



Sky Island Tours

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The Sky Island News

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February 2015

Somehow it is February already. I'm not really sure how that is possible. Anyway, in this issue I recap last month's field trips, profile one of southern Arizona's early spring butterflies, in addition to the monthly schedule and a 'Did You Know...' column. One exciting thing about February is that it marks the beginning of the insect field trip season. Things kick off with a butterfly trip to Molino Basin for the species that get going early. Be on the lookout for upcoming butterfly, dragonfly, beetle, and black light trips that feature insects and arthropods. Don't worry- there will still be monthly bird field trips, too!

See you soon!

January 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 for rates and more information.

Sandhill Cranes, Raptors, and Waterfowl. Wed., 2/4. 7AM-5:00PM. Contact the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum for more information and to register (883-3025, brice@desertmuseum.org or visit www.desertmuseum.org).

Southern Arizona is excellent for raptor watching, especially in winter. We begin with a brief overview of the raptors of southern Arizona and then hit the road to the Sulphur Springs Valley, where we expect to see Northern Harrier, Ferruginous, Red-tailed, and Cooper's Hawks, falcons, and many other birds, including thousands of Sandhill Cranes, ducks, and sparrows. Information: Bring lunch, snacks, drinking water, camera, binoculars, and comfortable shoes. Walking is generally on well-maintained paths. We will meet in the parking lot outside Sears at Park Place Mall.

Coachline Gravel Pit Birding. Mon., 2/9. 8AM-11AM. \$10/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.



This site is the new hotspot for birders in the Tucson area. I have been getting a lot of questions about this location lately, so thought that a trip might be in order. Among the species seen recently are Greater White-fronted Goose, Common Goldeneye, Hooded Merganser, Lesser Scaup, Vermilion Flycatcher, and many others. We will meet at the Wheeler Taft Abbett Library (7800 N. Schisler Dr.) in Marana. The library is east of Silverbell, between Ina and Cortaro.

Early Spring Butterflies. Tues., 2/3. 9AM-12PM. \$5/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.



February marks the beginning of butterfly season in southern Arizona and this trip gets the insect field trips up and running for the year. We will visit Molino Basin in the Santa Catalina Mountains, focusing on the manzanita flowers and pools in the streambed. Butterflies we hope to see include Spring White, Desert and Southwestern Orangetips, Brown Elfin, Sagebrush Checkerspot, and Arizona Powdered-Skipper, to name a few. We will meet at the McDonald's on the northeast corner of Catalina Highway and Tanque Verde Road and carpool to Molino Basin.



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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/eeduc/envIRON.htm>.

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

Santa Cruz River Birding Walk. Mon., 2/2. 8:30-10AM. Meet at Wheeler Taft Abbott Sr. Branch Library, 7800 N. Schisler Dr. *Reservations required.*

Tucson Mountain Park Birding. Sat. 2/7. 8:00-10:00AM. Ironwood Picnic Area (1548 S. Kinney Rd.). Leader is John Higgins.

Honey Bee Canyon Birding Walk. Sat. 2/14 and Sat. 2/28. 8:00-10:00AM. Honey Bee Canyon Park (13880 N. Rancho Vistoso Blvd. in Oro Valley). Leaders Marjorie Flory and Mary Ellen Flynn.

Birding Sweetwater Wetlands. Tues., 2/17. 8:30-10AM. 2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.

Cienega Creek Birding. Mon., 2/23. 8:00-10AM. 16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.

Canoa Ranch Birding Walk. Tues., 2/24. 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 to register.

January Classes

Arizona Butterflies Part 1: Swallowtails, Oranges, and Sulphurs. Fri., 2/6. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



In the first installment of the Butterflies of Arizona, we introduce the classification, structure, and metamorphosis of all butterflies. We then dive into the swallowtails, which include some of the biggest and most impressive butterflies on the planet. We conclude the class with a look at butterflies that are mostly white, orange, or yellow and are quite conspicuous as they flutter through your yard or the desert.

Arizona Butterflies Part 2: Hairstreaks, Blues, and Metalmarks. Wed., 2/11. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

The second part of the Butterflies of Arizona focuses on some of our most interesting insects. Hairstreaks, blues and coppers are collectively known as gossamer wings. They are small, fast-flying butterflies that are quite colorful and have extraordinary caterpillars. Next we delve into the metalmarks, so named for their shimmering wing markings. Both families are easily observed in your yard or on a mountain hike.

Trees of Southern Arizona. Thurs., 2/12. 6-8PM. Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 to register.

