

Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

The Sky Island News

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'Human beings are great in their own eyes, but are not much in the eyes of Nature.'

Kensho Furuya

Welcome to 2016! I wish each of you a happy, healthy, and fruitful year ahead. I am eagerly looking forward to the upcoming year. I have plans for more owl trips this spring and summer, there is a new multi-day field trip to the Chiricahuas with the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in April, another year of guiding for the Southwest Wings and Tucson birding festivals and more. On the insect front, I am planning at least one insect-oriented trip per month starting this spring, including blacklighting for moths.

Segueing into the aforementioned moth outings, I have also begun work on a field guide to the moths of southeastern Arizona. This effort will surely keep me busy, but will be a great adventure and a profound learning opportunity. I firmly believe that moths have entered the general consciousness (look at National Moth Week!) and that such a guide is sorely lacking for such a biologically diverse area as southern Arizona.

So, if I look bleary-eyed on numerous occasions this year, it will probably because I have been out at light sheets very late into the night.

I hope that you enjoy this issue!

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.

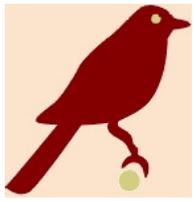
Birding the Santa Cruz Flats. Wed., 1/20. 8:00AM-1:00PM. Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.

The Santa Cruz Flats is always an interesting birding spot in winter. The agricultural fields and sod farms of the area, north of Picacho Peak, are the winter home of many birds. Among our targets are Mountain Plover, Ferruginous Hawk, Crested Caracara, Sprague's Pipit, and, potentially, four species of longspur. Bring binoculars, camera, snacks, lunch and water. We will meet at Crossroads Park in Marana, near the Wheeler Taft Abbett Library and carpool to the Flats.



Lake Cochise and Northern Sulphur Springs Valley Birding. Wed., 1/27. 8:00AM-1:00PM. Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.

This trip will take us to two very different, yet very productive, habitats. The first stop is Lake Cochise in Wilcox, where we can expect to see a variety of ducks (Common Mergansers are a possibility), raptors, shorebirds, and sparrows. The grasslands around the lake may harbor Sandhill Cranes and flocks of longspurs. We will then head south to the agricultural fields near Kansas Settlement where birds like Ferruginous Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Great Horned Owl, and Horned Lark will be our targets. Bring binoculars, camera, water, snacks, and lunch. We will meet in the dirt parking area at the top of the eastbound I-10 exit ramp for State Route 83/Sonoita/Patagonia (exit #281).



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January Classes

Raptors Part 1: Hawks, Eagles, and Allies. Fri., 1/8. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Dark morph
Ferruginous Hawk.
Photo by N. Harris.

Did you know that southern Arizona is the winter home of thousands of hawks and eagles? This class will highlight the best sites to look for them. Do you have trouble separating a Swainson's Hawk from a Red-tail? We investigate the tricky identification challenges that these birds present and take a close look at the classification, lifestyles, and conservation of these remarkable birds.

Raptors Part 2: Falcons and Vultures. Fri., 1/15. 12-2PM. 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.

Raptors Part 1: Hawks, Eagles, and Allies. Thurs., 1/21. 6-8PM. Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Visit www.tucsonbotanical.org or call 326-9686 X18 to register.

See above for the description.

Raptors Part 3: Owls. Fri., 1/22. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

Owls have captivated the imagination of mankind for centuries, symbolizing everything from evil and death to wisdom and protection. In this class we dive into the classification, biology and conservation of these nocturnal birds. Can't tell a Whiskered Screech-Owl from a Western Screech-Owl? We also learn the identification of owls by sight and sound.

North American Mammals Part 1: Rodents. Mon., 1/25. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

Believe it or not, rodents make up over 40% of the world's mammals, with new species still being discovered on a regular basis. This class surveys the nine families and over 200 species of rodents found in North America. Rodents, also known as the gnawing mammals, exhibit a tremendous diversity of size, shape, color, and habits. They are equally at home in the driest deserts as well as freshwater lakes and ponds. Some species are beneficial. Others are pests in homes and gardens. Join us as we begin our survey of North American mammals with a look at this intriguing group of animals.

