last issue of The Cactus Wren Edition. The cover and an article inside featured the botanical art of our former editor, Ms. Gillian Rice, which helped to emphasize that MAS is about more than just birdlife. Instead, we are about connecting people to the natural world and helping to protect critically endangered species and their habitats—especially riparian ones—in this desert state. Please share any comments you might have about that issue, the excellent debut effort of our new editor, David Chorlton.

Among the local environmental issues that our Conservation Chairman, Mark Horlings, is pursuing now is commenting on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Resolution Copper’s Oak Flat copper mine. The principal question the DEIS addresses is not the mine, or the methods of extracting the ore, but where to dump the tailings. The first site proposed for this dirty operation was the exceptional Sonoran Desert on the north side of U.S. 80 very near Boyce Thompson Arboretum. Thankfully, this site is no longer under consideration for the tailings.

I’m looking forward to seeing more of you at our monthly meetings and out in the field this winter.

Mark W. Larson
President

Letter from the Editor

by David Chorlton

From the 1951 edition of Herbert Brandt’s substantial ARIZONA AND ITS BIRD LIFE, come these observations about the San Pedro River: What a wonderful land, especially for the naturalist, this must have been when, in 1540, Coronado marched his army down its length searching for the seven fabled cities of gold! At that time the climax grasses were so luxuriant as to hide a man on horseback; the now deep, shifting river channel and its affluent were an almost continuous, broad marsh; thousands of beavers saw to that. Mr. Brandt continues with an account of the toll taken on the river by the introduction of cattle and other practices detrimental to the river’s strength and health, and adds these cautionary words: What is the outlook for man and birds? Is the dominant human factor going to continue his destruction or is he going to conserve and live in harmony with nature? In Apache-land he does not have much longer to make up his mind.

The San Pedro is still a wonderful land, and that will be evident from reading this issue, dedicated in large part to the river, while we are also made aware of the ongoing threats to the river and its life systems. Please follow up on what you see and read here to stay abreast of developments in our borderlands and speak out in support of wise policies for wildlife. In the long run, those are the policies that benefit humans as well.

When bad news outweighs the good, I remind myself of the power nature has to regenerate itself. Think of the programs such as that to bring condors back from extinction, for example. We have to create the best circumstances and show the will to make the future one with abundant birds and beasts around us.

We continue to acknowledge those who rescue and rehabilitate birds, this time featuring Wild at Heart and their raptors. Thanks, meanwhile, go out to Gloria and Paul Halesworth, whose work as WildWing Rehabilitation Inc. saved countless birds and now they shall enjoy a well earned rest from the long hours and responsibilities.

The range of contents this time shows the overlapping of science, art, and the love of nature, with Sidney Riddle’s river studies, Anina Gerchick extending her art work to help migrating birds with the Birdlink project, and the other words and pictures that make putting The Cactus Wren Edition together such a pleasure. Thanks to all contributors.

WINTER 2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Field Trips ........................................ 4
Conservation Update ............................ 6
Book Reviews ..................................... 7
Protecting the San Pedro by Gail Cochran .. 9
Poem by David Chorlton ....................... 10
Raptor Rescue by Beth Edwards .............. 11
Centerfield/San Pedro River .................. 12
A Bird for Every Season by R. J. Luco .... 14
Along the Lower San Pedro by Sidney Riddle 16
Anina Gerchick & BIRDLINK ................ 18
The Green Scene by Vicki Hare .............. 20
Christmas Bird Counts ......................... 22
Photograph by Matt van Wellene ............ 23

ANNOUNCEMENTS

AMAZONSMILE
Maricopa Audubon Society is now registered on Amazon as a charitable organization. Go to MAS Facebook page for details or use the following AmazonSmile link for Maricopa Audubon Society:
https://smile.amazon.com/ch/86-6040458
Log onto your Amazon account and a percentage of your purchase will go to MAS!
Maricopa Audubon Society Field Trips & Workshops

Car Pooling: Please make every effort to organize your own car pool, consolidate vehicles at meeting places and/or contact leaders for car pooling assistance. Be courteous to the trip leaders and help cover their gas costs. We recommend that passengers reimburse drivers 10 cents per mile each.

Reminders:
- Avoid wearing bright colors. Wear neutral-colored clothing and sturdy walking shoes.
- Bring sunscreen, sunglasses, head protection, and water.
- Always bring your binoculars. Bring a scope if recommended.
- Submit trip and leader suggestions to the Field Trip Chair, Larry Langstaff.
- Unless stated otherwise, reservations are required.

