

Sky Island Tours

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

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# The Sky Island News

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September 2015

In 2005, Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods* was published. In it, he coined a new term- Nature Deficit Disorder, a malady that human beings get from spending too much time indoors, resulting in a wide range of behavioral disorders. The causes for the condition include the fears of parents about the natural world and the omnipresent temptation of computer, cell phone, and television screens. Nature Deficit Disorder is not recognized as a physical or mental health issue by most medical organizations. It has also been criticized as a misdiagnosis that hides and mistreats the underlying root issues of why children are spending less time outdoors.

Here is what I know: many children today are spending far less time outside than I did as a kid. I am sure that there are many reasons for this, but, in my opinion, the main cause is the overwhelming influence of electronic devices. While computers and cell phone applications can be incredible tools of discovery, they also can turn young brains into tapioca pudding if used to excess.

So this month I urge each of you to do what you can to introduce a child to the wonders of the natural world. Take your grandchild, niece, nephew, neighbor, or other young person on a bird walk, or a flower walk, or just a walk around the block and point out to them what you see. Engage them. If we don't try to at least get them outdoors and looking around, then the future looks bleak.

Enough of the depressing soapbox oratory. Enjoy this issue!

## September 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.

**On a Wing and a Prayer: Pena Blanca Green Kingfisher Search. Fri., 9/4. 8:00AM-12:00PM.** Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email ([jeff@skyislandtours.com](mailto:jeff@skyislandtours.com)) to register.



Green Kingfisher. Photo by B. Holsten

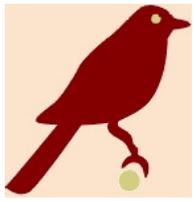
Friends of mine reported a Green Kingfisher recently from Pena Blanca Lake in Santa Cruz County. It has been seen for several days since its original discovery. Since this species is on the wish list for many birders in southern Arizona, this trip will look for these cool birds. If time permits, we may also go into Pena Blanca Canyon and try for Rufous-capped Warbler. Bring water, snacks, bug repellent, sunscreen. We will meet in the Safeway Shopping Center parking lot north of the McDonald's lot (but not in the McDonald's parking lot).

**Proctor Road Butterfly Blitz. Wed., 9/16. 8:30AM-12:00PM.** Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email ([jeff@skyislandtours.com](mailto:jeff@skyislandtours.com)) to register.

September is a great month for butterflies in southern Arizona. Not only are there a lot of species on the wing, but the chance of strays from

Mexico is good. A recent scouting trip to Proctor Road produced clouds of expected species, but also three Boisduval's Yellows, an Elf, and a White-striped Longtail! We will investigate the tithonia flowers, as well as, the mud along Madera Creek. Bring close-focus binoculars (if you have them), camera, water, sunscreen, and snacks. We will meet at the parking lot at Proctor Road.

**Pena Blanca Lake Butterflies and Dragonflies. Fri., 9/25. 8:30AM-12PM.** Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email ([jeff@skyislandtours.com](mailto:jeff@skyislandtours.com)) to register.



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We make a second trek this month to Pena Blanca Lake, this time searching for butterflies and dragonflies. Diversity of both groups should be excellent at this time of year. Only a few miles from the international border, there is always a chance of something unusual making an appearance. Bring close-focus binoculars (if you have them), camera, water, sunscreen, and snacks. We will meet in the Safeway parking lot 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. Call (520)-615-7855 X3 for more information. For descriptions of these trips and other programs offered by the Environmental Education Division, visit <http://www.pima.gov/nrpr/eeduc/environ.htm>.

**Starting in this month, online reservations and a \$5.00 fee will be required for all Pima County Natural Resources Programs unless indicated otherwise. Visit [www.pima.gov/nrpr](http://www.pima.gov/nrpr) to create a profile, register, and pay program fees.**

**Wake Up With the Birds. Every Thurs. 8:00-9:30AM.** Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).  
\*\*\*NOTE TIME CHANGE\*\*\*

**Birding Sweetwater Wetlands. Wed., 9/2. 7:30-9:30AM.** (2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.). No reservations or fee required for Sweetwater Wetlands programs.

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

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

**Dragons and Damsels of Cienega Creek. Fri., 9/11. 8:00-10:00AM.** Cienega Creek Natural Preserve (16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.).

**Nature Night: Bats in Flight. Fri., 9/11. 6:30-8:30PM.** Rillito River Park (4200 N. Campbell Ave.). No reservations or fee required.

**Butterflies of Agua Caliente Park. Sat., 9/19. 8:00-10:00AM.** Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

**Dragons and Damsels of Agua Caliente Park. Tues., 9/22. 8:00-9:30AM.** Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

**Cienega Creek Birding. Wed., 9/23. 7:30-9:30AM.** Cienega Creek Natural Preserve (16000 E. Marsh Station Rd.).

**Nature Night: Pantano Bats in Flight. Sat., 9/26. 6:30-8:30PM.** Pantano River Park (7600 E. Broadway Blvd.). No reservations or fee required.

