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Arizona Game and Fish Department Heritage Fund 2025 Report to the Arizona Legislature

Project Year July 1, 2024 to June 30, 2025

Acknowledgments

The assistance of personnel throughout the Arizona Game and Fish Department (Department), and our external cooperators, in preparing this report and conducting the activities reported herein is gratefully acknowledged.

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Si desea hablar con un representante de servicio al cliente bilingüe para obtener información llame al (602) 942-3000 de lunes a viernes de 8:00 a.m. A 5:00 p.m. Y luego ingrese el

número. 5 durante el mensaje grabado.

Project Funding

Title 17, Chapter 2, Article 6. Arizona Game and Fish Commission Heritage Fund

§ 17-296. Definitions

In this article:

1. “Public access” means providing entry to publicly held lands for recreational use where such entry is consistent with the provisions establishing those lands.
2. “Sensitive habitat” means the specific areas within the geographical area historically or currently occupied by a species or community of species in which are found those physical or biological features essential to the establishment or continued existence of the species and which may require special management, conservation or protection considerations.
3. “Endangered species” means a species or subspecies of native Arizona wildlife whose population has been reduced due to any cause whatsoever to such levels that it is in imminent danger of elimination from its range in Arizona, or has been eliminated from its range in Arizona.
4. “Threatened species” means a species or subspecies of native Arizona wildlife that, although not presently in imminent danger of being eliminated from its range in Arizona, is likely to become an endangered species in the foreseeable future.
5. “Candidate species” means a species or subspecies of native Arizona wildlife for which habitat or population threats are known or suspected but for which substantial population declines from historic levels have not been documented.
6. “Urban wildlife” means the wildlife that occurs within the limits of an incorporated area or in close proximity to an urban area that receives significant impact from human use.
7. “Environmental education” means educational programs dealing with basic ecological principles and the effects of natural and man related processes on natural and urban systems and programs to enhance public awareness of the importance of safeguarding natural resources.
8. “Habitat evaluation” means the assessment of the status, condition and ecological value of habitat and subsequent recommendations of management, conservation or other protection measures, or mitigation measures, including but not limited to, recommendation of reasonable alternatives for the proposed projects that might otherwise affect the habitat under assessment.
9. “Habitat protection” means the process of protecting the quality, diversity, abundance,

and serviceability of habitats for the purposes of maintaining or recovering populations of Arizona wildlife.

§ 17-297. Arizona Game and Fish Commission Heritage Fund

- A. The Arizona game and fish commission heritage fund is established consisting of monies deposited from the state lottery fund pursuant to section 5-572 and interest earned on those monies.
- B. The fund shall be administered by the Arizona game and fish commission and is not subject to appropriation and expenditures from the fund are not subject to outside approval notwithstanding any provision of section 17-241 or 17-261 or any other statutory provision to the contrary. Monies received pursuant to section 5-572 shall be deposited directly with the Arizona game and fish commission heritage fund. On notice from the Arizona state game and fish commission, the state treasurer shall invest and divest monies in the fund as provided by section 35-313, and monies earned from investment shall be credited to the fund.
- C. All monies in the Arizona game and fish commission heritage fund shall be spent by the Arizona game and fish commission only for the purposes and in the percentages set forth in this article. In no event shall any monies in the fund revert to the state general fund and monies in the fund are exempt from the provisions of section 35-190 relating to lapsing of appropriations.
- D. The commission shall not use its rights of eminent domain to acquire property to be paid for with money from the Arizona game and fish commission heritage fund.

§ 17-298. Expenditures from Fund; Purpose and Amounts; Annual Report

- A. Monies received pursuant to section 5-572 shall be spent as follows:
 - 1. Five percent on public access, including maintenance and operation expenses.
 - 2. Sixty percent on the identification, inventory, acquisition, protection and management, including maintenance and operations, of property with sensitive habitat. At least twenty percent of the monies available under this paragraph shall be spent to acquire property with sensitive habitat used by endangered, threatened and candidate species. Not more than twenty percent of the monies available under this paragraph may be spent on the operation and maintenance of the acquired property, including the acquired property's infrastructure. The commission may dispose of any lands acquired for use as habitat by an endangered, threatened or candidate species under this paragraph when the species no longer qualifies as an endangered, threatened or candidate species. The Arizona game and fish commission shall dispose of the land in a manner consistent with the preservation of the species of concern. The disposal may

include conservation easements and fee simple transfers with associated instruments of protection. The commission shall follow the guidelines established pursuant to section 37-803 relating to the disposition of real property by a state agency. In addition, disposal shall include a written agreement between the commission and the purchaser requiring the purchaser to incorporate management actions to ensure proper maintenance of the species of concern. Management actions may include maintenance of habitat, selective control of nonnative species, maintenance of genetic viability, monitoring of populations and habitat, coordinating conservation activities, funding conservation actions and assessing conservation progress.

3. Fifteen percent on habitat evaluation or habitat protection.
 4. Fifteen percent on urban wildlife and urban wildlife habitat programs.
 5. Five percent on environmental education.
- B. All monies earned as interest on monies received pursuant to section 5-572 shall be spent only in the percentages and for the purposes described in subsection A of this section or for costs of administering the Arizona game and fish commission heritage fund in such amounts as determined by the Arizona game and fish commission.
- C. On or before December 31, the commission shall submit its annual report to the president of the senate, the speaker of the house of representatives and the chairmen of the senate and house of representatives committees on natural resources and agriculture, or their successor committees, and shall provide a copy of this report to the secretary of state. The annual report shall include information on:
1. The amount of monies spent or encumbered in the fund during the preceding fiscal year and a summary of the projects, activities and expenditures relating to:
 - (a) Property acquisition, operation and maintenance.
 - (b) Identification, inventory, protection and management of sensitive habitat.
 - (c) Habitat evaluation and protection.
 - (d) Urban wildlife.
 - (e) Environmental education.
 - (f) Public access.
 2. The number and location of parcels of property acquired during the preceding fiscal year.
 3. For personal and real properties acquired with fund monies during the preceding fiscal year, the amount of property tax revenue paid to each taxing jurisdiction during the last full tax year prior to acquisition.
 4. The amount of money spent from the fund during the preceding fiscal year for employee personal services.
 5. The number of full-time employees employed in the preceding fiscal year in connection

with property acquisition, including survey, appraisal and other related activities.

6. The total number of full-time employees employed in the preceding fiscal year for the programs listed in subsection A of this section.
7. A list of the grants awarded during the preceding fiscal year, including information on the recipients, purposes and amounts.

Reporting Requirement

This Heritage Program Report to the Arizona Legislature is required under, and submitted in compliance with, Arizona Revised Statute § 17-298(C).

