



PHOENIX MOUNTAINS PRESERVATION COUNCIL LOOKOUT

Winter 2026 Newsletter



As the heat finally breaks in the desert, everyone's adaptations to the environment change to survive. Humans put on hats and jackets for early morning hikes. Roadrunners sunbathe. They turn their back to the sun, separate their wings, and ruffle the black feathers on their back and head. This position exposes their black skin, allowing both feathers and skin to absorb heat from the sun. They can stay in this warming posture for two to three hours. When temperatures drop into the 60s during the day, roadrunners may sunbathe several times throughout the day for half an hour at a time.

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PRESERVES UPDATES

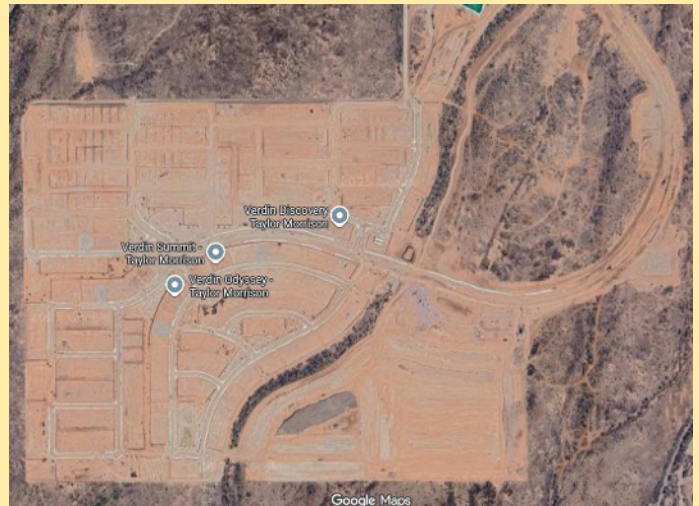
HAPPY VALLEY ROAD EXPANSION

The expansion and improvement of Happy Valley Road will be starting soon. At Ludden Mountain, they will expand the roadway to three lanes, install a sidewalk and multi-use trail, and add a new drainage ditch to capture water runoff from the mountain. This expansion will be going about 100 feet into the Ludden Mountain preserves.

The Streets Department were required by state law to salvage native plants – but those laws only require the salvage of cacti of a certain height. Park Rangers and Park Stewards took the opportunity to salvage the smaller cacti! They were able to save around 300 cacti that have been transplanted in South Mountain Park/Preserve near the Visitor's Center, Piestewa Peak, and North Mountain. At least there is some good news from this loss of open spaces.

VERDIN PROJECT

This is the community being built across the street from the Apache Wash Trailhead on Sonoran Desert Drive. There were years of planning and discussions when these development plans were being approved, which included assurances from the developers that the project would be environmentally friendly and take the existing landscape into consideration when building. Looking at the site from Sonoran Desert Drive and Google Maps, it seems they did not uphold their end of the agreement. The entire site has been bulldozed, including some washes.



The good news is that there's an opportunity to bring water and electricity to Apache Wash Trailhead.

ECHO CANYON TRAIL CLOSURE

Echo Canyon Trailhead has been temporarily closed since the rains we had in October. The rainfall caused massive amounts of erosion, washing away sand and gravel that was holding some boulders in place. The city is working with contractors to evaluate the stability of boulders, so they are not a safety hazard to visitors. Some boulders may need to be blasted away.

The closure was originally estimated for 2 – 4 weeks, but fixing damage, especially if boulders need to be removed or destroyed, will likely take longer. During the closure, Park Rangers and Park Stewards are taking the opportunity to work on landscaping at the trailhead, entrance, and parking lot. The Cholla Trail is still open if you want to enjoy this mountain now that the weather is cooling off.



