

UP AND UP SOME MORE TO THE HINCKLEYS!



Some of our master naturalists had a memorable time at Big Bend Ranch State Park last weekend. We were there to help Dr. Martin Terry in his quest (as a botany professor at Sul Ross) to find and advance the understanding of the rare and remote Hinckley oaks.

The first of these types of oaks were discovered by L.C. Hinckley back in the 1940s. He was also a botanist at Sul Ross and, in recognition of his discovery, the plant was named after him. The plants he discovered were in the Solitario area of what is now Big Bend Ranch State Park and were growing in an area of rugged canyons and high ridges where hiking carried many risks. In the intervening years few people knew where the plants were or even if any were still alive.

What had happened to that isolated population? Were the plants still there? Have they expanded their range? Did they hybridize with other oaks in the

area? No one knew. This led to Dr. Terry requesting help from the Tierra Grande master naturalists to find the plants in the Solitario and we rose to the occasion (quite literally). But first things first. What is a Hinckley oak? It is an amazingly diminutive oak, rarely exceeding a meter in height (as in the upper picture). It is thickly branched and has spinescent leaves that are remarkable in their prickliness (check the spines in the bottom picture). These oaks have been in the southern part of the Big Bend area for at least 15 000 years (they were found in pack rat middens dating back that far).

Nine Tierra Grande master naturalists plus Dr. Terry and his intern Molly K met last Friday night at Big Bend Ranch State Park and organized a search for the oaks. We looked at maps and some pictures of the topography of where we would be searching but, for some unknown reason, I really did not think the terrain could be that rugged. I don't think anyone else thought it either. But we would realize it on Saturday after a 4x4 drive to the base of an area marked as the Righthand Shut Up on the map.

The morning was overcast and wonderfully cool as we parked the vehicles at the base of the mountains. Dr. Terry pointed out the top most ridge and said we should find oaks just below that area. Although we were divided into 3 groups we started off together, hiking over a low ridge and along a steep trail before skirting along another very steep hill. It was on that hill that I fell and thought I would be heading the 30 or so feet to the bottom. But I managed to stop myself and Dr. Terry had managed to grab my pack before I went very far. Thank-goodness, I didn't think I would be able to climb back up that hill because of the loose dirt and rocks (which had caused my fall in the first place). We continued upward then down and then up some more and then a little bit down before finally heading up the final face of rock.

Part of the problem of climbing that hill were the wildflowers that were blooming. There were too many blossoms to just climb on...these plants were posing for their pictures to be taken and I could not ignore that. In addition to the flowers being beautiful, it was an unusual time for many to be blooming. Candelilla was flowering months after it should have been blooming and, in addition, their flowers were about half the size they should normally have been. Indian paintbrush, a late winter/early spring blooming plant was in bloom, Was all this in response to the drought and the late rains? Or was it normal on this slope? No one knew.

In spite of all the flowers of the different plants, we found our first oaks at around four thousand feet. My group gathered and followed one drainage to the top of a ridge (the ridge top was right at 4700 feet) while the two other groups headed up different areas. We found over 30 oaks growing between 4000 feet and 4400

feet. It was a good sign. The oaks looked healthy and we even found some acorns indicating that they were probably reproducing. In addition to finding the oaks, we took data on their exact location and elevation and collected a few leaves from each plant for genetic analysis.

It was around two in the afternoon when my group stopped for lunch and contemplated the way back down. None of us thought we could safely descend the same way we had come up, it was just too steep. We looked for alternate routes but were stymied by the fact that we had no clear view of the rocks below us. Finally, we met up with part of another group and worked out what we hoped was an alternate plan to get us safely back to the waiting trucks and so the descent began.

I discovered many years ago that although going uphill required more energy, going downhill was worse on joints and leg muscles and going down these "hills" was a nightmare because of the loose rock and the steepness. There were places so steep that the only way to go was on your hands and feet, scooting your butt just above the rock. I actually managed this quite well, raising my butt off the rock and clambering down slowly, avoiding lecheguilla and cactus. Everyone in the group was "vaccinated" by weapons of different desert plants. My exposed lower arms were crisscrossed with bloodied scratches from numerous ocotillo.

The sun came out about half way down the slope and while I reveled in its appearance I also thought about rattlesnakes. Sure enough, after about thirty minutes of sunshine and warmth I heard a faint sound in an evergreen sumac and could just make out a small diamondback coiled around the base of the plant. The sound I had heard was the rubbing of its scales together as it loosened its coils, it was still too cool to even think about rattling and it was far enough into the bush to not want to strike at a passing hiker.

We finally all made it back to the trucks, exhausted, bloodied to some extent, and hurting just about everywhere. But we had quite a sense of accomplishment. We had climbed the steep hillsides and found the Hinckley oaks and we found them in abundance. It was a very good sign for our drought blasted desert environment. The ancient Hinckleys look as if they will be around for many more years.

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