

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Ring around the Mountains

I've looked at the mountains around Tucson for years in wonderment and awe, appreciating their beauty, but lately realized that I had some questions. How many mountain ranges are there? Where did they come from? What ...? Anyway, I put this little "primer" together to answer some of those questions; perhaps you'd be interested too.

Tucson at 2,643 feet elevation is surrounded by six mountain ranges - all within 40 miles of downtown - with the highest peaks approaching 9,500 feet.

The story begins tens of millions of years ago with a period of intense folding and faulting of the earth's crust. That was followed by slow stretching during which the crust broke up into huge blocks along the faults. Some blocks dropped, forming basins or valleys, while adjacent areas rose, forming mountain ranges. The result of this "basin and range" geologic activity, plus millions of years of erosion from wind, rain, and streams, is the miracle of Tucson's mountains.

The **Santa Catalina Mountains**, just north of the city, are the largest and most complex of the mountain ranges surrounding Tucson. There are more than 50 separate peaks, over half not even named. Since 1908 the Catalinas have been designated as part of the Coronado National Forest. The Catalinas are the source of Sabino Creek that drains into the Rillito River and Cañada del Oro Creek that drains into the Santa Cruz River.

It is said that in the 1690s Italian-born missionary Eusebio Kino named the mountains after his sister's patron saint, Catarina (Catherine of Sienna, 1347-1380). It wasn't until the 1890s that the Spanish form of Catherine, "Catalinas," permanently replaced the Italian form in maps and documents.

From the 1860s to the 1960s the Catalina's history included sporadic and largely unsuccessful gold, silver, and copper mining.

The Catalinas are Tucson's most popular place for mountain recreation, including hiking, biking, climbing, camping, and picnicking. Favorite sites include Sabino Canyon and Bear Canyon on the range's east side and Catalina State Park in the western foothills.

Most of us have driven up the beautiful "Sunrise Highway" from Tanque Verde Blvd to the charming village of Summerhaven near the Catalina's highest peak, Mount Lemmon at 9,157 feet elevation. Mount Lemmon Ski Valley is the southernmost ski destination in the United States.

In 2003 the month-long Aspen fire seared almost 85,000 acres of land and destroyed 340 homes and businesses in Summerhaven. Since then the village has been slowly rebuilding and Tucsonans are rediscovering the Catalinas.

Miners are also rediscovering the Catalina's with the Oracle Ridge underground copper mine due to reopen soon on the back side of the mountains.

To the east of Tucson, separated from the Santa Catalina's by Reddington Pass, are the **Rincon Mountains**. The Spanish word "rincon" means "corner," the basic top-down footprint of the mountain range.

The Rincons are made up of a few broad peaks rather than a large number of jagged peaks. In fact, when you're driving east on Speedway Blvd it's hard to believe that you're looking at a substantial range of mountains. But Mica Mountain at 8,664 feet and Rincon Peak at 8,482 feet are certainly worthy mountains. Tanque Verde and Agua Caliente Creeks flow out of the Rincons, before draining into the Rillito River. Like the Catalinas, the Rincons are part of the Coronado National Forest.

Most of the Rincon Mountains are contained within Saguaro National Park East, or in the surrounding Rincon Mountain Wilderness.

The Rincon Mountain Wilderness has no major access road. The majority of the Wilderness is off-limits to motor vehicles and bicycles, but can be accessed by horseback or on foot for day-hiking or back packing from surrounding forest routes and trails.

The **Santa Rita Mountains**, also part of the Coronado National Forest, lie some 25-40 miles southeast of Tucson. The mountains are named for the patron saint of impossible causes, Saint Rita of Cascia (1381-1457). Some of the earliest silver mining in Arizona occurred in the Santa Ritas, beginning in the 1850s. The highest peak in the range, and the highest point in the Tucson area, is Mount Wrightson at 9,453 feet.

