



Shape the Future

Canyon Chatter

Friends of Madera Canyon

December 2025



TROGON AMBIGUUS.
Doubtful Trogon.

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On the cover: The Elegant Trogon recently underwent a name change due to advances in scientific understanding and taxonomic refinement. It is now the Coppery-tailed Trogon. The species was initially described as the Ambiguous Trogon, *Trogon ambiguus* in 1838 by John Gould. As researchers collected more specimens and analyzed their characteristics, it became clear that the northern populations—those in Mexico and the United States—exhibited distinct morphological differences, particularly in tail feather pattern and sheen, compared to their southern counterparts. To reflect these differences and improve clarity in classification, the northern group was reclassified as *Trogon ambiguus*, while the nominate *Trogon elegans* name was retained for the southern group. This update highlights how ongoing research and new discoveries can lead to changes in how species are named and understood within the scientific community.

The system of classification used to be about putting species together based upon how similar they looked. Now it is about shared ancestry. The most closely related populations are put together in the same species and the species that shared a common ancestor are placed in the same genus.

How to Join Friends of Madera Canyon

Below are links to join as a new member, renew a membership or make a donation. The links will take you to a secure server to use to make an automated payment. Do you have any questions? Let us know. If you prefer to help by writing a check, please make your check payable to Friends of Madera Canyon - mail to:

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A NEW MEMBERSHIP - RENEW A MEMBERSHIP
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From the President

December 2025

Education is the way in which you and I can help Shape the Future of Madera Canyon. At the core of the mission for the Friends of Madera Canyon is educating people young and old about the treasure of nature about which we share a passion.

On one of the Fall Semester field trips for area fourth graders led by FOMC Naturalist Doug Moore and his docents, the students in one group of four were given a plastic box with a magnifying glass on one side. The box has proved to be an effective way for the youngsters to be able to see details about various items they and their docent spot along the trail. Once the object under scrutiny has been examined by all in the group it is released, no worse for the wear. (Unless bugs experience trauma from spending a few minutes encased in a plastic box!)

Magdalena (not her real name) could not go ten feet without noticing something worth plastic-box-examination. Once she had corralled the critter, the three other students gathered around with their various expressions of wonder and excitement. The frequent stops were not in the docent's plan for the two-hour trip around the Proctor Loop, but she recognized what was happening: children were being enthralled by the life in the Canyon, eager to discover the next thing of wonder.

Do you suppose that Magdalena, when her mom asked her about the trip, bubbled over about the things she had seen? Did she, maybe, suggest to Mom that the family go back to the Canyon to find more fascinating things, maybe even with their own plastic box with a magnifying glass?

I have been on the Loop trails a lot these past few months working on the bench replacement project. Regularly, I run into folks on the trail who tell me about the deer just up the way or the flock of Mexican Jays that followed them for a while. I also encounter people new to the Canyon trails who ask about this aspect of plant and animal life or that. I share what I know which is not nearly as much as others know. Sometimes, what I describe is new to those people.

Those exchanges on the trail or in the conversations at the Visitor Information Station are another form of education. We share information, and we project our enthusiasm for the splendors of the Canyon. So are the contributions from FOMC to NABUR hosted by the Green Valley News or the stories GVN publishes about our work and our people.

At the recent Sip-and-Swirl event staged by the Greater Green Valley Community Foundation, I spoke with a number of people who stopped by our table to inquire about membership. To several, I mentioned that one of my favorite activities in the Canyon was to find a spot to sit by myself and...do nothing, just sit, listen, look, give over myself to just being there.

I got in return smiles of recognition. They, too, have found moments of peace and reflection in the Canyon away from the cacophony and distractions of modern life.

I see these as moments of education, too, where we comprehend and feel a part of nature.

Dan White



Naming A Bench—A New Way to Honor

If you have been wanting to find a way to honor a family member, a friend, or anyone with a significant tie to Madera Canyon, there is now a way: naming a bench in Madera Canyon.

FOMC member Betsy Martin contacted me about her desire to honor her late husband, Mike, in some way in the Canyon. The U.S. Forest Service prohibits memorial or honor plates on its infrastructure, like benches or fire grills. So, a physical nameplate was not in the cards.

