

Adventures in Ecotourism: Big Bend National Park 2017

Rick Shepherd, Friends of the Nature Center Board of Directors



Group at Rio Grande River and Boquillas Canyon Overlook on August 27. From L to R: Bill Huffman, Joe Gearheart, Frances Allen, Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, Linda Carpenter, Mary Sanford, Sharon Barr, Ginger Gearheart, Kathy (bus driver), Bob Gearheart, Karen Shepherd, Bill Richerson, Mary Gearheart. Not pictured: Rick Shepherd. Rick Shepherd Photo.

Friday, August 25th

Our adventure began early as nine of the 13 Big Bend Ecotourism Trip participants, including coordinator and leader Bill Richerson, departed on the 475-mile journey to our intermediary overnight stay at Marathon's historic Gage Hotel. The remaining foursome would be driving in from El Paso to meet us in Marathon. Heavy rain began pelting us after we headed west, but we soon pulled into the ghost town of Thurber for breakfast at the Smokestack Restaurant. Moving on, we passed through Midland and the towns of Imperial, Escondido,

and Fort Stockton. The highlight of the day was finding numerous prairie dog towns and their suspicious inhabitants on both sides of the road about 1½ miles north of Marathon.

After checking in, we took a short pre-dinner birding walk to the town's nearby 27-acre Gage Gardens. Still in the heat of the day, only a few species, including rock pigeons, white-winged doves, house sparrows, and a turkey vulture, were observed. Swallows favored the hotel's eaves. The road to Marathon afforded us several roadrunner observations and possible wire-sitting short-tailed hawks.



Purple prickly pear cactus, one of the more beautiful and unusual plants in Big Bend National Park. Rick Shepherd Photo.

The early twentieth century-era hotel is wonderfully well maintained, equipped with modern conveniences and decorated with numerous touches that reflect cattle ranching, which was the area's predominant industry at the time the Texas Historic Landmark was built in 1927. Inside the White Buffalo Bar, a mounted white bison head is prominently displayed, and the entrance is guarded by a "growling" black panther sculpture, appearing ready to pounce from the entryway facade above.

Saturday, August 26th

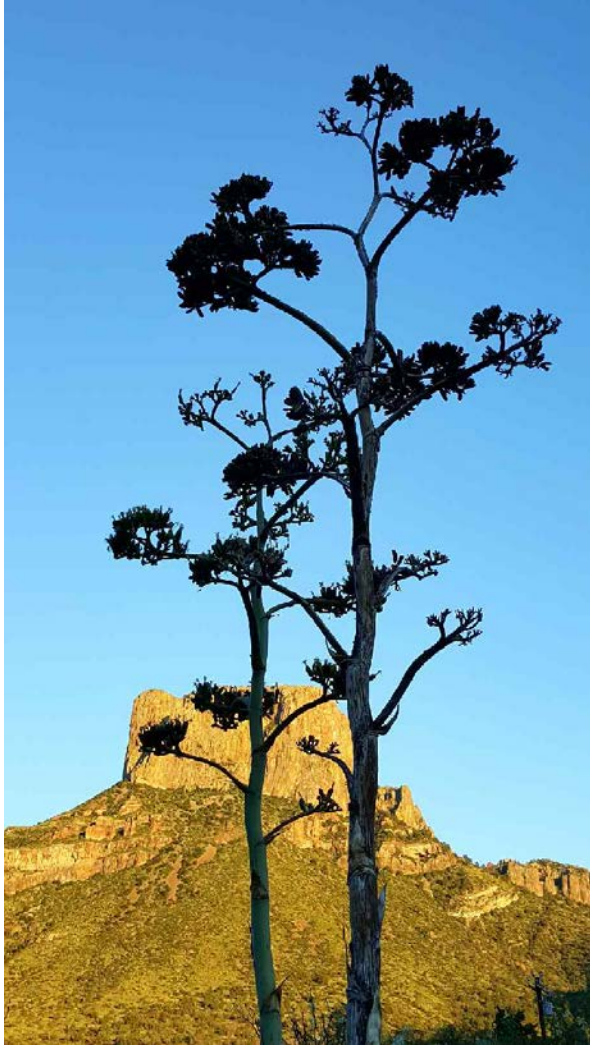
Birding on the street early the next morning found a western kingbird, white-winged dove, and Eurasian collared dove. After another pass through the Gage Gardens, we moved on to visit the nearby Post Park, formerly known as Fort Peña Park. Birds at this location included a huge flock of turkey vultures, soaring in the sky and preening on a large, high rock mound.

Two coots and a solo pied-billed grebe cruised down a small nearby stream. Also found were a golden-fronted woodpecker, one unidentifiable hummingbird, a mourning dove, a desert cardinal, a canyon towhee, and, most dramatic of all, a vermilion flycatcher.

We then headed south to Big Bend. Along the way, Bill discussed the dramatic effects of massive flash floods typical to this area, pointing out the clearly visible destruction from a recent flood. Much of this area had been used for ranch grazing, which was eliminated to minimize flooding effects and preserve soil and vegetation.

Approximately 20 miles after entering the national park is the Fossil Bone Exhibit, a most exceptional display of fossils representing the Dinosaur Excavation Project. We devoted about an hour touring it and explored the surrounding area where the fossils had been located.

