Desert Awareness Committee
OF THE DESERT FOOTHILLS LAND TRUST

Summer is here!

by Nancy Laizure

The summer solstice marking the first day of summer is several weeks away, but summer arrives early in the desert. An easy way to know it is summer is to feel the heat. There are other signs though that may be noticeable only to the observant. The paloverde trees sport their gorgeous yellow cloaks and with them the little black gnats. The deer stamp their feet impatiently, flick their ears and swish their tails trying to rid themselves of the pests. The insect eating birds have plentiful meals now. Will this be a year when the ironwood trees are covered with pale lavender blooms?

The mournful cry of white-winged doves is heard as they give notice of their return from Mexico.

Saguaros, puffed up from the spring rains, wear their summer bonnets of white blooms. Soon the blooms will turn to red fruit supplying bountiful food for many desert creatures.

The tree of life, the mesquite, blooms with yellow catkins as honeybees spend day after day pollinating them. Soon the pods will be ready to eat. What a treat for many desert dwellers!

The ocotillos are in full bloom and the edible flowers taste a bit like cucumber.

The sweet smell wafting up from the wash tells us the desert catclaw bush is blooming. Even desert senna and the white ratany tickle the sense of smell.

Woodpecker parents fly nonstop to and from the saguaro hole nest trying to keep hungry babies' bellies full.

The bachelor quail still hoping to find a mate call incessantly from the paloverde branches, "Who! Who!" sometimes even before daybreak. Baby quail run between Mom and Dad trying to keep up, their little walnut-sized bodies only a blur as they scamper through the brush. Good luck counting them!

Yes, summer is here. We feel the heat on our faces early in the morning. The daytime sky has a different look to it. The desert even smells different in the summer. But the plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert are in tune. The wildflowers and green grasses begin to fade and everything begins to turn brown. Plants go into their survival mode, dropping leaves, or in the case of the jojoba turning leaves sideways so they aren't in full sunlight, thus conserving moisture within the plant. The needles on the saguaro provide much needed shade to the trunk.

As the sun sets and the light of day fades, the desert awakens. As you sleep, predator and prey alike begin their nocturnal wanderings in constant quest for food. The poor-will calls his name over and over in the night. The great horned owl waits patiently on the old ironwood tree snag for his chance to glide on powerful silent wings and swoop down on an unsuspecting pack rat below. Bobcat, coyote, and fox slip silently through the night hunting and teaching their young how to become self-sufficient. The diurnal javelina herd is on the prowl too, searching for succulent plant morsels, maybe in your yard.

The first part of summer–May, June and the first part of July–are hot and dry with June usually being the hottest month of the year.

When the summer monsoon rains begin, still another phase of summer begins. Thunderheads build and in the evening will bring much needed moisture to all desert dwellers. The scent of the creosote bush will permeate through the humid air after a storm. The toads will sing their thanks all night long. All the plants will soak up the rain and store it, rationing it out as they are programmed to do. It may be a good monsoon season or it may not but the plants and animals will survive.

Yes, summer is here. See if you can use your senses to detect the signs of summer. Hear them, see them, and smell them. Train your senses to do what desert dwellers have done for eons. Most of all, take the time to enjoy "the most beautiful desert in the world."

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Members of the Desert Awareness Committee of the Desert Foothills Land Trust and occasional guests write this column. For more information about the Desert Awareness Committee call the Land Trust office at 480-488-6131. ©Desert Awareness Committee 2003.