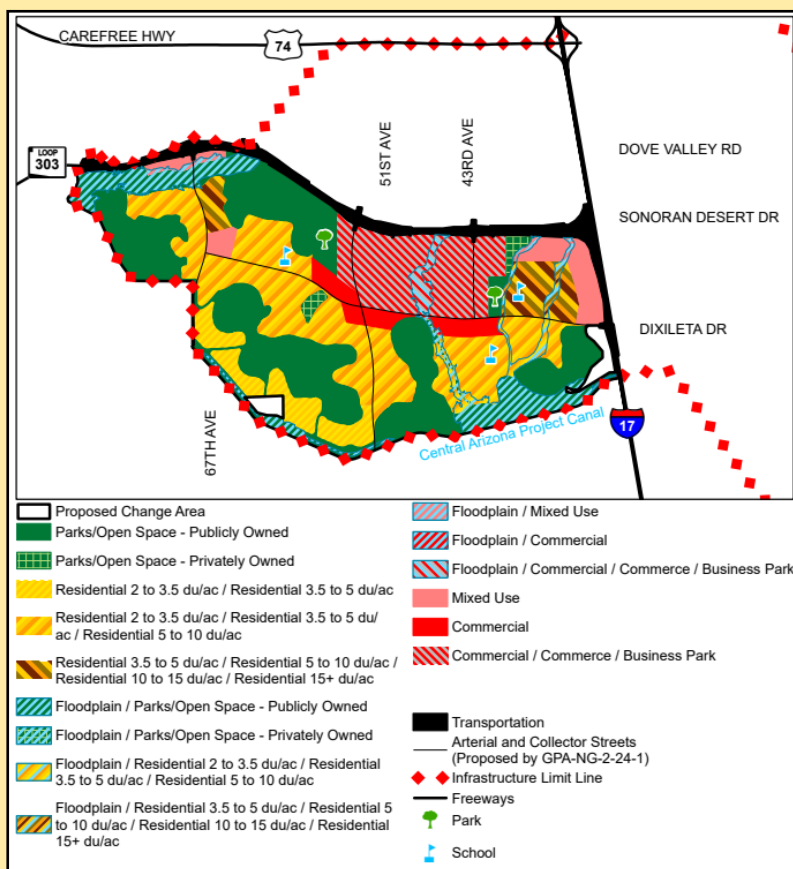
SOUTH BISCUIT FLATS

On November 13th, the North Gateway Village Planning Committee approved the rezoning of GPA-NG-1-24-1 with support from the City of Phoenix Planning & Zoning Department staff. This is a 7,377-acre area known as South Biscuit Flats/North Park located at the southwest corner of the 303 and I-17.

GPA-NG-1-24-1 is an amendment seeking to redesignate large portions of vacant Arizona State Land Department property into a mix of residential, commercial, employment, and open space uses. The plan includes new residential densities ranging from 2 to 15+ dwelling units per acre, and significant commercial and commerce/business park areas to create a technology corridor for job growth. The plan would dedicate over 2,100 acres of public open space to the Sonoran Preserve and establish urban trail linkages across freeways and canals. It also proposes updates to the City's Trail System Map to ensure connectivity across the community and to neighboring developments, while removing the Infrastructure Phasing Overlay to allow coordinated infrastructure financing and installation. The companion rezoning case (Z-139-24-1) would rezone much of the land from agricultural to Planned Unit Development (PUD) to enable this mix of uses.

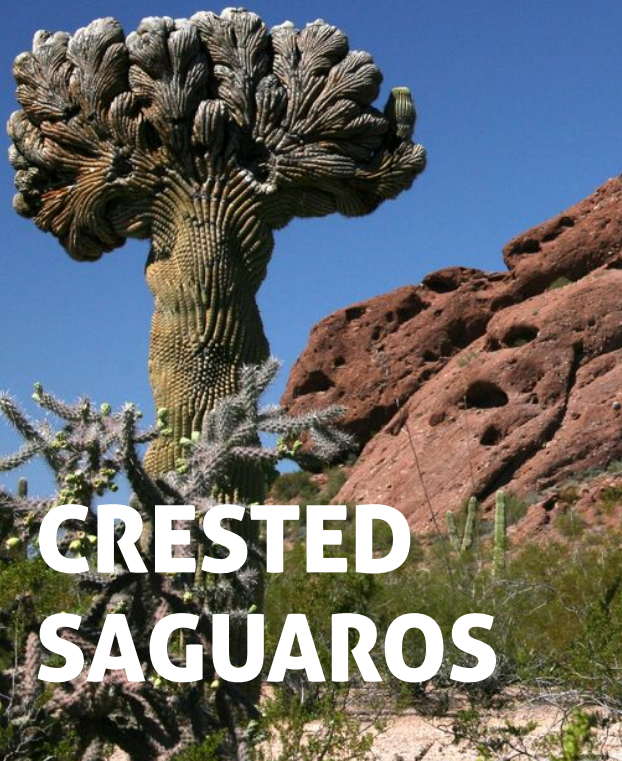
As of November 10th, the Planning & Zoning Department received 199 letters of opposition or concern and four letters of support from the public. Staff went ahead and recommended approval of this General Plan Amendment (GPA), noting that the proposal balances housing, employment, and open space while aligning with Phoenix's core values of diverse neighborhoods, economic growth, connectivity, and desert preservation. The City of Phoenix Planning Commission will hear the proposal on December 4th.