But, Betsy, Michele Gazica, and I put on our 21st century thinking caps. What about developing a program enabling donors to affix a name or names virtually, online, on the FOMC website, in a way that anyone visiting the site can know about the person(s) being recognized? I asked the FOMC Board and the U.S. Forest Service about the idea. They all thought the idea worth pursuing.

How it works: A donor makes known his or her interest in affixing a name to a bench for a period of ten years. Naming a bench without a back requires a \$1500 donation to the Friends. A bench with a back requires a \$2000 donation. The website will soon have pictures of each bench and what the bench looks over, the GPS coordinates and other information to help someone find the bench physically, and words composed by the donor. Finding the site and the bench information on the webpage will be easy.

The Mike Martin Bench was the first to be named. Fred and Marion Schmidt have named the next two—the Raptor Bench and the Meadow Bench—to recognize the Friends of Madera Canyon volunteers. A fourth and fifth bench naming are in the works.

Our intent is to have bench page on the website at the start of 2026.

If you have an interest in this program, please do not hesitate to contact board member Michele Gazica (michele.gazica@friendsofmaderacanyon.org) or me (dan.white@friendsofmaderacanyon.org).

Dan White

A Fledgling Eagle in Our Midst

Isabelle Donnelly, a senior at Walden Grove High School and a member of FOMC Youth Naturalist Group Member Troop 247, has completed her project to satisfy requirements for the rank of Eagle Scout. If you live in the area, you might have seen a full-page story about Isabelle in the November 23, 2025 [Green Valley News](#). Her project focused on removing graffiti from a collection of boulders in the Canyon, a task she identified as a freshman as one worthy of the time and sweat the work involved.

We are proud to be affiliated with Isabelle and Troop 247 through the Youth Naturalist Group membership program. When asked by the GVN what the biggest lessons were that she learned by being in Scouts and doing the project, she replied, “the value of patience and commitment.”

She will be awarded her rank at a Court of Honor, I hope to attend. Patience and commitment sounds like the qualities of an ideal FOMC volunteer-of-the-future, too!

Congratulations, Isabelle!

Dan White





Announcements

The Tucson Bird Alliance will be offering talks again in Green Valley on the 2nd Tuesday at 11am for the next 5 months. This year the talks will be held at Canoa Hills Center in the Saguaro Room. Here are the topics:

Note December's talk is canceled

Tuesday January 13 @11am with Jake Thompson "Birding Patagonia"

Tuesday February 10 @11am with Olya Weekley "Reducing Hazards to Birds"

Tuesday March 10 @11am with Stephen Vaughan "Exploring Arizona's Pygmy-Owls"

The Annual Meeting

The Friends of Madera Canyon is celebrating with an annual meeting on Saturday, January 24, 2026 at the Desert Hills GVR location. Doug Moore, Education Director and canyon naturalist, is giving a talk on "Madera Canyon: Past, Present, & Future". This meeting is open to everyone so please invite your friends. Coffee and doughnuts will be served at social time, which begins at 9. The program begins at 9:30.

The address is 2980 S Camino Del Sol, Green Valley, AZ 85622

See you soon at this fun event.



The Bird Page

Madera Canyon's Sparrows Part II

Bob Pitcher

This month, I continued the catalogue of sparrows found regularly in Madera Canyon that I began in last month's *Chatter*. Sparrows as a tribe are among the Little Brown Birds that are the despair of many birdwatchers. Sparrows are small, active, and mostly rather plain, generally brown above, whitish below, streaked for camouflage. Some have distinctive patterns of black, white, or chestnut. Most have distinctive songs as well, though winter birds tend not to sing. Sometimes one sees mixed flocks of sparrows, but other sparrow species keep to themselves, and some seem not to flock at all. Almost all sparrows are relatively shy, flitting away as one approaches, often disappearing into tall grass. Altogether, more than twenty species of sparrows are found regularly in the Canyon. Here are those I didn't cover last month.

White-crowned Sparrow, *Zonotrichia leucophrys*.

