



Sky Island Tours

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October 1, 2014

# The Sky Island News

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October 2014

I think that October is one of the best months of the year in southern Arizona. The mornings and evenings are wonderfully cool, while the days remain warm. Also, we bid adieu to the monsoon in October as the desert dries out a bit. Bird migration is well underway, making each trip into the field a chance for exciting discoveries. The reptile and insect seasons begin to wind down this month, but there should still be enough activity to keep fans of both groups going. So, get out and enjoy October!

In this issue I recap the blacklight trip to Madera Canyon. Unfortunately, the birding trip was cancelled due to the remnants of hurricane Odile. Also in this issue, is a rant about something that I recently heard from the local media. Sometimes I hear things from uninformed people that make me want to scream. This is one of those cases. There is also a profile of a butterfly that has yielded some interesting recent discoveries. All of the usual stuff is here too.

I hope that you enjoy this month's issue!

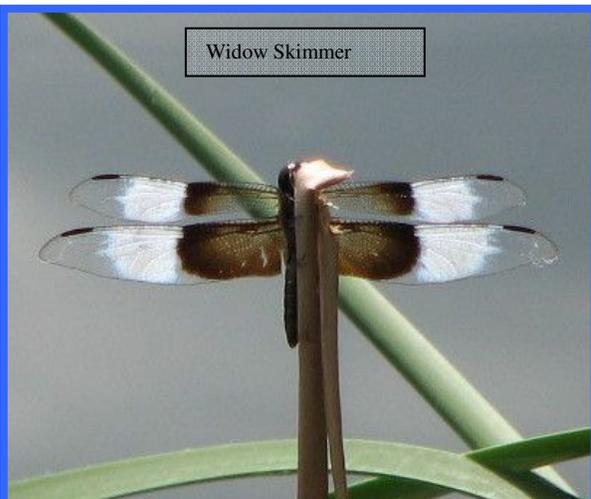
## October Field Trips

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](http://www.SkyIslandTours.com) for rates and more information.

**Birding Arivaca Cienega. Mon., 10/13.** 8AM-11:30AM. Donations accepted. Call (520)-488-8551) or email ([jeff@skyislandtours.com](mailto:jeff@skyislandtours.com)) to register.

Arivaca Cienega, part of Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, is a well-known birding site. The recent drought has diminished the amount of water present, but the area still attracts many birds. There are no specific targets for this trip. It simply offers the opportunity to see what is about on a weekday in the middle of October. Bring snacks, water, hat, and insect repellent. We will meet at the McDonald's at I-19 and Continental Rd.

**Butterflies and Dragonflies of Pena Blanca Lake. Fri., 10/24.** 8AM-11:30AM. \$5/person. Call or email to register.



The wonderful variety of butterflies and dragonflies takes center stage for this trip. We will travel to Pena Blanca Lake, a hotspot for insect diversity, where over two dozen species of each are certainly possible. Bring close-focus binoculars, camera, water, snacks, and sturdy shoes. You may also want to bring insect repellent (just in case). We will meet at the McDonald's at I-19 and Continental Rd.

## Pima County Classes and Trips

These trips are offered by the Pima County Department of Natural Resources, Parks, and Recreation. The trips listed below are those that I am leading. They are all free. Call (520)-615-7855 X3 for more information and to make 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. 8:00-9:30AM.** Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).



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**Cienega Creek Birding. Wed., 10/15. 8:30-10AM.** 16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.  
**Birding Sweetwater Wetlands. Fri., 10/17. 8:30-10AM.** 2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.  
**Nature Nights: Desert Night Shift. Fri., 10/24. 6:00-8:00PM.** Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

## October Classes

**Arizona's Mammals. Wed., 10/15. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

Did you know that Arizona is one of the richest states in terms of the number of mammal species? Or, that there are four different types of skunks in Arizona? This class will explore the diversity of our furred cousins in the state. Since most mammals are nocturnal, this class offers a nice opportunity to see what many of our mammals look like. So join us as we investigate the rodents, carnivores, hoofed mammals, bats and all of the other furry inhabitants of Arizona.

**Butterflies of Arizona Part 2: Hairstreaks, Blues, and Metalmarks. Thurs., 10/16. 6-8PM.** Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 to register.

