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LightHawk's monthly update, WayPoint, was created to share some of the good news we on staff learn about daily. These success stories illustrate the critical role we play in conservation efforts throughout North and Central America through the unique perspective of flight. We hope you enjoy WayPoint and will share with others our success stories from above.

Flights Show Pipeline Could Mean Big Drain on the Verde River

In the desert hills of central Arizona, the Verde River bubbles up from underground and flows nearly 180 miles before reaching the Salt River northeast of Phoenix. Seen from the cabin of a small airplane, the river's narrow meandering ribbon of green appears fragile against a backdrop of rugged desert canyons. This apparent fragility turns out to be a reality, as the Verde is imperiled by rapidly growing demands on the groundwater that sustains it.

Fed largely by a series of underground aquifers, the Verde includes the only designated Wild and Scenic River segment in Arizona and is one of the state's few perennial rivers. The Verde River corridor serves as a critical flyway for migratory birds, with one of the highest densities of breeding birds, including bald eagles, in the United States. The Verde is home to rare reptile and amphibian species, hosts one of Arizona's best remaining native fisheries and is one of the last places in Arizona where river otter breed. Other resident mammals include beaver, bobcat, mountain lion, mule deer, pronghorn and javelina.

This unique desert wildlife habitat, and the overall health of the Verde watershed, are dramatically threatened by new housing developments in the nearby cities of Prescott, Prescott Valley and Chino Valley. Since 1992, these cities have been pursuing a plan to build a 45-mile long pipeline that would transport more than 13 million gallons of water per day from the Big Chino aquifer to quench the thirst of new developments. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, "USGS hydrologists have calculated that between 80 and 86 percent of the waters in the upper Verde River come from the Big Chino aquifer—and predict that in time this project will appreciably dry up the first 24 miles of the river. Meanwhile, the nearby town of Chino Valley is also ramping up groundwater-dependent development and buying up 'water ranches' to feed growth." Water ranching refers to the practice of parties purchasing



The Verde River Watershed with proposed 45-mile pipeline shown in red. LightHawk partners, the Center for Biological Diversity are encouraging smart development decisions that keep the river flowing. *Map courtesy of the Center for Biological Diversity*

land with the sole intent of "mining" the groundwater beneath it for use elsewhere. Because of these threats, the Verde was recognized by American Rivers as one of "America's Ten Most Endangered Rivers" in 2006.

Since 2006, LightHawk Volunteer Pilot Gene Steffen has flown multiple missions over the Verde watershed with the Nature Conservancy, the Center for Biological Diversity and numerous local citizens' groups that have identified the Verde River watershed as a priority for protection.

LightHawk played a significant role in one of the region's recent successes – the purchase by The Nature Conservancy of the headwaters of the Verde as a wildlife preserve in March 2008.

In 2006 and 2007, Gene Steffen flew four missions over the Verde, educating staff from The Nature Conservancy, municipal leaders, hydrologists, and the media about the importance of the headwaters area. According to Dan Campbell, the Verde Program Director for The Nature Conservancy, "I've now worked with LightHawk pilots for three decades on two continents. Needless to say, the partnership works! Recently, we had the unique opportunity in northern Arizona of buying the headwaters springs where the Verde River actually springs from the ground. Without LightHawk's help we could have never done it. LightHawk has been an invaluable ally in helping to save this last great place."

Another flight by Gene Steffen in March 2008 enabled the Center for Biological Diversity's Verde Campaign Coordinator, Joanne Oellers, and volunteer videographer, Victor Michael, to capture video footage and still photographs to shed light on the continuing plight of the Verde.



Above the Middle Verde River Canyon. The proposed pipeline could dry up at least the first 24 miles of the river. It's difficult to predict the consequences for the lower reaches of the river. *Victor Michael/Metropolitan Imageworks/LightHawk*

According to Oellers, the Center for Biological Diversity is working, "to engage the public to insist the decision-makers for the Big Chino pipeline projects prepare a plan to protect the Verde River before any construction or more pre-construction activities continue."

Local media has taken a keen interest in the river's future, and as landowners in the path of the pipeline start to question the true price of selling a right-of-way across their property, the Center for Biological Diversity hopes that, "the pipeline planners will take note and consider what we've asked all along: plan for mitigation now." Armed with the undeniable perspective provided by the photos and video from their LightHawk flight, Oellers and her colleagues are engaged in a tireless effort to educate elected officials, water managers, conservation groups, and the general public about the importance of the Verde River and are encouraging the formation of a management district that would require smart development decisions.

Though the future of the Verde watershed remains cloudy, it is clear that the partnership between the region's conservation groups and LightHawk is making a difference, one flight at a time.

"By showing what we have seen from the air, by way of video and still photography, we hope that it will...give pause and additional consideration for the depletion of this natural resource."

- Victor Michael, Producer, Metropolitan Filmworks



LightHawk volunteer pilot, Gene Steffen and photographer/videographer Victor Michael of Metropolitan Imageworks at the hanger at Ernest A. Love Field in Prescott, AZ. *Joanne Oellers/Center for Biological Diversity/LightHawk*

About LightHawk

Founded in 1979, LightHawk is a nonprofit, volunteer pilot-based organization that flies environmental missions in collaboration with a large network of pilots and hundreds of partner organizations throughout Central and North America. LightHawk flights provide a powerful and effective platform for research, groundtruthing, environmental awareness, and education. Receive this from a friend? Subscribe by sending an email to info@lighthawk.org