The first White-crowned Sparrow in fall is a sign of cooler weather. The species is highly migratory, disappearing north in late spring. The White-crowned is probably the most common winter sparrow in the Canyon, seen wherever it can find grass and other seeds. It's usually in flocks of ten or a dozen, occasionally many more. Flocks usually post a lookout, an adult that sits a yard or so off the ground, to keep watch while the rest search for seeds out of sight. Toward spring, White-crowns start to sing, often only a part of their plaintive, clear song, of which snatches can be heard even in the fall. White-crowns are large for sparrows, with, in the adult, a bright white pair of crown stripes. But many here will be immature, with only an indication of the adult head pattern in light brown. There are two distinguishable subspecies here. The "Mountain" White-crowned, the common winter variety, has whitish lores (the feathers just back of the bill); the "Gambel's" has black lores and is usually seen only in migration.

White-throated Sparrow, *Zonotrichia albicollis*. This is the eastern counterpart of the White-crowned Sparrow, and is found only rarely in the Canyon during the winter. The White-throat is a little smaller than the White-crowned, with a less strongly marked crown but a much brighter white throat. When I've seen this sparrow in Madera, it has usually been near where Proctor Road crosses the creek, and with a flock of White-crowns. There are two color phases of White-throats -- one has a broad white stripe above the eye, the other a broad tan stripe. These are not subspecies, and in fact it's thought now that brown-stripes breed only with white-stripes, and *vice versa*.



Vesper Sparrow, *Pooecetes gramineus*. The Vesper is a grassland bird, found lower down in the Canyon, and more common below it. It's another sparrow likely to be found only here in cooler months. A larger sparrow, the Vesper has a strong white eye-ring and white outer tail feathers clearly visible when it flies (though other sparrows, like the Lark Sparrow and the Juncos, also have white tail feathers). Vespers are often found among different species of sparrows in mixed flocks. When they flush, they are more likely than others to fly into shrubs or small trees.

Savannah Sparrow, *Passerculus sandwichensis*. The Savannah Sparrow is so typical a sparrow as to be confusing for that alone – it looks like several other species. It's found in fields and other grassy areas with some cover, and travels in flocks, often numerous and sometimes including other species. There are Savannahs here year-round, but they're more likely to be seen in the Canyon in the winter months, and then they can be common at times around Proctor Road. Eliminating other species may be the best way to identify a Savannah, as it will have no distinctive patterning, only the usual sparrow striping, brown on a whitish background. Most, however, have at least a touch of yellow at the base of the bill and seem to have shorter tails than other sparrows.

Song Sparrow, *Melospiza melodia*. Common in so many other situations, the Song Sparrow is uncommon in the Canyon, probably for the scarcity of permanent wet spots here. This is the "Desert" Song Sparrow for the most part, a light rufous subspecies; Song Sparrows from farther north or east are a darker brown. Song Sparrows are more or less heavily streaked below, with, almost always, a central breast spot. They sing all year long, each individual with a somewhat different song, but all beginning with two or three introductory notes. Song Sparrows tend to be skulkers, keeping low in weeds or rushes, but they are also commonly in pairs, and give themselves away by cheeping to one another as they move around in hiding.

Lincoln's Sparrow, *Melospiza lincolnii*. The Lincoln's Sparrow is another winter sparrow in Madera, to be found from September to May. It likes brushy areas and is rarely found far from cover. The Lincolns are small, but they manage an elegant appearance – crisply striped below, on a buffy rather than whitish background. It sometimes has a central breast spot like a Song Sparrow, and otherwise looks much like a more northern Song Sparrow – but more dapper. Lincoln's don't sing here.

The Towhees

The rest of Madera Canyon's sparrows are all Towhees, a set of birds that taxonomists long had trouble placing properly. Some years ago, with the advent of DNA analysis, it was determined that Towhees belonged in the North American Sparrow family, the *Passarellidae*. Towhees are ground-hugging birds, long-tailed and very large for sparrows, and one or two are colored quite unlike typical sparrows. Five Towhees are found in Madera.

Canyon Towhee, *Melospiza fuscus*. This is a large, long-tailed bird, some 8.5 inches in length, a full two inches larger than any typical sparrow here. It's overall a light brown, and can appear to have no distinctive markings. Close up, it can be seen to have a rufous crown, a whitish throat, and rufous under the tail. It can nearly always be found around Proctor Road and the Whitehouse Picnic Area, and almost always in pairs, with larger, presumably family groups in the fall. With the exception of the Yellow-eyed Junco, Canyon Towhees are probably the least shy of our sparrows: they fly when approached, and may give an alarm call, but don't seem all that concerned.

