



STATE  
PARKS GUIDE  
2011

# THE STATE OF OUR STATE PARKS

It's been a rough road for Arizona's state parks. Last year, more than a dozen parks were nearly shuttered because of the economy, and there were reports that the entire parks system was in danger of collapse. Fortunately, town and tribal governments, friends groups and volunteers stepped in to help, but that's not enough. There are different theories on how to save the parks. What happens next remains a mystery.

By **KATHY MONTGOMERY**

The Superstition Mountains catch the day's last light,  
as seen from Lost Dutchman State Park. | GEORGE STOCKING



Gabrielle Warner wrinkles her pink, freckled nose and, with chubby fingers, teases apart the furry owl pellet laid out in front of her on lavender construction paper.

Four more kids from the Apache Junction branch of the Boys and Girls Club sit around the picnic table in identical postures, wearing identical, fluorescent green T-shirts. These desert detectives came out to Lost Dutchman State Park to uncover clues about the diet of the barn owl.

As they work, they refer to laminated charts taped to the picnic table. With each new discovery, they shout to one of three park volunteers.

Gabrielle leans over the table, one sneaker-clad foot tucked up underneath herself.

"Look!" she cries, freeing a tiny bone. She holds it up for Mitzi Rhinchart's inspection. Mitzi looks delighted, her smile lit by polka dots of sunlight streaming through her straw hat.

"Oh goodie!" Mitzi says. "It's like unwrapping a present. Look. Those are teeth!"

"Teeth?"

"See? Aren't they tiny? We've got a whole head here. Where do you suppose that would go?"

Gabrielle slides the bone down the chart, looking for a match. She stops next to a rodent's jawbone. It's a perfect fit.

Gabrielle and her friends have Mitzi to thank for the morning's

activities. A longtime park volunteer, planning and organizing programs is part of what Mitzi does. It's because of her efforts that Lost Dutchman still offers programs like this one. It's because of her efforts, in part, that the park is open at all.

Lost Dutchman is one of 13 state parks that nearly closed last year after a state budget crisis triggered legislative sweeps of Parks Department funds. Four additional parks had already closed after previous cuts. By the time this story went to press, the Parks Department had lost \$71.7 million to sweeps since the 2009 fiscal year. Reports warned that the entire state parks system was in danger of collapse.

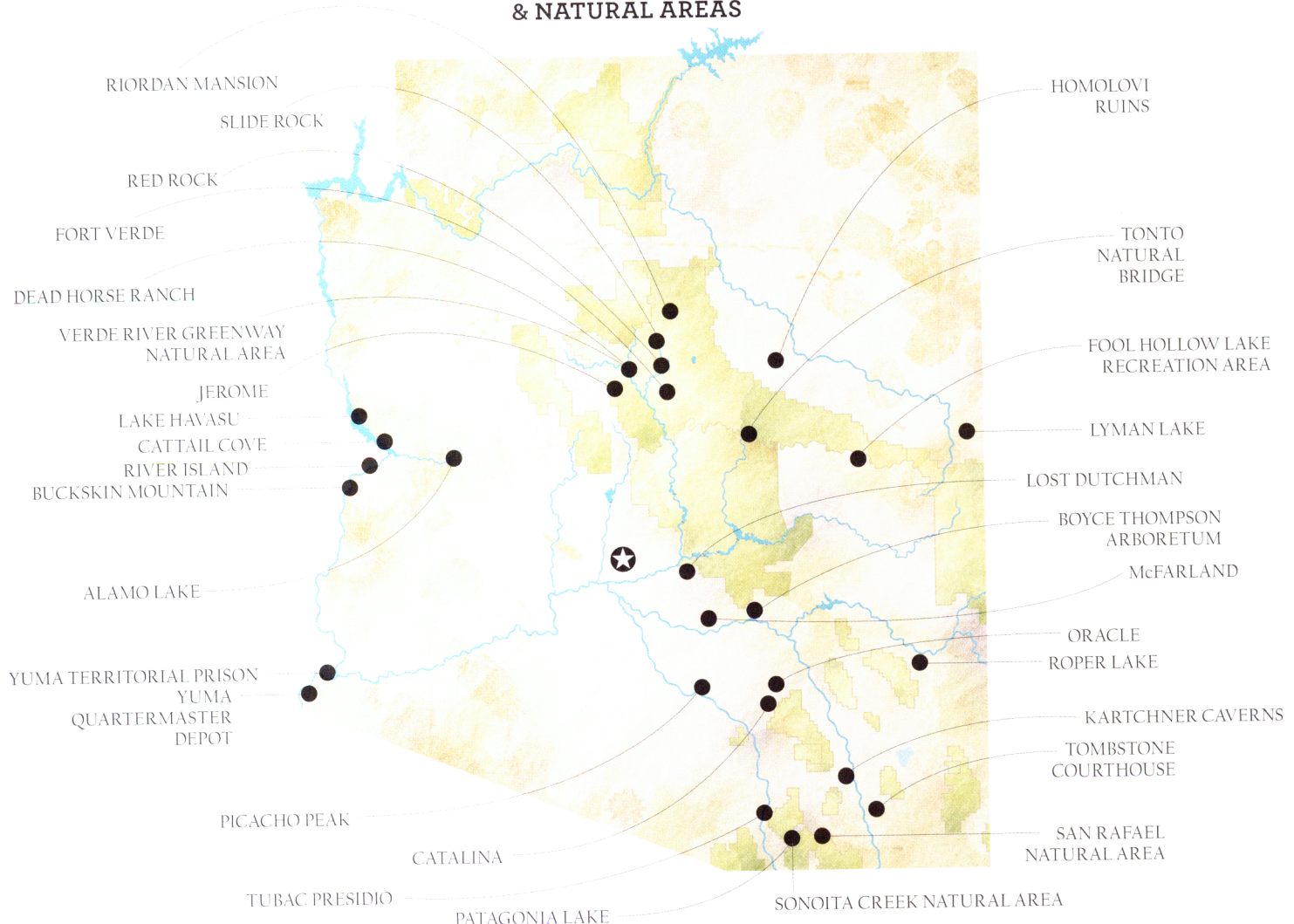
Interested groups around the state rallied. Town and tribal governments stepped in to manage some parks. Friends groups raised money. Volunteers stood in the gap to do work rangers once did. At Lost Dutchman, Mitzi helped organize the Friends of Lost Dutchman State Park, which raised \$26,000. It kept the park open.