Day Passes: Many locations in the National Forests require Day Use Passes. For details, see http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/tonto/passes-permits

Saturday, December 7th
Wickenburg area

We will begin our birding trip at Coffinger Park in Wickenburg, and move over to Wickenburg Meadows and Secret Ponds. If time allows (and depending how the birding goes), we will wrap up at Boetto Park. Expected birds include: Red-shouldered Hawk, Vermilion Flycatcher, a variety of sparrows and waterfowl (depending on water level in the ponds). Bring snacks, water, hat, sturdy walking shoes, and a scope if you have one. If possible, we can carpool from the parking lot next to the bridge. We will need one additional high clearance vehicle to access Secret Ponds. Please let the leader know if you are willing to carpool some of the participants to this location. Return about noon. Wickenburg is an old western town full of history and the well known Hassayampa River. After the trip, stay a while and enjoy lunch at one of the local restaurants or check out the town’s history at the Desert Caballeros Western Museum or of course the Hassayampa River Preserve.

Leader: Chrissy Kondrat
Difficulty 2. Eight participants need to reserve with: azdesertbird@gmail.com

Saturday, January 11th
Oak Flat

Explore this oak and manzanita habitat sacred to San Carlos Apache, threatened by a foreign-owned copper mine. Likely species include: Crissal Thrasher, Black-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, Dark-eyed Junco, White-breasted Nuthatch, titmouse species, Canyon and Spotted Towhee, ravens and accipiters. 8:30 am - 11 am (excludes optional lunch at campground). Bring water, jacket, sturdy walking shoes, snacks or lunch, optional scope.

Leader Myron Scott
Difficulty: 3. Maximum: 8. To register, email cell phone number to: larrylangstaff1@gmail.com

Wednesday, January 15th
Tempe Ponds

This easy local trip will start about 7:45 am at Tempe Town Lake (with stops at Tempe Marketplace and Tempe Center for the Arts), continuing to the ponds at ASU Research Park, and ending at Kiwanis Park to check out the pond. We can expect the usual variety of winter waterfowl plus common urban desert species, and hope for some unusual species. This is an excellent beginner’s trip, often with excellent close-up views, and it may include some surprises (such as Black-hooded Parakeets) that keep more experienced birders interested. Wrap up about 11:30.

Leader: Kathe Anderson
Limited to 8 participants. Reservations required. Difficulty 1. Meeting place and carpooling logistics will be determined a few days before at kathcoot@cox.net

Saturday, February 8th
Hassayampa Preserve

Join HP’s Interpreter Ranger, Eric Hough, who has an Arizona life list approaching 430, for a 2-hour guided morning bird walk. The focus will be wintering and resident desert riparian bird identification by sight and sound, as well as discussion of their ecology. This site has quite a variety of species due to the year-round water available to cottonwoods, willows, walnut, mesquite, and ash trees. Cost: $7 Maricopa County outreach fee and $5 adult entrance fee (unless you have a Maricopa County Parks annual pass or carpool with someone who does).

Trip limit:12. Difficulty 2. Bring warm clothes and good walking shoes, and water. To register, email cell phone number to larrylangstaff1@gmail.com

Saturday, February 15th
Seven Springs

Explore this sycamore and cottonwood riparian habitat with juniper uplands. Possible species include American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, Rock, Canyon and Bewick’s Wren, Western Bluebird, Hermit Thrush, Spotted and Green-tailed Towhee, and Red-naped Sapsucker. Bring water, jacket, sturdy walking shoes, snacks or lunch, optional scope. 8 am - 10:30 am.

Leader Myron Scott
Difficulty: 3. Maximum: 8. To register, email cell phone number to larrylangstaff1@gmail.com

Thursday, February 20th
Sweetwater Wetlands and El Rio

Sweetwater Wetlands, just outside Tucson on the north side, can be sweet indeed. Good days here can top 40 species easily, mostly waterfowl and water-related songbirds like Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds and Vermilion Flycatchers, but also some unexpected sightings such as bobcats. Paths are mostly level dirt and easily negotiated. From there, we’ll head north a bit to bird El Rio (formerly the Coachline Gravel Pits, complete with a frisbee golf course). That site has habitat more conducive to waders, shorebirds and different songbirds. We’ll start about 5:30 am in Scottsdale, find a spot for lunch near El Rio, and finish about 2 pm back in the Phoenix area.

