

What's that owl doing? Wildlife cams offer a link to the wild for Arizonans at home

Erin Stone, Arizona Republic Published 10:00 a.m. MT April 23, 2020 | Updated 11:06 a.m. MT April 23, 2020

Jeff Meyers is intimately familiar with how seriously people take live wildlife cameras. As Arizona Game and Fish Department's watchable wildlife program manager, he hears from a lot of devoted viewers.

At the beginning of the sandhill crane season last October, the agency's live camera had technical issues and was down for about two months. It's one of the program's most popular live cams. Every winter, tens of thousands of the long-necked, long-legged birds migrate to Whitewater Draw in southeastern Arizona, delighting viewers with their squawking and sheer numbers.

"You have no idea how much people rely upon these cameras in their daily lives," one woman emailed Meyers, frustrated as she stared at an empty black view.

"She knew they were there and she knew she couldn't see them," Meyers said. "There are no words that I am capable of saying that will do it justice — people are extraordinarily passionate about these wild animals."

ADVERTISEMENT



As homebound Arizonans look for an escape from the constant stream of COVID-19 news, as well as their own boredom, traffic on the agency's wildlife cams has spiked. Teachers, too, are finding the cams to be a useful tool to engage their students.

Sandhill crane season is over in Arizona now, so most regular viewers have shifted their attention to another of the agency's live cameras: a nest occupied by a great horned owl (<https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/greathornedowl/owlcam/>), whose eggs hatched just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and uprooted the lives of humans across the globe.

ADVERTISEMENT

Create a **FREE** account to stay connected and informed about your local community.



On March 17, when Gov. Doug Ducey told Arizonans to [stop gathering in large groups \(https://www.azdhs.gov/documents/preparedness/epidemiology-disease-control/infectious-disease-epidemiology/novel-coronavirus/eo-stay-home-stay-healthy-stay-connected.pdf\)](https://www.azdhs.gov/documents/preparedness/epidemiology-disease-control/infectious-disease-epidemiology/novel-coronavirus/eo-stay-home-stay-healthy-stay-connected.pdf), Game and Fish biologists noted a potential fuzzy-headed great horned owl in the nest.

Over the next few weeks, while most Arizonans started to work from home, schools were shuttered, and non-essential businesses closed, the nest's two owlets quadrupled in size. Meyers started to receive the emails.

Get the **Law & Order** newsletter in your inbox.

The latest public-safety news in the Valley.

Delivery: Mon-Fri

Your Email



"Thank you for having this live footage of the Great horned owl. This has kept me cheered up in this stressful time," one person wrote him on March 30.

"I shared the owl cam link with my Nextdoor neighbor, and people are enjoying a bright spot in their quarantine. Thanks!" wrote another on April 2.

By the end of March, as stay-at-home orders were extended through April, Meyers had received at least a dozen such emails. He noticed an uptick in viewership on the owl cam, an apparent result of more people at home looking for something to do, combined with the fact that the owlets are big enough to be seen in the nest, Meyers said.

Though they didn't know it, the owlets had arrived in the world during an unprecedented moment for the human race, and were providing a service that no owl before them had.

"People are finding themselves more sequestered at home and they're really thankful that these cameras are around," Meyers said. "They're very engaged, sending us multiple emails a week, asking us questions about nature and about the owls. Birders in general are really into what they do and the fact that they can still do it sitting at home right now is really giving them a tremendous amount of pleasure and security and comfort."

Scottsdale resident Steve Ashby has watched the sandhill crane cam with commitment over the last two years, but as the season's end coincided with the acceleration of the pandemic, the great horned owl cam became a tranquil escape in a world that seemed to have transformed overnight.

"As an obligation you read all the coronavirus news, but it becomes overwhelming," Ashby said. "If you can switch back and see the mom feeding these babies and knowing where they're headed and what their life's going to be like ... it just takes your mind away from things you can't do anything about anyway."