## September Classes

**North American Mammals Part 1: Rodents. Tues., 9/8. 6-8PM.** Cochise College (901 N. Colombo Ave. in SierraVista). Call 515-5492 to register.

Survey the nine families and over 200 species of rodents found in North America. Believe it or not, rodents make up more than 40 percent of the world's mammals, with new species being discovered on a regular basis. Rodents, also known as the gnawing mammals, exhibit a tremendous diversity in 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. This class will give you an overview of the North American rodent.



**Pioneers of Western Ornithology. Mon., 9/14. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

Cooper's Hawk. Wilson's Warbler. Hammond's Flycatcher. Did you ever wonder who the people were who had birds named after them? In this class, we combine history and ornithology as we explore the people immortalized in the names of North American birds.

**Things That Make You Go Ouch. Mon., 9/21. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.



Southern Arizona is home to many things that can sting, bite, poke or irritate you. We have rattlesnakes, black widows, scorpions, chiggers and other animals that can make us hurt. It seems as though every plant in the desert has thorns or spines on it somewhere! In this class, we investigate the threats that these nasties present to our well-being. We focus on the identification of the plants and animals that make living in southern Arizona a wonderful, but occasionally painful, experience.

**The Dazzling World of Caterpillars. Thurs., 9/24. 6-8PM.** Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 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.

## In The Binoculars

This section highlights upcoming events.

### Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (9/9).

Shea Lambert, a PhD student at the University of Arizona, presents 'Taxonomic Exploration and the Megadiverse Frogs of Madagascar.' 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.

## Lake Cochise Shorebird Trip Report

August is a good month to head to Lake Cochise in Willcox, as it is one of the best spots for shorebirds in southern Arizona. So, I was excited to be joined by a group of shorebird enthusiasts in mid-August for a trip to this hotspot.

Upon arriving at the lake, the first birds we observed were American Avocets, one of North America's most stunning shorebirds. Mostly white, with black wings, a peach neck, and an upturned bill make these shorebirds unmistakable. As is often the case, they were joined by several of their cousins, Black-necked Stilts.

Our attention was soon drawn to the water, where dozens of Wilson's Phalaropes were loafing on sandbars or swimming in dizzying circles, picking bits of food from the water's surface. Phalaropes are very interesting shorebirds. Their circular swimming creates a



vortex, bringing food from the bottom up to the surface. Hanging out with the Wilson's were Killdeer, and Least, Western, and Baird's Sandpipers.



Long-billed Curlew

Also at the lake, were a handful of Long-billed Dowitchers, nicely exhibiting their sewing machine-like foraging style. I was initially disappointed that there were no Long-billed Curlews (keeping with the lengthy beak theme!) present. But we eventually spotted four of these big, buffy, beautiful shorebirds standing on a sandbar.

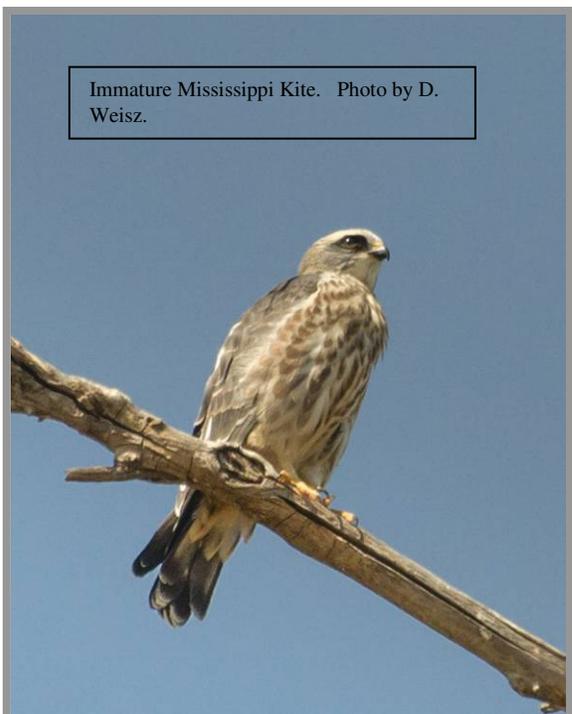
While scanning for other birds, one of the participants, Diane, saw one of her guides from a recent trip to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico also at the lake. It took me a little while to get over the remote chances of the two of them running into each other at a sewage treatment pond in a small southern Arizona town! Diane talked to Tom and got a tip about a Red Phalarope at the Benson Sewage Treatment Pond. This was definitely worth stopping for on the way home!

Getting to the pond in question, we quickly took note of the many Wilson's Phalaropes on the pond. So, I got busy slowly scoping them for the one that looked a bit different. It took a while, but there it was! A phalarope with a shorter, stubbier bill, a dark patch behind the eye, and more black in the wings, this individual was off by itself (probably wondering where all its brethren were), picking food off the water. It was not swimming in the circular pattern of Wilson's but, instead, was moving in more of a straight line fashion.