Leader: Kathe Anderson
Limited to 8 participants. Reservations required. Difficulty 1. Meeting place and carpooling logistics will be determined a few days before the trip. Please register with kathcoot@cox.net
Saturday, February 29th
Gilbert Riparian Preserve
Get a jump on your Leap Year list with Dr. Kevin McGraw from ASU, at a local hotspot! If you have never been to this Gilbert site, you will benefit from his expertise and direction. Wintering waterfowl is the prime focus here, but along with them are many wading birds, raptors and birds found in the trees and bushes around the Preserve. Bring a hat and water and binoculars. The early morning start time may necessitate warm clothes, so be prepared. A spotting scope is beneficial here and others will share. Plan on birding for 2-3 hours.
Difficulty 2. Limit 10.
For reservations, send your cell number to larrylangstaff1@gmail.com

Saturday, March 21st
Mount Ord
We will ascend the road through four life zones (desertscrub to Ponderosa Pine forest). Likely species: Gray Vireo, Olive Warbler, Painted Redstart, possible early Grace’s and Virginia’s Warbler, Acorn and Hairy Woodpecker, Bushtit, titmouse and nuthatch species, Cricet Thrasher. Bring water, jacket, sturdy walking shoes, snack, optional scope. 7:30 - 10:30 am.
Leader Myron Scott
Difficulty: 2. Maximum: 6. To register, email cell phone number to larrylangstaff1@gmail.com

Sunday, March 22nd
Lower Salt River
This well-known and close-to-the-city field trip involves a drive along the Bush Highway between Mesa and Saguaro Lake, with several stops for birding in recreation areas along the Salt River. Spring migration should be starting, which could afford us views of Lucy’s Warbler, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Violet-green Swallow.
Lingering winter residents that we could spot are Yellow-rumped Warbler, Lesser Goldfinch, Eared Grebe, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Also likely are sightings of Bald Eagles, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, and Phainopepla. This area is within Tonto National Forest and requires a day-use parking pass for all drivers. Bring a lunch, and a scope, if available.
Leader: Richard Kaiser
rkaserinnaz@aol.com 602-276-3312

Looking Ahead:
Monday-Tuesday, March 23rd-24th
Rio Rico area (near Nogales)
Friday March 27th
Birding by Boat on Lake Pleasant
Saturday, March 28th
Northsight Park, north Scottsdale
More information in the next Wren-dition

SAVE THE DATE
Winter Bird Count
December 7th, 2019
Huhugam Heritage Center
23159 S. Maricopa Road

MORE INFORMATION TO FOLLOW

Grocery shopping?
Support Maricopa Audubon when you shop at Fry’s Food Stores.

MAS is part of Fry’s Community Rewards Program. Register your Fry’s VIP card and select Maricopa Audubon #89166 as your non-profit organization at no cost to you.
Go to https://www.frysfood.com/topic/new-community-rewards-program
Conservation Update
by Mark Horlings

SAN PEDRO RIVER NEWS

1. New Management Plan for the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (SPR RCA)

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recently adopted a new Resource Management Plan (RMP) for those portions of the San Pedro River included in the SPRNCA. BLM abandoned its plan to open another 20,000 acres of SPRNCA to grazing. Under the RMP, grazing will be allowed on the same 7,030 acres already being grazed. The RMP also dropped the original Plan’s proposal to increase the number of months per year each acre may be grazed.

Public protest, including from MAS members, played a role in convincing BLM to make this change, so we can count it as a victory. As so often, however, conservation “victories” don’t mean things improved, merely that they did not deteriorate. MAS and its allies also objected to the original Plan’s proposal to allow ORV use and hunting in more of SPRNCA. The final RMP added restrictions on firearms near the San Pedro House but opened new areas to hunting and ORV use.

2. Vigneto Development and the Saint David Ci enega

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has reissued its Clean Water Act permit allowing Vigneto’s developer to fill washes within the planned 28,000 home development near Benson. Vigneto lies four miles from the San Pedro, and proposes to rely entirely upon groundwater for its 70,000 residents.

Conservation groups, as well as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, objected to the permit because the Corps of Engineers considered Vigneto’s impact on fewer than 100 acres of washes within the 12,000 acres of Vigneto, rather than the entire project. The controversy surrounding Vigneto has intensified since the retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Arizona State Director reported that he was instructed he would be “wise to reconsider” his earlier objections to the permit.

