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The Sky Island News

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August 2026

"Every bird, every tree, every flower reminds me what a blessing and privilege it is just to be alive."

Marty Rubin

August is birding festival month in southeastern Arizona, with Southwest Wings in Sierra Vista from the 5th to the 8th and the Southeast Arizona Birding Festival in Tucson from the 12th to 16th. I hope to see some of you at one or both of these outstanding events. It is always a pleasure to show folks from other places the wonderful birds and remarkable scenery of this part of the state. It is a nice reminder, too, that we get to see these amazing creatures and beautiful landscapes whenever we want to. Whether at a festival or not, get outside and enjoy summer's natural wonders.

I hope you like this month's issue!

August Field Trip



Rose-throated Becard
Dubi Shapiro

Harshaw/Patagonia Birding.
Monday, August 17. 7 – 11AM.
Cost is \$10/person. Email
(jeff@skyislandtours.com) to
register. **LIMIT 15**
PARTICIPANTS.

This month's trip heads to the beautiful Patagonia area. We will start by cruising Harshaw Road where we hope to spot Montazuma Quail, "Azure" Eastern Bluebird, and Rose-throated Becard. We will visit the town of Patagonia for nesting Mississippi



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Kite. Time permitting, we will make a stop at Paton's Center for Hummingbirds to see what the feeders are attracting. Bring water, sunscreen, hat and snacks. We will meet at the intersection of Sahuarita Road and State Route 83. This spot is about 3 miles south of I-10 and will be on the right if coming from the interstate. If coming from Sahuarita Road the meeting site is on the left where Sahuarita road ends at SR 83.

August Classes

Discovering Arizona's Dragonflies. Wednesday, August 19. 6-8 PM. Cochise College Center for Lifelong Learning. Call (520)-515-5492 or visit the Center for Lifelong Learning website ([Center for Lifelong Learning – Cochise College](#)) to register. This is a hybrid class, students having the option of attending virtually via Zoom or in person at Cochise College's Center for Lifelong Learning (2600 E. Wilcox, Room J-115, in Sierra Vista).



Dragonflies and their close relatives, the damselflies, are among the most fascinating insects found near wetlands around the globe. In this course, you will dive into the world of the order Odonata, exploring what makes these ancient insects such skilled hunters and graceful fliers. Learn about their remarkable life cycle, the habitats they depend

on, what they eat, and the incredible diversity of species. Whether you have watched dragonflies skim a pond or are seeing them with new curiosity, this class offers a deeper appreciation of these captivating creatures.

Flowering Plants Part 2. Friday, August 21. 10AM-12PM. Virtual Class Via Zoom. Tucson Botanical Gardens. To register, use this link <https://tucsonbotanical.org/class-schedule/>. Part of TBG's Botanical Master class.



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We conclude our survey of plants by continuing our exploration of flowering plants. We dive into some of the remaining families of flowering plants that are collectively called dicots. Like the plants discussed in Flowering Plants Part 1, many of these plants will be familiar while others you may never have heard of before.

Scarab Beetles. Friday, August 28. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Belltower Dr., in Green Valley). To register, call 648-7669 or visit <https://www.gvrec.org>.

Scarab beetles are a large family of beetles that are found in all terrestrial habitats. They are earthmovers, recyclers, pollinators, and, in some cases, pests. Scarabs include some of the world's most beautiful and stunning beetles. They are attracted to lights at night and can be found in your garden on flowers and in the soil. This class explores the wonderful world of scarab beetles.

Pima County Presentations

These online programs are free but you must register in order to receive the Zoom link to the presentation. The programs are recorded and all who have registered will receive the link to the recording. If you have questions or need assistance, contact us at: eeducation@pima.gov.

Visit our **Eventbrite** page at <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets> to register. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.



Female/Immature Male
Rufous Hummingbird
Matt Davis

**Adventures in Birding:
Hummingbird ID Basics.**
Tuesday, August 11. 7-8PM.
Virtual Presentation via Zoom.
Free, but registration is required.
To register visit
<https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Hummingbirds offer some interesting identification



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challenges, especially when it comes to females and immatures. This episode looks at some of the pitfalls and tips to identify these flying jewels.



North American Porcupine
Ryan Collister

The World of Mammals: Porcupines. Monday, August 17. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom. Free, but registration is required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/ticketsEE>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Porcupines are some of the most spectacular mammals on Earth. These improbable

beasts are excellent climbers that are well defended against most predators. This month we explore the fascinating world of porcupines.

