

Atascosa Lookout closed "due to government operation"

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Today I (Bill Bens) was leading a group of 14 Quail Creek Hikers up to Atascosa Lookout. We intended upon taking a break at the lookout and then heading down and over to Atascosa Peak. We were the first cars to arrive at the parking lot across from the trail head and we hit the trail somewhere around 9:00am. As we were on the final switchbacks to the lookout, just a few feet before the switchback where the route leads over to the peak, we came across this makeshift sign:



In addition to the sign, there was yellow "police" barrier ribbon across the trail. We stopped in our tracks to assess the surprise situation. Our second destination was Atascosa Peak, about a mile to the north of the lookout. Although the sign did not say that the peak was closed, the route to the peak was about 25 feet on the other side of the barrier ribbon. As we were deciding what to do, we noticed several people at the lookout who were observing us. I shouted up to them if it was OK if we proceeded to the peak and one of them shook their head no. We hiked back down the trail maybe 100 feet and regrouped in the warm sunshine, and took the break we intended to take at the lookout. I took my monocular out of my pack for a closer view and could see a what looked like a piece of equipment on top of a big tripod just outside the lookout. However, I couldn't tell if the people outside the lookout were were wearing a uniform.

Curious about what was going on, and somewhat upset that there was no warning sign at the trailhead, I took out my cell phone and called the Nogales Ranger District. They knew nothing about any "government operation" closing the lookout and said they would look into it and call me back.

In the meantime, one of the hikers in our group decided to proceed up to the lookout to see what was going on. He was stopped halfway buy someone wearing a border patrol hat who stated something like "you can't come up here and I can't tell you why".

While we were finishing up our break, a couple of hikers wearing bright red vests approached us from below. We advised them that the lookout was closed and when they asked why we speculated that it might be a border patrol operation. At this point one of the two hikers flashed his border patrol badge but said he had no knowledge of what was going on. They proceeded on up beyond the "police line" and were stopped short of the lookout by one of the "government" officials. Apparently, they were told to wait there while the official ran up to the lookout, as though he was checking with someone to see if it was OK for the couple to proceed. The official returned to where the couple was waiting and escorted them to the lookout.

On our hike back down, I received a return call from a Coronado National Forest dispatcher who advised me that no one had authorization to close the trail to hikers, and that he was going to send out a law enforcement officer to investigate.

As we continued hiking down, when Josephine Saddle in the Santa Ritas came into view, we saw the some mirror like reflection we had seen on the way up. We had dismissed it as an aircraft on the ascent but we could now tell that the reflecting object was stationary near Josephine Saddle. We suspect that it might be related to the "government operation" at Atascosa Lookout, perhaps having to do with the virtual border fence.

When we arrived back at the parking lot, forest service employee arrived. He stated that he was the caretaker for the lookout and apologized that we were unable to complete our hike. We explained what we had seen and he was quite dumbfounded as to what was going on. He stated that he was going to hike up to the lookout and find out what was going on when the law enforcement officer arrived. He did mention that the Forest Service was planning to replace communications equipment at the lookout this weekend but that should not have closed the lookout.

As we were about to depart the parking lot, the couple wearing the red vests were returning and were approached by the Forest Service caretaker. We decided that their discussion was none of our business and promptly left.

I left my card with the Forest Service caretaker and asked him to contact me about the status of the lookout, once he figured out what was going on. If I hear anything else I'll pass it on.

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