

A close-up photograph of a ringtail mouse peering out from a hole in a tree trunk. The mouse has large, upright ears and a pink nose. The background is a dark, textured interior of the tree.

✓ Make a Mark for

Wildlife

Story by Lee Allen
Photographs by George Andrejko

In this case, “X” does mark the spot where treasure is buried — if the “X” is in the form of a checkmark on your tax return that is designated for state wildlife.

Make a Mark for Wildlife is a voluntary program that allows taxpayers to support wildlife by checking the Arizona Wildlife Fund box on state tax returns.

The option has been around since 1982 when Arizona joined 40 other states in allowing taxpayers to make a voluntary and tax deductible contribution to worthwhile causes when filing state tax returns. Since that time, those donated dollars have had a cumulative effect in supporting the Arizona Game and Fish Department’s work to conserve and protect wildlife, one of the state’s most valuable natural resources.



JOSH AVEY (LEFT) IS CHIEF OF THE TERRESTRIAL WILDLIFE BRANCH, WHICH WORKS TO CONSERVE ALL WILDLIFE SPECIES THAT HAVE FUR, FEET OR FEATHERS.

Outdoor sportsmen as well as non-hunters and non-anglers who like to view and enjoy Arizona's diverse wildlife, have contributed millions of dollars toward wildlife conservation.

"Form 140 of the state tax return has a Voluntary Gift section in which taxpayers can indicate how much they want to donate to the program," says Ed Greenberg of the Arizona Department of Revenue. "In the 2018-2019 tax year alone, \$257,346 was donated to wildlife care and conservation via state tax returns. Over the past decade, close to \$2 million has been contributed to the Arizona Wildlife Fund."

— Every Dollar Counts

Much of Arizona's natural biological diversity is composed of nongame species, which is wildlife that is neither hunted nor fished in the traditional sense. The Arizona Game and Fish Department's Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Management program

was established to address the conservation needs of those species.

The good news is that few native species of wildlife have been extirpated from Arizona since pre-settlement days and even fewer have become extinct with native species still abundant, thanks to ongoing efforts.

With an average donation being in the range of \$20, each dollar is important because the Arizona Game and Fish Department receives zero general fund tax dollars.

Director Ty Gray has been with the department for 27 years and leads an organization with more than 600 employees that's funded with over \$120 million a year, primarily by the sale of fishing and hunting licenses, tags or stamps, and via a federal excise tax on firearms, ammunition and fishing gear.

"We are recognized as one of the world's leading wildlife management agencies with a tradition of dedication and innovation," says Gray. "Since the

department doesn't receive any monies from the state general fund tax dollars, all these other funding mechanisms are important if we are to fulfill our mission.

"The cumulative effect of even a small donation, multiplied numerous times, has a tremendous impact on conserving the state's wildlife resources that provide a variety of recreational opportunities for Arizonans and real economic benefits to our local communities," says Gray.

