

Friends of the Desert

Issue 55 Spring 2019

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

Photo: Bob Wick-BLM-CC Flickr

Thanks to You, Our Critter Cam Field Day for Kids Expanded to Four Schools and over 400 Children!

Local elementary school students undertake hands-on day of learning about local wildlife and wildlife linkages

In early March 2019, over the course of two days, more than 400 elementary school students descended on Catalina State Park for a day of hands-on learning about Sonoran Desert wildlife and wildlife linkages. Under clear blue skies, with a beautiful view of Pusch Ridge and the Catalina Mountains, these students learned how to use binoculars and spotting scopes; observed a packrat, birds of prey, and reptiles; completed hands-on activities about camouflage, wildlife tracks, and pheromones; and took a hike to see one of the “Critter Cams” they’ve been learning about all year.

This “Critter Cam Field Day” capped off a year of learning about wildlife and wildlife linkages, including sorting photos taken by the Coalition’s two Critter Cams located near the Oracle Road wildlife bridge. A huge thank you to all the

Coalition volunteers, community partners, and the teachers and parents of the Catalina Foothills School District elementary schools that helped guide students through this exciting field experience (especially teachers Charlotte Ackerman and Kelly Taylor). And to the kids that attended this special day — thanks for your enthusiasm and curiosity about the Sonoran Desert! Lastly, thank YOU for supporting this educational program for local children — in the coming year, we’ll be exploring how to bring this program to other local elementary schools, so stay tuned!

**Thank you for supporting
the Critter Cam program
for local children!**

Below: Over 400 children from local schools descended on Catalina State Park in early March 2019 to learn about wildlife and wildlife cameras on a guided hike, complete hands-ons activities about wildlife tracks, and learn how to use binoculars and spotting scopes.





Carolyn's Corner

Rosemont Mine and Interstate 11 Pose Grave Threats to the Sonoran Desert

Thank you for supporting our work against these destructive proposals

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 Ethics
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Desert Watch
- 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 Association
- Genius Loci Foundation
- Native Seeds / SEARCH
- 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
- Society for Ecological Restoration
- Southwestern Biological Institute
- Tortolita Homeowners Association
- Tucson Audubon Society
- Tucson Herpetological Society
- Tucson Mountains Association
- Wildlands Network

With your support, the Coalition has been working for two decades to protect our special places and our native plants and animals. Much of this time we have been fortunate to be working for important initiatives. The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, the Open Space Bond, the endangered species-focused Habitat Conservation Plan, voter-funded wildlife crossings, and the Ironwood Forest National Monument are some of the important successes we have been involved in thanks to you, along with other less well-known policy initiatives.

However, we sometimes need to work *against* projects that are not good for the community. Although we have had our share of those throughout the years, there are two projects moving forward that would destroy much of the positive progress our community has made in the last few years. These two projects are the Rosemont Mine and a new freeway (“I-11”) west of the Tucson Mountains. These projects would be disastrous for our region.

In early March, the federal government approved the final permit needed for operations to begin at the Rosemont Mine, after many years of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) memos criticizing the mine project. “*The Rosemont Mine will degrade and destroy waters in the Cienega Creek watershed containing regionally rare, largely intact mosaics of some of the highest quality stream and wetland ecosystems in Arizona,*” was the conclusion in one EPA memo. In another, the EPA said, “*...contaminated mine runoff is additive, increasing concentrations of heavy metals to existing downstream waters and worsening water quality.*” The fight is not over just because the permit has been issued. There has already been a lawsuit filed, and the Coalition intends to be involved as long as it takes to stop the Rosemont Mine.

Proposed by the US Federal Highways Administration, Interstate 11 is a multi-state highway from the border with Mexico on the south to the Arizona/Nevada border on the north. This proposal is working its way through the federal public process with two possible alternative routes being presented. The least destructive and obvious choice is the one the Coalition supports — co-locating with the already-built highways I-19 from Nogales to Tucson and I-10 from Tucson north. Unfortunately, we fully expect that the “preferred alternative,” soon to be released, will be a *new freeway* west of the Tucson Mountains, cutting a wide and long scar through the Sonoran Desert, diverting cars and large trucks, and disrupting wildlife and wildlife movement. This is backward and insane, especially considering the decades-long successful efforts to establish and expand protected preserves in this area, such as Tucson Mountain Park, Saguaro National Park, and Ironwood Forest National Monument. When the proposed route is released to the public, we will help you, our supporters and friends, with avenues to comment. As with the Rosemont Mine, we will continue with this fight until we win!

An I-11 route west of the Tucson Mountains is backward and insane and we will continue to fight this until we win!

Thank you for supporting all the ways we are *for* protecting the Sonoran Desert and the unfortunate times we must fight *against* projects that will destroy our open spaces and wildlife linkages. Your support is invaluable and we are grateful for your time, your donations, and your voice.

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Over 5,999 Animals Have Used the Oracle Road Wildlife Crossings

AGFD Releases New Monitoring Report

In January 2019, the Arizona Game and Fish Department released a new monitoring report on the Oracle Road wildlife bridge and wildlife underpass. Since the monitoring program began in March 2016, Game and Fish cameras have documented 6,000 crossings of 23 wildlife species at both the bridge and underpass combined. 3,187 animals have used the bridge with the majority being mule deer. 2,812 animals have used the underpass with high numbers from javelina and coyotes.

In February 2019, Game and Fish collared 20 mule deer near the crossings and cameras recorded the first collared deer using the wildlife bridge the next morning, and two bucks crossing the bridge twice within the first 48 hours.

