

## Phoenix and Central Arizona Wildlife Viewing by Month

### **January**

Amazingly, metropolitan Phoenix has great winter birding and wildlife watching. Some argue that Arizona has the nation's best array of thrashers, and the Baseline road "thrasher site" is the place to see all five: Le Conte's, crissal, sage, curve-billed and Bendire's. Head over to the Santa Cruz flats near Arizona City in southwestern Pinal County to seek the elusive mountain plover. Horned larks are common here, and additional "life-list" possibilities include crested caracara, ferruginous hawk and merlin. Rufous hummingbirds begin passing through on their amazing northward migration, which is timed in the Sonoran Desert to coincide with the blooming of chuparosa shrubs. Expect ravenous rufous hummers to bully and chase off your backyard nectar feeding regulars for a few peak weeks during migration.

At the Nature Conservancy's Hassayampa River Preserve northwest of Phoenix, search out winter resident birds such as red-shafted and gilded flickers, cedar waxwings, white-crowned sparrows, yellow-rumped warblers and ruby-crowned kinglets. The Hassayampa River flows underground beneath nearly 100 miles of Sonoran Desert, but emerges here to feed a lush riparian community supporting 280 species of birds. Palm Lake at the Preserve offers four-acres of open water and marsh. Watch for herons, white-faced ibis, and pied-billed grebe. Look down on occasion, too, for the tracks of deer, javelina, raccoon, bobcat and ringtails--you might even see the creatures that leave them.

### **February**

Guided bird walks are one of the best ways to improve your skills, and they're offered in many spots around the Phoenix area, from Hassayampa Preserve in the northwest to the Gilbert Riparian Preserve in the southeast valley, and Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park to the east. Trees are still bare, giving great views of the handsome spotted towhees which descend from the mountains to lower deserts during winter, along with American robin, western-scrub jay and even the occasional brown creeper. The Boyce Thompson Arboretum is famous for having a lone brown thrasher feeding in the myrtle thickets most winters; and this month also heralds the onset of migratory behavior, with the earliest summer birds just starting to arrive and claim breeding territories. Maricopa County has all four North American varieties of skunks (striped, spotted, hooded and hog-nosed); as well as javelina, raccoons and ringtails.

### **March**

Desert wildflowers typically peak during March-April, which is also the season for wildlife festivals! Gilbert's man-made wetlands have grown famous lately for attracting a streak-backed oriole, and the annual Feathered Friends Festival at the Gilbert Riparian Preserve offers a chance to look for it. This is a great family event, also an opportunity to visit Audubon chapter booths to pick up event calendars, bird checklists and field trip info. While you're there walk the trails around the percolation ponds and scan the shallow waters for stilts, phalaropes and herons.

Another worthy event is the Tres Rios Nature and Earth Festival, a weekend-long outdoor event that showcases the wildlife and habitat of the Gila River drainage in Avondale, west of downtown Phoenix. Beginner birding tours and nature walks are among the activities, and on-the-water tours allow a chance to see a heron rookery close-up.

## **April**

What a great month to explore Mount Ord, northeast of Phoenix and less than one hour's drive from Sky Harbor Airport via the Beeline Highway. The peak tops out at 7128 feet and serves as the dividing line between Gila and Maricopa Counties, high enough for ponderosa and pinyon pines to shelter nuthatches and hairy woodpeckers. For a scenic drive and great day of birding, continue up the Beeline Highway (route 87) to state route 188 and then turn southeast for a leisurely drive along Tonto Creek and past Roosevelt Lake. Wildlife areas are near the A Cross road and the Three Bar; great roadside views of the lake are frequent along 188 and you'll see spring populations of grebes, cormorants, ducks and coots.

Tonto National Forest camping areas are plentiful here and dark-sky nights allow great stargazing. Rise with the sun and use binoculars to glass the dry washes feeding Roosevelt Lake to see javelina herds and foraging coyotes.

You'll find aquatic birds nearer the Phoenix valley at the confluence of the Salt and Verde rivers (also known as the Phon D. Sutton Recreation Area). Less than a half-hour drive north of Mesa, the 100-acre parcel supports trees large enough for eagle and osprey nests. Visit in April to reacquaint yourself with the territorial "Whir!" call of a male Gambel's quail, and to hear the impressive mimicry of curve-billed thrashers.

## **May**

Cinnamon teal, black-crowned night heron, black-necked stilt, common yellowthroat and Bendire's thrasher are among more than 200 species confirmed at the Rio Salado Habitat Restoration Project along the Salt River and near central Phoenix. This area opened in 2005, and quickly earned a reputation amongst urban birders as a prime spot.

