

The Paton Center for Hummingbirds

Keith Ashley, Coordinator: Tucson Audubon's Paton Center for Hummingbirds

What is a bird worth? Let's say, for instance, a Yellow-breasted Chat. Maybe you've been listening to his one-bird band of melodic chatter and wild whistles coming from a thicket. You're delighted long before you spot him, though you wish he'd pop out of that bush—if only for a moment. Suddenly the chat flies to a tray of orange halves set out near the back fence. He's dazzling in the full sun, with his olive back and golden breast. You feel that familiar thrill of having just witnessed a small miracle of backyard beauty.

On the one hand, birders know they cannot put a price on the beauty, excitement, and inspiration wild birds bring us. On the other hand, the birding community recently showed exactly what it was worth to them to save a beloved birding hotspot: the Paton house in Patagonia. It was worth years of struggle and focus to acquire the funds, not just to purchase the home and land, but also to obtain a budget for upkeep and needed site improvements.

Tucson Audubon's Paton Center for Hummingbirds is the birding community's gift to itself, to birders around the globe, and—of course—to the birds. Tucson Audubon knows the value of this jewel. While preserving the legacy of Wally and Marion Paton, we are investing in the Paton Center's future. Here is a sneak-peek into our developing vision.

RAINWATER HARVESTING DEMONSTRATION—In Arizona, water means survival, for people and birds. Tucson's rainwater harvesting expert Brad Lancaster visited the Paton Center to help design a site-specific water-harvesting program that supports the health of the local watershed. Brad and his brother, Rodd, Tucson Audubon's Restoration Field Crew Supervisor, annually harvest 100,000 gallons of rainwater on their 1/8 acre home lot in Tucson. They do so through simple means available to most homeowners: rain cisterns, earthworks, and graywater



systems. These are the methods the Paton Center will also be employing and demonstrating.

Large basins along the driveway and in front of the house will feed habitat-pollinator gardens. Catchment systems from building roofs will provide extra water for our food-rich landscaping for birds and people. Water that currently runs along or pools beside Blue Heaven Road will be directed onto the property to feed the paddock.

RESTORATION—An important step in the evolution of the Paton Center is the restoration of the "paddock"—the small lot adjacent to the home. Formerly used for livestock, this tree-lined patch of green will be transformed into a healthier ecosystem with a special emphasis on enticing and supporting birds—from rare migrants to local rarities and everyday old friends. The paddock is already home to key elements of the Patagonia riparian-scrub biotic community: elderberry, mulberry, mesquite, and plenty of Vermilion Flycatchers. Resident Caretaker Larry Morgan reports seeing Arizona glossy snakes, short-horned lizards, and Gray Flycatchers there as well. At the same time, the paddock has suffered an onslaught of invasive species: London rocket, sticky grass, and horehound, to name a few.

Tucson Audubon's restoration crew has improved hundreds of acres of southeast Arizona in support of local wildlife and wildlife watchers. They'll now be focusing some of those efforts on the little lot next door.

COMMUNITY—We are also striving to build deep and lasting ties with the local community. The preservation of the Paton Center—and its birds—is intimately linked to the health and survival of this entire corner of Arizona. We will work toward shared resource conservation and economic sustainability goals in partnership with the Hummingbird Monitoring Network, the Patagonia Area Resource Alliance, Borderlands Restoration, the Nature Conservancy's Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve, and the town of Patagonia.

As we bring changes to the Paton Center, we are also taking care to preserve the best parts exactly as they are. Larry continues to fill the feeders every day—a couple of times a day now that the cowbirds are back in town. He continues to put out oranges for the orioles, and the Yellow-breasted Chats. We hope that you will continue to support the center as well, with your ideas, volunteer hours, and generous donations. Please support our summer appeal with your donation today.



(Upper left) Marcia Grand, major donor to the Paton project, reviews sketch of Paton Center plans with Keith Ashley.

(From above) (1) Yellow-breasted Chat. (2) Jonathan Horst and Larry Morgan remove invasive weeds before they go to seed in the paddock. (3) The shed before being removed by the restoration crew. (4) A new view of the leafy green paddock after removal of the shed.