

Strike up the Band



JULIE HAMMONDS

JUST BEFORE DAWN, THE MUSIC STARTS, RIFFS AND RUMORS IN THE AIR LIKE THE FIRST NOTES FROM AN ORCHESTRA TUNING UP AT THE FAR EDGE OF A PARK. Getting out of my car I'm greeted by this hint of birdsong; nothing too organized yet, just distant cheeps and warbles as the hidden musicians in the trees tune up. I slide the binoculars over my shoulders and start walking, determined not to miss the performance.

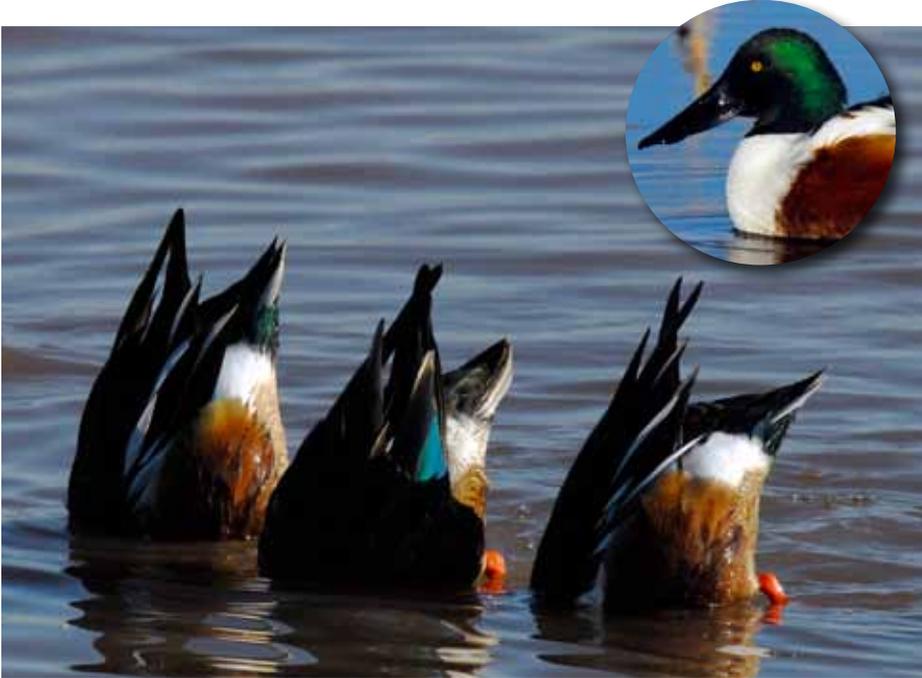
Sunrise is a maestro lifting a golden baton skyward. Flocks of yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds respond, burbling madly. Walking the trails alone, I peer between foliage for a glimpse of nearby ponds. Windows in the bulrushes

That's right. The dazzling dawn chorus, the morning's birding, the sneak peak into the lives of two raccoons: It's all happening at a manmade wetland.

and cattails reveal flocks of mallards and American coots, along with solitary pied-billed grebes. The grebes are silent, but the ducks quack quietly, exclaiming over food or warning off competitors. Newcomers on the wing announce their arrival with a splashy fanfare.

Ponds farther from the entrance of this wildlife-viewing area hold even more ducks. A flight of American wigeons whistles overhead and veers in for a landing among a crowd of Northern shovelers. Ruddy ducks mingle in singles and pairs. The ponds are busy, and not just with ducks: Startled by movement, I spy a raccoon standing at the pond's edge, staring into the undergrowth.

