

Friends of the Desert

Issue 62 Spring 2023

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

Reflecting on a Decade of Positive Results from the Wildlife Camera Program

Your support of this program has led to real conservation wins in the Sonoran Desert

by Jessica Moreno

As the fresh light of dawn begins to reflect over the mountains, it casts a warm halo over pointed ears, russet fur, and a restless tail. The quiet click of a camera shutter is followed by the coo of a mourning dove, but the bobcat doesn't notice – or perhaps isn't alarmed – by the human-made sound. The cat lolls back onto the manicured grass with the kind of total muscle relaxation only a cat knows. An ear flicks backwards. Click. By the time the coffee starts brewing the bobcat has gone.

It was in 2006 that Bob and Jan Cratty, together with their neighbors, including Terry Minks and Margie O'Hare, got curious about how they could use wildlife cameras to learn more about their backyard bobcats in Sun City Rancho Vistoso. They lived in the middle of a wildlife highway, but what critters moved through their backyards at night no one knew. Were they the same animals? New ones each time? When and how often?

In 2008, with a fresh university degree at the very start of my career, I helped lead a wildlife tracking and camera monitoring training for these Sun City residents under the auspices of the University of Arizona Wild Cat Research and Conservation Project (now Center). Some cameras were gathering photos in backyards, but by 2012, the hobby had gained momentum and interest in the community, and everything was primed for the science to start getting real. Cue the arrival of the Coalition.

Like a circadian rhythm or seasonal migration, I've come full circle with this program that formally began ten years ago. I'm a bit in awe looking back at the growth and success of what has become the oldest continually running community science wildlife camera monitoring project in southern Arizona.

continued inside

Wildlife photos, from top to bottom, left to right: Ringtail, bobcat with a gopher snake, former Executive Director Liz Petterson and current Director of Land Programs Cameron Becker with the Arizona Land and Water Trust placing a camera in the Sopor Ranch, Cooper's hawk with a dove, Gila monster, Bobcat female with young.



Photo: Mason Field-Unsplash



Carolyn's Corner

Interstate 11: A review and update

Thank you for your continued involvement in this important public process!

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.

Sixteen years ago, in 2007, Coalition supporters joined hundreds of concerned southern Arizona residents at an Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) Board public hearing in Tucson to shout, "Absolutely not!" to ADOT's proposal to build a new freeway around Tucson. ADOT called this the "I-10 Bypass." The opposition included Pima County's elected officials and the state leaders got our message loud and clear.

However, as happens often with bad ideas, this project came back a few years later, this time being sold by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), with ADOT assisting from behind the curtain. This proposal was called "Interstate 11," and was located to the west of Tucson as an alternative to I-19 and I-10 from Nogales to Phoenix.

Since 2013, Coalition supporters have taken advantage of every opportunity to oppose construction of a new freeway through Avra Valley lands west of the Tucson Mountains.

To a person, the speakers at the I-11 public hearings expressed adamant opposition to the Avra Valley route.

This route, if built, would decimate wildlife connectivity to and from many of our special protected landscapes: lands such as Saguaro National Park, Tucson Mountain Park, Ironwood Forest National Monument, and of course, the lands of the Tohono O'odham people.

Hundreds of residents appeared at public hearings throughout the region, thousands more submitted written public comments electronically. **To a person, the speakers at the hearings expressed adamant opposition to the Avra Valley route – the feds' recommended freeway route — and either opposed the project altogether or expressed a preference for "co-locating."** The latter option would upgrade and re-sign the current highways as both I-19 / I-11 from Nogales to Tucson, and I-10 / I-11 from Tucson to Phoenix.

The FHWA is deferring the decision on the final route through Pima County, which is very unusual in a two-tier Environmental Impact Statement. In other words, we did make a difference, but not enough! We continue to monitor the timeline of this "next step," but so far, funding has not been approved to conduct the Tier 2 planning process in Pima County.

This issue, with its enormous negative impacts on habitat protection and wildlife movement, prompted the Coalition to be involved in its first lawsuit last year. With the help of attorneys from the Center for Biological Diversity and joined by Friends of Ironwood Forest and Tucson Audubon Society, we filed suit in the federal district court in Tucson in 2022. **Our lawsuit argues that the FHWA violated the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) on multiple counts, such as making the decision to build an entire new 280-mile freeway, before analyzing the impacts this freeway could have on sensitive desert lands.** This conflicts with NEPA's directive that federal agencies analyze and disclose environmental effects of their actions to the public and decisionmakers in an Environmental Impact Statement *before* committing to those actions.

