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The Sky Island News

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"You say impossible, but all I hear is I'm possible."

Ted Lasso

Happy Spooky Season! October is one of my favorite months as fall is in the air and the natural world is going through profound seasonal changes. The temperatures cool, leaves change color, animals migrate. There is a lot going on out there. Get out and take it in!

I hope you enjoy this month's issue!

October Field Trip

Montosa Canyon Birding. Friday, October 16. 8AM – 12 PM. Cost is \$10/person. Email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register. **LIMIT 15 PARTICIPANTS.**



It has been a bit since a trip went to Montosa Canyon, so October seems as good a time as any to go! We will be on the lookout for migrants as well as resident birds. We will meet in the Safeway Shopping Center at I-19 and Continental Road on the Safeway side of the parking lot. Bring water, insect repellent (just in case), walking sticks, and snacks. We will mostly be birding from the paved Mt. Hopkins Road.



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October Classes

The Wonder of Bird Migration. Friday, October 9. 10AM-12PM. Virtual Class Via Zoom. Tucson Botanical Gardens. To register, use this link <https://tucsonbotanical.org/class-schedule/>.

The migration of birds is truly one of the awe-inspiring phenomena in Nature. This class explores the majesty of bird migration, including the types of migration, the genetic influences that control migration, the physiological underpinnings that allow birds to accomplish migratory flights, how birds navigate, and more. Come and investigate the miracle that is bird migration!



Arizona's Mammals. Wednesday, October 14. 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.

The state of Arizona is home to a diverse array of mammals, from tiny shrews to statuesque elk, from bats the size of hummingbirds to the Jaguar, the third largest cat in the world. Dive into the remarkable variety of mammals across Arizona, with a closer look at the fascinating species found in the southeast.

The Mysterious World of Bats. Friday, October 30. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Belltower Dr., in Green Valley). To register, call 648-7669 or visit <https://www.gvrec.org>.

With over 1,500 species around the world, bats are incredibly diverse, abundant, and misunderstood. The only mammals capable of flight, bats are found in all but the most hostile regions. This class explores the nocturnal world of bats, how beneficial they are, the threats that they face, and myths about them.



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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: Crows, Ravens, and Magpies. Tuesday, October 6. 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.

As we have officially entered Spooky Season, it is a good time to look at these trio of corvids that historically have been birds of bad omen. They are not, of course, but they are intelligent and fascinating birds that deserve a closer look.



Lifestyles of the Smooth and Scaly: Newts. Tuesday, October 13. 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.

Newts are a group of salamanders comprising about 100 species found across the Northern Hemisphere. They are highly toxic and exhibit a fascinating life cycle. They also, apparently, are a common ingredient in witches potions, making October a great time to look at them.

The World of Mammals: Baleen Whales. Tuesday, October 26. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom. Free, but registration is required. To



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register visit <https://bit.ly/ticketsEE>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

This month we leave the desert to look at some truly monstrous (in size) mammals that inspire awe and fascination whenever they are observed. Surprisingly, it is still unclear how many species of these mammals inhabit the world's oceans.

Order Up! Ghost Moths. Wednesday, October 28. 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.



In the spirit of the season, we explore Ghost Moths, a family that includes some very large moths. They have intriguing natural history, have short flight times, and are easily overlooked.

A Different Kind of Wildlife Story - RK Bear Rescue, Supporting Dogs in Need

Although this newsletter is primarily about our wildlife friends, we'd like to share some exciting news about RK Bear Rescue, our dog rescue based in Vail, along with some difficult news about the growing need for our work.

We're excited to share that RK Bear Rescue received its 501(c)(3) nonprofit designation earlier this year and has been busy rescuing, rehabilitating, and rehoming dogs in need.



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While it's incredibly rewarding to help individual dogs find loving homes, the bigger picture is heartbreaking. Pima County is facing a serious dog overpopulation crisis, with overcrowded shelters and stray dogs on our streets.