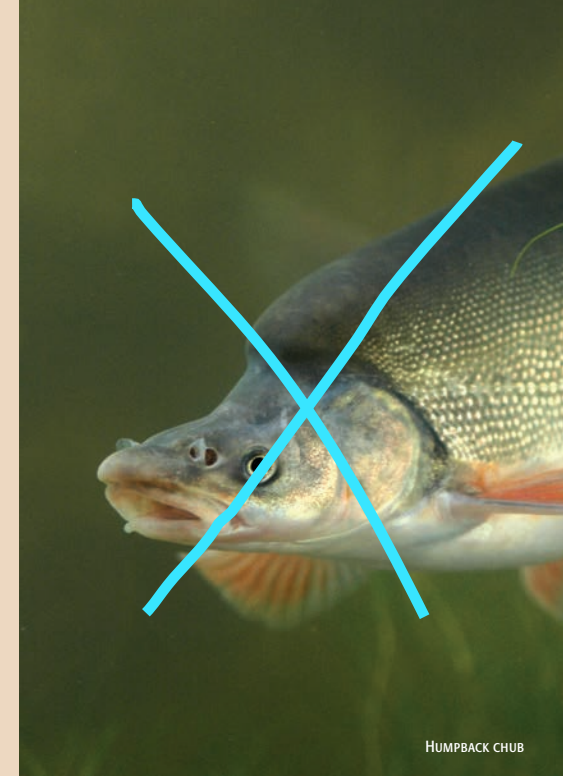
— Fin to Feather to Fur

Josh Avey, chief of the Terrestrial Wildlife Branch, and Chris Cantrell, leader of the Aquatic Wildlife Branch, are in accord on their support of the Make a Mark program.

Avey's branch covers everything that involves fur, feet and feathers. "We have a broad mandate affecting birds and mammals, and all the reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates," he says.



YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD



HUMPBACK CHUB

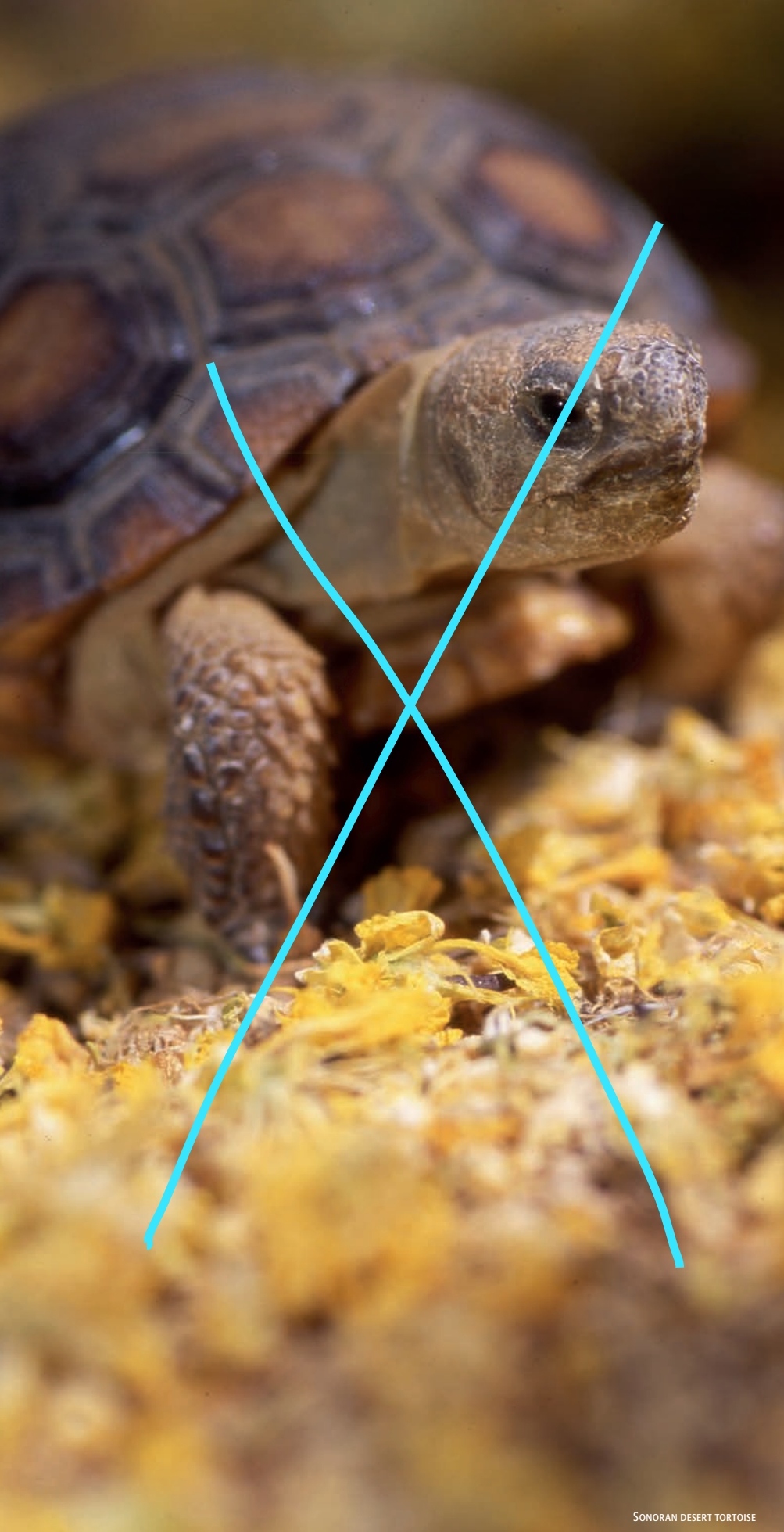
"Out of the 800 species we hold in trust in the state, only 40 are species that are managed for hunter harvest.

