



Friends of the Desert

Issue 60 Fall 2021
A Strong Voice for the People and Wildlife of the Sonoran Desert

Photo: Dulcey Lima-Unsplash

New project will collect wildlife data on Sopori Ranch

Data will help protect the Santa Rita-Atascosa Mountains wildlife linkage

by Jessica Moreno, Conservation Science Director

South of Green Valley, Carolyn Campbell and I hopped out of Liz Petterson’s open-windowed gray 4x4 truck to explore a nearby puddle just past the gate. The air was heavy with humidity and the mud stuck to our shoes like clay. Thousands of small black comma-shaped bodies wriggled in the chocolate water, and tiny Arizona spotted toads, still wet and clumsy with their residual tails, leaped ahead of us like scattered popcorn. We were visiting Sopori Ranch in July 2021 with the Arizona Land and Water Trust, and the toadlets heralded a fine day to come.

The Arizona Land and Water Trust works to preserve southern Arizona’s western landscapes, farms, and ranches and acts as a bridge for many private landowners seeking to protect wildlife habitat and water on their lands. Recently, they have been focused on raising over \$8 million to protect 1,300 acres of Sopori Farm and Sopori

Creek from future development. This astounding place sits among 25,000 acres of protected land, including Sopori Ranch, that together connect Sopori Creek with the Santa Cruz River on the other side of I-19.

In the mesquite bosque, every majestic and gnarled mesquite tree held potential for a wildlife camera with a great view.

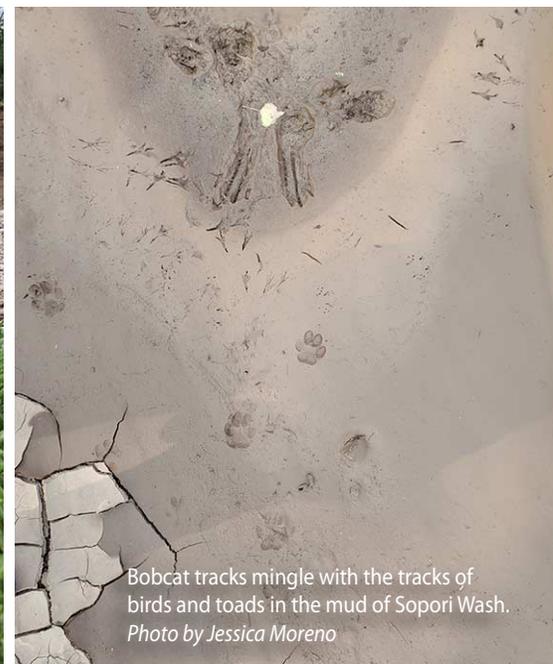
It is a vital keystone part of a wildlife movement corridor between the Santa Rita mountains, the Cerro Colorado, and the Atascosa mountains. White-tailed deer, jaguar, ocelot, mountain lion, bear, yellow-billed cuckoo, and lesser long-nosed bats are the stars of the show, but the area provides habitat for a host of plants and wildlife, from tadpoles and jackrabbits to sycamores and Pima pineapple cactus. The

importance of the riparian area and water cannot be understated. You feel it, walking the edge of the Ranch and into Sopori Creek: there is a living sacredness under your feet and in each deep breath of air.

continued inside



CSDP Executive Director Carolyn Campbell and ALWT Board President Diana Freshwater on a field visit to the Sopori Ranch. We are excited to collaborate with ALWT on collecting data about wildlife presence and diversity in this area in the coming year. Photo by Jessica Moreno



Bobcat tracks mingle with the tracks of birds and toads in the mud of Sopori Wash. Photo by Jessica Moreno



Carolyn's Corner

Creativity and inspiration keep us going

Thank you for helping us all stay connected

The Coalition's mission is to protect the biodiversity of the Sonoran Desert in southern Arizona through science-based advocacy, education, and collaboration.

We are grateful for the opportunity to live and work on traditionally Native lands, including those belonging to the O'odham, Tohono O'odham, and Pascua Yaqui.