Lifestyles of the Smooth and Scaly: Kingsnakes. Tuesday, August 25. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom. Free, but registration is required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Kingsnakes are some of the most beautiful serpents in the world, with vivid red, glossy black, and lustrous yellow. This month we explore the fantastic world of kingsnakes.

Order Up! Flower Flies. Monday, August 31. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation Via Zoom. Free, but registration required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Spend some time looking at flowers and you will surely observe flower flies. They dipterans are a diverse lot with close to 900 species in the US and Canada. This month we take a closer look at the beautiful world of flower flies.



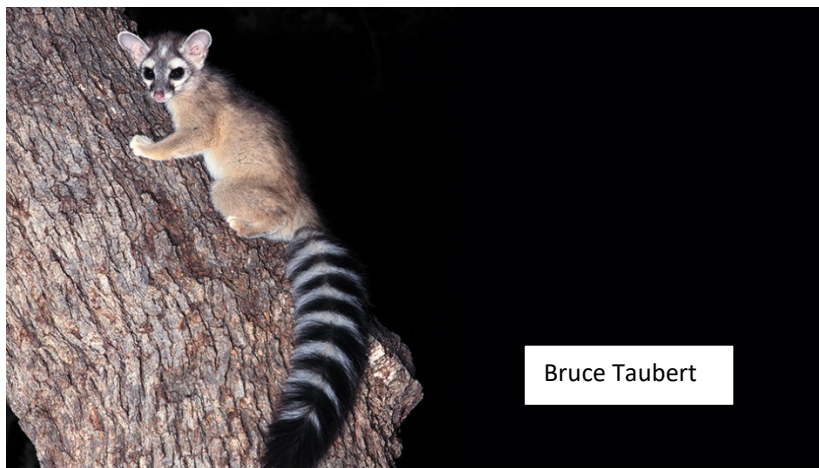
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Arizona's State Mammal

Many mammals are shy, retiring, or nocturnal. Some are all 3! A prime example is Arizona's state mammal, the Ringtail (*Bassariscus astutus*), a member of the raccoon family (Procyonidae). Their nature makes each sighting of a Ringtail a memorable event.

The body is gray or brownish and ends in a long, bushy tail that is boldly banded in black and white. The eyes are large and outlined with white. Ringtails weigh up to 2.5 pounds.

The cat-like look of Ringtail has led to 2 alternative names, miner's cat or Ringtail cat, both of which are incorrect as they are certainly not felids. Another alternative name, cacomistle (pronounced KACK-uh-miss-uhl or kah-koh-MEES-tleh), comes from the Mexican part of the species range.



Ringtail are usually found in dry rocky areas with some trees, such as oaks, junipers, and pines. They hide during the day in hollow trees, caves, and rocky crevices. They are excellent climbers and are capable of rotating their wrists 180°,

allowing them to climb down tree trunks and rock outcroppings head first. Ringtails also sometimes take up residence in attics, abandoned buildings, and other human structures.

Omnivorous in feeding habits, the Ringtail diet includes small mammals, invertebrates, fruit, acorns, and carrion. Food is obtained in trees and shrubs and on the ground.

Ringtails are territorial and solitary for most of the year, but mated pairs will stay together for some time after the breeding season. Mating occurs in March and April. Litters of 1 – 4 young are born after a 7 week gestation period. They begin hunting on their own at 2 -3 months of age.



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The state legislature named Ringtail the state mammal in 1986. Sightings of them are not common but driving quiet roads through desert lowlands or montane mixed woodlands may yield a sighting. They may also be spotted on night hikes.

You will surely remember it!

What's in a Name – *Selasphorus* Hummers

Southeastern Arizona is known as the Hummingbird Capitol of the US, a well-deserved title, as 18 species of these glittering jewels have been recorded in the region. Four of those are in the genus *Selasphorus*, one as a common mountain breeder, 2 as migrants, and the fourth as a stray during migration. An additional species has been recorded in the region once.

Selasphorus includes 9 species, ranging from southern Alaska to Panama. Those found in Mexico and Central America are resident. The genus name comes from the Greek, meaning 'light bearing.' This alludes to the brilliant coloration of the throat feathers (called the gorget in hummingbirds) exhibited by the males. These colors range from pink to orange to various shades of red.



Male Broad-tailed Hummer
Benjamin Hack

Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*S. platycercus*) is a common breeder in mountainous areas of western North America, from west Texas and southeast Arizona to Idaho and Wyoming. Its presence is often announced by the shrill trill of air passing through the wings. The specific epithet means 'broad tail' in Greek. It was described in 1827 by English

naturalist and artist William Swainson from birds collected on the wintering grounds in Mexico, which extends from northern Sonora and Nuevo Leon south to Oaxaca.

