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The Sky Island News

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"If you can't be in awe of Mother Nature, there's something wrong with you."

Alex Trebek

With apologies to my Canadian readers, I wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving. The time of year for family and friends is upon us. Enjoy that time with the people you care the most about. If you need a break, go outside, feel to cool air on your face and the leaves crunch underfoot. Look and listen for birds and other creatures. Time in Nature is good for the soul.

And I hope you enjoy this month's issue! I am grateful for each and every one of you, dear reader.

November Field Trip

Due to my schedule and the Thanksgiving holiday, there will be no field trip this month. I plan on offering a trip in December.

November Classes

The Sex Life of Birds. Friday, November 13. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Belltower Dr., in Green Valley). To register, call 648-7669 or visit https://www.gvrec.org.

In this class we explore the mating strategies, nests, eggs, and breeding biology of birds. Topics to be discussed include mating systems, nest architecture, egg formation, and more.

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Feathered Family Portrait: Hawks and Eagles. Friday, November 20. 10AM-12PM. Virtual Class Via Zoom. Tucson Botanical Gardens. To register, use this link https://tucsonbotanical.org/class-schedule/.

Hawks, eagles, and kites rank high on the list of many birders. They symbolize wilderness and power. In this installment of the Feathered Family Portrait series, we explore the world's hawks and eagles, looking into their diversity and natural history.

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.

Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Adventures in Birding: Alcids. Saturday, November 14. 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.

This month we head to the coast to explore the alcids, endearing birds that include puffins, murres, guillemots, and many more.

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Order Up! Ladybugs. Monday, November 16. 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.


Convergent Lady Beetle
Jason Michael Crockwell

Friend of the gardener and bringer of good luck, ladybugs are our allies against aphids, and other pests. This month we explore the diversity and biology of these familiar and fascinating beetles.

Lifestyles of the Smooth and Scaly: Geckos. Thursday, November 19. 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.

Geckos differ from most lizards in their nocturnal habits, hiding during the day and coming out in the darkness in search of insects. Geckos are not a single family of lizards, but multiple families. Join us as we enter the world of geckos.

The World of Mammals: Voles. Monday, November 23. 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.

Voles are a diverse and numerous assemblage of rodents that are important in the diet of many predators. They look like short-tailed mice and can be found in a variety of habitats across North America.

Wings Over Willcox Registration is Open

Southern Arizona's winter birding festival, Wings Over Willcox, will be held this year from January 14 – 17. The festival offers excellent birding opportunities throughout the Sulphur Springs Valley. The stars of the show are the thousands of Sandhill Cranes that winter in the area. But there are

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also waterfowls, raptors, sparrows, and many other birds that are worth seeking out.

The keynote speaker this year is George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin. His presentation will explore the cranes of the world.

In addition to field trips, Wings Over Willcox features free seminars and a Nature Expo. All in all, it is a great time.

Registration for the festival is now open. Visit https://na.eventscloud.com/website/79513/home for more information and to register. I hope to see you there!

The Rooter Skunk

North America is home to 6 species of skunk, 5 of which occur in Arizona. This diversity of skunk does not appear in any tourist brochures which, I am sure, is an oversight. For a long time skunks were classified in the weasel family (Mustelidae) but are now placed in a family all their own (Mephitidae). One of Arizona's skunks is the American Hog-nosed (*Conepatus leuconotus*), which is also known as Texas Skunk, White-backed Hog-nosed Skunk (quite a mouthful), and Rooter Skunk.



The head-body length of this skunk reaches up to 21 inches with the tail length contributing an additional 16 inches. American Hog-nosed Skunk can weigh up to 10 pounds. Striped Skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*) can weigh more but are not as long as American Hog-nosed Skunks. A broad white stripe extends from the crown of the head to the rump. The tail is all white above but can be black at the base on the underside in some individuals. The rest of the body is black. The snout is longer than in other skunks and naked at the tip. It looks a bit like that of a pig, but, to my eyes, it has a superficial resemblance at best.