Abert's Towhee, *Melospiza aberti*. The Abert's looks much like a Canyon Towhee, same size and shape and mostly brown, with a rufous undertail. It's also usually found in pairs. But



Abert's has a black face, and is much shyer, running away under cover as you get close. It's position is then given away by its loud, sharp alarm calls. Abert's is a desert bird; Proctor Road is about as far up in the Canyon as one is likely to see it, and that rather uncommonly.

Rufous-crowned Sparrow, *Aimophila ruficeps*. Though it and its Mexican relatives have recently been classed among the Towhees, the Rufous-capped Sparrow looks like a typical sparrow rather than a Towhee. It is among the larger typical sparrows, with a bright rufous crown and an obvious eye ring, and has a pair of moustachial stripes on either side of a white throat. It is unmarked whitish below. The Rufous-crowned is uncommon but breeds in the Canyon and can be found, often in pairs, throughout the year, and from Proctor Road at least to middle elevations. It likes steep slopes.

Green-tailed Towhee, *Pipilo chlorurus*. The Green-tailed Towhee is a little smaller than the other Towhees, and distinctively colored, being a more or less bright green on its back and tail. Generally a neutral gray below, it has a bright rufous cap and strong white stripes on its throat. It is almost always on the ground, and is good at staying out of sight. Though it breeds only a little farther north in Arizona, the Green-tailed is found here in the Canyon only from fall to spring. It's not very common, and usually forages alone.

Spotted Towhee, *Pipilo maculatus*. This bird looks little like a sparrow, with very different coloration and a size and shape reminiscent of a Cardinal, with which, before DNA analysis, it was often classified. This bird is a little over 8 inches long and, like the other Towhees, stays mostly on the ground, where it searches, sometimes noisily, among the leaves. The male is black on head, breast, and back, rufous below; the back is heavily spotted with white. White tail feathers flash when it flies. The female has brown in place of black. Spotted Towhees are found in the upper Canyon, where they breed and can be found year round. They are sometimes quite common. The song has been rendered as "Drink, drink your tea," slurred and lingering on the last syllable. The alarm – and they're easily alarmed – is also loud and distinctive.



And that's it: between this month's piece and last month's, the twenty-two sparrow species to be looked for – in appropriate seasons and habitat – in Madera Canyon. The *Birds of Madera Canyon* checklist, prepared by the Friends, includes four more sparrows that are found here so infrequently that I haven't included them. They are the Grasshopper Sparrow, the Clay-colored Sparrow, the Lark Bunting, and the Golden-crowned Sparrow. The first three have been reported in Madera fewer than half a dozen times in the last twenty years. They are

all grassland birds. The Golden-crowned Sparrow is only considered very rare here. It is similar to the White-crowned Sparrow, but a little darker and with a yellow crown stripe in the adult. One might possibly be seen in late fall or winter in the Canyon, with White-crowns.

Photos in order of appearance. White-crowned Sparrow from the National Parks Gallery; Lincoln's Sparrow, INaturalist; Green-tailed Towhee, National Parks Gallery.



The Editor's Desk

The Administration's Efforts to Re-purpose the Environmental Protection Agency

The week of November 24 saw a rapid series of environmental rollbacks by the Trump administration, with significant policy changes proposed each day. On Monday, the EPA moved to significantly reduce protections for wetlands and streams by narrowing the scope of the Clean Water Act. By Wednesday, federal wildlife agencies introduced changes to the Endangered Species Act, making it harder to protect threatened plants and animals by allowing economic considerations in their status reviews. On Thursday, the Interior Department announced plans to open nearly 1.3 billion acres of U.S. coastal waters—including previously untouched areas in the high Arctic—to new oil and gas drilling.

Environmental advocates warn that these proposals, if finalized, could cause lasting harm to water quality, endangered species, and marine ecosystems. The pace and scale of deregulation were notable, even as international leaders convened at a U.N. climate summit in Brazil, where the U.S. was absent for the first time in three decades.

