

Friends of the Desert

Issue 61 Spring 2022

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

The Many Pieces of a Connected Landscape

Protecting wildlife habitat on private land and removing old fencing crucial for wildlife movement

There's no doubt that there are many threats to landscape connectivity in the Sonoran Desert. Housing developments, roads, commercial spaces, industrial areas, and more, fragment the desert and impede the ability of wildlife to move freely. By constraining wildlife to smaller, disconnected pieces of habitat, we limit their ability to find food and mates and inhibit important genetic diversity. Protecting open spaces in perpetuity through the designation of local, state, and national parks is one important piece of solving this problem.

Two more important puzzle pieces are: 1) Working with private property owners to preserve connected open spaces on their parcels, and 2) Removing barriers to wildlife movement such as old barbed

wire fencing that is no longer in use. In recent months, the Coalition has made tangible progress on these two latter pieces.

To make real, long-lasting change and improve landscape connectivity in the Sonoran Desert, a multi-pronged, comprehensive strategy is essential.

While private development slowed considerably during the first 18 months of the pandemic, there has been a flurry of activity and new development proposals in recent months. In the last six months, the Coalition has provided input on a variety of private development projects in various parts of Tucson, Marana, and unincorporated Pima County. In August 2021, we supported a rezoning near Ina Road and Silverbell Road in the Town of Marana after working with the property owners to ensure adequate connected open space and wildlife linkages on the property. More recently, we opposed a new development proposed

continued inside

Gerry Berthelette with Arizona Game and Fish Department (below) and Trica Oshant-Hawkins with the Arizona Wildlife Federation (right) hard at work removing old barbed wire fencing near Three Points in March 2022.





Carolyn's Corner

Embracing Change and New Directions

Fence removal, new wildlife bridges, and more

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

As the last two years have more than demonstrated, it helps to cultivate an attitude of adaptability and flexibility in today's world. Along with being able to weather unexpected circumstances and changes in the world that are out of our control, we also must keep our minds open to new ideas and perspectives. This was demonstrated to me recently when a collaborative partnership the Coalition has been involved with for a long time — the Avra Valley Wildlife Connectivity Working Group, which is largely focused on policy issues and data sharing — decided to focus on on-the-ground projects to improve connectivity for wildlife with a series of volunteer events to remove retired barbed wire fencing in Avra Valley west of Tucson. While the group had identified this as a need a while ago, planning ramped up swiftly last fall and we quickly re-prioritized to make the first event happen in December 2022. A few months later, we have three events under our belts and Avra Valley has 11 miles less fencing out on the landscape that can inhibit wildlife movement.

Along with maintaining our existing programs, we also have new projects on our schedule. This includes a Tortolita BioBlitz being planned for Fall 2022 with both new and old partners and following the lead of the Tohono O'odham Nation as planning and siting commences for two new wildlife bridges over State Route 86 near Kitt Peak.

Coalition staff have also been actively engaging with the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion for the last 18 months and we are excited to transparently share our DEI goals with you soon. Should this work have happened a long time ago? Definitely. But we are "starting where we are" because that's all any of us can do. We are working hard to contribute to a more just, equitable, and inclusive community moving forward.

The Coalition is celebrating the 10th Anniversary of our Wildlife Camera Program this year and next year will mark our 25th Anniversary as an organization. This fall we will be launching our first paid internship program with the support of the Deupree Family Foundation. I hope we can continue to be an organization that embraces change and the necessary evolution of our work; continues to collaborate with new and long-standing partners; and stands firmly on the foundation of the last 24 years as we innovate and respond to the needs of today. Thank you for being with us on this journey.

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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.

Along with being able to weather unexpected circumstances and changes in the world that are out of our control, we also must keep our minds open to new ideas and perspectives.

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

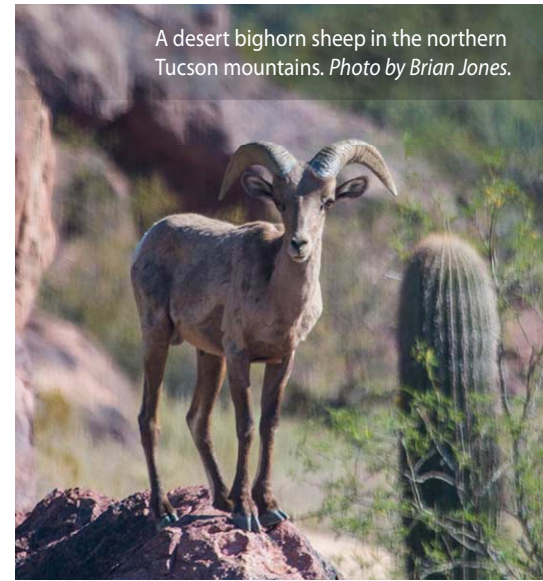
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State Route 86 Wildlife Bridges Move to Siting and Design Phase

Two new bridges will facilitate movement of bighorn sheep and other wildlife

In January 2022, representatives from the Tohono O’odham Nation, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Arizona Department of Transportation, and the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection conducted a scouting field trip to finalize the locations of two new wildlife bridges on State Route 86 near Kitt Peak. These bridges will complement two existing wildlife underpasses built nearby in 2013–2014. The group also identified ongoing maintenance tasks so the wildlife underpasses can continue providing a safe crossing location for wildlife for many years to come.