"The majority of the species we are responsible for managing don't fall under hunting or fishing, so these tax donation dollars contribute toward the conservation of these species," says Avey. "We get a majority of our funding revenue from licensing and tag sales, which is primarily targeted for the hunted species, so we're always looking for ways to increase our conservation funding for the non-harvested species."

The tax donation dollars are parsed wisely and, in some cases, have made the difference between species restoration and possible extirpation.

Take, for example, the Mount Graham red squirrel. "That population suffered horribly because of the Frye Fire in 2017," says Avey, "and the donation dollars we received helped prevent a catastrophe, ultimately affecting conservation for an imperiled species."

Asked for more examples of the program's success, Avey says, "I could go on for hours, but a few of our other success stories involve the Sonoran desert tortoise, the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl and the black-tailed prairie dog —



SONORAN DESERT TORTOISE

all these programs have been aided by tax donation dollars. Next year we're dedicating a large portion of these funds to study the Arizona toad, and these dollars will go toward surveying throughout the state and determining the health of the population."

Cantrell has spent 17 years working for the department, the last seven of which have been in charge of the Aquatic Wildlife Branch. "The tax write-off option is an amazing program that allows some of that funding to go to native aquatic species, dedicating resources to ensure recovery and conservation," he says.

Cantrell also can cite many examples of success in which potential tragedy was averted, like the most recent humpback chub triumph where the fish, one of the first species to appear on the endangered species list, is now being proposed for downlisting because of successful recovery efforts.

"One of the most critically imperiled species of our time is now headed for downlisting and that goes directly to the conservation work done within the Arizona Game and Fish Department that is partially funded through these checkoff dollars," Cantrell says.

Supplemental dollars, such as those raised through the tax checkoff program, help support conservation efforts for other species like the Gila topminnow.

"The Gila topminnow is another great success story. We are within a few years of completely delisting that fish from endangered species status," says Cantrell. "Once very much in danger of disappearing, it is now healthy throughout its historic range and at a number of

locations where it has met recovery criteria. It's at the point of downlisting to the less-ominous 'threatened' category. That success can also be attributed to funding by non-game checkoff contributions provided by the public to do that kind of work in Arizona."

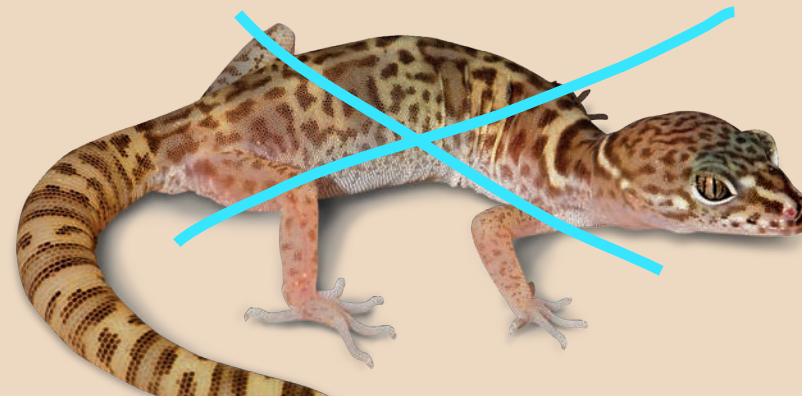
The donated dollars have become lifesavers that have spared a couple of species from disappearing. "While the Endangered Species Act listings provide the basic life support," says Cantrell, "these donated funds have helped subsidize the on-the-ground effort to remove them from life support to a sustainable status and a renewed part of our ecosystem into the future."