CONTENTS

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Page</u>
Acquisition	1
Identification, Inventory, Acquisition, Protection and Management of Sensitive Species	1
Habitat Evaluation and Protection	11
Urban Wildlife	14
Environmental Education	17
Public Access	20
Other Report Requirements	22

HERITAGE ACQUISITION

The Arizona Game and Fish Commission did not purchase any properties or conservation easements using Heritage acquisition funds during Fiscal Year (FY) 25.

HERITAGE IDENTIFICATION, INVENTORY, ACQUISITION, PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT OF SENSITIVE SPECIES

Heritage Identification, Inventory, Acquisition, Protection and Management (IIAPM) funds are combined with other funding sources, such as State Wildlife Grants (SWG) and Federal Pittman-Robertson Funds, to implement a wide variety of projects identified in Arizona's Wildlife Conservation Strategy (AWCS) the Department's version of the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). This leveraging of funds magnifies the return on investment by accomplishing critical conservation work throughout Arizona. In most cases, IIAPM funds provide a fiscal foundation that enables or entices other sources to contribute to making a conservation concept a reality. The projects below are just a few examples of hundreds of projects enabled by IIAPM funds thus far in Arizona.

Arizona Important Bird Areas - Community Science

Heritage IIAPM funding facilitates the support of Arizona's Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program. The IBA Program launched in 2001, is implemented by Audubon Southwest (with



collaboration of local Audubon chapters) and in coordination with the Arizona Bird Conservation Initiative. The Program identifies the most important sites for priority bird species and habitats, coordinates community-science bird inventory and monitoring, and promotes on-the-ground habitat projects. The IBA Program is closely tied to the Department's Wildlife

Conservation Strategy for conserving priority birds and helping to keep common species common, by pursuing actions to address stressors to habitats and to Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). To date, 48 IBAs have been identified in Arizona and include riparian and wetland habitats, southeastern "sky island" mountains, and grasslands. Sixteen of these IBAs are considered of global significance.

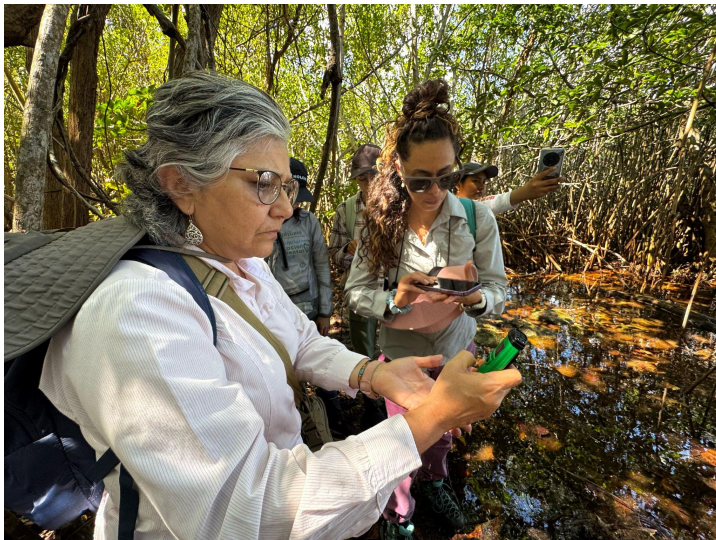
Phoenix Talussnail Surveys and Conservation

Among the rocky hills in the Phoenix metropolitan area and surrounding cities, there are numerous populations of a button-sized native snail called the Phoenix talussnail (*Sonorella allynsmithi*). Since 2016, Department-led surveys have documented 44 new populations of Phoenix talussnails in northeastern Maricopa County. Most of the known Phoenix talussnail populations occur in city and county mountain preserves. The Department is working closely with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in developing the Phoenix talussnail Species Status Assessment, prior to the USFWS evaluation of whether or not the species should be listed under the Endangered Species Act. The Arizona Heritage Fund supports Department-led efforts to survey and manage these unique desert-adapted snails.



2025 Wetlands Training Course and World Wetlands Day in Mexico

Arizona supports participation in wetlands conservation and training efforts in Mexico because



building technical capacity and collaborative stewardship for wetlands in Quintana Roo strengthens the conservation and management of habitats essential to migratory birds shared with Arizona. On February 2, 2025, the Department celebrated World Wetlands Day in collaboration with Mexico's National Commission for Protected Areas, the Government of the State of Quintana Roo, Mexico, the University of the Caribbean (UNICARIBE), and the Holcim Foundation. The ceremony took place

in the City of Puerto Morelos, Mexico. From February 24 to March 11, the Department implemented the 2025 Wetlands Training Course, focusing on the wetlands of Quintana Roo, Mexico. The Wetlands Training Course trained thirty-two students from local, state, and federal agencies; nongovernmental organizations focused on conservation; and universities, covering the definition, classification, delineation, evaluation, legislation, conservation, and management of wetlands in North America, with an emphasis on Mexican wetlands. The Wetlands Training Program in Mexico supports the Mission of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Partners in Flight, and Arizona Bird Conservation Plan.

Black-tailed prairie dog translocation in Sonora, Mexico

The states of Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, share part of the historic distribution range of the black-tailed prairie dog in North America. With only one colony left in the State of Sonora, the Department partnered with the Commission of Ecology and Sustainable Development of Sonora (CEDES) and established a new colony in a private ranch in northern Sonora. Ninety-eight prairie dogs were captured in southern Arizona in October 2024, transported across the US-Mexico border, and released into the grasslands



of the private ranch. In Mexico, the species is considered endangered by Mexican authorities. Arizona supports wildlife conservation efforts in Sonora, Mexico because collaborative recovery actions, such as translocating black-tailed prairie dogs to reestablish colonies within their shared historic range, strengthen the long-term viability of the species across the Arizona–Sonora landscape and directly advance regional conservation objectives.

Relict Leopard Frog Conservation



The relict leopard frog is a SGCN, and the subject of a multi-partner Conservation Agreement. This frog historically occurred in far northwestern Arizona along the Virgin River and other tributaries to the Colorado River. For nearly 10 years, the Department led a concerted and successful effort to remove invasive bullfrogs from Pakoon Springs, a remote site on the Arizona Strip, to provide habitat for relict leopard frogs. Working with partners at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas to obtain

captive-bred relict leopard frogs, the Department instigated the first translocation in 2022. In spring 2025, the Department and several partners performed three more relict leopard frog releases at Pakoon Springs. To date, this partnership successfully released nearly 2,000 relict leopard frog tadpoles and juvenile frogs at Pakoon Springs. The



Department has documented successful breeding for the third year, with the ultimate goal of a self-sustaining population following five years of releases in sight.

