



Sky Island Tours

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The Sky Island News

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May 2015

May starts the beginning of the real warm up in southern Arizona. By the end of the month, it will feel as if we are standing at the edge of an erupting volcano. But this is not exactly breaking news. May marks the proliferation of evening programs to take advantage of the cool evening air. Also center stage this month is the Southwest Wings Spring Fling, from the 6th through the 9th, in Sierra Vista. I really hope to see you at an event this month!

May 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.

Southwest Wings Spring Fling Field Trips. Visit <http://www.swwings.org/springfling.html> for registration information. The following descriptions are from the Spring Fling website.

Overnight Santa Cruz Valley- Wed. 5/6 (7:00AM)- Thurs. 5/7 (4:00PM)

This overnight tour with Jeff Babson will focus on the search for some of Arizona's most famous specialty birds, among them Montezuma Quail, Varied Bunting, Tropical and Thick-billed Kingbirds, and Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. We begin by heading to Patagonia and Rio Rico, where we will hit prime locations for Gray Hawk, Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, and other exciting finds. We will check out Pena Blanca Lake, where we hope to see Least Grebe, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Summer Tanager, among others. The next morning we visit Montosa Canyon, where Black-capped and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers are among the targets. We will search grasslands in the area for Botteri's, Cassin's, and Rufous-winged Sparrows. We will also spend some time in Madera Canyon, where several hummingbird species, as well as Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Painted Redstart, and Scott's Oriole, are possible. 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: moderate. This trip is best suited for intermediate birding skills. Bring your binoculars and do not forget your camera and insect repellent!

Price is for Double Occupancy, however, if you are interested in single occupancy please contact Gordon at (520) 266-0149.

Owls of the Huachuca Mountains. Thurs., 5/7. 7-10PM.



Whiskered-Screech Owl. J. Fuhrman

Owling is one of the most magical of birding adventures. The Huachuca Mountains are home to several sought-after nocturnal birds, including Whiskered and Western Screech-Owls, Common Poorwill, and Mexican Whip-poor-will. On this trip, we will target these birds and have the possibility of seeing many other nocturnal creatures. Owling, like all birding, has no guarantees except that we will have a good time. If no owls seen during this trip, pending room available, participants may join the Friday evening owl trip. Please do not wear white or very light colored clothing or hats – khaki is okay. Hiking Difficulty: moderate to difficult. Bring a flashlight or headlamp and field guide. Cameras are okay.

Madera Canyon-Santa Cruz River Overnight. Fri., 5/8 (7:00AM) - Sat., 5/9 (4:00PM)

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,



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Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher

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. **Hiking Difficulty: 3 Moderate.** *Single participants will be paired for overnight accommodations.*

Owls of the Catalinas. Mon., 5/11. 4PM-10PM. Tour is through Pima Community College. Meet at the Community Campus (401 N. Bonita Ave.). Call (206-6468) or email (www.pima.edu) to register.

Owls have captivated the imagination of mankind for centuries, symbolizing everything from evil and death to wisdom and protection. This unique tour begins with a presentation on these remarkable birds, emphasizing their vocalizations, followed by a trip up the Catalina Highway, where we will stop to listen and look for owls in several

different habitats. Information: Bring a sack dinner, flashlight or head lamp, cameras, jacket (for higher elevations), and water. We will stop at several sites along the route; walking on mostly flat surfaces (a small amount of hiking along uneven trails is required.)

Hummingbirds of Southern Arizona. Mon., 5/18. 8AM-5PM. Tour is through Pima Community College. Meet at the Community Campus (401 N. Bonita Ave.). Call (206-6468) or email (www.pima.edu) to register.

With their glittering colors, unparalleled flying abilities, and interesting behaviors, hummingbirds are of the main attractions for birders to southern Arizona. We start with a presentation on hummingbird biology and identification, followed by a van tour to some of the hotspots for hummers in southern Arizona-Patagonia and Madera Canyon. Bring lunch, water, sunscreen, hat, binoculars, and camera. Most of the tour will be spent watching feeders at the above locations.

