

Las Cienegas National Conservation Area

IBA web pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://aziba.org/?page_id=2358 • https://www.audubon.org/important-bird-areas/las-cienegas-national-conservation-area • AzGFD Conservation Opportunity Area
Priority	Global (Pending) State
Qualifying Criteria	<p>Global: <i>Chestnut-collared Longspur</i></p> <p>State: Species of Conservation Concern <i>Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Gray Hawk, Montezuma Quail, Cassin's Sparrow, Botteri's Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Lucy's Warbler, Sprague's Pipit, Baird's Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur</i></p> <p>Species in rare/unique habitat <i>Desert Grassland, Sacaton Grassland, and Low-elevation Riparian</i></p>
IBA Polygon Center Point (Latitude, Longitude)	31.78° N, 110.58° W
Size	37807 acres
County	Pima and Santa Cruz
Local Communities	Tucson, Sonoita
Description	<p>A lush green ribbon of vegetation defines one of the most significant riparian zones in southern Arizona. Cienega Creek gets its name from the cienegas, or marshes, which occur along its length. This rare vegetation community has nearly disappeared in the Southwest.</p> <p>Humans have made their living here for 10,000 years or more. This area is also part of one of Arizona's oldest working ranches, the Empire Ranch, which has been in operation since the 1860's. Members of the surrounding community care deeply about this landscape, and involve themselves in conservation and management concerns through the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership and other local groups. The Bureau of Land Management recognized these natural and cultural resource values when it acquired this parcel in 1988, managed it as the Empire-Cienega Conservation Area, and worked with stakeholders to develop an ecosystem management plan for the site. The U.S. Congress further recognized the site as a national treasure, elevating its designation to the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area in 2001.</p> <p>More than 45,000 acres of grasslands and woodlands in Arizona's Pima and Santa Cruz counties are protected as the Las Cienegas</p>

	<p>National Conservation Area. The region’s rolling grasslands, oak-studded hills that connect several “sky island mountain ranges”, and lush riparian corridors are irresistible to both people and wildlife. Cienega Creek, with its perennial flow and lush riparian corridor, forms the lifeblood of the NCA and supports a diverse plant and animal community.</p> <p>This area is used for many purposes and its proximity to Arizona’s second largest city has caused it to be used heavily for recreation. Land use is approximately 80% recreation, 10% transportation and 10% grazing.</p>
Mission/Goals	To conserve and protect unique examples of desert grassland, Sacaton grassland, and low-elevation riparian habitat and the populations of special status avian species that depend on them.
Current Habitat Conservation, Planning, and Management Activities	BLM is currently implementing a grassland restoration project on 20,000 acres of degraded habitat at Las Cienegas. By mechanically thinning mesquite woodlands, they hope to reestablish a healthy grassland ecosystem for the benefit of wildlife and all who wish to enjoy it. In addition, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the site’s conservation steward, is working with the Arizona Antelope Foundation to reintroduce prairie dogs to the site.
<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>70.60 Semiarid/Sonoran Savannah Grassland (<i>Montezuma Quail, Cassin’s Sparrow, Botteri’s Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Sprague’s Pipit, Baird’s Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur</i>)</p> <p>19.39 Chihuahuan Desertscrub</p> <p>4.84 Riparian (<i>Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Gray Hawk, Lucy’s Warbler</i>)</p> <p>2.43 Mexican Evergreen Woodland</p> <p>1.05 Wash</p> <p>1.02 Interior Chaparral</p> <p>0.68 Other (Pinyon Pine-Juniper Woodland, Rock, Sonoran Desertscrub: Lower Colorado River, Mesquite)</p>
Related Habitat Accounts*	<p>Low Grassland</p> <p>Sonoran Desert</p> <p>Lowland Riparian</p> <p>Madrean Pine-Oak</p>
Biological Description	The Las Cienegas National Conservation Area hosts one of the finest grassland valleys left in the southwestern United States. In addition, this grassland watershed supports some ten miles of perennial stream - a rare gem of green running through southern Arizona’s arid landscape. Together these grasslands and wetlands provide homes for a remarkable array of wildlife, including over 230 bird, 60 mammal, and 40 reptile and amphibian species - including at least five endangered species.