Pima County Classes and Trips

These trips are offered by the Pima County Department of Natural Resources, Parks, and Recreation. Call (520)-615-7855 X3 for more



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information. For descriptions of these trips and other programs offered by the Environmental Education Division, visit <http://www.pima.gov/nrpr/eeduc/enviro.htm>.

Online reservations and a \$5.00 fee are required for all Pima County Natural Resources Programs unless indicated otherwise. Visit www.pima.gov/nrpr to create a profile, register, and pay program fees.

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

Cienega Creek Birding. Tues., 1/5. 8:30-10:30AM. (16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.).

Birding Sweetwater Wetlands. Mon., 1/11. 8:30-10:00AM. (2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.). No reservations or fee required for Sweetwater Wetlands programs.

A Night with the Stars. Sat., 1/16. 6:30-8:30PM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.). Free. Reservations not required.

Canoa Ranch Birding. Tues., 1/19. 8:30-10:00AM. Historic Hacienda de la Canoa. (5375 S. I-19 Frontage Rd. in Green Valley).

Monthly Meetings

This section highlights the month's meetings of local organizations that may be of interest.

Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (1/4). Note the Day Change. THS meetings will now be held on Mondays.

This presentation for this month's meeting is entitled, 'Herpeto-botanizing in Sonora', by Robert Villa. The meeting starts at 7:15PM (45 minutes earlier than usual). Meetings are held at the Ward 3 Office (1510 E. Grant Rd.).

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.

Southeast Arizona Butterfly Association Meeting (1/17).

This month I have the privilege of giving the presentation at the SEABA meeting! The talk is entitled, 'The Moths of Southern Arizona.'. Meetings are held in the Education Room of the Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way), with social time at 6:30 with the meeting starting at 7:00PM.



The local chapter of the North American Butterfly Association, SEABA advocates for butterflies and their habitats through conservation, education, and recreation through monthly meetings and frequent field trips.

Tucson Amateur Astronomy Association Meeting (1/8).

The Introductory Presentation will be given by Dr. Mary Turner and is titled, 'Seasonal Objects of Interest'. Dr. Turner, TAAA's Chief Observer, will discuss the interesting objects visible with modest telescopes in the winter skies of southern Arizona. The Invited Lecture, by Dr. Michael Lesser of the University of Arizona Imaging Lab, is "Sensor Development at the UA Imaging Technology Lab." The presentation will highlight the work of the Lab for scientific research and high-end industrial applications. The Introductory Presentation begins at 6:30PM and the Invited Lecture follows at 7:30PM. TAAA meetings are held on the U of A campus at the Steward Observatory Lecture Hall.



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From the group's website, 'TAAA members enjoy exploring, observing, and learning about the objects in our solar system and beyond. We want to share our experience with you. From beginner to professional astronomer, with a telescope or without one, we invite you to join us in this exciting and rewarding endeavor.' Visit <http://tucsonastronomy.org/> for more information.

San Rafael Grasslands/Whitewater Draw Trip Report.

For the recap of December's field trips, I have decided to condense the two trips into one report. The first trip last month was a journey into the San Rafael Grasslands, south of Patagonia, to look for grassland birds. The second outing was to Whitewater Draw in Cochise County, a famous winter birding site, known for its Sandhill Crane roost.

The group heading to the San Rafael Valley was greeted with sunny, crystal clear skies, as we headed south. Upon reaching the grasslands, the first birds we saw were Eastern Meadowlarks that we flushed from along the roadside. The distinctive southwestern population of this species is a candidate for a split. The 'new' species would be Lilian's Meadowlark. We soon spotted American Kestrels perched on the fence line, the first of many of these colorful little raptors. We did not find any Baird's Sparrows, unfortunately, as the San Rafael Valley is home to this elusive sparrow.



