

Sonoran Riparian Scrubland

In and along drainages within the Sonoran Desert are scrublands of low to medium height (1.5 to 3.0 m), too dense to be considered desert scrub or strand. Although these scrublands usually contain plant species also found in adjacent desert scrub (e.g., *Lycium brevipes*, *Acacia greggii*, *Celtis pallida*, and especially the highly facultative mesquite), the actual stream channel dominants are usually distinctive riparian species. Seepwillow (*Baccharis salicifolia*) is abundant nearest water, with Desert Broom (*B. sarothroides*) in drier places and Mule Fat (*B. viminea*) in desert washes. Arrow-weeds (*Tessaria sericea*, *Pluchea camphorata*, and *P. purpurascens*) and Burro-

brush may dominate on sandy soils (Fig. 187). These and other evergreen shrubs have adapted to successional situations as befits their restricted occurrence to flood-prone areas. The deciduous Desert-willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) is a common arboreal component, as is the increasingly prevalent, deciduous Saltcedar.

Along the saline portions of the lower Colorado and Gila rivers and in the Salton Sea basin, are dense and taller (to 11 m or higher) "thickets" of introduced Saltcedar and the evergreen Athel (*Tamarix aphylla*). In the less disturbed sites, these may be accompanied by native Screwbean Mesquite, Lenscale, or Quailbush (*Atriplex lentiformis*), Arrow-weed, Western Honey Mesquite (*P. glandulosa* var. *torreyana*), and such purely salt-shrub species as *Suaeda torreyana*, *Atriplex polycarpa* and *Allenrolfea occidentalis* (Fig. 188). These communities are highly flammable because of deciduous and other properties of Saltcedar, and are now typically in a fire-succession stage. Each fire (or clearing) increases the prevalence of the root sprouting Saltcedar at the expense of more valuable native vegetation. Consequently, fire disclimax consociations of Saltcedar now exclusively occupy extensive areas along the lower Colorado River, its delta, tributaries, distributaries (e.g., Rio Hardy, Alamo, and New rivers), agricultural drains and sumps, and other poorly-drained, alkaline places (Fig. 189).

The value of these thickets to game species is well known, and such places often support a high density of Desert Cottontail (*Sylvilagus auduboni*) and Gambel's Quail (*Lophortyx gambelii*), and if of sufficient height (3+ m), nesting Mourning and White-winged Doves. Other birds well represented in Sonoran riparian scrub are the Crissal Thrasher, Abert's Towhee, Brown Towhee (*Pipilo fuscus*), Say's Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*), and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (Anderson and Ohmart, 1977; Anderson et al., 1977). If standing water is present, such scrublands may also often be inhabited by the Yuma Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris yumaensis*).



Figure 187. Sonoran riparian scrubland, strand, and woodland on the Verde River, Tonto National Forest, Maricopa County, Arizona. Scrubland composed largely of Burrobush (*Hymenoclea monogyra*), Arrowweed (*Tessaria sericea*) and Velvet Mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*) in scrub form. Elevation ca. 450 m.



Figure 188. Sonoran "lower Colorado River" scrub of Arrowweed (*Tessaria sericea*, *Pluchea camphorata*), Saltcedar (*Tamarix chinensis*), Western Honey Mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa* var. *torreyana*), Screwbean (*Prosopis pubescens*), Lenscale or Quailbush (*Atriplex lentiformis*) and Seepweed (*Suaeda torreyana*), with an occasional willow (*Salix exigua*, *S. gooddingii*), near Cibola, Yuma County, Arizona, along the Colorado River. Elevation ca. 120 m.



Figure 189. Sonoran "lower Colorado River" riparian scrub in the Colorado River delta below Riito, Sonora, Mexico. A disclimax community dominated by Saltcedar (*Tamarix chinensis*). The remaining few mesquites [*Prosopis glandulosa* var. *torreyana*, *Prosopis pubescens*] will eventually be displaced with increasing incidence of fire brought on by the flammable properties of Saltcedar. Elevation ca. 5 m.