The morning provided a productive look at southern Arizona shorebirds in late summer (although it was mid-fall by the bird's calendar).. Thank you to everyone who joined me. It was a delightful way to spend a few hours!

## Mississippi Kite Trip Report

Quick on the heels of the Lake Cochise shorebirds trip was the trek to the monastery in St. David to look for Mississippi Kite. This falcon-like hawk has a very limited distribution in southern Arizona and the spot is the most reliable locale for this wonderful raptor. So, it was with high hopes that our little caravan set out for the town of St. David.



Immature Mississippi Kite. Photo by D. Weisz.

After arriving at the monastery, one of the first birds that we saw was a Yellow-billed Cuckoo flying across the grounds! Definitely a good omen! The unfortunate thing was that not everyone saw it. Undeterred we headed out in search of kites. At the first pond, Lark Sparrow, Cassin's Kingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher, and Abert's Towhee were seen. Continuing on, we spied Lazuli Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, and Yellow-breasted Chat were added to the list. Looking north, above the large cottonwoods, we spied a pair of birds soaring in the clear blue sky. Closer examination revealed these birds to be Mississippi Kites! Although they were not real close, the white secondaries showed up quite clearly when the birds banked in the brilliant blue sky. A family group of American Kestrels soon caught our attention, as they took turns displacing each other from their favorite perch. Soon, I noticed a largish bird perched in a dead branch of a cottonwood. Training the scope on the mystery bird revealed it to be an immature Mississippi Kite!

After everyone got their fill of the kites, we continued our walk around the monastery grounds. We added Gila Woodpecker, Song Sparrow, Green Heron, and others. We stopped by the monastery gift shop where participants stocked up on monk bread, zucchini bread, and other tasty delights.

Some of the group decided to make a quick stop at the Benson sewage treatment pond on the way home to see if the Red Phalarope was still present. It was and it had been joined by some other great birds. We added Willet,



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Solitary Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, White-faced Ibis, and several other shorebirds. What makes shorebirds particularly fascinating is how quick the species change-over at a site can be. Visits to the same site in the morning and the afternoon can yield very different species lists. We also had the great pleasure of running into Rick Taylor at the ponds! A tremendous birder and a friend of mine, it was fun to spend some time in the field with him, as it had been awhile since I had done so. I think the group liked it, too!

Anyway, it seemed like a good time was had by all. A big Thank You to all who joined me on a fun, exciting morning!

## Butterfly Profile: Tailed Orange

September, like August, is a great month for butterflies in southern Arizona. The possibilities of a day in the field are great, as monsoon influx, fall, and multi-brooded species overlap at this time of year. This month I focus on a butterfly with an extended flight period in our area, the Tailed Orange (*Pyrisitia proterpia*).

The flight season is from June through December. Tailed Oranges are seasonally dimorphic butterflies. The namesake 'tails' appear only on late season (winter form) individuals, which are also more heavily marked with brown on the underside of the wings. Those on the wing now (summer form) lack the 'tails'. Instead, the hindwings are somewhat pointed. The orange part of their name does apply to the individuals flying now, as they are very bright orange, indeed! The two forms are different enough that they were originally described as separate species. Confusingly, I have seen both forms on the wing at the same time.



The most likely identification challenge with Tailed Orange is with Sleepy Orange. Sleepy Orange differs in that the undersides of the hindwings are more prominently marked with reddish-brown (in both winter and summer forms) and the hindwing is not as distinctly pointed as in Tailed Orange. The background color of the hindwing underside of Sleepy Orange is more yellowish than orange (both species are very orange on the upper side). A further distinction between these two oranges is that Sleepy is more cold tolerant and can be on the wing year-round in southern Arizona. The Tailed is a tropical species near the northern limit of its range here and lacks cold tolerance. In most years, Tailed is absent from the first half of the year. From June through the end of the year both species are on the wing and common. Both forms of both species can be found at the same time and place in the fall, creating 'opportunities' to study this variation in detail.

Tailed Orange larvae utilize sennas as their food plants. Adults will visit flowers for nectar, but are more frequently observed imbibing moisture and salts from mud.

This wonderful butterfly was originally described in 1775 by the Danish entomologist Johann Fabricius from specimens collected on Jamaica. Their range extends south all the way to at least Ecuador. Getting a good look at this bright orange delight drinking along a stream certainly makes me feel like I'm in the tropics!

## Did you know?

... that new research has shown that birds shout to be heard over human-generated noise? Scientists at the University of Exeter looked at how bluebirds altered their songs in response to an increase in ambient noise caused, in many cases, by human activities, such as traffic. They found that the birds immediately altered their songs after a volume increase in background noise. In essence, the birds were doing what humans do in loud environments. Pretty cool!