Industry groups, including farmers, oil drillers, and manufacturers, welcomed the moves as a boost for American energy and manufacturing dominance. Supporters argue the changes will reduce burdens on landowners and businesses, while critics counter that they prioritize economic interests over scientific guidance and environmental protection.

The proposals face strong opposition from environmental lawyers, activists, and some state leaders, particularly regarding expanded offshore drilling in regions like California, the Gulf of Mexico, and Alaska. Concerns are especially high for the critically endangered Rice's whale, which inhabits the Gulf and could be threatened further by increased drilling activity.

While finalizing these regulations may take up to two years and could be challenged in court, the administration has stated its intent to make these changes resilient to future political changes. This week's actions highlight the administration's aggressive approach to environmental deregulation, with potentially profound and lasting effects on U.S. environmental policy. JCM

Reference. Joselow J., Einhorn C. 2025, November 24, Section A, Page 14 of the New York edition. In One Week, Trump Moves to Reshape U.S. Environmental Policy. New York Times.

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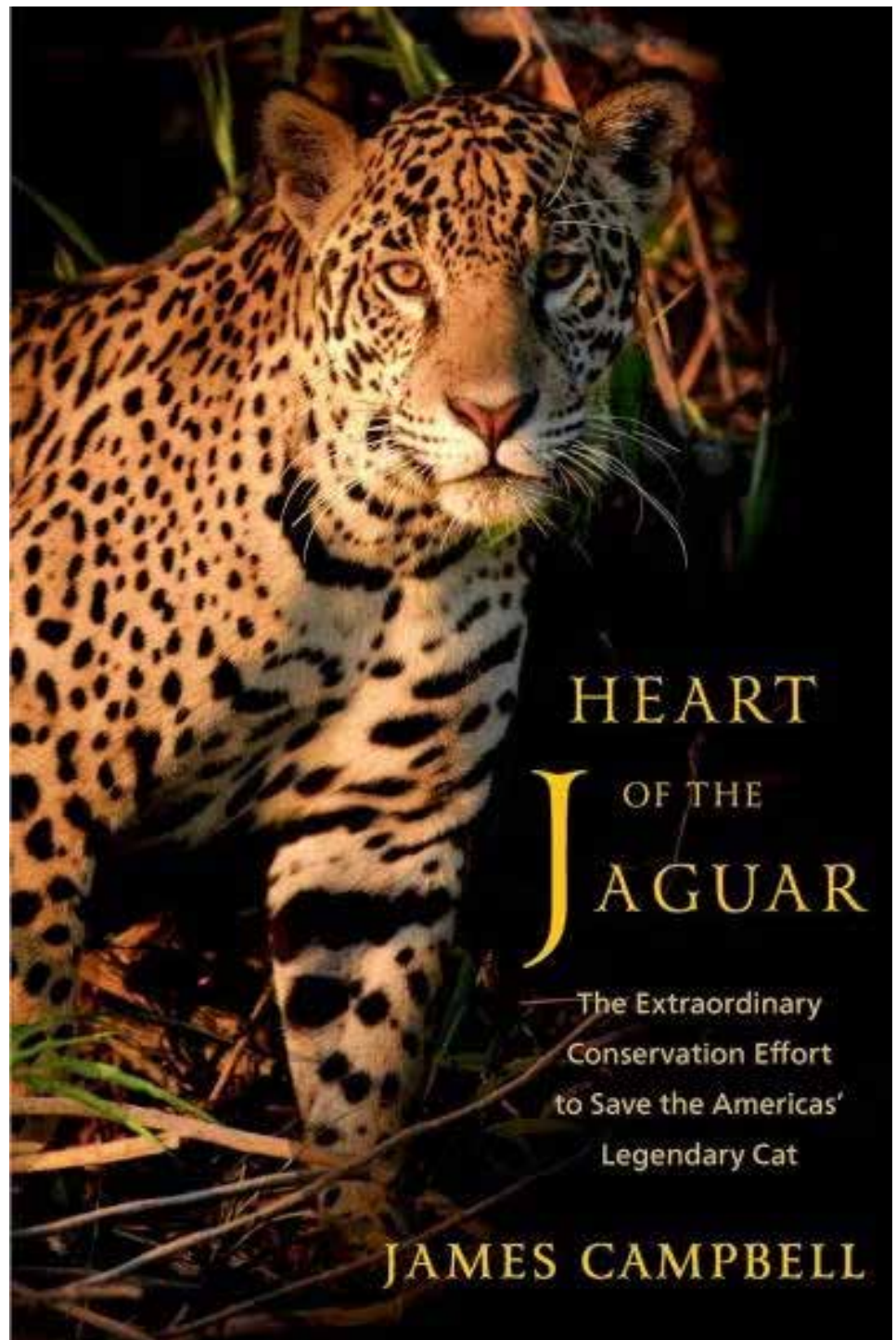


