

Friends of the Desert

Issue 57 Spring 2020

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

Photo: Dulcey Lima-Unsplash

New Project Collecting Data on Rincon–Santa Rita–Whetstone Mountains Wildlife Linkage

Thanks to your support, new data will hopefully lead to more wildlife fencing and a safer roadway

The sandy soil of Cienega Creek is damp at the water's edge, juniper and saguaro make unlikely neighbors, and the sun dapples through the leafy sycamore and cottonwood tree canopy. This is not only a steady source of water in the Sonoran Desert's Pimería Alta, but also an important wildlife pathway connecting the Rincon, Santa Rita, and Whetstone Mountains, and the traditional territory of the Tohono O'odham, Hohokam, and Sobaipuri. **Cienega Creek Natural Preserve and Davidson Canyon are vital lifelines for common low desert species, as well as higher elevation dwellers like turkey, white-nose coati, opossum, white tail deer, and black bear.**

Dividing this refuge is Interstate 10, which animals must regularly navigate. Thanks to funding from the Arizona Game and Fish Heritage Fund, we now have 45 wildlife cameras deployed at nine culverts and

Thanks to you, we now have 45 wildlife cameras deployed at nine culverts and bridges on I-10 located between Vail and Benson.

bridges on I-10 located between Vail and Benson. **Early in the project, we've already collected thousands of photos including mule deer, white-tail deer, coyotes, bobcats, and hooded skunks.** With this data we will be calculating passage rates to understand which animals use these culverts and how often, or if they approach but turn away.

continued inside



(Left) CSDP Conservation Science Director Jessica Moreno and volunteer Althea Weeks at a wildlife camera set up in the new I-10 project area. (Right) The Rincon Mountains loom over I-10 and a series of de facto wildlife underpasses being studied as part of our new I-10 project. Thanks for supporting connected Sonoran Desert wildlife linkages!



Carolyn's Corner

Healing Scars in the Desert

Wildlife crossings an important piece of protecting the Sonoran Desert

Working in the conservation field brings many surprises. Our work here at the Coalition has taken many twists and turns in the last 20+ years. Early on, our public policy work successfully transformed Pima County from being “development oriented” to being “conservation-oriented.” Leading campaigns to persuade voters to support Open Space Bond funding for hundreds of millions of dollars was gratifying as well.

One area that I did not think we would be spending so much effort on, however, is transportation! We have learned so much over the last many years about how important it is to protect large patches of habitat and open space and ensure that those patches (typically public parks, forests, refuges, and monuments) are connected. This is how populations of wildlife survive and thrive.

Thanks to you, we have built success upon success, protecting precious habitat in the face of many threats.

Because of your support, we have many protected open spaces in southern Arizona; however, if they are surrounded by barriers — housing, stores, roads, railroad tracks, etc — the animals within them will not be able to thrive and will eventually disappear.

It was with that realization, and support from all of you, that our work expanded from our efforts to protect important open space to also ensuring that lands that have become isolated by roads are reconnected through human-made mitigation structures. In 2006, our campaign for the Regional Transportation Authority succeeded and our expansion into “transportation experts” began.

Many in the community are familiar with the Oracle Road wildlife bridge because it is above-ground and hard to miss. It is large and adjacent to the urbanized area. However, **there are multiple wildlife underpasses that also exist and that are working beautifully for many species throughout the region.** And there are more on the way! Here are some of the locations: Camino de Manana, Sahuarita Road / Santa Cruz River, Tangerine Road, La Cholla, and Ajo Road / State Route 86 (SR 86) near Kitt Peak. And there will be more coming in the next phase of Tangerine Road west to I-10!

An exciting update to share is that we will soon have more vegetated wildlife bridges – built specifically for desert bighorn sheep — on SR 86 east of Kitt Peak. The SR 86 Wildlife Overpass project will construct two wildlife bridges on SR 86. The project will also include wildlife fencing to ensure that wildlife are funneled to the bridges and stay off the road. Right now, the funding agreement between the Regional Transportation Authority and the Tohono O’odham Nation is being finalized. We anticipate that approvals will be obtained through the various councils and boards in the upcoming months and that design activities will be initiated sometime during the summer. Once built, these will be the second and third wildlife bridges in the Sonoran Desert!

