

Wild Wednesday 5 May 2021. Spring is Galloping toward Summer, by Walt Anderson

To truly develop a sense of place, you need to listen to the conversations going on out there. No, the talking heads in the first photograph will not directly enlighten you; they stand in stony silence. But you can learn to read between the lines, to marvel at the very existence of these 1.6-million-year-old rocks that formed deep beneath the ground and now stand revealed to experience the seasons of wind, sun, frost, raven claw, and hiking boot. There is also recent history, more comprehensible to us short-lived creatures: the building of a railroad through what we now call the Granite Dells, the damming of Granite Creek to create Watson Lake, the expansion of a wagon road into busy Highway 89. More changes are coming: massive subdivisions, expansion of an already busy airport, stresses on our transportation corridors and finite water supplies.

I hope that we can learn to love our homeland for what it is and for what it could be. I want to celebrate here some of the life of this very special place and also to urge us to be wise in how we manage this incredible landscape. We need to protect what we love. There are things whose values transcend commodity, whose worth is not measured in economic terms. Ironically, protecting those intrinsic values can incidentally offer financial benefits to a community in addition to the esthetic ones.



Granite Gardens is a special part of the Dells. Some of it is protected as City of Prescott open space, and some of it is a small community that is an eclectic mix of the old and new. There still are opportunities to add more acres to protected status.



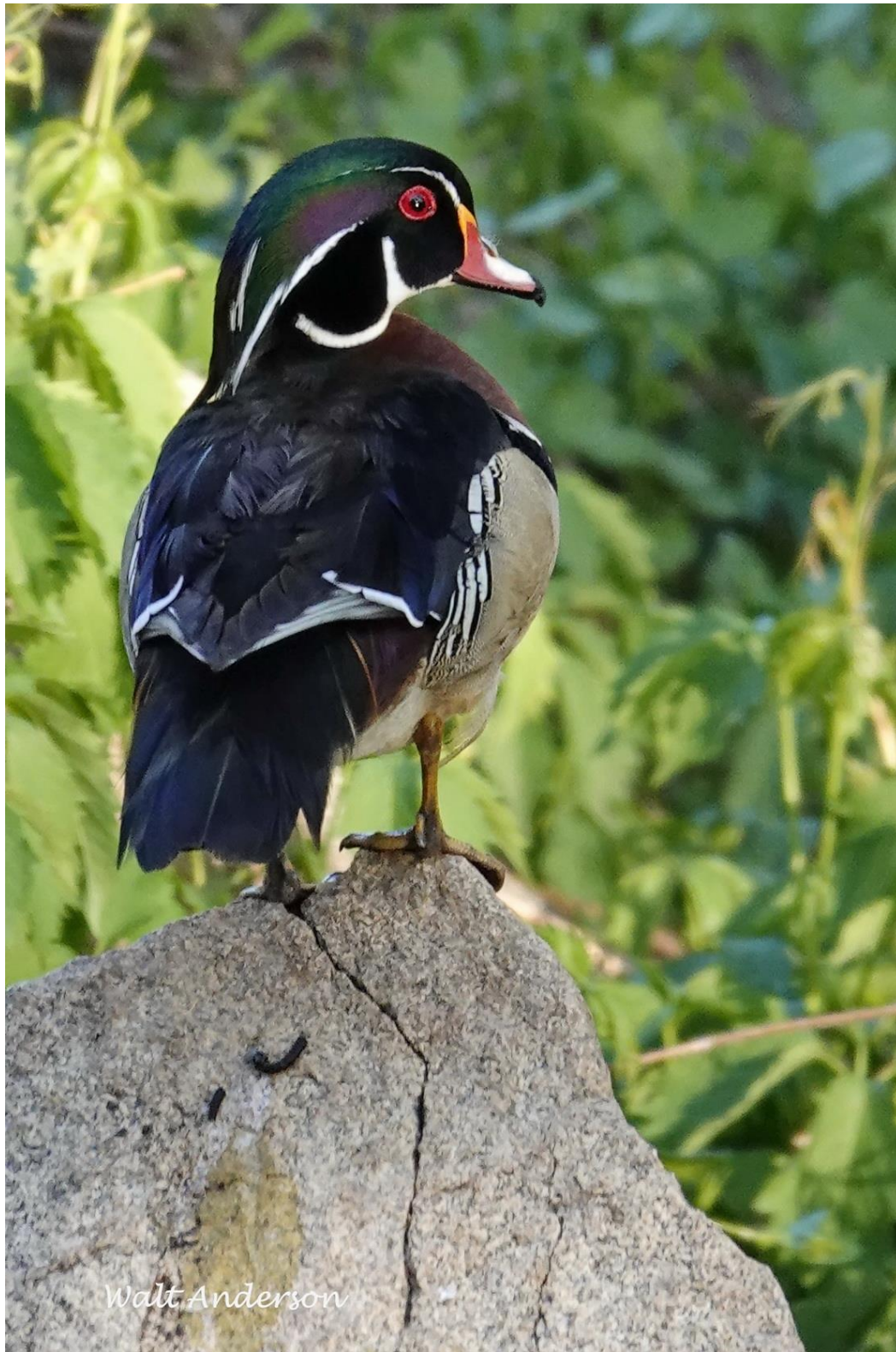
From a hilltop in Granite Gardens, you can look NW to the peaks next to the Constellation Trails. The line of pale-green cottonwoods follows Granite Creek, and just beyond the riparian ribbon is the transportation corridor of Highway 89, here out of sight but not of hearing.



