

From the River Road



It has taken me a little time to get back to the blog but I have been on the River Road (Ranch Road 170 east from Presidio) each week to monitor the progress of wildflowers. As already written, the blue bonnets, the desert marigolds, the tree tobacco, and many other plants seemed to be obliterated by the extreme cold (extreme by Big Bend standards that is). I am monitoring two spots: the top of the Big Hill (Santana Mesa) and the Colorado Canyon put-in, both of which suffered from the extreme cold.

Two weeks after the extreme weather there were no plants blooming at either location. The blue bonnets I had photographed before the freeze looked dead. The desert marigolds looked like they had a chance to come back to life but were definitely hurt by the cold. Tree tobacco varied in degree of damage: if the tree was close to the river, the blooms were gone and some of the leaves were brown but the plants looked like they would survive. The further from the river the “tree” was, the more severe the damage, to the point that many looked dead down to ground level.

Three weeks after the extreme weather new plants were beginning to bloom, including new blue bonnets, new desert marigolds, and bicolored mustards.

Although there was color these plants were not blooming on top of the Big Hill. It appears that those blue bonnets that bloomed early were killed by the cold, as were the desert marigolds. But those plants that had not yet bloomed are now blooming, not many but some. Most of the blue bonnets appear to be much smaller than normal for this area. In this part of Texas we have a larger blue bonnet with a deeper blue color: *Lupinus havardii*. These are a different species from those in central Texas that are smaller and a lighter blue (*Lupinus texensis*). Another sad thing to report about the area the Big Hill, it seems the cactus were also badly hurt by the cold. Many had turned a much paler color and had collapsed to the ground. The cold weather combined with the extreme aridity (no rain since October) probably acted together to do the damage. As for the exotic cactus that people had planted around their buildings, many of them have been destroyed by the cold, too.

As for other organisms at these sites: the Big Bend sliders appear unhurt by the cold, they were out sunning on all the rocks. The Bewick's wrens that I heard before the freeze were active at both sites and there were insects to chase, catch, and eat. In the river ring-necked ducks and American coots were paddling around.

The warmth of the last two weekends makes me think that winter is gone and we can celebrate an early spring but then I remember something I heard when I first came to Texas many, many decades ago: only fools and Yankees predict the weather. Point taken.

POSTED BY Patt Sims - February, 2011