RK Bear Rescue is working not only to save individual dogs, but also to help spearhead a larger effort to find lasting solutions to this crisis. [Pima County Has a Dog Overpopulation Problem - A Call to Action](#)

As we head into the final months of the year, we hope you'll consider RK Bear Rescue as part of your year-end giving. Your tax-deductible donation can help us continue rescuing dogs today while we work toward solutions that will reduce the number of dogs entering shelters in the future.

And if you're ready to save a life or meet one of our adoptable pups, we'd love to hear from you!

Learn more and get involved:

- [RK Bear Rescue Website](#)
- [Donate](#)
- [Follow us on Facebook](#)

To everyone who has already supported RK Bear Rescue, THANK YOU!

Your generosity is making a real difference in the lives of dogs who need a second chance. We're incredibly grateful to have you as part of the RK Bear Rescue Squad!

North America's Largest Bats

Fifty bat species have been recorded in the US and Canada. The 2 largest of them are found in western North America. They are close cousins in the Molossidae, the free-tailed bats. They are Greater Bonneted (*Eumops perotis*) and Underwood's Bonneted (*E. underwoodi*) Bats.

Greater Bonneted Bats are dark gray, brownish-gray, or chocolate brown, slightly paler below. They lack the long guard hairs present on the rump of some other molossids. The body length is about 4.5 inches with the tail adding about 2 more inches. The weight is about 2.25 ounces. For comparison, North America's smallest bat, Canyon Bat (*Parastrellus hesperus*)



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is under 3 inches in total length and weighs 1/8th of an ounce. The wingspan of Greater Bonneted Bat is 22 inches.



Greater Bonneted Bat
Roberto Leonan Morim Novaes

Day roosts for Greater Bonneted Bats include rock crevices and caves in canyon country. Unlike many bats, they cannot take flight from the ground, so they need several feet of free space beneath them to take flight. Their wing are long and narrow, adaptations for fast, long-distance flight. This is consistent feature of Molossid bats, which includes Mexican Free-tailed Bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*), Tucson's common bridge-roosting species.

The echolocation calls of these bats are audible to people with good hearing, detectable as high-pitched *cheep* notes that are quite loud. They are of the constant frequency type and are in the 9 -14 KHz range (most people's hearing tops out at about 20KHz).

The diet of Greater Bonneted Bats includes large moths, grasshoppers, katydids, planthoppers, and other insects. These bats are one of the few that will continue to forage in inclement weather, such as fog and rain (sometimes heavy).

A single pup is born each year after a gestation of 80 – 90 days. Greater Bonneted Bats have the widest range of births of any North American bat, from May to September.

What these bats do during the cooler months is uncertain. They may hibernate, but some sources state they do not. They may migrate, but most authorities believe they do not. There is much we don't know about bats as studying relatively small nocturnal mammals is not easy.



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Greater Bonneted Bats range from California to west Texas, south to southern Mexico. They are also known as Western or Greater Mastiff Bats.

A close cousin is North America's second largest bat, Underwood's Bonneted Bat (*E. underwoodi*). It is slightly smaller and paler than Greater Bonneted. It also has long guard hairs on the rump, which Greater lacks. The wingspan is also a bit smaller than its larger relative at about 21 inches.



This bat has a very small known range in the US, being known only from southern Arizona. Only a couple of colonies have been discovered in the state, the best known is in the Baboquivari Mountains southwest of Tucson. During the bat walks I lead in the summer for Pima County Department of Conservation Lands and Resources this species is frequently detected in small numbers. It is

unclear if these records represent misidentifications by the detection devices or if they are accurate. It is possible for these bats to fly the 60 – 70 miles from the Baboquivaris to the sites where the walks are conducted. Alternatively, there could be a roost that is closer that has gone undetected. Personally, I like the second option.

The behavior and diet of Underwood's is similar to that of Greater. A single young is born annually in June or July. Known roost sites include palm fronds, hollow trees, buildings, and caves.

The genus name translates as 'true bat.' *Perotis* translates as 'complete ear.' *Underwoodi* honors Cecil Underwood, a British ornithologist who collected the type specimen in Honduras.

While neither species is particularly common in southeastern Arizona, it is always a pleasant surprise to hear one echolocate or see one silhouetted against the night sky. They are impressive bats!



