



Echoes from the Canyon

October 2025

Echoes from the Canyon is a regular publication of the Sabino Canyon Volunteer Naturalists (SCVN).

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There's an Empress in the Canyon

Naturalist Kathy

Empress Leilia that is! Unlike other butterflies that gracefully flit from flower to flower, this unique butterfly has a habit of resting on the ground long enough for passerbys to get a good look or photo.



Empress Leilia (*Astero campa leilia*) can be found from southern Arizona, east to South Texas and south to Central Mexico. In Sabino Canyon, you can find it along any path where the larvae host plant, desert hackberry (*Celtis pallida*) grows. Rarely does this butterfly go to nectar as a food source, preferring dung, tree sap, and rotting fruit.

Empress Leilia butterflies have a wingspan of 1-1/2 to 2 inches, and males and females are similar in appearance. Its flight period is July to November but has occasionally been seen all year.

The male's job is to spend much of their day perched in a tree, usually a desert hackberry, watching for females. According to a 2002 PubMed study, the males have more acute vision than females, which makes the males good at their job. After the eggs have hatched, the caterpillar will munch on the hackberry leaves for about 15-17 days before forming a chrysalis. You would be hard pressed to find an Empress Leilia caterpillar or chrysalis on a desert hackberry because the caterpillar is green and the chrysalis looks like a leaf.

I wasn't able to find a good source as to why this butterfly was named Empress Leilia. The name Leilia seems to be of Arabic origin, meaning night or dark beauty.

My favorite place to see and photograph Empress Leila is along road 100E, the dirt path that leads to upper Sabino dam and riparian area, that eventually connects to the Creek Trail #52.

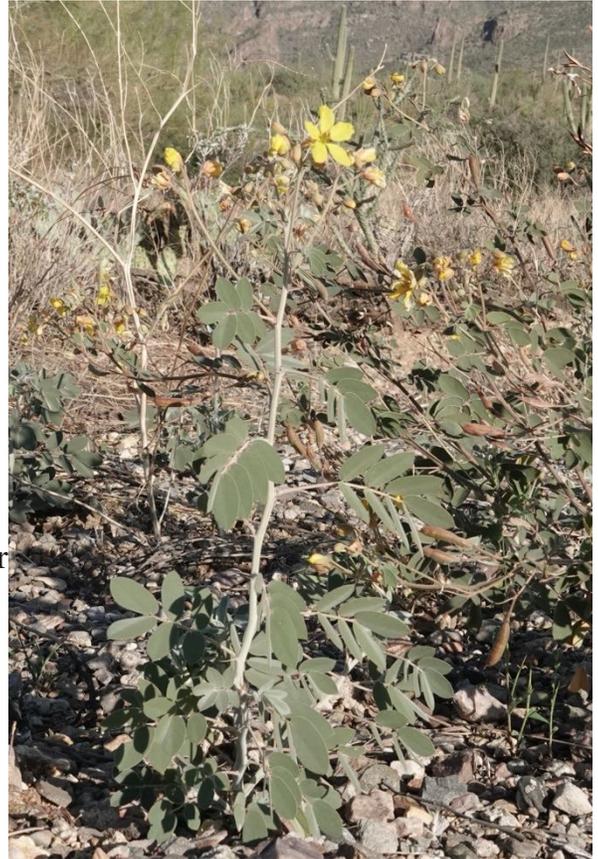
What's Blooming Now

Naturalist Debbie and Naturalist Kathy

It's October and there's not a lot blooming in Sabino Canyon. The next flower show will start in the spring, when brittlebush, ocotillo, and many other wildflowers begin to bloom. Meanwhile, desert senna (*Senna covesii*) can still be found blooming along trails and walkways.

Desert senna is an attractive plant with its beautiful gray (leaves), yellow (flowers), and brown (seed pods) color palette. Aside from its aesthetics, there are a few unusual characteristics about the plant.

- It uses the pop and drop seed dispersal method. Seeds are held inside a bean-shaped pod, even after opening, until the pod is bounced by the wind or a passing animal. The seeds will then spill out and land away from the parent plant. This gives the seeds a chance to grow in its own space, away from the parent plant.
- It's pollinated by buzz pollination and only eight percent of the world's 330,000 flowering plants are pollinated in this way. Native bees turn themselves into tuning forks by using their powerful flight muscles to sonicate (disrupt by using ultrasonic vibrations) the pollen from the flower's stamens. The bees then carry the pollen back to their nest as larval food.



Desert senna blooms from April to November, can be found at elevations from 1,000 to 3,000 feet, and prefers sandy desert washes, mesas, and dry rocky slopes.

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- **Facebook public page:** facebook.com/scvnat
- **Instagram:** instagram.com/sabinonaturalist

We also have a Facebook **group:** facebook.com/groups/scvnaz



Check out the SCVN website for all upcoming events sabinonaturalists.org.

**A Walk in the Park: The True Story
of a Spectacular Misadventure
in the Grand Canyon, by Kevin Fedarko**
Review by Naturalist Rebecca, SCVN Librarian

My summer read took me on a 750-mile walk with two clueless amateurs who set out on the toughest hike in America: through the heart of the Grand Canyon.