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

Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Tucson
Broadband

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 Alliance

Tortolita Homeowners Association

Tucson Audubon Society

Tucson Herpetological Society

Tucson Mountains Association

Wildlands Network

This past year has been full of challenges for all of us. But it has also led to creative approaches to how we work and how we stay connected with all of you.

We have adapted our wildlife camera "Desert Monitors" program to be mostly contact-free, with safe pick-ups and drop-offs of equipment, new databases for electronic transfer of photos, hosting group meetings through video-based communication, and setting up home-based offices. But we miss our personal connections! That spurred a new weekly email, *A Dose of Desert Joy*, where we all connect through a celebration of nature and the Sonoran Desert.

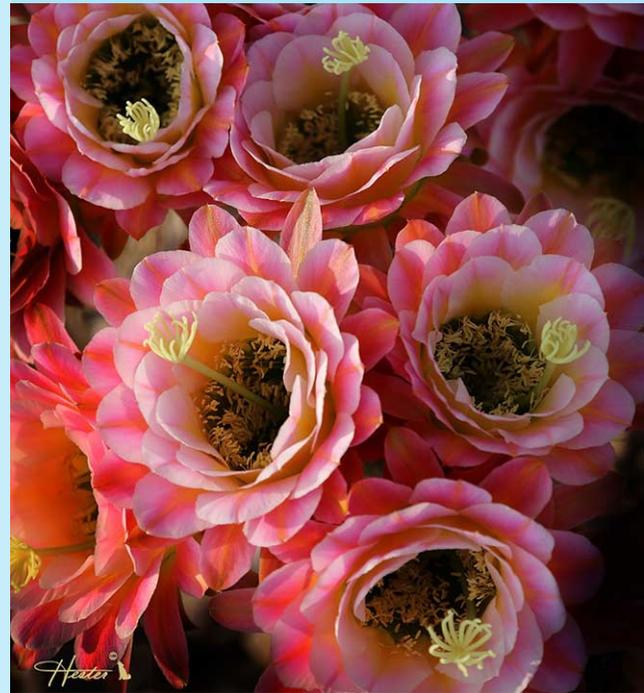
We have heard from many of you that you look forward to these photo-heavy and news-light emails. I hope all of you have enjoyed viewing our *Dose of Desert Joy* as much as we have enjoyed putting it together. I am always amazed, although I shouldn't be, at how much talent we have in our ranks of supporters. The photographs that you send in are stunning, and we have also received poetry, songs, and stories about the Sonoran Desert. One thing I am not amazed by is the deep love that our community holds for the desert — its wildlife, plants, vistas, sunsets, seasons.

Enclosed you will find our 2020 Annual Report. I hope you can take a minute to read through everything we accomplished together and please reach out if you want more information or have any suggestions for the future.

I have been educated and inspired by so many of you this year. It is this inspiration that keeps the challenges at bay and the beauty of nature and humankind alive. Thank you for helping us through these past months and joining us in looking forward to the work we have yet to accomplish!

Pink cactus flowers. Photo by Sheryl Hester

Inspiration keeps the challenges at bay and the beauty of nature and humankind alive.



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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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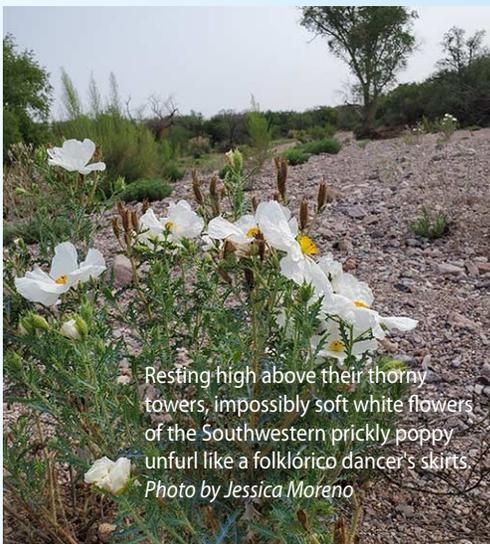
Sopori Ranch