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What's in a Name – Crows, Ravens, and Magpies

Being large and common around towns and villages around the world, crows and ravens play a part in many mythologies as tricksters, messengers, and guardians between worlds. In some cultures, the bird's all black plumage and carrion eating habits have lead them to be harbingers of death and doom. This thought is encapsulated in Edgar Allen Poe's classic poem *The Raven*. The beginning of Spooky Season is a good time to consider these birds as well as their cousins, the magpies.

There is no biological difference between crows and ravens. People call the larger ones ravens and the smaller ones crows. They are all in the genus *Corvus*, which is Latin for raven. The worldwide genus includes 48 species, 5 of which breed in North America.

The largest songbird in the world is Common Raven (*C. corax*), which is also one of the most widespread, ranging from the Arctic of North America and Eurasia to Nicaragua, North Africa, and China. It's success is indicated by the range of habitats it occupies, from Arctic ice floes to arid regions, and high mountains. The species name is Greek, meaning 'to croak.' As mentioned above, Common Raven is a songbird by ancestry, not for its utterances. It is the Norwegian death metal singer of songbirds. It was scientifically described in 1758 by Carolus Linnaeus based on birds from his native Sweden.



Smaller than Common Raven but larger than American Crow, Chihuahuan Raven (*C. cryptoleucus*) occupies the middle ground between the two. Common Raven is 24 inches long, Chihuahuan is 19.5 inches, and American Crow is 17.5 inches. A highly sought native of the Southwest and northern Mexico, Chihuahuan Raven is best separated from Common by its

smaller size, higher pitched vocalizations, and habitat. Chihuahuan



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occupies agricultural areas, desert grassland, and lowland desert regions, whereas Common is found more in forested or mountainous areas (but there is overlap between the 2 in habitat). The species name is from Greek words meaning 'hidden white,' a reference to the white feathers at the base of the neck that are seen mostly in windy conditions. This is also the source of the old name for the species, White-necked Raven. It was described by US Army officer and naturalist Darius Nash Couch in 1854 from birds collected in Tamaulipas, Mexico.

One of North America's most familiar birds is American Crow (*C. brachyrhynchos*), occurring in all US states except Hawaii and most Canadian provinces. They are a common sight in many towns and farmyards, the only requirement they seemingly have is scattered trees for nesting. The specific epithet means 'short billed' in Greek. These clever, intelligent birds were described in 1822 by German pastor and ornithologist Christian Ludwig Brehm from material collected in the environs of Boston.

The 'Northwestern Crow' was considered separate from American Crow until 2020 when it was lumped with American due to the broad zone of intergradation with the western subspecies of American Crow.

Northwestern Crow (*C. b. caurinus*) was described in 1858 by Spencer Baird from birds collected at Fort Steilacoom, Washington. The subspecific name is Latin for northwestern.



Ranging along the Atlantic Seaboard from Maine to Florida, inland to western New York, and the eastern Great Plains, Fish Crow (*C. ossifragus*) is a common but under-studied corvid.

American Crow is somewhat larger with disproportionately shorter wings and tail, the two are best separated by voice. The species name is Latin for

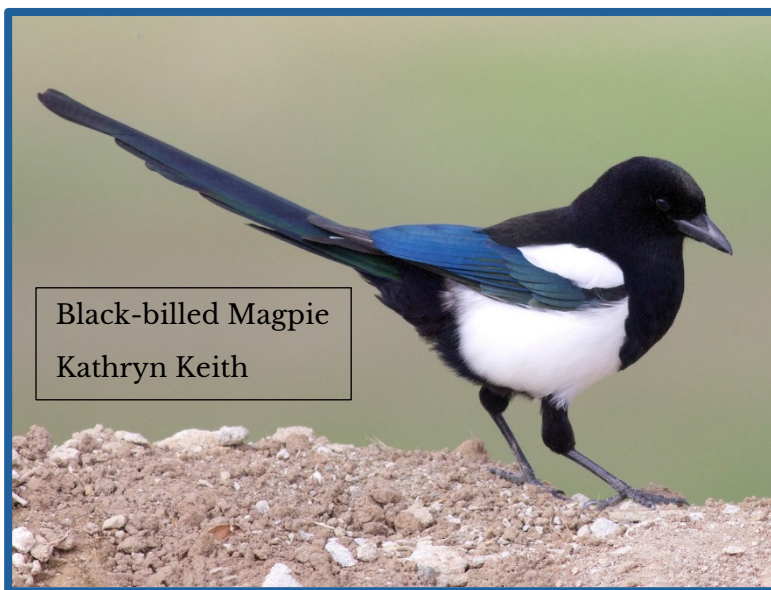
'bone-breaker,' which is likely a reference to bird's habit of dropping clams



