

HIKING THE CACTUS FOREST

Although I had hiked in the Rincon Mountain district of Saguaro National Park occasionally, it was not until the summer of 2004 that I decided that it was a good alternative to the hour-long drive to Mt. Lemmon to escape the heat during the hot summers. I looked at the map of trails in the park and put together a series of interesting routes meandering through the magnificent stand of saguaros, going no higher than Bridal Wreath Falls. I decided to schedule these hikes every Monday morning at sunrise so that we could get back before it got too hot. The hikes turned out to be a good start to the week, with our return coming when most normal people would just be getting up. The hikes were popular enough that I decided to continue them even after the temperatures cooled down, but still starting at sunrise. Since that first hike in May of 2004 I have led about 175 hikes in this area on most every Monday morning. On days that I had to cancel because of work obligations, Evie Litton, Marti Elkind, Bill Lund, and Gary Mason have taken over for me, making the total hikes well over 200.

Saguaro National Monument was created in 1933 and later made a national park in October of 1994. The Rincon Mountain District (as distinguished from the Tucson Mountain District) covers 66,632 acres or 104 square miles. With such a large area it was easy to put together a group of hikes that consisted of connecting trails so that our Monday morning hikes would take us to interesting places. By reversing these routes, the landscape looked entirely different.

Being out so early in the morning, we often come across animals found in the desert. These included jackrabbits, snakes, Gila monsters, deer, coyote, turkey vultures, ravens, javelina, tarantulas, and numerous bunny rabbits and lizards. The most exciting creatures that we have seen are rattlesnakes. So far, the grand total is 41 snakes, most of which were diamondback rattlers. 2005-2006 is noted for the least snakes, only three, and not until September 4. The most snakes was this past 2007-08 season with 13 snakes as of August 25. Most remarkable about this is that we did not see any snakes until July 28. All thirteen snakes were spotted in a one-month time period. On one day alone, August 11, we saw five diamondbacks and one other snake. Another memorable sight was sixteen turkey vultures, sitting on trees in a wash that we viewed from an overlook. A most thrilling time was when we heard (but did not see) a pack of coyotes very nearby talking back and forth to each other as we walked through the otherwise silent desert.

During the hot weather we take routes with little elevation gain. A Walk in the Cactus Forest starts at the Douglas Spring Trailhead at the end of Speedway and meanders in all directions for 5.2 miles. Another A Walk in the Cactus Forest starts at the end of Broadway and wanders around for 6.2 miles. Garwood/Wildhorse Figure 8 is shorter, only 4.8 miles, but has more elevation gain, with Little Wildhorse Tank as its destination. Pink Hill to Garwood Dam is longer (7 miles) with its obvious destination. Two loop trails, Loma Verde Loop and Squeeze Pen Loop, are 5.9 and 6.5 miles. A shorter loop, Freight Wagon Loop, only 3.5 miles, is my most recent addition, but it is one of the more interesting ones. I have a Rincon Ramble hike, starting at the end of Broadway that Don Link especially likes because of its alternate name, the one strap bra hike, called so because of its pattern on the trail map. Another version of the Rincon Ramble hike starts at the end of Speedway. Because of its elevation gain, I save this hike for cooler temperatures. Other cool weather hikes are Three Tank Loop, Little Wildhorse Tank, and Bridal Wreath Falls.

If you can get up early and would like to experience the desert in all its beauty and wonders, consider joining us some Monday morning. You never know what sights you might see when you are least expecting it.

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