

Tucson and Southern Arizona Wildlife Viewing by Month

January

The best season for thrashers birdwatchers! Skulking crissal, Bendire's and LeConte's burst into full song from exposed perches, courting in the low desert of Avra Valley where Costa's and Anna's hummingbirds perform spectacular aerial displays. The Santa Cruz Flats host ruddy ground doves and wintering mountain plovers. Waterfowl are numerous at Willcox, Patagonia and Parker Canyon Lakes and urban ponds. Wintering raptors and sparrows abound in many habitats alongside desert residents. The Wings Over Willcox birding festival celebrates over 20,000 Sandhill cranes and 14 species of raptors wintering in the Sulphur Springs Valley; which is also a great place to find end-of-the-rut Coues whitetail deer. Photograph antlered bucks in the grassy foothills below Cochise Stronghold.

February

Ducks and geese increase around ponds and lakes and early migrants begin to arrive. Raptors and sparrows are still abundant. Many desert residents begin nesting and passerines sing conspicuously. Vermilion flycatchers become more numerous and white-winged doves begin arriving in large numbers. The first tree swallows show up as they head north. Ever seen a coati? Arizona is one of only a few states where you can find these raccoon-like animals, and lower elevation foothills of the Chiricahua Mountains are a prime place to look. Check with owners of the bed-and-breakfasts in Portal, Patagonia and Ramsey Canyon. The Nature Conservancy's Muleshoe Ranch is also a hotspot for "coati connoisseurs".

March

Large numbers of singing Lucy's and yellow warblers mark the onset of spring as the cottonwoods begin leafing out. Gray, zone-tailed and common black-hawks begin to arrive along the large riparian corridors of the Santa Cruz and San Pedro Rivers. Bell's vireos are common and sing from mesquite bosques. Northbound swallow flocks congregate over ponds and early shorebirds begin moving through. Hummingbird numbers begin to increase and violet-crowns are reliable at feeders in Patagonia. Butterflies follow the wildflower blooms and begin to appear where nectar plants can sustain them – drive highways 181 and 191 and check the fields along the Sulphur Springs valley for the season's first emergent queen and bluish-black pipevine swallowtails – or the delicate yellow jittery trail of a sleepy orange butterfly making the rounds... or maybe the elegant two-tailed swallowtail, our state butterfly. Southeast Arizona Butterfly Association offers field trips to Box Canyon in Pima County, Portal and Fort Huachuca's famous Garden Canyon.

April

Scores of colorful migrant warblers, vireos, tanagers, grosbeaks, orioles, flycatchers, buntings, thrushes and hummingbirds invade to set up breeding territories. Birdsong abounds in every habitat and red-faced, Grace's and Virginia's warblers move into low mountain canyons. Owls become very vocal with migrant elf and flammulated alongside resident whiskered and western-screech. Shorebird numbers begin to build at Willcox and Avra Valley. Regular hummingbird breeders are common in the lowlands and mountain canyons. Migrant bats return from Mexico, and hibernating locals emerge for the season during spring months. Bridges and culverts provide

habitat for maternal colonies of Mexican free tailed bats, which can number in the thousands and are enthralling to watch as they stream out each evening to hunt for insects.

May

Mountain canyons teem with nesting species as elegant trogons and other colorful breeders arrive. Hummingbird diversity and numbers grow as feeders everywhere host large numbers of several species. Red-faced warblers and yellow-eyed juncos are common and tame in the lush conifer forests atop Mt. Lemmon. Riparian corridors along Nogales and Patagonia near the Mexican border host nesting thick-billed kingbirds and rose-throated becards. This is also the best time for rare Mexican vagrants like flame-colored tanager. Dragonflies can be equally colorful – and are often easier to find and photograph than birds. Bright orange flame skimmers patrol ponds, pools and standing water in agricultural drainages, often competing with blue-eyed darners who also hunt smaller, slower insects over water. Night-flowering cacti and yuccas offer a chance to seek nectar-feeding bats such as the lesser long-nose, which is an important pollinator for organ pipe cacti. If you're exploring a wet mountain canyon and hear what sounds like a bleating goat or sheep, it might be a canyon tree frog; listen for these along creeks, pools and streambeds during May and June.

