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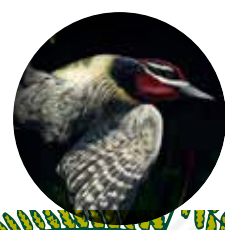


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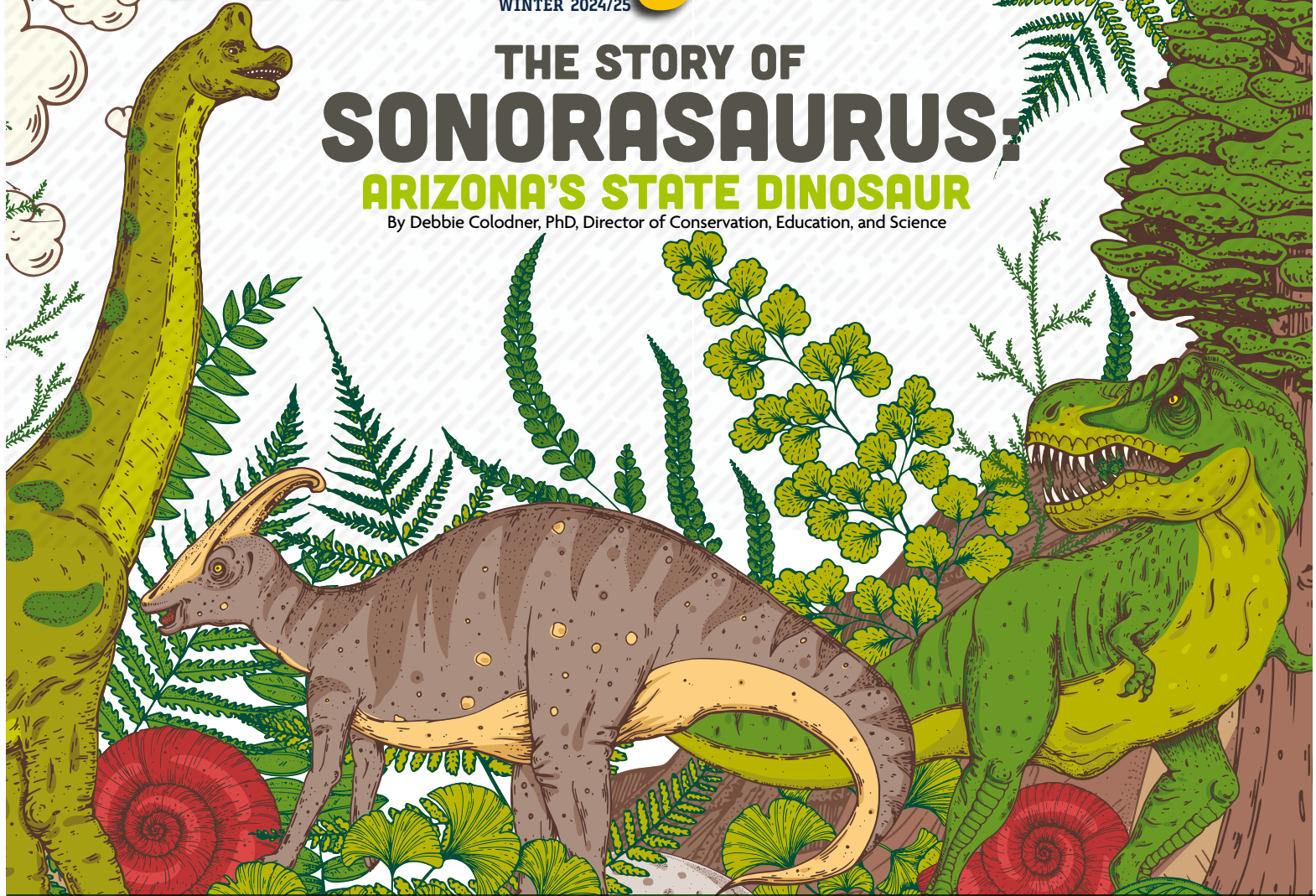
Desert Museum

Discovery

WINTER 2024/25

THE STORY OF SONORASAURUS: ARIZONA'S STATE DINOSAUR

By Debbie Colodner, PhD, Director of Conservation, Education, and Science



This December, a troupe of life-size animatronic dinosaurs will be at the Desert Museum! These amazing creatures will be joining the remains of their long-lost cousin, the Sonorasaurus. They'll discover that the landscape has changed quite a bit since the last time they roamed the Earth.