PROPOSED LAND DESIGNATIONS



READ THE ENTIRE AMENDMENT AT [HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/BDHNVXWX](https://tinyurl.com/bdhnvwxw)





CRESTED SAGUAROS

On the South Biscuit Flats land, there are crested saguaros. Local hikers of these properties have voiced their concerns to the PMPC, in particular for the well-being of the rare, crested saguaros.

So what is a crested saguaro? This is the term used to describe a saguaro growing a fan-shaped pattern at the top. This “fan” or semi-circular shape forms when the cells in the growing portions of the saguaro start dividing outward rather than in the normal, circular pattern. The cause of this bizarre mutation is unknown. Some scientists believe the trigger is frost. Crested saguaros are more common in the northernmost parts of their range, but data does not prove this to be the cause, at least not the only one. Others believe lightning strikes cause the cells to act abnormally. Still others believe it’s just something that happens because of a genetic

mutation. Regardless of how they started growing that way, this crested growth makes them even more susceptible to frost and strong winds than a typical saguaro.

One of the biggest threats to the crested saguaros is being moved. Transplanting large saguaros can be done but have a low success rate long term. After being at home for over a century in one spot, these majestic giants do not like to move, crested or not.

If you have not had the privilege to see a crested saguaro while hiking, you can visit the Desert Botanical Gardens where one is along the paved paths.

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SAGUAROS ARE NOT THE ONLY CRESTED CACTI. CHECK OUT THESE!



Crested hedgehog
Courtesy of Don Swann



Crested cholla
Courtesy of Don Swann



Crested barrel cactus
Courtesy of r/cactus/reddit.com

TAKING OVER THE DESERT

BY ANDY LENARTZ

Two invasive grasses present a significant threat to the Sonoran Desert environment. Buffelgrass and fountain grass are found in similar areas, neither are a native species, and both are a hazard to both native plant species and human developments.

Buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*) is a type of grass native to Africa, introduced to Arizona in the 1960s as livestock feed. When in bloom, buffelgrass produces reddish-purple flower stalks, often described as bottlebrush shaped. When the plant is green, the purplish hue is a key indicator. When dormant, the plant has a thin, golden straw appearance.

Fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) is another type of grass also native to Africa. Fountain grass was introduced to Arizona in the 1940s as an ornamental plant, a use



Buffelgrass
Courtesy of National Park Service



Fountain grass
Courtesy of University of Massachusetts Amherst

which continues to the present day. This plant is dense and can grow up to a couple of feet high. It will fully cover areas where it is introduced, killing off the native plants. Stems are numerous and tight together; the plant grows thick and heavy.

Both grasses will significantly change a local ecosystem in relatively rapid time. They spread quickly, outcompeting native plants for scarce water. This kills off the native plants, allowing the grasses to spread further and faster. Not only does this create a hazard

for local plants but it's a significant fire risk as well. Both grasses are dense and highly flammable when in a dry, dormant stage. They will burn at high temperatures for a long time, which creates a risk for any nearby developed areas or the natural environment.

We can all play a role in reducing the spread of these plants. Learning to remove the plants when they are first getting established is the most effective step. This requires accurately identifying the plants, pulling them out from the roots, and then bagging the plant prior to disposal. Care must be taken to not distribute the seeds when removing the plants. If possible, revisiting the site for several months is helpful to remove new growth that will sprout up from seeds already in the ground.

