

Atascosa Highlands

IBA web pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://aziba.org/?page_id=2730 • NAS Site 2289 • AzGFD Conservation Opportunity Area
Priority	State
Qualifying Criteria	<p>State Site Important to Special Status Avian Species (<i>Mexican Spotted Owl, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Golden Eagle, Elegant Trogon, Rose-throated Becard, Eastern (Azure) Bluebird, Arizona Woodpecker, Five-striped Sparrow, Montezuma Quail, Elf Owl, Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Bell's Vireo, Lucy's Warbler, Peregrine Falcon, Gray Hawk, Buff-collared Nightjar, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Yellow Warbler, Whiskered Screech Owl, Gila Woodpecker, Botteri's Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow Rufous-winged Sparrow, Five-striped Sparrow, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Desert Purple Martin, Thick-billed Kingbird, Tropical Kingbird, Varied Bunting</i>)</p> <p>Rare, Unique, or Exceptional Representative Habitat/Ecological Community (<i>Riparian/Thornscrub</i>)</p> <p>Diversity/concentration of breeding land birds (<i>95 potentially breeding species</i>)</p>
IBA Polygon Center Point (Latitude, Longitude)	31.65°N 110.53°W
Size	200, 320 acres
County	Santa Cruz
Local Communities	Ruby, Arivaca, Rio Rico, Nogales
Description	<p>The Atascosa Highlands are comprised of three small closely spaced mountain ranges on the United States and Mexico border just west of Nogales - the Tumacacori Mountains, the Atascosa Mountains, and the Pajarito Mountains. The San Luis Mountains lie just to the west of these three mountain ranges. These ranges are continuous with similar highlands that stretch southward into Mexico. Although unimposing in elevation, the Atascosa Highlands have sharp ridges, steep slopes, and rocky cliffs that limit the number of roads and give the area a feeling of remoteness. The vegetation is scattered evergreen oak woodlands on north facing slopes with scrub-grasslands on south facing slopes.</p> <p>Within this IBA are Sycamore Canyon and California Gulch, both managed by the Coronado National Forest. Both can be accessed from Ruby Road and both flow southward to Mexico's northern border.</p> <p>Sycamore Canyon contains a mix of Madrean evergreen oak woodland and Sonoran desert-dominated habitat as well as significant reaches of high-elevation riparian forest with species including Fremont cottonwood, willow, and velvet mesquite, with scattered Arizona</p>

	<p>sycamore. The canyon is relatively shallow and narrow with intermittent flowing reaches and pools. It supports such a diverse plant community (over 625 species) that it has been designated as a Goodding Research Natural Area. Partially thanks to this flora, the canyon also boasts up to 95 breeding species, one of the highest breeding bird diversity concentrations in Arizona. California Gulch is unique with quality Thornscrub habitat, a dense shrub layer on its steep sides, and a perennial spring-fed stream. Both canyons support several Mexican species that are rare in the United States.</p>
<p>Mission/Goals</p>	<p>To support and protect a significant example of riparian and Thornscrub habitats and the populations of migrant and breeding birds that depend on them.</p>
<p>Current Habitat Conservation, Planning, and Management Activities</p>	<p>Management of this IBA is guided by the Coronado National Forest Land Management Plan and border traffic enforcement priorities.</p>
<p>Land Cover Type¹ (%) and Associated Priority² Birds</p> <p>¹Southwest Regional Gap Analysis modified to align with ABBA/SWAP habitat types</p> <p>²AGFD SGCN and IBA Qualifying Species</p>	<p>39.77 Semiarid/Sonoran Savannah Grassland (<i>Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Eastern (Azure) Bluebird, Montezuma Quail, Gila Woodpecker, Botteri’s Sparrow, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Chihuahuan Meadowlark, Common Nighthawk</i>)</p> <p>31.08 Mexican Evergreen Woodland (<i>Mexican Spotted Owl, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Elegant Trogon, Arizona Woodpecker, Buff-collared Nightjar, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Whiskered Screech Owl, Western Screech Owl, Common Nighthawk, Eastern (Azure) Bluebird</i>)</p> <p>22.33 Chihuahuan Desertscrub (<i>Five-striped Sparrow, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Varied Bunting, Peregrine Falcon, Golden Eagle, Costa’s Hummingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, Gila Woodpecker, Verdin, Canyon Towhee Common Nighthawk</i>)</p> <p>3.64 Rock (<i>Peregrine Falcon</i>)</p> <p>1.79 Riparian, Mesquite and Wash: (<i>Mexican Spotted Owl, Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Elegant Trogon, Rose-throated Becard, Arizona Woodpecker, Five-striped Sparrow, Elf Owl, Bell’s Vireo, Lucy’s Warbler, Peregrine Falcon, Gray Hawk, Buff-collared Nightjar, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Yellow Warbler, Western Screech Owl, Gila Woodpecker, Lincoln’s Sparrow, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Desert Purple Martin, Thick-billed Kingbird, Tropical Kingbird, Varied Bunting, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Northern Pygmy Owl, Eastern (Azure) Bluebird</i>)</p> <p>1.37 Other (Pinyon Pine-Juniper Woodland, Interior Chaparral, Madrean Pine-Oak Woodland, Sonoran Desertscrub, Urban/Residential) (<i>Mexican Spotted Owl, Elf Owl, Whiskered Screech Owl, Costa’s Hummingbird, Gila Woodpecker, Desert Purple Martin, Common Nighthawk, Eastern (Azure) Bluebird, Black-chinned Sparrow,</i></p>

