

Sweetwater Network

February 2023



The Sweet Story of the Sweetwater Preserve



Twenty-two years ago, the largest tract of undeveloped land in the Tucson Mountains — sandwiched between Sweetwater Drive and Camino del Cerro — was being offered for development by an investment group in California, Sweetwater Properties, which included (interestingly) the well-known singer and Tucson native Linda Ronstadt. What you are now enjoying as a peaceful canyon drive and a park filled with wonderful hiking trails should never be taken for granted. Do you know the history behind it?

Realizing the enormous ecological significance of the land, supported by a report published in 2000 by the Tucson Mountains Association (the oldest homeowners association in Arizona), a small group of like-minded community members, including past and present residents of Sweetwater Canyon, set out to save the tract from the perils of development.

The group met with then Pima County Supervisor Raul Grijalva who advised them to create a detailed report on the land, and to enlist support from the Trust for Public Land, which endorsed the project early on along with TMA. Paula Chronister

*The Tucson Mountains, their foothills, and bajada slopes sustain an astonishing 1,000 to 1,200 species of native bees — regarded by experts as the richest known parcel of bee real estate in the world. Cactus bees (*Idiomellisoides*, above) are among them. Photos by Thomas Wiewandt.*

and Debbie Hecht co-chaired this ad-hoc committee and worked closely with Pima County's Board of Supervisors.

As support for the project grew, the TMA Sweetwater Preserve Committee produced a comprehensive document called "Sweetwater Preserve and the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan," an effort backed by the research of volunteer botanists, zoologists, ecologists, hydrologists, anthropologists and many others. In more than 40 pages, this detailed report highlighted the natural and cultural resources of the property, including sites of historic value, at least 150 species of birds & mammals, 33 species of reptiles and amphibians, and about 1200 species of bees that live in the area.

*Gila Monster (*Heloderma suspectum*) — This non-aggressive resident of the Sweetwater area is our largest, most fabled, and only venomous lizard in the United States. Few people have had the good fortune to see one in the wild. These secretive reptiles have large home ranges that span a mile or more and are readily displaced by urban sprawl. They occasionally turn up in swimming pools. Photo by Thomas Wiewandt*

Photos and captions reprinted from:

"Sweetwater Preserve and the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan"



Xeroriparian Habitat and the Sweetwater Preserve — Habitats with intermittent water supplies are vital to the welfare of more than toads, they help sustain most wildlife in the Tucson Mountains. Besides providing opportunities to drink, desert streambeds offer food and shelter that is unavailable or less desirable elsewhere. For many large mammals, arroyos serve as roadways, making travel across desert terrain quick and easy. Four major washes on Sweetwater Preserve have been identified by Pima County as important Xeroriparian "A" habitat; i.e., that of greatest value to wildlife. Sweetwater Drive and adjacent areas with low-density private dwellings is on the left, two major tributaries of Sweetwater Wash join as they intersect with Blue Bonnet Road in the lower left, and hiking/equestrian trails can be seen to the north (right) of these important natural watercourses. Photo taken early 2000s from ultralight aircraft by Adriel Heisey.

Tom Wiewandt served as lead editor, photographer, and production coordinator for this document. Adriel Heisey contributed aerial photographs, and book designer Nancy Solomon prepared the work for press. Sweetwater resident David Morton, now deceased, paid for its printing by AZ Litho and West Press at discounted rates. And letters of support poured in from 52 neighborhood, environmental, and community organizations in Tucson.

In November of 2001, TPL's negotiations, headed by Michael Patrick, were underway with the group of land owners. Eventually, they offered a

one-year option to buy the property, with a stipulation that the current \$45,000 property tax bill would be paid by TMA and TPL. An agreement was made, and the tax bill was split by the two organizations. TMA raised over \$30,000 in under three months, with contributions from 186 donors, many of whom were Sweetwater residents. In the meantime, the property owners began making development plans in the event the bond did not pass.

In December of 2003, the option to buy expired, so negotiations were held to extend, and in May of 2004 the open space bond passed, which

included funding to protect critical habitats under the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. Although not originally included in the SDCP, Sweetwater Preserve was the first parcel to be purchased with these bond funds in October 2004 — largely because of its ecological importance and wide community support.

Fortuitously, seven years later, Pima County seized an unexpected opportunity to buy the adjacent 187-acre parcel for an attractive price, thereby enlarging Sweetwater Preserve from 695 acres to 882 acres.