

Tales of Tucson #2 Beware the Pack Rat

To any of you following the shipping saga. . . it is almost over. The shipping company in Accra started off by trying to send my household goods to the wrong address. Then they crated my goods into a box bigger than the airlines would allow. And then about five weeks after they had taken my stuff they got it repackaged into three tri-walled cardboard containers and sent off. . .to the wrong airport.

I will be reunited with my stuff next week.

My niece and her family are wonderful, kind, and very giving. I have accepted their offer to stay with them and I feel pampered. Melinda and Robb are both successful professionals in the prime of their careers. A few years back they bought a house with good bones that fit their dreams. They have been remodeling and updating. They have busy lives so I am going to help out where I can with handyman stuff.

They take health seriously and have a salt water swimming pool and hot tub in the back yard and a home gym that is about 1200 square feet in what used to be the garage and shop. I am allowed to use each of them.



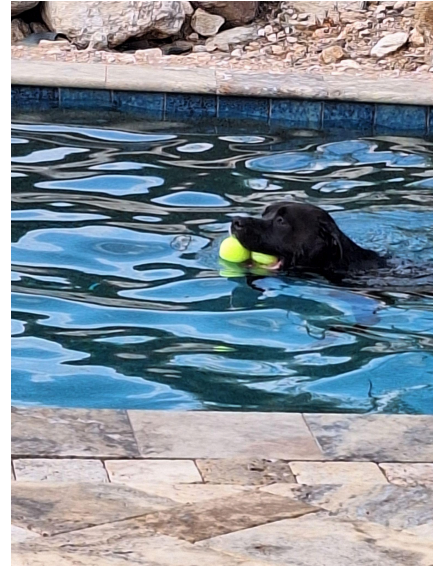
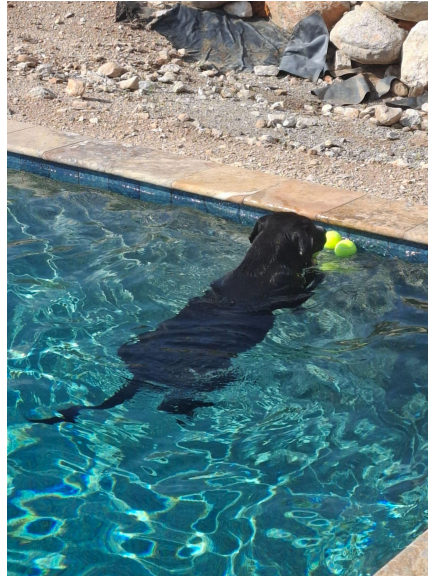
They have three kids; one getting out of college, one mid-way, and one going in this fall. Here is a picture of Robb, my (grand?) niece Rio, and me at the Old Tucson area.



Melinda and Robb also have livestock. Okay, well a couple large dogs with attitude, anyway. There is DaVinci – an older and still trying to gently dominate – Doberman, almost big enough to saddle, with arthritis in his hip and a weak bladder. And then there is Hemmingway. Like Sancho to Don Quixote, he is a good natured American Staffordshire cross who loves to swim and will go for hours if you care to throw the ball that long. (So I have been told but yet to see). Given the chance, DaVinci will steal the ball and hide it, thus ending the game and giving him a chew toy for later.



I tried changing the game a bit so I could do something else other than frequently throw the ball. I decided to throw multiple balls into the pool. At first it worked well. Hemmingway would swim out empty and come back with a ball in his mouth, drop it off and go back for another. Hemmingway likes swimming but the change was tiring him out. So Hemmingway figured a way to change the game by getting two in his mouth at a time and cutting his trips in half.



The idea of dumping the tennis ball supply started out to lengthen the game. Hemmingway's modification shortened the game. And DaVinci managed to steal all of the tennis balls in less than an hour, thus ending the game. (Still can't find where he put them).