Moving a bit further east we soon detected a pair of White-tailed Kites, another of our targets on this trip. These flamboyant raptors put on a show for us, hovering, stooping in a failed predation attempt, and chasing each other above the grass. This species is one of my favorite raptors and I always delight in seeing them. In this distance we also had Northern Harriers, which often share habitat with the kites during the winter months.

One thing that was surprising on the trip was the relative absence of sparrows. We had a couple of Vespers and Savannahs, but that was it. In the greater context, however, it appears that this may not be a great winter for sparrows in southern Arizona, as the numbers of many species seem to be down. This could be the result of a mild December in many areas.

The trip to Whitewater Draw was also greeted by sunny skies. However, the temperature was around freezing, by the time we got to our destination. In fact, most of the water was frozen over! There was a bit of open water that was inviting to ducks, including Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, and Ring-necked. The best

find was a gorgeous drake Wood Duck, skulking in and out of the reeds. Getting a good look required some patience, but was well worth the effort. If you can't get excited about these stunning birds, you must not have a pulse.

Walking the berm at Whitewater we spied many Northern Harriers, definitely the raptor of the day in terms of abundance. We also got good views of a beautiful female 'Prairie' Merlin. Merlins are always a joy to see. From the berm we added Greater Yellowlegs, Vermilion Flycatcher, Black Phoebe, many White-crowned Sparrows, Loggerhead Shrike, and others.

The find of the day, in my opinion, was a Golden-crowned Sparrow, a winter rarity from the Pacific coast. We almost passed it off as another White-crown but I'm glad we didn't! As you may have heard me say, it pays to look at flocks of White-crowns, because that is often where rarities, like Golden-crowned and Harris's Sparrows, are apt to be found.

Both trips were a lot of fun! I thank everyone who joined me. It is always a pleasure spending time in the field with you!

Butterfly Profile: Western Pygmy-Blue



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This month I feature a butterfly that you have probably seen but may have mistaken for a moth, the Western Pygmy-Blue (*Brephidium exilis*). With a wingspan of about a half-inch, this species is the smallest butterfly in North America and one of the smallest in the world. Despite its small size, this is a tough little insect, on the wing year-round here in southern Arizona.

Size alone is often enough to identify Western Pygmy-Blues. The underside of the wings is grayish near the base and rich, rusty brown from the median area to the edge. There is a row of four black spots along the trailing edge of the hindwing. Dorsally, the wings are warm brown with some blue scaling at the bases of the wings. Despite its name, there is not a whole lot of blue on this butterfly.



Western Pygmy-Blues are often found flitting around saltbush (*Atriplex*), but due to their small size are easily overlooked. The butterfly is attached to saltbush because it is the larval foodplant. Adults often visit flowers for nectar. I see them frequently on desert broom in the fall. Good places to look for these tiny beauties are Sweetwater Wetlands and along washes, especially when desert broom is in flower. Overall, Western Pygmy-Blues are more common at lower elevations.

The species was officially described to science in 1852 by the great French lepidopterist Jean Baptiste Boisduval from specimens collected in Sacramento, California. A second species of pygmy-blue, the Eastern (*B. pseudofoea*) can be found in salt marshes along the southern Atlantic and Gulf coasts. The two are now recognized by most authorities as separate species but they have been united as a single taxon in the past.

So keep your eyes peeled for this tiny creature the next time you are out for a hike. Pay particular attention in areas with saltbush.

Did you know?

...that a rare Amazonian butterfly was recently discovered and named after famed British naturalist Sir David Attenborough? The



insect is known as *Euptychia attenboroughi* and is only known from a 500 kilometer patch of upper Amazonian lowland forest in Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil. The research team that described the butterfly was led by Andrew Neild of the Natural History Museum in London and Shinichi Nakahara of the McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity at the University of Florida. They initially thought that the butterfly may belong to a new genus. DNA data, however, place the new species in the wide-ranging genus *Euptychia* in a group of butterflies known as satyrs. Mr. Attenborough is a hero of mine and I am glad to see that a butterfly was named in his honor.

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