For fountain grass, it is still occasionally used as an ornamental plant. Some nurseries selling the plants describe them as infertile, but this is not accurate. They can and do spread and should not be planted in this area. You can educate your homeowners association and ask to have fountain grass removed from the approved plant list for individual homeowners and public areas within your community. If you wish to take this step, the author of this article can share materials he created to successfully convince his HOA to take this step. Contact him at southmountainparkbook@gmail.com.

References

- Kittleson, N. & Brigham, L. (2013). *Buffelgrass identification pocket guide*. Southern Arizona Buffelgrass Coordination Center.
Lenartz, A. (2021). *South Mountain Park and Preserve: A Guide to the Trails, Plants, and Animals in Phoenix's Most Popular City Park*. University of New Mexico Press.



THE GOTH CARDINAL



BY TICE SUPPLEE

Courtesy of Jim Nelson/Audubon Photography Awards

One of my favorite southwestern birds is the Phainopepla. A slim bird, about 16 inches from head to tail tip. The name phainopepla is from Greek, meaning shining robe. The female and the young are not as striking, having a uniform gray color. The species has a fluttery and buoyant flight pattern that is distinctive. The male has bright white wing patches that are very noticeable and a great identification field mark. A bird of the southwest, they can be found from Nevada, Utah, and central California south to Sonora and Baja in Mexico and also in the Chihuahuan desert and grasslands of the southwestern New Mexico bootheel, extending south into the central highlands of Mexico. I have noticed that on a cold winter day in the desert Phainopepla like to sleep in, remaining snug within a mistletoe clump in a mesquite or palo verde tree until the sun warms the day.

Some call this bird Black Cardinal because of the crest. Phainopepla are not closely related

to cardinals, rather they are in a unique family of birds called silky flycatchers. The name of the family is misleading, with only four represented species, all in the America's, they are not at all related to flycatchers, being more closely related to waxwings and seasonally eat berries and fruits in addition to insects. I love the name, silky flycatcher. The shiny black feathers of the male do look "silky" and is set off by a flaming red eye-a perfect bird for the spooky season.

Phainopepla are also mimics and can imitate the song of other desert birds. So if you are trying out the Merlin sound bird identification app, be careful a Phainopepla isn't fooling you.

The Phainopepla specializes in eating mistletoe berries and building their nests within a mistletoe clump. The Phainopepla digestive tract is specialized to quickly dissolve the skin of a berry and digest the nutrients in the fruit. An individual bird may eat over 1,000 berries in a day. Phainopepla have a symbiotic relationship with mistletoe, tending to defecate on a tree branch while perched, spreading the mistletoe seeds for a new mistletoe clump to establish. I encourage people who live in the Sonoran Desert to not remove all the mistletoe from their trees, as it is an essential plant for Phainopepla to nest and raise a family.

According to the Audubon field guide the male builds the nest and both the male and female incubate 2-3 eggs and feed the young.



Courtesy of Robert Shupak/Audubon Photography Awards



The male will display over the nest site that is inside a mistletoe clump. The young fledge from the nest in 19-20 days after hatching. Young birds and adults will remain together and join other family groups that will congregate at higher elevations and in wet riparian areas in the summer where they feed on other berries and insects. Check out the migration pattern of this bird at Audubon's Migration Explorer.



Courtesy of Christopher Brown/Audubon Photography Awards

Recent research published in the ornithology science journal, *The Auk*, strongly supports that Phainopepla are indeed itinerant breeders. This research has revealed that it is

in fact, the same birds migrating in elevation. They winter, and in wet years breed, in the washes of the Sonoran and Mojave deserts. When the berries dry out and temperatures soar above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, Phainopepla migrate to higher elevations in the oak, pinyon, and juniper woodlands

