The Tucson Mountain Section

The dense forest of vigorous young saguaros growing in the Tucson Mountain Section presents a striking contrast to the dwindling population of old giants in the original section of the monument. In addition to the impressive saguaro forest, several plants and animals common only to the western parts of the Sonoran Desert can be seen here. These include the desert ironwood, desert horned lizard, and small sidewinder rattlesnake.

You may easily reach the Tucson Mountain Section westward from Tucson via Speedway Boulevard and Gates Pass Road. And on the way you may wish to visit the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, a fascinating presentation of living plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert.

Within the 15,500-acre Tucson Mountain Section, well-maintained dirt roads lead to hiking trails, scenic overlooks, and other points of interest. There are four picnic areas, with tables, shelters, and restrooms, but water and firewood are not available.

Administration

Saguaro National Monument, established on March 1, 1933, and containing 78,644 acres in two sections, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

A superintendent, whose address is Box 17210, Tucson, Ariz. 85710, is in immediate charge of the monument.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.
What to Do and See at the Monument

First, stop at the visitor center, where you will see exhibits explaining how the land acquired its profile and how the rocks and soil that make up the face of the land were formed. Other exhibits relate the story of man in the region, describe the desert's plants and animals, and tell the story of the saguaros.

Next, step outside the visitor center and look around you. In the foreground, you will see the spread of the Tanque Verdes, with a fringe of scattered saguaros on their lower slopes. Beyond these the Rincons lift their forested ridges high above the desert. Studying the desert are thousands of stately saguaros, with lesser desert plants growing at their feet.

Beyond the desert flatlands rise the mountains: first the Tarpeke Verdes, with a fringe of scattered saguaros on their lower slopes. Beyond these the Rincons lift their forested ridges high above the desert. Immediately before you is a 9-mile loop road through the saguaros of the flatlands, the Cactus Forest. Along this road are pullouts, where you can leave your car or gasoline in either of the two sections of the monument.

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The saguaro of the Sonoran Desert is a remarkable plant. It survives and grows to tremendous size against what appear to be great odds—heat, scarcity of water, disease, and the many animals that feed upon its fruits and seeds. Yet these, as well as the coolness of a desert evening and the freshness of an occasional rain, are the world of the saguaro.

For a saguaro, life begins when one of the seeds, having escaped the many creatures that feed upon them, sprouts in the shade of another desert plant. Thus for the first years the plant may be hidden beneath the branches of a paloverde or mesquite. At 5 years, the saguaro is only a few inches tall; at 30 years, a few feet; at 75, it may reach 15 or 20 feet, and about this time develops its first blunt branch.

The saguaro's stem is composed of a skeleton of 12 to 30 slender vertical ribs that support a mass of spongy tissues. Following a soaking rain (general rains between December and March and local thunderstorms from July through September), the saguaro's shallow, widespread root system draws up immense quantities of water, which are absorbed by the spongelike tissues. A mature plant, weighing from 6 to 10 tons, may take up as much as a ton of water. During extended dry periods, the saguaro gradually uses its stored water, shrinking in girth and decreasing in weight.

In May and early June clusters of creamy-white flowers—the State Flower of Arizona—appear at the ends of the branches. These large, cup-shaped blossoms contain nectar which attracts the white-winged dove, longnose bat, as well as many insects. Thus, the fertility of the saguaro's seeds is insured: the dove's feathers, the bat's fur and whiskers, and the insects transfer pollen from flower to flower.

Many birds eat the fruits and seeds of the saguaro while they are still on the branches, but most animals must wait until the fruits ripen, burst, and fall. On the ground, they are eaten by coyotes, round-tailed ground squirrels, rock squirrels, and many other creatures. Occasionally, the fruits are eaten by larger animals—the mule deer, for example, or the peccary, the little wild pig of the desert.

In the Tucson Mountain section of the monument, Papago Indians still harvest the fruits of the saguaro, as they have done for countless generations. Some of the fruit they eat fresh; others they prepare into pressed, dried cakes, and syrup boiled from the juice. Park regulations prohibiting removal of fruit were relaxed so that the Papagos could continue their ancient custom.

Apartment house of the desert, the saguaro provides a living place for several species of birds. The Gila woodpecker and the gilded flicker drill nest holes in the fleshy stems. Sap oozes from the exposed tissue, and a lining soon forms on the wall of the deep pocket, sealing off the precious moisture.

After the Gila woodpeckers and the flickers have raised their young and flown away, other birds move in. Tiny, sparrow-sized elf owls, sparrow hawks, purple martins, and flycatchers make their homes in the abandoned pockets. Larger birds, such as red-tailed hawks and great horned owls, build their nests among the branches.

The saguaro sometimes reaches a height of 50 feet, with as many arms, and may live 200 years although most die earlier. With decay of the spongy tissues, their tunics sometimes graceful woody skeletons are left weathering in the dry desert air.