June

The hottest, driest month and bird activity quickly dwindles by mid-morning... so start waking before sunrise to celebrate the coming summer solstice (you'll also enjoy the day's coolest temperatures!). Late breeders like yellow-billed cuckoos, sulphur-bellied flycatchers and five-striped sparrows arrive. High elevation forests are active with nesting Cordilleran flycatchers, olive warblers and many other montane species. Saguaro cacti fruit and attract scores of white-winged doves and other desert birds. The Festival of the Hummingbirds is held in Tucson. Cliff chipmunks and antelope ground squirrels are fans of cactus fruit too, and you'll find these industrious rodents scavenging fallen saguaro fruit. Antelope ground squirrels have distinct stripe, and are great to photograph and fun to observe scampering through those seemingly impenetrable cholla cacti.

July

The onset of the dramatic monsoon thunderstorms marks the breeding season of Montezuma quail, Cassin's and Botteri's sparrows and other grassland birds. Many species are on their second broods as the desert and mountains are transformed into a lush landscape. Owls become silent and shorebird numbers increase at ponds and lakes as the first southbound migrants begin passing through. Mid-summer is when wildlife photographers return to the Sulphur Springs Valley grasslands around Pearce, Sunsites and in the foothills of Cochise Stronghold to see whitetail does tending their tiny, spotted newborns. Fawns "drop" around the time of the annual monsoon rains; the reproductive cycle of Sonoran Desert Coues deer is timed for does to have the richest, greenest forage to provide for youngsters. Visit the tops of Sky Island Mountains during July and you may see ladybird beetles ("Ladybugs") which have converged at the mountaintops... sometimes millions of them, carpeting shrubs and small trees close to the forest floor.

August

Hummingbird numbers and diversity are at their peak as early migrants and fledglings crowd feeders in Miller and Ash Canyons, Patagonia, Portal and Madera Canyon where rarities such as white-eared, Lucifer and Berylline hummingbirds and plain-capped starthroat are possible alongside migrant rufous and calliope. Mountain canyons become quiet but still active with elegant trogons and painted redstarts and the possibility of Mexican rarities like Aztec thrush. Riparian thickets and desert scrub hold early migrants and flycatchers heading south. The Southwest Wings Birding Festival in Sierra Vista and Tucson Bird & Wildlife Festival in Tucson, make for outstanding birding and wildlife-watching. For more information on these and other festivals visit our calendar of events. August is also peak butterfly season. You can sign up for guided walks offered by the Southeast Arizona Butterfly Association. Mt Graham (near Safford) offers a chance to escape the low desert heat and to seek one of Arizona's rarest of all species – the endemic (and endangered) Mt. Graham red squirrel. The Swift Trail, also known as "Arizona 366," is paved and among the most scenic drives in Graham County.

September

As the monsoon rains come to an end, migrant birds gather en masse with large numbers of Swainson's hawks soaring in huge kettles as western kingbirds and swallows line up on powerlines. Shorebirds abound at ponds and lakes and mixed flocks begin to form in the mountain canyons as summer breeders begin moving down slope. Lowland desert areas host congregations of mixed species as migrants start heading south. Early wintering species like green-tailed towhees and sparrows begin to arrive. Autumn's onset is also a good time to try for a "skunk trifecta:" see if you can find three species of them including the most common striped skunk and its less common cousins the spotted and hooded. Skunks prefer habitat close to water, so look for these around dusk and dawn in the Patagonia-Sonoita region – and try to score an extra point by seeing a hog-nosed skunk!

October

Wintering species begin to arrive with large numbers of raptors and sparrows invading the valleys and agricultural fields. Ferruginous hawks and Sandhill cranes move into the Sulphur Springs Valley as northern harriers and short-eared owls appear in the San Rafael and Sonoita Grasslands. Waterfowl replace dwindling shorebirds at ponds and lakes and black-bellied whistling-ducks become more regular. Irruptive Lawrence's goldfinches may invade every weedy patch as yellow-rumped warblers abound in the lowlands. This is the best time for eastern rarities in riparian groves and mountain canyons. October is also the last big month for butterfly viewing -- migrant monarch butterflies are on the wing, and great places to seek them include the Canelo Hills, and also the Blue River Wilderness near Clifton and Morenci, just east of highway 191 and on the border with New Mexico. Reptile enthusiasts will also enjoy the Blue River's variety of snakes, lizards, frogs and toads.

