ROOT GORELICK

After a few wet years

in southern New Mexico

Living in southern New Mexico for five years (1994–1998) gave me the impression that this northern portion of the Chihuahuan Desert was strictly arid, and extremely so. Occasional heavy summer rains hardly made up for the other ten months without precipitation, although I did once see mud fall from the sky as a summer monsoon intersected a dust storm, leaving windshields and eyeglasses totally opaque and depositing an indescribable muck in your hair. Outside of riparian areas, the average woody vegetation, which is pretty much exclusively creosote (*Larrea tridentata*), grows to only one meter tall. On a clear day, you can see for a hundred kilometers in virtually any direction, so long as the mountains don't get in the way. I felt positively claustrophobic moving to the northern Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona, which has both summer and winter rains and a woody vegetation that averages two meters tall—simply too high for me to see over.

But recently southern New Mexico weathered two successive years of exceptional rainfall, and in mid-August 2007 I returned to see the results.

LEFT *Echinocereus viridiflorus* variety *cylindricus* **RIGHT** *Agave lechuguilla* infructescence
OPPOSITE *Dasylirion wheeleri* in full fruit

Opuntia oricola (?) and an oddly hairy opuntia seedling (inset).

Summer 2005 brought sufficient flooding along the Rio Grande, and FEMA trailers were still in Hatch two years later. But on my visit the ground was dry and the air was hot. Temperatures hovered around 35° C. I hike up to the saddle of a favorite haunt, Anthony Gap[1], just south of New Mexico state route 404 about 6 km east of Interstate 10, and stopped at a point less than a half kilometer north of the Texas state line.

The effects of the extra rains really showed. The ground was carpeted with *Epithelantha micromeris* seedlings, a species I had never seen there before (although this was certainly within its usual range). Some were in fruit, which seemed rather precocious. The plants were smaller than the *Coryphantha sneedii* I had seen here before, but those, too, had produced a healthy new crop of snow white heads, and both could now be found amongst stones of the same size and color as the plants. It quickly became impossible to walk without stepping on a few specimens of these two species.

In drier times I had found only one individual of *Glandulicactus wrightii* variety *uncinatus* at this locale—a gorgeous specimen completely enshrouded in long hooked, purple spines. But this time I found several smaller seedlings as well, with their slightly bluish epidermis readily visible through the spines. More common at the saddle, however, were *Coryphantha sneedii* and *C. tuberculosa*. *C. dasyacantha* and even a few seedlings of *Echinocereus coccineus* were

► continued on **page 33**

▼ *Epithelantha micromeris*

► **New Mexico** continued from **page 24**

▲ *Coryphantha tuberculosa*

present too. Ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) seedlings were extraordinarily green and fast-growing, and the lechuguillas (*Agave lechuguilla*) and sotols (*Dasylirion wheeleri*) were in full fruit. Another surprise was a hairy-spined seedling of a prickly pear, a character that is supposedly unique to *Opuntia engelmannii* and *O. polyacantha* of Trans-Pecos Texas[2]. Yet the adult prickly pears at this locale do not seem to be either of these species, but look to me rather like *O. oricola*.

The base of the trail was also delightful, with lots of reptiles, insects, and especially *Echinocactus horizonthalonius*, *Echinocereus dasyacanthus* and *E. viridiflorus* var. *cylindricus*. During dry times the latter always seemed to struggle here. But after two wet years, all of the specimens were a bit bloated and some of them comically tall.

References

1 Powell AM, Weedin JF. 2004. *Cacti of the Trans-Pecos and Adjacent Areas*. Texas Tech University Press: Lubbock. **2** Gorelick R. 2006. *Coryphantha dasyacantha* found in New Mexico… and the cacti at Anthony Gap. *Cact Succ J* (US) 78(4): 184–189.