In this class will discuss the small, fast-flying, and colorful butterflies known as hairstreaks, blues, and coppers, as well as metalmarks, so named for their shimmering wings.

**The Dazzling World of Caterpillars. Mon., 10/20. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Belltower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



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.

**Lizards of southern Arizona. Thurs., 10/23. 6-8PM.** Cochise College (901 N. Colombo

Ave. in Sierra Vista). Call 515-5492 to register.

The Sonoran Desert is home to a wide variety of reptiles. This class will look at some of the more conspicuous reptiles, the lizards. Lizards are often active during the day, exhibit interesting behaviors, and some are quite colorful. Why do so many lizards do push-ups? How do some lizards easily lose their tails when a predator threatens? Join us and find out!

**Beginning Bird Watching. Sun., 10/26. 9AM-12PM.** Tucson Jewish Community Center (3800 E. River Rd.). Call 299-3000 to register.

Birding is one of the fastest growing outdoor activities in the United States. In this class you'll be introduced to the joys of birding and learn why southern Arizona is considered one of the top birding sites in the country. Learn how to use binoculars and field guides, as well as basic principles for identifying birds. As part of the class we'll venture outdoors to the JCC Sculpture Garden to practice what we've learned.

**Bats, Bats, Bats. Wed., 10/29. 10AM-12PM.** Tucson Jewish Community Center (3800 E. River Rd.). Call 299-3000 to register.



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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. We will pay particular attention to bat species found in Arizona.

**Birds of Madera Canyon Study Tour. Thurs., 10/30. 8AM-5PM.** Pima Community College (401 N. Bonita Ave.). Visit [www.pima.edu](http://www.pima.edu) for registration information.



One of the best birding locations in North America, Madera Canyon, is nestled in the Santa Rita Mountains south of Tucson. On this tour, we begin with a classroom presentation on the birds that we hope to see, and then spend the rest of the day looking for and observing Magnificent Hummingbirds, Painted Redstarts, Arizona Woodpeckers and many more. Information: Bring a sack lunch, water, sunscreen, comfortable shoes, hat, binoculars, camera, and field guide. There will be some walking on generally paved or well-maintained trails (one section is somewhat steep and rocky).

**Bats, Bats, Bats. Fri., 10/31. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Belltower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

See description for class above.

## In The Binoculars

This section highlights events that are on the horizon.

## Southeastern Arizona Butterfly Association Events

The monthly SEABA meetings have returned! This month features Jillian Cowles' presentation on local wildflowers, their pollinators, and the predators that prey on them. Jillian is a member of the North American Moth Photographers Group (MPG). She has built a database of the plants and animals in her yard (near Colossal Cave) that currently has 350 species of plants and over 600 arthropods! Meetings are held at the Tucson Botanical Gardens. It is free and open to the public. This month's meeting is on Tuesday, 10/21 and begins at 7:00PM.

There are two SEABA field trips this month! The first is on 10/12 and goes to Sycamore Canyon, northwest of Nogales. Meet at the McDonald's at I-19 and Continental Road at 8:00AM. The approximate return time is 2:00PM. The leaders are Bill and Mary Adams. The second trip is 10/18 and visits Brown Canyon on Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. This is an RSVP trip, so if you wish to attend, call Bill Adams (520-574-6578) or email ([Adams542@cox.net](mailto:Adams542@cox.net)) to reserve your spot. As with all SEABA trips, a \$5.00 donation per person to SEABA is greatly appreciated.

## Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting

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 holds monthly meetings at the Pima Community College Center for the Arts Recital Hall, West Campus (2202 W. Anklam Rd.), which begin at 7:15PM. As this issue went to press, I did not have information on October's presentation. Check the THS website for details. THS also publishes the bimonthly newsletter, *The Sonoran Herpetologist*. Visit <http://tucsonherpsociety.org/> for more information.

## Blacklighting for Bugs in Madera Canyon

As most of you know by now, I really enjoy blacklighting for insects- setting up a sheet and a blacklight somewhere is exciting. Forrest Gump's quote "... it's like a box of chocolates, you never know what your gonna get," applies here. So last month, I set up a blacklight in the picnic area at the Mt. Wrightson Picnic Area in Madera Canyon.