Author Kevin Fedarko also introduces you to the “why” of his walk, which he weaves throughout his story. We learn of his blundering volunteer years working on whitewater dories. Driven by a desire to know more about the Grand Canyon, he volunteered for a post no one else wanted: he would be part of a crew riding through the most sublime wonder of the world.

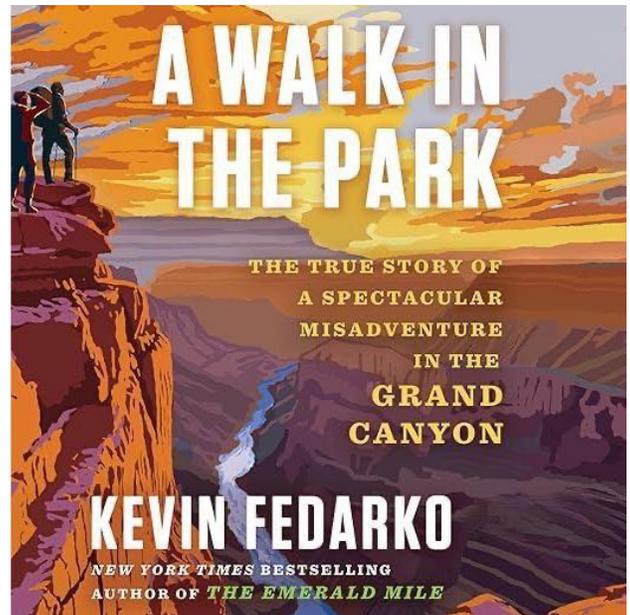
On one excursion while camping on a sandy beach and preparing food for the crew, Kevin spotted four men hiking in single file. They focused on each step, grimacing as they picked their way through the boulders.

Inviting them over for dinner, Kevin saw their ragged clothes, split lips, and sweat-soaked grime. It seared a memory that haunted him: the look of euphoria on their faces. What had they seen while hiking in the canyon? That’s what he hoped to find on his own hike. What grandeur lay in the cliffs, the ledges, and the rock?

Then in 2015, freelance photographer Pete McBride showed up on the Flagstaff doorstep of Kevin, who was now a nature writer. Pete announced that National Geographic was willing to sponsor him on a walk celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Grand Canyon National Park. While Pete photographed, Kevin would write. They just needed a guide to lead them.

That guide was Rich Rudow, a veteran Grand Canyon explorer who agreed to assist the harebrained, novice hikers. He agreed only because he hoped a written account would bring reverence and respect to the land and its native inhabitants.

When they started, neither Kevin nor Pete were fit for the hike or even remotely aware of what supplies and food to pack. Nevertheless, Kevin and Pete spent an entire year—most of it with



Rich—hiking, taking photos, and writing in remote areas of the Grand Canyon. Their journey was fraught with incredible hardships, some of which nearly killed them. But Pete’s sunny disposition and his refusal to give up because he knew everything would work out made Kevin believe the same.

Through elaborate, breathtaking descriptions of the canyon and its flora and fauna, Pete and Kevin captured their arduous journey in the magnificence of, in Kevin’s words, the “open air cathedral in the desert.”

I laughed, cried, at times felt utter disgust, empathy, and lastly hope that after reading, you too will be raptured, enlightened, and transformed.

Summer Storytime

Naturalist Adora-Marie

Summer Storytime started in 2001, and over 400 children and adults attended that first summer. With the exception of the Covid years, Summer Storytime has been going strong ever since. This past summer almost 250 children and adults enjoyed stories, games, songs, and crafts.

Children and parents delighted in surprise visits from Woodsy Owl and Smokey Bear. One day, 16 baby desert tortoises made an appearance. Naturalists helping with Summer Storytime this year all had a wonderful time reading favorite books, playing games, singing songs, dancing, and making crafts with the three-to six-year-old children, their siblings, and parents and everyone also enjoyed prickly pear lemonade.



Naturalist Nancy and Naturalist Holli read a book about javelinas to a rapt Summer Storytime audience. (Photo by Naturalist Adora-Marie)



Thanks to the Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum for giving permission to reprint this article. It appeared in their blog, “Desert Diaries,” and was written by Gracie Heim, the museum's content marketing lead.

Sabino Canyon, one of Tucson’s most cherished natural areas, is renowned for its rugged beauty and diverse wildlife. Among its inhabitants is the Gila Chub (*Gila intermedia*), a rare native fish species found primarily in this region and one that has faced significant challenges in recent years.

In June 2020, a lightning strike ignited the Bighorn Fire, which raged for over a month and threatened the fragile ecosystems of Sabino Canyon. This devastating blaze put many native species at risk, including the Gila Chub. Because of their limited range and ecological importance, efforts to conserve them became a priority.

In response, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum partnered with Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) to safeguard the species by temporarily housing Gila Chub during the fire.

“Native fish are a unique component of the Sonoran Desert’s biodiversity,” says Brian Hickerson, Gila River Basin Native Fish Coordinator at AZGFD. “It’s hard to put a value on what these fish mean to society or individuals, but the fact that you can leave Tucson and, within 30 minutes, find a desert stream teeming with native fish is an experience worth preserving—for current and future generations.”