Good news! This incredibly diverse and beautiful ecosystem contiguous with the Granite Gardens open space is soon to be protected when the AED annexation process is finalized. You can credit four years of intense effort by volunteers with Save the Dells and the Granite Dells Preservation Foundation that led to incredible outpouring of public support from concerned citizens. This citizen input and pressure helped the Prescott City Council to work with the developer to save a critical 475 acres in a beautiful part of the Dells for posterity. Work will continue toward adding more lands to create what we envision as one of the finest regional parks and preserves in the state.



Spring in the Dells is typically windy, which suits the reproductive strategy of the Fremont Cottonwoods just fine. An explosion of cotton “snow” fills the air on those breezy days, sending millions of fluffy parachutes over the landscape where some might find the right conditions of soil and moisture to germinate. The promise of new life, however, is often denied, especially in these drought years. Surface moisture is rare, and cottonwoods themselves are dying from drought stresses. Human demands for more and more water drop water tables and deprive our rare creeks of flow. Hydrologists warn us of overdraft, yet some of our elected officials rush to give away “water rights” based on fanciful projections that defy eco-logic.



Granite Creek is one of the few places in Arizona to host breeding Wood Ducks, and their future survival will depend on human maintenance of perennial flow and on the continued survival of the large trees in whose hollows they nest.



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The high, sweet whistles of Yellow Warblers grace the riparian areas in which they nest. Though they nest among the creekside willows and cottonwoods, they venture out into the uplands to feed on the tiny insects that thrive among the flowers of our oaks.



Though lacking the brilliant colors of the warblers, the Brewer's Sparrows and their Chipping Sparrow cousins often join the warblers in the oak flowers. A single tree can become an acornucopia of life!



Brown-headed Cowbirds are now back for the warmer months, and their gurgling and squeaky displays can be entertaining to tune into. These are nest parasites, however, with the females sneaking their eggs into the nests of unsuspecting hosts, which then may end up feeding imposter chicks that outgrow their own. We may recoil at the thought of parasitism, but it is a common and successful life history strategy for thousands of organisms. If parasitism is reducing the fitness of others without actually killing them, then we humans should cast no stones. On a planetary scale, there is no bigger parasite than us.



The Green-tailed Towhee is an “overgrown sparrow” that migrates through the Dells in spring and fall between their breeding grounds in the intermountain West and their winter haunts in Mexico and our southern borderlands. Migrant birds must find suitable habitat everywhere they go. Our vision of the greater Granite Dells Regional Park & Preserve includes allowing sustainable populations of birds to exist here, whether residents or visitors. And that applies to humans, as well!



Black-chinned Hummingbirds leave Arizona during the winter but return to breed widely across the state, where they compete to some extent with the larger and more aggressive Anna's and other species that may co-occur with them. This one is nectaring on a Claret Cup Cactus.



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The plaintive “Waa-aa” call of this male Gambel’s Quail shows him to be a bachelor crying for a mate. The sex ratio of adult quails is biased toward males, so every year, some fellas get left out and have to perform their lonely displays in case a female should lose her chosen mate.



The Crissal Thrasher, featured in an earlier essay on "mimids," tends to be quite shy once nesting has started, but in this drought year, we are visited by individuals seeking some high-energy suet to supplement the meager pickings out there in the dry chaparral.



The water content of the succulent plants that White-throated Woodrats often eat is so low in this drought year that some of them venture close to human habitation for edible plants, like our planted Hesperaloes, or perhaps to gnaw on the peculiarly inviting wires under the hood of one's car. This trespasser got a nice little dessert of peanut butter in a live trap, then a lift to a new location where it can find a bit more luscious green food.



While the cottonwoods are sending blizzards of seeds out to seek their reproductive fortunes, shrubby members of the rose family, like this Cliffrose and its cousin, the Apache Plume, are in full bloom. I love the heady scent of Cliffrose, which is really intended to draw in winged insects, and I love the feathery seedheads that are later dispersed on the wind, although not in clouds of tiny seeds like those of the profligate cottonwood.



Western Blue Flax is blooming now too, and this one has attracted a gorgeous metallic-green sweat bee of the family Halictidae. No sweat, no pollination.



All of this lovely life occurs in the Granite Dells, and we are absolutely thrilled that we are close to seeing the City accept an agreement to protect this very scene from the dozens of houses that were proposed. It is truly astonishing that a scene of such grandeur and biologic productivity was proposed for human development, but concerned citizens spoke loudly and clearly that such a loss was unacceptable. The animals, the plants, and the rocks do have voices, but those voices tend not to be heard by the political decision-makers unless they come through people who do hear, who do care. Let's continue to speak up for what we value!