Narrow-headed Gartersnake Recovery

The narrow-headed gartersnake is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Throughout its Arizona distribution along the Mogollon Rim and foothills, the species faces threats from habitat loss, nonnative species, and factors that affect stream conditions such as drought and wildfires. Since 2009, the Department has been working with the USFWS and Phoenix Zoo's Arizona Center for Nature Conservation to establish a captive propagation program to augment existing populations and reestablish extirpated populations. The Department and the Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at the University of Arizona monitor the snake's populations. In FY25, the Department and partners released 25 snakes at Canyon Creek in the Tonto National Forest; all were snakes born at the Phoenix Zoo. In the last four years, the Department has released a total of 98 snakes; all were given a unique mark to identify individuals if and when captured during monitoring. Over the course of the FY25 monitoring, the Department and partners continued to use passive PIT tag arrays to monitor released snakes to provide evidence that this multi-partner program facilitates species' recovery.



Sonoran Desert Tortoise Monitoring

For over 30 years, the Department has surveyed and monitored Sonoran Desert tortoises in



Arizona; monitoring tortoises on 17 permanent long-term monitoring plots. The data the Department collects allows estimated abundance, density, annual survival, and other life history parameters to provide a better understanding of the Sonoran Desert tortoise's population status across its geographic range. Long-term monitoring of the desert tortoises enables the Department to identify any population changes. The Department's long-term monitoring program provided data to the USFWS during the Species Status

Assessment for the Sonoran Desert tortoise. The Department's ability to provide pivotal, current, accurate information resulted in a 2022 decision to not list the species under the Endangered Species Act. The Department continues to use dedicated Heritage IIAPM funds to survey up to four long-term monitoring plots, and collect the information necessary to accurately identify trends in Arizona's Sonoran Desert tortoise populations and provide the best scientific data available. In FY25, three of the established longterm monitoring plots were surveyed between July and October. An additional Department of Defense plot was surveyed during the same period.

Topminnow and Pupfish Safe Harbor Agreement Progress

By enrolling in a Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA), ranchers, private landowners, and local governments help to recover some of Arizona's endangered fishes. The Department oversees and monitors landowner-enrolled sites under the SHA for Gila and Yaqui topminnow and desert and Sonoyta pupfish. There are currently 36 landowners enrolled in the SHA with a total of 72 refuge waters stocked for conservation to date. In addition, the Department will evaluate several other properties for potential enrollment in the coming year. Loss



and degradation of natural habitat, competition and predation by non-native fish, disease and parasites have impacted these fishes in the wild. SHA enrolled sites help further recovery goals for these fish and provide a ready source of fish for future stocking and repatriation efforts. Pinal and Pima County are enrolled because these fish also provide a native solution to mosquito control in local and rural neighborhoods; research demonstrates that topminnow are just as effective as nonnative mosquitofish in preying on mosquito larvae.

Arizona Five Species of Native Fish Conservation Plan

Under the Department's leadership, the Arizona Five Species of Native Fish Conservation Plan was finalized in August 2021. This plan outlines conservation actions and priorities for roundtail



chub, flannelmouth sucker, Little Colorado River sucker, bluehead sucker, and Zuni bluehead sucker. Since 2006, federal, state, tribal, and nongovernmental organization partners have worked together to implement conservation actions identified in the original Six Species Conservation Agreement and Strategy. Arizona is one of

the signatory member states to the 2006 Three Species Range-wide Conservation Agreement and Strategy for roundtail chub, flannelmouth sucker, and bluehead sucker. Arizona Heritage IIAPM funds help to plan and implement many of the state-led actions improving the status and distribution of roundtail chub, bluehead sucker, and Little Colorado River sucker. Specific projects implemented in FY25 under this conservation plan included surveys, stockings, and nonnative fish removal efforts.

Apache Trout Recovery

Apache Trout are one of two native trout species to Arizona, formerly listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and recognized as Arizona's state fish. The Department works with partners including the White Mountain Apache Tribe, USFWS Apache Sitgreaves National Forest, and Trout Unlimited since the 1960s to recover Apache Trout. In December 2021, the Department signed onto the Apache Trout Cooperative Management Plan, which outlines the management actions needed to achieve recovery and provide for long term management if and



when the Apache Trout are removed from the federal list of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife. In August 2022, the USFWS published a Species Status Assessment document detailing the current status of Apache Trout. The Department

collected data crucial to providing current, and accurate information for the development of the Species Status Assessment document. In August 2023, the USFWS published a proposed rule to delist Apache Trout from the federal list of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife. On September 4, 2024, the Apache Trout was officially removed from the list of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife due to the species' recovery. The Department implemented specific projects for Apache Trout recovery in FY25 including: translocations of Apache Trout to Conklin Creek, population estimate surveys on the East Fork Little Colorado River, and nonnative species removal efforts.

Gila Trout Recovery

Gila Trout are one of two native trout species to Arizona, currently listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The Department works with partners including the USFWS, United States Forest Service (USFS), and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to recover Gila Trout. The Department uses the Gila Trout Recovery Plan, which outlines a



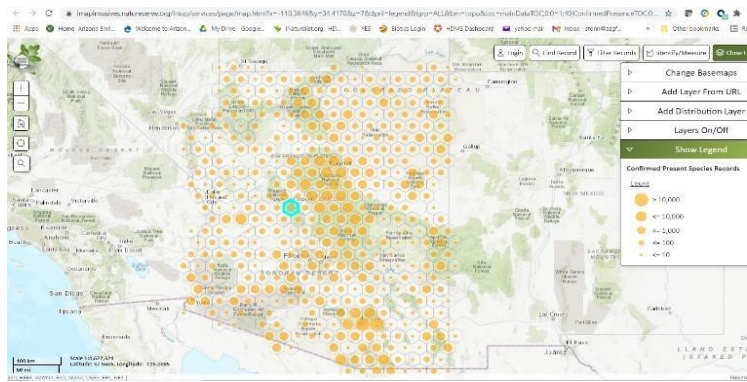
series of criteria designed to meet recovery objectives for the species, to guide Gila Trout management actions. The Department implemented specific projects for Gila Trout recovery in FY25 including two removals of nonnative trout to benefit eligible Gila Trout recovery streams on the Cave Creek Complex in the Chiricahua Mountains.

IIAPM Heritage Data Management System (HDMS)

HDMS is part of a network of more than 60 Natural Heritage Programs and Conservation Data Centers in the western hemisphere. HDMS amasses, assesses, and disseminates information on wildlife and other resources to help Arizonans make prudent decisions weighing future development, economic growth, conservation, and environmental integrity.

During FY25, Department staff entered 86 new records and updated an additional 320 records within the HDMS Biotics database; worked with program volunteers to write or update 28 species abstracts; and completed 21 state conservation ranks for Arizona species. The Department staff provided occurrence and status information to 93 requests related to research, conservation actions, and development projects.

