



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

March 1, 2015

The Sky Island News

Vol. 6 No. 3

March 2015

I am truly fortunate to be able to have the job that I have. To be able to share my passion for the natural world with others is a tremendous privilege and I thank all of you for your support and shared interest in nature. I recently remembered a line from a '70s song by the band Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, "Welcome back my friends to the show that never ends." That lyric nicely sums up my feelings about what I do- sharing with my friends (and all of you are my friends) the constant spectacle that is the Nature. I thank all of you for the opportunity to spend time with you in the field and classroom.

I hope you enjoy this issue!

March 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.

Early Spring Butterflies. Fri., 3/6. 9AM-12PM. \$10/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.

This trip is a repeat of last month's trip. I am optimistic that we will have better weather than we had last month and that we will get better looks at the butterflies (and more will be on the wing). 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.

Spring Raptor Migration Trip. Mon., 3/16. 8AM-11AM. \$10/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.



The middle of March is a good time to look for migrating raptors along the Santa Cruz River. On this trip, we will be on the lookout for Common Black Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, Gray Hawk, and other raptors headed to their breeding grounds. We will meet at the McDonald's at I-19 and Continental Road and carpool to Tubac.

Madera Canyon Spring Butterflies. Tues., 3/24. 9AM-12PM. \$10/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.

This trip will make stops at a couple of good spots for butterflies in scenic Madera Canyon. We will begin at Proctor Road to look for Pipevine and Two-tailed Swallowtails, Marine Blue, Empress Leilia, and more. We will then head up to Mt.

Wrightson Picnic Area and explore the streambed for Arizona Hairstreak, Western Azure, Mourning Cloak, Short-tailed Skipper, and whatever else is on the wing. Bring binoculars, camera, field guide, snacks, and water. We will meet at the McDonald's in the Safeway Shopping Center at I-19 and Continental Road.

Huachuca Canyon Birding. Wed., 3/25. 8AM-1PM. \$10/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.



Sky Island Tours

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

March 1, 2015

Huachuca Canyon, located on the north side of Fort Huachuca, has developed into a terrific spot for great birds. On this trip, our targets will include Montezuma Quail, Sinaloa Wren, migrating warblers, and, with any luck, Elegant Trogon. We will meet at the dirt parking area on the southwest side of the I-10 exit for Sonoita and Patagonia (exit # 281). We will carpool to the fort from there. Due to military regulations, **this trip is only open to U.S. citizens**. It is a good idea to have proper identification, in case the military police ask for it. I have never had a problem getting on the fort, but it helps to be prepared.

Florida Canyon Rufous-capped Warbler Trek. Mon., 3/30. 8AM-11AM. \$10/person. Call (488-8551) or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.



Rufous-capped Warbler is one of the most sought after birds in southern Arizona. This trip will head to Florida Canyon, where there appears to be a small breeding population, to search for this coveted species. Of course, we will be looking at all the other birds we see too! The hike has patches of thick brush and is moderate in difficulty. We will meet at the McDonald's in the Safeway Shopping Center at I-19 and Continental Road.

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. 8:00-9:30AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.). ***NOTE TIME CHANGE***

Roger Road Ponds Birding. Tues. 3/3. 8:00-9:30AM. Pima County Roger Road Ponds (2600 W. Sweetwater Dr.). *Reservations required.*

Tucson Mountain Park Birding. Sat. 3/7. 8:00-10:00AM. Ironwood Picnic Area (1548 S. Kinney Rd.). Leader is John Higgins.

Santa Cruz River Birding Walk. Mon., 3/9. 8:00-10:00AM. Meet at Wheeler Taft Abbett Sr. Branch Library, 7800 N. Schisler Dr. *Reservations required.*

Cienega Creek Birding. Tues., 3/10. 8:00-10AM. 16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.

Honey Bee Canyon Birding Walk. Sat. 3/14 and Sat. 3/28. 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., 3/17. 8:00-10AM. 2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.

Spring Butterflies. Wed., 3/18. 9:00-11:00AM. Molino Basin. *Reservations required.*

Canoa Ranch Birding Walk. Tues., 3/31. 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.

March Classes

Birds of Madera Canyon. Mon., 3/2. 7-9PM. Quail Creek Clubhouse Ballroom. Tickets are \$10 and are available at the Quail Creek Concierge Desk, Meredith's Hallmark Store (Green Valley), and the Green Valley/Sahuarita Chamber of Commerce.