	<p><i>Loggerhead Shrike, Cactus Wren, Verdin, Canyon Towhee, Pyrrhuloxia)</i></p>
<p>Related Habitat Accounts*</p>	<p>Low Grassland Madrean Pine-Oak Lowland Riparian Sonoran Desert Pinyon Juniper</p>
<p>Biological Description</p>	<p>This IBA is most known for its importance to Mexican species that, because they are at the northernmost edge of their ranges, are rare in the United States. Two sites within the IBA stand out in this regard – Sycamore Canyon and California Gulch</p> <p>Sycamore Canyon has a very high concentration of nesting IBA priority bird species. According to the Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas (ABBA), 95 species of birds were either confirmed nesting or designated as probable or possible nesting species in or adjacent to Sycamore Canyon. This is one of the highest breeding bird diversity concentrations in Arizona. ABBA surveys also discovered this unique area was found to have the lowest elevation breeding populations of many avian species in Arizona. These include: Spotted Owl, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Whip-poor-will, Acorn Woodpecker, Arizona Woodpecker, Elegant Trogon, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Rose-throated Becard, Eastern Bluebird, Painted Redstart, Hepatic Tanager, and Black-headed Grosbeak.</p> <p>Through the years, this rugged canyon has attracted many resident and visiting birders in hopes of viewing the rare Mexican species that have occasionally been reported. These include such birds as the Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Rufous-capped Warbler, Fan-tailed Warbler, and Yellow Grosbeak. Additionally, during ABBA surveys in 1993 and 1994, 3-4 pair of Rose-throated Becard were found nesting in Sycamore Canyon. This is one of the highest concentrations ever found for this species in Arizona and in the United States.</p> <p>California Gulch has a small but consistent population of Five-striped Sparrows, a species of conservation status. Excluding island nesters, this sparrow probably has the smallest regularly occupied breeding range of any bird in the United States. This range is restricted to the Pajarito, Patagonia, and sometimes the southern Santa Rita Mountains. This IBA has the best habitat for Five-striped Sparrow within their U.S. range. Additionally, the canyon supports nesting Gray Hawk, Montezuma Quail, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Tropical Kingbird, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, and Lucy’s Warbler, all of which are species of conservation status. The canyon also supports Buff-collared Nightjar, a rare species in Arizona.</p>