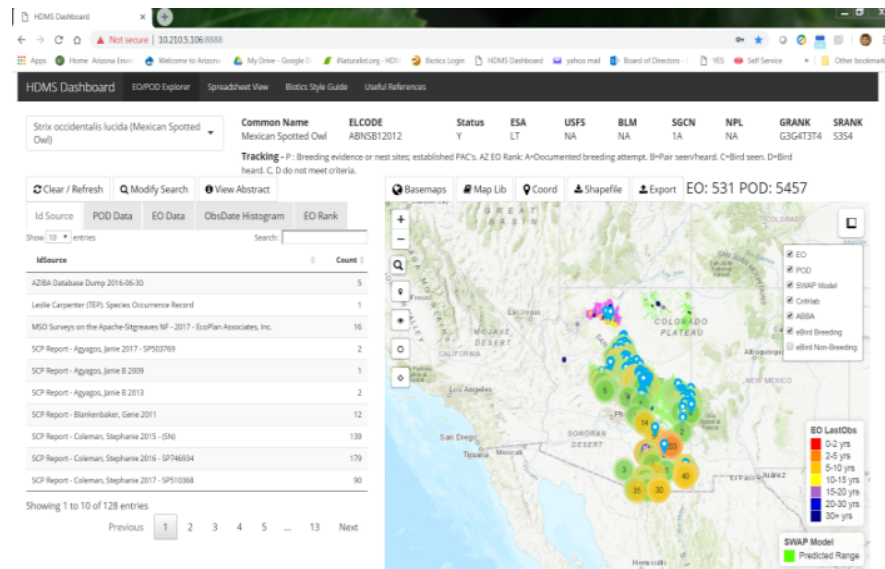
The Online Environmental Review Tool (ERT; <https://ert.azgfd.gov>) is the primary tool used for planning and environmental compliance for conservation, education, or development actions. The tool contains Department data and other resources, such as wildland fire data and county parcels. Users can view these resources, create maps, and generate reports that include lists of sensitive or special status species or sensitive areas documented in a geographic area. Nearly 3,150 projects were submitted to the ERT during FY25 for environmental compliance.



The iMapInvasives website (<https://imapinvasives.natureserve.org>) for tracking invasive species continues to attract users and accumulate more accurate data. Department staff upload datasets and enter other records to the database. The Department is also working with the Western Governors' Association on invasive data management.

The Department explores citizen science efforts with the iNaturalist HDMS Point Observation Database project (<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/hdms-point-observation-database>), which has 140,289 records, and the Arizona iMapInvasives project (<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/arizona-imapinvasives>), which has 92,869 records. The majority of entries in the iNaturalist project is submitted by volunteers.

Department staff continue to add data to the internal HDMS Point Observation Database and ensure that Scientific Activity License data submissions are added to the database. The database now has more than 1 million point observations to help guide research and management decisions. Department staff continue to increase other data sets to ensure the most current science is used in decision making. Department staff continue to develop the HDMS Dashboard, an internal application that allows biologists to view multiple data sources at once, including from online sources, to make sound scientific decisions on research, environmental compliance, and species management.



Built on the same technology as the Dashboard, Department staff built a web application (<https://hdms.azgfd.com/submit-data>) for submitting data collected through Scientific Activity Licenses (SAL). The tool was opened to all Licensees in FY22. The majority of SAL data was submitted through the tool in FY25. The application displays the licensee's data on a map and performs quality control checks to ensure the best quality data are submitted.

During FY25, the Department started developing a new interactive web species list that will take the place of the static species lists currently found on the website (<https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife-conservation/planning-for-wildlife/planning-for-wildlife-wildlife-e-friendly-guidelines/planning-for-wildlife-species-lists>). This new tool will enable users to search and filter based on species, status, county, and more. It also enables users to download customized Comma Separated Values (CSV) files to meet their needs. The tool includes links to status and other descriptions to improve access and understanding of the information provided.

Heritage Property Operations and Maintenance

As defined in Title 17, not more than twenty percent of the Heritage IIAPM funds may be spent on the operation and maintenance of Heritage Fund acquired property, including the acquired property's infrastructure. In FY25, the Department allocated \$924,800 for operation and maintenance activities and operational enhancement projects on Heritage-acquired properties, as authorized by *Laws, 2016 Chapter 224*.

Quigley-Achee Wildlife Area Tacna Marsh Operational Enhancement - Project Completion



Tacna Marsh was created by a historic oxbow of the Gila River and was once an 18 acre wetland known to be the easternmost breeding location of the endangered Yuma Ridgway's Rail. Tacna Marsh also provided habitat for a number of other sensitive wildlife species and offered recreational opportunities such as fishing and waterfowl hunting. However, due to invasive Tamarisk, Tacna Marsh had been reduced to less than 1.1 acres of wetland. In FY25 completed work included subgrade and

installation of a synthetic liner in Pond 2, creating three acres of open water habitat. Additionally, approximately two acres of shallow marsh were shaped to receive overflow from the ponds, further expanding the wetland footprint. The construction of ~4.5 acres of open water as well as ~2 acres of wetland/marsh habitat has enhanced habitat for a variety of wildlife such as waterfowl, quail, marsh birds, etc. The project aims to support the return of federally listed species such as the Yuma Ridgway's Rail, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, and Yellow-billed Cuckoo.



Cold Springs Ranch Operations and Maintenance

In FY25, the following efforts were taken to enhance the safety, cultural preservation, and environmental health of the property.



New wildlife-friendly fencing was installed across the two stream crossings on the property and annual fence maintenance was completed to secure the property against cattle trespassing as well as protect and benefit native wildlife by allowing them to move safely and freely.

The spring encapsulation project was completed. This project was undertaken to modernize and protect

the historic spring box, which serves as the water source for future Gila Trout hatchery operations. By implementing these upgrades, water security was significantly enhanced, pathogen control, and long-term sustainability for future Gila Trout hatchery operations.

Continued maintenance of the historic Stone Cabin ensures the longevity and usability of these facilities, contributing to both staff safety and historical preservation.

Ongoing maintenance of the access road, FR-420, by Department heavy equipment operators and continued maintenance of culverts by Department staff has improved accessibility and reduced the risk of water damage, ensuring safe and reliable access.

White Mountain Grasslands Wildlife Area Perimeter Fence Project

In FY25, the Department performed work to have sections of the property boundary and pasture fences at the White Mountain Grasslands Wildlife Area rebuilt. This project was needed due to the fences having reached the end of their serviceable life and to ensure the purpose of the acquisition for sensitive habitat. In total, 15,627 feet of fence was reconstructed.