Sky Island Tours

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

March 1, 2015

Madera Canyon is one of the most legendary birding locations in the entire U.S. Birders from around the world are lured to Madera by the chance to glimpse birds that are rarely found north of the Mexican border, such as Elegant Trogon, Whiskered Screech-Owl, Red-faced Warbler, and Varied Bunting to name a few. Join us for look at the birds of this wonderful birding area right in our backyard!

The Evolution of Birds. Wed., 3/4. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Birds have inhabited the planet for a long, long time. In this installment of the Bird Biology series, we explore the rich fossil history of birds. Did you know that the contemporary view of birds as the only animals with feathers gets very blurry as one examines the fossil record? We will also look at the two competing theories on the origin of birds and how these theories relate to the development of flight? Join us for a glimpse into the mists of time to see where modern birds originated.

Southern Arizona Wildflowers. Thurs., 3/5. 6-8PM. Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 to register.

Flowers can be found every day of the year in Southern Arizona. With enough winter rainfall, the flower displays can be spectacular. This class will introduce students to the beauty of southern Arizona's wildflowers and will also help you identify them.

Songbirds Part 1: Flycatchers to Kinglets. Mon., 3/23. 10AM-12PM. Tucson Jewish Community Center (3800 E. River Rd.). Call 299-3000 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 on birds on Earth.

Songbirds Part 3: Sparrows to Goldfinches. Thurs., 3/26. 6-8PM. Cochise College (901 N. Colombo Ave. in Sierra Vista). Call 515-5492 to register.

Close the final chapter of the Songbirds Series spotlighting sparrows, cardinals, buntings, orioles, blackbirds, and goldfinches. Like the other classes in the series, we will investigate the classification and identification of these birds using sight and sound. These birds include some of our gaudiest, as well as some of our most difficult to identify (especially sparrows).

Bird Classification. Fri., 3/27. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

This class in the Bird Biology series tackles the taxonomy and systematics of birds. In short, how birds are classified. Did you ever wonder why bird names are constantly changing? Or why the order of birds as they appear in field guides is never static? The class will show you the science behind these changes.

Songbirds Part 2: Thrushes to Tanagers. Mon., 3/30. 10AM-12PM. Tucson Jewish Community Center (3800 E. River Rd.). Call 299-3000 to register.



Sky Island Tours

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

March 1, 2015

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 (3/11).

This month's THS meeting features a presentation by Charles 'Chip' Hedgecock, "Photographing the Charismatic Microfauna: An Introduction to Field Photography." 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

The topic and speaker for the March meeting is not available at press time. Meetings are held at the Tucson Botanical Gardens. They are free and open to the public. This month's meeting is on Tuesday (3/17) and begins at 7:00PM. There are two SEABA field trips this month: Pima Canyon (3/8) and Sabino Canyon (3/14). See the SEABA website for details.

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.

Santa Cruz Nature and Heritage Festival

This festival highlights the rich natural and cultural history of southern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico. The festival offers an array of tours (birding, cultural, historical, and more), presentations, and workshops. It is also the only festival in southern Arizona that offers a birding trip into Sonora! For more information and to register, visit <http://natureandheritage.org/>.

Santa Cruz 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!

Coachline Gravel Pit Birding Trip Report

In the past few months the Coachline Gravel Pit in Marana has become a new birding hot spot. One of the reasons I wanted to do a trip to the site was frequent questions I received about where it was, how to get there, etc. The area was, until recently, the Flying

Disc Golf Course for the town. At least until the Santa Cruz River broke through the berm during the monsoon, flooding the area and creating a new wetland for birds. It has become noteworthy enough to be the subject of a front page article in the Sunday *Daily Star*!



Great Egret

So I was joined by an excited group of birders on a very un-winterlike February morning. One of the main targets for the trip was waterfowl and waders and the Gravel Pit (we really need to come up with a better name for the place!) did not disappoint. We had 10 species of duck, including Lesser Scaup, Common and Hooded Mergansers (all females), and several male Ruddy Ducks in breeding plumage, showing off their beautiful sky blue bills. We also had four species of



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

March 1, 2015

egret and heron- Great and Snowy Egrets (several of each), Green Heron, as well as, adult and immature Black-crowned Night-Heron. Numerous American Coots and Pied-billed Grebes filled out the water bird roster.

Other birds observed include Red-tailed and Cooper's Hawks, Vermilion Flycatcher, Black Phoebe, Tree, Northern Rough-winged, Barn and Bank Swallows, Rock Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, Verdin, Orange-crowned Warbler, and many others.

Thanks to all who came out to share a beautiful morning with the birds and me. It was a great group and a fun trip!