Thanks to all of you, we have been able to build success upon success to help heal many of the scars on our desert while protecting precious habitat in the face of many threats. We are so grateful to you.

Carolyn Campbell *Executive Director*
Kathleen Kennedy *Associate Director*
Jessica Moreno *Conservation Science Director*
Whelan *Program & Operations Manager*

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.

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

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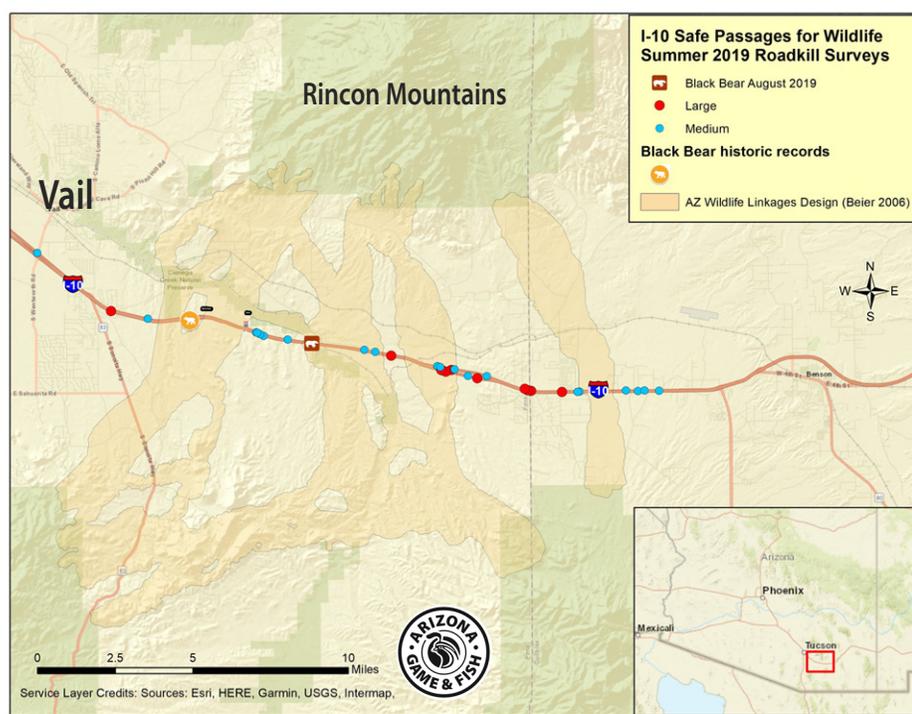
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Rincon–Santa Rita–Whetstone Mountains Wildlife Linkage

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For animals that don't use the culverts, nothing stops them from crossing I-10 itself. Thus, to gain a larger picture of the issue, we are also conducting driving roadkill surveys (you can add your own observations on our iNaturalist.org CSDP Safe Passages project). Mapping hotspots helps us find problem areas. One sad but significant result from last year was a black bear killed on I-10 just west of the Cienega Creek bridge. This was a good reminder about why this work is so important.

Although this project is in its beginning stages, the energy of our volunteers is building our momentum and we are already getting down to business to secure funding for wildlife funnel fencing and wildlife crossing improvements. With luck, it won't be long before we will be able to repeat our studies to show the difference we made.



Map of the summer 2019 roadkill surveys completed for the I-10 Safe Passages project courtesy Myles Traphagen of The Wildlands Network. Project funded by Arizona Game and Fish Department Heritage Fund Grant, The Wildlands Network, and the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection.



Become a Desert Champion Today!

Are you interested in giving regularly and automatically to support the Sonoran Desert and local wildlife? Our **Desert Champions** set up an automatic, recurring gift through our online giving webpage or through their personal banks (typically monthly or quarterly). Head to sonorandesert.org/donate-now/become-a-desert-champion to learn more. We can't wait to have you on board!

