

Sky Island Tours

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The Sky Island News

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July 2015

July is a great month for several reasons. First, it typically marks the beginning of the monsoon season. Even though the National Weather Service starts the monsoon on June 15th, the chances for rain are better in July. The rains bring a welcome respite from the heat and spark an explosion of life- plant growth and flowering, insects that feed on the new plant growth, and so forth. July also harkens the peak of herp season, with several desert toads making their brief annual appearance and better chances to see cool snakes while driving quiet desert roads after a rain.

The highlight of the month for me is the fifth annual National Moth Week, this year from July 18-26. There are a couple of things I love about this event. First, is the lure of the unknown. Every time a light sheet is set up, one never knows what will show up. Second, NMW highlights the amazing diversity of moths, beetles, and other insects that inhabit southern Arizona. I hope to see you at one of my NMW events this month!

In this issue I recap last month's Owling trip to the Santa Rita Mountains, as well as highlight another moth family in preparation for National Moth Week, and profile another of southern Arizona's butterflies. There is also the monthly schedule and the 'Did You Know...' column.

Enjoy!



Save
the date!
July
18-26
2015



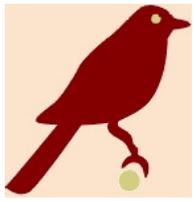
In preparation for National Moth Week, I offer the following passage from John Himmelman's wonderful book, *Discovering Moths: Nighttime Jewels in Your Own Backyard*. I think it perfectly describes the allure of mothing.

"...I share with you a world that exists unknown to most of us in every yard, lot, forest, and field. It is a dark world, brightened by the existence of its winged denizens. We are strangers in this world, because we are for the most part diurnal creatures. When darkness sets in, we retreat to our well-lit homes to wait it out. It has been my experience that once a person discovers just a smattering of what can be found in that darkness, the setting sun becomes a prelude to an exciting part of the daily cycle. A prelude to discovery.

Welcome to the night."

June 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.



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Search for the Five-striped Sparrow. Wed., 7/8. 7:00AM-1:00PM . Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register. Limit 10 participants.



©Robert Royse

The Five-striped Sparrow is one of the most sought-after birds in southeastern Arizona, being found in small numbers at a small number of locations. On this tour, we make the long trek to California Gulch, the most reliable spot for the species in the U.S. We can also hope to see Varied Bunting, Pyrrhuloxia, Rufous-winged and Black-throated Sparrows, in addition to our target bird. To be clear, the walk into the gulch is fairly steep and is not suitable for everyone. There is also the possibility that the roads into the gulch may be impassable due to monsoon storms. It will be an adventure! Meet at the McDonald's at Continental Road and I-19. Bring plenty of water, snacks, camera, sunscreen, and hat.

Blacklighting for Moths. Sat., 7/18. 7:00-9:30PM. Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.

To celebrate National Moth Week, this evening will highlight the moths of Madera Canyon, a legendary location for moth-ers. We hope to see several types of sphinx moths, wild silk moths, and many, many others. We can also expect to see some spectacular beetles. So come out for a fun, casual night of nature watching! We will meet at Madera Picnic Area in Madera Canyon (just before Santa Rita Lodge, on the right).

Blacklighting for Moths. Sat., 7/25. 7:00-9:30PM. Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.



Syntomeida hamptonii

A second night of celebration in honor of National Moth Week, this evening will highlight the moths of the Santa Catalinas. We hope to see several types of sphinx moths, wild silk moths, and many, many others. We can also expect to see some spectacular beetles. So come out for a fun, casual night of nature watching! We will meet at Middle Bear Picnic Area on Mt. Lemmon.

Overnight California Gulch. Wed., 7/29- Thurs., 7/30. Part of the Southwest Wings Festival. Visit <http://www.swwings.org> for more information. The information below is direct from the festival brochure.

