

Friends of the Desert

Issue 51 Summer 2016

A Strong Voice for the People and Wildlife of the Sonoran Desert

Photo: Tom Wiewandt

What's Next for Oracle Road? *Monitoring and maintenance program takes shape*

It's been a busy few months on North Oracle Road. In March, construction of the new wildlife bridge and underpass finished. April brought new video and still cameras installed by the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD). And in May, hundreds of community members came together to celebrate these impressive new wildlife crossings with a press conference, guided walking tours, and a festive gathering at nearby Pusch Ridge Stables.

Almost immediately, AGFD's new cameras began capturing stunning video and photos of wildlife using the crossings. At first, a small herd of deer tentatively checked out and crossed over the wildlife bridge at night. Weeks later, a large herd of deer was captured ambling over the bridge after dawn with the sun rising behind them. Coyotes, javelinas, and bobcats have also been caught on camera using both the bridge and the underpass. And just recently a deer has been reported using the underpass.

For the next three years, AGFD will continue to collect camera footage of wildlife using the crossings. This will provide important data about how long it takes different wildlife species to adapt to the crossings, especially as factors such as increasing vegetation changes. In July, the Coalition began collaborating with AGFD on this data collection with the installation of new wildlife cameras in the approach areas of the crossings. Our data will help the monitoring program establish whether there are some wildlife species approaching the

crossings but choosing not to use them right now.

It is well known that some wildlife species take longer to adapt to wildlife crossings than others. In Banff National Park, for example, where a series of wildlife bridges were built in 1997, it took grizzly bears up to six years to begin using the new crossings. Now that they have adapted, they are documented using the bridges regularly. New genetic studies have also demonstrated that bears are using the crossings to successfully find mates on the other side of the highway.

**Thank you for everything
you've done to help with
this amazing community
milestone!**

We know now that mule deer, javelinas, coyotes, and bobcats are willing to use the Oracle Road crossings almost immediately. We also can't

forget the desert tortoise that interrupted construction of the wildlife underpass! What wildlife species will be next? Our wildlife cameras recently captured a coatimundi just west of the underpass. We also have photos of foxes, badgers, jackrabbits and other species nearby. **You will be the first to know when AGFD documents new species using these crossings!**

Soon, AGFD will start to track the movements of desert tortoises near the crossings. We are also working with project partners to address on-going maintenance of the wildlife fencing, ensuring vegetation grows on the crossings, managing invasive species removal, and the installation of educational signage about the crossings. Stay tuned for more updates as all of these moving parts continue to develop!



Thanks to your support, a mule deer safely crosses Oracle Road on the new wildlife bridge this spring. Photo courtesy AGFD



A bobcat safely crosses under Oracle Road in the new wildlife underpass. Photo courtesy AGFD

Sponsor a Camera!

We need to install 20 wildlife cameras in the wildlife crossing approaches but only have 6 cameras right now. Each camera and related installation equipment costs ~\$350. Sponsor a camera today with your donation and you can give the camera a name of your choice! Contact us at (520) 388-9925 or admin@sonorandesert.org for more information!

The Coalition works to create a community where: ecosystem health is protected; nature and healthy wild animal populations are valued; and residents, visitors, and future generations can all drink clean water, breathe clean air, and find wild places to roam.

Coalition Member Groups

Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest
Arizona Native Plant Society
Bat Conservation International
Cascabel Conservation Association
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Environmental Connections
Center for Environmental Ethics
Defenders of Wildlife
Desert Watch
Environmental and Cultural Conservation Organization
Environmental Law Society
Friends of Cabeza Prieta
Friends of Ironwood Forest
Friends of Madera Canyon
Friends of Saguaro National Park
Friends of Tortolita
Gates Pass Area Neighborhood
Genius Loci Foundation
Native Seeds / SEARCH
Northwest Neighborhood Alliance
Protect Land and Neighborhoods
Safford Peak Watershed Education Team
Save the Scenic Santa Ritas
Sierra Club – Grand Canyon Chapter
Sierra Club – Rincon Group
Sky Island Alliance
Sky Island Watch
Society for Ecological Restoration
Southwestern Biological Institute
Tortolita Homeowners Association
Tucson Audubon Society
Tucson Herpetological Society
Tucson Mountains Association
Wildlands Network

Website: www.sonorandesert.org

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Welcome, Sarah!

I am happy to be joining the Coalition team as sad as it is to say goodbye to Hannah!