Volunteer Spotlight

Josh Skattum and Sam Wilber

Hello! We're Sam Wilber and Josh Skattum and we work together at Reid Park Zoo and volunteer for the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection as camera monitors. We call ourselves the Zoo Crew!

Both of us were new to Arizona at about the same time in 2018. Neither of us knew anything about the Sonoran Desert but we both thought it seemed like a fascinating ecosystem and we wanted to learn more! We both have a history of volunteering for wildlife and environmental organizations, so Josh went on the hunt to find a local organization that we could volunteer for that would introduce us to the desert and give us an opportunity to get involved with wildlife fieldwork. When we found the Coalition and realized we could get outdoors and work with field cameras we were hooked!

We've had a blast being camera monitors and are especially excited about our new cameras we are placing down near Cienega Creek. **Josh's favorite part of volunteering is hiking outdoors and meeting and connecting with other people interested in conservation. Sam's favorite part of volunteering is being out in nature and reviewing camera pictures to see what awesome wildlife went by.** We are both so glad that we found this organization, and we can't wait to keep volunteering and see what our new camera placements can learn!



Impact Briefs

Rosemont Mine

Since a federal judge halted construction of the Rosemont Mine in late July 2019, even more has happened to help stop this mine for good. In August 2019, the Army Corps of Engineers suspended the Clean Water Act permit for the mine. And in February 2020, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's approval of the mine was also overturned by Judge James Soto. Thank you for your persistence over the many years we have opposed this proposed mine in the Santa Rita Mountains.

Oracle Road Wildlife Crossings

Arizona Game and Fish Department continues to monitor both the Oracle Road wildlife bridge and underpass. The latest monitoring report from December 2019 disclosed that 19 vertebrate species have been identified using the crossings: 11 species at the bridge and 18 species at the underpass. 9,253 crossings have been documented: 4,649 crossings at the bridge and 4,604 crossings at the underpass. This is amazing — thank you for supporting protected and connected Sonoran Desert wildlife linkages!

Interstate 11

Since the close of public comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Interstate 11 route, the Coalition has been working behind the scenes to obtain all the public comments on the DEIS (by way of Freedom of Information Act requests). We have also been working to document the proposed route with aerial and land photographs and stay connected with our community partners. You will be the first to know when we have any more concrete news to share about the future of this ill-fated proposal.



Ripe prickly pear beckon in Cochise Canyon, a protected piece of open space in the Tortolita Mountains. Photo courtesy Pima County.

Local Community Rallies to Save Tortolita Preserve

Thank you for supporting the Tortolita Preserve!

Good news for conservation in Marana! On December 10, 2019, the Marana Town Council approved the new draft Marana General Plan with a few major changes we requested. This includes: 1) solidifying the long-term protection of the Tortolita Preserve, and 2) removing a “Special Planning Area” from lands southwest of the Tortolita Preserve so these lands will remain low density if they are ever developed.

Thank you to all the community members that showed up and voiced their concerns about these issues over the last couple months, including the newly formed Tortolita Alliance (tortolitaalliance.com)! Our voices can make a difference!

Thank you for using your voice — you made a difference!

The Tortolita Preserve is a 2,400-acre preserve located on the Tortolita Fan south of the Tortolita Mountains. It was formed in 2000 through a 99-year lease from the Arizona State Land Department that is paid for by the Town of Marana. It is an important piece of open space and wildlife habitat in the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage and also a popular place for hikers, mountain bikers, and birders.

If you'd like more information, you can read our full comment letter that we submitted to the Marana Town Council on December 9, 2019, along with the full draft Marana General Plan on our website at: <https://bit.ly/2TyxhEd>.

What's next for the Marana General Plan? Marana voters will get to vote on this new General Plan in August. If you live in Marana, we encourage you to vote YES on the Marana General Plan!

Stay Connected!



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