During the time of Sonorasaurus, about 100 million years ago, the Sonoran Desert was near the edge of an inland sea that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. Flowering plants and trees had only recently evolved and taken up residence among conifers, ferns and cycads. A great diversity of dinosaurs and other reptiles dominated the land, sea, and air. Average temperatures were 7 – 16°F (4 – 9°C) warmer than today, there were no ice caps, the sea level was up 150-300 feet (50-100 meters), and atmospheric carbon dioxide was nearly five times higher than it is now!

Sonorasaurus lived in what we now call southern Arizona, on a semi-arid inland floodplain crossed by intermittent streams and rivers. Rather than saguaros and palo verdes, Sonorasaurus lived among evergreen conifer

trees. This dinosaur, the only Sonorasaurus ever found, was a teenager when it met its end, perhaps by the hands of a huge predator.

FINDING SONORASAURUS

We'll never know if Richard Thompson was the first person to lay eyes on Sonorasaurus' fossilized bones, or to recognize them as the remains of a giant ancient animal. But he was the first with the interest and connections to help extract it from the ground for scientific study.

A student in geosciences at the University of Arizona, Thompson was drawn to Mattie Canyon on the west side of Whetstone Mountains by the coded colors and symbols on a geologic map. These told him where he could find rocks of the age and type that might preserve dinosaur fossils.

continued on page 2...

He set out to explore the canyon in November 1994, and quickly found abundant pieces of petrified logs and fragments of fossilized bone. Following the fragments up slope, he saw something that made his heart race: a large mahogany-colored section of a fossilized limb bone.

Fossils on public land are governed by federal laws to help ensure they are preserved for the benefit of scientific knowledge. Thompson contacted Ron Ratkevich, then paleontologist at the Desert Museum, to help apply for a permit to further explore and eventually extract the fossils. In January 1995 they returned to the site and Ratkevich was awestruck – they were looking at the first somewhat complete dinosaur skeleton ever found in southern Arizona.

EXTRACTING SONORASAUURUS

Digging up a dinosaur that had been embedded in sandstone for millions of years was not easy, especially in the Sonoran Desert where summer temperatures often reached over 110° F. Metal tools became too hot to touch, shade was unavailable, and every drop of water had to be hauled to the excavation site. The bulk of the work was done by volunteers, chosen from eager applicants from across the country.

Because the site was so remote, only hand tools could be used to excavate the dinosaur skeleton. Rock hammers, five-pound sledges, pry bars and chisels were all they used to remove rocks from the face of the sandstone ridge. On a typical day, the field crew would move as much as two tons of rock by hand.

Between 1995 and 1999, over 50 tons of rock were removed from above the skeleton and thousands of fossil fragments were transported back to a lab at the Desert Museum. Here, specialized tools were used to slowly chip away the hard sandstone matrix, exposing the bone. Lab volunteers painstakingly reassembled the fossils, sometimes from hundreds of fragments.

WHAT KIND OF DINOSAUR WAS IT?