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.).

Note Time Change

Butterflies of Agua Caliente Park. Tues. 5/5. 8:30-10:00AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Dragonflies and Damselflies. Tues., 5/12. 8:30-10:00AM. Agua Caliente Park. (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Cienega Creek Birding. Wed., 5/13. 8:00-10:00AM. 16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.

Evening Owl Walk. Fri., 5/15. 7:30-9:00PM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Bugs and Blacklights. Fri., 5/22. 7:30-9:30PM. Ironwood Picnic Area in Tucson Mountain Park (1548 S. Kinney Rd.).

May Classes

Songbirds Part 3: Sparrows to Goldfinches. Thurs., 5/14. 6-8PM. Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 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).



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Aquatic Insects. Fri., 5/15. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Arizona's streams, ponds, rivers and lakes contain an amazing diversity of aquatic life. Our waterways are loaded with I invertebrates, especially insects. In this class we investigate this diversity, which includes mayflies, dragonflies, beetles, backswimmers, water boatmen, water scorpions and giant water bugs to name a few. Join us for a look at the hidden aquatic diversity that exists in the desert. Many of these insects may even be in your fountain or backyard pond!

In The Binoculars

This section highlights events that are on the horizon.

Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (5/13).

Cecil Schwalbe, Ecologist Emeritus with the U.S. Geological Survey and affiliate faculty at the University of Arizona, presents "Scat Happens- 30 Years of Tracking Tortoises." 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

This month SEABA's meeting is the annual member's photography showcase. Meetings are held at the Tucson Botanical Gardens. They are free and open to the public. This month's meeting is on Tuesday (4/21) and begins at 7:00PM. This month's SEABA field trip is to Box Canyon (5/2). 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.

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!

Huachuca Canyon Trip Report

Last month I offered a birding trip to Huachuca Canyon targeting three species- Sinaloa Wren, Montezuma Quail, and Elegant Trogon. Well, I missed on all three. If it were a baseball game, I would have been pulled for a pinch-hitter! Anyway, I decided to try and improve on those results (which wouldn't be hard!) and run the trip again.



Another large group of birders joined me for a second trek into the beautiful Huachuca Mountains. Upon arriving at Camp Mariposa, we were immediately greeted by a calling Gray Hawk. A good omen, perhaps! Shortly thereafter we had the opportunity to see male Hepatic and Summer Tanagers in close proximity, allowing a great chance to compare these two species of beautiful birds. Dusky-capped Flycatchers were quite vocal, as were Bridled Titmouse and White-breasted Nuthatch. A group of Acorn Woodpeckers seemed to be investigating a hole in a sycamore branch as a possible nest site. We also had Yellow-rumped Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Bewick's Wren. But, alas, we missed the Sinaloa Wren (although a dedicated group of not-to-be-denied birders did see it after the rest of us had left). We also did not see, or hear, Montezuma Quail. !@*%#!



We then headed higher into the canyon for Elegant Trogon. In the upper parking lot, we were greeted by American Robin and another Hepatic Tanager. Walking up the trail, we spotted Painted Redstart, Plumbeous Vireo, and Black-headed Grosbeak, all of which are joys to see. A bit further up the trail we detected movement in the oaks. Elegant Trogon! And a glorious male to boot! Yes- we were out of our target bird slump. This particular individual seemed skittish as it made several short flights while we watched. As we ogled this male, we heard another male on the opposite side of the trail! After several minutes of trogon watching, we continued further up the path. What was that clinging to a large sycamore branch? Another male Trogon! And the icing on the cake was the female in the next tree! Four trogons in about 20 minutes! A nice tally, to be sure.

Alas, it was time to tear ourselves away from these magnificent birds and return home. Even though we missed a couple of our targets, I think that everyone was happy with the trip. Thank you to all who joined me!

Butterfly Profile: Common Buckeye

One of North America's most beautiful butterflies, in my opinion, is Common Buckeye (*Junonia coenia*). Luckily for butterfly watchers, this insect lives up to its name, as it is a familiar species in much of North America. It is always nice when observers have the opportunity to see something so beautiful on a frequent basis!



