

Corridors for Migration

by Mac Donaldson

The beautiful Cienega Valley in southern Arizona is a perfect example of a viable international wildlife corridor. Located within 20 miles (32 kilometers) of the U.S./Mexico border, it boasts a 9-mile (15-km) long perennial stream and is home to a rich variety of plants and animals, including five endangered species, three threatened species, and innumerable migratory birds. The heart of this corridor is the newly created Las Cienegas National Conservation Area. This intermountain grassland has important ties to habitats in northern Sonora and Chihuahua in Mexico through a similarity of soils, elevation, and annual rainfall.



The Las Cienegas National Conservation Area conserves grassland and riparian habitats used by a variety of wildlife.

Photos courtesy of Bureau of Land Management

In the 1980s, under the visionary leadership of the then Bureau of Land Management director for Arizona, Dean Bibles, a series of land exchanges took place to protect the landscape between the Coronado National Forest along the Mexico border and the Catalina/Rincon mountain forest complex from commercial development. The result was a migratory corridor of mountains and valleys with hydrological reserves in place to facilitate the movement of a great variety of species. Today, this public land is used for wildlife conservation and compatible ranching and recreational activities.

Human migration is one of many factors at work in the Cienega Valley. International smuggling of contraband and undocumented workers does have impacts upon the landscape. In this part of Arizona, few of these impacts are expected to be detrimental to wildlife and their habitat over the long term. Human migration has occurred in this region for a long time, just as wildlife crosses the same international borders.

Probably the most publicized large mammal that uses these migratory paths is the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), which models well the necessity for wildlife corridors. This large cat has been photographed in recent years in Arizona near the Mexico and New Mexico borders. Although the jaguar's closest established population is in northern Mexico, a large amount of suitable habitat exists in the southwestern U.S. The ability of these cats to travel distances through habitat corridors could enable them to repopulate parts of Arizona and New Mexico, restoring a part of our wildlife heritage that has been missing from this region for over 50 years.

Unfortunately, such migratory pathways can be blocked by large structures such as railroad lines, interstate highway systems, and sprawling housing developments. At present, the Cienega drainage from the Canelo Hills to the Pantano drainage at the base of the Rincon Mountains has few of these potential impediments. Housing development around the towns of Sonoita and Elgin here in southern Arizona is still kept dispersed enough by the existence of viable cattle ranching operations. The Union Pacific Railroad and Interstate 10 run parallel to one another with high bridges over two distinct canyons that facilitate the movement of wildlife.

The borderlands in the southwestern United States have unique habitats, wildlife, and opportunities. Those opportunities can be enhanced or degraded as mankind so chooses. Let's hope the larger vision will prevail.

Mac Donaldson and his family operate the Empire and Cienega Ranches in southern Arizona under a permit from the Bureau of Land Management.