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Wild Animals on the Sonoran Desert

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9-8-2017

I decided to run on down the the Hassayampa River Preserve today since I haven't been there in a couple of months. With bird migration picking up, I thought possibly I could see something new and interesting. When I first got there, it was pleasant, with a breeze. But then someone put a really big kettle of hot water on a really big burner and turned it up high so the water boiled and turned to steam and made it horribly hot where I was. I wandered around the preserve dripping sweat and feel fire under my own skin and wondered how stupid I could be to just endure the heat and humidity. After all, I was the only person there!

I spotted lots of familiar birds and was pleased that there were so many of every kind of bird. Also I was pleased with myself because I am more and more "birding by ear". I have learned many bird calls and can recognize the bird by that. Indeed it is best to know some calls because that is often all you will know of a particular bird such as Bell's Vireos and Yellow Breasted Chats. Some birds are extremely secretive and very skilled at never being seen, or rarely.

I wandered aimlessly, pouring sweat and contemplated going home but decided that I had best head down Mesquite Meander just because. The trail has become a super highway for big red ants. There is normally a red-ant hole part way down the trail but now, the red ants have claimed the trail for themselves for many hundred feet. One mustn't tarry along the trail so I kept up a good clip, marveling at the sheer number of ants. It looked like a human freeway as seen from above.

I found a nice shady spot and stepped off of the trail, shame on me! I thought I would take a little break and took off all of my gear (for you non-birders, that is binoculars, camera and belt pack full of water bottles and bird books, in other words heavy and hot) and felt the cool water of the tiny trickle of the "river." Soon I heard what I thought were Blue Birds so got ahold of my binoculars. I kept an eye up in the tall cottonwoods because I could see birds coming my way. I saw larger birds and smaller birds. The smaller birds flew away. A larger bird landed in a cottonwood almost just above me. I put the binoculars up to my eyes, magnifying the bird adequately for me to get good detail.

There are birds that are somewhat or very rare but that are in this area. Some of those birds have lured me to study them ad infinitum in videos and books and photos, so I know for sure what they look like. I have been on the hunt for some of those birds for years and years and have come to believe they are merely phantoms, figments of overzealous birders imaginations. I have completely doubted the reports of them at the preserve for years.

So when I looked up and saw a very distinctive long tail on one of the TWO birds, I decided that it just couldn't be what I thought it was. I quickly leafed through my mental catalogue of distinctly-marked bird tails, and only one bird possesses that tail. Next the bird flew closer in silhouette and I could see the short rounded wings and distinct long tail. I was trying to be VERY careful to not misidentify these 2 birds, but my heart was already singing because I knew for sure what they were. One bird was so close to me that I very clearly saw the whole bird and the color, shape and markings. HOWEVER I was not able to get a photo though I tried very hard! Anyway, the 2 birds were the elusive Yellow Billed Cuckoos.

I scored really big today and have been riding on a birders high ever since I saw them. The birds moved back in amid the cottonwoods and away from me but had allowed me a good look for probably 5 minutes or longer. I don't think I crushed a single ant on the walk back because I was riding high on elation at finally seeing but never expecting to see those cuckoos! What a day!!

9-15-2017

I rode my bike out to the local cattle tanks this morning. The first one had water and a lone ibis. I then rode up to the second tank. There was a mockingbird convention there and also plenty of migratory birds. Many were feasting on the ripe hackberry berries (they are quite sweet and good to eat) but most of the birds were hunting insects.

As I slowly got my camera and binoculars and settled my bike down for a little nap, I realized that the mockingbirds were "CCHHHUP"ing a warning call. I swear there were dozens of mockingbirds. I have never seen so many in one place. There was even one place in particular where they were concentrated, along with a half dozen other species, in other words a mob.

Ever so slowly, I tried to



quietly move (impossible on decomposed granite sand) toward the mob. I couldn't see anything in the tree where the birds mobbed. I expected to see a Great Horned Owl or at least a hawk.

Then I noticed tiny humps on the branches and raised my binoculars to see these little elves. They were actually smaller than some of the birds mobbing them, and I wondered how perching birds even consider them a threat. But they are birds of prey despite their diminutive size.