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I was joined by an enthusiastic group of bug nuts on a blustery evening to see what would show up at the sheet. We also had a brief visit from Warren Savary, who was busy collecting scorpions for the University of Arizona's Insect Fair. Bug folks see a blacklight out in the woods and just have to stop by to say hello! Another great aspect of blacklighting is that you get the opportunity to meet some cool people!

On this night we didn't have a large diversity of species. However, we did get representatives from many orders of insects. The greatest number of species was moths, from the order Lepidoptera. The Geometridae (inchworms and geometers) were well represented, with one of the stars being *Stannodes seiferti*. This genus holds their wings over the abdomen like many butterflies when at rest. This species is golden on the top side with pinkish gray on the underside of the wings. The light managed to coax a few individuals to make an appearance.

Other moths that came in included *Drasteria pallescens* (Noctuidae), which despite its name is actually a dark blackish brown overall, and *Arta epicoenalis* (Pyralidae), a small rusty moth with very thin white lines on the wings.



*Phengodes laticollis*

Another star for the evening was *Phengodes laticollis*, a beetle in the glowworm family (Phengodidae), so named for the bioluminescence of the eggs, larvae, and adult females. This is a very interesting family of beetles. Closely related to fireflies, adult males have large, feathery antennae used for locating pheromones produced by the females. Adult females look very different from the males- they are wingless and look much like larvae with compound eyes. Adults do not feed, but the larvae uses large mandibles to bite millipedes while injecting toxic saliva! Definitely a nice bug to show to the group.

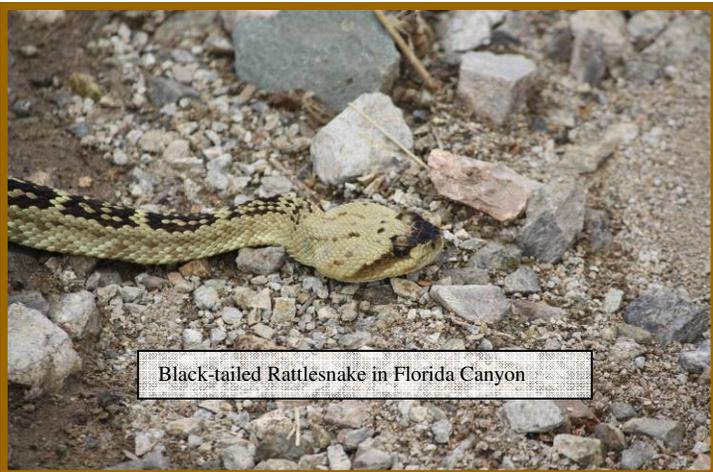
Other orders represented included silverfish (Thysanura) on the ground near the sheet, tree crickets (Orthoptera), which make the continuous trill that we all hear at night during the summer, mantisflies (Neuroptera) which look like the result of a high-speed collision between a praying mantis and a

lacewing, ichneumonid wasps (Hymenoptera), and a praying mantis (Mantodea). A very nice sample indeed!

I wish to thank everyone who came out for the evening. It was a lot of fun- great people, great conversation, and great bugs. In particular, 3-year old Zoe was a delightful member of the crew.

## Say What?

Recently, I was watching the local morning news program as I made coffee and tried to wake up. A piece came on about the dangers of living in rattlesnake country. At the conclusion of the segment, the reporter stated that the best way to avoid being bitten was '.. stay indoors and stay away from wildlife.'



Black-tailed Rattlesnake in Florida Canyon

I'm not kidding. I wanted to scream! That is like saying there's no use in getting on a plane because it's just going to crash. I was furious.

I have spent countless hours in the field in southern Arizona over the years and have never been bitten by a rattlesnake (or any other snake for that matter). I have seen dozens of these remarkable serpents. A few of them have rattled and assumed a defensive posture. The vast majority have either completely ignored me or have remained calm. Either way, not one of them has struck at me (even the one I stepped on a couple of months ago!).



Are rattlesnakes a potential hazard? Sure. But driving your car everyday is infinitely more dangerous than being bitten by a rattlesnake. (Funny how all of these hazards exist in the U.S. (rattlesnakes, alligators, whooping cough, etc., etc.) that everyone freaks out about but nobody hesitates for a second to get into a car, which is by far the most dangerous thing we do every day).

