

## River CleanUp: 2010





DJ and I canoed together years ago in Big Bend National Park and when the opportunity to participate in the river clean up was announced we thought of each other. A quick exchange of emails and we planned our clean up trip

The day had dawned cold, 38°F in Shafter. We sat around waiting for the sun to warm the desert. It took awhile. We journeyed to Lajitas and had lunch and headed over to the Warnock Center to find out which part of the river had the least number of people working on it. We headed back toward Presidio, unloading the canoe at La Cuesta in order to collect trash below the Big Hill and downriver to Lower Madera. The first few hundred feet revealed little in the way of trash, just the occasional orange or pink engineering tape of abandoned trot lines. We weaved our way through a tight rapid created by rocks and the low water level. At first glance we thought we would take the left channel but quickly realized it was blocked by a sunken log. A quick adjustment and we ran the middle channel with no problem.

We slowly eased into the shade of the Big Hill and Santana Mesa, a steep-walled igneous intrusion that created the Big Hill. Prior to the creation of Texas Ranch Road 170 in the 1950s, people on the east side of the hill were separated from folks on the west side by the incredible ruggedness caused by the numerous drainages as well as the huge boulders that regularly rolled down from the igneous mountains. That ruggedness apparent from the highway is not present on the river where the smoothed canyon walls make for easy canoeing. We stopped at several points to pick up trash: plastic water bottles, lost sandals and shoes, plastic jugs, and the ubiquitous engineering tape. Except for the engineering tape, everything appeared to have come in with river water. One of

the plastic jugs had the hand-written inscription, "c com" but no other markings. The sandals were child size and totally devoid of any marks thanks to the action of the river. One of the shoes, also a child's size, was marked with "Hanes Sporty". At one site we picked up the tattered label to a Nestle brand water bottle and then we picked up what appeared to be a Nestle brand water bottle much further down the river.

Birds were present, most calling from the reeds. Black Phoebes and Water Pipets were close enough to the water to see clearly. An American Coot scurried around on the river looking for food and totally unconcerned with our presence. In the mud along the banks we saw the footprints of a Great Blue Heron but neither saw nor heard the actual bird.

While looking for trash we also watched the insects and turtles, lots of turtles. Most of the turtles we encountered were the sliders (named after their quick escape from potential problems by "sliding" off their sunning rocks and into the protection of the water). Decades ago Dr. Jim Scudday from Sul Ross and others under his direction did a vertebrate study of Colorado Canyon including the area of the Big Hill, identifying those turtles caught or observed during the study. for the University of Texas, Lyndon Johnson School of Public Affairs. During that study they identified only four turtle species: Mexican Mud Turtle, Yellow Mud Turtle, Big Bend Slider, and the Spiny Softshell. On this trip, more than 30 years later, we saw mostly sliders (one Spiny Softshell), of which there are two common species in Texas, the Red-eared Slider and the Big Bend Slider, both classified as *Chrysemys scripta* but being different subspecies. The Red-eared Slider has a reddish patch behind its eye that is usually in the form of a stripe while the Big Bend Slider has an orangy-yellowish patch behind its eye, usually bordered in black.

As for insects, many tiny insects were in the cane and then on us as we canoed under the cane to collect trash. Although tiny, their movement on the skin created an itching sensation dispelled only by crushing the insect. We also saw butterflies from a distance, numerous sulfurs and the occasional Monarchs, or were they?. Pictures reveal the truth. After much studying, the picture was of a Queen, another of the milkweed butterflies (that includes Monarchs). The main difference between the Queen and the Monarch is in the white spots seen in the orange area of the wings. Queens have that, monarchs do not. The range of the Monarch does not usually extend this far west, but ranges have a way of changing and winds can certainly blow butterflies into other areas.

As we were working the banks of the river for trash we heard an occasional car drive up the Big Hill and, when we bothered to look up, we could see people above us enjoying their day along the river. We smiled, thinking how much we were enjoying our day on the river. Too soon our trip ended. . While we prepared

to load the canoe in the truck after the cleanup we looked at each other and said, why hadn't we done this more often?

**POSTED BY Patt Sims - November, 2010**