

# Cienega Valley-Empire Ranch Reserve



## Cienega Creek Natural Preserve Expansion

**Fee lands: 192 acres**  
**Cost: \$351,207**  
**Acquired: October 19, 2004 and February 9, 2007**  
**Funds: 2004 Bond Funds**  
**Partner: Arizona Land & Water Trust**

### Background

Recognizing the incredible importance of Cienega Creek and its watershed, the Board of Supervisors established the Cienega Creek Natural Preserve in 1986 using voter-approved bond funds for floodprone land. Spanning 4,000 acres, the Preserve protects 12 miles of the lower reaches of Cienega Creek, which supports native endangered fish species, provides aquifer recharge, and provides important natural flood control protections that lessen impacts to the developed areas in the Tucson Basin. The Preserve also hosts the historic railroad town of Pantano, along with many archaeological features, including bedrock mortars.



*Baker property flora. Photo by EPG. Inc.*



*Baker property. Photo by EPG. Inc.*

Once the Preserve was established, the County continued to seek ways to expand and enhance the Preserve and its sensitive biological resources.

### Baker Property

On October 19, 2004, with the assistance of the Arizona Land and Water Trust, the County was able to purchase the 155-acre Baker property for \$226,342. The acquisition of the Baker property established the connection between Colossal Cave Mountain Park and Cienega Creek Natural Preserve. Coupled with the Cates and Knez acquisitions, the corridor connection was effectively expanded. The property also supports habitat for 27 Priority Vulnerable Species and includes dense mesquite riparian woodland along Agua Verde Creek, an important tributary to Cienega Creek.

### Chess Property

On February 9, 2007, the County purchased the 37-acre Chess property for \$124,865, located adjacent to the Preserve and separated by the Union Pacific Railroad. The property is adjacent to the Cienega Creek drainage, and has two small washes that drain across the tracks into the Cienega. The Chess property also contains evidence of human occupation dating to the Archaic Period (7,500 - 2,100 B.C.) The Chess parcels fall in the SDCP-defined Lower Cienega Creek Priority Archaeological Site Complex.

### Management

Both properties act as open space buffers for the Cienega Creek Natural Preserve and are managed accordingly. As open space lands in a current natural condition, little active management is necessary. Management activities include site security and control of invasive plants with especial attention to buffelgrass invasion. No motorized vehicles, pets off leash, horses and open fires are allowed in the Preserve. All uses of the



Working with boy scouts to construct artificial bat roost in Cienega Creek where natural soil caves are eroding. Photo by Pima County

newly added properties and the basic acquisition footprint of the Cienega Creek Natural Preserve must support or enhance the unique ecological values and biological diversity of the riparian system within the Preserve.

## Recreation

The Cienega Creek Natural Preserve can only be visited with a permit issued by Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department. Guests can enjoy wildlife viewing, nature study, and hiking among the beauty of one of the last few intact riparian areas with a dense forest of Cottonwood willows and mesquite bosques that line the creek. One segment of the Arizona Trail will eventually bisect the preserve in the area of the Three Bridges.



Cienega Creek looking east towards the Rincon Mountains. Photo by Pima County

## Ongoing Property Improvements

- Because of the critical nature of the riparian system and year-round stream flow of Cienega Creek, research projects are routinely conducted within the Preserve.
- Studies on insect diversity, nesting bird ecology, invasive species presence, water flow, endangered plants, wildlife and fish are all common topics. (In 2008, a researcher found a grasshopper species in the Preserve that was previously known to only occur hundreds of miles away in Mexico).
- The elevated presence of bat species has been a focus of surveys and recent successful projects to replace natural soil caves being lost to erosion with artificial habitats that were built by Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation staff.
- Invasive plant surveys and control projects are ongoing and focused on a number of species.
- Location of the new alignment of the Arizona trail is being finalized and then will be constructed by AZ Trail volunteers.
- Projects to reduce trespass of livestock and ATVs into the preserve are also being completed and repaired continuously.