At press time, only five parks remained shuttered, and two of those had plans to reopen. Five parks were being operated by an entity other than the Parks Department. Nine others were run with the support of partners, five of them on a reduced schedule.

The next steps remained a mystery.

**According to a study** by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University, the state parks movement of the early 20th

## ARIZONA STATE PARKS & NATURAL AREAS





century sought to develop properties to fill the gap between highly developed city parks and largely undeveloped national parks, protect state resources and boost local economies. But with so much public land, Arizonans were slow to warm to the idea. A 1941 National Park Service study saw no need for a state parks system in Arizona.

Even so, a State Parks Association formed in 1950. It began pushing for a state parks system to curb vandalism of historic landmarks. It also pushed for a system because every other state had one. A 1957 law created the Arizona State Parks Board to "select, acquire, preserve, establish and maintain areas of natural features, scenic beauty, historical and scientific interest, and zoos and botanical gardens for the education, pleasure, recreation and health of the people." Tubac Presidio, donated the following year, became Arizona's first state park.

A federal program gave a push to state parks in the 1960s. But Arizona State Parks' biggest growth took place in the 1980s, spurred by a task force recommendation to systematically acquire and develop state parks to promote tourism.

Today, Arizona State Parks lists 31 parks and natural areas on its website. The nonprofit Arizona State Parks Foundation raises funds and awareness for state parks, and encourages friends groups.

Arizona State Parks' financial woes began long before the current crisis. According to the Morrison Institute, the trouble started during legislative sweeps of 2003. Money intended for capital improvements went instead to operations. The department hasn't had a meaningful capital budget since. Unmet capital needs now total more than \$150 million.

Even before the December 2009 sweeps that triggered the vote to close 13 parks, a governor's task force declared the entire state parks system "in imminent danger of complete collapse as a result of financial starvation during most of this decade."

The governor's panel and the Morrison Institute both concluded that the system could not be stabilized without a source of reliable, sustainable funding.

Part of the problem is the parks budget itself. Over the years, legislation and voter initiatives created about a dozen revenue sources. Each has a different formula. Most are protected or restricted. All this adds up to a budget that is confusing and difficult to administer.

To complicate matters, beginning in the 1960s, the Parks Department became steward to a number of grant programs that don't benefit state parks directly. These grants make it look like the department has more money than it actually does.

The question becomes: With the state struggling to provide basic services, should we worry about state parks? Executive Director Renee Bahl says yes. Aside from their recreational value, aside from their role in preserving our state's history and scenic places, Bahl notes that the state has invested a quarter-billion dollars in Arizona's state parks system.

"Even in difficult financial times, that's not something you should just give away or ignore," she says.