Early Spring Butterfly Trip Report

After postponing the trip for a week, several of us headed up to Molino Basin in the Santa Catalina Mountains to see what we happening on the butterfly front. The weather was ok, with a mix of clouds and sunshine. Unfortunately, it seemed as we had more clouds than sun which kept the butterflies down a bit.

We did, however, see butterflies! Pipevine Swallowtails were the most common, with several of them in view at the same time on a couple of occasions. We had the opportunity to view them basking in the sun, nectaring at manzanita flowers, and getting salts from damp sand along the creek. The sun glittering off the iridescent blue on the hindwings of males is a stunning site!

Another common species we had was Western, or Echo, Azure, which display a different brilliant shade of blue! The taxonomy of this group is still debated and some field guides do not recognize this form as a distinct species. These authors consider all spring-flying populations to be part of a single species, the Spring Azure. The butterflies themselves do not seem to be particularly disturbed by the taxonomic puzzle they present. Some of these restless insects were dining on nectar at manzanita flowers, but many were observed in flight, flitting about the oaks.

We had an interesting opportunity to see Common and Tropical Buckeyes within seconds of each other in almost the exact same spot along the path. These two close relatives are similar to one another but can be distinguished fairly easily with good looks. Buckeyes are fairly pugnacious insects, if it's even possible to use that term for a butterfly. Male find a good perch, often on bare ground, and investigate anything that enters its territory. If a rival male enters, it is quickly driven away.



Other butterflies seen on the trip included Desert Orangetip, Gray Hairstreak, Sagebrush Checkerspot, and Common/White Checkered-Skipper. The last species pair is identical in appearance, only separated by examination of the genitalia. We did none of that on the trip!

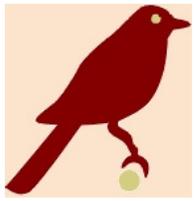
Thank you to all who joined me!

Butterfly Profile: Mourning Cloak

In the previous article, I mentioned some of the butterfly species that are on the wing early in the year, welcomed as six-legged harbingers of spring. Another butterfly that falls into this group (at least, in most of the country) is the Mourning Cloak (*Nymphalis antiopa*). We are fortunate here as this big, beautiful butterfly graces southern Arizona's woodlands all year.

The fact that adults of this species hibernate is one of the fascinating aspects of the biology of this butterfly. The adults that emerge from the pupa in the fall feed initially but then seek out tree hollows and bark crevices in which to spend the inclement winter months. On warm winter days it is not unheard of to see adults flying through forests with snow still covering the ground. A large (wingspan of three inches) maroon and gold butterfly with blue spots is not likely to be missed!

Mourning Cloaks are among the longest-lived butterflies in North America, capable of being on the wing for 10 months or more. However, this is a bit misleading as in many areas weeks or months of adulthood are spent in hibernation. This trait they share with their close relatives tortoiseshells and anglewings (Question Mark and the commas). This close knit group only visits flowers on occasion, preferring to get their nutrition from rotting fruit, sap flows, dung, and carcasses.



Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

March 1, 2015



Mourning Cloak caterpillars feed on the leaves of various trees, including willows, cottonwoods, elms, aspens, and many others. Like some other members of the Nymphalidae, caterpillars are gregarious in their early instars, becoming more solitary as they grow. Larvae are mostly black, but have numerous white markings that produce an overall grayish color. There are black spines on each thoracic and abdominal segment, with bright orange spots at their base.

In Britain, where the species is an irregular stray, this butterfly goes by the wonderful name of Camberwell Beauty. In the New World, Mourning Cloaks can be found from Alaska to Venezuela. It also occupies the northern portions of Europe and Asia. It was described to science in 1758 by the great Swedish botanist (and father of modern taxonomy) Carolus Linnaeus from specimens collected, not surprisingly, in Sweden.

As I have often said, if you want to find a particular butterfly species, find out what plant the caterpillars eat and then find the plants. I have observed them throughout the Sky Island mountain ranges of southern Arizona, as well as some low elevation spots such as Agua Caliente Park and Cienega Creek. I have already seen Mourning Cloaks on the wing in 2015, so be on the lookout for these big, unique butterflies!

Did you know...?

... that a recently discovered species of tarantula from northern Brazil was named after the late John Lennon? Described late last year, *Bumba lennoni* was described by Fernando Perez-Miles (University of the Republic, Uruguay) and Alexandre Bonaldo and Laura Miglio (both of Museu Paraense Emilio Goeldi, Brazil), all of whom, it turns out, are Beatles fans. So, one of the most accomplished rock songwriters now has a tarantula named after him. Pretty cool!