What is it looking at so intently? Amid the cacophony of birdsong, only this creature is quiet. The raccoon's ears swivel, but its eyes never wander from some hidden object of fascination. After a few tense minutes, movement: Another raccoon emerges. The first raccoon stomps its feet and makes a huffing noise. The second raccoon stops



NORTHERN SHOVELER PHOTOS BY GEORGE ANDREJKO



GEORGE ANDREJKO



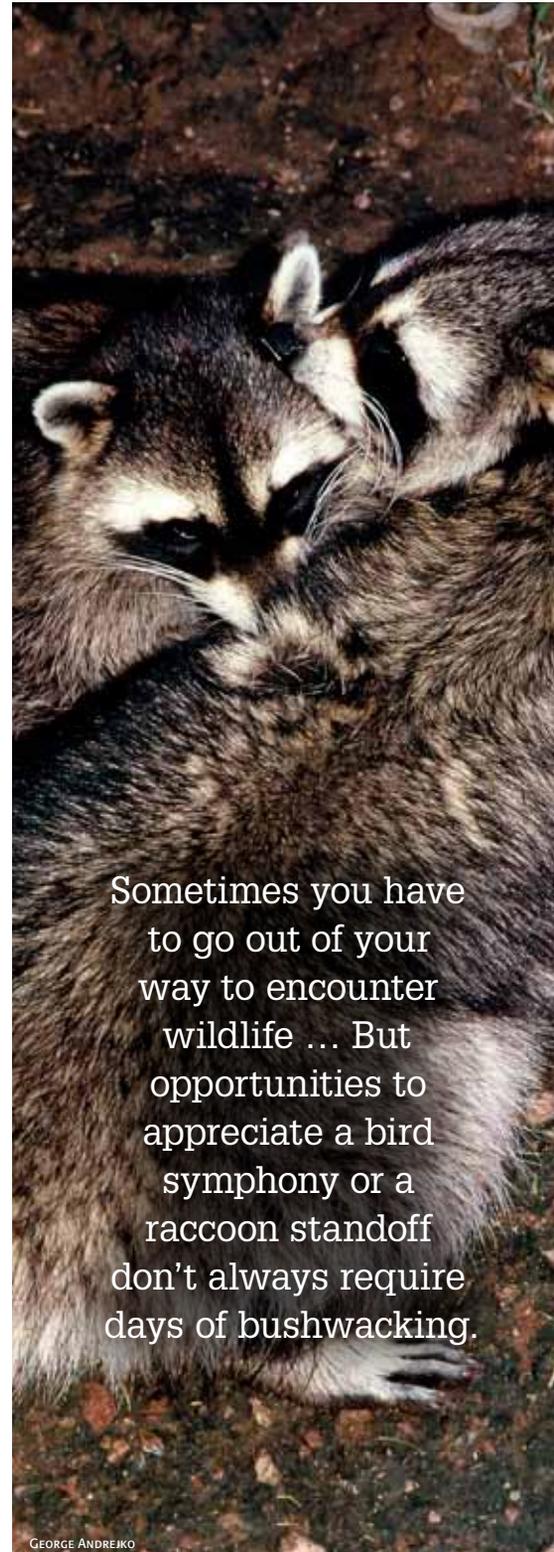
GEORGE ANDREJKO

Wetlands are wetlands, as far as birds are concerned. Sweetwater Wetlands attracts hundreds of species, including Northern shoveler (top), American wigeon (bottom left) and American coot (bottom right).

and crouches down low, a posture I interpret as submissive. I'm wrong, evidently: The first raccoon backs up slowly as if cowed, never looking away from the newcomer. Finally reaching cover, it turns and escapes into the bushes. A moment later, the second raccoon vanishes back the way it came.

Sometimes you have to go out of your way to encounter wildlife: not just "over the river and through the woods" but off even

the roughest road, over the farthest ridge, down the untracked wash, and as far away from other people as possible. But opportunities to appreciate a bird symphony or a raccoon standoff don't always require days of bushwacking. Just off Interstate 10 not far from busy downtown Tucson, I'm experiencing a fine morning of wildlife watching ... at Sweetwater Wetlands, adjacent to the Roger Road Wastewater Treatment Facility.



GEORGE ANDREJKO

Sometimes you have to go out of your way to encounter wildlife ... But opportunities to appreciate a bird symphony or a raccoon standoff don't always require days of bushwacking.