HABITAT EVALUATION AND PROTECTION

As defined in Title 17, Heritage Evaluation and Protection (HEP) funds shall be spent on programs that provide assessment of the status, condition and ecological value of habitat and subsequent recommendations of management, conservation, mitigation or other protection measures, including but not limited to; recommendation of reasonable alternatives for the proposed projects that might otherwise affect the habitat under assessment; in addition to protecting the quality, diversity, abundance, and serviceability of habitats for the purposes of maintaining or recovering population of Arizona wildlife.

For FY25, Department staff conducted the following Heritage-associated activities:

Arizona Online Environmental Review Tool (ERT)

The Department used HEP funds to maintain the ERT, facilitating access to Department data, creating maps, and receiving lists of species documented in a geographic area related to conservation, education, or development actions. Project reports generated by the ERT provide best management practices for Arizona's wildlife and their habitats. A total of 3,148 projects were submitted to the ERT during FY25.

Monarch and Pollinator Habitat Conservation

HEP funding supports monarch butterfly and pollinator habitat conservation throughout the state. The Department actively participates in the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies'



(WAFWA's) Western Monarch and Native Insect Pollinator Working Group (Working Group), to continue the planning and implementation of conservation actions described in the [Western Monarch Butterfly Conservation Plan](#) (Plan) that benefits pollinators, birds, and other species. These conservation actions and strategies in the Plan are then promoted within the state by the Department as a participant in the [Arizona Monarch Collaborative](#) and its Steering Committee. The WAFWA Working Group is updating the Plan, and intends to prepare a Bumble Bee Conservation Plan in FY26. The Department is incorporating milkweed and nectar plants for pollinator species into habitat restoration projects as opportunities arise, and continues to promote pollinator conservation through presentations and collaboration.

Wetland Restoration in Sonora, Mexico

The Department continues to provide financial assistance to the restoration of wetlands in Mexico. Arizona supports wildlife conservation efforts in Sonora, Mexico because restoring biologically rich coastal wetlands like the El Soldado Estuary sustains critical habitat for migratory bird species shared with Arizona, directly benefiting wildlife populations within the state and advancing the Department's conservation mission. Heritage funds have been used to implement mangrove restoration at the Estero "El Soldado" (Estuary "The Soldier"), an exceptionally biologically rich lagoon on the coast of the State of Sonora, Mexico. The Soldado Estuary is an important rest area for many migratory birds that are also found in Arizona.

Despite its small size the estuary contains high biodiversity, earning it the title of "unique among the estuaries of the Sea of Cortez." The Estuary is representative of a natural coastal wetland of the Mexican Pacific Ocean and stands as a healthy and flourishing example in its distribution in the northern Gulf of California. An initial registration of 408 species: 121 invertebrates, 80 fish, 75 birds, 11 reptiles, 9 amphibians, 9 mammals, and 103 plants. The work in Mexico benefits migratory bird species in Arizona and contributes to the Department's mission.

Land and Water Program

HEP funding supports the Department's realty program which includes land acquisition, disposals, and exchanges; existing property and water rights tracking; land and water use fees associated with Commission-owned property; drafting and execution of land use agreements on Commission-owned properties; drafting and execution of land use agreements with federal, state, local government, and private property owners; project reviews on Commission-owned properties; and maintenance of property and water right information. No property was acquired using Heritage Funds during FY25. There were three full-time employees working for the Department during FY25 associated with land and water rights evaluations and property protections. The Department completed the following activities as a function of the Land and Water Program.

- Scheduled water deliveries with the Bureau of Reclamation for Lower Colorado River-Multi-Species Conservation Plan leased land at the Cibola Valley Conservation and Wildlife Area.
- Prepared a land use agreement on a Heritage Acquisition funded property, Arlington Wildlife Area, for a short-term Right-of-Entry permit with the Department of Forestry and Fire Management for the purpose of implementing a biomass removal project on 125 acres that included Tamarisk removal, Athel tree removal, and cattail burning.
- Renewed an existing Cooperative Agreement for one year with two grazing sub-lessees on the Department's 13,533 acre Arizona State Land Department grazing lease on the White Mountain Grasslands Wildlife Area, a Heritage Acquisition funded property.
- Renewed an existing land use agreement with Navopache Electric Cooperative to access, operate and maintain existing electric lines across the White Mountain Grasslands Wildlife Area, a Heritage Acquisition funded property.

- Renewed an Intergovernmental Agreement with the Town of Springerville for 10 years to assist the Department with small operation and maintenance projects and maintaining the road into the Becker Lake Wildlife Area, a Heritage Acquisition funded property.
- Renewed an existing land use agreement on a Heritage Acquisition funded property, including a 5-year renewal of a license agreement with a grazing sub-lessee to access and use the base property and some facilities at Horseshoe Ranch in support of a livestock operation on the Department's federal grazing allotment.
- Paid administrative fees associated with Commission-owned water rights, including water assessments from the Norviel decree in Apache County, as well as from several canal companies and irrigation districts.

Project Evaluation Program

The Project Evaluation Program (PEP) uses HEP funding to incorporate fish and wildlife resource needs or features in land and water development projects and land and water management planning efforts in Arizona. To accomplish this, PEP biologists collaborate, coordinate, and partner with federal, state, municipal, and other land and water management agencies as well as private landowners and law enforcement authorities, to ensure that the needs of wildlife and wildlife habitats are considered during long and short range planning, and during project implementation.

The Department also uses HEP funding to consider and evaluate the effectiveness of mitigation activities for various land and water development projects and management planning activities in Arizona. PEP biologists evaluate the effects and impacts on fish and wildlife resources associated with land and water development projects and land management planning activities, and various enhancement projects/programs in Arizona. PEP biologists develop plans, recommendations, and guidelines for mitigating losses or for enhancement of fish and wildlife populations and habitat and coordinates the incorporation and implementation of fish and wildlife features in development projects and land management planning activities. PEP biologists also track and/or evaluate the effectiveness of mitigation projects established to offset habitat impacts from ongoing development around the state, where feasible.

The PEP team also administers the Department's Environmental Compliance Program and provides technical guidance and oversight to ensure that Department's activities comply with federal and state laws or other environmental legislation.

HERITAGE URBAN WILDLIFE

Human-Wildlife Conflicts

Department personnel recorded 8,153 calls related to human-wildlife conflicts across the state, of which, almost half (3,832) of the calls continue to be associated with the Phoenix and Tucson metro areas. The number reflects a modest increase (144 calls or 1.8%) from FY24. In addition,



the number of human-bear conflict calls have increased from the previous year. In FY25, the Department responded to 802 bear calls compared to 702 in FY24, which is an increase of 14%. The areas with the largest number of human-bear conflicts were the Pinetop and Prescott areas, accounting for 615 of the 802 bear calls. The Pinetop area received 42% of the 802 statewide bear calls with 337 calls. At the time of this reporting, there have been 2,434 bear calls for the partial calendar year 2025. Compare that to 576 calls in calendar year 2024 during the same timeframe for an increase of 322%. Human-coyote conflicts (1,858 calls) are the most common problem reported to the Department, accounting for over 22% of all human-wildlife conflict calls statewide. Human-javelina conflicts are

the second most common problem statewide, 13% of all calls, with bears being third at almost 10% of all human-wildlife conflicts statewide.