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and other mollusks to break the shells. Alexander Wilson described the species in 1812 from birds he collected at Great Egg Harbor, New Jersey.

The final crow on the US list barely makes across the international border with Mexico into the Brownsville, Texas, area. This is Tamaulipas Crow (*C. imparatus*). This small tropical crow is about 14.5 inches long, about the length of Great-tailed Grackle. The species name means 'unprepared' in Latin, referring to early authorities using an incorrect name and applied it to Great-tailed Grackle. When James Lee Peters, curator of birds at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, discovered the error in 1929, he applied the current name, implying that the earlier ornithologists were unprepared to recognize the differences between the species.



Magpies are in the Corvidae with crows, ravens, jays, nutcrackers, and allies. Multiple genera contain birds with 'magpie' in their name. The 2 North American species are among 7 species in the genus *Pica*, which is the Latin word for magpie. Black-billed Magpie (*P. hudsonia*) is the more widespread of the 2, ranging across much of

western North America. The species name refers to Hudson Bay, the type locality. This jaunty corvid was described in 1823 by Irish explorer, astronomer, and ornithologist (among other occupations) Edward Sabine of Sabine's Gull fame. Black-billed Magpie was formerly considered to be conspecific with Eurasian Magpie (*P. pica*) until 2000 when it was split based on genetic, morphological, and behavioral data.

Endemic to California, Yellow-billed Magpie (*P. nuttalli*) is an inhabitant of open oak woodlands of the Central Valley, southern Coast Ranges, and Sierra Nevada foothills. It is named after English botanist and ornithologist Thomas Nuttall who collected the birds used by Audubon to describe the species in 1837. The type locality is Santa Barbara. Yellow-billed Magpie is



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classified as Vulnerable by Birdlife International due to its small range and susceptibility to West Nile virus.

Crows, ravens, and magpies are fascinating, intelligent birds. It is always fun to observe them. Every day with one of these birds in it is a good day!

The Cool Habitat Spiny Lizard

Desert Spiny Lizard (*Sceloporus magister*) is a familiar reptile of the desert lowlands. It overlaps and is replaced in the foothills by Clark's Spiny Lizard (*S. clarkii*). A third spiny lizard is found in pine-oak, mixed conifer, and conifer-aspen woodlands at the higher elevations of southeastern Arizona's Sky Island ranges. This is Yarrow's Spiny Lizard (*S. jarrovi*).

Like other spiny lizards, Yarrow's is sexually dimorphic. Males are larger than females, reaching 4 inches in snout-vent length with females slightly smaller. Males are dark, each scale having a pale spot that can be green, blue, white, or other colors. This gives males a fishnet-like pattern. Females are brown, spotted with gray, and less colorful than males. Both sexes can be black in the early morning as they warm themselves in the cool mountain air.



Like other spiny lizards, Yarrow's feed on a wide variety of insects and other arthropods. They are quick, active predators that chase down prey or leap considerable distances to snatch unsuspecting victims.

Unlike their relatives at lower attitudes (which lay eggs),

Yarrow's give birth to live young, an adaptation to the cooler temperatures up in the mountains. Mating occurs in the fall with females storing sperm through the winter. Births occur in late spring or summer depending on elevation. Litter size ranges from 2 – 14, with larger females producing larger litters.



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Yarrow's Spiny Lizards do not brumate, which is somewhat surprising considering where they live. On sunny days in winter, Yarrow's emerge from the rocky retreats where they gather (sometimes in considerable numbers) to ride out the cooler temperatures to bask in the sun.