The State Route 86 wildlife bridges will be built to attract local bighorn sheep and other wildlife so they can safely cross between the Baboquivari Mountains to the south and mountain ranges to the north. Under a plan approved by voters in 2006, the Regional Transportation Authority is funding these crossings from \$45 million allocated for wildlife linkage infrastructure projects. We will keep you updated as this project progresses and want to extend a big thanks to the Tohono O’odham Nation and our other partners for leading this project.



A desert bighorn sheep in the northern Tucson mountains. Photo by Brian Jones.

The Many Pieces of a Connected Landscape

continued from front cover

for the northeast corner of Craycroft Road and the Rillito River. This has led to ongoing discussions and field visits with the property owners to provide our input on how to improve the proposal for wildlife and wildlife habitat. Through regular monitoring of new proposals and long-standing relationships with a variety of community partners, we plan to continue advocating for connected open spaces on private land. It is a win-win for the people that will eventually live or work on those parcels and the wildlife that live and move through these areas.

In December 2021, a group of 65 volunteers came together one weekend morning and removed three miles of old barbed wire fencing in northern Avra Valley west of the Tucson Mountains. Three miles of barbed wire, fence posts, and other related metal was hauled away by project partners. This improved the ability of wildlife to move freely between Tucson Mountain Park, Saguaro National Park, the Tohono O’odham Nation, and Ironwood Forest National Monument. In March 2022, a second fence removal event was held in southern Avra Valley near Three Points, resulting in 8 miles of fencing being removed from the landscape. After this event, the steel wire and fence posts were sold to interested buyers, with the generated funds designated for future projects. Saguaro National Park is also holding fence-removal events within the park boundaries by park volunteers, and more events are being planned for the future. You can sign up to receive information about future events on our website.

To make real, long-lasting change and improve landscape connectivity in the Sonoran Desert, a multi-pronged, comprehensive strategy is essential. We must continue to opportunistically protect more connected open space and steward open spaces that are already protected. As existing roads are expanded, we must continue to build wildlife bridges, wildlife

underpasses, and wildlife fencing to provide safe passages for wildlife and reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions. We must identify barriers to wildlife movement, such as old barbed wire fencing, and remove these barriers

systematically and consistently. And we must approach our goals with the entire community in mind, building relationships with local governments, indigenous nations, and private property owners and working together with them to improve the quality of life for people and wildlife.

Thank you for supporting all of this work — we are in this for the long haul, making investments today for a better tomorrow.

We must approach our goals with the entire community in mind, building relationships with private property owners and working together with them to improve the quality of life for people and wildlife.

Happy 10th Anniversary to our Wildlife Camera Program!

In April 2022, our wildlife camera program celebrates its 10th Anniversary. Back in April 2012, we held our first volunteer wildlife camera workshop and placed our first four wildlife cameras out in the field, two on each side of Oracle Road near the then-future sites of the Oracle Road wildlife crossings. Since then, our program has grown and evolved in exciting ways and made tangible contributions to local conservation projects.

Stay tuned for more about this fun anniversary in the coming months, including a look back at some major milestones, checking in with volunteers that have been with us from the start, and some fascinating data analysis.



Celebrate the Sonoran Desert with these gorgeous enamel pins and keychains!

Take a piece of the Coalition and the Sonoran Desert with you wherever you go! Both the pins and keychains are made from high-quality enamel and showcase our saguaro cactus logo.

Enamel pin — Small \$5, Large \$7.50
Keychain — \$8.50

Pick one up for yourself or a friend! Visit our website to order and for more information.

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!

Stay Connected!



Photo: Sherry Hester

The Latest on Endangered Species

Both good news and bad news for vulnerable wildlife species in the Sonoran Desert. In late December 2021, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to list the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl as a threatened species. This tiny owl was previously classified as an endangered species from 1997–2006 but the listing was removed after a lawsuit. We are hopeful this possible new listing will result in increased protection for pygmy owl habitat, especially as increases in development, an ongoing drought, and the impacts of climate change continue to negatively impact their habitat.



Cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl. Photo by Pima County.

In February 2022, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that they would not list the Sonoran desert tortoise under any classification in the Endangered Species Act. While we were disappointed by this decision, we will stay the course in our work to protect Sonoran desert tortoise habitat and provide safe passages across roads.



Sonoran desert tortoise. Photo by Lisa Snedaker and Susan Mainz.



Volunteer Spotlight: UA Environmental Law Society

University of Arizona Law students support an active chapter of the Environmental Law Society (ELS) by hosting speakers, films, and other events that encourage awareness and further study of how the law intersects with the environment. Law students are exposed to historical, current, and emerging issues as well as the practical dimensions of environmental law practice. This year, UA Environmental Law Society members joined us to form a Desert Monitor team. They monitor the newly deployed VERDIN camera — located near the potential future site of a wildlife bridge at Rattlesnake Pass in the Tucson Mountains — which will provide critical before- and after-construction data.