



Sky Island Tours

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December 1, 2014

# The Sky Island News

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December 2014

I will make this short as I know that all of you have more important things to do at this time of year than to read this rag. This issue includes the monthly schedule, reports on last month's field trips, a listing of the southern Arizona Christmas Bird Counts, and another Butterfly Profile.

Happy Holidays to you and yours!

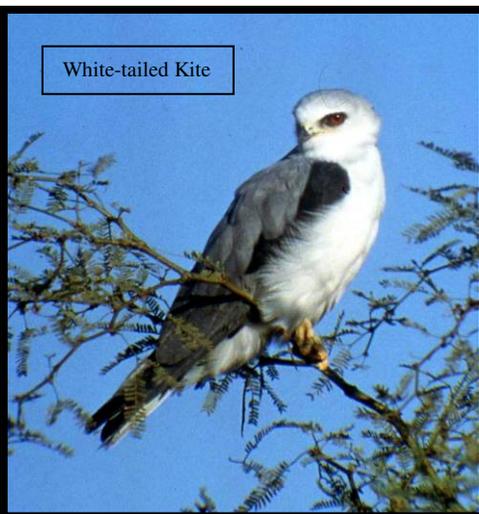
## December Field Trips

I also do private field trips for birds, butterflies, dragonflies, and general natural history. Give me a call (520)-488-8551 or visit [www.SkyIslandTours.com](http://www.SkyIslandTours.com) for rates and more information.

**Sulphur Springs Valley Birding. Mon., 12/8. 8AM-5:00PM.** Call 299-3000 to register. We will meet at the Tucson Jewish Community Center (3800 E. River Rd.).

The Sulphur Springs Valley is one of the premier winter birding destinations in southern Arizona, hosting thousands of Sandhill Cranes. Visitors from around the world come to witness the early morning liftoff of thousands of Sandhill cranes. The sight and sound of this experience are spectacular! Sulphur Springs Valley is also one of the top spots to see over 20 species of wintering sparrows, as well as many raptors, including Ferruginous Hawks, Rough-legged Hawks, Northern Harriers, eagles, falcons and hawks. Join us for a birding adventure to one of the top winter "hotspots" in southern Arizona. Bring lunch, water, snacks, binoculars and a field guide. We'll meet in the JCC lobby at 7:45 a.m. Carpool, or drive your own vehicle.

**Las Cienegas Birding. Wed., 12/17. 8AM-12:00PM. \$5/person.** Call or email to register.



This is a rerun from the Las Cienegas trip that was canceled in September because of hurricane Odile. Our main target species will be White-tailed Kite. We can also expect to see other raptors, wintering sparrows, longspurs, and other interesting surprises. Bring water, snacks, and the usual birding gear. We will meet at the intersection of Sahuarita Road and State Route 83.

## Pima County Classes and Trips

These trips are offered by the Pima County Department of Natural Resources, Parks, and Recreation. They are all free. Call (520)-615-7855 X3 for more information. Please note that some trips require reservations. For descriptions of these trips and other programs offered by the Environmental Education Division, visit <http://www.pima.gov/nrpr/educ/enviro.htm>.

**Wake Up With the Birds. Every Thurs. (except Christmas Day). 8:30-10:00AM.** Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

**Tucson Mountain Park Birding. Sat. 12/6. 8:00-10:00AM.** Ironwood Picnic Area (1548 S. Kinney Rd.). Led by John Higgins.

**Birding Sweetwater Wetlands. Tues., 12/9. 8:30-10AM.** 2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.

**Cienega Creek Birding. Fri., 12/12. 8:00-10AM.** 16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.



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**Honey Bee Canyon Birding Walk. Sat. 12/13 and Sat. 12/27. 8:00-10:00AM.** Honey Bee Canyon Park (13880 N. Rancho Vistoso Blvd. in Oro Valley). Led by Marjorie Flory and Mary Ellen Flynn.