Most callers reporting conflicts with wildlife were given information on identifying what is attracting wildlife to their homes or neighborhoods as well as methods for minimizing the conflicts. For communities experiencing chronic issues, Department staff conducted presentations, held discussions with residents on how to resolve conflicts with wildlife, and provided Department personnel to respond to human-wildlife interactions where there was an immediate public safety risk and/or the homeowner was not able to resolve the conflict on their own through self-help measures.



Arizona's diverse wildlife populations cause varying levels of conflict in different areas of the state. Department personnel have been increasingly responding to wildlife in distress, trapped or confined in some manner, or were responsible for human safety situations. For example, javelina



Human-elk interactions continue to be an issue, in particular the areas of Payson, Pine, and Strawberry. Of the 350 statewide elk calls in FY25, half (176 calls) were from this area in Unit 22. Compared to the 213 elk calls in FY24 in this area, this year's modest decrease may be due to increased enforcement of the Gila County Wildlife Feeding Ordinance. The Department is evaluating various methods to deal with this issue, such as research, public outreach and management options.

caught in a view fence or elk with garbage can lids, rope, and even Christmas lights stuck on their head, antlers and neck. Of the 8,153 human-wildlife conflict calls less than 2% (160 calls) resulted in animals being "handled" by Department personnel. One of those animals "handled" was a bull elk that had a volleyball net entangled on its antlers.



Urban Law Enforcement

Intentional feeding of wildlife continues to be a problem in Arizona's urban areas. Statewide, there were 266 calls to the Operation Game Thief Hotline reporting illegal feeding of wildlife in FY25 versus 180 calls in FY24, an increase of nearly 48%. Department personnel continue to send "no feeding" letters or conduct site visits to warn residents that, not only is feeding wildlife unlawful (violation of A.R.S. 13-2927), it can be detrimental to the wildlife. The state law currently applies only to Maricopa, Pinal, and Pima counties, however several counties and local municipalities have "no feed" ordinances. Gila County adopted their "Wildlife Feeding" ordinance on February 7, 2023 to curtail wildlife becoming a threat to public safety within the county. In Gila County, Department personnel have contacted 29 homeowners to provide information and education on illegal feeding of wildlife. Six citations were issued statewide in FY25 for illegal feeding with 2 of the 6 citations for illegally feeding elk in Gila County. Regional personnel continue to educate residents about the dangers of feeding wildlife through



individual contacts, community presentations on “Living with Urban Wildlife”, and through all printed and online materials about coexisting with native wildlife.

In addition, Department Officers are frequently tasked with investigating reports of violations associated with the unlawful collection, injuring, or killing of wildlife within urban areas. The types of violations vary from individuals unlawfully collecting reptiles from the mountain parks, shooting birds that reside in residential neighborhoods, fishing violations at urban lakes and ponds, to possession of restricted live wildlife.

Urban Wildlife Viewing Opportunities

In FY25, the Heritage Fund has contributed to many in-person and virtual educational outreach programs through the Wildlife Viewing Program’s (WVP) various events.

Department staff was able to implement and deliver both recurring and new education outreach events pertaining to wildlife viewing. Due to the support of the Heritage Fund, the WVP was



able to maintain the level of bighorn sheep events. These events proved to be highly sought after and successful experiences for all attendees. Other noteworthy events include: birding while kayaking, bat & buzzard viewing, hummingbird viewing, an elk viewing workshop, and multiple bat nettings. The events were all conducted to educate the public on these various species and how to view them safely and responsibly.

The WVP continued their work creating and delivering a series of virtual wildlife lectures about specific wildlife species and groups, wildlife adaptations, and how to safely and ethically view wildlife. These virtual lectures provide a great way for the general public to engage with Arizona's wildlife from the comfort of their own home.



Both the in-person and virtual educational experiences allow for the direct involvement of over 3,350 participants to enjoy and learn about Arizona’s wildlife. Additionally, Heritage funding allowed for the maintenance of several streaming wildlife cameras that have reached tens of thousands of viewers from more than 32 U.S. states and 40 countries from around the globe.

HERITAGE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

As defined in Title 17, Heritage Environmental Education funds shall be spent on educational programs dealing with basic ecological principles and the effects of natural and human related processes on natural and urban systems and programs to enhance public awareness of the importance of safeguarding natural resources.

Professional Educator Development

Department staff excel at developing and delivering professional educator training on mission-consistent topics. Department staff interacted with nearly 150 educators in FY25. In a change from previous years, the majority of these were virtual, as educators scaled back their professional training following the COVID surge. The Department offers engaging workshops that include lessons that integrate reading and writing into biology instruction, species-specific programs focused on mud turtles and bats, and workshops highlighting the Department's efforts to make highways safer for both wildlife and people. New this year, the Department partnered with staff at ASU to better incorporate Arizona wildlife into the extremely popular global education program known as March Mammal Madness. Department staff also participated in a variety of agency and nongovernmental boards and committees that provide support and resources to the educator communities throughout the state and nation, such as: Arizona Informal Educators Network and the Rural STEM Community of Practice. In addition, Department staff met with local school districts to discuss ways to better incorporate wildlife into STEM programming.

Wildlife Center

With Heritage funding support, the Department's Wildlife Center provides specialized care for the Department's collection of non-releasable native wildlife used as animal ambassadors for on and offsite educational programming. It also serves as an intake location for hundreds of tortoises that are surrendered annually to the adoption program. The Wildlife Center building was completed in March 2020 and improvements have been made every year to ensure optimal care is provided for the animal ambassador collection as well the safety of staff. The Wildlife Center is home to a wide variety of native raptors that many locals don't realize are right in their own backyard such as great horned owls, merlin falcon and a golden eagle to name a few. Other native wildlife



that call the Wildlife Center their home, a chuckwalla, spotted skunks, a rosy boa, Gila monsters and a few other small mammals and reptiles. These animal ambassadors travel with our Wildlife Education Outreach Coordinator throughout the state and serve an important role to introduce members of the public to the diverse wildlife in Arizona.