Yarrow's Spiny Lizard was described in 1875 by American herpetologist and paleontologist Edward Drinker Cope, who named after Henry Yarrow, who dabbled in many areas of natural history. The spelling differences between Henry's name and the scientific name comes from the fact that the classical Latin alphabet does not contain the letters y or w.

The next time you head up into the mountains, check out rock outcrops and boulders, as you may observe one (or more) of these lizards.

Butterfly Profile: Chiricahua White

A trip into the pines of the Sky Island ranges in fall presents the butterflyer with the opportunity to see one of southeastern Arizona's specialty butterflies, Chiricahua White (*Neophasia terlooii*).

A member of the Pieridae, which also includes orangetips, marbles, sulphurs, oranges, and yellows, Chiricahua Whites are strongly sexually dimorphic. Males live up to the common name of white, as they are indeed white (not a guarantee with the way we name things!), with black at the forewing apex. The cell (the large enclosed area near the leading edge of the forewing) is also black. On the underside, the hindwings have black veins.

Females are dramatically different, replacing the male's white with orange



with touches of red at the base and outer margin of the hindwing below. She is simply stunning! It is thought that females are Monarch mimics, even though they are substantially smaller.

Most whites feed on mustards and capers as caterpillars. Chiricahua



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Whites differ from their cousins in feeding on Ponderosa Pine and Engelmann Spruce as larvae. They share the conifer-feeding habit with their cousin, Pine White (*N. menapia*), which is widespread in western North America. The two do not overlap in range. Pine White ranges south to northern Arizona but does not make it into the southern part of the state.

Chiricahua Whites have a small late spring/summer brood but a large fall brood. They spend most of their time high in the canopy but do come down to ground level on occasion to take nectar from flowers and salts from mud. It is a fortunate observer who is indeed able to glimpse these butterflies at ground level.

All of the Sky Islands have populations of Chiricahua White. The Summerhaven area of the Santa Catalina Mountains offers easy access to these butterflies.

I hope you get to see them!

Moth in the Spotlight

October seems to be a good time to examine a family of moths that most people never see, ghost moths. They are not hard to find because they are invisible. The elusiveness of ghost moths is due more to their behavior – they are crepuscular, are generally not attracted to lights, and fly for a short period each night, often only 20 to 30 minutes around twilight.

Ghost moths are in the Hepialidae, a family with about 700 species worldwide, only 19 of which are found in North America. They belong to a group of ancient moths known as the non-ditrysian microlepidoptera, which are often referred to as ‘the archaic lineages.’ The group is most diverse in the southern hemisphere, suggesting an origin on the southern supercontinent Gondwana.



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Abantiades hydrographus
Connor Margetts

Despite their inclusion in the microlepidoptera, ghost moths are not small. In fact, some are downright huge. For example, an Australian species has a wingspan of 6 inches! North American species are much smaller but still have wingspans of 2 to 3 inches.

Adults lack mouthparts and are short-lived, facts that add to their elusiveness. The caterpillars of most species are usually either subterranean root borers or feed on wood, but some consume fungi, dead leaves, and even soft-bodied insects. The varied diet of Ghost Moth larvae is not unusual in microlepidoptera. Females broadcast their eggs while in flight, as they are not tied to specific host plants. They are also fecund, capable of laying up to 40,000 eggs in her short life.

Adult ghost moths perch with the wings held tent-like over the abdomen. The wings are often clad in earthtones, marked with white or silver markings. Some ghost moths in other regions can be spectacular, with the wings green, pink, or orange.

As stated above, ghost moths are rarely seen by most people. A species from California's Sierra Nevada, *Gazoryctra mcglashani*, was described in 1886 and went essentially unrecorded until 2014 when it was rediscovered at Chimney Flat, Eldorado County. The lepidopterists who found them stated that they were only seen in flight from 7:15 to 7:45PM.

A new species, *G. wielgusi*, was discovered in 1988 from the White Mountains of Arizona and New Mexico. Clearly, much remains to be learned about ghost moths!

If you happen to see a Ghost Moth, take a photo and post it to iNaturalist. You will add important data points for these poorly known insects.