November

Most winter species have arrived and duck numbers increase. Wintering hawks, kites, falcons and eagles are numerous in desert fields and agricultural areas. Mountain plovers and ruddy ground doves are more reliable in the Santa Cruz Flats and Sulphur Springs Valley. Sage thrashers and sage sparrows have arrived in the desert scrub alongside scores of red-tailed hawks and sparrow flocks. The first week of November remains a great time for a fall foliage drive to Mt. Lemmon in the Santa Catalina Mountains near Tucson or Mt. Graham near Safford. Aspens

and maples above 8,000 feet in these ranges can be as colorful with red and gold leaves as a postcard from New England, and Abert's squirrels are busy stashing food in preparation for snowy months ahead.

December

The San Rafael and Sonoita Grasslands are prime for Baird's sparrow, Sprague's pipit, McCown's and chestnut-collared longspurs among huge flocks of wintering sparrows and many white-tailed kites. Low mountain canyons and riparian thickets may host a rarity like rufous-backed robin or varied thrush. Raptors and sparrows abound in many habitats. Winter solstice occurs this month and it's also the peak of the rut for Coues whitetail deer, when bucks send all their available time searching for does, sparring with rivals, marking territory – seldom even stopping to eat. They're distracted, and charismatic to photograph during this season. Where to find them? Coues deer like grassy slopes of southern Arizona mountain ranges including the Chiricahuas, Dragoons, Dos Cabezas and Pinalenos.

Explore the vast Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, in December's milder weather. Here you'll find one of the rarest of all North American ungulates: the endangered Sonoran pronghorn. Captive breeding programs, water developments on the refuge and habitat improvements have allowed numbers to increase from less than two dozen pronghorn to around one hundred. Intrepid explorers can seek creosote and bursage flats, mesquite, palo verde, ironwood, and an abundance of cacti, including ocotillo, cholla, and saguaro on the bajadas – the sand, silt, and gravel deposited by running water on the slopes of mountain ranges.

Other Wildlife Viewing Sites

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

Arizona-Sonoran Desert Museum

Founded in 1952 by William Carr and Arthur Pack, the museum is dedicated to conserving the Sonoran Desert by protecting native plants and animals, providing educational programming, maintaining and improving the museum's collection of plants and animals and supporting research and advancing scientific understanding of the desert. The goal of the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum is to inspire people to become friendlier to their environment. This indoor and outdoor museum exhibits more than 300 species of native wildlife and 1,300 varieties of native plants. Exhibits: Earth Sciences, Mountain Woodland, Desert Grassland, Desert Loop Trail, Cat Canyon, Riparian Corridor, Cactus Gardens, Pollination Gardens, Walk-In Aviary and Desert Garden.

Chiricahua National Monument

A "Wonderland of Rocks" is waiting for you to explore at Chiricahua National Monument. The 8 mile paved scenic drive and 18 miles of day-use hiking trails provide opportunities to discover the beauty, natural sounds, and inhabitants of this 11,985 acre site. There are more than 71 species of mammals, 46 species of reptiles, 8 amphibians, 171 species of birds and uncounted numbers of insects that regularly occur on the monument. Visit the Faraway Ranch Historic

District to discover more about the people who have called this area home: Chiricahua Apaches, Buffalo Soldiers, Erickson and Stafford families.

Patagonia Lake State Park/Sonoita Creek State Natural Area

At two and a half miles long and 250 surface acres, Patagonia Lake is popular for a variety of recreational activities, including water skiing, fishing, camping, picnicking, and hiking. Created by the damming of Sonoita Creek, the lake attracts a tremendous variety of wildlife, particularly waterbirds. Visitors come from all over to see southeast Arizona specialty bird species.