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American Hog-nosed Skunks are found in a wide variety of habitats across their range, which extends from Arizona and west Texas to Nicaragua. They can be found in dry rocky canyons to riparian areas, brushy thickets, coastal plains, and agricultural areas.

The diet is mostly insects and their larvae which are often dug up using the long claws on the forefeet. When insects are scarce, they become more opportunistic, feeding on fruits and small vertebrates. They get enough water from their food and rarely drink free water.

The breeding season of American Hog-nosed Skunks is February and March. Litters of 1 – 5 (usually 2 – 4) are born after a gestation period of about 60 – 70 days. The young are adult-sized by late August and disperse away from the natal territory.

Like other skunks, American Hog-nosed are mostly nocturnal in behavior but can sometimes be about during the day. They spend the day in hollow logs, rock crevices, brush piles, or burrows, either those of other animals or ones they dig themselves.

Like other skunks, American Hog-nosed has glands near the tail that expel foul-smelling musk as a defense mechanism. Their first strategy is to find an escape route. If that fails, they will turn to face the threat, stand on the hind legs, and take a couple of steps toward the pursuer. Back on all 4 feet, they will hiss loudly and kick soil backwards with the rear feet. If all that fails, they will spray the unfortunate beast that did not heed the warning signs.

American Hog-nosed Skunks appear to be declining across much of their range. Reasons for the decline include habitat loss and alteration, collisions with motor vehicles, and disease. In southern Arizona, skunk populations have experienced a significant decline in the past couple of years with some of the losses attributed to rabies (skunks are frequent rabies victims in the region).

While rarely seen, American Hog-nosed Skunks are out there. May you be lucky enough to see one!

What's in a Name – Chickadees

Among North America's most cherished birds are the chickadees, charming little birds that can be found across most of the continent. What they lack

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in bright colors is made up with active lifestyles, hardiness, and sheer exuberance.

Chickadees are members of the Paridae, a family of 62 species in 13 genera mostly found in the Northern Hemisphere. While most members are clad in earth tones, some, like Fire-capped Tit (*Cephalopyrus flammiceps*), are brightly colored. Chickadees are placed in *Poecile*, which contains 15 species. Some are called tits, which is derived from Germanic and Norse roots meaning small and the word is applied to many small birds, especially in Eurasia. North American species are called chickadees after their onomatopoeic contact and alarm calls.

The genus name is Greek for 'colorful' or 'varied,' and was applied first to the Marsh Tit (*P. palustris*), a common species across much of Eurasia. While some chickadees could be called colorful, most do not fit the term in the same way that warblers and tanagers are colorful. They are not particularly varied in their appearance either. So your guess is as good as mine on what English zoologist George Gray had in mind when he coined the name in 1842.



Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Marie O'Shaughnessy

The most distinctive North American chickadee is Chestnut-backed (*P. rufescens*) a forest denizen of the Pacific Northwest. I often lament about how poor some bird names are, but in the interest of fairness this bird is very accurately named. The species name is Latin for 'reddish.' It was described by John Kirk Townsend in 1837 from birds collected in forests along the Columbia River, probably near Fort Vancouver, Washington.

Next on the North American list is Boreal Chickadee (*P. hudsonicus*), something of a specialist of coniferous forests from Newfoundland to Alaska. The species name refers to Hudson Bay in Canada which was named after English explore Henry Hudson who was cast adrift by his mutinous crew in 1611 in the bay that bears his name. This delightfully tame bird was named by German naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster in 1772

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from birds collected along the Severn River on the west coast of Hudson Bay.


Gray-headed Chickadee
Jessie Barry

Formerly known as Siberian Tit, Gray-headed Chickadee (*P. cinctus*) is the most challenging North American chickadee to find owing to its remote habitat. It is the only member of Paridae to breed in both the Old and New Worlds. It breeds across northern Eurasia but extends to Alaska and northwestern Canada. Described by Dutch naturalist Pieter Boddaert in 1783 from specimens that came from Siberia, the specific epithet is Latin for 'banded' or 'wreathed.' I am not really sure what Boddaert had in mind when he named the species because I do not see any bands on Gray-headed Chickadees. Or wreaths for that matter.