After years of growth and care, 243 of our scaly friends were finally ready to return home!

Desert Museum and AZGFD employees worked with the Forest Service to successfully transport the fish to Hutch's Pool in the Pusch Wilderness area of Sabino Canyon in May of 2025.

The fish were carefully transported in aerated, treated water to reduce stress, then placed in oxygen-filled bags inside five-gallon buckets for the hikers to carry on their backs to the release site. The group hiked roughly eight miles roundtrip in the heat of the day and remarkably all fish survived the journey—though the hikers joked *they* were the ones who should've been riding in cool water!

Hutch's Pool was chosen for its depth and size, making it an ideal refuge during drought—and it doesn't hurt that it's stunning, too.

Located near the upper edge of designated critical habitat, it helps ensure the Gila Chub occupy as much protected area as possible. With natural rock barriers limiting upstream movement, this spot gives them the best chance to survive and repopulate downstream.

After a challenging hike, the group took a well-earned lunch break and enjoyed the peaceful oasis tucked within the vastness of the Catalina Mountains. One by one, each person had a chance to release the chub into their new home, marking a hopeful new chapter for native fish in Sabino Canyon.

Moving forward, the population in Hutch's Pool and near the East Fork of Sabino Canyon will be regularly monitored by Arizona Game and Fish Department staff. These ongoing efforts will help ensure the fish adapt well, grow in number, and continue to thrive over time.

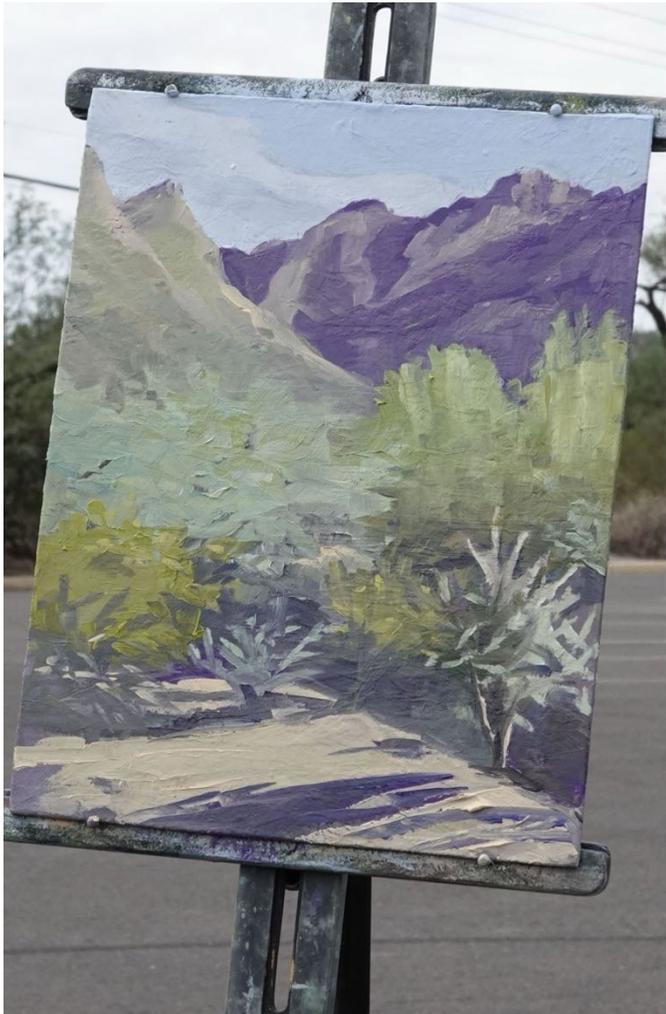
This reintroduction is more than just a conservation win. It's a reminder of the resilience of native species and the power of collaborative stewardship. Thanks to years of care, coordination, and a shared commitment to the land, visitors to Sabino Canyon can find native Gila Chub swimming in its waters and witness a living piece of Arizona's natural legacy.



A member of the U.S. Forest Service releases Gila Chub fish into Hutch's Pool at Sabino Canyon. (Photo by Gracie Heim, Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum)

Sonoran Plein Air Painters

Naturalist Kathy



Last Wednesday I was lucky enough to be walking past the Visitor Center when I noticed a group of people, along with their paintings afixed to aisles, gathered under the ramada. I found out these folks were Sonoran Plein Air Painters. It was a real joy to see their paintings, done just that morning, of Sabino Canyon's beauty.

The canyon will be host to two more Sonoran Plein Air Paint Out sessions this month, Wednesdays, October 15th and October 22nd.

To learn more or to see their calendar of events, check out their website sonoranpleinairpainters.com.



Echoes from the Canyon is published monthly except July and August by members of the Sabino Canyon Volunteer Naturalists. If you are interested in learning about the Sabino Canyon Volunteer Naturalist program or about educating the public and/or children in learning about the flora and fauna of this unique riparian environment of the Sonoran Desert, please visit <https://sabinonaturalists.org/join-us/>

