



Sky Islands

Exclusive and Unrenewable

If you're not familiar with the Sky Islands, think of them as mountains—but not just any mountains. These majestic masterpieces are incredibly diverse and unique. Diverse because they support over 2,000 plant species, about 270 bird species (more than half the breeding bird species in N. America), more than 75 reptile species, and the list goes on. Unique because there is no other biological or geographical phenomenon like them on earth.

The southwestern U.S. Sky Islands are about forty ranges of mountains in southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico and northeastern Sonora and northwestern Chihuahua. The Sky Islands stretch from the Catalinas, Galiuros and Pinalenos ranges that lie 80 – 90 miles north of the international border, into the storied Sierra Madre range well over 100 miles into Mexico.

The term “Sky Islands” was coined in 1967 by Weldon Heald to denote mountain ranges that are isolated from each other by intervening valleys of grassland or desert. The valleys of this basin act as barriers to the movement of woodland and forest species somewhat like saltwater seas isolate plants and animals on oceanic islands.

The Sky Island complex of mountains, often likened to an archipelago, stands alone in its one-of-a-kind presentation. The southwestern U.S. Sky Islands, (unlike the African or Venezuelan sky islands) extend from subtropical to temperate latitudes, with a complex pattern of species that have both northern and southern origins.

Each Sky Island has a unique ecosystem with a stack of life zones ranging from arid (dry) to boreal (forested). These ecosystems provide a globally rare range of habitats, from tropical to temperate, that have supported an unusual mix of wildlife, including parrots, black bears, jaguars, wolves, and over half of all the breeding birds in North America. And, although some species have been rendered extinct, there have also been additions. A survey on top of the Pinalenos yielded three new species of flightless beetles; recently the Ramsey Canyon leopard frog was discovered in the Dragoon Mountains.

The greater Sky Islands region is globally important for its role in launching the wilderness preservation movement, as well as for its wild and enchanting landscape. The region is of international importance because

of its outstanding biological diversity.

Whenever you have a multidimensional and vast region such as the Sky Islands, it deserves proper and conscientious stewardship. Pressure is being put on the eco-system by humans at an ever increasing rate. Camping, rock climbing, hunting, fishing, military maneuvers, car based tourism, grazing, timber and fuel wood extraction take a constant toll on a rich wilderness area like the Sky Islands. Over the past century, the precious habitat of this region has experienced loss of species, degradation of watersheds and fragmentation of landscapes by roads and development.

The Wildlands Project and regional partners—Sky Island Alliance, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and Naturalia (Mexico)—have created a visionary approach to protecting and restoring the wildlands of this beautiful and ecologically significant region.

The Sky Islands Wildlands Network Conservation Plan is a prescription for restoring degraded ecosystems by connecting important core wildlands areas to one another via wildlife movements linkages. The resulting wildlands network will provide the foundation for the return of key species and ecological health throughout the Sky Islands region.

The Sky Islands Wildlands Network has been implemented through the efforts of a broad-based network of conservationists, citizens, scientists, land managers, ranchers, wildlife enthusiasts and outdoor recreationists. Just as connects landscapes protects ecosystem health, connecting people to the process protects community values. Working together, networks of people can protect the networks of land needed to restore nature and sustain human communities.