Hydrologic studies indicate that Vigneto will further deplete and San Pedro and dry up the Saint David Cienega. The Arizona Department of Water Resources (DWR) has issued its own Groundwater Management Act finding that the aquifers supplying the project contain a 100-year supply of water for Vigneto. The Groundwater Management Act assures homebuyers that their wells will not run dry. It does not assure rivers that their aquifers will not do so.

3. Groundwater Pumping in Sierra Vista and Fort Huachuca

Last year, the Arizona Supreme Court ruled that DWR did not need to consider SPRNCA’s reserved rights to water in the San Pedro before issuing its finding that a 7,000 home development in Sierra Vista enjoyed a 100-year supply of water. MAS Vice President Robin Silver served as the named plaintiff in that suit. That development, now under construction, will pump more than 3,000 acre-feet of water annually.

Recent reports list additional stressors on the San Pedro. Fort Huachuca has increased its water use by thirty percent since 2014. DWR has issued 420 permits for new wells in and near Sierra Vista since 2012.

Draining the San Pedro will end a migratory corridor for more than 300 species of birds, including species listed as endangered or threatened. MAS and its allies have filed a Notice of Intent to sue with Fort Huachuca and the Department of Defense.

OAK FLAT AND RESOLUTION COPPER

Tonto National Forest (TNF) published its draft Environmental Impact Statement in August. The Arizona Mining Reform Coalition, which includes MAS, prepared detailed comments to file by November 7.

The most important change from previous plans is that TNF named a new preferred site to dispose of the waste rock and tailings from the mine. Instead of dumping tailings in a 400-foot deep pile across from the Boyce Thompson Arboretum, Resolution Copper would send them 22 miles from the mine, to Skunk Camp near the existing Ray Mine. Relocating the tailings pile would remove one major objection to the mine. However, the Native Americans and rock climbers opposing the mine care chiefly about Oak Flat itself, and this change does not affect the loss they will suffer.

Tonto National Forest held six public meetings in six affected towns. Members of the San Carlos Apache Tribe were particularly eloquent at those meetings, stressing the cultural importance of Oak Flat, which the mine will collapse, to their traditions.

Help MAS with an Employer Matching Gift

Many Maricopa Audubon members aren’t aware that their employers may include a matching gift program in their benefits package. Programs vary from business to business, but they generally offer a dollar-for-dollar match when an employee makes a personal gift to a nonprofit organization like Maricopa Audubon Society.

Please visit your human resources department or charitable giving department to see if this opportunity is available to you. You usually have to fill out and submit a form, which is sometimes done online. If you have already made a donation to MAS in the past year, you may be able to get a matching gift after the fact from your employer for up to 12 months later.
Those who bird by ear hear about ten times more birds than they see (beware the mimics!), but auditory memory is difficult for many so they rely primarily on visual signals (plumage, morphology, behavior, habitat, etc.) for identification. Bird sounds were first analyzed by spectrograph in 1961 by British ornithologist W.H. Thorpe. The Singing Life of Birds: The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong, Donald Kroodsma, 2007, had an accompanying CD with sonograms. The Warbler Guide, Stephenson & Whittle, 2013, has a $5.99 audio download of species in the book. Pieplow’s is the first comprehensive guide, This book teaches you how to visualize bird sounds using spectrograms. Pieplow, a professor of writing and rhetoric at the University of Colorado, Boulder, pitched the idea for this book to Houghton Mifflin, who agreed to print it after the eastern guide was published in 2017. The western edition was released last April.

Thumbing through the array of spectrograms - computer-generated graphs that show an audio wave through time - can be intimidating. The book’s introduction includes a primer on translating the graphs (also available free online at earbirding.com) to guide you to visualizing sound at a glance. Sounds are broken down into five essential components: pitch, speed, repetition, pauses, and tone. Each of these is dissected further to describe the full spectrum of bird sound. There is a section on making your own recordings and spectrograms as well as one on playback ethics and regulations. Pieplow summarized this topic quite well by noting that while birders refer to a bird responding to playback as “cooperative,” the bird may call it harassment.

He concludes the introduction with other resources, including online recordings from Zeno-canto and Cornell Lab’s Macaulay Library; books; and the blog he and Andrew Spencer created: earbirding.com, which includes a page on selecting software to create your own spectrograms.

