Simply put, the San Pedro River bird migration corridor in southeastern Arizona makes the long trip from South America to Canada possible for many of the migrant birds that use our part of the Pacific Flyway. Without stopover places with good habitat they just couldn’t make it.

I enjoy the San Pedro River corridor and the annual migration as much as the birds do. I’m not a snowbird because to me the river environs are new and exciting all year. Twice a year, over 250 species temporarily use their migratory home along the San Pedro River. The migration period is a great time for birding, while the 100 or so year-round residents are close friends and I like to see them too.

Winter is interesting because some species become more inter-specifically social in winter and gather in large groups, proving that birds of a feather really do flock together. For instance, the congregation of the Yellow-headed Blackbirds defines winter like nothing else, as does the persistent calling of Great Horned Owls. The appearance of Mexican Mallards, American Wigeon, and Northern Shovelers on the river, and big flocks of brown/gray-colored sparrows: Chipping, Brewer’s, and White-crowned Sparrows help mark the season.

The first call of the Canyon Wren in February and the Gray Hawk, usually in late March, both say spring to me. The arrival of the orioles: Scott’s, Hooded, and Bullock’s; and many warbler species is always thrilling. Great Blue Herons carry nest building material and one day, the mostly empty sky is filled with dozens of soaring Turkey Vultures. The mournful calls of poorwills fill the early morning airwaves and loud chirps of Gambel’s and Scaled Quail preparing to mate are a mid-day chorus. Gould’s Turkeys gobble often in early morning.
The appearance of the first summer tanagers and grosbeaks (Black-headed and Blue) in May heralds summer as does the first appearance of Gambel’s Quail and turkey broods. Passing Common Black Hawks, calls of Yellow-billed Cuckoo, groups of Blue Grosbeaks and hummingbirds (mostly Black-chinned and Broad-billed, but occasionally Rufous and Anna’s) define the summer season too. Mallard broods, including Mexican Mallard, roam the river and juvenile Great Blue Herons, Red-tailed Hawks, and ravens stand up in their nests to squawk and beg.

In fall, the annual White-crowned Sparrow shift change takes place in southern Arizona when our summer birds move south to Mexico and birds from the north arrive to occupy their niche along the San Pedro. Flocks of Lark Sparrows, Western Kingbirds, and mixed groups of hundreds of swallows (Barn, Tree, Rough-winged and Violet-green) line fences and power lines. Groups of migrating Sandhill Cranes, Double-crested Cormorants, and ducks of various species are heard or seen flying over.

It is a year-round nature show along the San Pedro River, each species living a life that makes a television-worthy documentary. Hopefully the birds can just keep doing what they do. Our job is to protect the forests, rivers, mountains, wetlands, and grasslands so they can.

R. J. Luce received a Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Biology. He worked for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department for 30 years on songbird, marsh, and small mammal management programs. Among his books is River of Life, a photo essay about the San Pedro River.
Along the Lower San Pedro
by Sidney Riddle

Water is king in the arid Southwest. So too are the places where water resides: streams, rivers, and their terrestrial confines. These riparian zones, which surround rivers, often support a wide array of habitat types and wildlife species. By most estimates, riparian zones are less than two percent of the total landmass in the Sonoran Desert, but are used by the majority of wildlife species. To compound this issue of rarity, there exists a constant tug-of-war between ecological and human water needs.

The lower San Pedro River basin in Southeastern Arizona is a prime example of this wildland-human water conflict. It is part of one of the last remaining undammed rivers in the Southwest and supports expanses of native cottonwood-willow gallery forests which provide critical habitat for a rich wildlife assemblage. This portion of river has the great misfortune of
sensitive to changes in water conditions. Lizards are similar to birds in that some species exhibit a strong affinity for particular types of habitat structure, making them useful animals for understanding the effects of habitat change.

The research that my colleagues and I conduct aims to address the question of how these predicted habitat changes might alter the amphibian and reptile communities.