**Canoa Ranch Birding Walk. Tues., 12/16. 8:30-10:00AM.** Historic Hacienda de la Canoa (5375 S. I-19 Frontage Rd. in Green Valley). *Reservations required.* Call 877-6004 or email [CanoaRanch@pima.gov](mailto:CanoaRanch@pima.gov) to register.

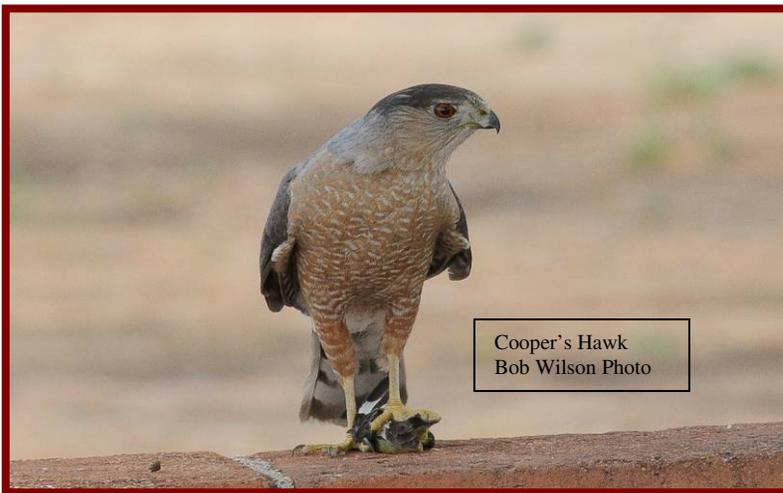
**Birding Roger Road Ponds. Tues., 12/30. 8:30-10:00AM.** (2600 W. Sweetwater Dr.) *Reservations Required.* Contact me or call 615-7855 to register.

## December Classes

**The Sex Life of Birds. Fri., 12/5. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

The Bird Biology series continues with a look into the sex life of birds. We explore the various mating systems that birds employ to create the next generation and the role of each sex in these systems. We will also look into nest architecture, clutch size and variation, incubation and fledging. Join us for a look at the amorous side to our feathered neighbors.

**Raptors Part 1: Hawks, Eagles, and Allies. Wed., 12/10. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Did you know that southern Arizona is the winter home of thousands of hawks and eagles? This class will discuss not only where to find hawks during the winter but many also other interesting aspects of their lives. Do you have trouble separating a Swainson's hawk from a red-tail? Join us to investigate the tricky identification challenges hawks and eagles present and take a close look at the classification, lifestyles and conservation of these iconic birds.

### **Woodpeckers, Roadrunners, and Quail.**

**Thurs., 12/18. 6-8PM.** Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 to register.

Roadrunners, woodpeckers, quail and doves are the focus of this class, as we discuss the classification, identification and ecology of these birds. Ever wonder why woodpeckers don't get headaches? Or, which dove is important to healthy saguaro populations? What bird put southern Arizona on the birding map? This class will answer these questions and many more. Join us for a look at some of our most visible and familiar desert birds.

**Raptors Part 2: Falcons and Vultures. Fri., 12/19. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

Falcons are the jet fighters of the bird world. Caracaras are relatives of falcons that are similar in some ways to vultures. Why are falcons and caracaras placed in the same family? How fast can falcons fly? How come vultures don't get sick when they eat dead things? We answer these questions and learn about the classification, identification, and conservation of these fascinating birds.



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## In The Binoculars

This section highlights events that are on the horizon.

### Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (12/10).

This month's THS meeting features a presentation by Tom Jones, Amphibians and Reptiles Program Manager for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Tom's presentation is "Invasive Bullfrog Removal in the American Southwest: A Case Study from the Pajarito/Atascosa Mountains, Arizona." The meeting is at the Ward 3 Office (1510 E. Grant Rd.) and begins at 7:15PM.