<p>Focal Bird Species</p> <p>Bold Type are Road to Recovery species</p>	<p><u>AGFD Species of Greatest Conservation Need (2022)</u></p> <p>Tier 1: Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Mexican Spotted Owl, Peregrine Falcon, Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo</p> <p>Tier 2: Abert’s Towhee, American Kestrel, Arizona Woodpecker, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Black-Throated Sparrow, Black-chinned Sparrow, Botteri’s Sparrow, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Buff-collared Nightjar, Bullock’s Oriole, Cactus Wren, Canyon Towhee, Common Nighthawk, Costa’s Hummingbird, Desert Purple Martin, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Eastern (Azure) Bluebird, Elegant Trogon, Five-striped Sparrow, Gila Woodpecker, Hooded Oriole, Inca Dove, Lincoln’s Sparrow, Prairie Falcon, Rose-throated Becard, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Scott’s Oriole, Thick-billed Kingbird, Verdin, Western Screech Owl, Whiskered Screech Owl</p> <p><u>Federal Threatened or Endangered Species</u></p> <p>Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Mexican Spotted Owl, Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo,</p> <p><u>USFWS Birds of Conservation Concern</u></p> <p>National – Arizona Woodpecker, Bell’s Vireo, Lucy’s Warbler, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Five-striped Sparrow, Varied Bunting, Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo</p> <p>USFWS Region – Bell’s Vireo, Botteri’s Sparrow, Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Five-striped Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Lucy’s Warbler, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Varied Bunting, Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Yellow Warbler</p>
<p>NABCI Bird Conservation Region</p>	<p>34: Sierra Madre Occidental</p>
<p>Ownership</p>	<p>Coronado National Forest</p>
<p>Conservation Land Status**</p>	<p>National Forest</p>
<p>Human Population Density</p>	<p>Rural</p>
<p>Legislative District(s)</p>	<p>Arizona Congressional District 7 and State Legislative District 21</p>
<p>NRCS Major Land Resource Area</p>	<p>53: Southeastern Arizona Basin and Range</p>
<p>Visitation, main access, and permits needed</p>	<p>From Tucson: Go south on I-19 to Exit 12 to access Ruby Road. Go west on Ruby Road into the Atascosa Highlands. Ruby Rd is the main access point into this area. Other exits off I-19 are access points for areas further north such as Rock Corral Canyon. Virtually all of this land is open to the public and there are some relatively well-known</p>

	areas favored by birders such as Sycamore Canyon, Pena Blanca Lake, Arivaca Lake and California Gulch. There are also less known excellent birding areas such as Walker Canyon, Pena Blanca Canyon and Rock Corral Canyon.
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*References available written narratives (located on the [SJV website](#)) for general habitat types occurring within the IBA.

**Identifies whether the IBA or portions of the IBA have a special land management designation such as: wilderness, primitive area, wildlife area, refuge, park, monument, designated conservation area, conservation easement, or other similar designation

IBA Activities:

Issue or Activity	Priority	Description	Actions
CBC	M	Within the Atascosa CBC	Extract IBA data from CBC
AZ IBA Surveys	H	Annual trogon surveys and encourage eBird entries	TAS lead
IBA Trogon Surveys	H	Breeding surveys	Annual – TAS lead
Yellow-billed cuckoo surveys	M	USFWS Breeding Survey Protocol	As funding is available
IBA Signage	H	Install signs identifying the site as an IBA	Signs made and with TAS
IBA Dedication	L	A formal recognition event	Pending IBA Review
Updated	April-2020		

Partners:

Name	Role(s)	Contact Information	Actions
Coronado National Forest	Land managers	Nogales Ranger District 303 Old Tucson Road (520) 281-2296 http://www.fs.usda.gov/coronado/	Review and approve mini-conservation plan
Tucson Audubon Society	IBA Steward	300 E University Blvd # 120, Tucson, AZ 85705 (520) 629-0510 tucsonaudubon.org/	Advocacy and bird surveys

Conservation Targets:

These are species, communities, or ecological systems that represent and encompass the full array of biodiversity found in this IBA.

Conservation Target	Current Condition
Semi-arid Grassland Birds	Good
Desert Scrub Birds	Very Good
Madrean Oak Woodland Birds	Very Good
Riparian Birds	Very Good

Conservation Challenges:

Conservation challenges are primarily human activities that immediately affect what we are trying to conserve. Through a Miradi process, it was found that drought and mining pollution pose the greatest threats to birds within this IBA.

Challenges	Semi-arid Grassland Birds	Desert Scrub Birds	Madrean Oak Woodland Birds	Riparian Birds	Summary Rating
Woody Plant Invasion	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
Grazing	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Drought	Medium	Low	High	High	High
Mining Pollution	Low	Low	Medium	High	Medium
Wild Fire	Low	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
Summary Ratings:	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium

Atascosa Highlands				Severity (1-3)	Scope (1-3)	Permanence (2-4)
Threats on National Database						
Forest Grazing		4		1	2	1
Extraction Industry	Pollution from mining (at a site)	6		1	2	3
Natural events	Fire, Drought	8		3	2	3

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