"Overlooked wildlife demonstrate the value of intact riparian habitat along the lower San Pedro River"

of the lower San Pedro River. To address this question, we compared capture rates of herpetofauna in native riparian forest dominated by Fremont’s cottonwood and Goodding’s willow, monotypic forests of non-native saltcedar, and forests of velvet mesquite. We trapped amphibians and reptiles in 2018 and 2017 at eighteen sites in the aforementioned three riparian forest types near the confluence of the San Pedro River and Gila River. We trapped only during the summer months, when ectothermic animals are most active. We assigned each animal a unique mark so that we would have an idea of how many individuals of each species were at each site. In addition to our trapping effort, we also deployed sound recorders to document reproductive vocalization effort of amphibians.

During the course of our study we captured 960 individual lizards, representing nine species. The most notable result of lizard-trapping was that lizard abundance was more than twice as high in gallery forests than in monotypic saltcedar forests, and was about fifty percent higher in gallery forests than in comparatively drier mesquite forests. In addition to lower abundances, we found marked differences among lizard community composition between the three riparian habitat types. The most commonly captured species in gallery forests and mesquite forests was the parthenogenetic (asexual; all-female) Sonoran spotted whiptail. Interestingly, this species was almost completely absent in saltcedar forests, and seemed to be replaced by the closely related tiger whiptail. This finding is consistent with patterns found in other wildlife communities wherein habitat specialists are replaced by generalist species when riparian habitats are dominated by saltcedar.

We encountered amphibians less frequently than lizards and captures were largely composed only of Couch’s spadefoot toad. This mostly fossorial frog was captured three times more often in mesquite forests than in gallery forests and only two individuals were captured in saltcedar forests over the course of two summers. Our sound recordings told a similar story, as we detected calls of male Couch’s spadefoot in both mesquite and gallery forests, but not in saltcedar forests. We were not surprised to have a greater number of captures in the drier mesquite forests, as this species is possibly the most arid-adapted amphibian in North America. However, we were alarmed to find so few individuals in residing in saltcedar forests and to see no reproductive effort there.

To date, the bulk of wildlife research on the San Pedro River has focused on birds, and for good reason, as several threatened or endangered species use the river and its riparian habitat. Our research demonstrates the importance of an intact San Pedro River to not only charismatic wildlife groups, but also to overlooked wildlife communities like amphibians and reptiles. Our findings add to an extensive and growing body of literature which argues that the San Pedro River riparian system is unique and valuable ecological resource that warrants protection. As thirsty human populations continue to flock to Arizona, rivers like the San Pedro could be pushed beyond their limits. 🌼

As a wildlife biologist with Arizona State University, Sid Riddle specializes in riparian ecosystems of the Southwest.
One million plant and animal species are facing extinction risks according to the 2019 UN Inter-governmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Habitat creation, conservation, and expansion in cities can be challenging due to spatial and fiscal constraints. BIRDLINK responds to the challenges of biodiversity loss and critical stopover habitat conservation with an innovative concept of habitat interventions that enhance community engagement in conservation. Birds are universally appealing to people, and they help to focus attention on environmental issues. Native plant habitat is critical for a significant number of bird species that migrate through our cities, as well as for other important pollinators.

BIRDLINK offers low cost, deployable native plant structures to cities facing a shortage of ground and mid-level canopy habitat. The BIRDLINK sculptures “green infill” public spaces—adding species diversity and vegetated areas to neighborhoods. The first BIRDLINK prototype has sparked public excitement with its living structure. These densely planted native species habitats provide food and refuge for birds and insect pollinators. BIRDLINK living sculptures outperform planting beds, which the public generally ignores, by making vegetation noticeable through artful stacked configurations of planted modules that attract people’s attention. The universal appeal of birds, the display of plant beauty and accompanying informational signage also make BIRDLINK an educational tool. Two New York City public spaces currently site BIRDLINK. The project is poised to build its initial successes into a scalable, replicable tool for confronting the challenge of biodiversity loss and for communicating ecological urbanism to diverse communities.

aninagerchick.com/birds
https://sunstonestrategies.coveragebook.com/b/323daacf/attachments/17119202

Birdseye Prey digital image 2017 is a collage made from my original painting Birdseye which is oil on canvas 48 x 34 inches.
I have been a painter all my life with an emphasis on people and portraiture as well as landscape with animals. I became focused on birds while painting outdoors, and since I live on the Atlantic Flyway I thought about habitat requirements to support the large bird populations that migrate through New York City twice a year. I began designing interventions for urban public space as an artist and then studied landscape architecture in order to have the ecological knowledge and the planning tools to design for public space. Now the BIRDLINK project is a way to integrate both my fine art and landscape architecture interests and connect people with birds.
Connecting with nature makes Arizona a fun and better place to live!