I first learned about the Coalition a few years ago and after getting to know more about the impactful work being done and seeing the wildlife crossings completed, I knew I wanted to be a part of such an outstanding and impactful group of people. My love affair with the natural world began when I was a child spending summers on a farm in Montana. I first started working toward the preservation and restoration of natural spaces 15 years ago in Pennsylvania when I joined the Illick's Mill Project working toward the restoration of a historic grist mill.

The truth be told, I never thought I would end up in Arizona. Once I arrived, I thought I would leave in a matter of months seeking greener pastures. That was well over a decade ago. :)

Landing here in Tucson was one of the best things that has ever happened to me. I have grown to love the surrounding landscape more and more as the days pass. The subtle beauty of the Sonoran Desert has captured my soul and I hope to reside here always side by side with the great saguaro. I am happy to have the opportunity to use the skills I have acquired in outreach, marketing, social media, and coalition building to further the collective voice of this community which is as much in love with this grand land as I am.

I have big shoes to fill. Having known Hannah for the past few years, I am happy to call her a colleague and friend. Taking me under her wing before she goes, Hannah has made me feel at home and helped get me up to speed so that I may hit the ground running. She will be missed and I know you will join me in wishing her the best!



And Thanks, Hannah!



After three years of working at the Coalition, it's time for me to start my next adventure pursuing a Master of Science in Planning degree at the University of Arizona. It has truly been an honor to work for such an amazing and impactful organization. In just my short time here, I have seen the expansion of our wildlife camera project in two regions, the completion of wildlife crossings across State Route 86 and Oracle Road, and the protection of important open space (just to name a few). I look forward to seeing what amazing things the Coalition accomplishes next as Sarah comes on board!

I'm so grateful to everyone I have been fortunate enough to meet and work with during my time here, especially the amazing Coalition staff, our wildlife camera volunteers, and our member groups. Thank you for everything! I have learned so much during my time here and I am excited to continue pursuing my passion for protecting Sonoran Desert open space and creating vibrant and sustainable communities through my graduate program. I know I leave my position in very capable and enthusiastic hands, so please join me in welcoming Sarah to the Coalition!



Our wildlife cameras continue to be very busy! Fox, coatimundi, and javelina are just three of the species we've caught on camera recently. The coatimundi photo was taken west of the new Oracle Road wildlife underpass and this is the first time we've gotten this species on camera! Thank you to our many volunteers who are the foundation of this program!

More Cameras for More Critters

With your help, the Coalition is expanding its wildlife camera project

It's been a busy year for our wildlife camera project! In December we expanded the project into the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage with four new cameras. Since then we have added two more cameras in that region to document wildlife in this critical wildlife linkage. We've seen photos of a great variety of wildlife already, including deer, skunk, javelina, fox, raccoon, and more!

And in July, we added the first four cameras to the approaches of the Oracle Road wildlife bridge to document animals moving towards the bridge but maybe not crossing yet (it is well-established that some wildlife species take longer than others to adapt to new crossings). Our data will complement the video footage and still pictures being collected by the Arizona Game and Fish Department who are

managing cameras on both the wildlife bridge and underpass. In the coming months, we will be adding 16 more cameras (for a total of 20 cameras) to the approaches of both the wildlife underpass and wildlife bridge to gather as much data as possible about wildlife use of the crossings.

In the Oro Valley area we have 17 wildlife cameras in the field gathering data about wildlife in the broader wildlife linkage from the Santa Catalina to Tortolita mountains. We've gathered thousands of stunning photos of wildlife that will benefit from the crossings and are looking forward to many more!

We Need You!

Want to volunteer to monitor a wildlife camera or sort photos in our office for analysis? Email Sarah at Sarah.Whelan@sonorandesert.org or call our office at (520) 388-9925. We look forward to meeting you!

Interstate 11: Economic Driver or Environmental Catastrophe?

Coalition submits detailed scoping comments on Environmental Impact Statement

For many years, the Coalition has advocated for smart transportation solutions. Whether that means constructing wildlife crossings, installing bat houses under bridges, or opposing new interstates through biologically-important areas, we always argue for solutions that are cutting-edge, forward-thinking, and conservation-minded.