We have not had "our day in court," other than to appear before federal judge John Hinderaker to respond to the FHWA's request to dismiss some of the charges. As of now, we are awaiting the judge's decision. Regardless of that decision, the other NEPA complaints will move forward at some date in the future. **The outcome of the I-11 public process so far has been largely driven by the incredible involvement of a huge number of concerned citizens. Thank you from everyone here at the Coalition for all your efforts — they have made a huge difference!** Stay tuned.

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

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.

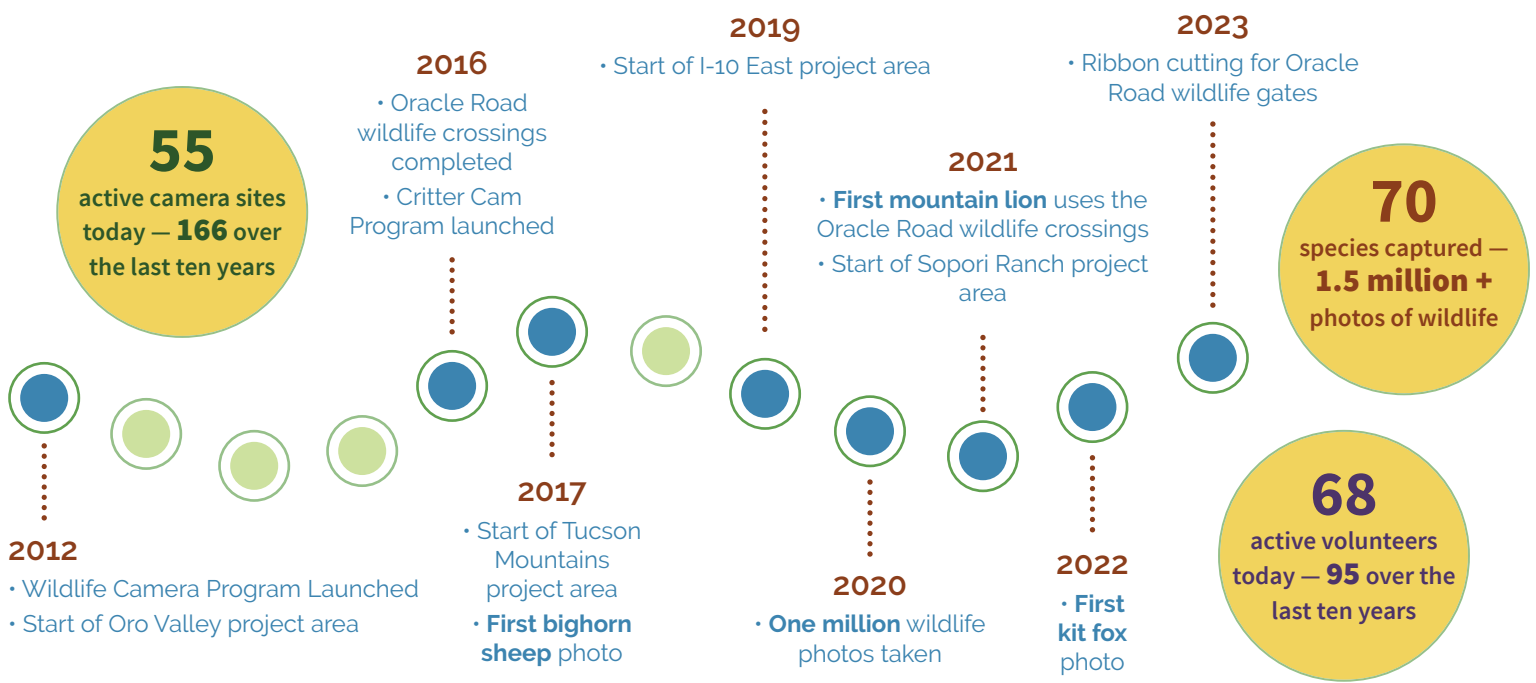
sonorandesert.org

738 N. 5th Ave., Suite 205
Tucson AZ 85705
Office: **520.388.9925**

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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



Reflecting on a Decade of Positive Results *continued*

The first workshop and wildlife camera placements in 2012 with Carolyn, Kathleen, and Gabe Wigtil started something incredible.

Four years before construction would start to break ground on the first wildlife bridge in the Sonoran Desert, half a dozen wildlife cameras were in place in the wildlife corridor beyond the Cratty's backyard collecting valuable data, maintained and monitored by the very same residents who lived in the area. Data gathering, planning, community building, and advocacy for a wildlife bridge were advancing in sync.

I love to volunteer! I love being outdoors and working on projects that help the environment!

Jan Johnson

I wanted to get involved with an effective group and I found one.