Ultimately, about 1/3 of the dinosaur's skeleton was found and extracted from the surrounding rock. The sizes and shapes of bones identified it as a sauropod, a long-necked plant-eater that walked on all four legs. Ratkevich estimated that it was 50 feet long and 12 feet high at the shoulder, about half the size of its more famous cousin, Brachiosaurus. He traveled to New York City to compare the Desert Museum fossils to those in the American Museum of Natural History's huge collection. The bone structure of the Mattie Canyon dinosaur was different from all the others. It was a new genus and species of the brachiosaurids and named *Sonorasaurus thompsonii* for the place where it was found, and for Thompson.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SONORASAUURUS

Paleontologists use bone sizes and lengths to estimate the weights of long-extinct animals, even when they do not have the whole skeleton. In research published in 2017, Dr. Michael D'emic calculated that *Sonorasaurus* probably weighed in at about 38,000 lbs (19 US tons, 17 metric tons, 3-4 times the weight of an adult African elephant). D'emic also studied the microscopic anatomy of its bones and was able to tell that this dinosaur grew slowly and sporadically, perhaps limited by periods of low food availability, consistent with a semi-arid environment. The study also revealed that it was relatively young and had only reached 75-80% of its adult size.

Based on further studies of the sedimentary rocks around *Sonorasaurus*, D'emic concluded that this dinosaur lived in an area with nearly constant temperatures, but highly variable rains. It died on a flood plain and was buried in sediments deposited by a meandering river. *Sonorasaurus* would have lived among fish, turtles, crocodylians, and a variety of other dinosaurs and other animals, very few of which are preserved in the rock record of southern Arizona.

While excavating *Sonorasaurus*, the crew discovered a tooth from another dinosaur. The size of this tooth matched scrape marks found on some *Sonorasaurus* bones. Its shape indicated that it belonged to a carnivorous dinosaur, and its size suggested it was from a large theropod, similar to *Acrocanthosaurus* (think of a big T. rex). Twenty years later, further analysis of the tooth led researcher D'emic to conclude that it actually came from a different theropod known as a carcharodontosaurid. Did the theropod attack the *Sonorasaurus*? Did it kill it? Or was it scavenging food from its already dead body? With such limited hard evidence, paleontologists are constantly updating and revising their understandings as new clues emerge.

THE TIMES OF SONORASAUURUS

Pinning down the date when *Sonorasaurus* lived was very important, since its estimated age was near the beginning of a 30-million-year period (from about 100 to 70 million years ago) when sauropods are absent from the fossil record of North America. If *Sonorasaurus* lived during this period, it would be evidence that sauropod dinosaurs were not absent, but rather that we had not yet found their fossils.

Scientists don't currently have methods to date dinosaur bones directly. Instead, they have to date the rock layers in which the dinosaurs occur. Ratkevich, and later D'emic, determined the age of the sandstone in which *Sonorasaurus* was buried to be between 98 and 110 million years ago. This makes *Sonorasaurus* one of the last sauropod dinosaurs to have lived in North America before they disappeared for 30 million years. Were sauropods really gone, or have we just failed to find their fossils? If they were really absent, where did they go, and how did they get back to North America? These are just a few of the fascinating questions that paleontologists continue to research.

HOW DID SONORASAUURUS BECOME ARIZONA'S STATE DINOSAUR?

In 2018, *Sonorasaurus thompsonii* became Arizona's state dinosaur thanks to an 11-year-old student from Phoenix, Jax Weldon. Like so many young people, Jax was fascinated by dinosaurs. When he learned that other states have state dinosaurs, he thought that Arizona should too. He did some research about Arizona dinosaurs and decided to propose *Sonorasaurus* because it has been found only in Arizona. With the encouragement of his teacher and parents, he wrote to the governor, and to his great surprise, Governor Ducey wrote back. State Senator Brophy-McGhee sponsored Senate Bill 1517 to make *Sonorasaurus* the state dinosaur. The bill passed the legislature and was signed into law April 10, 2018.

Join us in celebrating 30 years since the excavation of *Sonorasaurus*! This winter, visit the Desert Museum for a thrilling prehistoric adventure during Dinos in the Desert. Explore the very grounds where dinosaurs once roamed and ignite your inner paleontologist's curiosity. Don't miss this chance to connect with the past and see the real fossils of the *Sonorasaurus*!! 🦕

...THOMPSON CONTACTED RON RATKEVICH, THEN PALEONTOLOGIST AT THE DESERT MUSEUM, TO HELP APPLY FOR A PERMIT TO FURTHER EXPLORE AND EVENTUALLY EXTRACT THE FOSSILS. IN JANUARY 1995 THEY RETURNED TO THE SITE AND RATKEVICH WAS AWESTRUCK - THEY WERE LOOKING AT THE FIRST SOMEWHAT COMPLETE DINOSAUR SKELETON EVER FOUND IN SOUTHERN ARIZONA...