The northernmost hummer in the world is the Rufous (*S. rufus*), breeding north to 61° N latitude in Alaska. This most pugnacious member of a family



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known for their fiery temperament is a migrant through southeastern Arizona, with larger numbers passing through in the fall. The species name obviously refers to the reddish coloration of the males. It was described in 1788 by German ornithologist Johann Friedrich Gmelin from birds collected at Nootka

Sound on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Rufous Hummingbirds are most frequently observed in late summer and early fall in Arizona so be on the lookout for them soon.

Allen's Hummingbird (*S. sasin*) is something of a mystery in southeastern Arizona, with most records coming from banding stations. A few records have come from high quality photographs of the fanned tail, usually from birds visiting feeders. Since Allen's and Rufous are nearly identical in appearance it makes sense that records of the former are from such circumstances. However, I suspect that Allen's is more regular in the region than these reports suggest, simply due to the identification challenges these birds present. This nearly identical physical look between Allen's and Rufous is especially pronounced in females and immatures (male Rufous are mostly rufous on the back, Allen's are green. A small percentage of male Rufous, however, are green-backed and look much like Allen's). In hand (or in good photos), Allen's has a narrower tail, with the outermost tail feather (R5 in shorthand) extremely narrow, almost stiletto-like, and R2 (the feather just outside of the central tail feather) pointed. In Rufous this feather usually shows a slight indentation and the individual tail feathers are broader. Confused yet?

The common name is a patronym honoring Charles Allen who lived in Marin County, California, and was one of the first to notice differences between 'his' hummingbird and Rufous. The specific epithet comes from the indigenous word applied in general to hummingbirds. The bird was



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named by French ornithologist Rene Lesson in 1829 from birds collected near San Francisco.

The smallest bird in North America, measuring about 2.75 inches, is Calliope Hummingbird (*S. calliope*). Like it's cousin, Rufous Hummingbird, is a migrant in southern Arizona that is more numerous in fall than in spring. The stunning pink gorget with white stripes is unique. Females look like small versions of female Broad-tailed Hummingbird.



Male Calliope Hummer
Marya Moosman

Formerly placed in the monotypic (single species) genus *Stellula* ('little star'), it was moved to *Selasphorus* in 2012 based on genetic data. The species name is Greek for 'beautiful voice.' English naturalist and hummingbird fanatic John Gould named the species in 1847 from birds collected in Mexico. It is unclear what he intended with the name as Calliope, in Greek

mythology, was the 'fine-voiced' leaders of the Muses. These birds do not have what most observers would call a beautiful voice! The colors of the gorget may have inclined Gould to name the bird after the musical instrument, as these feathers are similar in shape to the steam whistles of a calliope. Regardless, this is a charming bird.

The Bumblebee Hummingbird (*S. heloisa*) has been recorded once in Arizona, on July 2, 1896, in Ramsey Canyon in the Huachuca Mountains. It was formerly placed in *Atthis* (a beautiful young woman who was a favorite of the poetess Sappho) but was moved to *Selasphorus* in 2020, again based on genetic studies. The species name is a matronym in honor of Héloïse Joséphine Boucard, Abbess of the Oratory of the Paraclete and scholar. I know what scholar means but don't know anything about the rest of that title. Endemic to the Mexican highlands, Bumblebee Hummingbirds breed from southern Chihuahua and Sinaloa, patchily south to Oaxaca. If it made it to southern Arizona once it can happen again, so keep your binoculars up!



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August is an excellent time for hummingbird watching! Hopefully you will see some of these wonderful birds soon!

Red-spotted Toad – Arizona's Widespread Toad

Monsoon season brings with it much-needed rainfall (fingers crossed) and increased humidity, so it is a good time to talk about amphibians. Arizona is home to 6 species of toad in the genus *Anaxyrus* that were formerly placed in *Bufo* (the issue is still debated). The state's most widespread toad is the Red-spotted (*A. punctatus*).

Relatively small, Red-spotted Toads reach a maximum length of about 3 inches. They are pale gray or light brown in color. The skin, like many toads, has numerous glands that secrete milky white toxins when the animal is disturbed. The glands are marked with the namesake red spots, although in older individuals the spots can disappear resulting in a plain gray or brown toad.



The head is rather flat in profile. The parotoid glands behind the eyes and tympanum ('ear drum') are small and round. This species lacks the cranial crests shown by many other toads.

