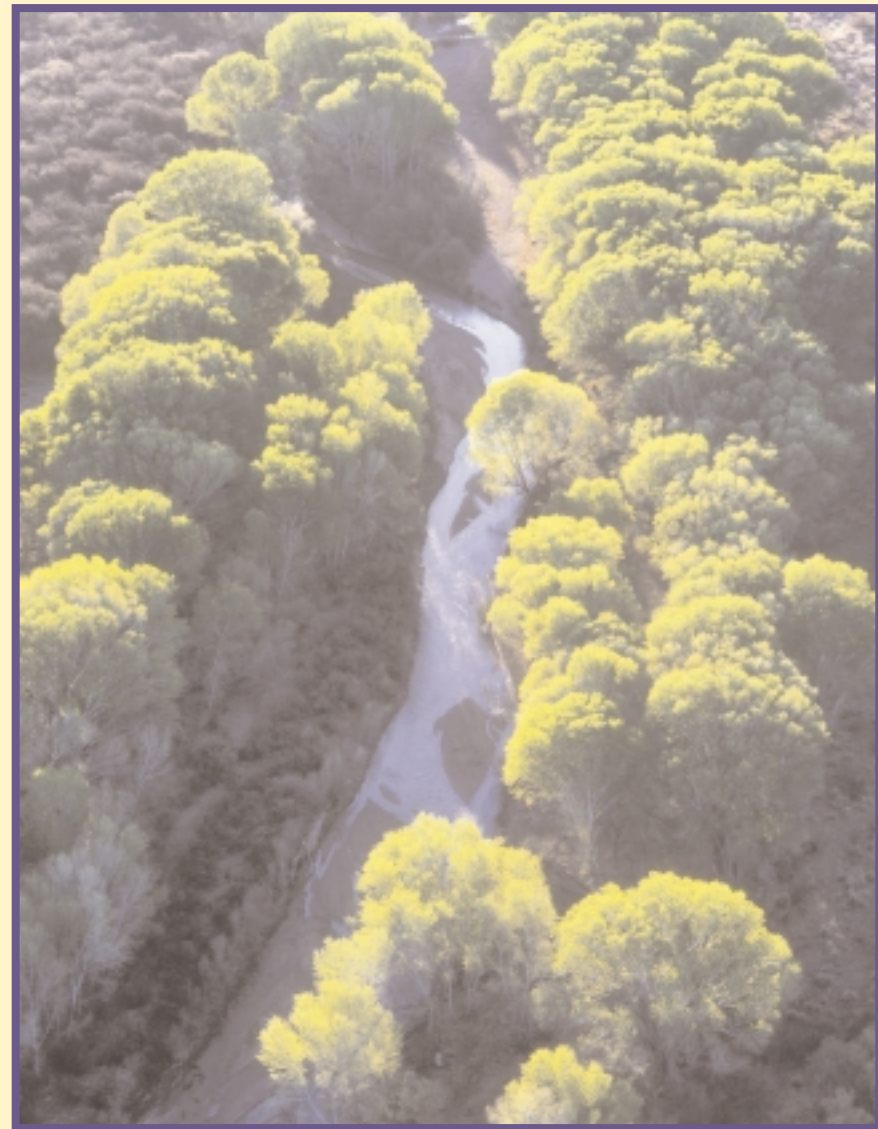# Arizona's riparian communities:
miracles, not mirages

San Pedro River

Cottonwood, willow trees are well-rooted in Arizona's riparian areas

The cottonwood-willow forests of Arizona's riparian communities are considered some of most important native habitats in North America. These two related trees, from the *Salicaceae* family, are perfectly adapted to survive the vagaries of life along a free-flowing river. In fact, to reproduce successfully, they require periodic flooding. Seeds released to the winds in early spring find perfect conditions for germination in nutrient-rich silt left by the high waters that follow winter rains and spring snow melt in the mountains.

However, these forests are in decline today. They're threatened by dropping groundwater tables, the diversion of stream flow and construction of flood control devices, livestock grazing, and competition from nonnative species like the salt cedar.

Major Riparian Areas in Southern Arizona

Gila River
Ⓐ Bonita Creek
Ⓑ San Simon Creek

Santa Cruz River
Ⓒ Cienega Creek
Ⓓ Sonoita Creek
Ⓔ Rillito River
Ⓕ Sabino Canyon

San Pedro River
(pictured above)
Ⓖ Aravaipa Creek
Ⓗ Babocomari River

12,000 ft / 3,658 m above sea level

5,000 ft / 1,524 m

near sea level

Black Creek

Phoenix
Salt River
Gila River
Gila River
Casa Grande
Yuma
Tucson
Sierra Vista
Nogales
Santa Cruz River
San Pedro River

vermilion flycatcher

Frémont cottonwoods

ringtail

Some of Arizona's most spectacular plants and animals can be found in the state's riparian communities. For example, the vermilion flycatcher may not be as big as an American bald eagle, but it more than makes up for it in sheer intensity of color. Below are just a few of the standout residents of Arizona's riparian habitats.

Flip pages back to start again.