

West Coast Wildlife Viewing by Month

January

Beaver and muskrat were hunted along the Colorado River by indigenous people for 1,000 years and “mountain men,” such as Arizona explorer Bill Williams, gave their names to western landmarks. The Bill Williams River tributary stretch near Lake Havasu remains a place to find native fur-bearers along with ringtail, gray fox, coyote, javelina and raccoon. Look for Sonoran mud turtles and nonnative spiny softshell turtles feeding on plant, amphibians, and small invertebrates, too.

Yuma offers Mittry Lake (northeast of Yuma) between Laguna and Imperial Dams. A mix of desert-scrub and riparian habitats means diverse waterfowl (sora, snowy egret, black-crowned night heron; also barn, great-horned, and western screech owls). Common mammals include mule deer, javelina and bobcat – and don’t be too surprised to spot a feral burro. During breeding/nesting season, rarities such as yellow-billed cuckoo, southwestern willow flycatcher, Yuma clapper rails (they nest here) and common moorhen can be seen.

February

Cibola National Wildlife Refuge has plenty to see year-round, but February is a particularly good month to explore while the temperatures are cooler and migrant waterfowl are most abundant. Drive the three-mile self-guided auto tour and check out farm fields along the way for Canada, snow, and Ross’ geese. The Cibola is one of Arizona’s wintering spots for Sandhill crane. Check for mallard, pintail, American wigeon, ruddy, and cinnamon teal off your life list. Cibola Lake is closed to allow a safe haven for migrant waterfowl. Lake access reopens in March, when you’ll see geese, ducks, and grebes (Clark’s, western, and pied-billed); also bald eagles. Don’t forget to scan dead, standing trees (snags) around the lake for a variety of birds and small mammals, and check your bird guide to be confident of the markings of the rare Yuma clapper rail which nest here (least bitterns, too).

March

Not far from Hoover Dam is the Colorado River Nature Center—pay a visit to learn about places to find wildlife along Arizona’s West Coast. Behind the dam is Lake Mead. This giant lake is in a dry environment: this region typically receives four inches or rainfall in a good year! Located at the southwest end of Bullhead City, the Nature Center includes 140 acres west of State Route 95, and bordered on the east side by BLM lands and on the west side by the Colorado River. Carp, channel catfish, rainbow trout and striped bass attract fishermen – and also winter migrant bald eagles. Spring is ushered in with warmer temperatures in March and rodents are easier to see; look for pocket mouse, kangaroo rat – and larger mammals such as black-tailed jackrabbit and striped skunk.

April

Spring and summer migrant birds arrived and claimed their territories at the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge in March, but April and early May are the prime months to watch for white-winged dove, elf owl, common poor-will, lesser nighthawk; noisy sparrows such as black-chinned and rufous-crowned – and colorful orioles including hooded, Bullock's and Scott's. One of Arizona’s most charismatic large mammals can be found here, too: desert bighorn sheep.

You'll want a spotting scope or 10X binoculars to glass the high ridgetops and watch the horizon for majestic silhouettes of a "full curl" ram. Use your ears as well - listen for small rocks rolling down a slope for a clue that desert bighorn sheep are on the move uphill. One reliable spot to look for sheep is Signal Mountain. Arizona's West Coast region has one big annual festival geared towards wildlife watchers this month, and it's well worth attending.

May

Drive I-8 towards Yuma and watch the landscape change, becoming predominately Lower Colorado River Desertscrub habitat, with brushy flats and dry washes – and less than eight inches of rainfall a year. Plants here include creosote and bursage; during May the more heat-tolerant reptiles become active, so look for desert iguana, zebra-tailed and short horned lizards, also rattlesnakes including the sidewinder and Mojave. Visitors to the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge should plan hikes through the Horse Tanks region... watching for natural rock waterholes and nearby grinding mortars and petroglyphs as evidence of visitors from 1,000 years ago. Territorial male Gambel's quail will be calling from prominent perches; Costa's hummingbirds can be seen doing elaborate courtship flights, and side-blotched lizards are easy to see scooting across trails or basking in the sun. Warmer months also bring the chance to find a basking chuckwalla or desert iguana. Here's a tip for the more serious reptile aficionados – ask refuge staff where to find the rare Tarahumara leopard frogs, and whether they're active and visible in May.

June

Summer heat is most intense this month –impressive during June. Temperatures can reach 118 at the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Alamo Lake Wildlife Area in southeast Mohave County (north of Wenden), and park staff advise caution – but they also encourage wildlife viewing, particularly reptiles and amphibians. Alamo Lake is a choice spot in June when summer nights prompt the Arizona toad and lowland leopard frog into song. Listen for their calls at dusk; temperatures are cooler and this is also the time to watch for California leaf-nosed bats. "Herpetology" is the science of reptile study, and other "herps" worth searching for at Alamo Lake include the banded Gila monster and Sonoran desert tortoise. Two of the state's scarcest native fish can also be found in these waters: the desert pupfish and Gila topminnow.

