

The Site Guide

Sonoita Creek, Patagonia, Arizona

Location Santa Cruz County, southeastern Arizona

Description A perennial stream (for part of its length) in the dry Upper Sonoran Zone at about 3900 feet in elevation. The watershed of Sonoita Creek includes some of the southeastern slopes of the Santa Rita Mountains and some of the northern slopes of the Patagonia Mountains. It joins the Santa Cruz River at a point 9 miles north of the Mexican border, just after the Santa Cruz has reentered the U.S. after having made a sweep through northern Sonora, Mexico. For about 4 miles below the town of Patagonia, Sonoita Creek has a broad flood plain and supports a mature forest of cottonwood and willow trees with undergrowth of elderberry. Four miles below Patagonia the flood plain narrows forming a cut through a rocky canyon and supporting a riparian thicket which includes sycamore, cottonwood, willow, ash, hackberry, elderberry, catsclaw, mesquite, walnut,

and soapberry. This narrow canyon continues until the creek reaches Lake Patagonia, and then it continues below the lake. Surface water in the creek appears at the Patagonia sewage plant outlet and continues to a point well below the lake. The water level of the lake is permanent. Nature Conservancy owns the first two miles of the stream below Patagonia. From there to the lake the stream is privately owned by the Sonoita Creek Ranch Company and by Fred Fendig, owner of Circle Z Ranch which includes one mile of the stream. The lake, owned by a recreation corporation centered in Patagonia, is new and has no vegetation around it yet.

Access Nearest airport Tucson (rental cars available). By car 85 miles from Tucson: 65 miles S on Highway 89 to Nogales; 20 miles NE on Highway 82 to Patagonia. From east: 10 miles SW on Highway 82 from Sonoita.

Accomodations Motels at Nogales; one (new) motel at Patagonia. Restaurants at Nogales, Patagonia, Lake Patagonia, Sonoita. Groceries, gasoline at Patagonia, Sonoita, Nogales. Fee campground with facilities at Lake Patagonia. Free camping permitted at Sonoita Creek Ranch along creek; no facilities.