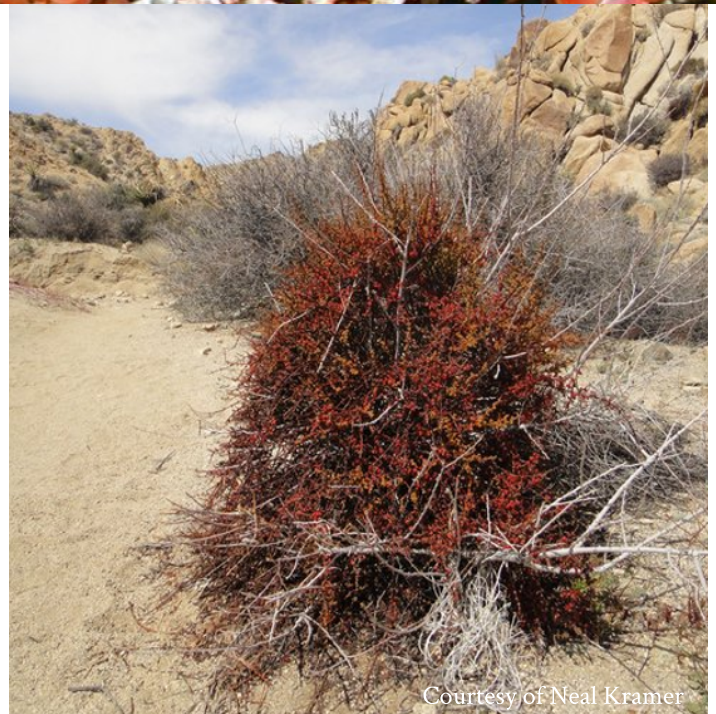
where the same birds that were wintering in the desert raise another family. This is a great reproductive strategy, as in some years when there is no winter precipitation and birds have failed spring breeding seasons in the desert, the Phainopepla has a second chance at higher elevations. Read more about this study at Audubon Magazine online.

DESERT MISTLETOE

The mistletoe so important to the safety and reproduction of Phainopepla is *Phoradendron californicum*, a leafless plant that attaches to woody desert trees in the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts. It is a hemiparasitic plant, taking water and minerals from its host plants but does its own photosynthesis.

Tiny, yellow, fragrant flowers bloom in the winter. Once pollinated, clear or white to reddish fruits are produced. While Phainopepla can quickly digest the berries, they cannot digest the seeds. They disperse the seeds when they defecate or wipe their bills. Mockingbirds and Gila woodpeckers also eat the berries and disperse seeds, but it's the Phainopepla the mistletoe is most dependent on. Because Phainopepla spends so much time in the plant, it eats the most berries.

These berries are edible by humans. People have long eaten them raw and cooked them into a pudding or paste. If you see the fruits in the preserves – leave the berries for the birds!



Courtesy of Neal Kramer



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Desert mistletoe flowers
Courtesy of borregowildflowers.org



PROTESTING IN THE PRESERVES

BY ANDY LENARTZ

The Phoenix area has seen numerous large-scale protests in recent months. Can these protests take place at city parks? What if one wanted to make some money selling snacks and water to the protesters, is that permitted? The City of Phoenix municipal codes provide the answers to these questions.



Courtesy of Caleb Ferguson

Large assemblies at City of Phoenix parks require a permit. Approval will be based on the size of the event and specific requirements for events of more than 50 people, with a more stringent set of requirements for events with more than 500 people. Free speech laws prevent the city from granting approval based on the intention or topic of the protest, decisions are made based on the safety and logistical requirements demanded by the size of the event. There are a few additional stipulations, public address systems are not allowed without a permit and ignoring an order to disperse is a violation of city ordinance G-5144, § 2, 2008.



Courtesy of Carla Gunn



Courtesy of Carla Gunn

The vending question is quite simple. Street vending, which includes vending on street, sidewalks, and public places in the City of Phoenix requires a permit. And one restriction on the permit is that vending is not permitted in city parks, according to municipal code section 31-24. So the answer to this question is simply no, vending is not permitted in city parks... at least most of the time. City code does allow limited exceptions where a permit could potentially be obtained, including farmers markets, community gardens, and special events.

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phoenixmountains.org
pmpcaz@gmail.com



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12950 N. 7th Street
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PMPC Contact Information:

PMPC email: pmpcaz@gmail.com

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