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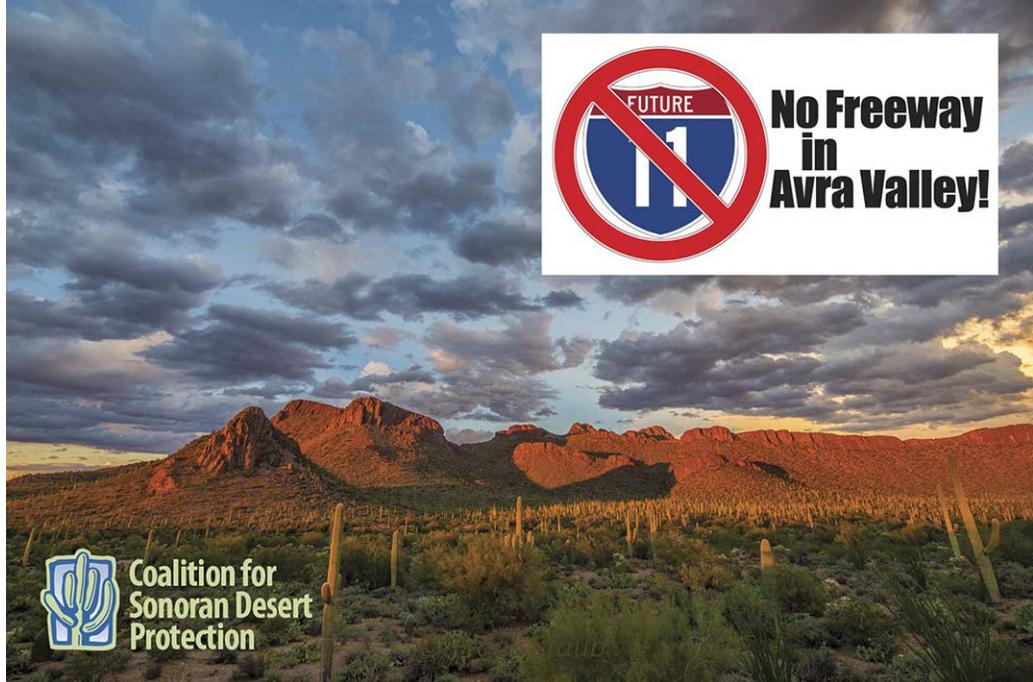
We were here in the early hours of the morning to beat the heat, with coffee in our mugs and an assortment of donut holes close at hand. Together with Liz and Diana Freshwater, we planned to scout out some potential sites for wildlife cameras, with the aim to photograph the wide array of species in the corridor and create a species list to augment past surveys. It was hard to avoid in the mud from the last rain, and it slowed me down... I couldn't help but to stop to admire the delicate four-toed tracks of bobcats, to trace a herd of javelina with their hooved tracks like two thumbprints pressed together stitching a trail across the wash, and to exclaim over the long-toed hopping and waking gaits of Sonoran Desert toads.

Near the junction of Sopori Creek and Interstate-19, where we investigated placing a camera to show which species were traveling under the highway, a large turkey vulture perched on a snag and watched us. In the mesquite bosque, every majestic and gnarled mesquite tree held potential for a wildlife camera with a great view.

Despite the humidity, the overcast sky and a refreshing breeze worked with the scenery to make a day of hiking and driving along bumpy ranch roads such a pleasant adventure that it was hard to turn back to the highway and home. I look forward to going out again this fall, when the air will be chilly and the sycamore tree leaves yellow and full of the smell of tannins, to deploy new wildlife cameras with our partners and spend a field day training our colleagues in their use and regular maintenance. Every camera site offers potential and mystery, just waiting to be uncovered. Those first wildlife images are hard to wait for.



Resting high above their thorny towers, impossibly soft white flowers of the Southwestern prickly poppy unfurl like a folklórico dancer's skirts.
Photo by Jessica Moreno



Thank you for speaking out against the proposed I-11 route through Avra Valley!