There is no road to the top of Mount Wrightson, but there is a paved road from I-19 into the northwestern part of the Santa Ritas to Madera Canyon, one of the world's premier birding areas and a favorite of Tucsonans for picnicking, hiking and camping.

The Smithsonian Institution's Fred Whipple Observatory sits atop nearby Mount Hopkins at 8,560 feet.

In July 2005 the massive Florida fire burned over 23,000 acres, mostly in wilderness areas.

Currently the Santa Rita Mountains are involved in a controversy over copper mining. The proposed open-pit Rosemont Mine would occupy 4,500 acres of the Rosemont Ranch on the north flank of the mountain range. Opponents raise both economic and environmental issues.

Roughly 30 miles southwest of Tucson, just west of Green Valley and Sahuarita, lie the **Sierrita Mountains**, almost totally ignored in any listing of Tucson-area mountain ranges. Living up to the meaning of their name, “little mountains,” the Sierritas offer mid-elevation, somewhat scrubby peaks and lower, gentle hills, cut deeply by valleys. The range has been a popular site for cattle ranching and mining explorations since 1900. Keystone Peak tops the local mountains at 6,188 feet.

The attraction for visitors is pleasant solitude, a rich dose of mining history, and a “non-park” experience. Much of the land lies on private property and access to parts of the Sierritas, for example the Keystone Peak Trail, may have to be negotiated.

Mining continues today on the northeastern side of the Sierritas in two enormous open-pit copper mines: Freeport McMoRan’s Sierrita Mine and ASARCO’s Mission Mine.

The familiar **Tucson Mountains**, just west of Tucson, are named for the city they frame with beautiful Arizona sunsets. The relatively low summits, with Wasson Peak the highest at 4,687 feet, “do not escape the desert.”

Tucson Mountain Park, established in 1929, protects the natural resource area that includes rock art, Hohokam ruins, and old mines. The Park provides non-motorized shared-use trails for hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers with access from several paved roads, particularly Gates Pass Road, along the old 1880s stagecoach route from Tucson to Quijotoa. Picnicking and wildlife viewing opportunities are located throughout the park.

Additional recreation areas located with the Tucson Mountains include Saguaro National Park West, the renowned Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, and Old Town Studios. And, since 2005 the Tucson Mountains have been the home of JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort & Spa.

Perhaps the most recognizable of Tucson Mountain sites is Sentinel Peak at 2,887 feet, formerly a lookout point for the Spanish on the western edge of Tucson. In 1915 fans of the University of Arizona football team whitewashed a large “A” on its side to celebrate a victory. The tradition continues today on “A” Mountain with the permanent red, white, and blue “A.”

The lowest of Tucson’s surrounding mountain ranges are the **Tortolita Mountains**, on Tucson’s northwest, on the northern boundaries of Marana and Oro Valley. The Tortilitas nevertheless feature rugged peaks, gullies and canyons, vast strands of cacti, and a rich ranching history. The unnamed highest peak in the Tortilitas rises to 4,652 feet.

The Tortolitas (little turtle doves) were named for the multitudes of small doves that were present in the area until the early 1900s.

Much of the mountain range is protected by Tortilita Mountain Park, established in 1986 at 3,000 acres and steadily expanding since. Southeast of Tortilita Mountain Park lies Honeybee Village, a former Hohokam pueblo, and nearby is Honeybee Canyon, a riparian area with one of Pima County's only perennial streams, Honeybee Creek. Both areas offer hiking and picnicking.

Beginning in the 1990s there has been considerable conflict between environmentalists and the developers of resorts, golf courses, and million dollar homes in the southern foothills of the Tortilitas. Access to Tortilita Mountain Park, especially from Marana, has also become contentious.

Remember, that's **six** mountain ranges within a one-hour drive of downtown Tucson! How many have you visited?

Next time: Tucson's Waterworld



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Tucson has six mountain ranges within 40 miles of downtown.



*Tucson residents appreciate the Tucson Mountains that frame our beautiful sunsets.
(Courtesy of Pat Wood)*