

Friends of the Desert

Issue 64 Spring 2024

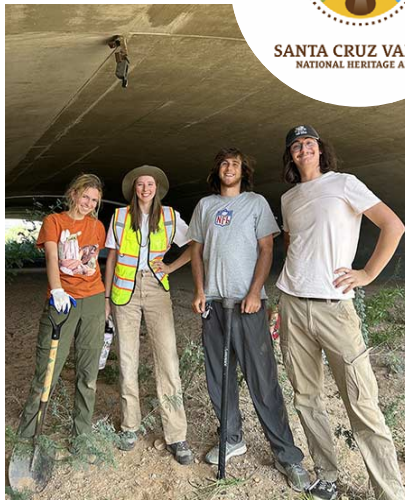
A Strong Voice for the People and Wildlife of the Sonoran Desert

First six months of Habitat Restoration Days make a big impact

What have we accomplished so far on the Oracle Road wildlife crossings?

February 2024 marked 6 months of our Habitat Restoration Days, our year-long project to restore and improve the habitat on the Oracle Road wildlife crossing bridge and underpass. With the help of an amazing crew of volunteers, we are removing invasive species, spreading native seeds, and planting native vegetation monthly for an entire year. **Since September, with the help of hundreds of dedicated volunteers, we have removed over 50 bags of buffelgrass and other invasive plants from the project area.** This opened up more space to plant more native vegetation such as soap tree yuccas, parry's penstemons, ocotillos, globe mallows, and several native leguminous trees such as palo verdes, mesquites, and ironwoods brought to us by Strategic Habitat Enhancements. In addition to planting, we spread a native seed mix containing grasses, shrubs and wildflowers. We targeted seed-spreading in areas needing erosion control and where buffelgrass was pulled to compete with any invasive seeds that were left behind.

The future of this project holds more exciting opportunities for both the wildlife crossings and our community. We'll be adding even more plants to the crossings, specifically selected to increase the species diversity on the bridge. **During the second half of the project, we hope to partner with Bat Conservation International and the**



The first recorded Sonoran Desert tortoise to use the Oracle Road wildlife crossing bridge, discovered during our November Habitat Restoration Day!

Tucson Cactus and Succulent Society to plant agaves and cacti. These plants will support essential Sonoran Desert pollinators such as bats, birds, native bees and butterflies. In addition to planting, we will continue making educational videos about restoration work and the importance of wildlife crossings. By the end of the project, we will install new interpretive signage to inform the public that these locations are important wildlife crossing areas and should not be disturbed. This will help protect the hard work we've done to restore the habitat, and provide our wildlife with a peaceful passage to explore their connected lands.

Want to join our Desert Wildlife Crossing Crew? Head over to our Volunteer webpage and sign up for the days you can volunteer. *We'd love to have you join us for this exciting new project and we need more hands to do this important work!*



We'd love to have you join us for this exciting and much-needed new project! **RSVP for our new Habitat Restoration Day events at <https://bit.ly/3F5TQIR>**



Carolyn's Corner

Advocacy and on the ground

Thank you for helping us deepen our impact!

For the first 15 years, our work was largely advocacy focused. Highlights included overseeing the acquisition and protection of open space properties with local bond dollars; advocating for a region-wide transportation plan tax for wildlife crossing infrastructure; and ensuring that wildlife crossings funded by that tax were in the best locations for animals moving through the landscape.

Then, as needs emerged, we moved into on-the-ground conservation in 2012. We now have a fleet of wildlife cameras monitoring wildlife movement at completed wildlife crossings and potential locations for future infrastructure. Our amazing Desert Monitors and Desert Identifiers contribute thousands of hours to the program, with dozens more giving their time in years past.

In 2022, our work with the Desert Fence Busters began. **This has led to the removal of almost 40 miles and 41,000 pounds of obsolete fencing, improving connectivity across the landscape for wildlife.** And in 2023, we launched our Habitat Restoration Days to improve and restore native habitat on the Oracle Road wildlife bridge and its sister underpass.

The cumulative effect of our work with policy initiatives and on the ground conservation has been massive. **With your help, we have worked and will continue to work to truly protect and restore the Sonoran Desert.** Thank you for being such an important part of this story and for your continued support this year!

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



New Mural in Town!

Our Program and Communications Coordinator, Jonni Zeman, refreshed our office space with a new mural! This piece was inspired by a colorful photograph taken by Doris Evans, featuring a mule deer doe surrounded by prickly pears and agave.