Book Review

***Heart of the Jaguar, the extraordinary conservation effort to save the America's Legendary Cat.* James Campbell. W.W. Norton 315pp. JCM**

An engrossing and in-depth chronicle of the fight to preserve the Jaguar, *Heart of the Jaguar* delves into the remarkable efforts to save this elusive and iconic species, as well as the passionate individual who made it his life's mission. The Jaguar, once roving vast territories across North America, stands among Earth's most powerful predators and the planet's third-largest cat. Its domain once spanned from the southern United States deep into Mexico, Central America, and the wilds of South America. Yet, despite its ancient lineage—having first appeared in the New World over a million years ago—the Jaguar now faces the grim reality of extinction. The species has been wiped out in places like Uruguay and El Salvador, and its numbers have plummeted elsewhere, leaving it critically endangered throughout much of its historical range.

Heart of the Jaguar not only recounts the dramatic rescue mission for this magnificent animal but also provides a vivid portrait of Alan Rabinowitz, the visionary conservationist at the heart of this movement. Rabinowitz, described by *Time* magazine as "the Indiana Jones of wildlife protection," was a scientist of formidable intel-



lect and relentless drive. In the 1980s, he embarked on pioneering studies of jaguars in Belize's dense jungles and the sprawling wetlands of the Brazilian Pantanal. These early expeditions ignited his lifelong commitment to the species. His most ambitious endeavor, the Jaguar Corridor Initiative, sought to link Jaguar habitats across the Americas, providing the big cats with a network of protected pathways and safe havens. Even as his own health declined, Rabinowitz remained unwavering in his determination to ensure the Jaguar's survival, making this initiative his final crusade.