Chandler resident and wildlife photographer Nikki Ely has watched the great horned owl cam throughout the pandemic, It's helped her relax amidst the anxiety of keeping track of the coronavirus spread. Sometimes, when the mother owl looked directly at the camera, Ely felt like she was there in person in front of the nest.

"Th
my [Create a FREE account to stay connected and informed about your local community.](#)

rscotch eyes," Ely wrote in an email to The Republic. "Best of all, I can view this from hing to see nature on Facebook instead of alarming daily Corona Virus statistics."

Choose your critter cam

- [Great horned owl cam \(https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/greathornedowl/owlcam/\)](https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/greathornedowl/owlcam/): At Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area, east of Bisbee
- [Bald Eagle Cam \(https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/baldeagle/baldeaglecam/\)](https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/baldeagle/baldeaglecam/): At Lake Pleasant north of Phoenix
- [Sandhill Crane Cam \(https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/sandhillcrane/cranecam/\)](https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/sandhillcrane/cranecam/): Whitewater Draw, east of Bisbee
- [Desert pupfish cam \(https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/pupfish/pupfish-cam/\)](https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/pupfish/pupfish-cam/): At Mesa Community College
- [Bat Cam \(https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/bats/bat-cam/\)](https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/bats/bat-cam/): Near Pima, in Graham County

Cameras provide essential connection

The Arizona Game and Fish Department is the only agency in the state that has live wildlife cameras. The video streams are a small part of the agency's wildlife viewing program: Meyers and his team of biologists arrange bighorn sheep viewing on pontoon boats on Canyon Lake and bison viewing in northern Arizona. They lead night hikes so people can observe rattlesnakes, tarantulas and scorpions.

One of their most popular events is bat netting, where the public can see "sky puppies" (as Meyers refers to bats) up close. It's a way for the public to learn to appreciate the maligned mammals, who are actually vital to the habitats they live in. They reduce insect populations, pollinate plants and even reseed deforested areas, Meyers said.

But with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, those events have been canceled and the wildlife cameras have become the only sure way to connect the public with Arizona's wildlife. Though the pandemic has bumped viewership up a notch, on average, people from 40 states and 30 countries around the world tune into the cameras every week, Meyers said.

"Our whole purpose with these cameras is really to give people this intimate look into wildlife and to educate the public and tell the story of these critters," Meyers said. "It helps to foster a passion for conservation and that's really what our goal is."

Game and Fish currently runs [five live cameras \(https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/\)](https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/webcamlist/) of native wildlife throughout the state: the bald eagle cam at Lake Pleasant, the sandhill crane cam at Whitewater Draw, an underwater cam of desert pupfish at Mesa Community College, a bat cam in a barn near Pima, and the great horned owls in southeast Arizona.

The cameras eat up the majority of the program budget, Meyers said. Installing the great horned owl cam was only possible through a \$20,000 donation from [Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation \(https://azsfdc.org/\)](https://azsfdc.org/), a non-profit organization that engages hunters, anglers, and wildlife conservation organizations on habitat-use issues.

"That money goes right back into the program, into educating people about wildlife around the state," Meyers said. "Our goal was to get these cameras to be self-supporting through donations because right now the cams make up maybe 5-10% of my program, and they eat up about 75% of the budget, and that budget is supporting all of the education and wildlife viewing programs."

The high-definition cameras are not only expensive to purchase and maintain, but they require a constant power source and internet connection. They are often in remote locations, so maintaining power means either running cable (which can cost upward of \$10,000 for every quarter mile of distance covered), or buying, building, and supporting a solar array to keep the cameras up and running 24 hours a day.

The great horned owl cam is still the best show in town right now. The owlets will likely fly the nest sometime in the next two weeks, Meyers said, but they'll still stick around the nest for two months after that at least. Starting in May, bats will start to populate the old barn outside the town of Pima in Graham County, a stopover on several bat species' migrations. They've been observed at the barn since 1992.

If funding permits, Meyers hopes to add more critter cams, including a camera looking down on the great horned owls nest, two burrowing owl cams (one for inside the underground raptors' burrow, and the other for the surface), possibly a Sonoran desert toad cam; and a large mammal camera, that could show elk and hummingbirds, skunks and bobcats, or anything else that happens to pass through the frame.

