

## **Forum Features Sonoita Creek Watershed Advocacy Groups**

By Andrew Gould and Bob Brandt

Five leaders of local environmental organizations concerned with the health of Sonoita Creek shared ways their organizations are working to protect and enhance the watershed at the annual meeting of the Friends of Sonoita Creek (FOSC) on Saturday March 17. A crowd of over 40 people at Cady Hall learned how the staff and volunteers of these organizations work collaboratively to protect the watershed and halt the decline of riparian habitats in Arizona.

Carolyn Shafer, Chair of Patagonia's Flood and Flow Committee, began by emphasizing the importance of water to life in this arid land. She explained the committee's mission is to make recommendations to the town council, described the committee's ambitious Watershed Management Plan, spoke of the new citizen science project, Patagonia Area Water Science (PAWS), and urged the audience to stay informed and involved by attending meetings of the Flood and Flow Committee on the third Thursday of each month at 10:00 a.m. Her committee's water theme "slow it down and sink it in" is a common thread of all the presenters' organizations.

The Borderlands Restoration Network, was represented by Executive Director Kurt Vaughn, who assumed his position last November. Vaughn gave a brief explanation of BRN's mission which is to protect and restore landscapes in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands region while building an economy that creates jobs that honor the earth and its plants and animals. He cited the Borderlands Earth Care Youth (BECY) as an example of BRN's environmental education work and also highlighted the Borderlands Field School, a four-week "immersive practical training course designed to inspire the next generation of environmental leaders," planned for July and August.

Jonathan Lutz, Manager of the Tucson Audubon Society's Paton Center for Hummingbirds, reported that his center of only 1.4 acres drew over 13,700 visitors last year and visitation is up 30% so far this year. Lutz pointed out that TAS shares with other environmental organizations the goal of eliminating invasive Johnson grass and replacing it with native grasses such as sacaton. Thus, the multitude of little flags along Blue Heaven Road that designate where this work has been accomplished by a cadre of volunteers and TAS staff.

Martin Lawrence, Manager of the Nature Conservancy's Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve, gave a brief history of the conservancy's work nationally and internationally and made special note of the organization's shift in focus from purchasing and protecting isolated parcels of land to broadening the scope of its work to bring together all stakeholders to form alliances that protect the land and benefit the people who depend on it for their livelihoods and enjoyment. He also spoke of his concern for the decline of the Willow/Cottonwood riparian forest gallery as a symptom of far-reaching decline of riparian habitat.

Colt Alford, Manager of Patagonia Lake State Park, is also responsible for Sonoita Creek and San Rafael State Natural Areas. Alford related that PLSP is an officially recognized Important Bird Area where at least 353 species of birds have been identified. He also noted that fence surveys by FOSC around part of the state natural area resulted in construction of pipe fencing

around Coal Mine Springs, home of the endangered Gila Topminnow. One of Alford's conservation goals is to secure funding and agreements to fence cattle out of the birding area along Sonoita Creek. Besides increasing the enjoyment of the birding experience, this would help slow erosion of the creek and the silting of the lake.

FOSC encourages the public to learn about their work, their accomplishments and opportunities to join in this work by visiting their website at <http://sonoitacreek.org> and signing up for their email newsletter. Additional volunteers and board members are urgently needed.