



Cabeza Prieta

National Wildlife Refuge

Wildlife & Ecology

Enjoy Your Refuge

Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (CPNWR) offers excellent opportunities to explore one of the most biologically diverse deserts in the world. The Sonoran Desert is an arid and harsh environment, but abundant in wildlife! The following information will help prepare you for the animals and plants you will encounter on your journey through the refuge.

Birds

During the spring and fall, numerous species of warblers, swallows, and flycatchers migrate through the refuge, looking for food and shelter among the desert vegetation. Some birds are year-round residents, such as the elf owl and the Gila woodpecker. Due to fluctuations in weather and suitable habitat, bird populations on CPNWR are extremely variable. Birds common on the refuge include raven, Gambel's quail, western screech-owl, and Costa's hummingbird.



Black-throated gray warbler perched on tree.

Renee Tressler/USFWS

Mammals

Over 40 species of mammals are found on the refuge. During a visit to CPNWR, you will notice that bats, squirrels, mice, rats and gophers make up the majority of mammal residents. Most of these warm-blooded animals have physical or behavior adaptations to help them cope with life in the harsh desert. Some species are light in coloration to deflect the sun's heat, while others have adopted a nocturnal lifestyle. Extreme efficiency in conserving water is a common adaptation in desert mammals – some can even survive without drinking any water, extracting what little they need from the plants they eat.

Pollinators

Pollinators are a diverse and essential part of the Sonoran Desert ecosystem. The formally-endangered lesser long-nosed bat is the primary pollinator of the saguaro cactus. Using their elongated snouts, the bats are able to reach the sweet nectar deep within saguaro blooms. As they forage, the bats spread pollen from flower to flower, resulting in fertilization.

Agile hummingbirds use their narrow beaks and long, bristled tongues to extract nectar from tubular flowers. Some types of pollen stick to the heads of hummingbirds, while other plants deploy pollen that adheres to the hummingbird's bill. Either method allows pollen to be spread as hummingbirds zoom from flower to flower.

From tiny, blue-green sweat bees to fuzzy bumblebees, the Sonoran Desert provides habitat for a large variety of bee

species, all of which serve as important pollinators. Other insects such as beetles, flies, butterflies, and moths also play a necessary role in pollinating desert plants.

Reptiles & Amphibians

The hot, dry climate of the refuge is ideally suited to the needs of cold-blooded reptiles. Generally, the region experiences 90-100 straight days of 100 degrees F temperatures during June to October. Over 15 species of lizard and 20 species of snake are found on the refuge, including the highly venomous Arizona coral snake.

Toads and frogs are not generally thought of as desert residents, but five toad species and at least one frog species occur in CPNWR. Most, such as the Colorado River Toad, are located in near proximity to man-made water catchments or natural basins (tinajas) that fill during summer storms. Others, such as Couch's Spadefoot Toad, occur throughout the refuge and are active following summer showers.

Plant Life

Plants are equally important to wildlife in maintaining a vibrant desert ecosystem. Nearly 400 plant species have been identified at CPNWR. Creosote flats, characterized by broad flats on gently sloping hillsides, support creosote bushes, white bursage, mesquite, palo verde, ironwood, and an abundance of cacti including cholla and saguaro. Depending on the amount of rain received during the fall and winter, over 30 species of wildflowers may bloom in the spring.

Wildlife Checklist

Use the checklist below to keep track of the wildlife you encounter.

Animal	
JAVELINA	
SONORAN PRONGHORN	
MULE DEER	
RED-TAIL HAWK	
COYOTE	
GAMBEL'S QUAIL	
WESTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKE	
GROUND SQUIRREL	
ROADRUNNER	
BIGHORN SHEEP	
LIZARD	
DESERT TORTOISE	
TURKEY VULTURE	
GILA WOODPECKER	



Bocat near mine. USFWS

Wildlife Watching Tips

- Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife.
- Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers, and nests left behind often tell interesting stories.
- Walk quietly and be aware of sounds and smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.
- For a closer look, bring binoculars.
- Observe from the sidelines. Leave “abandoned” young animals alone. A parent is probably close by.
- Wildlife feeding is prohibited on the refuge.
- Try sitting quietly in one location. Let wildlife get used to your presence. Many animals that have hidden will reappear once they think you are gone.
- Teach children quiet observation. Other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Wildlife Facts

- Bobcats, named after their short or bobbed tail, are roughly twice as big as the average house cat, weighing 12-30 lbs (5-14kg).
- Adult javelina generally weigh 35 to 60 lbs, the male being slightly heavier than the female. New born javelina weigh about one pound.
- Sonoran pronghorn is the fastest land mammal in North America, reaching speeds up to 60 mph (96 kmh).
- Chuckwallas are smaller than Gila monsters and non-venomous. They are dull in color having variations and patterns of red, yellow, orange and black skin.
- Desert tortise are capable of surviving for long periods without food or water.
- Gila monster feed primarily on the eggs of birds, lizards, snakes, and desert tortoise. They can survive long periods without food by storing extra fat in their tails.



Chuckwalla basking on rock. Greg Risdahl/USFWS



Gila monster under palo verde tree. USFWS



Round-tail ground squirrel in burrow. Renee Tressler/USFWS