

Friends of Cave Creek Canyon

2020 Annual Report

Greetings, Friends!

This is the first annual report from Friends of Cave Creek Canyon, and I hope you enjoy reading about some of the projects and programs your memberships and donations have helped make possible.

In past years we have reviewed these accomplishments all too briefly at our Annual Meeting in December. Not meeting in person this year means we can cover this year's activities in greater depth in this report. I hope it will become a new tradition!

Below you will see the opening paragraphs of six topics: the South Fork Day Use Area Project, the Visitor Information Center, Education Outreach, Willow Tank, the Financial Report, and Chiricahua-Peloncillo Heritage Days. To read more than the first paragraph on each topic, please click on the line after the paragraph which says "Learn More About ...".

To read the entire report click [here](#).

Most of our projects have been uncontroversial, but the South Fork Day Use Area Project has generated both support and opposition. We remain convinced that this project will contribute to the health of the South Fork area of the canyon, reducing pollution by providing permanent restroom facilities, and concentrating casual visitation to an area only 300 yards from the paved road. The controversy has been painful. The positive aspect of it is that all involved are passionate about the health of South Fork.

FOCCC has a wonderful hard-working board as well as terrific volunteers, all of whom have contributed their time and expertise to helping Cave Creek Canyon. They are responsible for so much good that has occurred in the canyon, and I cannot thank them enough.

Thank you for your support. We look forward to continuing our efforts in the new year.

Reed Peters

President

The South Fork Day Use Area Project

By Mike Williams and Reed Peters

In Sept., 2014 Hurricane Odile caused major flooding in Cave Creek Canyon. The very popular trail head area at the end of Cave Creek South Fork Rd. [FS42E] and about ¼ mile of road were destroyed. Without toilet facilities, Cave Creek became polluted from human waste. The purpose of this Project is to replace the vault toilet, benches, picnic tables, and other elements that enable all of the public to appreciate and enjoy the area.

This project is very small, only occupying less than 1 acre of land in the entire canyon. Additionally, it is just on the edge of the Biological-Zoological Zone, about 300 yards from the junction with FR 42.

This project provides many benefits to the community and to visitors:

- Toilet facilities that are handicapped accessible
- 3 well separated picnic tables
- Information about the canyon
- Access to the canyon for the mobility impaired
- More dispersed parking. The berm area does not have adequate parking for the number of visitors during the busy times of year. Frequently in the spring when there are many bird watchers and birding tours present in the canyon, traffic is heavy and dangerous to pedestrians.



The Forest Service formulated a Draft Environmental Assessment of the Project which was submitted for public comment in August. Over 200 comments were made, with the majority favoring the project. These comments along with their own internal analysis, and assistance from other agencies such as US Fish and Wildlife will enable the Forest Service to develop a Final Environmental Assessment of the project. This is expected to be available early next year.

During the construction of the project there will be minor disruption to the canyon, and that will not occur during the nesting season. There will be very little removal of plants as this project will be in a fairly open area of the canyon.

Visitor Information Center

By Rolf Koford

In a normal year, the VIC is a popular stop for visitors to Cave Creek Canyon. This year



started normally. With staffing by FOCCC volunteers, the VIC was open seven days a week to assist visitors with information about campgrounds, hiking, birding and the area. There is also the occasional tire needing air, access to Wi-Fi, or just someone wanting to chat after spending hours on the road. All this activity came to a screeching halt in March, when the Forest Service told us to close because of the pandemic.

For the next six months, the building and grounds remained closed to visitors. The Forest Service allowed volunteers to remain in the RV sites and we were able to have multiple volunteers on site throughout the closure. The volunteers answered phone calls during restricted business hours, watered the lawn and plants, etc. Their presence was appreciated, and they appreciated having a safe port in the pandemic storm. There was turnover, as volunteers returned to a place they knew and loved.