These toads are habitat generalists occurring from the hot dry Lower Colorado River desert scrub to Subalpine

conifer forest. Red-spotted Toad breeding is not restricted to the monsoon season, even in the Arizona Uplands of the southern part of the state. They will use isolated habitats like plunge pools and meltwater ponds to commence breeding earlier in the year. They will, of course, take advantage of temporary ponds and elevated water levels brought by monsoon rains to continue the breeding season.



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Like in most frogs and toads, males vocalize to attract females to breeding sites. Red-spotted Toad calls are long, high-pitched trills with a monotonous quality. Females lay their singly, not in long strands as seen in some other toads. Upon hatching, tadpoles develop for about 8 weeks before metamorphosing into toadlets.

The diet is made up of a wide range of invertebrates. One study found that ants and beetles were the most numerous items consumed. It appears that anything that will fit into its mouth is fair game for the Red-spotted Toad.

A study published in 2012 suggests that there may be multiple species within what is now recognized as Red-spotted Toad. Looking at multiple loci in the genome researchers found 3 lineages in the Red-spotted Toad. The lineage in the Baja peninsula diverged first, followed later by divergence in the populations found in the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts. To my knowledge no further work has been done on the Red-spotted complex to clarify the relationships of the 3 lineages.

Most bodies of water in Arizona host populations of this delightful amphibian. A nighttime stroll through a wetland offers a good chance to see a Red-spotted Toad.

Butterfly Profile: Arizona Sister

A walk through the oak woodlands of southern Arizona's Sky Island ranges is time well spent. This habitat is the home of many interesting plants and animals – Bridled Titmouse, White-nosed Coati, Madrean Alligator Lizard, Arizona Yucca, and many more. On such a stroll you may also encounter a stunning butterfly gliding over your head, Arizona Sister (*Adelpha eulalia*).

From above the black wings are crossed by a thick white band. An orange patch is found near the forewing apex. The pattern below is equally striking. The white band and orange patch are still present but most of the underside is marked in pale orange and blue.



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Arizona Sister looks much like its cousin, California Sister (*A. bredowii*), but the 2 do not overlap geographically. Further, Arizona Sister is larger and brighter than California and has a complete pale blue bar on the outer edge of the white stripe below (his bar is partial in California).

Arizona Sister occurs throughout most of Arizona, absent only from the hot, dry southwestern corner of the state. The range extends to southern Nevada, most

of Utah, to southwestern Kansas and west Texas, south to Guatemala.

California Sister is found from northern Baja through most of California (except for the southeastern part of the state) to southern Washington.

Adult Arizona Sisters typically do not visit flowers. Instead, they get their nutrition from rotting fruit and mud. Good places to look for them are the margins of streams or pools as they are imbibing salts from wet soil. They can also be seen perched with wings spread basking on sunlit foliage.

The larval foodplants are various oaks, including Emory (*Quercus emoryi*), Arizona White (*Q. arizonica*), and Netleaf (*Q. rugosa*) Oaks, among others. It is believed that winter is spent in the larval stage.

Arizona records of this beautiful butterfly extend from late March to January, so there is still plenty of time to see this gem in 2026.

Moth in the Spotlight

One of the pleasures of being out in Nature is that every day is different and one never knows what to expect. Many readers have heard me say that every outing is like Christmas morning. That is true of blacklighting as well. One of the events last month for National Moth Week was a case in point.

Setting up lights in the parking lot of the Carrie Nation trailhead in Madera Canyon, the group was regaled with beautiful jewel scarabs, giant antlions, and many other insects. The beacons in the night also brought in many moths. We had several Florestan Sphinx (*Manduca florestan*) and a couple of the much smaller Doll's Sphinx (*Sphinx dollii*). Near the end of the evening, something came rocketing in from the surrounding woodland. It was very



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fast in the air. Like most sphinx moths, it took a few minutes to calm down and sit still (I don't know why these moths do this, but they do). Catching glimpses of the coloration, I knew it was a new species to the sheet. Finally, it sat still. It was a Falcon Sphinx (*Xylophanes falco*), a nice find!



All sphinx moths are fast fliers, but members of *Xylophanes* are exceptionally fast and they look the part. They have medium brown forewings with narrow black and white stripes on the inner margin, giving them the appearance of fine wood grain. The anal region of the forewings is falcate, with an indentation from the body to

about mid wing. Like other sphinxes, the abdomen tapers to a point.

There are 2 other resident *Xylophanes* but they do not occur in Arizona. Tersa Sphinx (*X. tersa*) of the eastern states has yellowish triangles in a black field on the trailing edge of the hindwing. Pluto Sphinx (*X. pluto*) of Florida and the Gulf Coast has greenish forewings.