What If There Were No Rivers? Protecting Arizona’s San Pedro River

Did you know one of the most important riparian areas in the United States is the San Pedro River? The San Pedro is home to 84 species of mammals, 14 species of fish, 41 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 100 species of breeding birds. More than 200 species of migrant and wintering birds also depend upon the San Pedro for temporary habitat. Nearly 45% of the 900 total species of birds in North America use the San Pedro River at some point in their lives. That amounts to millions of migrating birds using the cottonwood-shaded corridor. Unique wildlife such as the coatimundi, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, jaguar, ocelots and ringtails also inhabit the area.

Did you know the San Pedro is unique because it is the last undammed desert river in the American Southwest? It is one of two Arizona rivers that flow north from Mexico into Arizona. The San Pedro begins at the confluence, or meeting, of two streams in Sonora, Mexico about twenty miles south of Sierra Vista, Arizona and continues for 143 miles north, ending as a tributary of the Gila River. On November 18, 1988, Congress designated 40 miles of the upper San Pedro River as a Riparian National Conservation Area to protect its riparian ecosystem.

Did you know rivers are part of a ‘water cycle’ which replenishes the Earth’s supply of fresh water essential for almost every living thing? Rivers carry water from land to the ocean. As seawater in the ocean evaporates, clouds form. They carry moisture and release it as precipitation or rain, which feeds small streams and rivers. This endless process is part of the Earth’s water cycle. If there were no rivers there would be no rain, no wildlife, no freshwater fish, and not enough clean drinking water for humans. Rivers bring life to hundreds of plants, birds, and animals that depend upon water for survival.

Did you know parts of the San Pedro River are no longer perennially flowing, and there is concern that the river is drying up due to population explosion and the pumping of thousands of acre-feet of groundwater from the aquifer beneath the river? An aquifer is an underground layer of water-bearing permeable rock, rock fractures or material such as gravel, sand, or silt. Because the San Pedro River aquifer is close to the surface, water from the mountains can run down and be stored in there for use during dry spells. If the water table in the aquifer gets below a level where the trees and plants cannot reach it, the trees will perish and the river will dry up.

Did you know volunteers are helping to map the flows of the San Pedro so that water managers can come up with strategies to restore year-round flows and prevent further deterioration of the ecosystem? Each year, more than 100 volunteers have worked along 300 miles of the San Pedro River and its key tributaries to map where the river has water and where it doesn’t. Organizations such as the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson and the Maricopa Audubon Society of Phoenix-Scottsdale-Tempe, are working tirelessly to protect the threatened San Pedro ecosystem against the encroaching population and its pumping of groundwater. Visit these websites for information on their efforts, how you can become involved or support their efforts:

https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/support/join/ and https://www.maricopaaudubon.org/join

4 https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/water-cycle/

EXTRA

Did you know The United States has more than 2.9 million miles of rivers? Rivers can carve out canyons in the landscape like the Grand Canyon in Arizona which was carved by the waters of the Colorado River. The watershed of a river is an area of land that contains a set of streams which drain into a single body of water. Rivers and the waters that feed them have many different names -stream, creek, brook, rill, runnel, rivulet and watercourse, which all are considered tributaries.

Vicki Hire is an accountant who loves to see birds when she looks up from statistics.
Green Scene True or False?

1. The San Pedro River flows North.  
2. The San Pedro River begins in Sonora, Mexico.  
3. The San Pedro River’s waters flow perennially.  
4. Coatimundis live in the San Pedro riparian areas.  
5. Congress designated 40 miles of the upper San Pedro River as a Riparian National Conservation Area.

Guess this Bird!

CLUE: This bird does not drink water but obtains it from the food it eats. It has a long tail that has a stroke of cinnamon color down the center.

