Pond Restoration – What about the Wildlife?

Agua Caliente Park is an important wildlife sanctuary.

Just as humans flock to the park for its cool shade and water, wildlife does too, which makes the park a haven for hundreds of species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. The pond restoration project will disturb the habitat for many of these species, but Pima County has been working to ensure that the disturbance to wildlife is minimized or mitigated during the restoration.

Timing – the drawdown of the pond’s water level will begin after the spring migration for birds, thereby ensuring that migratory ducks and other waterfowl will have left for their breeding sites to the north. Meanwhile, water will continue to be delivered to keep Pond 2 full so any of the resident waterfowl could move to Pond 2.

Currently, all the fish in the pond are non-native, meaning they have been introduced to our region. The pond hosts populations of introduced blue gill, bass, tilapia, koi, catfish, and mosquito fish. As we prepare for the renovation, all of these fish will be permanently removed from the pond.

Pima County intends to introduce native species to the pond after renovation. Native species to be reintroduced include the native Gila topminnow, which performs the important job of consuming mosquito larva. An exception to the native-species focus will be Pima County’s continuation of a program to stock the pond with sterile, non-reproducing grass carp that serve an important function of eating aquatic vegetation. The grass carp currently at the park will be moved to Pond 2 during the restoration of Pond 1.

In the summer monsoon you will see that the ponds at the park provide habitat for scores of native toads. Unfortunately, there is also a thriving population of invasive bullfrogs that have a voracious appetite (they even eat bats). The pond renovation provides a rare opportunity to reduce or eliminate bullfrogs from the ponds.

The dead “skirts” of palm trees are habitat for one of the uncommon bat species in our area, the yellow bat. Because a few dozen palm trees must be removed as part of the restoration project, Pima County is looking to reduce harm to the yellow bat by trimming the palm skirts during the winter when yellow bats are not known to be residing in the park.

A popular feature at the park are the dozens of red-eared sliders basking in the sun, but too much of a good thing has become a problem. Starting in the Fall of 2018, Pima County staff will begin live-trapping turtles, with the intention of relocating some individuals to a turtle rescue facility in Phoenix.