

FEATURED PLANT

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Common Name: Whorled Milkweed

Scientific Name: *Asclepias verticillata*



▶ JOSHUA MAYER

There are about 30 species of milkweed found in Arizona. Two of the most toxic milkweeds in the western United States are of concern to livestock producers in Arizona: Whorled milkweed, *Asclepias verticillata* and Horsetail milkweed, *A. subverticillata*. These milkweeds occur throughout the state at elevations from 2,500-8,000 feet. They grow in a variety of rangeland settings from dry to moist soils, as well as weeds in cultivated fields and along roadsides.

Milkweeds get their name from the milky sap that is released when plant parts are broken. Whorled and Horsetail milkweeds are perennial forbs with creeping rhizomes. Long, narrow leaves are arranged in a whorl around the stem. The flowers are greenish-white to cream color and grouped in dense, umbrella-like heads at the tops of flowering stems. The majority of growth occurs in late spring and early summer.

All classes of livestock are susceptible to milkweed poisoning. Milkweeds are poisonous at all stages of growth and even when dry in baled hay. They contain toxic glycosides and resins. As little as 0.2% of body weight consumed in green plant material can be lethal.

Some of the signs of poisoning include: depression, weakness, difficulty in breathing, dilation of pupils, rapid, weak pulse, bloating, and respiratory paralysis. Signs of poisoning occur within a few hours and livestock may die soon after or within a couple of days.

Animals usually do not eat milkweeds as they are not highly palatable. Poisoning can occur when there is a scarcity of good forage. Animals should be removed from pastures with high densities of milkweed and poor forage conditions. Hay contaminated with milkweed should not be fed to animals. Although milkweeds are susceptible to certain herbicides, preventing animals from consuming milkweed is the most effective way to reduce losses.

Sources:

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FEATURED BIRD

Dan L. Fischer - Author of *Early Southwest Ornithologists, 1728-1900*, University of Arizona Press

Common Name: Elf Owl

Scientific Name: *Micrathene whitneyi*



▶ DAN L. FISCHER

One of the smallest owls in the world, the Elf Owl has been named for its diminutive size of only 5 to 6 inches in length and a weight of a mere 1½ ounces. These bantam owls lack "ear tufts" and appear grayish-brown with prominent arched whitish "eyebrows." Their large eyes have a yellow iris that controls the size of the black pupils which vary in size depending on the intensity of light. The pupils in dim light open widely and reduce in bright conditions. Their retinas are densely packed with receptor cones enabling them to spot and define objects clearly.

In southern Arizona Elf Owls occur fairly commonly among the lower saguaro forests and riparian courses, up into the elevated oak areas north to the Mogollon Rim. They may be one of the more common avian species in some areas. As nocturnal predators, Elf Owls feed primarily on invertebrates such as beetles, scorpions, centipedes, grasshoppers and even moths in flight. They arrive from Mexico in mid-March on their annual northward migration. The males become quite vocal by announcing their presence with territorial and courtship songs of loud, rapid, high-pitched chirps. Both sexes utter a soft, short, whistle contact call. They return south into Mexico beginning in September.

Elf Owls select old unlined cavities usually created by woodpeckers for nesting and roosting sites during the day. Observers are often startled and suddenly surprised by a chance and rewarding experience when passing a silent adult owl peering from the entrance of their summer home at dusk. Usually 3 glossy white eggs are laid in early May and are incubated by both sexes for about 23 days. Both parents tend the young which leave the cavity in about 30 days.

Dr. James Graham Cooper (1830-1902), a surgeon, naturalist and author working under contract with the Geological Survey of California, discovered this tiny owl while serving at Fort Mojave on the Colorado River. Incidentally, this site is the extreme northwest limit of range of this bird. In 1881, Cooper named this owl in honor of Josiah Dwight Whitney (1819-1896), California state geologist. Mount Whitney (14,495'), the highest peak in the Sierra Nevada of California, is also named for him.