The wildlife cams are a way to reach a broader audience, Meyers said.

"It gives people the ability to watch from their living rooms and for people who can't physically get out and go to these places, it gives those people that ability," Meyers said.

It also helps foster a passion for conservation, Meyers said. "Once they realize that animals have an intrinsic value, and they have a right to have a place to live, then, we hope that knowledge turns into people saying, 'hey I want to protect them, I want to protect this land, I want to protect this habitat, I want to protect this species for the future generations.'"

Katherine Studey's fourth graders couldn't keep their eyes off the drama of Arizona Game and Fish Department's live bald eagle camera last year. Every morning, the science and writing teacher at Maryland School in central Phoenix would have her students watch the feed and write down their observations.

Through a powerful optical zoom lens on a camera 200 feet from the nest, the classroom had a high-quality view of everything from ravens and ringtails snatching the eagles' eggs from the nest to a new male kicking the first mate to the curb and building another nest a half mile away.

"It was very dramatic in my fourth grade classroom," Studey said.

Studey hadn't had much time this year to incorporate wildlife cameras into her lesson plans, until COVID-19 intervened. With her students at home without the schedules they were used to, she had to think quickly about how to adjust her lesson plans.

"I was thinking about how I could engage my kids in doing some fun science stuff and I thought about the web camera," Studey said.

She shared a Google file with the class. Every day, the kids were encouraged to spend five minutes watching the great horned owl livestream and record their observations.

"It became such a neat project so quickly," Studey said. "I love that it's local. I know there are a lot of great web cams out there like [Explore.org](https://explore.org) (<https://explore.org/livecams>) where you can watch whales and orcas and all kinds of different things on camera. But I think it has a lot more value for the kids to actually go hey, this is here in Arizona. This wildlife is native to us."

At the same time Eric Proctor, wildlife education coordinator for the Game and Fish Department, was thinking about how he could convert resources he usually presents to educators at in-person workshops to online, to assist teachers and parents with kids at home.

"I have my own two kids and we saw the shift when the schools basically got shut down," Proctor said. "I saw a lot of uncertainty from both the parents and the teachers themselves. How do we take an education paradigm that was largely in person and shift it entirely to an online thing? And I realized that might be where our department might be able to serve some benefit."

He compiled resources for how to make an ethogram, a catalog of all the different kinds of behavior observed in an animal. Studey's student project was featured in a webinar he created.

Proctor expects to continue expanding these online learning programs spurred by the COVID-19 crisis.

"I don't want to create digital resources just for this moment in time," Proctor said. "They should be something that could be meaningful later."

He's currently creating a variety of "[Wildlife Science at Home](https://sites.google.com/view/learningfromhome/home) (<https://sites.google.com/view/learningfromhome/home>)" activities (they're fun for adults too).

Proctor's lessons from the pandemic are not only in the professional realm. He hopes they can extend to the personal too.

"I suspect we're not alone in this, that there are people finding those elements in life that they may have just been rushing past before," Proctor said.

"I'm hopeful we learn to become more patient, more purposeful, more engaged in what's immediately around us — our own house, our families, what we have, the wildlife that's out there where we live," he said. "I hope that continues to transfer, that when everything opens up we suddenly aren't back to where we were, and we forget everything we learned here."

Erin Stone covers the environment for The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. Send her story tips and ideas at erin.stone@arizonarepublic.com (<mailto:erin.stone@arizonarepublic.com>), and follow her on Twitter [@Erstone7](https://twitter.com/Erstone7) (<https://twitter.com/Erstone7>).

Environmental coverage on azcentral.com and in The Arizona Republic is supported by a grant from the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust. Follow The Republic environmental reporting team at environment.azcentral.com and [@azcenvironment](https://www.facebook.com/azcenvironment) on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Read or Share this story: <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-environment/2020/04/23/wildlife-cams-provide-diversion-arizonans-deal-coronavirus/5141245002/>

