

Sky Island Tours

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The Sky Island News

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June 2015

Let me start this issue with an apology for the delay in getting it to you. It was delayed for a couple of reasons. First, I was in the Yucatan Peninsula for about a week. Second, when I returned, I had computer problems. I am looking into a way for you to subscribe to the newsletter and you will get it automatically. It will still be a free, monthly publication, but I think this method offers a better way for me to get it to you. Anyway, this issue is here, better late than never.

Well, my weather prediction for May proved to be way off. I recall saying something about the temperature feeling like standing on the edge of a volcano by the end of May. Not to be deterred by being wrong, I predict that June will indeed be toasty. As a consequence of June's heat, I am offering more night programs this month. These programs will highlight the moths, beetles, bats, owls, and nightjars, all fascinating creatures that have their own stories to tell. I look forward to seeing you at one of these events!

This month's issue offers a recap of the Southwest Wings Spring Fling, a look at the Saturniidae, some of the world's most spectacular moths, and a profile of another local butterfly species, Reakirt's Blue. As always the monthly schedule and another 'Did You Know?' installment is here, too.

Enjoy!

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.

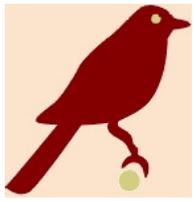
Santa Rita Night Birds. Wed., 6/17. 7:00-9:30PM. Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register. Limit 10 participants.

Nighttime birding is like Christmas- you never know what you are going to get! On this trip we will explore the grasslands and woodlands of the Santa Rita Mountains, searching for birds like Common Poorwill, Mexican Whip-poor-will, Whiskered Screech-Owl, Elf Owl, and more. If we are real lucky we might even get a Buff-collared Nightjar! Like any other birding, the results of owling trips are unpredictable. Often, birders have to be happy with simply hearing the birds. Other times it is possible to get great close-up views. We will meet at the McDonald's at I-19 and Continental Road. Bring a flashlight, camera, binoculars, and, perhaps, a light jacket (you never know what the temperature will be like at higher elevations!).



Blacklighting for Bugs. Sat., 6/20. 7:00-9:30PM. Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.

The night is full of many spectacular creatures that most people don't even know exist. Join me at a blacklight sheet in Madera Canyon to see some of these animals. We can expect a great diversity of moths and beetles to show up, many with beautiful colors and stunning patterns. Other insects and arachnids will also put in appearances. We might even see a Ringtail! All the while we may be serenaded by owls. 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).



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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/educ/environ.htm>.

Wake Up With the Birds. Every Thurs. 7:30-9:00AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Birding Sweetwater Wetlands. Fri., 6/5. 7:30-9:30AM. (2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.).

Cienega Creek Birding. Mon., 6/8. 7:30-9:30AM. 16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.

Birding the Santa Cruz River. Tues., 6/9. 7:30-9:30AM. Meet at Wheeler Taft Abbett Library (7800 N. Schisler Dr.) in Marana.

Butterflies of Agua Caliente Park. Tues., 6/16. 8:00-10:00AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Nature Night: Bats and Bugs. Fri., 6/19. 7:00-9:00PM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Insects and Spiders. Tues., 6/23. 8:00-9:30AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Dragonflies and Damselflies. Tues., 6/30. 8:00-9:30AM. Agua Caliente Park. (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

June Classes

Fishes of Arizona: Natives and Invaders. Mon., 6/15. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

The desert Southwest harbors a surprising number of native fishes. Many of these species have declined precipitously in the wake of habitat destruction and alteration and competition with exotic species. In this class we introduce the natives, such as topminnows, chubs, dace, and others. We will also learn about the non-natives, such as bass, sunfish, and catfish, many of which were introduced for sport fishing. Join us for a look at the unexpected world of Arizona's fishes.

The Mysterious World of Bats. Thurs., 6/18. 6-8PM. Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 to register.

Bats are a much-maligned, much-misunderstood group of mammals. In reality, bats are fascinating, diverse, and highly beneficial. This class will explore the diversity, importance, and ecology of these amazing animals. We will also dispel many of the misconceptions that humans have about bats. In this chapter of the North American Mammals series we pay particular attention to bat species found in Arizona.

The Dazzling World of Caterpillars. Wed., 6/24. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Hylaphora columbia gloveri caterpillar

Every butterfly and moth that you see flying in your garden or attracted to your porch light, was once a caterpillar. That is a lot of caterpillars! In this class, we will explore the many colors, shapes, food plants and ecologies of caterpillars. We will also see what butterfly or moth some of the featured caterpillars will become following their remarkable metamorphosis.

Dragons and Damsels. Thurs., 6/25. 6-8PM. Cochise College (901 N. Colombo Ave. in Sierra Vista). Call 515-

5492 to register.



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Dragonflies and damselflies are large, incredibly beautiful insects that are becoming as popular with wildlife watchers as birds and butterflies. Many species bear evocative names like dancers, meadowhawks, skimmers, pondhawks and more. They are conspicuous components of most freshwater habitats. In this class, students will receive an introduction to these fascinating creatures, with a special focus on species found in southern Arizona.

In The Binoculars

This section highlights events that are on the horizon.

Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (6/10).

Philip Brown, a lifelong amateur herpetologist and currently an interpretive ranger at Saguaro National Park, presents 'Amphibians and Reptiles of the Avra Valley.' 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.

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

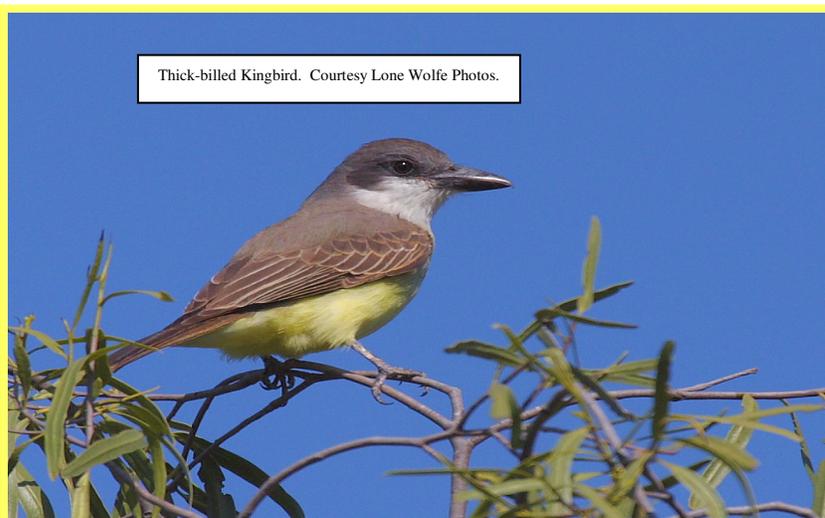
The 2015 edition of this great festival is August 12-16, once again headquartered at the Riverpark Inn. Online registration for the festival is now open. Most of the field trips for this event sell out, so reserve your spot now to make sure that you get on the trips that you want. The keynote speakers are Rick Wright and Paul Baicich. Visit www.tucsonaudubon.org for more information. I look forward to seeing you there!

National Moth Week

The 4th annual National Moth Week will take place July 18-26, 2015. Look for events to celebrate the beauty and diversity of moths, the incredibly diverse and beautiful, nocturnal (mostly!) cousins of butterflies. I will be scheduling moth nights for Sky Island Tours and Pima County Natural Resources in honor of NMW. Moth fever- Catch it!

Southwest Wings Spring Fling Recap

The second annual Southwest Wings Spring Fling was held from May 6-9 and was based at Cochise College in Sierra Vista. This year I guided two overnight trips and an owling trip. The weather was nice for the most part, although a bit windy at times and chilly at night.



Thick-billed Kingbird. Courtesy Lone Wolfe Photos.

The first tour I led was a trip to the Santa Cruz Valley and Madera Canyon. We made stops at Las Cienegas, Paton Center for Hummingbirds, Patagonia, Kino Springs, Pena Blanca Lake, Montosa Canyon, and Madera. Among the many highlights were good numbers of Grasshopper and Botteri's Sparrows at Las Cienegas, Thick-billed Kingbird at the Patagonia Roadside Rest Area, Rufous-winged Sparrow at Kino Springs, a 'Western' Flycatcher at Pena Blanca that was frustratingly silent, and many others. The species total for the trip was 102.

Thursday night featured the annual pilgrimage into Ramsey canyon for nocturnal birds. It was a cool, breezy evening that yielded views of Elf Owl. We had Mexican Whip-poor-will and Whiskered



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Screech-Owl respond to vocalizations but refused to come into view. We missed entirely on Western Screech-Owl and Common Poorwill.

The second overnight trip was very similar to the first but in reverse order. This trip encountered Northern Harriers interacting with Swainson's Hawk at Las Cienegas, a very surprising female Purple Finch at the feeders at Santa Rita Lodge, about 75 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks at the Amado Pond, Violet-crowned Hummingbird at Paton's, and plenty more. This trip tallied 112 species, a record for Southwest Wings according to Board President Gordon Lewis!

For the entire festival, the three trips that I lead recorded 131 species. Not a bad couple of days!

I wish to thank everyone who attended these trips. It was a great pleasure to spend time in the field with you!

Butterfly Profile: Reakirt's Blue

Several members of gossamer wings (Lycaenidae) frequent backyard gardens- Gray Hairstreak, Marine Blue, and Ceraunus Blue to name a few. Another member of this group is Reakirt's Blue (*Echinargus isola*).



The best field mark for this species is the bold black spots surrounded by white on the underside of the forewing. There are usually five such spots in a row but not all are visible all of the time, depending on the position of the wings at rest. On the upper side, males are bright blue and females are brown with blue at the base of the wings. Like many gossamer wings, Reakirt's Blues rest with their wings close, so the top side is usually visible only when basking.

Caterpillars of Reakirt's, like those of some other blues, do not feed on foliage. Instead, they consume the flowers and buds of the food plant. Upon hatching, the caterpillars burrow into a flower head, making them difficult to find. The larvae are yellow, yellowish-green, or red in color and shaped like pill bugs. In our area, the major food plants are mesquite and acacias. Reakirt's Blues are avid flower visitors and are also attracted to mud.