The Tucson Herpetological Society is a great local organization 'dedicated to the conservation, education, and research of the reptiles and amphibians of Arizona and Mexico.' THS also publishes the bimonthly newsletter, *The Sonoran Herpetologist*. Visit <http://tucsonherpsociety.org/> for more information.

### Southwest Wings Spring Fling \*\*\*Registration is now open\*\*\*

The 2015 Southwest Wings Spring Fling is scheduled for May 6-9 at Cochise College in Sierra Vista. Registration for this great event has just opened. Most of the field trips for this event sell out, so reserve your spot now to make sure that you get on the trips that you want. The Spring Fling offers field trips, but no free programs, vendors, banquet, or keynote speaker (which are featured in the main festival in early August). Visit [www.swwings.org](http://www.swwings.org) for more information. I hope to see you there!

## Rabbitbrush Butterfly Trek

When I plan my monthly field trips, I am always optimistic about the weather. Surely, we will have good weather, right? Well, the Rabbitbrush Butterfly Trek just so happened to be on what turned out to be the coldest morning southern Arizona had seen since February. In the Sonoran Desert, the lower the temperature, the lower the butterfly activity. Great, I thought. Nothing spells a great butterfly show than temperatures in the 40s.

Anyway, an intrepid group of butterflyers and I remained optimistic as we headed to the rabbitbrush along Harshaw Road, south of Patagonia. As soon as we got out of the car, I spied a Queen. It turned out to be a good omen! As we worked our way through the field, we saw more Queens. Soon we spotted another species, West Coast Lady, which is the least common on the three lady species in southern Arizona. A great sign!



These were the first two of what would ultimately total 23 species for the morning. We had all three ladies (Painted, American, and West Coast), both buckeyes (Common and Tropical, including both the typical and the dark forms of the latter), Variegated Fritillary, Arizona Sister, Dorantes Longtail, and a whole bunch more. We were finding new species even as we were getting ready to return home.

It turned out to be a really fun trip. What a wonderful way to spend part of Election Day! Thanks to everyone who joined me for a morning with the butterflies!



## Birding the San Rafael Valley

November marks the month when we really begin to see an influx in birds that will over-winter in southern Arizona. Waterfowl, raptors, and sparrows take center stage during the winter. To investigate the early arrivals, I was joined by a great group of enthusiastic birders on an exploration of the San Rafael Valley grasslands to see what had come south by mid-November.



The San Rafael grasslands are particularly good for sparrows and raptors and these were the two groups that I was most interested in. The first bird we saw upon entering the Serengeti-like valley, was an American Kestrel, the first of several of which we would see on the trip. We would also chalk up several Northern Harriers and a pair of Red-tailed Hawks for the morning.

A couple of miles into the valley, we stopped at a spot that was swarming with the sparrows on a scouting trip a couple of days prior to the tour. The group was (or became!) very proficient at identifying Savannah Sparrows, as this was the most common emberizid of the day. We also encountered a flock of Chipping Sparrows that were acting very much like Yellow-rumped Warblers, gleaning insects from the leaves and branches of a small cottonwood, as well as flycatching on occasion. Other sparrows we had were Vesper and White-crowned. We missed the highly sought after Baird's Sparrow and we could not relocate the Grasshopper

Sparrows I had seen in the same area while scouting. We also witnessed the restless flight of a flock of Chestnut-collared Longspurs that seemed to be taking their own tour of the valley, as they flittered across the brilliant blue sky before disappearing over a ridge.

Other birds that were seen on the trip included Eastern Meadowlark, Loggerhead Shrike, Say's Phoebe, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Dark-eyed Junco (the last two of which were observed in oak woodland on the way out of the valley), among others.

All in all, it was a fun morning with a really superb group of birders. A big Thank You to all of those who joined me on this trip!

## Southern Arizona Christmas Bird Counts

(As of 11/29. Check the Tucson Audubon Society website [www.tucsonsudubon.org](http://www.tucsonsudubon.org) for the latest information).