Perhaps more importantly, Bahl says the collapse of the state parks system would devastate tourism.

In 2007, Northern Arizona University calculated the economic impact of 27 Arizona state parks. It found that, directly and indirectly, the parks contributed more than \$266 million to Arizona's economy. That included 3,347 jobs and more than \$22 million in taxes to state and local governments.

A report released in January found that visitation at state parks had decreased by nearly 4 percent since the NAU study, the result of the recession and changes in park operations. Visitor spending,

## helping hands

One person can make a difference. That's what Mitzi Rhinehart taught Steve Jakubowski.

Jakubowski was assistant park manager at Lost Dutchman State Park when Mitzi walked through the gates nine years ago. He describes her as an energetic, spunky woman with a "get on the train or get out of the way" attitude.

One of State Parks' 800 volunteers, Mitzi embraced her duties.

"I was just right for it," she recalls. "People want to know, 'Where do I go to the post office? Where's the picnic ground?' I knew, because I'd been coming here for years."

By 2007, budget cuts had taken a toll on the park's public programs. After a long career in libraries, Mitzi knew how to put together programs and promote them. So she lined up volunteers to talk about birds and bats and history. She booked musicians.

"One guy could do yodeling, which was a riot," she recalls.

She wrote to newspapers and chambers of commerce. She designed posters and fliers, and got other volunteers to distribute them.

When she heard the park would close, she helped organize Friends of Lost Dutchman State Park.

"She was the instigator," Jakubowski says. "She got the ball rolling, set it up, pursued it and kept at it."

The group raised enough money to keep the park open.

Nicole Armstrong-Best, who runs the volunteer program for State Parks, says with deep cuts to State Parks' staff, there are parks that would be closed if not for such volunteers.

"They were essential a year ago," she says. "Now they are vital."

Volunteer Mitzi Rhinehart explains the contents of an owl pellet to Gabrielle Warner at Lost Dutchman State Park. | MOLLY SMITH



according to the report, decreased by 16 percent.

"The fact is that a closed park or a park that's closed certain days of the week does affect the local economy," Bahl says. "And if there are no tourists, there's no outside spending in that community."

At press time, the state was facing a \$1.4 billion deficit. The question of what to do about State Parks remained.

**In 2009**, a governor's Task Force on Sustainable State Parks Funding recommended the Legislature fund the parks system at the level of past support, a little more than \$8 million a year. In addition, it recom-



# open & shut

Here are the parks that were open, or scheduled to reopen, as of February 2011. Check the Arizona State Parks website at [www.azstateparks.com](http://www.azstateparks.com) for current information.

## Parks Never Closed

Buckskin Mountain State Park  
Catalina State Park  
Cattail Cove State Park  
Dead Horse Ranch State Park  
(including Verde River Greenway State Natural Area)  
Fool Hollow Lake Recreation Area  
Kartchner Caverns State Park  
Lake Havasu State Park  
Patagonia Lake State Park  
(including Sonoita Creek Natural Area)  
River Island State Park  
Slide Rock State Park

## Parks Operated by Arizona State Parks Staff Through Partnership Support

Alamo Lake State Park  
Fort Verde State Park (closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays)  
Homolovi Ruins State Park  
Jerome State Historic Park (closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays)  
Lost Dutchman State Park

Picacho Peak State Park  
Red Rock State Park  
Riordan Mansion State Historic Park (closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays)  
Roper Lake State Park  
Tonto Natural Bridge State Park (closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays)

## Parks Operated by Partners Without Arizona State Parks Staff

Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park  
McFarland State Historic Park  
Tombstone Courthouse State Historic Park  
Tubac Presidio State Historic Park  
Yuma Prison State Historic Park  
Yuma Quartermaster Depot State Historic Park

## Closed Parks

Lyman Lake State Park  
Oracle State Park  
San Rafael State Natural Area

mended a registration fee of \$15 on noncommercial vehicles to support the parks. The fee would give Arizona residents free admission to state parks and include an opt-out provision. Even at 50 percent participation, the panel expected the fee to generate about \$40 million per year, enough to operate the parks and pay for the most critical capital needs.

The panel liked the vehicle tax idea because it would give Arizona residents a direct benefit. Funding would also increase with the population, allowing the system to grow with demand. But proposed legislation failed to get the support of lawmakers who saw it as a tax increase.

A proposal to sell Lake Havasu State Park also received little support, both in the Legislature and at State Parks, because the loss of that park's revenue would devastate the entire system.

As this article went to press, the scenarios that seemed most likely were some sort of agency reorganization and privatization.