We are excited to report on the success of this project. Coalition cameras continue to document wildlife in the crossing approaches and surrounding wildlife linkage area with the amazing support of our volunteer Desert Monitors and Desert Identifiers. **Thank you!**



Above and below: Beautiful Sonoran Desert habitat can be seen in these photos of 545 acres of new open space near Ajo recently acquired by Pima County. *Photos courtesy Pima County*

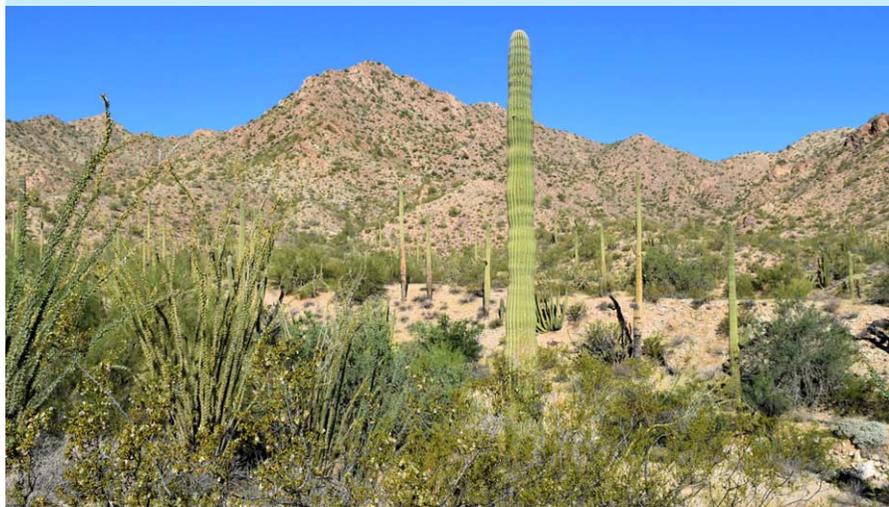
Pima County Acquires New Open Space Properties

Over 1,000 new acres of open space are now preserved for people and wildlife

Good news! In late 2018, Pima County added to its already impressive portfolio of local open space lands. According to Pima County Environmental Planning Manager Julia Fonseca, “In December 2018, the Pima County Board of Supervisors unanimously accepted a donation of 545 acres near the Ajo Scenic Loop in western Pima County from a total of seven owners who wish to protect this natural desert over the long term. Pima County Regional Flood Control District also got full property rights to nearly 500 acres of the Big Wash near Rancho Vistoso Blvd. that was previously protected by a conservation easement.”

The Ajo open space property is largely surrounded by Bureau of Land Management land and is near the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. Desert bighorn sheep have been observed on the property. The Big Wash open space property is an important piece in the larger Santa Catalina-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage and will support the Oracle Road wildlife crossings.

With your support, the Coalition will continue to work with Pima County and the Regional Transportation Authority to finish filling in wildlife fencing gaps near the new Big Wash open space — this will further increase the effectiveness of the Oracle Road wildlife crossings for the benefit of wildlife and people.



Since 2016, the Oracle Road crossings have been used by 23 wildlife species with 5,999 documented crossings.



Game and Fish cameras captured this mule deer heading east on the Oracle Road wildlife bridge in September 2018. *Photo courtesy AGFD*

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The Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection is an independent, nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization. Contributions to the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law. Our EIN # is 82-2156664.

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Design & Layout: Julie St. John

Desert Champion Spotlight: Kelli Gaither-Banchoff, LMT

Tucson and the surrounding mountains and desert are my home and where I've raised my children the last 25 years. I remember when the Coalition was just an incredible idea and have supported their efforts since the beginning to protect the lands and animals of southern Arizona that are so precious to me. I understand the need for development and economic prosperity and believe it can be successfully directed in a way that supports the protection of the wild and natural world while also facilitating the healthy growth of our community. This is where the Coalition excels and leads!

I'm proud to be a supporter of the Coalition and its incredible staff. Maintaining the balance of our desert habitat should be our primary concern locally — for the health and sustainability of all of us who live here. **Become a monthly donor with me!**

Thank you, Kelli, for your inspiring words and your long-time commitment to the Coalition and the Sonoran Desert!



Kelli with her daughter Allie.



Become a Desert Champion Today!

Are you interested in giving regularly and automatically to support the Sonoran Desert and local wildlife? Our recurring donors, affectionately called our Desert Champions, give monthly or quarterly through our online giving portal or through their personal banks. Head to sonorandesert.org/donate-now/become-a-desert-champion to learn more. We can't wait to have you on board! Questions? Give us a call at (520) 388-9925 or send an email to admin@sonorandesert.org —we'd love to hear from you!

Volunteer-driven Wildlife Camera Project Continues to Grow

Photos being used to inform I-11 opposition and new cameras being added east of Tucson

Our community science wildlife camera monitoring efforts continued on course, and in 2018 we gathered over 10,500 images of wildlife from 45 camera sites. In total, our data has reached nearly 80,000 wildlife photos and counting. In 2018 alone, over 40 different species were photographed, including badgers in three locations, and over 142 photos of roadrunners!

With the help of our volunteers (thank you!), we added additional cameras sites this year as we refined our study design in Oro Valley near the wildlife crossings, and we continue to ramp up our work in the Tucson Mountains to inform our opposition to the proposed Interstate-11 bypass through Avra Valley.

In addition, we are beginning a new endeavor to improve wildlife movement east of Tucson across I-10 between Vail and Benson, and we have cameras — and volunteer Desert Monitors — ready to launch this new project in spring of 2019.

Thank you for your continued support of this project!



Right: This fox was captured by our GINGER wildlife camera in the northern Tucson mountains, monitored by Coalition volunteer Skylar