

Gila River Riparian Restoration Project

By Rachel More-Hla, Gila Watershed Partnership



Photo Courtesy of Glen Leverich. Gila River restoration site taken by drone.

The Gila Watershed Partnership (GWP) is an active non-profit working in Graham and Greenlee Counties. Our program areas focus on maintaining healthy ecosystems and healthy communities. One of our projects focused on restoring and maintaining the Gila River. The Gila River Riparian Restoration Project began in 2013 thanks to a grant from the Walton Family Foundation (WFF).

Under this restoration project, the GWP remove invasive salt cedar trees (*Tamarix spp.*) that have taken over the Gila River corridor. The project will impact numerous sites over the next five years. As the tamarisk leaf beetle (*Diorhabda spp.*) moves closer to the Gila River, we are preparing by removing the salt cedars and replacing with native trees, including

cottonwoods and willows. Planting native trees will ensure habitat for the diverse wildlife that relies on the river for survival. Restoring the Gila River is also important as our riparian areas are declining, the threats of wildfires increasing, and a growing number of native species are becoming threatened and endangered.

Since receiving the WFF grant, we have completed the process of planning, permitting, and implementation. Ground work began in February of this year, and will continue through mid-April.



Removal of salt cedar and replacement with native species is being done by a youth crew from the Arizona Conservation Corps (AZCC), a division of AmeriCorps. The youth crew is ages 18-25, and will receive an AmeriCorps Education Award at the end of their service term. These awards can be used towards tuition at universities and payment for school loans. This is a great opportunity for our youth to get outdoors, learn about career opportunities in natural resources and gain valuable work skills. We look forward to maintaining a partnership with AZCC crews this fall season and into the future.



Our first season of restoration efforts, will impact over 18 acres of land along the river. We aim to more than double that number by the end of this year. Our goal for the entire 5 years is to impact 200 acres of land along the Gila River. We are working with Stillwater Sciences and Northern Arizona University to determine areas of high priority and expand restoration to more sites in the fall.

Restoration sites will be maintained by surveying and removing regrowth of salt cedars. We will follow up on previously planted native

trees and adjust restoration techniques as necessary to increase chances of survival. A completed project plan based on adaptive management should be finalized this spring.

The involvement of all our partners has been crucial to starting the Gila River Riparian Restoration Project and maintaining the momentum to meet our goals up to this point. We owe a big thank you to our permitting partners, US Army Corps of Engineers, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Arizona Department of Environmental Quality for working with us each step of the process to get our permit in hand this past February. Our consulting partners, Stillwater Science, Tamarisk Coalition, Northern Arizona University and so many more continually dedicate time to working on our implementation plans and we are so thankful to them. Finally, this project would not be possible without the generous funding received from our granting partners. The Walton Family Foundation is dedicated to restoring rivers in the west and their dedication to this project is so vital to the Gila River and our community. Freeport MacMoRan Inc, US Fish and Wildlife Partners Program, and the United Way of Graham County have also funded the project. Expanding to be more sustainable funded is an organizational goal of the GWP, and all our funding partners are helping us get there.



Current Project Updates FOR MORE INFO, SEE GWPAZ.ORG

Upper Gila Watershed Riparian Restoration

...funded by The Walton Family Foundation, US Fish & Wildlife, and United Way of Graham County

- Will replace invasive tamarisk with native species to restore natural habitats
- Working at 3 sites along the Gila River, finishing work for this season Mid-April.
- AZCC and Boulder Creek contracted to do on-the-ground work.

Clifton Restroom

...funded by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ)

- Installing restroom facilities in a recreational area just outside of Clifton.
- Final installation being completed.
- Water quality testing being done near site.
- Post-install revegetation planning has begun.



San Francisco River Restroom

... funded by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ)

- Will install a second restroom for recreation on the San Francisco River Greenlee County and reduce the E.coli levels on the river and make river recreation safer for our community.
- Work can begin now that we received SHPO cultural clearance.
- Reviewing drilling proposals for site work.

Developing Greenlee County as a Bird Watching Destination

... funded by Freeport McMoRan Inc., Town of Clifton, and United Way

- Contracts in place to line out the trails, work-up signage, and print brochures.



Discovery Park Pollinator Garden

... funded by Eastern Arizona College, US Bureau of Land Management

- Installing pollinator garden at EAC Discovery Park campus to benefit the monarch butterfly and other important pollinators.
- Working on EAC landowner agreement and cultural clearances.
- Our next volunteer event coming soon!

WRRC Water Needs Assessment and Planning

... funded by the BOR & Desert Landscape Conservation Cooperative

- Water Supply & Demand Work Team is meeting April 22nd at 2PM.
- Contact Dr. Kelly Mott-Lacroix for more information, klacroix@email.arizona.edu.

Botanical Etymology for Dummies

This month's species is *Aquilegia chrysantha* or **Golden Columbine**, a dazzling resident of our watershed's upland riparian areas and the Native Plant Nursery. Head up to Frye Mesa for a glimpse of this popular native wildflower.

Aquilegia, Latin aquila, eagle; referring to the similarity of the curved spurs of some species to the talons of an eagle.

chrysantha, Greek *chrysos*, golden, and *anthos*, flower; golden-flowered.

To translate: this columbine can easily be identified by its golden flowers with distinctive talon-like



Golden Columbine
Aquilegia chrysantha

petals.



GWP

ON FACEBOOK TO KEEP UP WITH
ALL OUR EVENTS!!

April 7th – Arizona GIVES Day.
Support GWP, Ask us how

April 22nd – Water Supply &
Demand Work Team meeting, 2PM
@General Services Building

May 13th – GWP General Meeting
with City of Safford Water Dept

June 10th – EAC Pollinator Garden
Presentation

July 8th – GWP Partners
Appreciation Dinner

Every Thursday – Open Volunteer
Hours with GWP, 8-11AM @
Discovery Park Greenhouse

Thank you to our partners:

AZ Department of Agriculture
AZ Department of
Environmental Quality
AZ Department of Transportation
AZ Game and Fish Department
AZ Geological Survey
AZ State Land Department
City of Safford
Eastern Arizona College
Farm Bureau
Freeport McMoRan Inc.
Gila Valley Irrigation District
Gila Valley NRCD
Graham County
Graham County Chamber
of Commerce
Greenlee County

Natural Resource
Conservation Service
Southwest Decision Resources
Tamarisk Coalition
Town of Clifton
Town of Duncan
Town of Pima
Town of Thatcher
U.S. Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Forest Service –
Apache-Sitgreaves and Coronado
U of A Cooperative Extension
U of A Water Resource
Research Center

EVENTS

Get involved in your watershed

For more information, contact Steve Eady at the
Gila Watershed Partnership, P.O. 1614, Thatcher 85552
Email us at info@gwpaz.org

Check out our new website... WWW.GWPAZ.ORG