Our community rises to the occasion and strongly opposes a new freeway through the desert

It was "all hands on deck" from July 16 - August 16, 2021 as comments were accepted on the Tier 1 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the proposed Interstate 11 from Nogales to Wickenburg. **The Coalition strongly opposed the Preferred Alternative – West Option presented in the FEIS which traverses Avra Valley west of the Tucson Mountains.**

Notable accomplishments included:

- * The City of Tucson unanimously reaffirmed their 2019 resolution opposing any new freeway in Avra Valley at their meeting on August 10, 2021.
- * The Town of Sahuarita Mayor and Council unanimously opposed the West Option for I-11 at their meeting on August 10, 2021 and subsequently submitted a letter expressing this opposition on August 13, 2021.
- * Pima County adopted a resolution opposing any new freeway in Avra Valley and the proposed I-11 West Option at their meeting on August 16, 2021. Pima County received over 225 letters from community members supporting this resolution.
- * A diverse array of community organizations submitted comments on the FEIS opposing the I-11 West Option through Avra Valley.
- * The Coalition submitted a detailed comment letter which was co-signed by 24 other community and conservation organizations.
- * Many of you submitted your own comment letters and shared information about I-11 on your social media channels, by forwarding our Action Alert emails, and through your own networks and contacts.

Your voice and advocacy were crucial to this campaign – thank you!

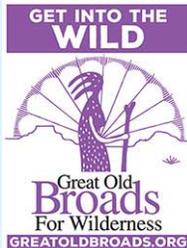
Thank you so much for this important advocacy and for using your voice to advocate for the people and wildlife of the Sonoran Desert. You will be the first to know when we have new information to share about next steps.

Two new member groups join the Coalition!

Welcome to the Tortolita Alliance and the Great Old Broads for Wilderness – Tucson Broadband

Great Old Broads for Wilderness

We are an environmental organization, founded in 1989, that focuses on keeping public lands public, monitoring air and water quality issues, and the protection of wildlife. Our work rests on four pillars: Advocacy, Stewardship, Education, and Fun.



The Tucson Broadband, led by Co-Leaders Fran Krakow and Su Libby, hopes to collaborate in 2022 on one or more stewardship and/or advocacy projects with the Coalition and its member groups. Our most recent project took place in March 2021 when the Broadband leaders from Phoenix, Prescott, Flagstaff and Tucson drove along the southern border wall over a period of seven days in order to document any visible environmental violations through the use of geolocation photography and first-person testimonies. This data was shared with the Wildlands Network and other non-profits.

If anyone has any suggestions for stewardship activities in the Tucson area, please contact Su Libby at: Bigwiscon@gmail.com. Our website is: www.greatoldbroads.org.

Tortolita Alliance



Formed in late 2019 in response to the attempt by the Town of Marana and the Arizona State Land Department to reconfigure and rezone the beautiful 2,400-acre Tortolita Preserve, Tortolita Alliance successfully thwarted this effort and has built on this success. We became an Arizona non-profit in early 2020. Our mission is to advocate for the continued conservancy of the Tortolita Preserve and associated lands, ensuring protection of open space, wildlife habitat, watershed, and compatible recreational use. Our 620 members are continually informed via www.tortolitaalliance.com of a variety of environmental items including: open space, wildlife and plant observations, trail conditions, drought, water supply and more.



Josh Skattum and Sam Wilber were still smiling at the end of this long field day even though they had to get their jeep towed to get home.

Field Adventures: Going above and beyond in Davidson Canyon

The Zoo Crew team started early to beat the heat and afternoon monsoons, with the plan to visit a few hard to reach camera sites for the I-10 East project. Monsoon floods had ripped several cameras off their mounts and filled ones that remained with a slurry of mud and water. Samantha Wilber, Josh Skattum, and Aiden Doherty took the initiative and brought along their colleague Kevin from the Reid Park Zoo, and some of the Zoo's metal detectors, to try to look for cameras buried downstream while installing new mounts for camera replacements. The crew also had to repair the washed out road at several points, before Sam's plucky green Jeep's clutch went out less than a mile from the highway. Just before sunset, with the rain rolling in, Jessica and Eddie Moreno were able to tow Sam's Jeep out safely. On the bright side: there's nothing like conversations with a local caterpillar while waiting for a tow truck in the creosote-scented rain.



Sam Wilber admires a local caterpillar while calling for help after the clutch went out on her jeep while on a rescue mission for some of our wildlife cameras.

Stay Connected!



@ForTheDesert



SonoranDesertProtection



SonoranDesertProtection

Today is a wonderful day to become a Desert Champion!

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!