Desert Tortoise Adoption Program

With support from the Heritage Fund, the Department's Tortoise Adoption Program continues to provide education and awareness for Arizona citizens and desert tortoise caretakers. For



generations, homeowners in many Arizona desert communities have kept desert tortoises as pets. Through the Department's streamlined adoption application process, potential tortoise adopters gain valuable knowledge about desert tortoises, their care and essential role in the desert environment. Many of the education and awareness campaigns focus on ensuring that unwanted desert tortoise pets are not released to the wild, potentially spreading pathogens or parasites to a wild population.

During the tortoise season, the Department took in 447 surrendered

and found captive desert tortoises, received 227 applications, with 153 Arizona residents stepping up to provide homes for captive desert tortoises. Department staff responded to the influx of surrendered tortoises by increasing their presence at community events and partnering with local businesses to help provide them much-needed homes. The Department frequently promoted the program on television, radio and through its social media platforms and delivered outreach to schools and local organizations such as local libraries and through PAC911 community outreach pet adoption events. The Desert Tortoise Adoption Program has also increased biosecurity and protocols to prevent upper respiratory infection from potentially spreading to wild desert tortoise populations.

Environmental/Wildlife Outreach

The Department's animal ambassadors include a variety of native hawks, eagles, owls, reptiles, invertebrates, and small mammals. These ambassador animals are not only very popular and entertaining, they also help create a true connection between the public and wildlife that helps highlight the role the Department plays in conserving and protecting these animals and their habitats.

In FY25, Department staff traveled throughout the entire state delivering environmental and wildlife education to over 6,000 people at events such as the Department's Outdoor Expo, regional birding events, community festivals, while also providing local schools and libraries with family friendly programs. This year the Department was able to provide programming for new audiences at the Arizona Science Center, Desert Mountain Club and the Desert Broom Library. Staff have also expanded the "Urban Wildlife" program, which highlights our urban wildlife, and has become popular with many Homeowners Associations.



HERITAGE PUBLIC ACCESS

Public Lands Access (Heritage Public Access)

The Landowner Relations Program oversees the Department's recreational access efforts by which the Department collaboratively enhances opportunities for the public to enjoy wildlife. This is accomplished by identifying lands and waters that are closed to the public or that do not have sufficient access, and then work with all interested parties to meet recreation and other access needs.

FY25 was a successful year with significant accomplishments. The Department entered into 23 new or renewed access agreements. For FY25 the Department allocated \$268,240 of federal funds, \$377,500 in Heritage funding and \$644,625 of other Game and Fish funding towards



securing access agreements and easements, the Respect Program, and the Adopt-A-Ranch program. The projects funded with these federal dollars are included in this report as accomplishments because the Department biologists that developed and administered these projects were funded partially with Heritage Program funds. These efforts secured access to an additional 42,000 acres for the public to enjoy for wildlife related recreation. In total, the

Department had 83 active access agreements in FY25 and the Department has secured 4.8 million acres of public recreational access. The Respect program provided signs to 89 ranches, cattle guards to 2 ranches, 7 swinging gates, 3 ranch clean ups, and fence modification projects to improve wildlife connectivity. The Department assisted with 22 Adopt-A-Ranch events which included more than 371 volunteers totaling more than 2,814 volunteer hours. These volunteer hours represent \$91,338.11 of in-kind match that contributes to the Heritage Access resources for projects that secure access for Arizona's citizens.

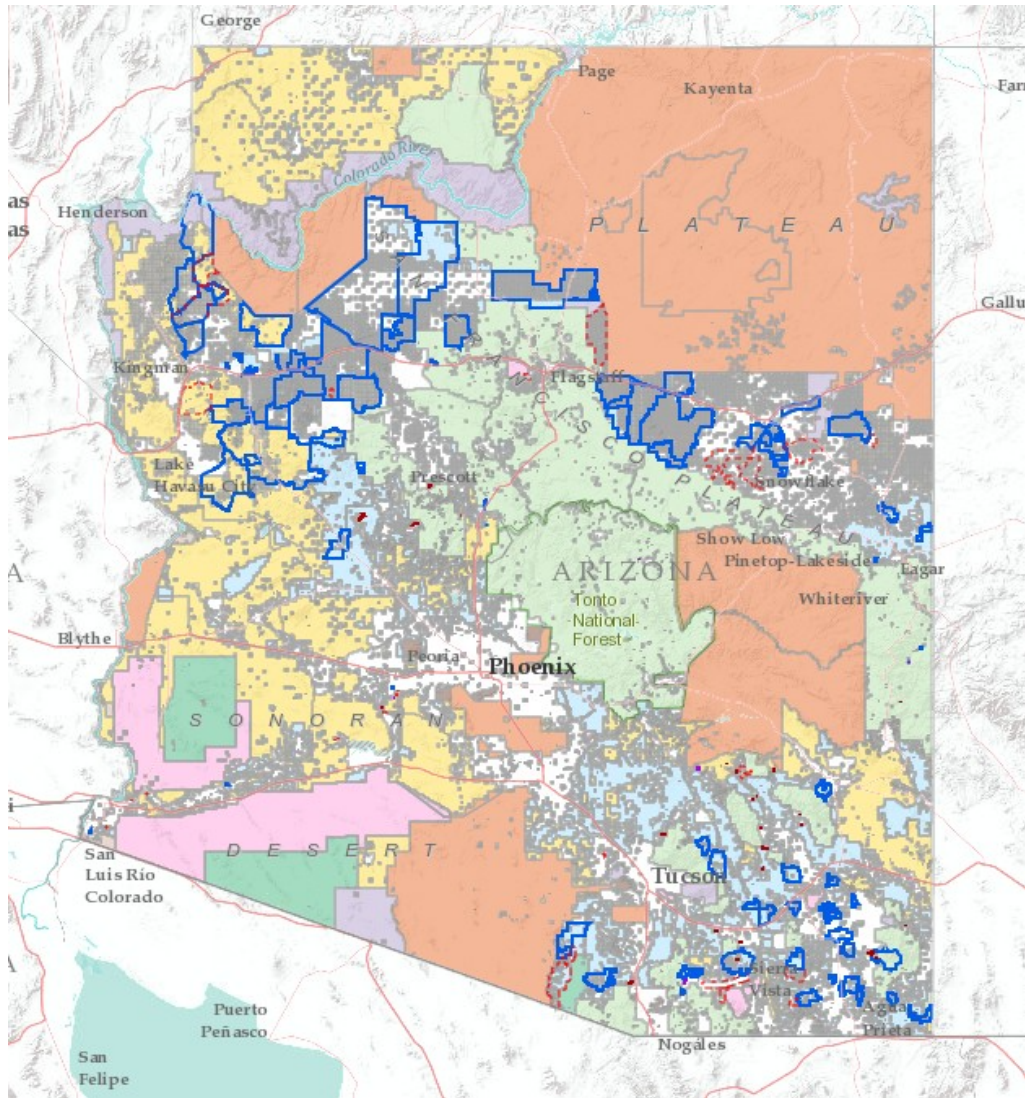
The Landowner Compact Program

In 2013, the Department began a program called the Landowner Compact, designed to make an impact on the behavior of people recreating on private lands. The Compact is not appropriate for every landowner or every ranch in the state, but it has been a successful program with 12 landowners currently enrolled.