When I think of the desert. . . well I should say that BEFORE when I thought of the desert, the first thing I would think of is the heat and then the plants. When it came to animal population I might

think of lizards, maybe a roadrunner, snakes, and spiders big enough to qualify.

I was and you may be surprised to discover over 30 animals in the local Tucson area, some of which I had never considered and a few I had never heard of before.





Tucson covers a large expanse and while the downtown is as dense as any metropolitan area with multi-story buildings and more masonry than horticulture, it takes less than two miles and you find yourself in areas where the population density drops dramatically and the buildings are typically one story with flat roofs. And while you may not readily see them the desert animals are thriving.

There are critters like black bears, mountain lions, and coyotes that stay away from the city, and as most are prone to, away from humans as well. The Lesser Long-nose Bats pollinate the saguaro cacti at dusk, a task I never even thought about but would have assumed it done by insects or bees.

There are two main snakes, the Gopher Snake and the Arizona Black Rattlesnake. There's the Desert Tortoise and the Sonoran Mud Turtle, the Gila Monster, the Western Collared Lizard and the Zebra Tailed Lizard representing the reptile family.



The bird population is prolific with Harris Hawks (on left), the Redtailed Hawk, the Northern Cardinal, the Cactus Wren, Gambel's Quail, Gila Woodpecker, White-Winged Dove, Roadrunner, Elf Owl, Mexican Spotted Owl, Broadbilled Hummingbird, and Phainopepla (a Central American bird). There are also badgers, bobcats, and the White Throated Wood Rat, also known as the Pack Rat. Left alone the pack rat will climb

anything it can chew off and take. But the nocturnal pack rats do not like light. To prevent them from enjoying themselves in and on your vehicle people put solar lights under the car.

There is a mammal here that looks like a pig, but isn't. It is called a javelina and is an herbivore, for the most part. They can get up to two feet tall and weigh 55 - 80 pounds. They live in the desert and tend to be out and about in the cooler parts of the day.





They can give birth at any time during the year and live in herds of ten to several dozen in areas they mark as theirs by scent. We know there are some in our neighborhood. There was one (possibly more) chewing on a bush in the front yard.

Before we leave the desert populous there are others to consider. Though not animals, I have added these three because they demand their own level of respect when you are in their area. Two are spiders.



The first of the bunch is the Arizona Bark Scorpion. Coming in at about one to three inches in length, the bark scorpion is prolific and tends to stay out of the direct heat. It is more nocturnal and a great climber. So instead of just under a rock, you can find it in trees as well as eaves. It's sting can kill but there have only been two fatalities since 1968.

The last two critters for this missive are a spider and a wasp. The spider is the mighty tarantula. And the wasp and her actions were the inspiration for much in the movie, "Alien." It is called the Tarantula Hawk Wasp. Rated as the most painful insect sting noted (4 on a scale of 1-4). It is said the sting feels like being stung by an electrical prod and the only thing you can do is scream for five to ten minutes as the neurological poison works its way through your system.



As you can see in the picture, the Tarantula hawk Wasp can easily be two to three inches in length. The female, when pregnant and ready to deliver will fly out and track tarantulas by smell. If she finds a tarantula burrow she will play the silk threads to imitate a captured insect and draw the spider out. She will also scout the desert floor for available prey. Tarantulas fear the wasp.

Once she has found a tarantula, the wasp will sting the spider and cause it to become instantly paralyzed. The tarantula will not die, instead be held in a state of like suspended animation.



The wasp will either drag the tarantula back to her hive, or build a burrow and bury the tarantula. Before she leaves the spider she plants a singular egg on the spider's stomach. When the egg hatches it will start by eating its way into the spider's body, gorging on it's blood and eating parts of the body, but keeping the spider alive and finishing off the necessary internal organs for life, last.

Are these all of what you'll find lurking in the back yard? Not by a long shot. They are just the most common. Bear in mind I have not met all of the "neighbors" yet and I am not hell bent to do that either. However, as I become more aware of my surroundings I will keep you posted.