International Migratory Bird Day is celebrated in May and you'll find events at the Hassayampa Preserve and Boyce Thompson Arboretum. You'll find birds, too! Hassayampa visitors should look for willow flycatcher, yellow-billed cuckoo and blue grosbeak. If you're at the Arboretum listen for western tanager, Bell's vireo and yellow-breasted chat. Look for cliff chipmunk and rock squirrel families emerging from their burrows throughout the day. Busy rodent burrows also make this a great month to find Gila monsters! Don't underestimate these slow-moving creatures, one of only two venomous lizards on the planet. Gila monsters feast on quail eggs and are known to raid rodent burrows, and can grow up to more than a foot long. Here's another suggestion – drive up the Apache Trail (Route 88) and take a cruise on the Dolly Steamboat on Saguaro Lake; passengers see bighorn sheep frequently on cliffs overlooking the lake.

## **June**

If spring is for the birders, then summertime is for "herp" fans and Arizona is the best of all states for snakes, lizards, frogs, toads, turtles and tortoises. In Maricopa County the park system offers interpretive tours and checklists for amateur herpetology enthusiasts who prefer to search solo. San Tan Regional Mountain Park in the southeast valley has "Wildlife Encounters" nighttime walks at dusk and the promise of western diamondbacks or black-tailed rattlesnakes.

Carry along one of the newer pocket-size black lights to see scorpions glow in the dark with their eerie greenish-yellow color. After morning sun has warmed the boulders you'll find chuckwallas basking at South Mountain Park. Summer programs are offered at other parks such as Usery (flashlight tours after dark), and Estrella Mountain Park have a great "Signs of Life" walk exploring den sites, scat and tracks. Bring your kids and try your own variation of detective work: try to find scene-of-the-crime forensic evidence when fur, feathers or bones reveal where a predator met up with prey. The first of all cactus fruits are ready this month, look atop the saguaros for white-winged doves with their bills stained crimson red from ripe fruit.

## **July**

Haven't taken time to learn your dragonflies? Make this the year! Summer heat brings out stunning dragonflies including bright orange flame skimmers and blue-eyed darners, with their intricate abdominal patterns resembling a mosaic tile of blue, black and white. The artificial wetlands at the Gilbert Riparian Preserve near the crossroads of Greenfield and Guadalupe are among Grand Canyon State photographers' favorite places to find the striking creatures and catch 'em in the lens. Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park (near the town of Superior) offers guided dragonfly walks once a month on summer Saturdays. Usery Mountain Park also offers ranger-guided "Wildlife Safari" two-mile nighttime hikes, and over at Hassayampa you'll find plenty of fledglings, busy feeding and getting strong enough to survive the autumn migration. Zone-tailed hawks, common blackhawks and Harris hawks aren't uncommon; bonus birds might include a yellow-billed cuckoo. Gray fox kits are adorable and photogenic, as are javelina youngsters – sometimes called "reds" before their coarse, bristly coats turn from russet to gray. Look for fox and javelina at dawn and dusk when they're likely to be out feeding or approaching water.

Thousands of Mexican free-tailed bats emerging from a day roost beneath a bridge to take wing and hunt insects... now that's an unforgettable sight! And one that's repeated at sunset nightly at the Maricopa County Flood Control tunnels near the southeast corner of 40th Street and Camelback Road. Don't be surprised to find other people gathered there, despite hot summer nights. Arizona Game and Fish Department's popular "Bats Aren't So Bad" series of workshops have raised awareness and benefits of the Valley's maternity colonies of migrant bats, and the public has responded. The nightly show is free, and the dusk hour is a great one to watch for great blue herons flying over and to listen for screech owls hooting a territorial chant.

## **August**

It can be hit or miss, but during the hot summer months you can often see one of Phoenix's largest urban bat roosts in action right here in the middle of town. This is an amazing sight to see! At sunset thousands of Mexican free-tail bats emerge from the "Phoenix Bat Cave" near the Biltmore to forage on mosquitoes. There are so many bats that it is nearly a steady stream lasting for a good twenty minutes. The Phoenix Bat Cave is really a 7 mile long underground tunnel which is part of a Maricopa County Flood Control ditch. A good viewing spot is at the southwest corner of 24th Street and Biltmore Circle, just south of Lincoln. If you go, park at the commercial building located at 2400 W. Arizona Biltmore Circle. The building is on the northeast corner of 24th Street and Arizona Biltmore Circle, just south of Lincoln Dr. The viewing area is on the southwest corner of that intersection, south of the Squaw Peak Police Precinct. In addition to the Mexican free-tailed bats along the canal near Camelback and 40th St.

easily seen in July, look for lesser nighthawks in the same area. Not hawks at all, they are still excellent predators - of insects! Look for brown, slender birds with long graceful wings sporting a white band near each wing top. These are crepuscular hunters - they are most active at dusk and dawn. Nighthawks have huge eyes and mouths that open wide like a gate. They dart about in the low sky and scoop flying insects into their open mouths. Listen for a faint and sweetly strange sound from the nighthawks when they scoop low to the ground.

