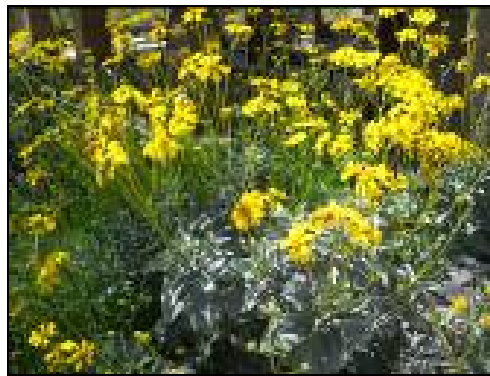




Rotary eClub  
of the Southwest USA  
A Rotary International eClub

## A Walk in the Desert - Arizona in the Springtime

Karen Naranjo



RECSWUSA, our eClub, started in District 5510 in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. The Sonoran Desert is the largest of the four North American deserts, all of which extend into

Arizona. The Sonoran encompasses the southern third of Arizona, California including Baja, and Mexico.

With two distinct rainy seasons the Sonoran is one of the "wettest" deserts: in the winter we get Pacific cold fronts before they swerve north across the rest of the country, and in the late summer, the winds change to a more south / southwesterly flow, which is our "monsoon".

Random Fact:

Monsoon is an Arabic word for seasonal wind changes - although it is more humid, leading to the development of thunder clouds, we don't necessarily get rain.



As a wet desert, we get about 6 inches of rain per year which typically falls on less than 20 separate days. However, the rainfall is not evenly distributed during the year:

- about half comes in the "winter": (Jan-Mar), tapering off to
- almost none in May/June
- and about half during the monsoon through early winter

Winter 2009-2010 has been a great rainy season: in January - March 2010 we had about 3.5 inches, more than in all of 2009 combined.

This has led to a remarkable wildflower season. Sonoran wildflowers typically bloom after the winter rains - no rain means no flowers.



In about 6 weeks, most of the "ground cover" will have gone to seed and will be dried up and brown. It will be invisible and look much more like what you would expect in a desert.

There are many varieties of cassia, not all of them native to the Sonoran desert. They are very prolific and explode in yellow blooms any time it rains, spring, summer, winter or fall. The heavy sweet smell quickly becomes cloying.

The bushes can be as much as six-eight feet in circumference. Cassias are legumes and produce a flat brown pod of seeds for each blossom. The bushes are so heavily laden that they droop - and if it rains again, there can be blooms and pods on the same plant.



Brittlebrush is characterized by the fuzzy gray leaves and the sunflower-like blossoms, which are held on stalks 8 to 12 inches from the body and leaves of the plant. There are several varieties and several lookalikes of

different varieties. It is hard to tell them apart unless there are two together.

In the picture below are probably notch-leaved Phacelia (and no, I can't pronounce that). The interesting thing about most of the actual wildflowers is the enormous range of sizes in almost all varieties. You will see be a single stem four inches high with one bloom where there was just a little water. A few feet further on, where there was more



water, the same plant will form a dense mound 12 to 18 inches high covered in blooms.

I discovered that it's very hard to get an idiot camera ("point and shoot") to focus on very small flowers.

These narrow-leaved popcorn flowers aren't really out of focus: the plants are only four or so inches tall, covered with bristly hairs so they look misty. The blossoms are tiny white tubes the size of grains of rice - before cooking. They look blurry with your bare eyes.

If you brush past these, they are prickly on your skin: luckily they're so small that you nearly have to be barefoot (or taking pictures) to touch one.



These orange fiddlenecks are again very small: each tiny bell is about a quarter of an inch: the stem grows in a curved arch with flowers upright

all along the bow. Again, you can see a single-stemmed plant of six inches or a mound up to 18 inches with dozens of plants.



One odd thing is that with all the flowers, I saw relatively few bees. There were one or two everywhere but I guess with so much to choose from, no real gathering.

The preserve system, which is part of the Phoenix Parks

and Recreation department, offers a very different experience than the duck ponds, grass, and benches kind of park. (We do have those, too, of course.) There are a variety of preserves, including South Mountain Preserve, which is widely reported to be North America's largest municipal park. The National Trail Trek is an annual hike the length of South Mountain is 15.5 miles, 1250 vertical feet and about 6 to 7 hours long (for me anyway).

You will find the occasional bench in the preserve: and many of them have interesting, cryptic, or just plain mysterious plaques on them. I'm

quite certain that the George M. Cohen mentioned below is not the Yankee Doodle Dandy (that's a Cohan, anyway!)



(Nancy Weaver Cohen: My Hiker Girl - A ray of sunshine / A breath of fresh air. / A healthy mind and body, / Always a comfort. / Always my companion, / Always my love. - George M. Cohen)

On the next page, you will see a picture of the "back" or north-facing side of Piestawa Peak - which was named in honor of Lori Piestawa. The previous name, "Squaw Peak" had been controversial for some time as being offensive. There wasn't really a good alternative until Pfc. Piestawa's capture and death as the "first Native American woman to die in combat on foreign soil". They had to keep adding clauses on to eliminate all the Native American women who died in various wars on this continent.