Southern Arizona is home to a wide range of trees that are found in desert valleys, riparian areas and on mountain tops. We will take a close look at many of southern Arizona's trees, including mesquite, palo verde, alligator juniper, sycamore, and more.



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Arizona Butterflies Part 3: Brush-foots. Wed., 2/18. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

Did you know that the Brush-foots are so named because of their specialized front legs? In this class, we introduce the largest family of butterflies in the world. Brush-foots includes such familiar butterflies as Monarch, Queen, Painted Lady and Red Admiral, as well as such magical creatures as satyrs, fritillaries and buckeyes. Join us for the third installment of the Butterflies of Arizona series as we explore these colorful and well-known butterflies.

Arizona Butterflies Part 4: Skippers. Wed., 2/25. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



In the final installment of the Butterflies of Arizona series, we study skippers. Fast-flying dynamos, some skippers present serious identification challenges to butterflyers. Other skippers are stunningly beautiful and easy to recognize. This class will explore these fascinating butterflies and tackle the many identification hurdles that these butterflies present.

Songbirds Part 2: Thrushes to Tanagers. Thurs., 2/19. 6-8PM. Cochise College (901 N. Colombo Ave. in Sierra Vista). Call 515-5492 to register.

In the second part of the Songbirds series, we focus on thrushes, thrashers, pipits, warblers, and other families. What the heck is a pipit? You get the answer in this class! Join us as we continue our tour through the wonderful world of songbirds!

In The Binoculars

This section highlights events that are on the horizon.

Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (2/11).

This month's THS meeting features a presentation by Larry Jones of the Southwest Reptile Research Collective and co-editor of the wonderful 'Lizards of the American Southwest: A Photographic Guide.'. His talk is "Lizard Activity and the Monsoon: Is there a Connection?" 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.

Southeastern Arizona Butterfly Association Events

Noted bird and butterfly expert Rich Hoyer recaps a recent trip to Peru that tallied over 500 species of butterflies in two weeks! Meetings are held at the Tucson Botanical Gardens. It is free and open to the public. This month's meeting is on Tuesday (2/17) and begins at 7:00PM.

The Southeast Arizona Butterfly Association (SEABA) is a local chapter of the North American Butterfly Association (NABA). SEABA holds monthly meetings from September- May and conducts field trips to many of the best areas in southern Arizona to find butterflies. Visit <http://www.naba.org/chapters/nabasa/index.html> for more information.

Southwest Wings Spring Fling ***Registration is still 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 been open for several weeks. 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 for more information. I hope to see you there!



Whitewater Draw Birding Trip Report

Whitewater Draw in Cochise County is one of the premier winter birding sites in southern Arizona, known for its waterfowl, raptors, and, especially, Sandhill Cranes. So, I was thrilled to be joined by some wonderful birders on a visit to Whitewater. The morning was cool, (mid 30s) and sunny, once the fog burned off. Yes, I said fog.

The waterfowl show was good, producing Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Green-winged Teal, and a single female Bufflehead. Also on the water were Pied-billed and Eared Grebes, American Coot, and Common Gallinule. In the distance was a flock of Snow Geese. They were several hundred yards away and, no matter how hard I tried, could not find a Ross's Goose among them.

We also had a nice raptor show with many Northern Harriers and Red-tailed Hawks. The best raptor of the day was a female 'Prairie' Merlin. These are truly magnificent little raptors. A Loggerhead Shrike was perched close by, tempting fate that the Merlin was not hungry. I consider shrikes to be honorary raptors, due to their highly predatory lifestyle.

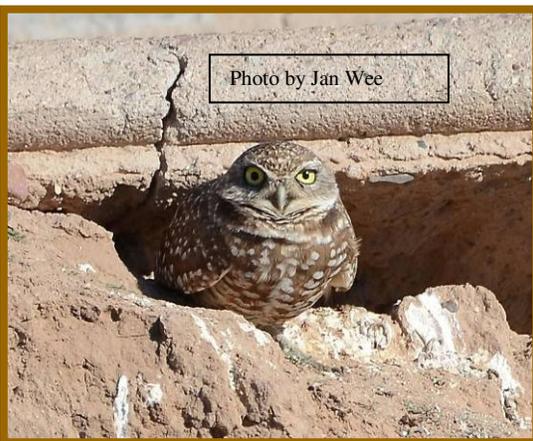
Some Sandhill Cranes were present when we arrived. But the real show occurred toward the end of the trip, when wave after wave of these majestic birds came back to Whitewater after feeding in nearby agricultural fields. There were literally thousands of these birds over our heads, the air filled with their distinctive voices. It is a spectacle that I never get tired of.