August is also peak season for butterflies, with guided walks offered at Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park, Desert Botanical Garden, Gilbert Riparian Preserve, and other spots – check out the website for the Central Arizona Butterfly Association for dates and details. Adventurous (and cautious) wildlife watchers can look for black bears feasting on ripe prickly pear cactus fruit in the opuntia patches at Mt. Ord, or other mountain foothills of the Tonto National Forest.

### **September**

Migrant songbirds are quieter, and so are the trails of South Mountain park near Phoenix, especially on “Silent Sundays” which encourage non-motorized access to park roads. Arrive early in the morning and you’ll hear the “gur-gur-gur-gur” of a cactus wren calling from a cholla (some describe this call as sounding like a car that won’t start). Listen for the emphatic “whee-wheet!” of a curve-billed thrasher. Boyce Thompson Arboretum celebrates the seasonal migration season with the “Bye Bye Buzzards” event, a quirky seasonal salute to turkey vultures before these impressive birds depart to spend winter months in southern AZ and Mexico. County parks offer nighttime events such as the Full Red Moon walk, and nights are warm enough in September for a final opportunity to see a late-season Gila monster foraging to fuel up before winter hibernation. Check out the South Mountain Environmental Education Center, and nearby Javelina Canyon gives hikers a chance to see the namesake, distinctly Sonoran Desert mammals. Fat Man’s Pass is another hike popular with wildlife watchers.

### **October**

The last of the autumn migrants are passing through Maricopa County and “migrant traps” such as the Hassayampa Preserve, Gilbert Riparian Preserve and Boyce Thompson Arboretum. Wilson’s and McGillivray’s warblers, green-tailed towhees and northern “red-shafted” flickers are among species to watch for. To see native mammals, first know and seek out their food sources. Most of the palm trees around the valley are nonnative, but many produce fruits which attract squirrels, ringtails and even javelina – as well as numerous bird species. Butterfly wings will look ragged, tattered and worn in October, and this is the final month to see the southwestern monarch butterflies before they migrate. Would you believe these seemingly delicate insects are known to travel as far south as Mexico City?

### **November**

Winter residents have arrived at the Hassayampa Preserve. Cedar waxwing, American robin, and yellow-rumped warbler should be easy ones to mark off your checklist on a visit. Looking for mammals? Arizona has the distinction of hosting all four North American species of skunks, as well as two types of deer (“mulies” and the elegant Coues whitetail). Javelina, raccoons, ringtails and bobcats all call the Preserve home, and may be seen shortly after sunrise. Drive up to Mt.

Ord for autumn color in the Fremont cottonwood trees, maybe also big-tooth maples on steep and north-facing slopes of sheltered canyons.

## **December**

Christmas Bird Counts begin this month, and are one of the most popular watchable wildlife events of the year. Counts within this region include the Salt-Verde River count and two dozen more. The Salt-Verde Count is centered at Adams Mesa and includes sections of the McDowell Mountain Regional Park, the northern half of the Fort McDowell Indian Reservation, and the southwestern shore of Saguaro Lake. White-crowned sparrows and ruby-crowned kinglets are here in force this time of year, and possibly the most numerous “CBC” species of all. Amateur birders are encouraged to volunteer with Christmas Bird Counts; dates and participant contact information is published in this month’s Arizona Wildlife Views magazine, published by the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

## **Other Wildlife Viewing Sites**

Don’t Miss These Outstanding Wildlife Viewing Areas and Many Others Highlighted in The Arizona Wildlife Viewing Guide

### **Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park**

Arizona's oldest and largest botanical garden has vigorously embraced watchable wildlife programs, with guided “Learn Your Lizards” walks in summertime, bird walks during all four seasons, and even dragonfly and butterfly tours during the hot months of summer. Highlights include the well-known cactus garden, the Queen Creek Riparian corridor, panoramic vistas, Ayer Lake, and much more.

### **Riparian Preserve at the Gilbert Water Ranch**

An impressive checklist of 200 species means birds are abundant throughout the year, and 4.5 miles of walking trails means easy exploring – and this facility is particularly welcoming to wheelchair-users. With an urban fishing license, fishing is permitted, too! This unique area recycles municipal wastewater to create a community wetland wildlife sanctuary for recreation, education, and research. The Riparian Institute also offers programs and classes to the public (bird walks, youth camps, after-dark black light walks for scorpions) and public star party viewings at the new observatory.

### **Hassayampa River Preserve near Wickenburg**

Entry fees are \$5-per-day, but it’s really worth buying the Nature Conservancy’s annual pass for \$25, and then planning visits to other magnificent preserves around Arizona at Ramsey Canyon, Patagonia-Sonoita Creek, and Aravaipa Canyon. The Hassayampa River runs underground for most of its 100-mile course through the desert, but emerges here to support wetlands, an impressive riparian area, and to welcome those who pursue watchable wildlife. The preserve contains more than 300 acres (Palm Lake itself accounts for four acres) and the Arthur L. Johnson Visitor Center contains interactive displays on desert and riparian ecology which provide guests with colorful and detailed stories about the special plants and animals found within the preserve.