

# Pinetop Wetland Project Update

Photo and text By Dan Groebner

On your next visit to the Pinetop Arizona Game and Fish Department office and the trail head for the TRACKS organization maintained Hatchery Trail, you might just hear a new voice emanating from the nearby wetland. Northern leopard frogs were introduced last summer and survived the winter just fine, announcing their success with resounding croaking and calling this spring as they laid their first egg masses, creating the next generation. Cooler weather quiets them a bit but this summer you should be able to hear them from the convenient handicapped accessible viewing platform built next to the main parking lot. The larger adult frogs can be seen in the pond if you have sharp eyes or binoculars. Even though these frogs are not on any endangered species list yet, they are uncommon in Arizona and the western United States so the objective is to recover their numbers before they need to be listed as threatened or endangered.

Along with the documented breeding of the leopard frogs, the four narrow-headed garter snakes, released last summer after being raised in captivity at Northern Arizona University (NAU), also survived the winter. The snakes, who are officially classified as threatened, used the deep pit dug near the wetland that was then filled with rocks, a small heater, Wi-Fi connected sensors and topped with insulation. Hibernation habitat for garter snakes needs to stay above freezing and must maintain high humidity so the snakes avoid dehydration. In the wild, animals can search far and wide for these areas but the 1/3 acre wetland has limited habitats so their hibernation pit had to be built for them. Sensors within the pit revealed that it stayed near 60% humidity and about 45 degrees Fahrenheit during the winter at the bottom of the pit. They appeared to be in good health when captured this spring and only lost about 10% of their weight over the winter when they don't eat. In contrast, the local mother black bears can routinely lose up to 40% of their body weight during the winter!

The two new fish holding ponds and a created wetland were built over the past few years in the footprint of the old historic Pinetop fish hatchery without using a penny of State tax dollars. During the summer of 2016, Game and Fish as well as NAU biologists established the first populations of fish, frogs and snakes in the ponds and wetlands. Normally, when pond and wetland habitats are created by landowners, the nearby wildlife quickly find the new source of food, water, cover and breeding habitats so, "If you build it, they will come." However, the wetland is in a "closed system" where water does not flow freely through the area and fences prevent all animals except for birds, squirrels and insects from making the area their new home. The fence and isolated water source is needed to prevent non-native invasive species like bullfrogs and crayfish from taking over and out-competing the native species being raised in the

wetland. The fence also concentrates the animals inside so they are more likely to find enough food and to breed.

Overlooking the new wetland and ponds, the local TRACKS organization established the Old Hatchery Trail and KIOSK and held a Grand Opening ceremony August 13, 2016 in conjunction with the release of frogs and snakes into the wetland. The trail takes you by the new rubber-lined ponds as well as some historic decaying concrete walled raceways and connects to the nearby Springs Trail. Bathrooms are available at the Game and Fish office during regular business hours only.

With the wetland's location adjacent to the conference room facilities at the Regional Game and Fish office, abundant opportunities exist for training and educational programs. A STEM workshop for local science teachers has already been conducted that combined classroom and lab type activities indoors with field data collection in the established wetland, the constructed fish ponds and nearby Billy Creek. The Blue Ridge Junior High Science Club collected baseline data including water quality, invertebrate populations and photo points that will be compared with information as the wetland goes through its natural succession. Another local Blue Ridge Junior High student is developing a system to very precisely radio-track the snakes without disturbing them, using cutting edge electronics that allow him to radio-track animals using just his Android smart phone and the antennae he and his father made from scratch. Many agencies are embracing citizen science activities these days, including Game and Fish, so the wetland could serve as an outdoor learning opportunity in the future.

So, if the construction of the wetland did not use any state tax dollars, how was it paid for? A variety of sources contributed, including a grant from the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Game and Fish Heritage Fund (state lottery proceeds) and other Game and Fish funds. There are still operations and maintenance costs to cover so a new program within Game and Fish will allow private company or individual sponsorships and advertising opportunities. For example, a local business could sponsor a permanently mounted weatherproof binocular or spotting scope on the viewing platform, with a plaque of acknowledgment, like you see at many tourist attractions. Or simple placards are available for display on the front side of the public viewing platform. The area is used by thousands of people who need to register their boats, buy a fishing and hunting license or use the new trail head to access the White Mountain Trail System. For more information on these opportunities, contact Game and Fish at (928) 532-2308.

Future plans being discussed for the area include introductions of rare California floaters (a native mussel once so common it was a food source for local residents) and endangered Three Forks spring snails. Although diminutive, these critters help filter excessive algae from the water and on rocks when their numbers become significant.

To help further diversify the wetland habitat, the plot in front of the viewing platform is being planted and seeded with hummingbird and butterfly friendly plants. Nectar producing plants like columbine, honeysuckle and penstemon that attract hummingbirds are mixed in with butterfly-loving native milkweeds, phlox and asters. In addition to the viewing platform and trail, a new bench has been installed on the east side of the wetland where you can view and hear water cascading down the constructed “Mount Pyrgulopsis,” named after the scientific designation for the Three Forks spring snail.

So, if you’re looking for a trail to hike and an opportunity to learn a little about the historic Pinetop Hatchery as well as native critter conservation, stop by the new Pinetop Game and Fish ponds and wetland. Take plenty of photos as the area will be hard to recognize in a few years when the willows and other plants become established for the benefit of the wildlife.

## **Global Big Day 2017 is May 13**

If you’re one of those folks who grab your copy of “Get Your Mountain On AZ” as soon as it hits the newsstands, you still might have time to participate in this year’s Global Big Day, the international effort to document the world’s bird population using the free smart phone app “eBird,” sponsored by the Cornell Lab. If you missed the Big Day this year, you can still use the information below to enhance your birding experiences and prepare for next year. The following information comes from the organizers:

Last year’s Global Big Day featured more than 60% of the world’s bird species in a single day. Sightings came in from more than 17,000 eBirders spread across 154 countries.

The eBird folks offer some tips to preparing for the Global Big Day. Here are three quick ways to have the most fun:

1. “Scout” your birding spots for May 13. Finding where the birds are ahead of time makes the big day birding more fun and also gives you more chances to be out enjoying birds. Perfect.

Learn how to use eBird at [eBird.org](http://eBird.org)

2. Use eBird Mobile. This free data-entry app makes it so you don’t have to enter your sightings at the end of the day and tools like “Quick Entry” mean you have less time with your face in a notebook.

3. Get a friend involved. Perhaps this is a good birding buddy or someone who has never been birding before. Make it a friendly competition or join forces as a Global Big Day team. Share on social media using #eBird\_GBD. Check out the Facebook Event.

No matter what you do—have a great time, enjoy the birds around you, and let us know what you find!