



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

January 1, 2015

The Sky Island News

Vol. 6 No. 1

January 2015

Happy New Year! I hope that everyone had an enjoyable holiday season with friends and family.

You will find all of the usual things in this issue- the month's schedule, "Did You Know...", and a report on last month's field trip to Las Cienegas. This month, I am offering two field trips that visit sites that I hope you find interesting (even though they are a bit farther afield than usual). Also, January's Butterfly Profile features a brand new species and the fascinating story of its discovery.

Enjoy!

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.



Hawks, Eagles, and Falcons Study Tour. Wed., 1/21. 8AM-5:00PM. Contact Pima Community College for more information and to register (206-6468 or visit www.pima.edu).

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 on generally well-maintained paths.

Whitewater Draw Birding. Fri., 1/9. 7AM-12:00PM. \$10/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.

Whitewater Draw, southeast of Tombstone, is one of the premier winter birding spots in southern Arizona. On this tour, we can expect to see many raptors and waterfowl. We also hope for owls, shorebirds, and Sandhill Cranes. Bring water, snacks, and the usual birding gear. We will meet at the intersection of Sahuarita Road and State Route 83.

Santa Cruz Flats Birding. Mon., 1/19. 7AM-1PM. \$10/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.

The agricultural areas near Picacho Peak, often referred to as the Santa Cruz flats, are another good winter birding site. Crested Caracara, Mountain Plover, and longspurs are the main targets for this trip. Bring water, lunch or snacks, and the rest of your usual birding stuff. We will meet at the Denny's Restaurant west of I-10 between St. Mary's and Speedway Blvd.



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson
Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com
www.SkyIslandTours.com
Phone: 520-488-8551

January 1, 2015

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. (except New Year's Day). 8:30-10:00AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Tucson Mountain Park Birding. Sat. 1/3. 8:00-10:00AM. Ironwood Picnic Area (1548 S. Kinney Rd.). Leader is John Higgins.

Birding Roger Road Ponds. Tues., 1/6. 8:30-10:00AM. (2600 W. Sweetwater Dr.) **Reservations Required.** Contact me or call 615-7855 to register.

Honey Bee Canyon Birding Walk. Sat. 1/10 and Sat. 1/24. 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. Wed., 1/14. 8:30-10AM. 2667 W. Sweetwater Dr. Led by Mary Ellen Flynn.

Cienega Creek Birding. Fri., 1/16. 8:00-10AM. 16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.

Santa Cruz River Birding Walk. Mon., 1/26. 8:30-10AM. Meet at Wheeler Taft Abnett Sr. Branch Library, 7800 N. Schisler Dr. **Reservations required.**

Canoa Ranch Birding Walk. Tues., 1/27. 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

Bounteous Beetles. Wed., 1/7. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Lampetis drummondi

Beetles are the largest single group of animals on the planet. They are also full of contradictions. Beetles can be both pests and highly beneficial predators of pests. They can be brightly colored or dull. They range in size from that of the head of a pin to half a foot. This class will introduce students to the amazing diversity of beetles, focusing on species found in southern Arizona. I will be bringing in some live specimens as part of the class.

Hummingbirds: Flying Jewels. Thurs., 1/15. 6-8PM. Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 to register.

Hummingbirds generate awe and fascination for many people. Their glittering colors, unparalleled flying abilities, and interesting behaviors make them one of southern Arizona's main birding attractions. Using color slides and audio recordings, you will learn the identification of hummingbirds and basic aspects of their biology. You will also find out how create a garden that can attract these remarkable birds to your yard.

Ghost Birds: Extinct and Endangered North American Birds. Fri., 1/23. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson
Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com
www.SkyIslandTours.com
Phone: 520-488-8551

January 1, 2015

Passenger Pigeon, Carolina Parakeet and Great Auk are North American birds that have disappeared forever. This class explores the sad legacy of the loss of these and other birds. We will also look at some of our birds that have become endangered and the efforts being taken to prevent them from sinking into oblivion. The news isn't all bad - there have been some success stories. Join us for a look at America's lost and imperiled bird life.

Songbirds Part 1: Flycatchers to Kinglets. Thurs., 1/29. 6-8PM. Cochise College (901 N. Colombo Ave. in Sierra Vista). Call 515-5492 to register.



In the first installment of the Songbirds Series, we will look at flycatchers, vireos, jays, wrens and several other groups of birds. We will discuss the classification and identification of these birds, using slides and audio recordings. Do you know what separates the flycatchers from all of our other songbirds? This class will tell you. Join us for the first part of our journey through the songbirds, the most diverse groups of birds on Earth.

The Sex Life of Birds. Fri., 1/30. 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.

In The Binoculars

This section highlights events that are on the horizon.

Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (1/14).