I volunteer with interesting like-minded people, monitoring a wildlife camera, helping with mailings, and lobbying in Phoenix.

Sarah McKenzie

Looking out from our camera locations, I am encouraged to see that there is still a large swath of natural Sonoran Desert extending to the Tortolitas . . .

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.

Chuck Graf

The CSDP Wildlife Camera Program is locally and internationally known in connection to the Oracle Road wildlife crossing project and has successfully led to permanently safer, more functional connected habitat for desert wildlife.

Hannah Stitzer (now Oden) came on board, and camera placement expanded to both sides of the Oracle Road highway. Then Whelan brought a fresh perspective to the program and refined and improved the study design, data management process, and volunteer training even further. **The Critter Cam for Kids program was born and nurtured under Whelan's tenure, giving local 4th graders access to camera data and a better understanding of desert wildlife and their need to move freely.**

By the time I came to join the Coalition staff in 2018, landing gratefully like a bird at its wintering grounds, the CSDP Wildlife Camera Program was locally and internationally known in connection to the wildlife crossing project and had successfully led to permanently safer, more functional connected habitat for desert wildlife. Most of the original volunteers were still involved, and new folks wanted to join every year. Our Oro Valley project was maintaining close to 30 long-term camera sites, and we had expanded our reach to study the next threatened wildlife linkage under our watch, from the Tucson Mountains to the Tortolitas. With the launch of our I-10 East project in 2019 to improve the Cienega Creek corridor east of Tucson, the program was soon 80 cameras strong. When record monsoon floods wiped out nearly a third of our cameras in 2021, the community came together to buy upgraded models to replace the whole entire fleet.

Only a decade later, and we have gathered over one and half million wildlife photos of more than 70 species in the Sonoran Desert. With an updated top-of-the-line database, Desert Identifier volunteers now help keep pace with the flow of data by sorting through every image from the comfort of home, even when home is in Canada or Missouri. People of different ages and backgrounds come together to hike to their cameras in common cause, and with common joy of the desert. Wildlife crossings span highways, and the wildlife are using them. But we are far from done.

When the new moon rises, dark shadows in the backyard make everything seem larger, but the night is calm. A bobcat leaps onto the wall from a desert acacia thicket. This time, a minute sound or glimpse of red light attracts her gaze for a moment. The one lens reflects the lenses of the other. Click.



This is a beautiful moment 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!



Check out our new Events Calendar!

sonorandesert.org/events/

Honor Hector Conde with your gift today

This past winter, long-time conservationist Hector Conde passed away. Hector's interests were varied and vast, but he was most focused in his later years on concerns about water and on establishing wildlife corridors for the species who live in the Tucson region. He helped collect and analyze data and map potential corridors to connect the Catalina Mountain range to the Tortolita Range. In his memory, his friends and family have set a goal to raise \$5,000 in support of the Coalition's Desert Wildlife Internship program. So far, we have raised \$1,613 in Hector's memory. Can you donate today and support future conservationists through our internship program? Donations can be made securely at our website anytime: sonorandesert.org/donate-now/ and mention "Hector Conde" in the note for your donation. You can learn more about Hector at <https://bit.ly/3LqoyPt>.



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Volunteers remove old barbed wire fencing in the Big Wash in Oro Valley in November 2022.

Desert Fence Busters

The Desert Fence Busters (DFB) have been busy this past year! Founded in 2021, the DFB is a collaborative partnership between local nonprofits and government agencies. Our aim is to remove old, out-dated barbed wire fencing that is dangerous to wildlife and reduces wildlife habitat connectivity across the Sonoran Desert landscape. The DFB has held 9 fence-busting events so far with the assistance of hundreds of volunteers. Keep your eye out for more events in Fall 2023!

Santa Cruz River wildlife ramp

Plans are underway to construct an important wildlife ramp into the Santa Cruz River near the El Rio Preserve in Marana. This ramp will be located in a portion of an existing steep levee that currently impedes wildlife movement into the Santa Cruz River. Once the wildlife ramp is complete, one more piece of the puzzle will be finished allowing wildlife to move more freely between the Tucson and Tortolita Mountains. Next up? Building a wildlife bridge over Interstate 10 nearby!



Photos courtesy (left) Pat Miller and (right) Town of Oro Valley.

It's a wrap on the Oracle Road wildlife gates!

The final touches are complete on new wildlife gates at the entrances to the neighborhood just west of the Oracle Road wildlife underpass. These gates will close the remaining gaps in nearby wildlife fencing and further improve the safety of Oracle Road for both people and wildlife. Big thanks to the neighbors, Town of Oro Valley, and Pima County for your partnership on completing this project!