After the primer come the Species Accounts in taxonomic order with a small illustration (most are by Roger Tory Peterson), a range map, and multiple spectrograms representing various vocalizations from 1 – 8 seconds long with brief descriptions of each one. There are over 500 species (including a dozen introduced Psittacids, excluding pelagics), 3,800 digitally edited spectrograms, and an online companion of some 7,500 edited streaming audio files by nearly 350 recordists, including local birders- Chrissy Kondrat-Smith, Lauren Harter, Ryan O’Donnell, Micah Reigner, and David Vander Pluyrn. The outside footer is labeled with the species name for quick reference.

The Visual Index, which follows the Species Accounts, is what really makes this book unique. Spectrograms are simplified into symbols or “shorthand”. Each sound is named, described, and grouped with similar sounds (including tricky, non-avian ones) along with possible species and their page numbers in the Species Accounts. The Visual Index is divided into seven color-coded sections according to a primary characteristic such as a single-note sound, repeated similar notes, 2- and 3-syllabled phrases, etc. To expedite your search, the back endpaper has a guide to sub-categories. You can quickly search the Visual Index for a bird heard in the field.

If you can’t confirm your species from the spectrographs, you can refer to the scrolling sonograms (audio tracks from which the books graphs were made using Raven Pro software) for free, online at Peterson bird sounds where you can “see” the sounds as they are heard. Many species have multiple files representing various behaviors, ages, and sex such as alarm, courtship, begging, etc.

In conclusion, if your eyes glaze over reading an owner’s manual, this book may not be for you. But with a little discipline and drive, you will be greatly rewarded. At $28 list, this is well worth the cost. It tackles a complicated subject with elegant simplicity and takes your birding to another level. While the book is a tad heavy for a field guide, if you learn the symbols shorthand, you can draw spectrogram symbols while fresh in your mind to look up later on. This alone makes the study of spectrograms, and this book, worthwhile.

Laurie Nessel organizes the programs for MAS meetings, along other work on behalf of wildlife. (She did not take the photograph attributed to her in our last issue of Mary Jo Ballator. We don’t know who did.)
San Pedro Anthology

Essays submitted in support of the 30th Anniversary of the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area

Compiled by Kate Scott & Tony Heath with Nicole Gillett in coordination with Tucson Audubon Society, 42 pp., $15, includes shipping. To order, go to www.MAWCenter.org/shop

by David Charleton

This short but varied collection of writings ranges from personal reflection through scientific and historical aspects of the San Pedro River in prose and poetry, with illustrations that are strikingly effective in black-and-white. The opening contribution is from novelist Barbara Kingsolver, who formerly lived in Tucson and knows the river well. “In summer this modest saint invites us down from the blazing heat into a willowy tunnel of cool shade, birdsong, and the velvet brown scent of riverbank. We take unhurried hikes, reading the dappled script of animal tracks and the driftwood history of flood and drought embedded in the steep banks. The sight of a vermillion flycatcher leaves us breathless every time—he’s not just a bird but a punctuation mark on the air, printed in red ink, read out loud as a gasp.”

R. J. Luce succinctly summarizes why the river is so important: “The San Pedro River is the primary wildlife movement corridor that connects the mountains of the Madrean Archipelago, often referred to as Sky Islands. These isolated mountain ranges: Whetstone, Dragoon, Mule, Chiricahua, Galiuro, and Huachuca, to name a few rise from the Chihuahuan desert in southern Arizona.”

We can sense the character of a place best as it is experienced directly, and here is a record of exactly what the river means in personal terms. This anthology brings focus to detailed observations such as this, from Lizann Michaud, a Bisbee based graphic artist and musician: “Another trip...seeing (and hearing!) several bees inside a large Datura flower bud—the skin of the flower cone, translucent, backlit by the setting sun, dark buzzing bee shadows bouncing inside, then, waiting and watching as the bees pried the large fragrant blossom open, in their eagerness to take pollen.”

Based just outside Bisbee, Michael Gregory has long been an observer of natural systems and is a former conservation chairman of the Sierra Club Grand Canyon Chapter, and former director of Arizona Toxics Information. He is also a poet whose work has deep roots in his chosen ground. His poem, When it Rains in May ends by listening to local voices:

“Up on the rimrock they decipher unanswered prayers. Down here the message goes round by word of mouth.”