I have only seen one other elf owl and that was along with a crowd of photographers, and it was a well known bird in a popular, easy-to-get-to location in Madera Canyon.

These elf owls were just there in the wild. Though they are tiny, they have a ferocious stare, as you can see in the pictures. I have heard elf owls around the house at night in the deep darkness where I can't see. I have



hoped for over 20 years to catch a glimpse of one, maybe poking its head out of a hole in a saguaro. So today, I not only got to see one, I got to see 2 and I watched them for probably 10 minutes.

Then one flew away but the other continued to stare me down so I thought I should leave it in peace. I watched them for much longer than I watched the Yellow Billed Cuckoos. It

was quite the amazing birding morning!

9-17-2017

As I went outside this morning, I noticed the good morning committee on the power pole. It is hard for me to realize that vultures have babies.

They seem more like creatures that would spontaneously appear through fetid holes in the ground. But there on my power pole is a mother and baby albeit a mostly-grown baby. Hard to imagine a youngster being lovingly fed offal! But I love the vultures and they spend a lot of time here at my house in large groups on poles and fence posts. I



imagine with the cooling weather, they will move south soon.

The other photo is of



Acorn-Mart. The Acorn Woodpeckers have several snags up by Thumb Butte (Prescott area) that are riddled with holes they filled with acorns. The woodpeckers made the holes and then stuffed them with acorns. At one point I counted 5 Acorn Woodpeckers caching acorns on the same snag, so there isn't a territorial issue with them at all. For them it is just a giant store to be utilized

in the winter when other food is scarce. You can see one of the woodpeckers on a limb in the photo.

9-20-2017

This is my latest troll that looks like he is about to be shot by the firing squad. I need to un-stiffen him a bit! He was a lot of fun to make and is my sister's birthday present so don't tell her. He has a bird on his head in a nest on his hat and a basket full of kittens. What is more fun than a basket full of kittens!



9-22-2017

There is an inherent problem in continually topping my own stories and that is they need to be more and more incredible. I can't help but wonder what is next. I was visiting with my friends Carolyn and Phil in Yarnell today, and we were hiking down the wash by Phil's house not far from his house. Phil's dog was along. Carolyn and Phil brought up the notion that I am incredibly lucky about seeing interesting wildlife and maybe my luck would bring us something interesting for the day.

We were about 300 or so feet from Phil's house with Phil in front of me and his dog ranging around and Carolyn bringing up the rear. The going down the wash was rough and bouldery. Suddenly I heard loud growling and a great ruckus off to my left and out in front and Phil started yelling

"mountain lion!! Mountain lion!!"

In a flash, I saw a monster cat bound into view after Phil's dog!! The cat was maybe 30 or so feet in front of me clearly visible, right out in the open, I saw the dark tawny fur and the muscles bunched beneath the fur of the haunch as it bounded after the dog.

I started yelling at Phil to get his dog before the cat did, and then suddenly the dog was behind the cat. The cat turned and faced me for an instant, I saw the beautiful markings of its face and noticed the long tail and felt incredible wonder at seeing this huge cat but wasn't afraid of it, only afraid for the dog! The cat ran down the wash with all of us scrambling after it, me yelling at Phil that I wanted a photo!

But he kept running, and the dog treed the cat! I scurried as fast as I could over boulders to the tree to try to get a photo of the cat, who had a rather vicious countenance at that point, facing us, hissing and growling, and it was the first time I thought maybe chasing a mountain lion might not be the best idea. Moki the dog was at the base of the tree barking and carrying on.

Just as I got close enough to start taking photos, it appeared to me that the limb the cat was on (this was a very small oak tree that wasn't very tall and the cat was probably only a little over head high up it) broke and the cat plummeted to the wash whereupon Moki the dog foolishly (in my opinion) instantly took off after the fleeing cat!

Dog and cat vanished completely but, Phil called the dog who eventually came back, probably unable to keep up with the fleet feline! What an exciting but quick few minutes!! When we all regrouped I smiled broadly at Phil and Carolyn and said "was that me?? Was it once again my luck??" and we all thought that must be the case.

But after chasing mountain lions, what is in store for me next???