This month's THS meeting features a presentation by Jeff Servoss, Wildlife Biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. His presentation is entitled "The Decline of Northern Mexican and Narrow-headed Gartersnakes: Can they be recovered?" 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 for more information. I hope to see you there!



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

January 1, 2015

Las Cienegas Birding Trip Report

December's field trip was a second try at birding Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, a beautiful example of desert grassland that is home to many interesting birds. My first attempt of a tour of the area was thwarted by hurricane Odile, and its threat of rain of biblical proportions. I put Las Cienegas on the schedule for this month, as it the winter residence of many sparrows and raptors. Just like the first try to visit, the weather forecast was not promising- temperatures in low 50s and rain likely. Not to be stopped by some rain and cool temperatures, I was joined by a group of adventurous birders and pressed on despite the weather. As it turned out, I am glad that we did!



We entered Las Cienegas from the north, off of State Route 83. The first birds we saw included American Kestrel, Loggerhead Shrike, Vesper Sparrow, and Eastern Meadowlark. It would turn out that Vespers were by far the most common sparrow observed on this day. A bit further on, one of the participants spotted a very distant bird in a tree. It looked fairly large and was quite pale in coloration. Even with scopes on it, it was hard to make out much detail. I had a good idea of what we were looking at, but I wasn't positive. Then it turned its head and I saw the black patch around the eye and the identification was confirmed- White-tailed Kite! This was our target bird for the trip (thanks, Jim!). But, the looks were so distant that I wanted better views. So we got back in the cars and continued east.

About 1/8th of a mile further we saw a flock of sparrows flush from the roadside- mostly Vesper with a few Savannahs. Looking to the hillside to the north we spotted another raptor in flight. Yes, another kite! And much closer! After a few moments it perched in a mesquite tree allowing folks to get good views. Within minutes a second appeared from the west! At one point we had two kites, at least

three American Kestrels and a Northern Harrier in view at the same time! All I could hear here was the sound of camera motors and the oohs and aahs of fellow birders watching the raptor show.

After watching the spectacle for awhile we pushed on to the Empire Ranch headquarters. Here we added Gila Woodpecker and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. In reality, at this point, it would have been difficult to top what we had already seen. So as a rain squall hit us, we decided to call it a day.

Thank you to all who came out to witness the kites and other birds (and the wonderful cloud show!) on a day that was far less than ideal. It was a joy to be out there watching the kites with you!

Book Review

Natural History of the Ironwood Forest National Monument: A Sonoran Desert Primer. Royce E. Ballinger and Young D. Cage. Rusty Lizard Press.

This review is long overdue. I received a copy of this important book in July and I am finally getting around to this review. In the interest of full disclosure, I was asked by Dr. Ballinger to review the insect and mammal sections of this book. That said, this book is a very good overview of the natural history of Ironwood Forest National Monument (IFNM). Created in 2000 by Executive Order, IFNM is a gem that is under the radar of many, yet offers excellent examples of the Arizona Uplands and Lower Colorado River subdivisions of the Sonoran Desert.

The book begins with a brief introduction to the various mountain ranges and valleys of the monument, including a map of IFNM. This is followed by an in-depth look at some of the keystone species that inhabit IFNM, such as the monument's namesake tree, saguaro, Desert Tortoise, and Gila Woodpecker. The main parts of the book look at the plant, invertebrate, and vertebrate life of the monument. These offer many interesting tidbits of information. For example, one of the more easterly occurring individuals of organ pipe cactus is found in the monument's Roskrige Mountains. Or that Desert Bighorn Sheep can be found (but not easily seen) in some of IFNM's mountains.



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

January 1, 2015

The plant section begins with fungi and lichens and continues on to discuss ferns, cacti, trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. In particular, I enjoyed the addition of the lower plants to the book, as these organisms are often overlooked in works of this type. Many of the most important or easily seen plants are discussed. With almost 600 plant taxa recorded from the monument, this is just a mere sampling of the flora of not only IFNM, but much of the lowlands of southern Arizona.

The invertebrate section also covers only those species that are easily observed or play important ecological roles in IFNM. Centipedes, millipedes, scorpions, spiders, solfugids, and insects are discussed. For the insects the focus is again on the most obvious (large, common, or brightly colored) species. The information herein will get the interested observer on their way to recognizing and appreciating the arthropods of the region.

Vertebrates are covered next. To some degree, the species featured are those for which photographs were available. The book concludes with a look at changes and threats to the monument, such as climate change, illegal trash dumping, target shooting, off-road vehicle use, smuggling, and non-native species.