Deni Seymour traces threads of history in A River Heals:
The San Pedro’s Legacy, Paul Young tells about Environmental Engineers: Beavers on the San Pedro River, and Kelly Tighe recalls San Pedro River Memories, to point out just three selections that touch on the senses as well as the science of an Arizona treasure. The photographs appear carefully selected and bring more light to a collection that strengthens the case for careful stewardship of the San Pedro.

Sign up for the e-newsletter!

To receive updates and supplements to The Cactus Wren-dition, sign up for the monthly (September to May) e-newsletter. It includes meeting and field trip reminders, special events, and citizen science projects. To subscribe, contact laureenessel@gmail.com.

Note: We do not use the email list for anything other than the described purpose.
Protecting the San Pedro River
by Gail Cochrane

Like a magic elixir, water brings life to the arid desert. The San Pedro River is the last undammed river of the American Southwest, and critically important to multitudes of resident and migratory birds. This riparian corridor is also precious habitat for eighty-four species of mammals, including jaguar, coatimundi, bats, mountain lions, and beaver; and more than forty-one species of reptiles and amphibians. Six native fish species remain, including the Gila Chub which is proposed for federal listing as endangered.

As a mild climate and relatively low land costs have driven growth and development along the Santa Cruz and Salt River valleys, the San Pedro corridor has become ever more vital to the survival of birds navigating the north-south migratory flyways. The species of note that qualify the site as an Audubon Important Bird Area are the endangered Southwest Willow Flycatcher, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, Tropical Kingbird, Bell’s Vireo, Lucy’s Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Gray Hawk, Common Black Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk and the majority of nesting Mississippi Kites in Arizona.

Groundwater pumping since the 1940s has decreased the San Pedro River’s base flows by 67%. The last remaining perennial flows are now threatened. When the river’s water is drawn deep underground, native streamside plants such as cottonwoods are weakened and invasive species such as tamarisks thrive. This has a profoundly negative effect on bird species in particular and all animal species in general.

Just as a wide range of animals leave their prints at the river’s edge, so the conservation of the San Pedro River watershed has been taken up by a surprisingly diverse group of organizations. A common recognition of the ecological stakes and a collaborative approach have made these alliances strong.

“Despite the critical importance of this major riparian zone in context of rapid dwindling wildlife habitat in the state, the San Pedro Watershed is being subjected to inappropriate development pressure.” In response to these threats stated on their website, the Lower San Pedro Watershed Alliance has formed a collaborative of twenty entities including local, state, and federal agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations. Using tools such as conservation easements, advocacy and wildlife monitoring programs, the Lower San Pedro Watershed Alliance has fought to save this unique desert river ecosystem. Their efforts have resulted in the conservation of 190,000 acres of private and leased watershed land now held in various types of easements. At the Three Links Farm project a 90% reduction in agricultural water use has been achieved over the last five years. Cottonwood seedlings now grow along the riverbed and shores and the natural flows are intact throughout this reach of the river. The LSPWA has taken a stand against development pressures such as the I-10 Bypass proposal and the SunZia Transmission Project.

The most recent threat, the proposed Villages at Vigneto development near Benson, would bring 70,000 new residents to a verdant Italian style complex that would draw all of its water needs from the fragile San Pedro watershed aquifer. That planned development is now held up in the court system thanks to EarthJustice efforts.
Protecting the San Pedro River cont.

The Nature Conservancy has been a key contributor to the protection of the San Pedro watershed. Through easements, four private properties have been conserved from development and now make up a 10-mile long corridor linking the Galliuro Mountains to the Rincon and Catalina Mountains.

The Cochise Conservation and Recharge Network is a cooperative effort with Cochise County and Fort Huachuca. One stormwater runoff recharge facility is already using surface water to replenish the aquifer and support river flows, and three other sites owned by Nature Conservancy are planned along the river.

Groups of citizen scientists walk the entire 170-mile length of the San Pedro River every June and record where it is wet and where it is dry during the most arid time of the year. Twenty years’ worth of data on summertime surface flows within the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area are now available as an animation. These observations were recorded by volunteers through the Wet/Dry Mapping Project - a collaboration between the Nature Conservancy and the Bureau of Land Management. For more information on the Wet/Dry Mapping Project see http://azconservation.org/projects/water/wet_dry_mapping

The Business for Water Stewardship is a collaborative project between Arizona Land and Water Trust, Intel Corp and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Over 100 acres of agricultural fields near Mammoth, Arizona historically used to grow corn and wheat have been converted to pasture of native grasses. This restoration not only saves on irrigation but better captures and filters surface water and enhances groundwater recharge. The Trust estimates 710 acre feet of water has been saved the first six years of crop conversion, with 610 acre feet potentially saved every year going forward.