The rugged canyons of the Pajarito Mountains are some of the most celebrated birding spots on the Arizona-Sonora border. This overnight tour will focus on the search for the area's most famous specialty birds, among them Montezuma Quail, Varied Bunting, and Five-striped Sparrow. This tour also provides excellent opportunities for seeing a good cross-section of southeast Arizona's many specialties, including Gray Hawk; Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet; Tropical Kingbird; Mexican Jay; Painted Redstart; Cassin's;

Botteri's, and Rufous-crowned Sparrows; and Scott's Oriole. We begin by heading to Patagonia and Rio Rico, where we will hit prime locations for Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, and other exciting finds. Our route then takes us to California Gulch, where we will make the short, but very steep, walk on an abandoned road for the afternoon Five-striped Sparrow show. The next morning we will briefly explore the "birdy" Santa Cruz River. *With the exception of the steep walk into and out of the Gulch, most of our birding will be from the vehicle or on level, sometimes rocky paths. This trip includes all meals and lodging at the Amado Territory Inn B & B. Single participants will be paired for overnight accommodations, unless single room is requested. Hiking Difficulty: 4 moderate to difficult. This trip is best suited for intermediate birding skills. Bring your binoculars and do not forget your camera and insect repellent!*



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Overnight Madera Canyon/Santa Cruz Valley. Fri., 7/31-Sat., 8/1. . Part of the Southwest Wings Festival. Visit <http://www.swwings.org> for more information. The information below is direct from the festival brochure.

Join Professional Guide Jeff Babson on an extended trip to Madera Canyon and the Santa Cruz River Valley. The Santa Rita Mountains with Madera Canyon at its heart, is rated the third best birding destination in the United States. The area has had fifteen species of hummingbirds, Elegant Trogon, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, many species of wood warblers, and over 256 species of birds documented. The Santa Cruz River has a wide variety of birds including nesting Gray Hawks, and many lower altitude Arizona Specialties. All meals and lodging at the Amado Inn are included. Please Call if you need single occupancy.

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. 7:30-9:00AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Butterflies of Agua Caliente Park. Tues., 7/7. 8:00-10:00AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Birding Sweetwater Wetlands. Tues., 7/14. 7:30-9:30AM. (2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.).

Cienega Creek Nature Hike. Wed., 7/15. 7:00-8:30AM. Cienega Creek Preserve(16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.).

Nature Night: Bats in Flight. Fri., 7/17. 6:30-8:30PM. Rillito River Park (4200 N. Campbell Ave.).

Cienega Creek Birding. Tues., 7/21. 7:30-9:30AM. Cienega Creek Preserve (16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.).

Birding the Santa Cruz River. Tues., 7/28. 7:30-9:30AM. Meet at Wheeler Taft Abbett Library (7800 N. Schisler Dr.) in Marana. RESERVATIONS REQUIRED.

July Classes

Natural History of Belize. Mon., 7/13. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Belize, formerly known as British Honduras, is located on the Yucatan Peninsula, tucked between the Caribbean Sea to the east, Mexico to the north, and Guatemala to the west and south. This class will highlight the incredible natural wonders of this Massachusetts-sized nation. Over 500 species of birds, over 700 species of butterfly, over 4000 species of flowering plants, not to mention jaguars, whale sharks, and many reptiles and amphibians call Belize home. Join us for a look at a natural paradise.

Mammals of Arizona. Thurs., 7/16. 6-8PM.

Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 to register.

Did you know Arizona is one of the richest states in terms of diverse mammal populations? As most of these species are nocturnal, this course offers the rare opportunity of seeing a number of our mammalian neighbors up close with

photographs.



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Marvelous Moths. Thurs., 7/23. 6-8PM. Cochise College (901 N. Colombo Ave. in SierraVista). Call 515-5492 to register.

Engage in the fantastic night-shift world of moths. Moths are an extraordinarily successful group of insects and important pollinators of many desert plants. Yet they are also one of the least appreciated. There are far more moths than butterflies and many rival butterflies in their brilliant colors. Some of them are active during the day. This class will explore moths: their classification, identification, and biology.

North American Mammals Part 1: Rodents. Mon., 7/27. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register. ***NEW***

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 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.

In The Binoculars

This section highlights events that are on the horizon.

Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (7/8).

Michael Sredl, from the Nongame Branch of the Arizona Game and Fish Department, presents 'Las Vegas and Arizona Leopard Frogs??? Paradigm and Puzzle of the *Rana pipiens* complex.' Meetings are held at the Ward 3 Office (1510 E. Grant Rd.) begin 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.