Follow us on social media

- [sonorandesertprotection](#)
- [sonorandesertprotection](#)
- [sonorandesertprotection](#)

- Carolyn Campbell** Executive Director
- Kathleen Kennedy** Associate Director
- Jessica Moreno** Conservation Science Director
- Jonni Zeman** Program & Communications Coordinator

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**

*Friends of the Desert is printed on 100% recycled paper.
Design & Layout: Julie St. John*

Breaking Free: How the Desert Fence Busters Improve Habitat Connectivity

Over 40 miles of outdated barbed wire fencing removed from the landscape in the last 2+ years

The Desert Fence Busters (DFB) have been busy during their third season “busting fence” in Avra Valley. Since December 2021, almost 40 miles of outdated, dangerous barbed wire fencing has been removed from the landscape. Removing this much fence is heavy lifting; in fact, the DFB estimates they’ve recycled 20 tons of scrap metal from this project. This has improved the overall connectivity of existing open spaces and wildlife habitat and reduced the possibility for wildlife to become entangled in this old fencing. So far, the DFB has opened over 1400 adjacent acres for wildlife movement. Big thanks to all of our community partners and all the volunteers that have contributed to this incredible project!

The Desert Fence Busters is a collaborative community project that aims to identify and remove outdated barbed wire fences that limit healthy wildlife movement and endanger wildlife in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona.



Welcome Lilly and Woods!

Our new Spring Desert Wildlife Interns — Lilly Ramirez and Woods Nystedt — started in mid-January! Along with helping to keep our ever-expanding wildlife camera photo database in tip-top shape, Lilly will be enhancing and improving our environmental education and outreach materials and Woods will be completing important data analysis and a white paper on our I-10 East wildlife camera data. Welcome to the team!

Our Desert Wildlife Internship program is funded by the Deupree Family Foundation.



Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty!

Making seed-balls to strengthen native plant diversity on the Oracle Road wildlife crossings

Seed-balls are made with a mixture of clay, soil, water and native seeds. Despite their simplicity, they're excellent tools for restoration and revegetation. Seed-balls provide the seeds with a perfect packet of nutrients and protect them from hungry birds and seed-foraging insects. When the rains come, the ball unfurls so that the seeds can germinate and root into the ground.

As a part of our Habitat Restoration Days, we held a seedball workshop in January with volunteers to make these restoration tools for the Oracle Road wildlife crossings. The seed mix we used includes native grasses, shrubs, and wildflowers appropriate for the project area.



All you need:

- 2 part soil
- 1 part clay
- 1 part water
- 1 part seed mix

A bucket or container for mixing

An egg carton or aluminum tin

Got all the ingredients?

With your hands, mix together ingredients until it forms into a ball! If it's too dry, add some more water, and if it's too wet, add some more soil and a little clay.

Form 1-inch balls.

Place seedballs in your egg carton or aluminum tin, slightly spaced apart.

Store in a cool, dry place until the seed balls are fully dry.

Extra fun: Make your seedballs into animal shapes or imprint with wildlife tracks!

Now your seedballs are ready to be used!

Another fantastic year for our Wildlife Camera Program!



Over 1.5 million photos of wildlife track deer movement, biodiversity, and the need for connected open space

In Oro Valley we continue to monitor wildlife movement near the Oracle Road wildlife crossings, with 24 cameras that have gathered more than 400,000 photos of 65 species. In the Tucson-Tortolita Mountain Wildlife Linkage 22 cameras have collected 160,000 photos of 43 species, including the tiny 5-pound desert kit fox. Five cameras in Sopori Ranch are photographing species for outreach in partnership with the Arizona Land and Water Trust, and our completed I-10 East study, with over 1 million photos, continues to yield more results the further we dive in.

Thank you for making all this possible!

We saw everything from snuggling kit foxes, badgers on a mission, spotted skunks among the rocks, and mountain lions traversing mountain ranges. We even photographed an escaped pheasant! **But these photos mean more to us than pretty pictures and fun social media reels: the data was invaluable this year in helping us install wildlife gates, seek funding for new wildlife funnel fencing, design wildlife ramps and plan future wildlife crossing structures.** Deer activity and biodiversity trends are showing key areas where crossings are working, or are still needed. **We couldn't make it happen without our dedicated volunteer Desert Monitors and Desert Identifiers!**



Interstate 11 lawsuit expanded

New Legal Challenges Filed for Threatening Endangered Species

On December 14, 2023, conservation groups, including the Coalition, filed new charges against the Federal Highway Administration for failing to protect threatened and endangered species, including the newly listed cactus ferruginous pygmy owl, from the proposed Interstate 11 in Arizona. We argue that the owl's new protections require federal officials to go back to the drawing board before determining the precise route for the highway in Pima County.

The agencies involved failed to consider the devastating harm from this project to already struggling plants and animals. They've ignored the concerns of local communities, state and federal agencies, Tribal Nations, and conservationists. That alone is reason to stop this proposed project in its tracks.



Sky Jacobs

New CSDP Merch!

Designs and options are growing! Along with a new t-shirt design featuring an updated interpretation of our logo, our Program and Communications Coordinator Jonni Zeman has since expanded our merch options by adding new artwork of various Sonoran Desert wildlife species.

You can order a new t-shirt by visiting our website, giving us a call, or sending an email to admin@sonorandesert.org. You can also go to [Sonorandesert.threadless.com](https://sonorandesert.threadless.com) where you can order all the new designs on t-shirts, stickers, totes, and more!



Richard Tribble