

Mojave Rattlesnake (*Crotalus scutulatus*) Photo by Terry Johnson

One of my joys in life is educating people about the beauty and ecology of our native reptiles. I am proud to be licensed in Arizona with the necessary permits to exhibit venomous snakes educationally, and also to safely capture/humanely relocate all nuisance reptiles.

I saw my first rattlesnake this year on March 6th. He was enjoying the warm air from the front porch of his hibernaculum in Rattlesnake Canyon (Greenlee County). I love seeing them undisturbed like that, but of course a person usually has to see them first, which is often easier said than done.

Rattlesnakes are very cryptic (camouflaged), which serves them better than rattling does when living in the proximity of mankind. Snakes seldom stand a chance when confronting humans, they are better off hiding and escaping than announcing their presence. In the long run, those who stay calm and go un-noticed are more likely to reproduce than those individuals who nervously give themselves away with a raucous rattle.

Six species of rattlesnake are discoverable in Graham County:

1. Western Diamondback Rattlesnake
2. Mojave Rattlesnake
3. Northern Black Tailed Rattlesnake
4. Arizona Black Rattlesnake
5. Twin Spotted Rattlesnake (on Mt. Graham)
6. Prairie Rattlesnake

The other two reptiles found in Graham County that possess potentially dangerous bites are Gila Monsters and Arizona Coral Snakes. Gila Monster venom is particularly painful, and Arizona Coral Snake venom is a deceptively slow acting neurotoxin. Neither one is considered to be deadly, but rapid medical assistance/observation is a safe precaution.

Gila Monster Lizards are a restricted species that may not be caught, kept, killed or harassed. Coral Snakes are beautiful and inoffensive animals when left alone, but they should not be handled because they will bite to defend themselves.

In Arizona, this species is the one that most people are bitten by, and it also has the most human fatalities recorded in the Southwest. They are sometimes called "Coontailed" rattlers because of their black and white tail rings.

Mojave Rattlesnakes inhabit the desert flats of Graham County. Their reputation for being aggressive is largely undeserved, at least among the many individuals that I have met. Mojaves are often greenish-gray colored, but some are mostly brown. They have black and white ringed tails similar to the Western Diamondbacks.

Northern Black Tailed Rattlesnakes are also greenish-yellow colored and many people mistake them for being Mojave Rattlesnakes. Although Black Tailed Rattlesnakes are wide ranging habitat generalists, they are somewhat more likely to be encountered within riparian and mountainous areas where Mojaves are less likely.

The Arizona Black Rattlesnake species is fond of the higher elevations, and they are often mistakenly called "Timber Rattlesnakes". Known to be a relatively placid species, they are admired by herpetologists everywhere. This species is currently being studied for their social and family interactions by herpetologist Melissa Amarello and others.

Some of our Southern Arizona sky islands harbor various small montane species of rattlesnakes that are protected as restricted



Northern Black Tailed Rattlesnake (Crotalus molossus)
Photo by Terry Johnson



Western Diamondback Rattlesnake(Crotalus atrox)
Photo by Terry Johnson

wildlife; they may not be killed, caught, harassed or kept. Mount Graham has one such species called the Twin Spotted Rattlesnake.

It is a special little variety that lives primarily in the talus slopes, so human interactions are not very common, although they have been seen at Riggs Lake.

Prairie Rattlesnakes are much more common in New Mexico and Northeastern Arizona, but there is little doubt that they crowd into Graham County along the border with Hidalgo County, N.M. They inhabit the desert-juniper grassland and have been recorded in eastern Cochise County. These animals may be locally abundant; they use communal den sites, and are known to have an explosive temperament.

Outdoor recreation puts us in their habitat, so incidental encounters are more likely when we are fishing, camping, picnicking, and hiking. All snakes are protected in Arizona by game laws, and in some cases bag limits, so if you kill one in the wild without a hunting license you could be cited for illegal poaching. Enjoy seeing them and give them their space. They are important links in the ecosystem and should not be destroyed.

Reptile Conservation/Reptilist

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Project and Program Status Report

The AWPf Gila River Restoration Project at Apache Grove – Natural Channel Design will be continuing with their work on the project, adding to the revegetation and planning for spraying any salt cedar regrowth. A comprehensive monitoring plan will be included in the project. After the grant period is over, the Gila Watershed Partnership plans to continue monitoring the project to document its success. Let us know if you would like to be part of the monitoring team.

AWPF The E.coli Reduction on the San Francisco River Through Alternate Livestock Water on Kaler Ranch – Jan has finished the completion reports for the well, solar installation, and the tanks and trough. We will soon complete another round of photo monitoring and we will also test for E.coli in the San Francisco River.