Two chickadees are widespread in eastern North America, Black-capped (*P. atricapillus*) and Carolina (*P. carolinensis*). Black-capped ranges further north than Carolina making it all the way to western Alaska. The specific epithet of Black-capped comes from Latin words meaning 'black hair on the head.' While birds obviously do not have hair, the intention is accurate. Carolus Linnaeus named the species in 1766 from specimens collected near Quebec City.

Carolina Chickadee is clearly named after the geographical region where the specimens (may) have been collected. Audubon described this bird in 1834 from material collected either in New Orleans or Charleston. Audubon was often unclear in the details he used in describing new birds. The 2 species are very similar and are a significant identification challenge. Adding more spice to the sauce, they also hybridize where their ranges meet.

The Rocky Mountain west is home to Mountain Chickadee (*P. gambeli*), found in coniferous forests from west Texas and Baja California to southern Yukon. Distinguished from other chickadees by its white eyebrow stripe,

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Mountain Chickadee is named after American naturalist William Gambel (of Gambel's Quail fame). It was described in 1886 by American ornithologist Robert Ridgway from birds collected outside Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Mexican Chickadee
Bryan Calk

The final chickadee on the North American list is a southeastern Arizona specialty, Mexican Chickadee (*P. sclateri*), largely restricted to the Chiricahua Mountains in the US. The name is a patronym that pays tribute to Philip Lutley Sclater, British naturalist (among other things), famous for identifying the 6 distinct zoological regions of the world – Nearctic, Neotropical, Palearctic, Ethiopian, Oriental, and Australasian. It was described in 1897 by German ornithologist Otto Kleinschmidt from birds that were collected in southern Mexico, either in Veracruz or Puebla. Many birders make the trek to the Chiricahuas to see this delightful little bird.

May one of these wonderful feathered sprites be in your near future!

Twin-spotted Rattlesnake – A Rare Gem

Southern Arizona is home to 3 small rattlesnakes that live in the Sky Island ranges. These are Ridge-nosed (*Crotalus willardi*), Rock (*C. lepidus*), and Twin-spotted (*C. pricei*). A recent Road Scholar trip to the Chiricahuas led to an unexpected sighting of a Twin-spotted in Rustler Park at about 8,500 feet elevation on a cool cloudy afternoon.

Grayish brown in color, this snake is named for the paired dark spots down the back. There are also dark blotches on the sides that may be indistinct in some individuals. The final segment of the rattle is orange. The maximum length is only about 26 inches. When they rattle the sound is very high-pitched and sounds insect-like.

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Twin-spotted Rattlesnake is an inhabitant of conifer forest in 4 Sky Island ranges in southern Arizona – Chiricahuas, Pinaleno, Huachuca, and Santa Rita Mountains. This snake is rarely seen, but when it is observed it is most often encountered near rock slides and talus slopes. It is diurnal in habits owing to the cooler temperatures at the high elevations where it is found. Twin-spots are protected in the state of Arizona.



The diet of Twin-spotted Rattlesnake is composed mainly lizards augmented by the occasional small mammal or bird. Cannibalism has been reported in this species.

Measures of the toxicity of venoms contains 2 parts – the drop-for-drop toxicity of the venom components and the amount of venom potentially delivered (known as venom yield) in a bite. Twin-spotted Rattlesnake is ranked as the 5th most dangerous rattlesnake in Arizona owing to the toxicity of the venom. However, venom yield is low. Like all venomous reptiles, Twin-spotted Rattlesnakes should never be handled. I should really not have to say that!

Certainly a highlight of the day was seeing this uncommon, elusive serpent. Sometimes the 'best' bird of the day is not a bird at all!

Butterfly Profile: Dark Buckeye

If you can see through the clouds of American Snouts on the wing right now (and, my goodness, there are a lot of them!), you may notice other butterflies flitting about. One of them is a butterfly whose classification has been problematic for a very long time. This is Dark Buckeye (*Junonia nigrosuffusa*), which has also gone by the moniker of Tropical Buckeye.