Most people don't see this side, which is only visible from the trail.

The new name quickly became controversial, too, as United States Geological Survey rules state that the honoree must have been deceased for at least five years.

The city voted to change the name immediately but the USGS did not consider and approve the change until 2008.



This is likely to be a Mexican Golden Poppy as the deeper orange California Poppy is not really native to this area. Both varieties grow freely without additional water. You really have

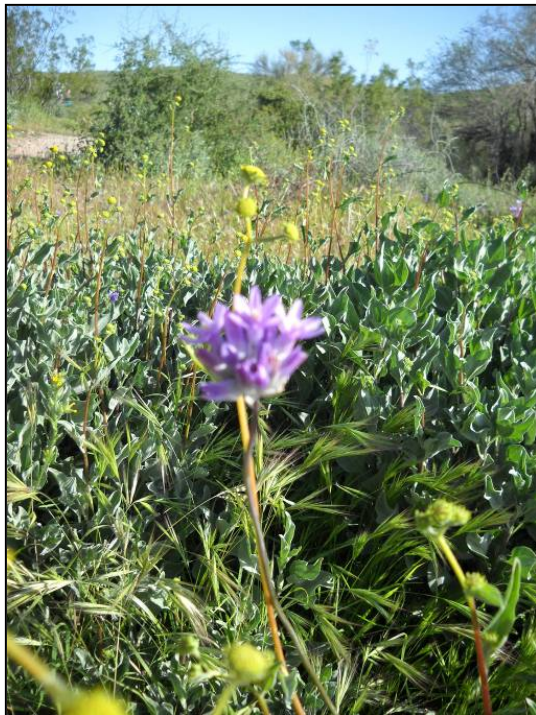
to wonder where the wildflowers come from: when the winter is dry, there are few wildflowers and some varieties seem to be entirely absent. However, after a winter like 2010, they arrive in great drifts in

undisturbed land. This clump of poppies has a lupine protruding right through.



I have never seen Pink Fairy Duster in the wild before: I have several in my yard where they are loved by butterflies and hummingbirds. This is in the McDowell Mountains Regional Park, an area which

is about fifteen miles east of my home and the Phoenix Mountains Preserve.



This entire area burned in the Rio fire about fifteen years ago: Its still all open ground with no large cacti, mesquite, creosote, or palo verde, but a wide variety of smaller plants.

On the left, I think, are Bluedicks - its almost impossible to get a picture of the whole plant because of the 12 to 18 inch stem over a relatively small plant. They are actually bulbs like lilies and tulips.

This is a "Desert Wishbone Bush" - I have seen them over the years but never knew the name - how odd. This lovely plant is entangled in a Triangle Bur Ragweed.



The Triangle Bur Ragweed - very prolific, very allergenic - and on top of everything, it gets "stickers" (the bur) after it blooms. Get these in your bootlaces - yuck! This single plant is enough to keep you sneezing for a month.





We don't typically get vast fields of wildflowers except where they've been seeded. This one is probably a result of the Rio fire.

Here is a better look at a single Desert Lupine plant. It has the seven fingered leaves and deep blue bloom held on an upright stalk. It's all just a little "skinnier" than its plumper cousins, including the Texas Bluebonnet.

On the next page is the famous Saguaro (sa-wha-ro) cactus, native only to the Sonoran desert. These plants can live up to 150 years, and reach heights of 45-50 feet. A cactus that big will weigh up to ten tons - most of it water.



Saguaro live in a very specific range: on some hillsides, you can see a "saguaro-line", where the cacti grow above the line and not below it. The water released when a saguaro dies is a significant bonanza to animals and other plants living in the desert.

This fellow on the right is probably about 100 - 125 years old as they only develop arms after about 75 years.

A fallen cactus (below) acts as a nursery for other plants and a home for animals.



The Ocotillo lives in the southwestern deserts, the Sonoran, Mojave, and Chihuahuan. The name reflects its multiple arms, resembling an octopus.



This is not a true cactus at all and doesn't have the dense flesh that stores water against drought. In dry conditions, the ocotillo drops its small leaves and turns brown. As soon as it rains - every time it rains - this messy collection of dry brown

sticks produces green leaves and deep orange flowers at the tip of the multiple branches. The brittle arms of a dry ocotillo do break off easily. However, if you put that dried stick in soil and water it a bit, it will come back to life. You can see living fences constructed in this manner.

On the right is one of the many varieties of cholla (cho-ya), covered in dense spines. This one is called "teddy bear" because of its prickly coat: Note the many broken off bits on the ground: while cholla do bloom, they also propagate when the pieces root in the ground where they fall.



I have a 20-year-old "volunteer" chain fruit cholla in my front yard: a piece from a neighbor's plant broke off and blew across the street in a storm.



This is called jumping cholla because its spines are so long and so fine that you can brush against them even when you think you're far enough away.

Thank you for visiting my

home! To learn more, go to [phoenix.gov/parks](http://phoenix.gov/parks) or [desertmuseum.org](http://desertmuseum.org).