AWPF Eagle Creek Riparian Corridor Protection Project - The landowner, Darcy Ely, is taking GPS readings for the monitoring, and Jan Holder is working on the implementation plans.

The Business District Façade Improvement program is in final clean-up and reporting stages. “Before and after” photos will be ready by this time next month

The BOR Graham County Fairgrounds Project – Representatives from Graham County, Safford Utilities, Bill Cook and Bill Brandau met at the fairground to coordinate efforts. Graham County has purchased a water treatment plant with a due date of installation in July. We are coordinating the installation of equipment from the grant with the installation of the new water treatment plants. City of Safford will be assisting Graham County with the installation of the facility. The grant equipment will be installed at the time the new water treatment facility is installed. This effort will produce approximately 100,000 of water per day that can be used on the fairgrounds substantially reducing the demand on city water.

AWPF Eagle Creek Riparian Restoration at Filleman Crossing Project – The AWPf has granted us an extension on the project.

The USFW Syfert Wildlife Watering Facility – The Syferts have successfully transferred their water rights into their name, and are ready to move forward. Dan Taylor, from Bat Conservation international visited the site and will be helping to re-design the water catchment.



Susan Syfert, with Dan Taylor, from Bat Conservation International, planning the restoration of a wildlife watering facility.

USFW Partners Eagle Creek Riparian Restoration at Filleman Crossing Project - The USFW Partners program has generously granted us additional funds for the project.

The Chase Creek Business Support Center and Commercial Kitchen continues to move toward opening later this year.

ADEQ Education Master Watershed Steward Program, Phase II –This semester’s class culminated with an extra field trip to the Arizona Riparian Council Annual Meeting field trip at the farm of Larry Barney, where they visited the Apache Grove river restoration project. This semester class is complete except for getting finals back from students and getting reporting into Jan. Bill will be working on the sediment project during the summer with some of this semester’s students.

AWPF Eagle Creek Riparian Restoration at Filleman Crossing Project - We have received a grant extension from the AWPf for two years to complete this project.

E. coli Reduction on the San Francisco and Blue Rivers project is nearing the wrap-up of its Master Watershed Steward course focusing on the San Francisco and Blue Rivers. In this last month, Dr. Phil Guertin of the U of A School of Natural Resources and the Environment presented on geology and soils of the watershed and provided extensive material on the Wallow fire clean-up efforts and longer-term concerns.

BLM's Dave Arthun gave an overview of comparative sinuosity and cross-section studies of the San Francisco and Gila Rivers dating back to the 1930's and got the class acquainted with the Proper Functioning Condition evaluation disciplines that BLM uses.



Tom Subirge explains surface flows after the Wallow fire

Environmental consultant and retired District Forest Ranger Frank Hayes and his longtime Forest Service colleague Tom Subirge led a fascinating 14-hour tour of the upper San Francisco and Blue Rivers system; Harry and Mary Quinsler provided hospitality at their ranch on the Blue at lunchtime.

Dr. Suzanne Menges and Deborah Mendelsohn led a session applying the knowledge gained through the MWS course to developing potential

solutions for fecal contamination problems on the San Francisco and lower Blue. Rancher Larry Barney shared stories about the ambitious engineering and re-planting project on his farm on the Gila River near Duncan.