In its report, the Morrison Institute called Arizona's cultural and recreational infrastructure outdated. Arizona's economy and the role of government were shifting dramatically, possibly permanently, it said. "It is hard to deny that the old ways of doing business do not seem to be working."

The study noted that Arizona's state parks include a larger than average number of historical and cultural sites, which are expensive to maintain and attract fewer visitors. It recommended that State Parks look at alternatives for smaller, less-visited sites, such as working with local governments, creating partnerships or ceding them entirely to another public agency. This is, in fact, what it did. But while State Parks saw these as temporary measures, there seems to be support in the Legislature to make the changes permanent.

"There are nine parks that are making money for the rest of them," says Senator Steve Pierce, majority whip and vice chairman of the Senate Natural Resources Committee. "Some of those need to be weeded out. Some of those need to be partnerships. Those that are not making money, if the residents of those towns want to keep them open, they're going to have to help do that. And they are."

There also seems to be Legislative support for agency reorganization, perhaps combining State Parks with other natural resource agencies, such as agriculture, water resources and environmental quality, as Utah and Colorado have done.

More recently, the governor's Commission on Privatization and Efficiency released a broad, preliminary recommendation that State Parks privatize some concessions or contract private companies to run certain parks entirely, citing the Forest Service in Arizona as a successful model. At press time, COPE's final report had not been published.

The State Parks Foundation commissioned its own study of privatization and efficiency. The report by PROS Consulting, released in January, recommended that State Parks adopt more private-sector

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

**VISIT A STATE PARK.** Gate fees and other revenues keep the system operating. Visit [www.azstateparks.com](http://www.azstateparks.com) for more information.

**VOLUNTEER.** Volunteers do everything from office work to trail maintenance to scientific research, depending on their backgrounds and interests. Some live on site. Submit an online application at [www.azstateparks.com/volunteer](http://www.azstateparks.com/volunteer).

**SUBSCRIBE TO ARIZONA HIGHWAYS.** Five dollars of every \$24 subscription is donated to the Arizona State Parks Foundation. Visit [www.arizonahighways.com](http://www.arizonahighways.com) to learn more.



Lyman Lake State Park | RANDY PRENTICE





Buckskin Mountain State Park | PAUL GILL

principles. These include operating some parks on a reduced schedule or seasonally — not in response to budget cuts, but as standard operating procedure — reducing little-used services, and employing more contract and seasonal labor.

Functions like retail, hospitality and food service can be outsourced to private companies in parks where there are favorable conditions. In some parks, partnerships with nonprofits or public agencies make more sense. The best solution for privatization, the report said, is to transition State Parks to a quasi-governmental entity such as a parks authority or special district.

At press time, the Foundation planned to propose a governor-appointed task force to oversee the next steps. Meanwhile, State Parks had sent out requests for information to assess private-sector interest in State Parks concessions. The State Parks Board had just given authority to issue a request for proposals to operate the lodge at Tonto National Bridge and to move ahead with a potential private-sector marina development in the Lake Havasu area.

“When State Parks was founded, I don’t believe anybody expected it was going to make a profit,” says State Parks Board Chairwoman Tracy Westerhausen. “This economy is forcing people to rethink that, for better or worse. We’re entering into a new era where we’re going to have to work to that goal as hard as we can.”

She feels “cautiously optimistic” about the future of state parks, in part because so many people rallied to support them.

Pierce also sounds optimistic. “In the last 100 years, there have been

a lot of good programs, well-intended when they started out,” he says. “Now we’re going to have to see if we can afford all of them.

“I will say this is all temporary. Nothing’s going to be damaged. Nothing’s going to be outright sold and given to developers. ... There are going to be reforms that are going to be good in the long run. I think studies are being done, and it’s going to get better and the parks are all going to be whole.”

**Meanwhile**, back at Lost Dutchman State Park, the desert detectives have finished their work. With the Superstitions as a backdrop, they line up for a group photo.

“What do you say?” asks Judy Borey of the Boys and Girls Club.

In unison, they shout: “THANK YOU!”

## Help Us Help Our State Parks

Our state parks are struggling. That’s why *Arizona Highways* is teaming up with our park colleagues to help ensure that Arizona, through the pages of our magazine and the state’s 31 parks, remains open and accessible to residents and visitors alike. Here’s how you can help: For every \$24 subscription (1 year) to *Arizona Highways*, we’ll donate \$5 to the Arizona State Parks Foundation. To learn more, scan this QR code with your smart phone or visit [www.arizonahighways.com](http://www.arizonahighways.com).