To learn more about the program, visit <https://www.azgfd.com/landowner-compact/>

Private and Landlocked Public Areas Opened for the Public - Statewide Perspective

GIS analysis of private, state trust and landlocked public lands secured for public access through cooperative agreements showed 4.8 million acres (blue in map) at the end of FY25.



OTHER REPORT REQUIREMENTS

The Department received \$10 million from lottery revenues for Heritage funded programs. Expenditures totaled approximately \$8.7 million in FY25. The following information represents Department expenditures in FY25:

Heritage funds spent for:

- (a) Heritage Property Acquisition /Due Diligence \$0.00
- (b) Heritage Property Operations and Maintenance \$1,057,409
- (c) Identification, inventory, protection & management of sensitive habitat \$3,661,076
- (d) Habitat evaluation and protection \$1,545,661 (\$851,360 used to match Federal Grants)
- (e) Urban wildlife \$1,584,959
- (f) Environmental education \$395,597
- (g) Public access \$495,772

The Department spent \$2,552,580 for employee personnel services and \$962,736 for employee related expenses on 31 FTE's and 21 PTE's

There were three full-time employees working for the Department in the preceding fiscal year connected to property and water rights acquisitions. The Department expended a total of \$218,626 for Habitat Evaluation and Protection Personnel Services for these activities.

Heritage Partnership Program

The Heritage Partnership Program provides the Department with the opportunity to collaborate with external entities and fund conservation and recreational projects around the state. For FY25, the Heritage Partnership Program provided funding for four projects:

Status of Sonora and Desert Sucker Populations in the Lower Salt and Verde River Systems

The Department has received requests from the public to create a catch-and-release sport fishery for Desert and Sonora Suckers in the lower Salt and Verde Rivers, however population demographic information for both species was needed to inform any potential regulations. To address this, the Department worked with the Arizona Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit on a project to evaluate the status of Desert Sucker and Sonora Sucker populations in the lower Salt and Verde Rivers. This project will provide estimates of population demographics, and movement patterns. This information will be used by the Department to evaluate how angling pressure will affect the



populations and will be used to inform any potential future regulations.

Wildlife Connectivity in the Tucson Metropolitan Area

University of Arizona's School of Natural Resources built a camera trap network throughout the Tucson metropolitan area to monitor wildlife and build connectivity maps between undeveloped state and county land and the urban landscape determining the landscape connectivity between rural and urban environments. The data is available via an online portal with the purpose of informing conservation management practices, detecting potential health threats and serving as an educational tool for community science programs.



Willard Springs Wildlife Overpass

The Arizona Department of Transportation, in collaboration with the Department, was the recipient of the Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program (WCPP) grant for the construction of a 100' wide wildlife overpass, approximately 17 miles of new eight-foot high wildlife fencing that will also connect to drainage culverts to allow smaller wildlife to cross, wildlife escape ramps, and double-wide cattle guards, on Interstate 17 from Munds Park to Kelly Canyon. This project is anticipated to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions by >90% and provide a safer roadway for motorists and wildlife, while also providing habitat connectivity for local wildlife.



Desert Pupfish Genetic Evaluation

The Desert Pupfish Recovery Plan emphasizes the need for genetic management of the species to maintain natural levels of genetic diversity in replicate populations. This project benefits the Department by providing the scientific information basis on which to develop a Desert Pupfish genetic management strategy, which will allow the Department to meet two of the



four recovery criteria specified in the Desert Pupfish Recovery Plan. The Arizona replicate populations have been isolated from wild stocks for nearly 50 years. A 2007 genetic evaluation of the species found that nearly all populations evaluated had genetic diversity compared to wild stocks. Since then, 41 new populations have been established from low and high diversity sites. This project conducted a more current genetic evaluation of Arizona populations to provide a contemporary picture of genetic diversity on the landscape, which will inform strategies for future establishments, augmentations, and management to meet recovery goals.

Heritage K-12 Small Grant Program

The Heritage K-12 Small Grants Program provides grant opportunities for educators. After going through an internal review process in FY21, the traditional Heritage Grants for Urban, Schoolyard, IAPM and Public Access funding shifted to a new approach (beginning FY22) for providing outside funding opportunities on a case by case basis. Funding opportunities are still available for projects eligible under A.R.S. 17-298 and that align with current Department and Commission priorities. ([Heritage Grant Update](#))

Arizona Game and Fish Department Heritage K-12 Small Grant Program

Another round of the new Heritage K-12 Small Grants was opened. These grants provide small financial resources (up to \$3,000) to Arizona teachers to help implement quality wildlife education in their classrooms. The Department received 28 applications and 12 grants were awarded either full or partial funding totaling \$31,806. These projects spanned across 6 Arizona counties (Cochise, Coconino, Maricopa, Pima, Yavapai and Yuma). Department staff delivered multiple informational grant webinars for applicants to ensure high quality grant applications.

- Dorothy Hall Elementary School was awarded \$2765 for “Bird of a Feather Learn Together”
- Kinsey Inquiry and Discovery School was awarded \$3000 for “5th Grade Verde River and Research Trip”
- Chandler High School was awarded \$2900 for “Fishing Experience”
- Flowing Wells High School was awarded \$2800 for “Thinking Like a Scientist: Inspiring Future Environmental Leaders with Experience and Exploration of Arizona Water Resources”
- Cactus High School was awarded \$2742 for “Maintenance of School’s Native Wildlife Atrium”
- Granite Mountain Upper Elementary School was awarded \$3000 for “6th Grade Outdoor Wildlife and Habitat Study”
- Douglas Elementary was awarded \$1750 for “Pond Life: A Story of Water in the Desert”
- Friends of Cave Creek Canyon was awarded \$2998 for “Befriending Cave Creek Canyon: Engaging Rural Youth in Biodiversity Discovery”
- Sahuarita High School was awarded \$2940 for “Monies for Science Teachers at Sahuarita High School”

- Camp Verde Elementary School was awarded \$1500 for “Native Pollinator Plants for Learning and Wildlife”
- Willow Bend Environmental Education Center was awarded \$2500 for “Enhancing Science in a Box: Wildlife Education Kits Update”
- Gila Ridge High School was awarded \$2911 for “Exploring Arizona’s Wildlife: A Bone Box for Hands-on Learning”