SCENES FROM SONORASAUURUS

CLOSE UP OF LEG SEGMENT OF SONORASAUURUS



JAX WELDON



RICHARD THOMPSON

FIRST CLUE! THIS IS WHAT RICHARD THOMPSON SAW WHEN HE MADE THE DISCOVERY!



THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS EXCERPTS FROM SONORASAUURUS, A DINOSAUR OF THE DESERT, BY RON RATKEVICH, ARIZONA-SONORA DESERT MUSEUM, 1997.



RON RATKEVICH

DIG SITE WITH FOSSILIZED BONE EXPOSED

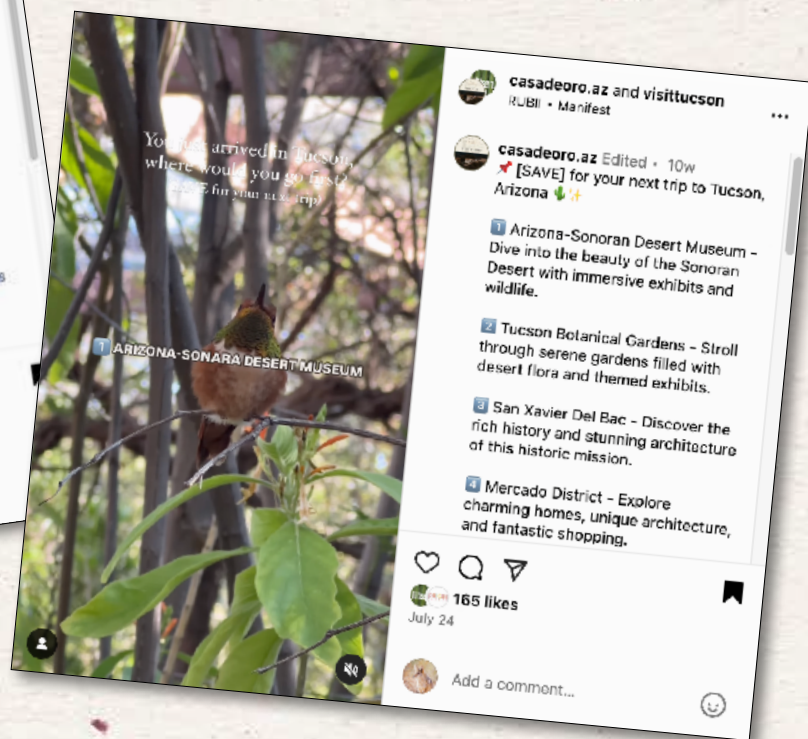


RON & RICH RATKEVICH

We love seeing the Museum through your eyes! Tag @desertmuseum for a chance to be featured!

social media SPOTLIGHT

ARIZONA-SONORA
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Take a class! Take a trip!

Adult Classes & Trips with the Desert Museum!

For more details and to register for classes and trips: 520-883-3025 or desertmuseum.org/adultclasses. Prices are 10% more for non-members.



RANCHO DE LA OSA DECEMBER 6 - 8

It rests in the desert grasslands along Arizona's southern border with Baboquivari Peak in view. This trip is about border history: Spanish land-grant ranches and Barb horses, the Mexican Revolution, mining camps and ghost towns, and the Buenos Aires Wildlife Refuge. We'll visit the wee town of Sasabe, sprinkle in geology lessons, and have a morning free for riding e-bikes or horses, and enjoy fabulous meals. **\$970**

BLACK LAVA / WHITE SAND DECEMBER 15 - 18

Come explore the interior landscape of coastal Sonora! We'll spend a full day in the Pinacates for an up-close view of volcanic peaks, cinder cones including huge maar craters, varieties of lava flows, and majestic shifting dunes. Visits include the salt fields in Gulfo de Santa Clara, the Center for the Study of Deserts & Oceans (CEDO), and a cultural outing to the sacred lands of the Tohono O'odham community of Quitovac. **\$1350**