The beautiful weather, fantastic birds, and great company made for a special morning.

Santa Cruz Flats Trip Report

I had the privilege of leading a caravan of birders into the Santa Cruz Flats on a wondrous southern Arizona winter day for a morning of targeted birding. This region north of Picacho Peak, composed of sod farms and alfalfa and cotton fields, is a very interesting area at this time of year, despite its lack of scenic beauty.

Exiting I-10 at Toltec Road, our first stop was a flooded field south of the road that had a nice collection of Northern Pintail and Least Sandpiper. Scanning the field to the north, we had distant looks at Crested Caracara and Mountain Plover- our main two targets. We watched disappointingly as the birds refused to provide good looks. Drat! I hoped that we would do better than that.



Turning south onto Pretzer Road, we stopped in what looked like good sparrow habitat. We didn't find many sparrows, but we did get good looks at a light morph Ferruginous Hawk (thanks, Steph!). Many photos were taken of this regal raptor! A bit further south, we stopped near an inviting field that produced Horned Lark and Killdeer, but no Mountain Plovers. One of the participants noticed three caracaras further down Pretzer. We got into the cars and gave chase. But again, the caracaras eluded us. Double Drat! A very nice consolation prize was the Burrowing Owl about 30 feet from the cars!

Continuing on, we turned onto Tweedy Road and headed to the sod fields of Evergreen Sod Farm. Stopping in front of the farm's small pond, we noticed many birds on the ground out in the sod. Getting scopes on them revealed that we were looking at 30-40 Mountain Plovers! This is perhaps the largest flock of these declining shorebirds in southern Arizona this year. These birds are hard to get good looks at and this view was much better than our previous look. It

helped that they were foraging on the pale green of recently seeded sod, as they are devilishly hard to spot on barren ground.

Parking the cars on Fast Track Road (that really is its name!), we looked into another field that I had wanted to visit. Yes!! A Crested Caracara was walking on the ground! Our second main target bird had been found. Looking more closely, we saw seven or eight caracaras in this one field! We were given quite a show by these odd falcons- adults and immatures, perched and in flight. What a great way to end the trip. We saw many other birds- Greater Yellowlegs, Eastern Meadowlark, American Kestrel, a plethora of Red-tailed Hawks, including a rufous morph.



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Thank you to all who came along on this outing. It was a great group! A delightful morning indeed!

Butterfly Profile: Brown Elfin

In my opinion, the butterfly season in southern Arizona takes wing in February. In fact, there are several species whose adult flight period begins in late January and is over by April! This month's butterfly field trip targets many of these early-flying butterflies. One of these is the aptly named Brown Elfin (*Callophrys augustinus*).



In essence, elfins are hairstreaks that lack the thin 'tails' on the hindwing that are present on most hairstreaks. They also tend to be butterflies that exhibit some cold tolerance, flying early in the spring or at fairly high latitudes. Thus in many areas these active little butterflies are true harbingers of spring. Adult Brown Elfins are indeed brown, but the overall tone of brown can vary considerably from tan to reddish to almost purplish brown. A unifying feature is that the underside of the wings is two-toned with darker coloration at the wing bases and paler near the wing margins.

In Arizona, Brown Elfins are found in close proximity to manzanita, the larval foodplant for the species in our area. The species ranges across North America in a big upside-down U- from northern Mississippi north to the Maritime Provinces then west across Canada to the Pacific coast, then southward to California. Our population is disjunct from its closest cousins to the west.

A good place to look for Brown Elfin is to scan flowering manzanita shrubs. Not only is this the caterpillar foodplant, but it is also a major nectar source for the adults. They do occasionally visit other flowers and damp soil. The larvae feed not upon the leaves of manzanita, but mainly on the unopened flower buds. An interesting aspect of the biology of Brown Elfin is that eastern populations feed mostly on blueberries and other members of the heath family (Ericaceae), while western populations feed on plants in many different plant families.

The species was formally described in 1852 by British entomologist John Obadiah Westwood, from specimens collected near the north end of Lake Winnipeg in Saskatchewan. There are four subspecies in the U.S. and Canada with two additional subspecies in northern Mexico.

Did you know...?

... that this year's Sandhill Crane census totaled 19,000 cranes! Arizona Game and Fish conducts the survey annually in early January. The numbers are down over the past couple of years, but they are not necessarily cause for concern. Crane numbers can fluctuate from year-to-year for a variety of reasons-weather, changes in agricultural crops on the wintering grounds, and the like.