The Panther Junction Visitor Center and park headquarters (3,750 feet elevation) were next on the agenda and featured a short trail through representative flora and a Texas madrone tree plus crissal thrasher and pyrrhuloxia flitting about the rest of the small trees. The movie shown detailing the birth and geologic evolution of the Big Bend area and its establishment as a national park was impressive. A nice discovery in the book



Sunset highlights a century plant against a cobalt blue Big Bend eastern sky. Rick Shepherd Photo.

section was *Lone Star Dinosaurs* by Louis Jacobs, with original artwork by Karen Carr, published by Texas A&M University Press. I brought it to the attention of Sally McCoy, and she has indicated it may be available soon in the Nature Center's gift shop. It's a great read!

Onward to the Chisos Mountains Basin and park lodge. We were greeted by a magnificent rim of mountains, with elevations ranging from the Casa Grande Peak at 7,325 feet to Emory Peak's 7,825 feet. Elevation of the basin itself is 5,300 feet.

Sunday, August 27th

We were greeted by two white-tailed does in the lodge parking lot on the way to breakfast before heading out to the Rio Grande area east of the park. On our way, several desert millipedes ("pink worms") were found crossing the asphalt. The bus stopped at the request of Bill Huffman, whose advanced biology degree includes awareness of this large desert species. We continued to see them throughout the day.

On our way to the Rio Grande and Boquillas Canyon overlooks, we stopped to hike along the Marufo Vega Circle Trail to familiarize ourselves with this desert's flora, including creosote bush, golden-spined prickly pear cactus, tar bush, ocotillo, candellia, Texas sages (ceniza vs. cenizo), leather skin, resurrection fern, barrel cactus, and twinleaf stylex.

Returning to the bus, we headed to the overlooks. Boquillas villagers make small souvenirs, which are brought across the river and left at the overlook for visitors to purchase and leave cash in a receptacle for the artisans to collect later. Our next stop—the Rio Grande Village—for hiking the nature trail and boardwalk, where we were surrounded by eight- to nine-foot cane. This body of water is the only known habitat for the Big Bend minnow (*Gambusia gogji*). Also seen from the boardwalk were five pyrrhuloxias perched on dead tree limbs.

On our return to the lodge in the early afternoon, we encountered a wonderful surprise: a mama black bear, followed by her twin cubs, sauntering across the road. They were too quick for anyone to get a photo before they disappeared into the very steep, heavily forested area to the left side of the road. Later, the ranger advised us where we could most likely observe them at dusk. We tried without success...bummer! We were also unable to see any javalinas during our stay, and the ranger indicated he had not seen any in the basin area for approximately three years. Our own personal uninvited guest, discovered upon return to our room, was a small scorpion lying in wait just inside the door frame. It was expeditiously removed to nearby vegetation. Needless to say, I carefully searched the room and declared it free of any more uninvited "guests."



Examining a desert millipede, or "pink worm." Rick Shepherd Photo.

Monday, August 28th

Setting out early once again, Bill scheduled visits to the west side of the park, including Castolon and its historic general store (originally a cavalry post and post office). When camping close by is possible, the store serves campers' needs as well as folks like us who happen by. The neighboring ranger station provides security. We moved on to the empty, soggy Cottonwood Campground below, where we were fortunate to see a black phoebe, a magnificent male vermilion flycatcher and his mate, an unidentified streaking yellow warbler with black wing markings, a loggerhead shrike, and another golden-fronted woodpecker. We headed west, but the road to the Santa Elena Canyon was closed due to flooding. We were frustrated not being able to see either the black or gray hawks that nest annually here and that many of us have seen before.

After returning to the general store for lunch, we headed off to visit the vast Sotol Grassland and then to view the Homer Wilson Ranch from the road pullout high above the ranch. We then visited a wooded birding site on Sam Nail Ranch, which had previously contained two windmills to provide water and entice birds. This time, the windmills were failing to provide water for the normally burbling creek. The widespread drought in the area has been significant.

The evening's dinner was at Terlingua's historic Starlight Theatre Restaurant & Bar. Abundant history is attached to this town. The sunset was beautiful. Departure was delayed to allow us to see whatever nighttime wildlife might be found along the roadside or crossing the highway. We arrived at the Chisos Basin unrewarded

by any observable highway creatures. And YES, we really hoped to see our mama bear and her cubs again, with cameras ready to capture the nocturnal ursine family should we have the chance.



*Seeing a tarantula was a highlight of the trip.
Rick Shepherd Photo.*

Tuesday, August 29th

On the way home to Fort Worth, our last roadway creature crossing turned out to be a beautiful tarantula, for which the bus stopped briefly. The arachnid was corralled by several of us before it could escape eager hands lifting it up for observation. It decided the arm connected to that hand would be a great way to ascend for a better view of the situation. By now, something of a crowd had gathered, and THIS TIME, cameras were in action. Once we were satisfied with our gentle inspection and the spider's unaggressive behavior, we rewarded its eagerness to leave by lowering it into the roadside vegetation, where its breakfast was probably unwittingly awaiting.

Our last reported bird citing was that of a raven (common vs. Chihuahuan was not certain), and we will not allow it to be an ominous "Poe" sign regarding future Friends of the Nature Center ecotourism trips.

We were very grateful to have Kathy as our bus driver again, and we enjoyed having her participate in our off-bus activities. Hopefully, she'll be available to facilitate our travels in the future. **Thanks once again, Kathy.**

Thanks to Bill Richerson for his planning and execution of travel arrangements, his teaching style, and his willingness to share his in-depth naturalist knowledge. His knowledge of the Big Bend National Park stems in great measure from repeated trips with his high school biology students over the years.

We hope to see you on future trips and hope you will tell your friends about these excursions to help foster growth of future Friends of the Nature Center's ecotourism trips.



*Big Bend National Park patch.
Rick Shepherd Photo.*