In October, the Forest Service gave us permission to partially reopen. Visitors were to be kept outside the fence. Picnic tables were positioned near the fence and we put out the OPEN flag for four hours a day. Volunteers wore face masks and encouraged visitors to do the same. As visitation picked up, so did requests for souvenir merchandise. Group meetings led to sales procedures with which volunteers were comfortable.



In November, when local campgrounds also opened, things at the VIC felt almost normal again, but outdoors. It remains to be seen how we will do when the weather turns colder. We have erected a canopy on the lawn to provide some shelter. November sales totaled over \$1200, which is close to last year's total. The profit from these sales goes to maintaining the grounds and facility. In addition to hand wipes and disinfectant spray, we pay for supplies like printer paper and ink cartridges. We pay for internet capability, which serves visitors and volunteers. We provide propane for volunteers, especially important in winter. This year, we bought a portable air conditioner, a washing machine and a dryer. Equipment like computers and printers need replacing every few years.

Education Outreach

By Carol Frischmann

Friends of Cave Creek Canyon provided educational field trips to a select group of underserved school-aged children in a pilot program funded by the Arizona Community Foundation. In addition to the field trips, we were able to hire a consultant to help our education coordinator Carol Frischmann streamline the field trip process and create 3 “digital handbooks”, one for each of the stakeholder groups (teachers, FOCCC volunteers, and parents). These handbooks ensure that the field trips are consistent, streamlined, and successful.

Through the always accessible site, teachers will have all the information they need to have a successful field trip with their students at Cave Creek Canyon. Students and parents can use the extension “Family Fun” site to continue the fun after the trip. FOCCC trip leaders and volunteers will also have the information they need to carry out a successful program at their fingertips.



Due to Covid-19, we had to pause providing our field trips, but anticipate all the pieces being in place to ensure a wonderful educational experience at Cave Creek Canyon once field trip opportunities resume. Putting the remaining pieces in place is supported by FOCCC's Gerry Hernbrode Education Fund.



Provided Materials for Programs

Al Bamman

Wynne Brown

Shane Burchfield, Bugs of America

Dinah Davidson

Mary Frank

Ray Mendez

Mel Moe

Narca Moore-Craig

Portal Store and Café

Dirk Sigler

Jimi Walker

WILLOW TANK REPORT

Rene Donaldson and Alan Craig

Purpose

Willow Tank is one of the very few reliable sources of water for birds and critters on the east side of the Chiricahua Mountains and has also been used by the Forest Service in controlling fires. It is located in Arizona, west on Sulphur Canyon Road off of State Line Road south of Rodeo, New Mexico, and is managed by FOCCC on property owned by Larry Rivers.



Year In Review

The year began with record levels of water in the tank after a partially dry 2019 when it was drained (2018) to eliminate the non-native predator bullfrogs (see FOCCC website <http://www.friendsofcavecreekcanyon.com/projects/willow-tank/>). At the same time, the Tank was reconfigured to provide some deeper water for diving ducks and accommodate the Forest Service's helicopter-transported water bucket used in fighting fires and a larger island for nesting birds including ducks. Even though the water level was high this year throughout the spring, bird numbers and species remained low through the first six months. Perhaps having just been pumped from below ground, the water still had very little aquatic vegetation or invertebrates to attract birds and other critters? Or perhaps the current severe drought caused birds to starve or to go elsewhere?

As of mid-November, birders had reported on eBird checklists, 157 species of birds at Willow Tank during the year. In addition to the frequently seen Gambel's and Scaled Quail, American Coots, Swainson's Hawks, Killdeer, Greater Roadrunners, Lesser Nighthawks, Vermilion Flycatchers, Common and Chihuahuan Ravens, Cactus Wrens, Curve-billed Thrashers, Black-throated Sparrows, Blue Grosbeaks and Red-winged Blackbirds were such goodies as Wood Duck and 10 other species of ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, a fly by Roseate Spoonbill, White-faced Ibis, Golden Eagle, Virginia Rail, Soras, 7 species of shorebirds, Painted Bunting, huge numbers of Lark Buntings, and 12 species of warblers, including Lucy's, and Northern Waterthrush.

