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If You Build It, They Will Come

New video shows deer and other animals crossing Oracle Road wildlife bridge

Tucson – Last fall, a desert tortoise interrupted construction workers to use the new wildlife underpass crossing on north Oracle Road in Pima County, before it was even completed. Now, just weeks after construction was finished, new camera footage has documented a variety of other animals using the wildlife crossings on north Oracle Road in Pima County. Coyote, javelina, and mule deer have all been photographed using the wildlife bridge and underpass and avoiding the oftentimes-deadly 6-lane divided highway. Now that these crossings are “open for business,” this stretch of highway is not only safer for both motorists and wildlife, but also provides habitat connectivity essential for wildlife survival.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department installed video and still cameras on the crossings in early April, and, within days, mule deer, coyote, and javelina were filmed using the wildlife bridge and underpass to cross Oracle Road safely. A link to the first video of deer crossing the bridge can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLcfwGMF7Xk>

This unique project is a result of many years of community collaboration among local and state jurisdictions, elected officials, conservation groups, and neighbors. The wildlife crossings were funded by countywide excise tax of the Regional Transportation Authority, built by Arizona Department of Transportation, and connected lands managed by the Arizona State Land Department, U.S. Forest Service, and Rancho Vistoso Homeowners Association. Pima County funded additional land acquisitions adjacent to the wildlife bridge, and Arizona Game and Fish Department wildlife experts helped develop the project through all phases.

“The voter-approved RTA plan supports wildlife linkages with a 20-year budget of \$45 million to implement multiple projects across the region.” said RTA Executive Director Farhad Moghimi.

The Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection, Sky Island Alliance, and Tucson Audubon Society, among others, have been working for close to two decades to secure funds for wildlife crossing infrastructure, with the open space “wildlife linkage” between the Santa Catalina and Tortolita Mountains being a top focus. “I still have to pinch myself sometimes,” said Carolyn Campbell, Coalition Director. “This project had so many pieces to put together and processes to maneuver, that I often thought maybe it couldn’t be done. But it is, and immediately the animals are using them!”

AZGFD has monitored and documented the success of wildlife crossings throughout Arizona for more than 15 years. Jeff Gagnon, AZGFD Statewide Research Biologist is enthusiastic as well. “This is the most unique project I have worked on,” said Gagnon. “Large protected parks so close to an urban area present challenges for sure. But as I had hoped, wildlife immediately took the opportunity to start crossing these structures – they are working like they are supposed to.”

The Coronado National Forest to the east and the Tortolita Mountains to the west are home to an array of desert animals, including mule deer, bighorn sheep, mountain lions, bobcats, badgers, skunks, white-nose coati, javelinas, coyotes, and much more. “We are fortunate to live in a place with such a wealth of biodiversity and wildlife,” said Jessica Moreno, Sky Island Alliance Conservation Manager. “Every crossing we build keeps more wildlife and people safe. This first video represents the success of people coming together cooperatively, to vote, volunteer, and support this project.”

Christina McVie, Conservation Chair of the Tucson Audubon Society said, “This successful collaboration highlights significant benefits to public safety in avoiding wildlife-vehicle collisions and sets a clear standard for future transportation improvements in our region. It is important to respect these crossings and give wildlife room to roam. Folks should know that it is illegal for people to walk, ride or drive through the crossings.”

A celebration and press conference will be held at the State Route 77 wildlife bridge on Tuesday, May 10th at 9am. The public is welcome. Details will be sent out at a later date.

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