Even SRP is involved in conservation of the San Pedro River. Mitigation obligations placed on SRP relating to the Roosevelt Lake Habitat Conservation Plan require the utility to acquire and manage into perpetuity replacement habitat for Southwestern Willow Flycatchers and Yellow-billed Cuckoos on the lower San Pedro. These and other legal requirements will drive the utility in efforts to transfer surface water rights on the lower San Pedro from agriculture to instream flow for wildlife.

The Cascabel Conservation Association works to develop collaborative stewardship of the Middle San Pedro River watershed, while the Upper San Pedro Partnership is active in the Sierra Vista and Fort Huachuca areas. Audubon’s Western Rivers Action Network is also involved in this essential work.

Over our lifetimes, the interests of big money, resource extraction and development have won out over the needs of habitats and wildlife. But here on the stage of this one river, internationally recognized for its biodiversity, we see how clarity of purpose and collaboration may still save the day. 🦅

Gail Cochrane is a 22-year resident of the Sonoran Desert and wildlife advocate.

Poem by David Chorlton

Villages at Vigneto

Turn on a faucet in the kitchen of a new house among houses built close to a river that has been redirected to serve domestic needs, and out comes the first Vermillion flycatcher followed by Yellow-billed cuckoos, a Gray hawk, grosbeaks, warblers, vireos, doves, jays, and struggling through the plumbing a badger prepared to gnaw through every chair leg he can find.

It won’t be long before the orioles appear, and after them a Coachwhip and a garter snake. Some turtles thud as they drop into the basin, then two dozen sparrow species come back into the light after their journey through darkness left behind when the current weakened and the water was too little to sustain them. A bobcat shakes the last moisture from his fur as sunlight spreads its daze glow on the window and the bats arrive. It’s too late to turn the faucet off. Too late to put the river back where it belongs.

(First published in Slipstream, Niagara Falls, NY)
Raptor Rescue
by Beth Edwards

Wild at Heart, Inc is a volunteer-based, non-profit organization dedicated to the rescue and care of Arizona’s hawks, owls, eagles, and falcons. Since its founding over 28 years ago, over 10,500 rescues have come through its doors. Bob and Sam Fox, Co-Directors, created WAH with the rescue of a single Barn Owl, Chia, who went on to become Wild At Heart’s first Barn Owl foster bird parent. Thanks to their efforts and to the 100+ active volunteers, WAH now rescues approximately 800 birds each year.

Another aspect of WAH is its involvement in community outreach and education for Arizona wildlife. With the aid of its volunteers, WAH goes on the road to take some of its educational birds into schools, community centers for the general public and, into the workplace to raise awareness of not only nature but for the opportunity for volunteer group activities.

Wild at Heart is also known to be the most active, if not only, organization to “pre-rescue” Arizona’s threatened population of Burrowing Owls. WAH has a strong relationship with real estate developers where it helps to remove the ground dwelling owls before bulldozing and construction begin. With the help of volunteer groups from the general public (from youth to senior citizens), over 2,000 Burrowing Owls have been relocated to new safer areas within the state.

How you can help if you find an injured bird:

Contact Wild at Heart by calling 480-595-5047. Please DO NOT send an emergency message through e-mail or through the Facebook page. Take a picture if you are not sure of species or if it needs help and call. Phone is answered 24/7!

Secure the injured bird in a box, laundry hamper, or pet kennel.

If the bird is a large owl or hawk, you can toss a large towel over it and then scoop up the bird. It is their feet, not their beak that are dangerous.

Cover the box with a towel and place the bird in a dark, quiet area that is protected from the heat or cold.

Never try to give the bird food or water. Their diets are specialized - food could harm their stressed bodies and it is easy to asphyxiate a bird with even small amounts of water poured into its mouth. At most, place a shallow dish of water with the bird and let it choose if it wants to drink.

If you would like to learn more about how to help Arizona’s raptors or would like to support your wildlife through volunteering or donations, see their website at https://WildAtHeartRaptors.org or their Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/WildAtHeartOwl.

Beth Edwards works with Wild at Heart