Like other buckeyes, this species has 2 eyespots on the forewing and 4 on the hindwing. Two reddish bars cross the forewing cell. The overall color is

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dark brown, rendering the markings less distinct than in the Common Buckeye (*J. coenia*), a more widespread species.



Also in common with other buckeyes is the rather pugnacious nature of this butterfly, which, I know, sounds like an oxymoron. Males will perch on the ground and fly up to investigate *anything* that enters its territory, including people and vehicles. Adults can be seen nectaring on flowers (Desert Broom and Rabbitbrush are popular flowers this time of year) or alighting at mud for salts.

Dark Buckeye caterpillars feed on a variety of plants including monkeyflowers (*Erythranthe sp.*), purslane speedwell (*Veronica peregrina*), and others. Common and Dark Buckeyes share many larval foodplants. Adults can be found just about all year but are most abundant in autumn.

As mentioned, the taxonomy of buckeyes has long confused lepidopterists, with anywhere from 1 to 4 species being recognized in North America. The *Annotated Taxonomic Checklist of the Lepidoptera of North America North of Mexico* (that's quite a title), published in 2022 lists 8 species! Papers

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published in the last few years, looking at different genes and other data, vary widely in the number of buckeye species recognized. Clearly, the last word on these butterflies has yet to be written!

Regardless of how many buckeyes there are, we should not stop looking at these fantastic gems. Personally, I like that there are tough taxonomic nuts to crack out there! Makes the plants or animals all the more intriguing.

Moth in the Spotlight

One of the fun things about being out in Nature is that you never know what you are going to see. Long time readers have heard may say that many times. It's really just a matter of getting out there and being observant. A recent example involves a moth that I had not recorded in my yard before, but I did this year. Twice.



The new yard moth is the Obscure Sphinx (*Erinnyis obscura*), a relatively small member of the Sphingidae (which are also called hawk moths). It has gray forewings marked with black and orange hindwings, which are typically covered by the forewings at rest. It is sexually dimorphic with females more muted than males, which have more distinct black markings. The total length is about 1.5 inches. Thus it is large for moths in general but small for its family.

Obscure Sphinx resemble Ello Sphinx (*E. ello*) but is much smaller (2.3 inches vs. 1.5 in.) and lacks the banded abdomen of its larger cousin.

The flight season in Arizona is from July through October with additional records in December and January, according to the Moth Photographers Group website. The range in the US is mostly southern, from California to South Carolina, but Obscure Sphinx are prone to wandering and records

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exist for all of the Great Plains states east to Ohio and extreme southern Ontario.

The caterpillars come in 2 color morphs – a more common greenish form and a less frequent brown and gray form. Like most sphinx moth larvae those of Obscure Sphinx have a horn at the rear of the abdomen and the origin of the name 'hornworm' for the larvae. Unlike its congeners, caterpillars of Obscure Sphinx lack an eyespot on the back.

Caterpillars can be found on a variety of plants including milkweed vine, dogbane, spurges, and more. Several of these plants harbor secondary chemicals in their tissues that are toxic to most herbivores. Adults can be observed nectaring at flowers around dusk. They are also attracted to lights.

It was a pleasant surprise to behave Obscure Sphinx show up at my lights recently. I hope they become a regular fixture in the yard! Yet another example of turn your lights on – you never know what may show up!

Book Review. Every Living Thing. Jason Roberts. Random House. 2025. 432 pages.



It is well known today that the hierarchical classification scheme developed in the 1700s by Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus is still in use. Sure, there have been modifications to the system but the basic framework remains intact. Linnaeus also introduced the system of binomial nomenclature that is still used to today to name all organisms, from bacteria to fungi, animals to plants. These were 2 key innovations that helped rescue biology from the chaos of naming and classifying things present up to that time.

While Linnaeus was working Sweden, a contemporary in France, born Georges-Louis de Buffon, later going by Comte de Buffon, was also trying to make sense of the natural world.

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While his name is widely recognized, most of us don't know a lot about Linnaeus. Buffon's name and life is less known. Jason Roberts' book dives into the lives of these 2 giants in the history of science but it is much more than that.