SANDHILL CRANES, RAPTORS AND WATERFOWL FEBRUARY 6, 2025

Thousands of Sandhill Cranes migrate from as far away as Alaska to spend the winter in the agricultural fields near Willcox, one of our region's birding hot spots. **\$105**

LAND OF THE SERI FEBRUARY 19 - 23, 2025

Our voyage includes a panga ride to the mangroves of Isla Tiburón, birding in the estuary of Laguna de la Cruz, a walk in a cardón forest, and of course, meeting with the Seri people themselves. Enjoy time on the beach at Kino Bay, as well as fresh seafood. **\$1880**

MAMMOTHS OF THE SAN PEDRO VALLEY FEBRUARY 27, 2025

Visit a mammoth kill site and learn about the Clovis Culture, see fossils of the megafauna that roamed Arizona 10,000 years ago, and practice throwing an atlatl. Picnic at the St. David Monastery then end the day collecting gypsum crystals. **\$98**



BAJA CALIFORNIA: ECOLOGY, GEOLOGY, WHALING AND COWBOYS MARCH 28 - APRIL 10, 2025

From the bizarre Vizcaíno desert, its forests of boojum and cardón, to the aquamarine coves, lush date palm oases, Tres Virgenes volcanic field, the peninsula is a wonderland! Two days with the gray whales and one with the sequestered cowboys of San Francisco de la Sierra will astound you. **\$5020**



RAPTOR FREE FLIGHT:
Our exhilarating Raptor Free Flight program returns December 6, 2024!

Watch birds fly overhead Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and Mondays at 10:00 a.m. through March 31, 2025. Pro tip: We recommend arriving at the Museum at least 20 minutes prior to showtime to allow time to park and walk to the demonstration site. **Raptor Free Flight is included in admission or membership.**

DINOSAUR EXHIBIT:
Get ready for an unforgettable prehistoric adventure in the heart of the Sonoran Desert!

Dinos in the Desert is coming to the Desert Museum this December. Experience the thrill of seeing 10 incredible dinosaur species brought to life throughout our grounds. This is a unique opportunity for the whole family to explore, learn, and immerse yourselves in a world where dinosaurs roam. **Join us for a journey back in time!**



Plan a Day at the Museum!

NOON YEAR'S EVE:

Tuesday, December 31, 2024 from 10:00 am - 1:00 pm. Ring in the 'Noon Year!' with all of your favorite animal friends!

Ditch the midnight ball drop and celebrate 2025 at noon! Little ones can dance the day away with their favorite live DJ, get their face painted, and create with Legos. There will be arts and crafts stations and fun, educational activities. Dinosaur costumes and clothing encouraged. It's the ultimate New Year's Eve party for kids! Event is free with Museum admission.

ROCKIN' MINERALS:

January 18 & 19, 2025 from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

You're invited to dig into the rockin' world of minerals at the Desert Museum. Enjoy fun, hands-on activities for families. Visit themed activity stations where kids can collect rocks, minerals, and fossils in their own egg carton collection box. This year's focus - volcanic rocks! **Shop for your own mineral and fossil treasures at rock-bottom prices!**

- Rare Minerals
- Rock Sculptures including small dinosaur replicas
- Gemstones & Jewelry
- Wire wrapping
- Plant & Rock Combos
- Lapidary Rock & Fluorescent minerals
- Rock Readings (bring your own rock and our experts can tell you about it)



AVIAN ADVENTURES:

Looking to get more hands-on? Reserve your spot for the experience of a lifetime!

Your adventure begins as you have the exclusive opportunity to meet a special Sonoran Desert bird of prey! After a quick glove training, you will watch the majestic Eurasian Eagle Owl fly to your very own glove and experience what it is like to hold a four-pound owl! You will be able to interact and ask questions with our Raptor Free Flight trainers in an intimate setting.

