

Native Plant Society of Texas
Big Bend Chapter
March 2007 newsletter

All Aboard for the O2 -

The O2 is one of the legendary ranches of the Big Bend, and our March 24 meeting/field trip will join Dr. Bonnie Warnock, Sul Ross faculty member and natural resources specialist and several of her graduate students at their restoration projects of Duff Creek: vegetation management and its effects on watershed hydrology and riparian health. We'll look at non-native species control, herbicide treatment, prescribed burning, hydrology, drainage profiling, spring discharge, water quality, native species re-introduction, erosion control, and restoration in arid environments - with some time to enjoy the scenery and watch birds along the all-weather creek.

Natural Resource Management graduate students will be available to discuss their particular restoration projects on the O2 and students from the Department of Earth and Physical Sciences will be available to discuss their hydrology work on the property.

This is a mildly strenuous, "roughing-it" field trip, and we are *limited to 20 participants*.

Participants are asked to meet at the Turner Range and Animal Science Center at Sul Ross State University at **8am**. We will carpool from there. High clearance and/or 4-wheel drive is necessary on the ranch roads. The O2 gate is 35 miles south of Alpine on Hwy. 118. We will arrive at the gate at 8:45 a.m. If you are coming from the south and want to meet us at the gate, please be there by 8:45. It will take us 30 min from the gate to reach the Duff Creek restoration site for a walking tour of the watershed and projects. We will leave the site at 12:30 and be **back in Alpine by 1:45**. Binoculars, hats, cameras, waterproof boots, water and lunch are suggested.

Please call One Way Plant Nursery, 432.837.1117 to make reservations.

From Restoration to Conservation -

Here comes La Entrada, and unless we do something to allay the traffic it will create, there goes the Big Bend as we know it. Please plan to attend an important meeting from 6 to 8 p.m. March 13 at the Alpine High School, Loop Road and 5th St.. This is one of a series of similar meetings being held all over the region. Unhappily, most people in the region - Presidio, Ft. Stockton, Midland/Odessa - are pleased as punch to have the additional revenue, jobs and federal money that this project will bring. Only we, the few in the Tri-County High Country, are in opposition.

This is truly a David and Goliath fight to keep our air clean, our skies dark, our towns small friendly and quiet.

The alternative, that could satisfy all sides, is the use of the train to protect our native vegetation, habitats, plants and animals while allowing those who need them to have the revenue, jobs and federal money they want.

Please attend this meeting. I have attached a full page of details. If you cannot open the attachment but want to read more, please e-mail me and I will send you the text in an e-mail.

Opportunity Knocks -

There is still time to become part of the Alpine Sustainability Project - even if you don't live in Alpine. See their Web site www.alpineproject.org

Also The Small Business Development Center now offers free online learning for small businesses. Topics cover business plans, maintaining finances, starting a business, and creating a web presence. The direct link to the on-line training is <http://utsa.edu/sbdcregional/regmodules.cfm>.

CDRI Cactus Festival March 17-24 with ace botanist Jackie Poole. For details see their Web site: www.CDRI.org

Spring is Around the Corner -

One Way receives its first shipment from Mountain States next week. Be the first on your block to stock up on penstemons, nolina, rhus and quercus.

Wildflowers Down South -

This just in from another ace botanist - this time Joe Sirotnak, biologist for BBNP:

March has come in like a lamb. The snowy cold and sleety days of January are long gone, and in their place are warm clear days, cool starry nights, and a fragrant hint of mustard flower on the spring breeze. If not for those few wintry weeks in January, in which the park received 2+ inches of mostly frozen precipitation, this 2007 spring wildflower update might have been much very brief.

Although the 2007 spring wildflower season is not likely to overwhelm any long time Big Bend visitors, several species are currently in full bloom, with several species in bud and looking green and healthy. Because of the cold weather, the flowering season is developing more slowly than usual and several species are well behind their long-term average appearance time. The good news is that we should have good, though probably not extensive, flower displays into April.

The best stands of Big Bend bluebonnet are along the road to RGV around the Tornillo Creek bridge. The west side of the park has fewer bluebonnets, but sources tell me that they are abundant in Big Bend Ranch State Park. Below 2500 feet, bi-colored mustard (also called mesa greggia) is abundant on the east side and occasional on the west side. The common name "bi-colored" refers to the flowers that start off white, but turn pink after a few days. Many Torrey yucca flowers are appearing throughout the park, with the highest density being around Castolon and the Mule Ears Spring trail. A few lechuguilla stalks are coming up south of the Chisos Mountains. The pungent and musty foliage and varicolored flowers of sandbell (nama) are common in clay hills at lower elevations, especially East River Road. Although not showy, several species of annual plantain are adding to the spring green throughout the park.

Other less common wildflowers in bloom include the yellow two-leafed senna, several species of nightshade, including the beautiful purple ground cherry (Mule Ears to Castolon), trailing four-o'clock, and yellow composites such as yerba raton and dogweed. A few brilliant yellow rock nettles can be seen in shady places below 3000 feet, e.g. Tuff Canyon.

Big Bend is home to dozens of flowering shrub species. Most of these haven't started flowering yet, but a few are off and running. The petal-less flowers of desert olive have appeared and are covered with native pollinators and honeybees. Feather dalea and the underappreciated and much maligned creosote bush are blooming parkwide.

Once again, however, the stars of this years spring bloom will be the cacti (or cactuses, either word is accepted), of which 52 taxa (44 species) are found within the park. Tiny golf ball mammillaria can be found around limestone bedrock and Warnock's cactus is in bloom everywhere below 3000 feet. Brown-flowered hedgehog are starting to bloom as high as 3800 feet, although the common name "brown-flowered" belies the beauty variety of color in these diminutive flowers, which might be called "coffee to brick burgundy" if they were colors in a clothing catalog. Rainbow cactus is in bud, with some individuals ready to produce five or more large yellow (sometimes peach-colored) flowers per stem.

The first prickly pear flowers should be here any day. Many species are loaded with buds. Low-elevation and limestone species like blind and spiny-fruited prickly pear will star, followed by purple and brown-spined varieties, and finally Engelmann's and Chisos prickly pears, blooming as late as May and June.

Above 3500 feet, spring is lagging a bit. But we should start seeing flowers in the Chisos foothills by mid-March. February was typically dry, and March is historically the driest month of the year, so flower shows at these elevations might be sparse until the rainy season. Many of our typical late spring perennial wildflowers in the mid elevations (e.g. thread-leaf groundsel, paperflower) are not even greening up yet. Unless we get a little rain and the weather stays warm, don't expect to see much in the Basin or the high Chisos until May or June.