- 12/14 Su Saint David Tom Wood 520-432-1388 [tom@sabo.org](mailto:tom@sabo.org)
- 12/14 Su Tucson Valley Rich Hoyer 520-325-5310 [birdernaturalist@me.com](mailto:birdernaturalist@me.com)
- 12/17 We Green Valley-Madera Canyon Clark Blake 520-625-1015 [mcblake@nas.com](mailto:mcblake@nas.com)
- 12/18 Th Patagonia Abbie Zeltzer 520-604-6320 [amindajar@gmail.com](mailto:amindajar@gmail.com)
- 12/20 Sa Avra Valley Mary Lou Cole 520-578-0114 [birdingnana@msn.com](mailto:birdingnana@msn.com)
- 12/20 Sa Nogales Michael Bissontz 520-577-8778 [seetrogon@comcast.net](mailto:seetrogon@comcast.net)
- 12/20 Sa Ramsey Canyon [Open] N/A [has\\_admin@huachuca-audubon.org](mailto:has_admin@huachuca-audubon.org)
- 12/20 Sa Santa Catalina Mountains Brian Nicholas 520-760-3583 [weehawker2@yahoo.com](mailto:weehawker2@yahoo.com)
- 12/27 Sa Portal Jackie Lewis 520-558-2287 [winjac12@vtc.net](mailto:winjac12@vtc.net)
- 01/02 Fr Atascosa Highlands Jake Mohlmann 610-390-2424 [mohlmann2@yahoo.com](mailto:mohlmann2@yahoo.com)
- 01/04 Su Buenos Aires NWR Bonnie Swarbrick 520-240-3737 [bonnie.swarbrick@gmail.com](mailto:bonnie.swarbrick@gmail.com)

## Butterfly Profile: Thicket Hairstreak



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My reasoning in selecting December's butterfly of the month is, admittedly, a bit of a reach. Its flight season is March-September, so there is practically no chance that you will see one this month. But it is in the limelight nonetheless for a reason that I will get to shortly.



Thicket Hairstreak (*Callophrys spinetorum*) is a handsome butterfly, with reddish-brown to dark brown underwings with bold black and white bands that form a W near the outer angle of the hindwing. The steely blue uppersides are rarely seen in the field. They will readily visit flowers for nectar and mud for salts. An inhabitant of mid- to high elevations, Thicket Hairstreaks are found in forests and woodlands with conifers. A good spot to see them is on Incinerator Ridge off the Catalina Highway.

The genus *Callophrys* is something of a taxonomic dumping ground. It contains the elfins and the 'green' hairstreaks, such as Juniper (*C. gryneus*), Sheridan's (*C. sheridanii*), and Hessel's (*C. hesseli*). Some taxonomists divide the genus into smaller units. These authorities place the Thicket Hairstreak into the genus *Loranthomitoura*. The closest relative of Thicket Hairstreak appears to be Johnson's Hairstreak (*C. johnsoni*), which occurs mostly in the Pacific Northwest.

Finally, I get to the reason that Thicket Hairstreak is the butterfly of the month for December. Its caterpillars feed on mistletoes. In specific, they consume dwarf mistletoes in the genus *Arceuthobium*, which parasitize members of the pine and cypress families. Mistletoes make up the Viscaceae, commonly known as the Christmas mistletoe family. The only other butterfly species in Arizona to use mistletoes as larval foodplants are Great Purple Hairstreaks (*Atlides halesus*), which utilize members of *Phoradendron*, and are more common at lower elevations.

So there it is- the Thicket Hairstreak has a tie to the Holiday Season!

## Did you know...?

... that one of our native cacti has a connection to Christmas? The desert Christmas cholla (*Cylindropuntia leptocaulis*) is one of the skinniest of all cacti. It is inconspicuous due to its small size and habit of growing underneath taller shrubs. The small yellow flowers of spring and early summer yield orange or red fruits that ripen in autumn. The species gets its holiday name because the fruit stay on the plant into winter, with the bright fruit acting as beacons for this otherwise easily overlooked cacti