



May 2026

Echoes from the Canyon is a regular publication of the Sabino Canyon Volunteer Naturalists. A printable PDF version is available for download on the website's [Echoes From the Canyon Archive page](#).

Fun Things To Do

Adopt-A-Tortoise

Critters and Saguaros

A Long Recovery

Book Review: The Sounds of Life

Mt. Lemmon Summer Hike Schedule

Note: Click on photos to enlarge them. Click the View in Browser link above to translate.

Fun Things To Do

Naturalist Gordon

Here are the activities from May 15 to June 15. Next month's edition will show those that continue after June 15. For more information on any event or presentation check out our [Event Calendar](#).

- **Summer Bird Walk:** 1st and 3rd Sundays 6:30–9:00 a.m. Meet at the Visitor Center.
- **Mt. Lemmon Summer Hike:** Fridays starting June 5, 8:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m. See Event Calendar for meetup location.
- **Summer Lizard Walks:** 1st Saturday of the month, 7:30–10:00 a.m. Meet at the Visitor Center.
- **Birds of Sabino Canyon table:** 2nd and 4th Sundays, 8:30-10:00 a.m. Meet at the Visitor Center
- **Summer Storytime:** Wednesdays starting June 3, 9:00–10:00 a.m.
- **Ask a Mountain Naturalist table:** Saturdays starting June 6, 9:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m. at the Palisades Visitor Center, Mt. Lemmon.
- **Bird the Lemmon:** June 7 and 14, Aug 2 and 9, 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Yep – It's Tortoises All the Way Down ...

Naturalist Ann

Whether referencing a Hindu guru, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, or Stephen Hawking, the foundational importance of the turtle has gotten a lot of play through the ages. The Sonoran Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*) is no less important to our incredible Sonoran Desert ecosystem.

The Sonoran Desert tortoise is the quintessential desert dweller. And though not yet designated as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service ([Click here](#) to read more about that), they require humans to be educated about what they need if they are to survive.

The largest range of the Sonoran Desert tortoise is Arizona. The Arizona Game & Fish Department (AZGFD) is responsible for protecting these amazing desert dwellers and run the state adoption program for tortoises who are in captivity. As such, they want Arizona residents to know that:



- Once a tortoise has been in captivity, it can NEVER be released back into the wild due to disease risks that could harm wild populations.
- Breeding Sonoran Desert tortoises does not help the overall tortoise population because they cannot be released. In fact, to breed the Sonoran Desert tortoise is illegal (AZGFD Rule R12-4-

407). Practically, breeding these protected tortoises just creates more tortoises that must be cared for—for life (50-100 years)—by humans.

- It is not safe to have more than one male tortoise in an enclosure because they can become very aggressive and territorial, particularly if they sense female tortoises are in the vicinity. They will fight to kill the other.
- Only Arizona residents can adopt a Sonoran Desert tortoise and the tortoise can never leave the state. If you adopt, you must agree to keep the tortoise in captivity in Arizona.

How do I know this? Because we adopted a Sonoran Desert tortoise from AZGFD in October 2022. Max (aka Mac, #L216) is about 60 years old and is a very headstrong guy who loves his globe mallow, hibiscus flowers, and saguaro fruit. [Click here](#) to learn about tortoise adoption.

So if you or any of your friends or family have one or more of these amazing Sonoran Desert animals, please get in contact with the AZGFD Tortoise Adoption Program (twolf@azgfd.gov) to find out what you need to do to protect this amazing Sonoran Desert icon.



Ann's adopted 60-year-old desert tortoise, Max, gets acquainted with the family dog, Tavi. (Photo by Ann)

Critters and the Saguaro

Thanks to the Arizona-Sonoran Desert Museum for this information and to Naturalist Gloria for pointing it out to us.

[Click here](#) to read more about how the sentinel of the desert provides food and habitat to an amazing number and type of insects. Per the article, **a small chunk of rotting saguaro (about one cubic foot) examined at the University of Arizona contained 413 individual arthropods.** "Compare that small portion to the size of a whole saguaro and you instantly understand why insects are this planet's dominant life form," said the article.



AI-created photo. Not realistic, but you get the idea: saguaros support many arthropods.

A Long Recovery

David Lazaroff

Three photographs taken years apart in the same place, east of the Sabino Canyon Visitor Center:



What are these pictures telling us? (Photos by David Lazaroff)

Something intriguing is happening here. Why the dramatic increase in saguaros? It's a mystery, but fortunately we have some clues.

Clue number 1: An 1892 newspaper article describing a fuelwood scarcity in Tucson.

Mr. Shortridge, in the wood business, tells that already for ten miles around, with the exception of the Etchells, S. Hughes, Buckalew and Shortridge ranches, the supply is nearly ended. Mexicans are now bringing in roots and stumps, dug up and cut up into stove size. Many Mexicans, he says, go as far out as twenty or thirty miles, taking two or three days for the trip. Others make a precarious livelihood by stealing what they can from ranches or government land. ("Tucson's Wood Supply," Arizona Daily Star, December 20, 1892)

Clue number 2: By the last decade of the nineteenth century, there were several roads to Sabino Canyon, traveled by miners, aspiring dam-builders, and picnickers.

Clue number 3: Many of the mesquites east of the Visitor Center today have weathered stumps at their centers.

These clues suggest a story, don't they? It begins more than a century ago.