A Visit to Sweetwater

Sweetwater Wetlands in Tucson is located on Sweetwater Drive, which can be reached using the Prince Road offramp from Interstate 10 (southbound) or from Prince Road itself. The facility is open 364 days a year (closed one day a year for vegetation-control activities). There is no entrance fee. Posted hours:

- **Tuesday–Sunday:** Dawn to approximately one hour after dusk.
- **Monday:** 8 a.m. to approximately one hour after dusk.
- Gates are locked one hour after dusk.

FROM WASTEWATER TO WILDLIFE HABITAT

That's right. The dazzling dawn chorus, the morning's birding, the sneak peak into the lives of two raccoons: It's all happening at a manmade wetland. Most of the water that flows in Sweetwater's ponds is produced when the filters are cleaned at Tucson Water's reclaimed water treatment plant.

I know what you're thinking: Ugh. A wastewater treatment plant? That's where the stuff that drains and flushes out of Tucson homes goes to be treated. How could this be a good place to watch wildlife? It's sure to be gross, right?

It's not like that, I promise. Instead of mud that doesn't bear close inspection and a certain odor in the air, the settling ponds at modern wastewater treatment facilities offer diverse plant life and multitudes of wildlife. Many such areas — including Sweetwater — are developed with walking paths, viewing platforms and signs to help you identify that elusive creature you saw. Such areas are close to town and open to the public just about every day, free of charge. If you are looking for a place to connect with nature, try your local manmade wetland.

According to Bruce Prior, a hydrologist for Tucson Water, Sweetwater was developed in cooperation with a citizens advisory committee that included the Tucson Audubon Society, among others.

A green heron watches over one of the ponds at Sweetwater Wetlands (right).



Many such areas — including Sweetwater — are developed with walking paths, viewing platforms and signs to help you identify that elusive creature you saw.

JULIE HAMMONDS



JULIE HAMMONDS

According to the “Sweetwater Wetlands Bird Checklist,” ... more than 230 species of birds now can be seen in this area.

He praises the committee for their vision of what Sweetwater would become. “They didn’t want it to look too engineered,” he says. “They wanted it to be natural. When you visit, you see there aren’t too many straight lines here. Everything is curved.” From the pathways to the ponds to the many different plants growing on the site, all the area’s details were selected to produce a natural effect.

In the planning phase, “We were worried about whether we would have to bring in ducks and other wildlife,” Prior says. The planners asked people who had worked on other reclaimed-water wetlands in Arizona for their opinions. “They said, ‘Build it and they will come.’ Just put water in the ground. The ducks will show up.” Not to mention the songbirds, raptors and shorebirds: According to the “Sweetwater Wetlands Bird Checklist,” available from the Tucson Audubon Society, more than 230 species of birds now can be seen in this area.

In a dry state such as Arizona, it’s especially true that where water goes, wildlife follows. There are places like Sweetwater Wetlands all across Arizona. Wherever wastewater is reclaimed, you can find wildlife habitat and wildlife-watching



GEORGE ANDREJKO

GEORGE ANDREJKO

Pied-billed grebes (top) and other water-loving wildlife can be seen at mandmade wetlands throughout Arizona, including Kachina Wetlands, Tres Rios Wetlands, and Pintail Lake (top left to bottom right).

opportunities — often enhanced with trails, facilities, public programs and signage.

In addition to Sweetwater, arguably the most famous of these is the Riparian Preserve at Water Ranch in Gilbert, Ariz., a suburb of Phoenix (see sidebar). In other parts of the state, reclaimed wetlands that have been developed to some extent for wildlife watchers and photographers include:

- Tres Rios Wetlands, Phoenix
- Pumphouse Wash/Kachina Wetlands, Flagstaff
- Sierra Vista Environmental Operations Park, Sierra Vista
- Pintail Lake (Allen Severson Memorial Wildlife Area), Show Low
- Jacques Marsh, Lakeside

Wetlands such as these aren’t just for birds and birdwatchers: A visit can yield sightings of bats, dragonflies, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians, as well.