	<p>This area has five of the rarest habitat types in the American Southwest: cienegas, cottonwood-willow riparian areas, sacaton grasslands, mesquite bosques, and semidesert grasslands. In a state where desert arroyos, washes, and many streambeds remain bone-dry most of the time, the year-round flow of Cienega Creek makes it a highly valuable resource.</p> <p>Arizona IBA surveys have documented wintering Chestnut-collared Longspurs in high enough numbers to qualify this site as a Global IBA on two separate occasions. This area is also very important for summer nesting sparrows such as Cassin’s Botteri’s and Grasshopper Sparrow. These monsoon-associated nesting sparrows can be found here in abundance during the summer. There are also White-tailed Kites and other raptors that use this area with at least one report of White-tailed Kites nesting within the Las Cienegas NCA. Empire Gulch does contain nesting Western Yellow-billed Cuckoos and is an important migration area.</p>
<p>Focal Bird Species</p> <p>Bold Type are Road to Recovery species</p>	<p><u>AGFD Species of Greatest Conservation Need</u></p> <p><u>Tier 1:</u> American Peregrine Falcon, Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher</p> <p><u>Tier 2:</u> Abert’s Towhee, American Kestrel, American Pipit, Azure Bluebird, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Black-throated Sparrow, Botteri’s Sparrow, Brewer’s Sparrow, Bullock’s Oriole, Canyon Towhee, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Chihuahuan Raven, Common Nighthawk, Gila Woodpecker, Golden Eagle, Grasshopper Sparrow, Hermit Thrush, Hooded Oriole, Horned Lark, Killdeer, Lark Bunting, Lincoln’s Sparrow, Loggerhead Shrike, Long-eared Owl (Northern), Northern Harrier, Prairie Falcon, Pyrrhuloxia, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Scaled Quail, Scott’s Oriole, Sprague’s Pipit, Swainson’s Hawk, Swainson’s Thrush, Thick-billed Longspur, Vesper Sparrow, Western Burrowing Owl, Western Screech-Owl</p> <p><u>Federal Threatened or Endangered Species</u></p> <p>Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher</p> <p><u>USFWS Birds of Conservation Concern</u></p> <p>National – Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Lucy’s Warbler, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Baird’s Sparrow,</p> <p>USFWS Region – Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Sprague’s Pipit, Lucy’s Warbler, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Botteri’s Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Baird’s Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur</p>
<p>NABCI Bird Conservation Region</p>	<p>34: Sierra Madre Occidental</p>

Ownership	Bureau of Land Management
Conservation Land Status**	National Conservation Area
Human Population Density	Rural
Legislative District(s)	Arizona Congressional Districts 6 and 7 and State Legislative District 19
NRCS Major Land Resource Area	41: Southeastern Arizona Basin and Range
Visitation, main access, and permits needed	From Tucson: Head east on I-10 to Highway 83 then head south. Before the junction of 83 and 82 at Sonoita is the west entrance to Las Cienegas towards Empire Ranch. You can also go east on the 82 and head north into the south entrance of Las Cienegas. Some areas are private and signed. There are roads that are open to the public that travel through the NCA.

*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
Bird Monitoring	H	AZ IBA Surveys winter longspur surveys	TAS lead- Encourage eBird entries
Bird Monitoring	M	Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Southwestern Willow Flycatcher	BLM Lead
IBA Signage	M	Install signs identifying the site as an IBA	Partial-TAS lead
IBA Dedication	M	A formal recognition event	Completed 2024

Partners:

Name	Role(s)	Contact Information	Actions
Bureau of Land Management, Las Cienegas NCA	Land Manager	Tucson Field Office 3201 East Universal Way Tucson, AZ 85756 Phone: (520) 258-7200 https://www.blm.gov/visit/las-cienegas-national-conservation-area	Restoration projects focused on riparian and grasslands. Prairie Dog introduction

Name	Role(s)	Contact Information	Actions
Tucson Audubon Society	IBA Steward	300 E University Blvd # 120, Tucson, AZ 85705 (520) 629-0510 tucsonaudubon.org/	Bird surveys, and advocacy
Cienega Watershed Partnership	Steward and Science	outreach@cienea.org (520) 548-9459 P.O. Box 903 Vail, AZ 85641	Annual Science on the Sonoita Plain Symposium
Arizona Game and Fish Department	Wildlife management	Region V 555 N. Greasewood Rd. Tucson, AZ 85745 520-628-5376	Prairie dog and pronghorn antelope management

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
Grassland Birds	Very Good
Desert Scrub Birds	Good
Riparian Birds	Good

Conservation Challenges:

Conservation challenges are primarily human activities that immediately affect what we are trying to conserve. Through a Miradi process, impacts to groundwater from mining and woody plant invasion in grasslands pose the greatest threats to birds within this IBA.

Challenges	Desert Scrub Birds	Grassland Birds	Riparian Birds	Summary Rating
Mining	Low	Low	Very High	Medium
Wild Fire	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Invasive Woody Plants	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Grazing	Low	Low	Medium	Low

**Important Bird Areas: Mini Conservation Plan
Las Cienegas NCA**

**Updated
April 2025**

Las Cienegas NCA		Severity (1-3)		Scope (1-3)	Permanence (2-4)	Immediacy (Optional 1-2)
Threats on National Database						
Forest Grazing						
Invasive Species	Mesquite/Acacia	3	1	1	1	
Extraction Industry	Rosemont Copper Mine	6	2	2	2	
		10	2	3	4	1

Las Cienegas National Conservation Area Important Bird Area