The naming of this species is an interesting side note to this common butterfly. It was described to science in 1867 from specimens collected in Veracruz, Mexico. The describer was Tryon Reakirt, an American lepidopterist from Philadelphia. He was part of the family importing and wholesale drug business and was a serious amateur lepidopterist. He eventually branched out and opened his own business, the Delaware Lead Works, in 1868. Unfortunately for Reakirt, he was a better butterfly man than a business man and his business went into bankruptcy in 1871. Running from his creditors, he left the U.S. for Lima, Peru. His disappearance was due more to the fact that he forged \$110,000 in checks from large pharmaceutical houses than his business failure. He died of dysentery in Lima in late 1872 or early 1873.

The genus name was coined by Vladimir Nabokov, the noted novelist and another serious amateur lepidopterist, in 1945.

Moth Family Portrait

As National Moth Week inches closer, I present a profile of another moth family that we hope to see at National Moth Week events. June's featured family really needs no introduction- the group includes North America's largest moths, as well as, some of its most beautiful. I am speaking of the Saturniidae, the wild silk moths.

Saturniids comprise about 1,500 species worldwide, approximately 70 of which occur in North America. Arizona hosts 26 species of wild silk moth. The family is divided into nine subfamilies, of which three (Ceratocampinae, Hemileucinae, and Saturniinae) occur in the U. S. and Canada. More details about each group are given below.



Silk moths present some fascinating traits. Some, such as the buck moths, are primarily diurnal. Most, however, comply with the usual moth pattern and are nocturnal. Among mothers (to repeat from last issue, that word is moth-ers), silk moths are famous for their late arrivals at lights, often well after midnight. Adult mouthparts are rudimentary and adults cannot feed. Instead, they survive their short adulthood, usually about a week, by surviving on the food reserves stored by their larvae. I find it incredibly ironic that our largest moths do not (indeed, can not) feed as adults!

Silk moth caterpillars are fantastic, too. They can be large meaty beasts that may be either diurnal or nocturnal feeders. They are often covered in fleshy warts (called scoli) that bear hairs or spines. Larvae of the Hemileucinae are covered with urticating, or stinging, hairs that can deliver a painful sting and cause blisters. Most North American saturniids consume the foliage of broad-leaved trees, although some consume conifers or grasses.



Hubbard's Small Silkmoth

The subfamily Ceratocampinae includes the imperial moths, locust moths, and oakworm moths, among others. They tend to be brightly colored and will come to lights. Most species rest with their wings in a deltoid or inverse-V position. Caterpillars are fantastic, covered in scoli and present an intimidating aspect. However, they are harmless. The most frequently encountered species in the desert valleys of southeastern Arizona is Hubbard's Small Silkmoth (*Sphingicampa hubbardi*), a velvety black species with pinkish hindwings. The caterpillars feed on mesquite and palo verde. Another local ceratocampine is the Western Royal Moth (*Citheronia splendens sinaloaensis*), a gorgeous white, orange, and gray insect. The purplish-brown caterpillars are fearsome looking, but harmless, and are frequently found on wild cotton.

The buck moths, io moths, and Pandora moths make up the Hemileucinae. This is the group with stinging caterpillars. Members of this group can be either diurnal (buck moths) or nocturnal (io moths). The last group is well-known for the large eyespots on the hindwing. These are normally concealed by the forewings, but when threatened, the forewings are moved out of the way to reveal the eyespots. This may give a potential predator reason to pause long enough for the moth to escape. Caterpillars consume a variety of plants but often use mesquite, palo verde, and acacia in the desert and oaks in the mountains. Fourteen members of this group are found in southern Arizona.



Antheraea oclea, the Western Polyphemus Moth

The final North American group of silk moths is the Saturniinae, the rock stars of the moth world. This group includes the largest moths on the continent, the Cecropia Moth and the Polyphemus Moth, both with wings spans of six inches. One of the largest moths in the world, the Atlas Moth of Asia, has a wing span of 11 inches! This group also includes the ethereal Luna Moth, a delicate green moth with elegant tails. Saturniids are famous for their silk production, second only to the domesticated silk moth (which belongs in a different family and is extinct in the wild). These are the insects that produce the silken cocoons that can be seen in leafless trees in winter. The larvae, not surprisingly, are big, too. Many are a beautiful blue-green and are adorned with colorful scoli. Saturniines are often late arrivals at lights, frequently showing up after midnight. I have,

however, found them at light sheets much earlier than that.



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Now that you have been introduced to this wonderful group of moths, I hope you get to meet their acquaintance at a National Moth Week event!

Did you know?

... that the moth species that the Chinese 'farmed' for the silk industry no longer exists in the wild? The Silkworm (*Bombyx mori*) is native to China, Japan, and Taiwan and the silk industry was already well-established by the time of the earliest Chinese writings. The silk used in clothing and other products comes from the cocoon of this species. Each cocoon is made of a single strand of silk that, if carefully unwound may stretch up to a mile! Somewhat confusingly, this species is not in the same family (but a closely related one) as the wild silk moths profiled above. Pretty cool insect, in my opinion!