Common Buckeyes are often seen basking on the ground, soaking up sunshine, ready to intercept anything that enters its territory. It is somewhat amusing to see a butterfly do its imitation of a pit bull! They will visit flowers for nectar and will also occasionally be seen at mud.

Monarchs are well-known for their fantastic migrations. Common Buckeyes are also migrants, re-populating northern parts of their range each spring or summer. In southern Arizona they are permanent residents.

Caterpillars feed on a variety of plants, including monkey flower, figwort, snapdragon, verbena, and others. Larvae are typically solitary but can sometimes be seen in groups. I recently saw many larvae on watercress at Cienega Creek.

Buckeyes have been part of considerable taxonomic debate, with anywhere from one to four species being recognized in North America. Currently, three are recognized- Common, Tropical (*J. genoveva*), and Mangrove (*J. evarete*). Tropical Buckeyes are also common in Arizona. A recent genetic study seems to indicate that there may be only one widespread and variable species occurs in North America. This continues decades of confusion regarding the true status of Buckeyes on this continent. Clearly the final word on the subject has yet to be written.

Common Buckeye was described to science in 1822 by the German lepidopterist Jacob Hubner. The type locality for the species (the location where the specimen was collected that was used to describe the species) has never been clarified, but Venezuela, Cuba, and the United States have all been suggested.



Moth Family Portrait

With National Moth Week coming up in July, I will be providing family portraits of moth families that are regularly seen at blacklights (and porch lights) as a way of getting readers excited about these amazing insects. In the first installment I introduce the sphinx moths of the Sphingidae. Also known as hummingbird moths or hawk moths, sphingids form a very distinctive group. Characterized by a strongly tapered abdomen, elongated and narrow forewings, short, rounded hindwings, and large eyes.

Sphinx moths exhibit a considerable size range, with forewing lengths spanning 14 mm in the smallest species to 90 mm in the largest. Most of these moths are avid flower visitors. In fact, many of the flowers that attract butterflies during the day will be attended by sphinx and other moths at night. They can also serve as important pollinators for deep-throated flowers, such as orchids. Species in some genera, however, do not feed as adults.



Rustic Sphinx
Caterpillar on
Arizona Ash

Caterpillars of these moths are as distinctive as the adults. The feature that most, but not all, sphingid caterpillars share is a 'horn' on top of the dorsum at the rear of the body. This has led to yet another name for the group that applies to the larvae- hornworm. Those of many species are robust, meaty beasts that typically feed at night and remain hidden under the leaves of the host plant during the day. Some species can become pests of plants such as tomato (Tomato Hornworm, a.k.a. Five-spotted Sphinx (*Manduca quinquemaculatus*)). The range of host plants that are utilized by sphinx caterpillars is wide and includes wolfberry, datura, ash, cottonwood, honeysuckle, and snowberry to name a few. The name sphinx is applied to this group because the resting posture of the caterpillar resembles, to some, the Sphinx in Egypt.

Worldwide there are about 1,280 species of Sphinx moth, with 127 being recorded from North America. Arizona is home to at least 49 species. Several of these are strays northward from Mexico and have only been seen in the U.S. on a handful of occasions. As mentioned above, adults are attracted to nectar and many will also show up at black lights. The most common sphingid in Arizona is White-lined Sphinx (*Hyles lineata*), a medium-sized member of the group that is a frequent visitor to lights.

Did you know?

... that the White-lined Sphinx (*Hyles lineata*) can undergo periodic population explosions? One such outbreak, from Death Valley National Park in the early 1970s, contained at least 15 caterpillars per square meter over a swath at least a quarter mile wide. Another, in the Baboquivari Mountains of western Pima County, had so many dead larvae on the road that driving became hazardous. One of the ecological factors contributing to these incidents is the wide range of host plants that the larvae feed upon. For example, in the West, all members of the Onagraceae (evening primroses) and Nyctaginaceae (four o'clocks) are consumed by the species. The caterpillars come in several color morphs, including green, yellow, and black.