At an unknown date, perhaps shortly before 1900, woodcutters (we won't call them "Mexicans") pull carts into a woodland of mesquites and scattered saguaros, west of Sabino Canyon. They approach every tree of harvestable size, saw it off near the ground, load the wood into the carts, and drive off.

Larger, well-established saguaros survive the destruction, but smaller ones, formerly sheltered by the mesquites, fare poorly. Many of them perish—immediately, by trampling during the harvesting, or later, by exposure to punishing heat and cold.

Over the ensuing decades, many of the surviving larger saguaros live out their natural lifespans. Few young saguaros replace them, due to the shortage of mature trees to serve as nurse plants. Saguaros become inconspicuous in the landscape.

By 1980, the mesquites are recovering. Some of the sawed-off trees have long since resprouted from their stumps. (Some that had been too tiny to harvest are growing, too.) Though the mesquites are still small, young saguaros have become established beneath them, mostly out of view of the camera lens.

By 2002, the mesquites have grown larger, and the new generation of saguaros is becoming conspicuous among them. But drought has set in, and this time it's the mesquites that are faring poorly. Weakened trees are infested with mistletoe, and some have died.

By 2026, the maturing saguaros stand out boldly in the landscape, but the mesquites are still suffering from the ongoing drought.

This is a story of a plant community's recovery from trauma and of its later response to renewed stress. Is it a true story? It will take more study to know for sure. Meanwhile, it reminds us of some important things.

First, change can be breathtakingly fast at Sabino Canyon, when caused by a flood, a wildfire, or people with saws. But it can also be so exceedingly slow that it's hard to perceive. Photography collapses time and helps us see.

Second, Sabino Canyon isn't simply a natural environment that people happen to visit. Even before the woodcutters arrived (if they did), the landscape in these photographs had been transformed by human activity. Centuries earlier, Hohokam farmers had rearranged soil and stones to manage rainwater for their crops. This was, and is, abandoned agricultural land.

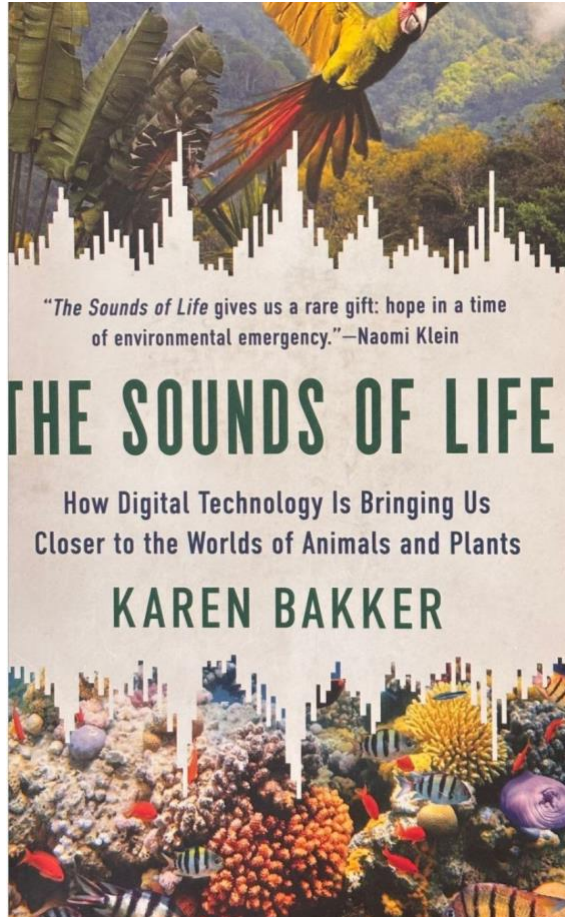
Nature and humankind are intimately intertwined at Sabino Canyon. If we hope to understand this fascinating place, we must always remember the people who are part of its story.



Two plants with linked histories, east of the Visitor Center. (Photo by David Lazaroff)

Book Review: *The Sounds of Life* By Karen Bakker

Reviewed by Naturalist Rebecca



Karen Bakker's *The Sounds of Life* traces how humans have learned to hear and understand the hidden sound world of animals and ecosystems. Early discoveries, like Professor Pierce's work with insect chirps and Roger Payne's recordings of humpback whale songs, revealed that animals communicate in complex, meaningful ways.

Advances in digital recording and algorithms have transformed this field—now called bioacoustics and eco-acoustics—allowing scientists to analyze and even begin to “translate” animal sounds. These tools are being used to study species like turtles, bees, bats, and elephants, linking their vocalizations to behavior and environmental conditions.

Beyond research, bioacoustics technology is helping restore ecosystems and protect wildlife—for example, reviving coral reefs, guiding bees, and reducing human-animal conflict. It also enables real-time tracking of animals like whales through apps, improving safety and conservation.

The work echoes indigenous traditions of deep listening to nature and suggests a future where understanding animal communication could play a key role in protecting biodiversity and shaping how humans interact with the natural world.

Come Join Us!

SCVN 2026 Mt. Lemmon Summer Friday Hike Schedule

Naturalist Ricki

[Click here](#) for a printable list of this summer's Mt. Lemmon Friday hikes, complete with details. Put the list on your fridge and join in! The first hike is June 5.



One of last summer's Mt. Lemmon hiking groups taking a lunch break at Marshall Saddle. (Photo probably by a cooperative by passing hiker)



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/>

*Copyright © 2026 Sabino Canyon Volunteer Naturalists, All rights reserved.
You are receiving this email because you opted in at our web site.*

