

Sometimes the best idea is not to reinvent the wheel...but just to improve the wheel so it rolls easier. Around 20 years ago, a local boy scout troop installed 5 cement dog watering bowls which were filled by a portable water tank for the wild animals living on the Robbins Butte Wildlife Area in Buckeye, Arizona. A couple of those bowls still exist today but are now filled by hand.

Robbins Butte is a swath of Sonoran Desert that lies 40 miles southwest of Phoenix and covers 1,681 acres of land which is managed by the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Lying just south of the Gila River are extensive areas of broad, almost impenetrable thickets of deciduous salt cedar, variously interspersed with native willows, cottonwoods and mesquites.

As you get away from the river there are larger mesquites, blue palo verdes, athel trees (an evergreen, non-native salt cedar relative) and gray thorn bushes. Gambel's Quail, Mourning Dove, mule deer, javelina, coyotes and cottontail rabbits are readily seen but the habitat provides for 22 species of mammals, 4 species of amphibians, 17 species of reptiles, and 86 species of birds. Also, a plethora of insects live here as well. Hunting is permitted on the wildlife area while using only shotguns or archery equipment.

This Gila River corridor has a diverse habitat drawing large populations of resident and migratory wildlife to the area. From the top of Robbins Butte, one can see a broad overview of the river corridor and adjacent desert regions. Ruins and petroglyphs document the importance of this area to human habitation and farming from over the last 500 years. Today, Robbins Butte is farmed to provide food crops for doves and other migratory birds as well as providing nesting habitat for both migratory and upland bird species. The area is an absolute heaven for coveys of Gambel's Quail as its thick varieties of brush provide both plentiful food as well as cover. But, in the desert, water can be a problem.

Ryan Sutter, Lower Gila River Wildlife Areas Manager Region 6 of the Arizona Game and Fish Department, lives on and has managed Robbins Butte for the last nine years. He observed how effective those little original water bowls were in this arid climate for the quail, javelina, rabbits and doves. Based on those observations, and the clear benefit of providing water to benefit all the wildlife in such an arid environment, Ryan dreamed of one day setting up a better system to provide water in strategic locations throughout Robbins Butte.

In 2016, the Valley of the Sun Quail Forever chapter began a relationship with Ryan to see how we could help him provide a great, long-term, viable public quail hunting habitat that is close to Phoenix. Over the past couple of years, VOTSQF has received grant monies to help Ryan plant fields of grain, sorghum, grasses, and pollinators. These large fields, along with their buffer strips and riparian areas have helped improve the health of all the wildlife!

In a brain storming session with Ryan in 2020, he brought up his dream of placing watering bowls strategically throughout Robbins Butte. VOTSQF saw all the benefits and agreed to look for grant monies to help him make this dream a reality. Fortunately for us here in Arizona, we have the Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation (AZSFWC) which is a 501-c-3 organization whose mission is to educate and inform sportsmen and wildlife conservation organizations throughout the state, and the public at large on important issues related to wildlife and wildlife habitat, and to provide grants. By purchasing a special AZSFWC Arizona License Plate, you are making a contribution to Arizona's wildlife and habitat. Seventeen dollars (\$17) of each twenty-five (\$25) special license fee goes directly to the AZSFWC's Wildlife Conservation Fund. These monies then fund various quarterly grants for important on-the-ground wildlife habitat restoration and enhancement projects as well as outdoor recreational and educational opportunities that promote conservation.

Based on Ryan's updated water bowl drinking system model, VOTSQF applied for a AZSFWC grant for over \$7,000 to install the first portion of water for wildlife at Robbins Butte. We thankfully received the grant which purchased 10 massive rolls of 2" piping, 10 industrial float-type dog watering bowls as well as the little stuff that all projects have to have. When including the volunteer labor hours our project valued out at over \$10,000. The long-term project goal is to install up to 6 miles of watering system throughout the area so the total ballpark value of the project will be around \$60,000. Unlike the original Boy Scout model, this new updated system is being connected to a newly drilled well with a reverse osmosis system which will make it completely automated.

It took 2 gorgeous days and about 220 volunteer labor hours, to install the first mile of the project. Ryan used a large tractor to place the rolls of piping as our volunteers walked behind to make sure it laid out correctly. Another group of chapter members followed up with pipe cutting and installing the drinking bowls. The new bowls are basically an industrial sized dog bowl with a float system like you may have for your own dog. Signage was created and posted so that anyone hunting Robbins Butte will know that there is now water available out there for the bird hunters who are hunting with their dogs and for folks who are training their hunting dogs. We also placed a couple of game cameras to monitor how long it takes for the different species to start using the drinkers. It took a little time, but the animals responded by using the bowls. We have seen quail, deer, javelina, rabbits, coyotes, fox, bobcats, skunks, doves and mice at the bowls. Amazingly, we even saw a badger! In October of 2021 we installed the second mile of the water project.

We would like to say “thank you” to whomever thought up the original boy scout dog bowl project idea. We too thought it was a good idea and are happy that we could help a habitat that supports so many species. We are also proud to say that our Valley of the Sun chapter won the Quail Forever National award for Education & Outreach in early 2022, in large part due to this water project. We are now preparing to install the third mile of this project later in 2022.

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