

## The River Road in Winter







It was January 30th, less than 9 days ago, when my husband and I drove along the River Road (Ranch Road 170) to see what spring wildflowers were already blooming. The temperature was 68°F when we stopped at Colorado Canyon Put-In (which I still call Rancherias). Tree tobacco, a member of family Solanaceae, was in full bloom as was Shaggy False-Nightshade. Rio Grande Sliders (the most common type of turtle in the area) were basking on a dozen large rocks sticking out of the water. Black Phoebes, Bewick's Wrens, Say's Phoebes, Pyrrhuloxia, and Northern Rough Wing Swallows were busy looking for bugs. I was wearing shorts, a short-sleeved shirt and a cap to keep the sun out of my eyes.

We drove to the top of Big Hill to see what else was blooming: bluebonnets, Havard Nama, desert marigolds and several other members of the sunflower family (Asteraceae), brightened the dusty ground at the top of the hill. Honeybees scoured the bluebonnets looking for drink of nectar, soldier beetles worked many of the sunflowers and a bright green bee cruised desert marigold blooms. The sun was warm the sky was blue the mountains were red. It was a spectacular day.

What a difference 8 days makes. We returned to Rancherias and the Big Hill today, February 7th. This time I wore a quilted undershirt, canvas over shirt, jeans, a vest, and wool socks. A jacket was tossed in the back seat, just in case.

This time we saw nothing blooming. When I got out of the car at Rancherias the temperature was 52°F, not cold but I was not uncomfortable in my layers. The tree tobacco had dark brown remains of flowers and lots of dead leaves, the nightshade had curled up into almost nothing and was difficult to find. Two turtles

were all that were seen on the rocks, not the dozen of the 30th. Amazingly, the bird life seemed completely unaffected, the same species were there and they were actively searching for insects but try as I did, I never saw an insect for them to catch.

We drove on up the Big Hill, where we had seen beautiful flowers on the 30th. The bluebonnets had keeled over and looked dead. The desert marigold was definitely frostbitten as was one clump of nama. We couldn't even find the remains of the other flowers.

The highway department was working on removing an incredibly large rock from the side of the road near the top of the hill and I talked with one of the crew. "How cold do you think it got here last week?" I asked. He reported that they had measured the temperature at 6°F on Thursday morning.

So spring will be delayed a little this year. I really do not know how such low temperatures will affect the plants. I have seen lower temperatures but that was at a time when I couldn't afford to go driving down Ranch Road 170 twice in 8 days. I was too busy doing other things (like working). Now I have some time so I will check on the plants once a week and keep you posted on what happens.

**POSTED BY Patt Sims - February, 2011**