New pollinator garden at Canoa Ranch draws them all

By Jorge Encinas

Coronaviruses throw a big wrench into many of the fun summertime activities residents enjoy, but there's something new many might not know about - the pollinator garden at Canoa Ranch.

The Pima County Regional Flood Control District wrapped up the six-acre project in late June.

DIVERSE HABITATS

Flood Control civil engineering manager Darrel Brossman and the county started the project after completing the 2.5-acre cienega - marshy, wetland in February.

The lake, cienega and new pollinator garden at the Historic Canoa Ranch combine to create a significant habitat for migrating wildlife passing through the area.

"That was a really big push for us to create additional habitats," Brossman said. "It's a nice balance of three different habitat types that all enhance the Canoa Ranch site.

And that enhancement isn't just on Canoa Ranch's superintendent Matt Smogor.

"The diversity is nice because there's a very different food web at each area," he said. "So that I'll attract a more diverse area of pollinators within those food webs, and they'll be able to commute in all these new habitats that are so close to each other."

This comingling in one centralized location provides an enhanced wildlife viewing experience for visitors at the variety of sites going up will increase. And critics of different types took quick notice of the new features, especially on one animal-focused amenity Flood Control provided.

Part of the pollinator garden includes a wildlife drinker - an artificial watering hole. Brossman said the drinker was first for Flood Control and is a lasting experience as they plan to incorporate more into a future project at Canoa Ranch.

Brossman said the project, which also restores the area, would sell credits to other agencies and organizations that would offset the loss of habitat from their projects.

"It won't have trails, as a requirement of the Corps of Engineers," said Brossman. "It's just pure water, just good for providing a habitat.

And the county needed plenty of them. Pima County's Native Plant Nursery in Tucson has kept busy providing many of the plants for the project, and the biggest one is yet to come.

The nursery's program coordinator Andrew Hatch said the pollinator garden took 600 plants.

When the cienega wrapped up in February, the county's nursery provided about 600 plants and trees to the project. The county's next project, a 30-acre mitigation bank at Canoa Ranch, will draw even more plants.

Hatch said the pollinator garden is a medium-sized project, but the mitigation bank is the biggest one on the horizon.

He said the project called for 3,780 plants and trees. The county's nursery would provide at least 2,800 of the plants, and the rest would likely come from private nurseries.

MITIGATION BANK

The 30-acre Mitigation Bank provides a large habitat area for wildlife and could give Canoa Ranch a dedicated revenue source in the future.

"I'm just going to do one plant at a time," said Brossman. "It's going to be a good deal for us, a good deal for us, and a good deal for the Army Corps of Engineers finish.

Much like the pollinator garden before restoration, the 30-acre mitigation site is covered in Amaranth - commonly called pigweed. While native to the area, the name is a clear indication that it's not a desirable species.

"This is a big problem because it grows so fast," Hatch said. "It grows very fast, and it's very aggressive.

Because pigweed is so aggressive, it can outcompete other plants for living space. The heat challenged the project as well.

This summer has pushed or broken different records.

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and is even making a run for Tucson’s hottest year. The current record is 1984, with 90 days hitting triple digits.
Tuesday marked 84 days with triple digits. The second hottest year was 1988, with 93 days at 100 degrees or warmer.

So far, Hatch said the nursery sent 150 plants to the pollinator garden as replacements.
Brooks said the heat meant ensuring the irrigation system continues to function correctly.

It just makes it a little more stressful for new plants to establish when we’re in this 100-degree heat,” she said.

The pollinator garden uses about 3,232 acre feet of water annually. An acre foot is the amount of water one foot deep covering an acre, or one acre foot is about 330,000 gallons.
However, the usage will vary with temperature and as plants become established.

The water comes from the lobo and circulates it, keeping it cooler during the summer.

“The heat isn’t just a challenge for plants taking root. The heat always presents challenges,” Snigur said.

“The thing that I’ve seen is irrigation can be challenging because there are limited hours for some people to be outside.”

SHUTDOWN ALTERNATIVE

While the heat could be a deterrent, Snigur said Camo Ranch is still a good option for people looking to get out of the house.

“The nice thing is that we’ve opened and people can come,” he said. “We just ask that when people do come in the middle of the day to bring the proper clothing, sun protection, lots of fluids and have a phone on you just in case you get into a situation where you need to call first responders.”

The county continues to restore Camo Ranch’s compound despite COVID-19 by keeping the doors closed to the public.

The wildlife drinker at the pollinator garden is first for the county’s Regional Flood Control District.

Snigur said the visit center is coming along, and plants are in the works for new fencing to replace the old chain link fence that came with the property during its unoccupied period.

However, the addition of the pollinator garden provides the public with a new option when recreational options are on the decline. The “Anna Trail, there’s a four and a half mile walking path there, intermixed with the pollinator paths that are adjacent to the Anna Trail,” he said.

Along with the pathways around the lake and cacti that tie into each other, there are surprising opportunities.

The county’s wildlife camera captures coyotes taking a drink in the pollinator garden.

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