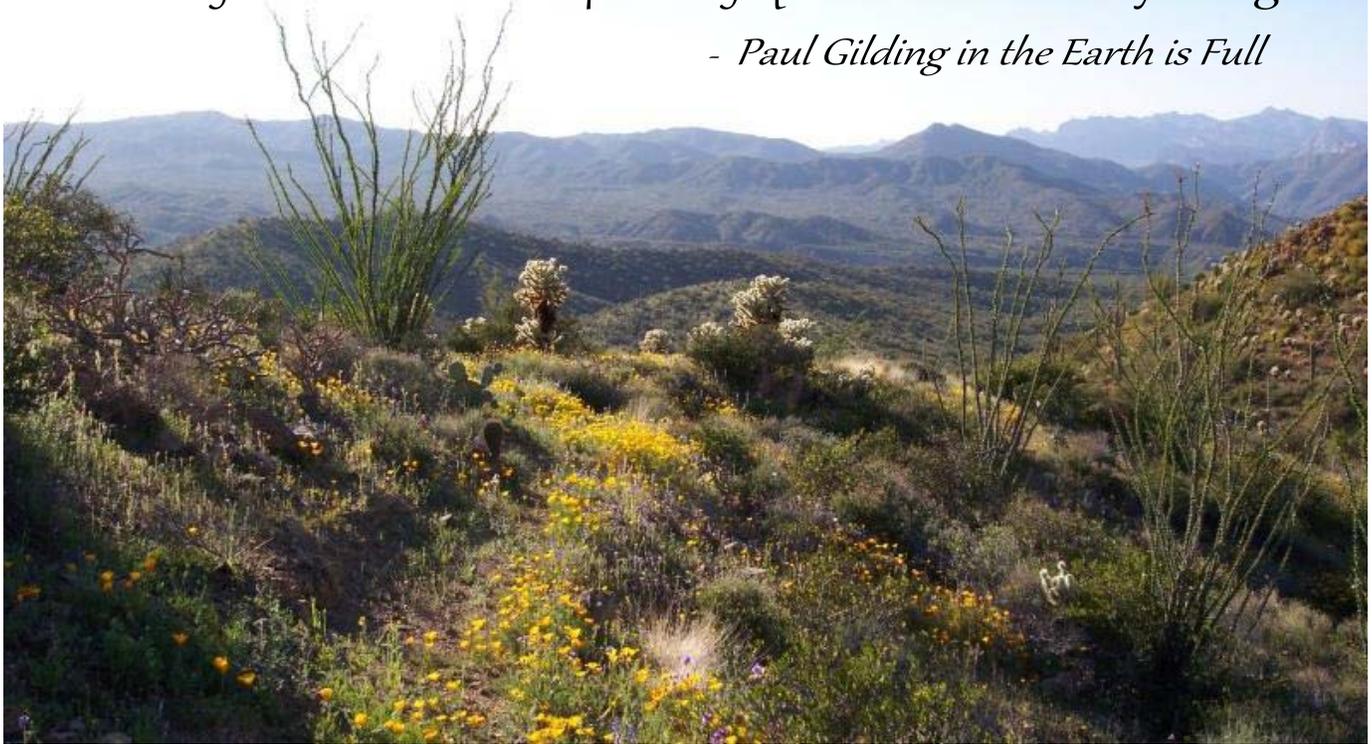
Two students gave presentations: 12-year-old Sharmayne McCarty showed photographs of native and transient birds she has been tracking and studying, and Clifton English teacher Richard Ward shared a curriculum he is now developing, "A Poetic Approach to Understanding the River," referencing the powerful impacts of Aldo Leopold's writings. Many class members have joined up with Friends of the Frisco for the San Francisco River clean-up set for May 26th.

Besides finishing its MWS course, the E. coli project is collaborating with Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold on signage for San Francisco river accesses, and with BLM, Forest Service and Greenlee County on proposed restroom installations.

The AWPf Gila River Water Conservation Education Program – The water audit crew are hard at work performing water audits to over 100 of the high water users identified by the City of Safford. The water audits are free to residents, business owners or municipalities. Susan Syfert and the water audit crew have been completing water audits for home owners in the City of Safford. They are starting on the municipal buildings in the City of Safford and Thatcher, and homeowners in Morenci.

It takes a good crisis to get us going. When we feel fear and we fear loss we are capable of quite extraordinary things.

- Paul Gilding in the Earth is Full



Calendar of Events

Wednesday, May 9, 2012 @ 7 p.m. Our meeting will feature Terry Johnson, the Reptilist, who will introduce us to some affable and charming snakes and reptiles.

Wednesday, June 13, 2012 @ 7 p.m. - Heidi Blasius, BLM biologist, on the Porter Wash Restoration Project

Wednesday, July 11, 2012 @ 7 p.m. - Seth Salek, U.S.F.S. on the priority watersheds in the Coronado Forest.

Our partners include:

- Arizona Department of Agriculture
- Arizona Department of Environmental Quality
- Arizona Department of Transportation
- Arizona Department of Water Resources
- Arizona Game and Fish Department
- Arizona Geological Survey
- Arizona State Land Department
- Bureau of Land Management
- City of Safford
- Town of Thatcher
- Town of Pima
- Town of Clifton
- Town of Duncan
- Gila Valley NRCD
- Discovery Park
- Farm Bureau
- Freeport McMoRan Copper and Gold Inc.
- Graham County
- Greenlee County
- Gila Valley Irrigation District
- Natural Resource Conservation Service
- University of Arizona Cooperative Extension
- University of Arizona NEMO Project
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- U.S. Forest Service – Apache Sitgreaves and Coronado Forests
- U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
- And many community members

Get involved in your watershed

For more information, contact Jan Holder at the Gila Watershed Partnership, 711 S. 14th Avenue, 85546, 520-419-0374, email-watershedholder@gmail.com