If you live in Arizona, anywhere in Arizona, you are in rattlesnake country. When you are outside, whether in your yard or in the wilderness, be alert. Watch where you place your hands and feet. If you hear a rattle, look around and locate the snake and move away from it. Don't panic and blindly run in a random direction, as you may step right on the snake.

It's not a hard concept to understand. Most of the rattlesnake bites in the U.S. are the result of what Harry Greene calls 'testosterone tyranny'- young males (up to the age of around 30), disregard or do not appreciate the dangers of interacting with these snakes. Oh, and consumption of alcohol is often involved (big surprise there). If you are not a member of this demographic your chances of being bitten are slim.

So get over this rattlesnake fear. There are much more important things to worry about- like the driver near you, texting friends while behind the wheel. They are infinitely more dangerous than any rattlesnake!

## Butterfly Profile: Rita Blue

A couple of years ago, while doing some scouting work with Fred Heath, Jim Brock, and others for the upcoming North American Butterfly Association biennial meeting, we headed up to Gordon Hirabayashi campground on Mt. Lemmon. We were investigating reports of a butterfly that had never been recorded in the Catalinas. Upon arriving at our destination, we started searching the area for our prize. It wasn't long before someone spotted it. A careful inspection clinched it- a population of Rita Blue (*Euphilotes rita*) did indeed exist in the Catalinas!

A Rita Blue of the recently discovered population on *Eriogonum polycladon*, a new foodplant for the genus.



Rita Blues, like most members of the Lycaenidae (which includes coppers, hairstreaks, and blues), are small butterflies. As is typical of the family, Rita Blues rest with their wings closed. When in this position, they are about the size of a dime. Rita Blues are sexually dimorphic- dorsally the males are purplish blue, the females are brown with a thick orange band on the hindwing. On the underside, both sexes are gray with black spots and a solid orange band on the hindwing.

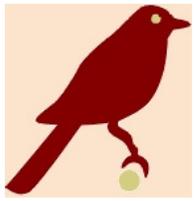
Rita Blues belong to a group called 'buckwheat blues', in reference to the food plants of the caterpillars. This genus is one of the most taxonomically difficult groups of butterflies in North America. They are often sedentary, staying close to populations of the buckweats consumed by the caterpillars. This has led to marked variation of populations within species. To complicate matters, some populations currently classified as the same species occur in the same area but fly at different times of year and feed on different buckweats! The taxonomy of this group

is far from settled. Paul Opler and Andrew Warren recognize 11 species in the genus in their list, which I consider to be the 'unofficial' list of North American butterflies.

Another fascinating aspect of the Rita Blues in the Catalinas is that the larval foodplant, *Eriogonum polycladon*, had never been known to be a foodplant for any of the buckwheat blues! Other populations of Rita Blue, in the Chiricahuas, Huachuclas, and Pinalenos, use *E. wrightii* as the caterpillar host.

The flight season for Rita Blue in southeastern Arizona extends from mid-August to mid-September. With such a short flight season it should come as no surprise that there is only a single generation per year.

The genus *Euphilotes* is a fascinating group of butterflies. There is still much to be learned about their biology. This is certainly a group where careful observation by dedicated amateurs could increase our scientific knowledge. I personally relish the fact that buckwheat blues are not about to be pigeon-holed into one of our species concepts. They are full of mysteries!



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## Visit the Sky Island Tours Blog!

If you have some free time, please check out my blog. Go to my website (<http://skyislandtours.com/>) and click on the Blog tab in the upper right corner. I will update the blog frequently, with observations from the field, interesting sightings, tour reports, and more. So give it a look and let me know what you think!

## Did you know...?



Black-winged Dragonlet. Photo by P. Deviche

that there have been a couple of interesting recent sightings of Arizona dragonflies? First, on July 29<sup>th</sup>, Rich Bailowitz and Doug Danforth found several Band-winged Dragonlets (*Erythrodiplax funerea*) at Arivaca Cienega, part of Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. This is noteworthy because they represent the first observations of the species in the state in over 60 years! The second interesting sighting was that of at least 10 Narrow-striped Forceptails (*Aphylla protracta*) near Mammoth in Pinal County. This species was first recorded in the state in 2008 on San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge in Cochise County. It has been documented at once in 2012 and another single individual in 2013. To find 10 at one pond at one time is remarkable. This is yet another example of finding unusual things simply by spending time in the field. So get out there!