
Adventure at Your Doorstep

by: Margaret Stewart¹

IN TUNE WITH THE WORLD OF THE SONORAN DESERT



photos: Dave Mills

Diversity in the Sonoran Desert: (l to r) Gambel's Quail, backlit Teddy Bear Cholla, Harris Hawk on backyard fence railing, desert marigolds, Cactus Wren

Every morning this month, between seven and seven-thirty, a truly amazing thing happens: the sun comes peeping over the eastern hills, illuminating a series of events in which all of Nature is involved. If you put on your walking shoes and a hat with a brim, you can share in the adventure.

Outside your door a covey of quail is scratching around in the gravel for seeds. Their babies, hatched during the summer, have grown to adulthood, but they continue to hang around with the extended family until mating season in the spring. Their scurrying and cries of alarm when you step out the door are part of Nature's winter song.

Your newspaper is lying on the driveway. You pull off its plastic sack and tuck it into your pocket. It's the right size to collect the trash you'll find on your walk – a nice way to say "thank you" to Mother Nature for the treasures of quiet and beauty she'll reveal to you.



The cactus wren down at the corner of your lot isn't afraid of you, but your passing annoys him, so he feels free to scold you from his perch in the cholla and to waggle his tail in warning. He's a building fool, and this morning he can't resist making a few repairs to his bulb-shaped nest, held in the safety of the cholla's prickly arms.

The sun's edge is just showing over the hills; above your head the ghostly circle of last night's moon sails along in the cloudless blue sky. Dry, caressing Arizona air is blowing through the Foothills. It's cool as you approach the arroyo and you hug your elbows to keep them warm.

Two coyotes cross the road in front of you following their trail, the arroyo. They look at you curiously as they trot along and then vanish into the desert, perfectly camouflaged by the bursage and mesquite. Maybe they're headed for their dens or looking for a bite of mouse for breakfast.

This is a good time to practice your soccer moves by kicking the bigger stones to the side of the road. Weep a tear for the joggers, as with strained faces they pass you by. Your walk is not only exercise. Nature is putting on a performance for you, one that will renew your spirit.

Late summer monsoons gave a boost of energy to perennial desert plants. Buckwheat's white flowers pop into view as the sun's rays stretch across the desert warming your face and reaching into deep, shadowy places under mesquites and palo verdes. Desert marigolds, always in season, nod their golden heads beside rabbit bush, now fuzzy with seeds.

Nearby desert broom, a shrub of disturbed earth and sandy bottoms, is getting ready to cast seeds in drifts of white fluff along roadsides and arroyos.

The phainopeplas are back from their summer vacation in the cooler mountains. A pair of sleek little birds sits like silhouettes in a catclaw, waiting for you to walk on so they can go back to eating mistletoe berries.

Under roadside shrubs, rabbits tremble as three Harris hawks zoom down to perch in an ocotillo, making the branches bend and sway. One flies off to a nearby chimney for a better view of the food supply. Tremble, indeed, Mr. Rabbit.



People in cars rush by you intent on a distant goal. The wonders you are enjoying are available to all, but speed and destinations make the drivers unaware of the desert and its inhabitants. You begin to hum snatches of the old song, “Slow down, you’re movin’ too fast...Gotta make the feeling last...”

Just then you spot the deer, a doe, almost invisible in the shadow of a mesquite tree. A magical creature in a dappling of sunlight, quivering to spring away. And as another car streaks by, she kicks up her heels scattering granite sand as she darts off into a thicket and springs over a fence.

With a smile, you turn back to the road. Your house is in sight now, your heartbeat is elevated from exercise and you feel the glow of well being. Soon you’ll shake a sackful of cans into the recycling bin. The sun is up, the day has begun and you’re in tune with your world in the Sonoran Desert Foothills. Thanks for the show, Mother Nature!

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