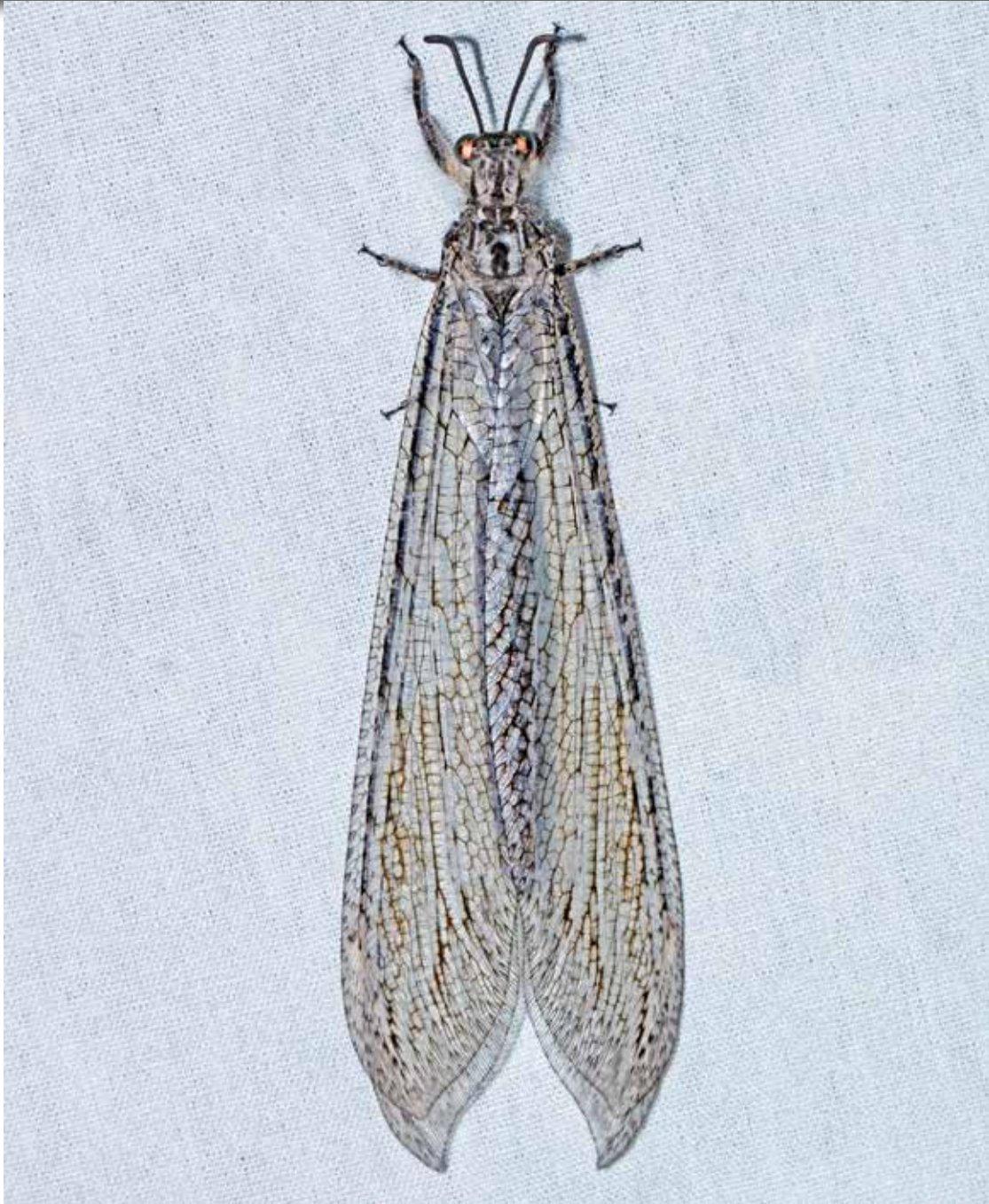
Author James Campbell takes readers on an epic journey that spans continents and centuries. He traces the jaguar's story from its migration over the Bering Land Bridge in prehistoric times to its sacred role in pre-Columbian civilizations, and finally to its precarious existence in today's fragmented forests and protected reserves. Along the way, Campbell uncovers the numerous threats facing the species, from the illegal trade in Jaguar body parts to the relentless advance of industrial agriculture and the mounting challenges posed by climate change.

Yet amid adversity, Campbell discovers sources of hope and inspiration. He introduces us to a diverse cast of modern-day guardians—wildlife biologists conducting groundbreaking research, Indigenous leaders fighting for their ancestral lands, ranchers adapting their practices to coexist with big cats, and dedicated park administrators safeguarding critical habitats. These individuals, united by a shared sense of purpose, continue to build upon Rabinowitz's legacy, often at great personal cost. Their courage and perseverance are obvious throughout the narrative.

With compelling storytelling and insightful analysis, *Heart of the Jaguar* celebrates these unsung heroes and underscores the profound importance of preserving the Jaguar's place in the natural world. Campbell's work is a testament to the enduring spirit of conservation and a stirring reminder that the fate of one of nature's most charismatic creatures rests in our collective hands. This book not only informs but also inspires, urging readers to recognize the value of biodiversity and the urgent need to protect it for future generations.

He introduces us to a diverse cast of modern-day guardians—wildlife biologists conducting groundbreaking research, Indigenous leaders fighting for their ancestral lands, ranchers adapting their practices to coexist with big cats, and dedicated park administrators safeguarding critical habitats.





Ant Lions and Doodlebugs are the same insect, with the name “doodlebug” referring to the adult stage, which is a large flying insect, while the ant-lion is the larvae which creates a conical pit in the sand to trap prey. The larval stage is a voracious predator that uses its large jaws to capture ants and other small arthropods that fall into its pit, which it then liquefies and consumes. After completing metamorphosis within a sand-and-silk cocoon, the antlion emerges as a winged adult that feeds on nectar and pollen, playing a role as a pollinator, before mating and repeating the cycle. The doodlebug in the photo was photographed in Florida Canyon. JCM

Send comments, articles, & announcements to:
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