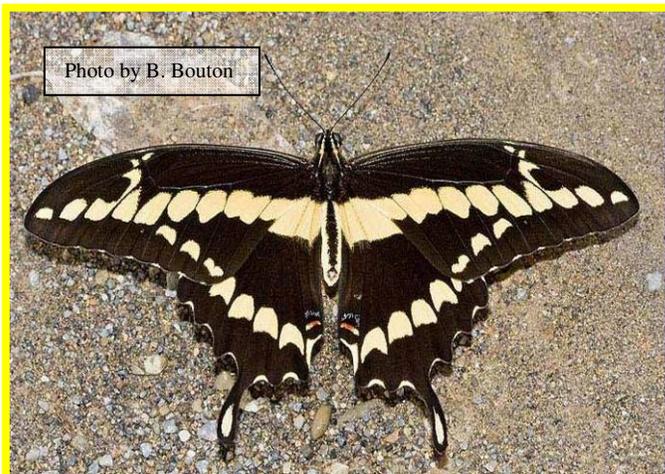
I highly recommend this addition to the literature on the Sonoran Desert. It is highly readable with very little scientific jargon. The photographs are excellent. The photo by the second author of a Desert Spiny Lizard on page 172 is a stunningly beautiful example of the high quality of the volume. Anyone interested in the Sonoran Desert should own a copy. After reading the book, get out and explore Ironwood Forest National Monument and see the flora and fauna for yourself!

Butterfly Profile: Western Giant Swallowtail

This month's butterfly was chosen because of the fascinating story of its discovery. It is one of the largest butterflies in North America and it is common in many areas. It is also one of the newest species on the planet, described in a recent paper in the journal *Zookeys*, published on the 23rd of December, 2014. It is now known as the Western Giant Swallowtail, *Papilio rumiko*, and here is its story (in condensed form).

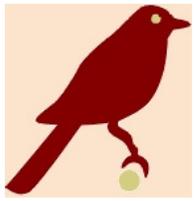
The story began in 2005, when one of the paper's authors, Kojiro Shiraiwa, collected several specimens from San Diego County, California. When these were compared with specimens from Indiana, several differences in wing pattern were discovered. Intrigued, the researchers looked further, at DNA and male genitalia, and the results of these studies reinforced the differences in wing pattern.

What they had discovered was that, what was called the Giant Swallowtail, was actually two species, one eastern, the other from the American southwest south to Panama! Taxonomists call the western population a cryptic species, populations that are very similar in physical appearance but are reproductively isolated from each other. Populations from central Texas east are now known as the Eastern Giant Swallowtail (*P. cresphontes*). Populations to the west and south are Western Giant Swallowtail. There is a narrow band in central Texas where the two species occur together. (Note: The authors of this paper place these butterflies in the genus *Heraclides*. This is because some authorities split the genus *Papilio* into three genera. This is probably correct, but has not been universally accepted. The Opler-Warren list, the unofficial list of North American butterflies, recognizes *Papilio*).



The Western Giant Swallowtail can be distinguished from its eastern cousin by several differences that can be seen in photos or binoculars. Western Giant has two broad yellow stripes from head to thorax (Eastern Giant has yellow spots on the head and thorax). Western Giant has more slender wings with longer tails. Western Giant has smaller yellow marginal spots on the forewing. Also on the forewing, Western Giant has a submarginal row of three spots (not four as in Eastern Giant) and a larger, more well-defined, intrusion of the background color into the horizontal yellow spot band.

There are also consistent differences in male genitalia between the two species. In addition, the mitochondrial DNA differs by about 3% (differences between species is usually at least 2%). All of these criteria strongly suggest that two species are involved.



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

January 1, 2015

The two species use members of the Rutaceae as larval foodplants. In our area, these include non-native citrus (*Citrus sp.*) in urban areas and hoptree, or wafer ash (*Ptelea trifoliata*), a native tree or shrub that occurs in rocky canyons. The caterpillars bear an uncanny resemblance to bird droppings, an excellent example of evolutionary trickery that reduces predation by birds.

Adults will visit flowers for nectar and wet soil for nourishment. The flight period of adults in southern Arizona is from March to November, with multiple generations each year.

You will probably have to wait a few weeks before seeing an adult Western Giant Swallowtail on the wing. But when you do see one, you will be watching the newest species of butterfly in North America!

Did you know...?

... that the Western Giant Swallowtail is not the only recently described insect species from Arizona? A new tiger beetle, *Cicindelidia melissa*, was described in the journal *Zookeys* in a paper by Daniel Duran of Drexel University and Stephan Roman. The new species occurs in high elevation forests from the Chiricahua Mountains in southeastern Arizona south into the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Durango, and Sonora. The new species is similar to the Western Red-bellied Tiger Beetle (*C. sedecimpunctata*), but differs in underpart coloration and habitat preference. Two new species in one issue of the *Sky Island News*!