All three Arizona Game and Fish representatives are appreciative of the contributions received via the Arizona Wildlife tax checkoff option.

"This type of funding depends on the generosity of the public," says Cantrell. "There are a lot of initiatives that people can donate to, so we're competing with other interests and programs coordinated by the state. By having lots of options to select from, sometimes folks miss out on the wildlife category.

"It's our job to draw the public's attention to our needs and the benefits of the successes we've had and to encourage their generosity to support continuing conservation recovery programs for Arizona's wildlife species." 🦋

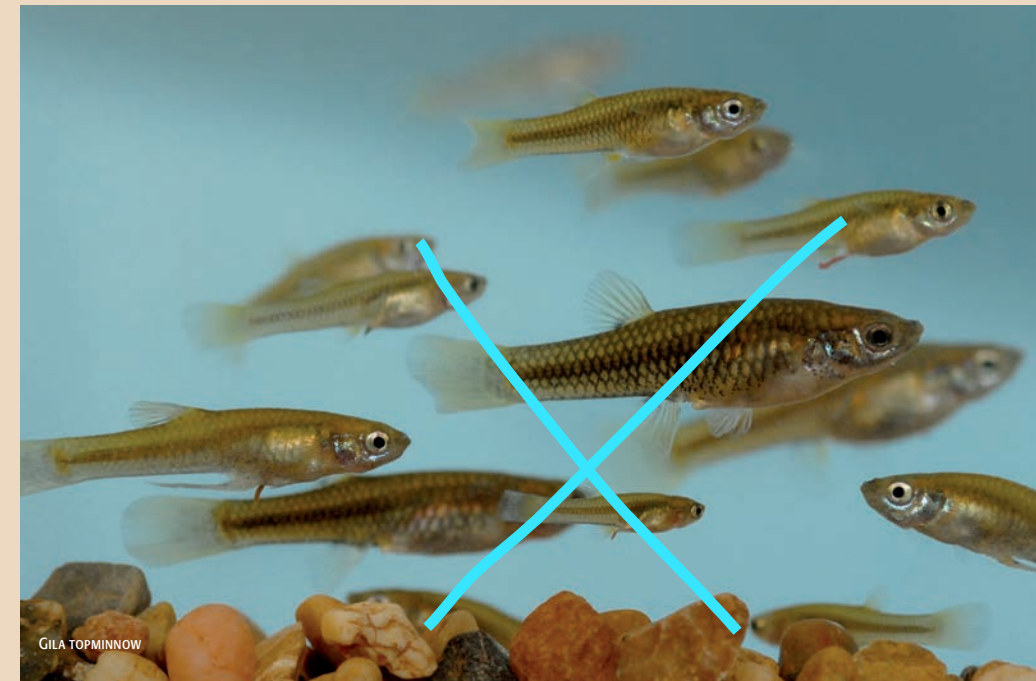
- Outdoorsman Lee Allen holds a lifetime fishing license and supports the state's conservation programs by Making a Mark for Wildlife on his tax return.



WESTERN BANDED GECKO



MOUNT GRAHAM RED SQUIRREL



GILA TOPMINNOW



CHRIS CANTRELL LEADS THE AQUATIC WILDLIFE BRANCH, WHICH FOCUSES ON ALL OF ARIZONA'S FISH SPECIES, INCLUDING THE RAZORBACK SUCKER PICTURED HERE.