

The Other Patagonia

By Elizabeth A. Bernays



Arizona woodpecker
(*Picoides arizonae*)

LINDA GHEEN

On a hot, dry morning I recently clambered along the floor of one of my favorite canyons—steep, lichen-covered rock faces towering on either side. I stepped across the trickling stream, where a painted redbird sipped from the water and a crowd of little blue butterflies puddled in the mud. I looked up into the tree canopy, hoping to see one of the endangered Mexican spotted owls that live here, or even an ocelot or a jaguar. And though it sounds as if I were in a Central American jungle, I was close to home, in the spectacular Patagonia Mountains of southeastern Arizona. Specifically, I was in Humboldt Canyon—one of the really special places in the region.

I'm struck by the biological diversity here: sky islands, washes, desert flats, and grasslands that attract wildlife of all kinds. In a nearby protected habitat, the Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve, biologists have documented more than 300 species of birds, including violet-crowned hummingbirds and black-bellied whistling ducks. Most creatures come to the area because of the creeks and various waterways. Water, the most valuable commod-

ity for both people and wilderness, is a scarce resource in the West. Arizona is in the midst of a sixteen-year drought, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts more severe droughts in the coming decades.

In fact, waterways are so low right now that mining companies have been using that to their advantage, in part by underestimating the impact of mining on the water table. Last year one silver and minerals mining company submitted a plan of operation to conduct exploratory drilling on public lands near my hometown of Patagonia. The memo lists "municipal watersheds" as "none present," when in fact the site contains Harshaw Creek, which drains into Sonoita Creek, which drains into the Santa Cruz River, whose watershed also includes the city of Tucson. The Forest Service approved the drilling.

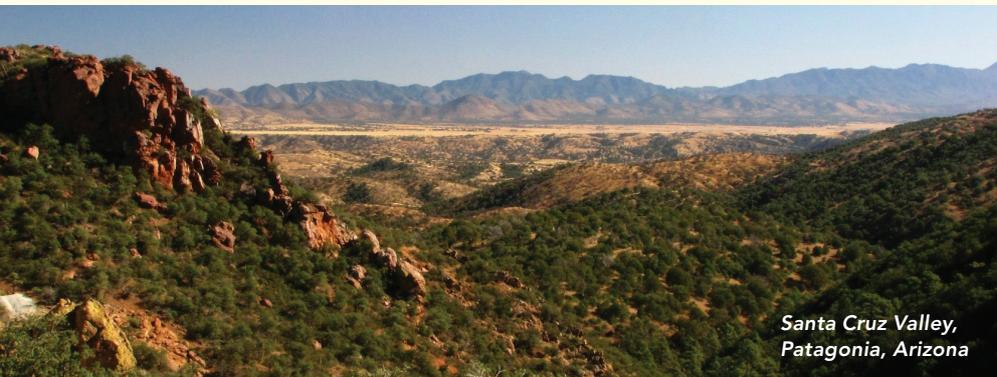
Hundreds of mining claims have been staked, and several international companies are planning to develop open pit mines in the Patagonia Mountains. Almost all of them rely on vast quantities of water; copper mining alone uses at least 50 billion

gallons of fresh and recycled water per year in Arizona. All of these mining claims make use of the outmoded General Mining Act of 1872, which says that anyone over the age of eighteen (though the age restriction doesn't apply to corporations) may mine federal lands, as long as the mineral has been "located." By some estimates, 2 billion dollars' worth of minerals are extracted every year, without any remuneration to the government or its citizens.

In Humboldt Canyon it is obvious to me how water is the lifeblood of the region. I think of what would change, what the state would lose, if water no longer flowed down the myriad washes, or if the trees on the mountainsides withered and died. How much more prone to wildfire would we be then? What would any of us sip on a summer day?

On my hike I may not have seen the rarest of birds, but I did hear the *chk-chk-chk* of a yellow-billed cuckoo and the squeaky chirp of an Arizona woodpecker. Still wild, still thrilling with birdcalls, still the home of a dozen endangered species, the canyon is a place where I can renew my state of mind and appreciate something unspoiled. For now.

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Santa Cruz Valley,
Patagonia, Arizona

LANDSCAPES: GLEN GOODWIN