The construction of an Interstate 10 "bypass" has been an idea we have long opposed, whether along the San Pedro River or through Avra Valley west of the Tucson Mountains. Most recently, in July we submitted detailed "scoping comments" on the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for "Interstate 11," a proposed highway between Nogales and Wickenburg. While no specific corridors are identified at this time, the map of the "Study Area" included much of the Tucson region, including Avra Valley

What are scoping comments? They are comments that inform the federal government what issues we think should be reviewed, studied, and deliberated in the EIS for a project. In this case, the Arizona Department of Transportation and Federal Highways Administration

are jointly managing the environmental review process.

Our scoping comments covered a wide range of issues, including impacts to federal and local conservation lands, vulnerable wildlife species, wildlife linkages, Pima County's Conservation Lands System, riparian habitat, and noise and light pollution. We also argued that the purpose and need for this project have not been well-established and that broader impacts need to be studied in detail. In the end, we've concluded that "improvements to existing transportation corridors and reducing congestion on existing highways in order to accommodate future traffic will best minimize environmental impacts."

What's next? The selection of corridor alternatives, publication of a Draft EIS, and more public comments before a Record of Decision and Final EIS are published. The entire process is expected to take three years and we are currently in the middle of the first year. For more information on the project, visit i11study.com/Arizona. To read our full scoping comments, visit <http://bit.ly/29GNOPz>.

Thank you to our many supporters who submitted scoping statements. Your voice makes a difference.

Protecting Open Space in New Developments

Small amounts of open space add up to a big impact

With the economy back on the up-swing, new residential and commercial developments are quickly moving forward in Pima County.

Your ongoing support helps us work directly with property owners to advise them on how to include functional and connected open space in their projects.

In unincorporated Pima County, if a property (or part of a property) is located in the Conservation Lands System, related open space guidelines recommend a certain amount of open space be preserved on the property. In other local jurisdictions, other planning documents recommend how much open space should be protected given the biological importance of the property. However, there are often many different ways that open space can be configured to achieve the best outcome for wildlife.

This year so far, the Coalition has worked on eight projects resulting in 345 acres in protected open space. This open space is located both on the properties approved for development and in “off-site mitigation” areas.

Because of your ongoing support, we’ve developed constructive working relationships with most local developers and we are proud of the work we are doing to protect open spaces, both big and small. Thank you!

Invest in the Sonoran Desert today:

Become a Desert Champion!



Photo courtesy Bill Lesch

Our recurring donors provide a critical foundation for our projects. Please join us! Call us at (520) 388-9925 or visit sonorandesert.org to sign up. Thank you!



Loft Cinema August 17, 6:30pm
3233 E Speedway Blvd, Tucson 85716
Gen. Admission includes 1 free raffle entry
\$8 in advance / \$10 at the door

It's back!

The Coalition is hosting the Wild & Scenic Film Festival August 17!

Join us for 10 inspiring films, a raffle, and a theater full of your Coalition friends.

Visit sonorandesert.org for more information and to get your tickets!

Volunteer/Donor Spotlight: *Chuck Graf*

As a native Tucsonan, I remember when Kolb Road was dirt, as was 22nd Street out east, and have vivid memories of riding in our family car as it dropped steeply down 22nd Street into Pantano Wash. The desert from there pretty much extended undisturbed to the Catalina and Rincon Mountains. After my junior year at Rincon High, we moved to the Phoenix area, where I graduated from ASU and spent most of my working career as a hydrologist.

When my wife, Mary, and I chose to move back to Tucson last year, I soon learned about the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection. There was much to like—action, not talk. They had assembled a truly impressive coalition and were clearly good at working with their coalition partners, including governmental partners. They were protecting desert wildlife corridors between the mountains and getting wildlife over/underpasses built.



Talking to Kathleen Kennedy of CSDP at a local event, I found they needed volunteers to monitor new wildlife cameras in the northern Tucson Mountains, so I attended the “camera school” taught by Hannah Stitzer. I now monitor two cameras with my cam co-caretakers, Don Broomall and Aleksandra Apostolova, always optimistic about capturing great photos.

Looking out from our camera locations, I am encouraged to see that there is a still large swath of natural Sonoran Desert extending to the Tortolitas. Yes, it is encroached on in places, particularly by the I-10 crossing, but if we resolve to, we can protect it and enhance it as a viable wildlife corridor. I picture the animals out there safely padding along on their game trails and hope that we can pass that reality to our children and grandchildren. For me, that is one great reason among many to support the Coalition.

Thank you Chuck for all your hard work and dedication to our wildlife camera project!