Are My Eyes Playing Tricks on Me?

By Cindy Murray

My husband, Hugh, and I delight in hosting an occasional summer's evening barbecue on our Timberline patio five miles northeast of Flagstaff. Once a guest mentioned, "It's gorgeous out here! Why don't you put up a patio roof to shade the area?" He had a good point, seeing that our region's thin mountain air allows the sun's rays to beat down with ferocity. And for that reason, we rarely sit out there before 5:00 p.m. during the summer. Nonetheless, my answer was something like this: "This is Big Sky Country, and I want to be able to see it all! I love watching storm clouds blossoming over distant cinder cones just before a summer downpour, and seeing wind-driven plumes of snow scuttle across the open fields. I'd have to give that up if we had a patio roof." Now, after twenty years of residing under big skies, I can recall other amazing sightings here in Flagstaff that I hadn't witnessed anywhere else.



A monsoon storm builds over the Timberline horizon. Photo by Cindy Murray

One day as I was walking outside to fetch the mail, I caught sight of a tiny furry head poking out of a burrow in my ditch. I'd seen gophers here on occasion, but this creature bore a smaller head on a longer neck with an eye-fetching yellow chin. I hurried back inside to grab my camera with its long zoom lens. Inexplicably, the critter was still there when I returned, and I got a good shot. I soon identified it as a long-tailed weasel, which inhabits elevations here of 6,000-12,000 feet.

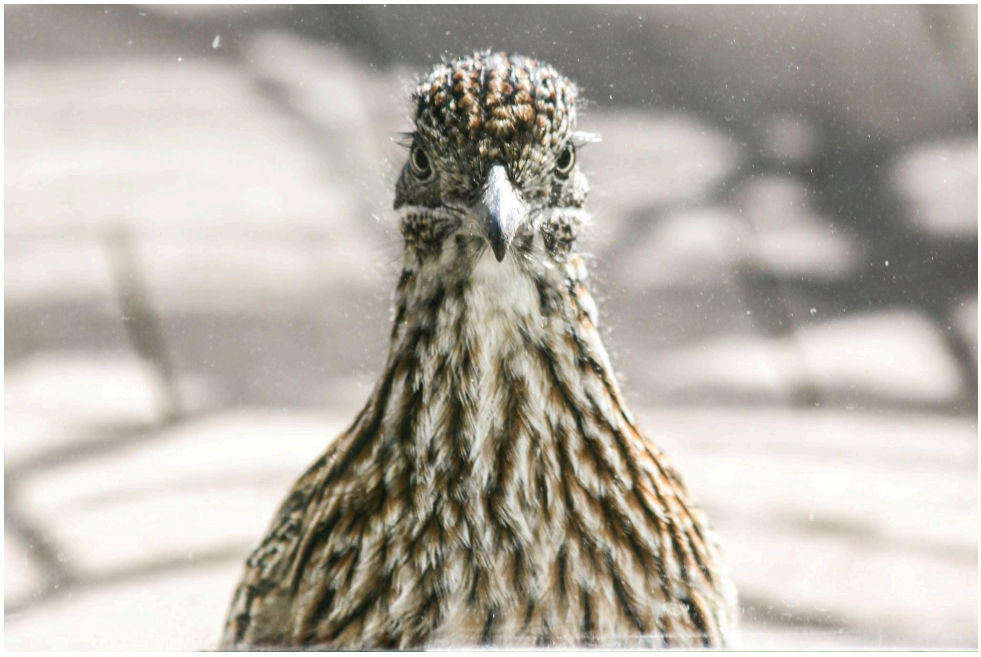


The long-tailed weasel inhabits Arizona in wooded, high elevation habitats. Photo by Cindy Murray

Hiking in the higher elevations of the San Francisco Peaks one day, I was amazed to come upon a gorgeous specimen of bristlecone pine--I hadn't known these beauties resided in Arizona. Its twisted, shrublike character gave testament to a long lifespan withstanding harrowing winds and moisture deprivation.

Last spring, my neighbor showed me a recent photo of a mountain lion lazily stretched out on the limbs of an old cottonwood tree in close proximity to Highway 89. I don't know how I missed it--I see that tree every day from my kitchen window. Apparently, Animal Control sedated the animal and delivered it to a remote wilderness region.

When we first moved to our neighborhood, Hutchison Acres, I spied a bull elk with a huge rack of antlers grazing on my neighbor's lawn. It was only the second time I had seen an elk in my life! It stuck around for about a week, casually wandering from one yard to the next.



A roadrunner pecking at the Murrays' sliding-glass door. Photo by Cindy Murray

I had been under the impression that roadrunners require hot, desert-like habitats, but a friend informed us that they venture into neighborhoods during winter—Nah! That couldn't be true! But yes! We get one touring our neighborhood almost every winter. Once, a roadrunner was pecking under our patio, and it came up with a dark object the same shape as, but larger than, a fish oil capsule. I couldn't believe my eyes when the bird tipped its head back and swallowed that thing whole. I then remembered we had grown a tomato plant there the previous summer, and I realized the "thing" was a tomato hornworm pupa overwintering underground. Now that's what you call the perfect kind of pest control!

Now I must address the wind. Winds on the open expanses of Timberline, Doney Park, and several other Northern Arizona regions can be formidable! A number of years ago I returned home from work to discover that a huge plank of one-inch-thick plywood had impaled our fairly recently constructed wooden fence. It had cut through the thick horizontal wooden rail holding the pickets together like a hot knife through butter. Another day we returned home to find a large panel of wood deposited onto our front walkway. When our neighbor took a look at it, he exclaimed, "That's the roof of my chicken coop!" Fast-forwarding a

few years, our large trampoline, which had been anchored to the ground for fifteen years, simply disappeared. We couldn't believe our eyes when we found it in the aforementioned neighbor's yard, wedged between his fence and his garage.



If you look closely, you'll spot a second rainbow to the right of the right of the bright one. The naked eye can discern this wondrous sight more clearly. Photo by Cindy Murray

Circling back to the perks of viewing Big Sky Country from my roof-free patio – each time I behold a double rainbow arcing over the region's burnished-red cinder cone hills dotted with Ponderosa pine, I am impelled to do a double, even a triple take. Yes, I think Hugh and I will do just fine without a roof covering our heads during our summertime barbecues.

Cindy Murray, University of Arizona Master Gardener, has been a writing and editing contributor for "Gardening Etc." for over a decade. She delves into subjects ranging from growing vegetables to native landscaping, together with the life cycles of birds and insects encountered therein. Gardening Etcetera is written for the community by certified Master Gardeners of the University of Arizona's

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