July

July can be a lizard month in the desert. Take I-40 across from Kingman toward Needles, accessing the Hualapai Range and the Black Mountains. Many of the common and smaller lizards prefer temperatures below 100 degrees (ornate tree lizards, side-blotched), but the heat-tolerant desert iguana can remain active all morning and when the sun is high and has already convinced the iguana's lesser reptile cousins to find shelter. Iguanas are known for surprising bursts of speed; they're usually found on the ground and will take cover beneath rocks and underground – but when native desert creosote shrubs are blooming you might be lucky enough to see an iguana which climbed up to snack on the delicate yellow flowers. While you're looking for iguanas on the desert floor, watch for chuckwallas, too – higher up and basking on boulders. Hatchling zebra-tailed lizards also begin to appear this month.

Summer Highlight - Desert bighorn sheep can be seen along the banks of the Colorado River around Willow Beach. Kingman regional staff of the Arizona Game and Fish Department offer a

workshop on the natural history of desert bighorn sheep in July - complete with a boat trip to viewing areas.

August

One of the great things about birding Arizona is the higher variety of birds you can find, even within one general family listing. For example, you can find cactus, rock, Bewick's, canyon, and house wrens with relative ease at popular birding spots, and sometimes boost that to six with a vocal marsh wren. Curve-billed thrashers are common throughout most of the state; Crissal and Bendire's are a little more challenging. Bendire's have been reported near Bullhead City in August, an area you'd also expect to find white-winged dove, verdin, roadrunner, and Anna's hummingbird. This month is also a great time to search for desert tortoise. If you happen across one, look and photograph, but don't touch or bother them. It's against the law to take one home! Big desert tortoises can have shells more than a foot long and the largest of them are believed to be at least sixty years old. To find them look for desert fruit. They love prickly pear cactus fruit, and August is the month these ripen and begin to drop off the paddle-shaped plants. Tortoises prefer mountain slopes, canyons and bajadas, so look for places with suitable habitat – and with ripe prickly pear fruits.

Summer Highlight - The desert bighorn sheep are still quite watchable along the Colorado River near Willow Beach in August. The Kingman regional staff of the Arizona Game and Fish Department offer a workshop on the natural history of the sheep in August - complete with a boat trip to viewing areas.

September

Take I-8 from Casa Grande through Gila Bend and on to the small community of Tacna and check out the 600-acre Arizona Game and Fish Department's Quigley Wildlife Management Area with wetlands and agricultural fields. Quigley Pond is a marshy lake formed by a backwater section of the Gila River and is a great spot for various waterfowl (and the occasional hunting peregrine falcon) and marsh birds such as rails and moorhens. This oxbow of the Gila River provides an ideal mix of open water and shallow marshlands supporting cattail, bulrush, and hidden nesting spots. Two different endangered birds, the Yuma clapper rail and the southwestern willow flycatcher, have raised young here. Watch for northern harriers gliding low over the marshes and grassy areas. You might also see a white-tailed kite. Other spots nearby along the Gila River can be reliable for white-faced ibis, herons and egrets, cinnamon teal, vermilion flycatcher, and blue grosbeak.

October

Kingman is a good October destination – the city is near the Havasu National Wildlife Refuge, and has interesting migrants which can be spotted within city limits – check Metcalf Park for possible Wilson's, Audubon's or black-throated gray warblers and wintering ruby-crowned kinglets. Head over to the refuge for the impressive sight of American avocet flocks overhead. Black-crowned night-heron can be found here too, along with belted kingfisher, American white pelican, and ring-necked duck.

November

The fur trade brought settlers here for centuries, agriculture was another major draw. Trapping has dwindled, but there are plenty of agricultural areas – and the fields north of Highway 95 and west of Topock Road are a good place to find flocks of horned larks during wintertime – occasionally with Lapland longspur, and northern harriers making low flights over the fields and hunting rodents. Topock Marsh in November has attracted vagrants such as prairie warbler, northern parula and American redstart, and over at Lake Havasu you can find ring-billed gulls, occasionally with rarer associated seabirds; also grebes.

December

Katherine's Landing (just north of Davis Dam on the Colorado River) is a prime place for reliable winter birding and occasional exotics. Wood duck, ovenbird, and even a male black-throated blue warbler have been reported in the vicinity, along with common loons.

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

Imperial National Wildlife Refuge

Description: Imperial National Wildlife Refuge protects wildlife habitat along 30 miles of the lower Colorado River in Arizona and California. The river and its associated backwater lakes and wetlands are a green oasis, contrasting with the surrounding desert mountains. Wetland wildlife is most abundant in winter, when 'snowbirds' such as cinnamon teal and northern pintail use the refuge. During the summer months, look for permanent residents such as great egrets and muskrat. In the desert, wildlife such as black-tailed jackrabbits and western whiptail lizards are plentiful. Watch at dawn and dusk for desert bighorn sheep and mule deer heading to the river for a drink.

Bill Williams River National Wildlife Refuge

Description: With its majestic rock cliffs; its ribbon of cool water running through classic Sonoran Desert; and its cattail-filled marsh harboring rails and waterfowl, Bill Williams River National Wildlife Refuge offers a little bit of everything for both wildlife and people.

Mittry Lake Wildlife Area

Description: Mittry Lake Wildlife Area in the milder winter months is a great place to watch wildlife. The lake is an oxbow of the lower Colorado River, with well-developed wetland and

marsh habitat. Stunning views of the surrounding mountain ranges enhance the excellent waterfowl and wildlife viewing. In the winter the area plays host to as many as 10,000 waterfowl. This is one of the most accessible settings for wildlife viewing in the Colorado River Plain