It reveals the rivalry between the two. Linnaeus and Buffon were very different people. Linnaeus was more of a showman, relishing the public attention he attracted. Buffon was the more serious scientist who worked tirelessly for decades with almost military dedication. Linnaeus thought that he was classifying God's creations. Buffon thought that Linnaeus' scheme was rubbish.

Both were prolific, producing many important works throughout their careers. The 10th edition of Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae*, published in 1758 is considered the beginning of modern taxonomy (the science that names, describes, and classifies organisms). He wrote other important works as well, like *Genera Plantarum*, which was published in 1753. Buffon, meanwhile, produced the multi-volume *Histoire Naturelle*, beginning in 1749 and continuing to 1804!

But the two luminaries couldn't be more different. Linnaeus was a tireless self-promoter. Buffon was certainly famous in his day, but he was more interested in understanding Nature. There are parallels between these 2 and John James Audubon and Alexander Wilson, giants in American ornithology (see Kenn Kaufman's *Birds that Audubon Missed*).

Roberts' brings the lives of Buffon and Linnaeus to life, from their early years through their most productive periods to their last days. On the way, readers travel to Lapland to collect plants, survive the French Revolution, and are introduced to many other important figures in the history of biology who were students and colleagues.

This is an excellent book that I found very enlightening. I think that you will too.

New Species Report

We live in the molecular genetics age. Analysis of DNA and other molecules are used to solve crimes, explore genealogy, and many other uses. This technique is also being used to explore relationships within and among species, sometimes with surprising results.

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A recent paper in *Communications Biology* took an integrative approach, looking at a very familiar group of birds. A team of researchers examined morphological, ecological, and genetic evidence to determine that a cryptic species had gone undetected. But the data revealed far more than that.

When I first saw the article my reaction was how could this have gone unnoticed? These birds are iconic and beloved by millions of people around the world, whether they are birders or not. The new species is a penguin! But it gets better! There are actually 4 new species of penguin!



Southern Gentoo Penguin
Jim Holmes

The Gentoo Penguin (*Pygoscelis papua*) complex is widespread in the Southern Ocean, including many subantarctic islands, reaching north along the coast of Argentina nearly to Buenos Aires. Three of the new species were elevated from subspecies status. These are Northern Gentoo (*P. papua*), which is now restricted to the Falklands/Malvinas and Martillo Islands off of South America, Southern Gentoo (*P. ellsworthi*) from the Antarctic Peninsula, South Orkneys, South Shetlands, and South Georgia,

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and Eastern Gentoo (*P. taeniata*) of the Crozet, Marion, and Macquarie Islands. These 3 taxa were formerly recognized as making up the Gentoo Penguin species but the data revealed that they are different enough from each other to warrant species status.

The newly recognized species is the Southeastern Gentoo (*P. kerguelensis*) from Kerguelen Island, which was previously not recognized at the subspecific level. In fact, while it was known to differ from other Gentoos, it had no taxonomic status at all. In addition to genetic differences, the new species differs in flipper length, bill width, tarsus length, and other morphological traits.

Looking at any of the 4 Gentoos, it may be hard to distinguish those from one area or island group from another. But the physical differences, on average, are real. The genetic differences are also real and indicate that there has been very little, if any, gene flow between them for a long time. In short, despite appearances, they all 'act' as valid species.

These studies highlight the fact that many organisms can look very similar but are quite different in their DNA. Who knows how many other species will be revealed with this sort of study? My guess is that it is a big number.

Did you know?

… that crocodiles survived the asteroid impact that wiped out the dinosaurs because of their preference for warm habitats? 66 millions years ago an asteroid impacted the Earth, near the present day Yucatan Peninsula, leading to the demise of all non-avian dinosaurs. Crocodiles were able to survive the cataclysm. But how?

Researchers from University College, London, analyzed more than 7,000 fossils and records of over 400 living and extinct species combined with computer models reconstructing Earth's climate and geography over the past 245 million years. The results suggest that tropical and subtropical regions remained suitable for crocodiles and their relatives. Areas near the equator remained warm enough to provide refugia where crocodilians could persist and eventually recover.

Fascinating!