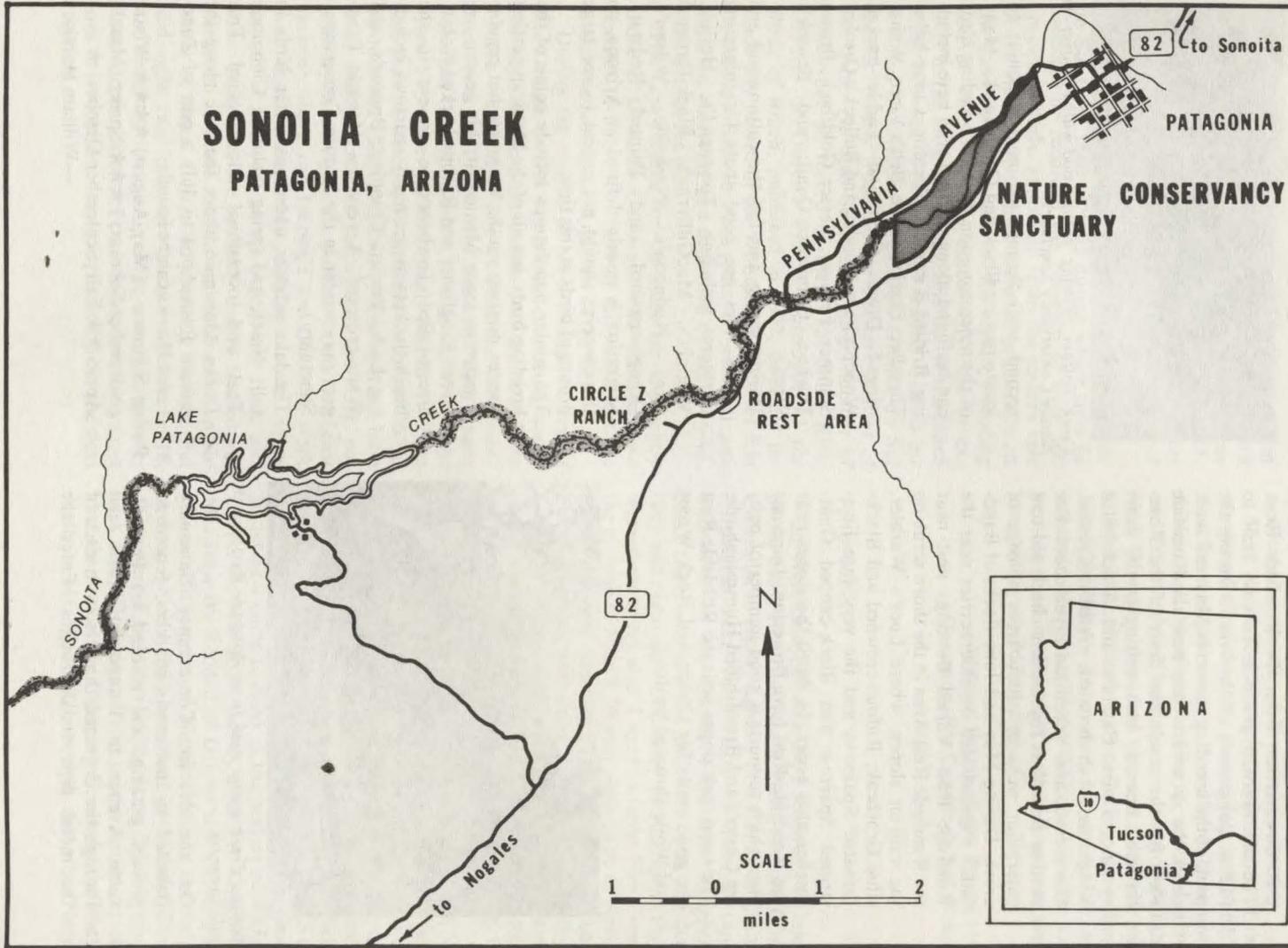


Roadside Rest Area with sycamore where becardas and Thick-billed Kingbirds nested in recent years.



Old railroad grade trail across road from Roadside Rest.

SONOITA CREEK PATAGONIA, ARIZONA



Birdwatching The area is best known for its great number of breeding birds, some of which are typically Mexican species. Park at the Roadside Rest (highway marker 15½ miles NE of Nogales) and walk along the trail on the far side of the creek ¼ mile upstream and ¼ mile downstream from the Roadside Rest. The old railroad grade is an easy trail to follow along most of the creek. During the peak of the breeding season in May and June, check the sycamore trees near the Roadside Rest for the pendulous nests of the Rose-throated Becard. Also nesting in the same sycamores are Cassin's and Thick-billed Kingbirds, Ash-throated, Wied's Crested, Olivaceous, and Vermilion Flycatchers. For nesting Beardless Flycatchers check old tent caterpillar webs in willow trees at edge of creek. During May and June flocks of Band-tailed Pigeons feed on elderberries near the Roadside Rest. Varied Buntings nest near the Roadside Rest Area in the thorn scrub on the canyon slopes, where Lucy's Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Rufous-crowned and Black-throated Sparrows and the very rare Five-striped Sparrow and Black-capped Gnatcatcher also occur. In April the slopes near the Roadside Rest have flowering *Anisacanthus* which supports a good number of nesting Costa's and Broad-billed Hummingbirds. The steep rock slopes near the Roadside Rest are good spots for Cañon and Rock Wrens and White-throated Swifts.



Sonoita Creek across road from Roadside Rest and ¼ mile upstream.

On the Nature Conservancy Sanctuary (labelled by numerous markers, fenced to prevent grazing, and reached via Pennsylvania Avenue in Patagonia), trails lead through the ungrazed thickets from each of the metal pipe walk-throughs. Enter the



Creek bottom showing cottonwood-willow groves in Nature Conservancy Sanctuary.

second walk-through (from Patagonia) to locate nesting Black and Gray Hawks. Many of the more common Arizona breeding birds can be found along the foot trail here including Bridled Titmouse, Verdin, Curve-billed Thrasher, Black Phoebe, Bell's Vireo, White-winged Dove, Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Hooded and Bullock's Orioles, Summer Tanager, Lesser Goldfinch, Brown Towhee, Gambel's Quail, and Bewick's Wren.

During spring and fall the cottonwood and willow trees are good spots for migrating warblers including Townsend's, Hermit, Virginia's, MacGillivray's, Black-throated Gray, Audubon's, Nashville, Wilson's, Orange-crowned, and Painted Redstart. Migration is poorly defined in Arizona, so the observer should not expect to see large groups of birds at this time.

The winter populations include some of the breeding birds, but all of the Mexican nesting species migrate south. Very rare but regular wanderers from Mexico at this season are Green Kingfisher and Rufous-backed Robin. Green-tailed Towhees are present in the brush thickets as are many sparrows including Lark, Vesper, Chipping, Brewer's, and White-crowned. A very few Hepatic Tanagers may winter in the Nature Conservancy Sanctuary.

The lake attracts numerous water birds in fall, winter, and spring including Cinnamon Teal and occasional Black-bellied Tree Ducks. One mile above the lake along the stream from April to July a pair of Zone-tailed Hawks can be found.

Rating Summer (May-August) ★★★★★ Winter (November-February) ★★★ Spring (March-April) ★★ Fall (September-October) ★.

—William Harrison