

PROJECT WILDLIFE: BISBEE

By Deborah Young

Dr. Young has always had an interest in unappreciated species, from bacterial infections on saguaro, to codling moths on apple trees and to bed bugs in housing.

Bisbee is well-known for its wide variety of wildlife, such as deer, coyote, skunks (4 species!), coatiundi, javelina, and foxes. There are 515 species of birds, including 280 nesting species, documented in Bisbee. Ocelot, jaguar, New Mexico ridged-nose rattlesnake, Mexican spotted owl and western yellow-billed cuckoo are listed as endangered wildlife species in Cochise County. I have found bobcat tracks and coatiundi scat in my neighborhood. These are megafauna, usually defined as the large animals of a particular region. But the "little fauna" warrant our attention too and I want to encourage you here to appreciate all these other species, many of them small and modest, which you have probably seen but might not have welcomed - mushrooms, darkling beetles and carpenter bees.

I have included mushrooms (a mushroom is the fruiting body of a fungus) here because the best available molecular evidence shows that fungi are more closely related to animals than plants. The rains bring out several kinds of mushrooms, including earthstars and stinkhorns. They each have different ways of spreading their spores. Earthstars are often found on wood mulch; they look like little brown stars with a round, puffball center. When it rains, the points of the star open and expose the center. Hard rains break open the puffball center to spread the spores. The stinkhorn is a phallus-shaped mushroom that emerges from an egg-shaped base. The spores are covered with odiferous slime on the cap. Flies are attracted to the slime, scattering the spores.

There are a couple of kinds of darkling beetles wandering around our property. They seem to be great walkers and they are probably in search of food, eating detritus of grasses and broad-leaved plants, which they find by odor. Some people call them stink bugs because of the odor they excrete from their rear end as a defense mechanism. It looks like they are doing a headstand. Another common name is piñacate beetle; from the Nahuatl word pinacatl, for "black beetle."

Carpenter bees have excavated precisely rounded galleries inside the wood posts in the pergola in our yard. If you google "carpenter bee", you will find a long list of ways to get rid of them but I prefer to observe these gentle giants try to get their large body into the small tubular flower of the salvia. Using their mouthparts, they cut a slit at the base of the corolla and steal away with the nectar without having pollinated the flower. You can safely watch them -- males cannot sting and females sting only when provoked or handled roughly.

I hope I have encouraged you to take a few minutes to explore and value the wide variety of the "little fauna" sharing our environment. Project Wildlife is committed to enhancing the ecological health of our region - in schools, churches, businesses, parks

and in our own backyards. We do this with easy steps, such as using native plants, providing water sources and adopting sustainable gardening practices. When you support wildlife in your backyard, you increase the number and diversity of all kinds of animals. Be recognized for what you do for our community and for wildlife by registering your garden with the National Wildlife Federation at www.nwf.org.