Protecting Arizona’s San Pedro River

Answers on page 23

Across
2. The San Pedro River begins in Sonora, ________
5. Millions of _________ migrating birds use the cottonwood-shaded corridor along the San Pedro River
6. Rivers are part of a process called water ________, which replenishes the Earth’s supply of fresh water
7. The San Pedro River flows ________
9. Another word for rain
10. These carry water from land to oceans
13. Rivers can carve out ________ in the landscape
14. Clouds carry __________ and release it as rain
16. An underground layer of water-bearing permeable rock, rock fractures or material such as gravel, sand or silt
19. Where two or more streams of water meet
20. The San Pedro River is home to 84 species of ________

Down
1. Streams or rivers flowing into a larger river or lake
3. The San Pedro River is 143 ________ long
4. ________ are mapping the flows of the San Pedro
8. Organizations are working to protect the threatened ________ of the San Pedro River
11. The last undammed desert river in the American Southwest
12. Rivers are the ________, to hundreds of plants, birds, and animals
15. The ________ ________ has more than 2.9 million miles of rivers
17. The Grand Canyon was carved by the waters of the ________ River
18. In 1988, forty miles of the upper San Pedro River was designated as a Riparian Natural Conservation Area by ________
# Christmas Bird Count

The National Audubon Society has conducted Christmas Bird Counts since the year 1900. Volunteers from throughout the Western Hemisphere go after during one calendar day between December 14 and January 5 to record every bird species and individual bird encountered within a designated 15-mile diameter circle. These records now comprise an extensive ornithological database that enables monitoring of winter bird populations and the overall health of the environment. Participants are typically assigned to teams based on their bird identification skills and endurance. Many counts hold a compilation dinner at the end of the day where results are tabulated and stories are shared. Help is needed on most of these counts.

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Membership

Being a Friend of Maricopa Audubon Society keeps you in touch with fellow birders and brings you four issues of The Cactus Wren-dition annually. It costs $20, or more if you choose to give additional support, and you can pick up a form at the book sales table during a monthly meeting. You can also sign up by visiting our website: http://maricopaaudubon.org

There is more! You can contribute in the best way possible by lending your abilities to our board. Interested? Send an email to: larsonwarren@gmail.com

Green Scene Puzzle Answers

Answer to Guess this Bird
Ash-throated Flycatchers like to winter in Arizona and Mexico. They rely on nest holes originally made by other birds such as woodpeckers, or in naturally occurring cavities in dead trees. Sometimes they will also nest in artificial cavities like mailboxes, fence posts and other structures. They forage mostly by flying from a perch to hover and pick insects from foliage, but seldom catch them in mid-air. Their diet also includes spiders, bees, and caterpillars. Learn more at https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Ash-throated_Flycatcher/id

Answers to True or False?
1. TRUE
2. TRUE
3. FALSE
4. TRUE
5. TRUE

Answers to Protecting Arizona’s San Pedro River Crossword Puzzle
Time-dated material; do not delay!

Monthly Meeting
Please see meeting information on page two. Contact a board member if you have questions, or check out our website at www.maricopaaudubon.org

Membership Information and How to Receive The Cactus Wren-dition
Two distinct memberships exist: membership of the National Audubon Society (NAS) and membership of the Friends of Maricopa Audubon Society (MAS).

To become a member of the NAS please go to:
www.audubon.org/audubon-near-you

We send The Cactus Wren-dition to all current members of NAS if you are assigned to or choose MAS as your local chapter. NAS provides MAS $3.00 per year for each member assigned to us.

To become a Friend of MAS, please pick up a form at the book sales table at our monthly meeting or visit our website, http://maricopaaudubon.org

For specific questions please contact our Membership Chair.

Submissions
Copy for The Cactus Wren-dition must be received by the editor by mail by January 15, April 1, July 1, and October 1. Articles not received by the deadlines may not appear in the upcoming issue. Some issues may feature a specific focus, so please feel free to enquire and take the theme into account. Email to: The Cactus Wren-dition Editor, David Chorlton: chorltondavid3@gmail.com

Opinions
The opinions expressed by authors in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the policy of the National Audubon Society or the Maricopa Audubon Society.

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