Avian Adventures takes place on Thursdays and Saturdays starting December 6, 2024 through March 15, 2025 at 2:00 p.m. \$125 per person. Reservations required.

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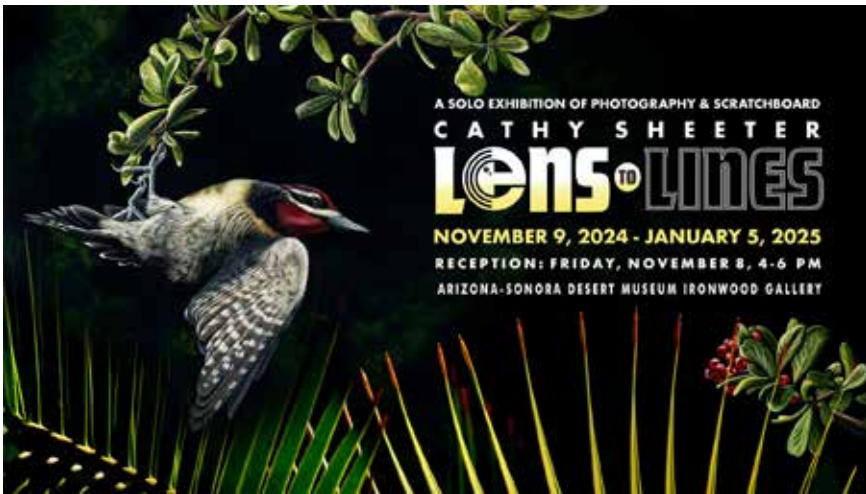
DESERT MUSEUM ARTS UPDATE

www.desertmuseumarts.com

ARIZONA-SONORA DESERT MUSEUM

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The mission of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum is to inspire people to live in harmony with the natural world by fostering love, appreciation, and understanding of the Sonoran Desert.



LENS TO LINES: Scratchboard and Photography by Cathy Sheeter

Ironwood Gallery

November 9, 2024 - January 5, 2025

Daily 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Cathy Sheeter's "Lens to Lines" invites viewers to explore the harmonious relationship between the artist's photographic eye and the exquisite craftsmanship of her scratchboard work. Through this collection, Sheeter displays her technical prowess in both mediums creating artwork that evokes deep emotional responses. Her mastery of scratchboard and photography asks the viewer to see the world through her lens and feel the lines that bring her subjects to life. This exhibition is a celebration of nature's beauty and the artist's exceptional ability to portray it in both mediums. www.CathySheeter.com

BALDWIN GALLERY

November 2, 2024- January 19, 2025

Daily 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

The Art Institute at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum proudly presents the 2024 Fall Student Exhibition, showcasing the creativity and talent of our students. This exhibition highlights artwork from beginner to advanced students, reflecting their growth, dedication, and deepened connection to the desert's unique flora and fauna.

Through expert instruction and hands-on learning in the serene desert environment, students have developed their artistic skills while fostering a love and appreciation for the natural world. Whether exploring the intricate details of desert botanicals or capturing the majesty of local wildlife, these works are a testament to the Museum's mission of promoting conservation through art.



BEST ART CLASSES IN TUCSON 2024!!!

For the second year in a row, the Art Institute has won the "Best Art Classes in Tucson" category in the Tucson Weekly! The unique backdrop of the Museum, instruction by professional artists, and having the opportunity to draw birds, mammals, reptiles, and insects creates a magical experience for all skill levels. Thank you to all our supporters and we hope you join us for a class. *For more information or to register: desertmuseumarts.com/ or email us at arts@desertmuseum.org or call us at (520) 883-3024.*



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www.desertmuseum.org

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Associate Director for Education (CESD)
Design & Layout: Nancy Serefsky,
Graphic Design Manager

The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum recognizes that it resides within the ancestral homelands of the Tohono O'odham and the multi-millennial presence of the Pascua Yaqui. We honor these tribal nations, and commit to equal-partner relationships as we unite to inspire all people to live in harmony with the Sonoran Desert region.