Tucson Bird and Wildlife Festival *Online registration is open*****

The 2015 edition of this great festival is August 12-16, once again headquartered at the Riverpark Inn. Online registration for the festival is now open. 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 keynote speakers are Rick Wright and Paul Baicich. Visit www.tucsonaudubon.org for more information. I look forward to seeing you there!

Santa Rita Night Birds Trip Report

Owling is one of the great adventures in birding that you don't have to travel far to enjoy. Being outside at night in southern Arizona is magic, serenaded by tree crickets under star-filled skies. Throw in the possibility of seeing some elusive night birds and you have all the makings for an exciting evening. So it was with much enthusiasm that a bunch of night birders and I headed into the Santa Rita Mountains to look for owls.

We started off at the Mt. Wrightson Picnic Area- a good place to begin because there are good birds there and it offered a welcome respite from the heat. Within minutes we heard the first of several Mexican Whip-poor-wills singing. We actually had a couple of individuals get within viewing range, but they intelligently seemed to land behind hillocks and rocks, making actually seeing the birds impossible. It was nice to hear them, though.



Our next stop was the Amphitheater parking lot, where we hoped to get onto Elf Owls and Whiskered Screech-owls. Well, we did get a receptive Whiskered come in close, but we were never able to actually see it. This is one of the frustrating aspects of owling- you stand around in the dark looking for birds that are very well camouflaged. At this point I told the group that the American Birding Association had revised their listing rules a while back so that birds that were heard, but not seen, were listable. That idea went over about as well as a heat lamp in Hades. Nevertheless, we pressed on.



Whiskered Screech-Owl. Photo by Becky Hoag.

Our next site was Madera Picnic Area. Within minutes we had Whiskered Screech and Elf Owls responding to playback of their calls. Soon, a shape flew by and landed in a juniper. I shone the light on a wonderful Whiskered Screech-owl, one of a pair that clearly had set up home in the vicinity, as we heard a second bird close by while we watched the other. Of course, Murphy's Law dictates that a great photo opportunity presents itself when one does not have their camera with them. That is what happened with this bird, as some of the cameras were left in the vehicles. Drat!

A short time later we heard an Elf Owl close by. After about 20 minutes or so of searching, we finally spotted the little fellow perched in an ash tree. Not to repeat the past, everyone got good photos of the dude.

As we headed back to the cars, we got on the Whiskered again, as they had moved to the opposite side of the road. This time everyone got photos!

On the way out, we stopped at Florida Wash, where we were soon on a Western Screech-Owl, which provided more good photo opportunities. In my opinion, this site has proven to be the most reliable spot for Westerns this year. Although Westerns are similar to Whiskered in terms of plumage, the songs of the two are easily separated.

So we ended up with good looks of three owl species and heard Mexican Whip-poor-will at close range. I think that everyone had a good time- I know that I did! A big 'Thank You' to everyone who turned out on such fun night!

Butterfly Profile: Wiedemeyer's Admiral



Photo by Kim Davis and Mike Stangelard

One of the most striking butterflies to be found in southern Arizona is Wiedemeyer's Admiral (*Limenitis wiedemeyerii*). Widespread in northern Arizona, this species is notably localized in our part of the state, being found primarily in the Pinaleno Mountains (Mt. Graham) and the Chiricahuas. It is surprising that this admiral is not more common here, as seemingly suitable habitat is found in many of the higher Sky Island ranges in southeastern Arizona.

The flight period of Wiedemeyer's Admiral is also somewhat restricted, being on the wing from June through August. A reliable location to look for it when it is on the wing is Hospital Flat, a campground in the Coronado Forest in the Pinalenos. Once found, this butterfly is distinctive. The dorsal surface is black, with a thick white band through both wings. On the underside, the wings are also mostly black and white with red highlights. If you travel to Montana or southern Alberta, Wiedemeyer's overlaps with the White Admiral, but the White have a band of red spots on the upper hindwing and are much redder on the underside.