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Book Review. *Birds of the Mesozoic*. Juan Benito and Roc Olivé. Princeton. 2024. 272 pages.

A few months ago I reviewed Steve Brusatte's brilliant *The Story of Birds*, which is a highly readable account of the evolution of birds. That book got me interested in learning more about the early history of birds. A bit of searching led me to *Birds of the Mesozoic*. I didn't really know what to expect from this book but I took a chance. I am glad I did!

PRINCETON FIELD GUIDES

BIRDS OF THE MESOZOIC

JUAN BENITO AND ROC OLIVÉ



WITH A FOREWORD
BY LUIS CHIAPPE

This book looks back at birds that lived during the Age of Dinosaurs and those that lived in the immediate aftermath of the asteroid impact. It covers over 200 species in a field guide format. The time span of the book extends from the Late Jurassic to the origin of modern birds about 66 million years ago.

The book begins with a thorough introduction composed of several sections that provide a wealth of information that is important to the story of birds. Phylogeny and Taxonomy, for example, asks a crucial question: What is a Bird? The section on Osteology is an informative discussion of the bird skull and skeleton. Other sections discuss the plumage and biology of these early birds. The introduction concludes with

a look at the important geological formations that have yielded fossils that have been key to the story of bird evolution.

Most of the book is devoted to the species accounts which are divided into the main groups of fossil birds. Each account begins with a banner that has the scientific name and its translation. The body of the accounts includes sections on the known skeletal material that have been found thus far for the species. The morphology section goes into greater detail on the fossil remains. Next comes a description of plumage and soft tissue found for the species, if any. The final heading is on the biology of the species, inferred from the analysis of the fossil material.



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Each account contains a portrait the species, which is ‘necessarily speculative but are as accurate as possible’ given the known data. The plates are beautiful. While they may not be what these creatures looked like exactly, they are the best that can be rendered and offer a glimpse back in time. Accompanying the illustration is information on the location where the fossils were collected, the geological setting where they were found, their age, and a size estimate of the bird. The illustrations made me want to build a time machine to back and see these creatures!

Birds of the Mesozoic may not be for everyone. But if you want a detailed and concise look back in time to the origins and early history of birds, then you will want this book.

New Species Report

Genetic data has revolutionized taxonomy, the branch of biology that names and classifies organisms. Taxonomists from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries relied mostly on morphological traits, internal and external physical features that could be readily observed. Considering this information was all that they had at hand, these taxonomists did a remarkably good job. But genes have shown that they got some things wrong.



A small cat from American tropics is a case study. The Tiger Cat (*Leopardus tigrinus*) ranges from Panama and Colombia south to Bolivia, and east to Venezuela, the Guianas, and Brazil. It is absent from the Amazon

Basin. The species has presented problems to taxonomists for decades. A recent paper that applied genetic data across the range of the Tiger Cat has



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provided some clarity to the species and revealed the presence of a previously unknown form.

Tilcayo Cat (*L. tilcayo*) is found in the Bolivian Yungas, a narrow band of exceptionally diverse forest on the eastern slope of the Andes. The head/body length is about 20 inches, with a tail length of 10 inches. Tilcayo Cats only weigh about 3 pounds. These diminutive felines are light brown, darker along the back and paler near the limbs. Dark brown or black rosettes cover the body. It differs from its closest relatives in a range of characteristics that are subtle and had been overlooked.

The researchers who conducted the study leading to the naming of the new cat used whole genome sequencing, a laboratory technique that maps out every base pair across all chromosomes and DNA. This data showed that Tilcayo Cat is distinct from its closest relatives and it split about 1.4 million years ago.

The common and scientific names come from the local name for the species. It is the first new felid to be described in 100 years. The discovery reinforces the idea that there is much to be discovered about the natural world.

Did you know?

... that kiwis are the only birds with the nostrils at the tip of the bill? This is an adaptation for helping these nocturnal birds find their may prey, earthworms. Unusually for birds, kiwis have an advanced sense of smell. Placing the nostrils in this position allows these remarkable birds to find their subterranean prey in the dark of New Zealand forests.