GEORGE ANDREJKO

Sure, the habitat is serving a purpose, in addition to attracting wildlife. It’s filtering water that has seen a lot of use. But a visit is not the smelly or messy experience you might think. In fact, trekking to your local reclaimed wetland to watch wildlife can be a downright fruitful expedition: no wilderness experience required.

A LITTLE DUSK MUSIC

The symphony of birds at Sweetwater quiets down a bit during the warmer part of the day, but as dusk approaches, the marsh wrens start buzzing again, the warblers

That's one of the gifts of wildlife watching: The chance to witness a moment in the life of an animal.

start warbling and the blackbirds strike up the band and burble their hearts out. The ponds turn orange in the late light, with the big-shouldered Catalina Mountains glowing in the distance.

At this point in the day, I am toting a heavy camera with a long lens. Carrying a camera changes my attitude. I pay more attention to birds if they're in decent light and at a good angle. I also take more time. If a location looks good, I'll wait awhile to see what develops.

Sometimes nothing does. But other times, you get a gift, like the bright yellow Cassin's vireo that flits over my head and lands on a branch to consume an unlucky moth. Because I'm already here, with my big camera set up on its tripod, all I have to do is swing the big glass into position and aim. In the late sunlight, I have a perfect view.

When the bird is done eating, I start off for one last walk along the trails. As clouds turn pink overhead, I watch flights of ducks



JULIE HAMMONDS

A Cassin's vireo eats an afternoon snack on a branch at Sweetwater Wetlands.

land on the ponds, some splashing long trails across the water, others settling with a plop. At the trail's edge, my eyes spot the sinuous outline of a snake, curving near some reeds. Moving closer, I see a pattern of black diamonds in faint relief against deep gray. The snake is about 4 feet long and has an elegant, smooth head, with yellow along its jaw and sides.

The snake is not alarmed as I stand still, watching it slither along the path's edge. I think back to the raccoons, as well as all the birds that sang for me today. None of them tried to avoid me. That's one of the gifts of wildlife watching: The chance to

witness a moment in the life of an animal.

Eventually, the snake slides into the reeds and is lost to sight in the dusky light. Later, I look it up in "A Field Guide to Amphibians and Reptiles of Arizona." This common kingsnake is the first snake I've ever seen on my own in the wild. The encounter was so calm on both sides that I look forward to seeing more snakes ... a wish that may come true, someday, perhaps while I listen to a chorus of birdsong at another reclaimed wetland. 🦋

■ The author shares her thoughts on writing about wildlife at words4wildlife.wordpress.com.

Gilbert's Riparian Preserve at Water Ranch



JULIE HAMMONDS

Ask a birder or bird photographer where to go in Arizona, and the Riparian Preserve at Water Ranch in Gilbert, Ariz., is sure to be at or near the top of the list.

Among the state's premier reclaimed wetlands for wildlife, the 110-acre preserve offers miles of trails alongside large ponds. Close to 200 bird species have been sighted here, including all the birds common to the Sonoran Desert, plus more species usually found near water. On and along the area's ponds, herons, egrets, waterfowl, black-necked stilts and other shorebirds can be seen — and the watery vistas are especially pleasant when you're looking for a change from the desert.

Visitors to the preserve run the gamut from serious photographers stalking elusive images to families pushing strollers while delighted

toddlers point at the ducks. The Riparian Preserve is family-friendly, offering plenty of places to picnic, play and explore.

Public programs and classes help people get to know the place better. In addition to walking and watching wildlife on your own, visitors may take guided bird walks and naturalist walks led by experts. Other public programs include garden tours, dragonfly/butterfly walks and observatory programs. On March 26, the Feathered Friends Festival is sure to draw a crowd. These events are offered through the Riparian Institute, a nonprofit organization formed by the town of Gilbert to develop and promote the Riparian Preserve project.

The preserve is located at 2757 E. Guadalupe Road, next to the Southeast Regional Library.