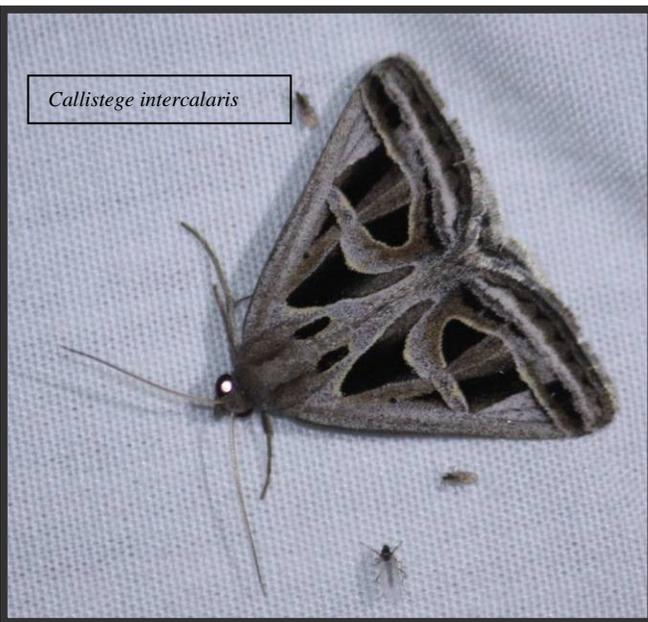
The larval food plants are varied, but include willows, aspen, chokecherry, and others. Note they are trees and shrubs not forbs or grasses. The adults do not visit flowers often but will feed on rotting fruit, dung, and mud.

This wonderful butterfly is named in honor of John Wide-eyed, a German-American from New York City who wrote *Catalogue of North American Butterflies*, in 1864. Perhaps more importantly Mr. Wide-eyed was an early mentor to William Henry Edwards, the dean of American butterflies. The species was, in fact, described by Edwards from specimens collected in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

Moth Family Portrait- The Noontide

The last two months I have highlighted two families of mostly large spectacular moths- sphinx moths and wild silk moths. This month I feature the most species family in the entire order Lepidoptera- the Noontide. This group is often referred to as the owl or cutworm moths. While not as spectacular as some moth families, the noctuids are a very good group to know because they make up a substantial portion of the moths that come to backlights and patio lights.

There are roughly 30,000 species of noctuid worldwide. North America is home to almost 3,000 species. That's a lot of moths! In fact, this one family of moths single-handedly outnumbers all of the world's butterfly species by about 12,000. Many owlets are rather somberly colored in black, brown, gray, and white- not eye-catching to most observers. However, these colors and patterns make the moths exquisitely camouflaged when they are perched on tree trunks and branches.



Owlets typically are triangular in shape when at rest, with the wings held tent-like over the abdomen. Generally of medium size, these moths have robust bodies with the thorax often humped, like that of a buffalo. Many of these moths have two notable spots on the forewing, the orbicular spot (which is circular in shape) and the kidney-shaped reniform spot.

There have been numerous taxonomic changes within this group over the past decade. For example, the tiger moths, a brightly colored group of insects that is sure to capture one's attention, have been removed from the family and included in the Erebidae. These changes are likely to continue as lepidopterists further explore this exceedingly diverse group.

Among the noteworthy members of the family is one of the largest moths in Arizona, the Black Witch (what an awesome name!), with a wing span of almost six inches. This is a tropical species that is prone to wandering and typically shows up during the monsoon season. An assemblage that is a favorite of many moth-ers is the underwings in the genus *Catocala*. These moths have very cryptic on the forewings

but have striking hindwings patterned in red, pink, orange, or white, the black stripes. Underwings do not come to lights, but they will show up at bait.

Some noctuids are agricultural pests. One of the most troublesome is the Corn Earworm (*Helicoverpa zea*). Don't let the name fool you- this moth's caterpillars will feed on numerous other crops in addition to corn, such as tomato, tobacco, and cotton to name a few. Other family members can also be pests to farmers, which is not surprising in such a large family. Another noctuid group of economic importance is the armyworms in the genus *Spodoptera*. So named for their habit of marching en masse across the landscape, armyworms consume many agricultural crops and can cause significant losses.

Did you know?

... that sphinx moths slow down their brains to feed at night? A recent article in the *New York Times* describes work done by researchers from Georgia Tech and the University of Washington using robotic flowers and high-speed video cameras to investigate



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how these nectar-loving moths feed in the dark. Their results suggest that the moths slow the part of the brain that is the visual processing center, much like a slower shutter speed allows photographers to take pictures at low light levels. This allows the moth to get a clear image of the flowers that they are feeding on. Very cool! Thanks to Aviva for sending me the link to this article.