

Fools, Yankees, and Mesquites



I mentioned fools and Yankees trying to predict the weather in the Chihuahuan Desert in an earlier blog but the more I think about it the less I believe it is a Yankee or a fool's mission. I think it is human to try to predict and prepare for what is coming as far as weather is concerned. There is another saying in this part of Texas: "if you don't like the weather, wait a few minutes and it will change". Nobody ever seems to remember that in those few minutes, the weather can ruin you, destroy your crops, kill your stock and wreck your house. Oh yes it can...I've seen it done. But mostly we just try to get through the bad weather, particularly the weather that is too cold.

If you look into local lore you will find there are lots of sayings that try to describe when freezing weather ends.

As for spring with its warm, almost hot days, clear skies, high winds, does that mean spring in the Big Bend of the Chihuahuan Desert? I was preparing for a camping trip with students from Presidio High School. We would be doing water quality tests over a 24 hour period during the weekend. As I thought about spring-like temperatures. I didn't even look at my down sleeping bag. I mean, the warm weather is certainly a harbinger of spring. As I left the house I noticed the signs of spring. Cactus wrens, cardinals, canyon wrens and doves were all calling. Yes, that is a sign of spring. As I drove along the river I saw a few wildflowers, recovering as they were from the hard winter. A few mustards dotted the road side, along with a few bluebonnets and even fewer desert marigolds. These plants do not indicate seasons, merely conditions. Considered

ephemerals by botanists, these plants germinate after summer rains but don't bloom until late fall and into winter. Their blossoms have more to do with the length of day and summer rainfall than with seasons of the year.

One plant, the mesquite, is used throughout the Big Bend country as an indicator of spring. "When the mesquite leafs out", the saying goes, "no more freezing weather". As we stopped at the Colorado Put-In along the river to do water quality testing, I searched for new leaves on the mesquites. Yes! There they were. Almost lime-green in color, these leaves were definitely brand new to the plant. A closer look showed that flower buds were also emerging from the tree. Great, no more cold weather! That is, if you believe in folk tales.

Buzzards know when the danger of frost is over, according to other folk tales. They never come back to the Big Bend before the last freeze according to my neighbors. I watched the sky as I drove along the river. Ravens, lots of ravens were visible. They live here in the winter, filling in for the buzzards as carrion eaters. Lots of hawks were visible, too. Possibly many of them were migrating north. I saw pyrrhuloxias and wrens, one kingfisher and lots of sparrows, but no turkey vultures. A few people had reported seeing buzzards during the back yard bird count in Presidio but they didn't know that we have black vultures as residents throughout the year. Only the turkey vulture, noted for its red head, counts as an indicator of spring. But turkey vultures seem to be more keyed to the calendar. For years the first turkey vultures would arrive in Shafter on March 10th, long before the dangers of freezing weather have passed.

Friday night we had dinner around the camp fire and as the students talked I looked around at the different plants. Bees were busy gathering pollen from an ash tree while, birds were busy gathering bees. But ash trees are not mentioned in folk tales, neither are the bees. As darkness fell so did the temperature. I snuggled down into my bedroll, hoping it wouldn't get too cold.

Usually cold fronts are heralded by a line of clouds in the north. As I looked out at the clear sky I saw no bank of clouds to the north. Every cold front this year has been preceded by an unseasonably warm spell, like we had just had. Why should this one be any different? By morning the temperature was at 32 degrees Fahrenheit. I was curled in a little ball, trying to stay warm until the sun appeared. As I emerged from my tent into the warmth giving sunlight I saw that I was camped near a mesquite with new leaves. So much for folktales!

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