Rain

With two storms in March and September, the Tank received over 3.4 inches of rain, a record amount since we started to record it. There were botanically insignificant amounts in July.



Current Projects

In October we transplanted horsetail milkweed (*Asclepias subverticillata*) from the Sulphur Canyon roadside opposite Willow Tank. This year's heavy rainfall came at the right time to produce many roadside plants, and we were able to transplant before the mowers arrived. The plants joined three already planted in September 2019, a donation from Narca Moore-Craig.

A Lucy's Warbler nest box was installed on the large mulberry tree. The unusual nest box design was developed recently, and tested with great success, as a Tucson Audubon project.

Problems

Bullfrogs. Despite our best efforts (and with AZ Game and Fish and SWRS support) bullfrogs were first noticed in the Tank in June. Geoff Bender (SWRS) was notified and made several trips to eliminate them. There are still a small number in the Tank and we hope the Great Blue Herons are enjoying them.

Domestic Fowl. Earlier in the year there were four domestic ducks in the Tank that posed a threat to native waterfowl as far as virus transmission is concerned. They are no longer enjoying our largesse.

Agricultural Pump. While records are unavailable for Willow Tank, the summer was surely one of the hottest on record with the result that our solar pump could not keep up with the rate of evaporation. Even in a normal, year, it is challenged to do so. In the past we have used an agricultural pump owned by Larry Rivers to top the Tank off when the water level is low. When we attempted to do so this summer, we discovered a problem with the 2-year-old pump. This begs the question whether or not to replace it at great expense or to increase the number of solar panels to power a new larger solar pump that FOCCC will own. The two alternatives are being researched at present.

Goals

Host Work Day

Replace pump (see above)

Install Burrowing Owl nest "boxes"

Plant weeping willow (namesake of Tank) to replace a young one that didn't make it over the summer

Plant mulberry

Keep bullfrogs to a minimum

When water is available, keep shallow water on all exterior sides of Willow Tank if Geoff Bender and AZ Game and Fish agree.

Thumbs Up

To visitors who have taken the time to list species in our logbook: Peg Abbott, John Barthelme, Dave Jasper, Reed Peters, Cathie Sandell. And we give kudos to our regular ebird listers Dawn Zappone, Cathie Sandell, Peg Abbott, John Barthelme, Rick Taylor, John Yerger, Debra Davison and many others who have followed suit. We thank you all.

Photo Captions

Fall w/reflections: Fall color

Rick and Joan working: Joan and Rick Schneider at work

Horsetail milkweeds: Newly transplanted horsetail milkweeds

Lucy Warbler nesting box



Chiricahua-Peloncillo Heritage Days

By Kim Vacariu

After several months of preparation and securing of presenters, Heritage Days 2020 was cancelled due to the Coronavirus situation. Fortunately, most of the confirmed presenters agreed to be on-call for Heritage Days 2021, so should a traditional Heritage Days be possible in September, 2021 there is an impressive slate of talks to choose from. However, it is the general consensus of the event's principal sponsor, Friends of Cave Creek Canyon, that a traditional Heritage Days celebration, including presentations, food, outdoor market, and movies can only be possible if vaccines have been widely available and administered in our area. If that is not the case, several options exist to continue the event in a virtual format. Decisions on Heritage Days 2021 will be made by the FOCCC Board beginning April 1, 2021.

We Thank Our 2020 Volunteers!

Dave Baird
John Barthelme
Shane Burchfield and Laurel of [Bugs of America]
Vicki Beno
Bonnie Bowen
Alan Craig
Debra Davison
Maya Decker
Tony Donaldson
Forest and Cynthia Duncan
Michele Lanan
Jackie Lewis
Barbara Miller
Mel Moe
Jack and Alice Newton
Larry Rivers
Bob Rodrigues
Joan and Rick Schneider
Dirk Sigler
Lorriane Titus
Jimmi Walker
Mary Sue Waser
Pedro Romero
Rachel Tevis
Andrew Waser
Steve Wolfe