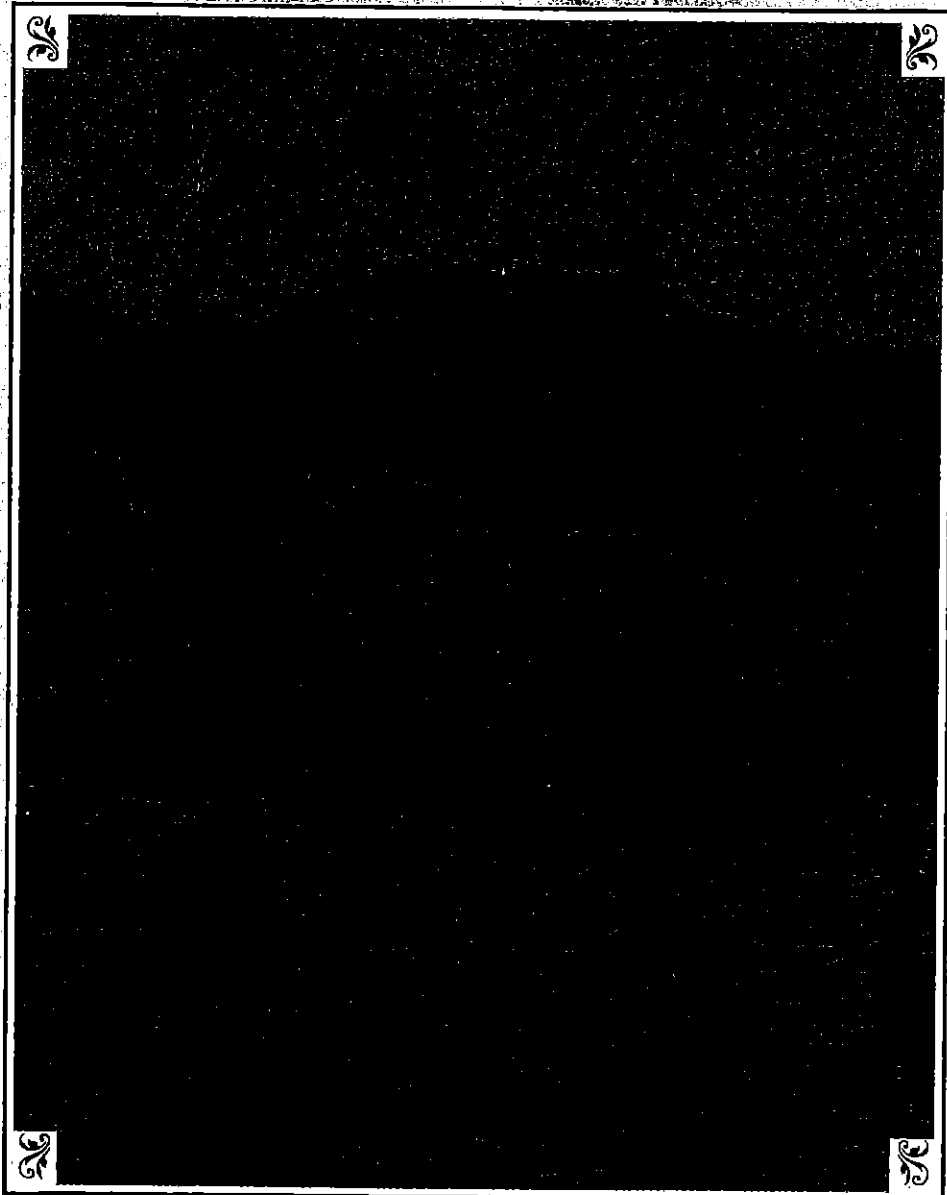


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ONCE A RIVER

*Bird Life and Habitat Changes
on the Middle Gila*



Amadeo M. Rea

About the Author...

AMADEO M. REA's field of expertise is the taxonomy and distribution of birds of western North America. His interest in natural history began during a childhood spent on a ranch in El Dorado County, California. Five years of teaching on the Gila River Reservation at St. John's Indian School, Komatke, gave him the opportunity not only to pursue ornithological studies but also to tap the wealth of biological data in the oral history of the Pima Indians. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and in 1977 became curator of birds and mammals at San Diego's Natural History Museum.

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animals, none are seen but the coyote. The fruits which are actually grown and cultivated by the inhabitants are various: beans, maize, wheat, watermelons, melons, squash, and cotton. If you wish to consider others which can be grown there, every species of grain, tree and legume would do well because of the mild climate and even temperature. The river can fertilize these beautiful tracts of land with its waters. These can easily be conducted anywhere for farming. Even the gentiles steal a portion of its water by means of a poorly built dam which feeds a main ditch along their fields and distributes the water to small fields cultivated by each family.

But as editors Matson and Fontana point out (*in* Bringas, 1977:2), Spain and England became involved in war in 1790 and the Bringas report was destined never to be delivered to the king. Mexican revolutionaries and Spanish royalists began dividing up sides, even among the clergy, and war broke out in 1810, leaving little political or economic interest in Pimería Alta.

Early Anglo Accounts

The United States acquired from France, by the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, an immense parcel of land west of the Mississippi, ending somewhat vaguely at the Rocky Mountains. Western boundaries were technicalities for statesmen to worry about. Following the Mexican War of Independence in 1821, the already weak Hispanic influence began to wane in what was to become southern Arizona. Floods of Anglo-Americans began to traverse the country, often passing through the Pima Villages. The earliest of these were trappers (who seldom left reliable written accounts) and United States military personnel on reconnaissance into Mexican territory. The military personnel often kept journals of their Arizona travels. Beaver attracted the trappers. They occurred in exploitable numbers from the headwaters of the Gila to its mouth at the Colorado River (G. Davis, 1982; Dobyns, 1981).

At this time there were two major transcontinental routes to California—few attempting a more northern continental crossing through the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada. The more difficult of the two was to follow the Gila directly west from its headwaters in western New Mexico. A longer but somewhat easier route was to come west at a lower latitude to the Mexican village of Tucson, then head northwest to the Gila River, a course followed almost exactly by Interstate Highway 10 today. Both routes passed through the Pima Villages.

Few itinerants followed the Gila downstream from the Pima Villages to its confluence with the Salt. Most left the western (Maricopa) villages about the area of Sacate and Maricopa Wells (earlier called Santa Teresa) and traveled a *jornada* of 45 miles (72 km) south of the Sierra Estrella to Gila Bend, where they again struck the river. The *jornada* was a day's travel without available food or water for pack animals; understandably, some travelers preferred to make the trip at night. In spite of the hardships, the *jornada* shortened the road to California by about 90 miles (145 km). As a result few Europeans ever