



# Friends of City of Rocks Newsletter

Volume 2, Number 1, January, 2024

Hello, Friends! This newsletter has stories about sparrows and cienegas. Karen and Bill have some help for us all with those little brown birds and AT of the Pitchfork Ranch has shared a piece on the importance of cienegas in our desert environs. Read on...

## Upcoming Events



### Hikes, Bird and Otherwise

Check out our webpage for dates as soon as the weather gets warmer. Now is a great time to go on your own and find those Great Horned Owls that are getting down to business. Recent years the park has played host to two pairs: one among the rocks and another pair in the cienega. Now is a great time to find them before the leaves pop.



### Star Party

There's a star party every month. Next dates are Saturday, February 10 at 5:30, and Saturday, March 9 at 5:30. A year's worth of dates are on our webpage. Follow the signs to the gathering in the campground. Expert volunteer astronomers are there and will share their telescopes.

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### A Primer to Identification of Sparrows at City of Rocks State Park for Beginning and Intermediate Birders

by Karen Beckenbach and William (Bill) Norris



There are fewer better places in this country to observe birds than Southwest New Mexico. Although many visiting birdwatchers' first stop is the 3.3-million acre Gila National Forest with its abundant woodland and forest habitats for birds, we advise them to spend a day or two at adjacent City of Rocks State Park. Though small in comparison (just a few thousand acres), the park offers extensive desert grasslands and shrublands, not to mention its famous rock formations and an isolated desert wetland (i.e., Cienega) which are attractive to birds in all seasons. As soon as one steps out of their car at the park Visitor Center, it's hard to miss large, noisy Curve-Billed Thrashers and Cactus Wrens flying in and out of planted chollas, Canyon Towhees foraging underneath parked cars, Gambel's Quail scurrying about in the parking lot, Chihuahuan Ravens flying endlessly overhead, and Rock Wrens and Say's Phoebes singing from the tops of boulders and tall rock pinnacles.

However, this just scratches the surface of the bird species that call City of Rocks State Park home.

[READ MORE HERE:](https://cityofrocks.org/a-primer-to-identification-of-sparrows-at-city-of-rocks-state-park/)

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## **Aridland Ciénagas**

By A. Thomas Cole\*

Despite their unique and rare place in the American Southwest, little is known about ciénagas. Depending on which scholar you ask, there were many hundreds, if not thousands—in what can be thought of as the International Four Corners Region of Arizona, New Mexico, Sonora, and Chihuahua—before European arrival. Recognition and numbers of their smaller cousin, Sumideros, are essentially lost.

The spelling, pronouncing, and etymology of the word “ciénaga” is a complex account beyond the scope of this writing. Suffice it to say the word is derivative of the Spanish term for “silt,” (cieno) properly spelled with either a second “e” or an “a,” the former more common but a lesser choice. Ciénaga also requires a tilde (é), although it’s commonly omitted.

Ciénagas are desert marshes, alkaline, freshwater, spongy, wet meadows with shallow-gradient, permanently saturated soils in otherwise arid landscapes. These unique arid-land wetlands are commonly associated with seeps or springs, found in canyon headwaters or along margins of streams. Ciénagas often occur because bio morphology forces water to the surface, over large areas, not merely through a single pool or channel. In a healthy ciénaga, water slowly migrates through long, wide-scale mats of thick, sponge-like wetland sod. Before Spanish arrival, ciénagas often occupied the entire widths of valley bottoms, a description that explains historic, pre-damaged ciénagas, few of which can be described that way today. The blue-lined photograph illustrates where the portion of the Burro Ciénaga on the Pitchfork Ranch south of Silver City, New Mexico flowed before it was damaged.

READ MORE HERE: <https://cityofrocks.org/aridland-cienagas/>

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\*A. Thomas and Lucinda Cole retired to the Pitchfork Ranch south of Silver City, New Mexico where they have been restoring the portion of the Burro Ciénaga on the ranch and surrounding habitat since 2004. For a 5-minute video explaining ciénagas, go to Video about Aridland Ciénagas A.T. has also written Restoring the Pitchfork Ranch: How Healing a Southwest Oasis Holds Promise for Our Endangered Land to be published by the University of Arizona Press in February, 2024. To learn more about the ranch, ciénaga, and book,

go to the ranch website: [pitchforkranchnm.com](http://pitchforkranchnm.com) where you can find information about the ranch, its wildlife, archaeology, restoration and other information, read excerpts from the book, blurbs and preorder.

## **An Invitation to the 10th Natural History of the Gila Symposium**

By

Reyna Rodriguez  
Western New Mexico University

Conservation Legacy  
The 10th Biennial Natural History of the Gila Symposium artists, and in 2024 serves as a gathering for researchers, land managers, conservationists, educators to trade insights and ideas received from the Gila Region, encompassing the watersheds and adjacent areas in southwestern New Mexico, southeastern Arizona, and northern Mexico. This year's Symposium holds significance as it kicks off the opening of the Gila Centennial, commemorating 100 years of the wilderness idea in the United States. The Symposium will present previously undiscovered facets of the Gila's history, and make contributions to the comprehension of its legacy.

Scheduled to take place February 28 to March 1 at Western New Mexico University's Global Resource Center, this free event is open to the public, either online through Zoom or in person. The symposium aims to enrich the ongoing scientific discourse of the Gila region by bringing together researchers, educators, community leaders, and natural history enthusiasts to engage in discourse and share information. The three-day event will feature a range of activities, including a photography exhibit, panel discussions, creative presentations, field trips, workshops, and potentially a cameo appearance from Aldo Leopold. Topics will include

## **Become a Friend**

Interested in helping out City of Rocks State Park? Consider joining the Friends. Typical Friends activities include highway cleanup, cutting and splitting firewood for sale to park campers, operation of a gift shop in the park Visitor Center, fund-raising, and more!

[Join or Renew](#)

restoration, conservation, entomology, archaeology, herpetology, sustainable ecosystem management, indigenous perspectives, and more. Keynote speakers include Chiricahua Apache leader Joe Saenz and Executive Director, and co-founder of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition Teresa Ana Martinez.

Please visit the symposium website for real-time updates, speaker bios, and detailed schedule information.

<https://wnmu.edu/gilasymposium>

The purpose of the Friends of City of Rocks State Park, Inc. is to help support the New Mexico State Parks in the enrichment of the park area. Specifically, the Friends aim to enhance, preserve and promote park use, to participate in nature as responsible stewards of the Earth, to create an awareness of the wonder, fragility and importance of the park, to develop and improve existing education/interpretive programs, to develop and improve public awareness of the park, and to encourage public participation and/or membership in the Friends group.

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