The caterpillar food plant is Scarlet Bouvardia (*Bouvardia ternifolia*), also called firecracker bush. The plant is a shrub growing on steep rocky slopes and canyon bottoms in Madrean Evergreen woodlands. The red tubular flowers of the plant attract hummingbirds.

Arizona flight records of Falcon Sphinx are from July to October. The range extends from southeastern Arizona to west Texas, however, records from New Mexico are sparse.

Xylophanes is diverse with over 80 species, with most in the Neotropics. In addition to the 3 breeding species in North America, an additional 3 species



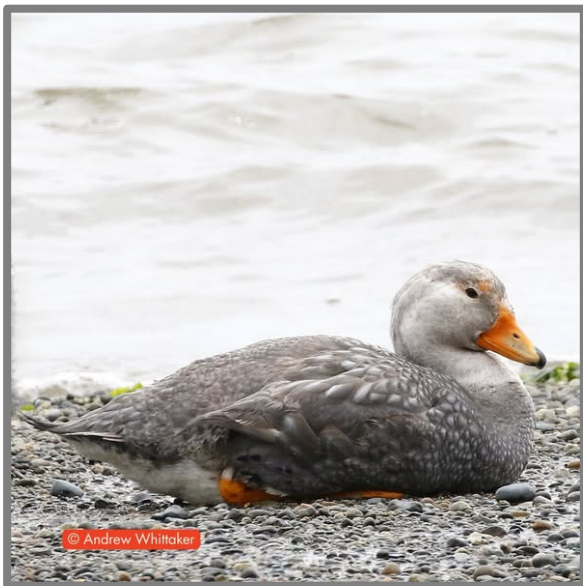
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have been recorded in Florida, Texas, and Arizona. *X. ceratomioides* was found in Madera Canyon once, on July 6th, 1985.

As we were admiring the first individual, a second one flew in. What a pleasant surprise! Even though in my excitement I kept calling them Tersa Sphinx! On the drive home, I realized I was calling them by the wrong name. I mumbled some of my finest vocabulary upon this realization. But by any name, Falcon Sphinx is a spectacular insect!

New Species Report

To the surprise of some, new bird species continue to be described. So far in 2026, 4 new birds have been added to the roster of recognized bird species. Many of these new birds are not novelties that have never been observed before. However, that still does occur as in the case of Inti Tanager (*Heliothraupis oneilli*), a bright golden yellow songbird described in 2021 from Bolivia. Instead, most new birds have been considered to be part of known species but are nearly identical in appearance, hiding the fact that they are distinct. Only with the application of new techniques, such as analysis of vocalizations and genetic data, is it proven to be different despite the closeness in looks.



An example of such a previously unknown species comes from southern South America. Steamer-ducks form a group of 4 species of large ducks that are typically found along coastal waters of islands, bays, fjords, and rocky coastlines. 2 of the species can also be found on freshwater lakes, pools, and rivers. 3 of the 4 species are flightless. These ducks are dark gray with orange or yellow bill and legs. They range in size from 28 – 33 inches.

The new species, Chiloé Steamer-duck (*T. ketru*), found along the coast of Chile and some nearby islands, was considered to be part of Fuegian Steamer-duck (*T. pteneres*) until investigators recently took a closer look. When they did so, they found that the new taxon had different vocalizations than Fuegian Steamer-duck, most



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pronounced in the contact calls. In addition males and females of *ketru* were sexually dimorphic in bill color; this is not the case in Fuegian.

Another distinction is in habitat preferences – *pteneres* is found on rocky, wave-washed coastlines, *ketru* lives in lagoons and more protected sites. The two populations show an abrupt division at the Taitao Peninsula, with Fuegian south of the peninsula and Chiloe to the north.

This is a nice example of using multiple lines of evidence to examine the taxonomic status of an organism. In their totality, these lines of evidence suggest that the Chiloe Steamer-duck is a ‘good’ species. Birders now have another tick for their life list.

Did you know?

... that the rare and poorly known Goblin Shark was caught on video for the first time? Researchers at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and the University of Western Australia caught an individual on camera on a bottom lander near the Tonga Trench. Remarkably, another Goblin Shark was caught on camera in 2019 near Jarvis Island in the Pacific Remote Islands National Wildlife Refuge, which the researchers confirmed when the video was shown to them. The sightings greatly expand the Goblin Sharks range to include the central Pacific, previously having been documented in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and off of California, Japan, and Australia.

Great records of an extraordinary animal! The deep ocean is one of Earth’s final frontiers of biological exploration. Not only do countless new species await discovery in the abyss, but new things about known creatures occur with almost every expedition.



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Ocean Expedition Trust