

Mt Atascosa and on to San Diego, March 20- 29, 2016
Tim McNary

Like most road trips, this one started with a long day's drive; Fort Collins to Socorro, New Mexico. There had been a front range Colorado snowstorm a day or two before, but the snow had melted and the roads were clear. I made good time to Raton Pass, where one crosses from Colorado to New Mexico. On to Las Vegas, (that's New Mexico) and a little further to where route 3 heads south along the Pecos River. I had never been along this road and found the drive a wonderful surprise. Very winding and slow, the road passes through small towns that date back to Spanish settlement in the 1700's and before. An interesting mix of old adobe home and modern vacation homes. Occasionally there were adobe "beehive" ovens in the yards, which looked still very much in use! Eventually the road rises out of the river valley and crosses expanses of rangeland and junipers. I knew at some point, that I had to turn west and get back to Interstate 25. I kept looking and hoping for a gas station, but none of the little towns or cross roads had gas. So with fumes in the tank, I made it into Mountainview, NM, where there was an open gas pump. I'm in love with these modern gas pumps that accept credit cards, even when the pumps are unmanned with attendants. Leaving Mountainview, I saw smoke rising in the distance. Watching the smoke for quite a while, I made it to I-25 and headed south, still toward the smoke. A



ways north of Socorro, cars were stopped along the highway, watching the smoke, and from there, you could see the flames. Wanting to stop and take a couple photos from the highway didn't seem advisable, there was an exit ahead where I found a good spot to stop. Guess it was the best spot, as this ended up to be where the news station from Albuquerque was reporting from. The little I could figure was the Rio Grande Bosque (woods) had caught fire. The reporter said it was not a controlled burn, out of control.

Made it to Socorro for sunset! I did stop at a couple spots along the road in New Mexico to catch grasshoppers. As expected there were not many, but did catch a few *Arphia conspersa* and *Psoloessa delicatula*.

Got an early start the next morning and before getting too far, I stopped for gas in Magdalena, NM. I little step back in time, this gas station had an attendant, and only took cash. Magdalena ends up to be the terminal of the cattle/sheep drive that runs from Arizona to the rail head in Magdalena. The historic signs along the way says the stock drives lasted from the 1800s until the 1970s when trucks became a more economical way to transport livestock. Cattle, apparently, can go 10 miles a day and sheep five during a drive and the cattle drive took 15 days and sheep 30 days. BLM dug wells along the stocktrail in the 1930s and the well at Datil is now a National Monument. There is a campground there, but nothing else to see, not even a well! The morning was quite cool, freezing in fact, and the first place I stopped

was along the Tularosa River, east of Aragon, NM. Not really a river, and barely a creek, it did have water striders and riffle bugs to collect. The road follows the river through the pine forests and I entered Arizona on route 78. This is where one comes off the higher plateau of central New Mexico and northern Arizona. The road dives from the pine forests, down to the creosote and agave deserts grasslands over about 30 miles. I ended the day in Willcox, AZ.



Today was to be a short days drive from Willcox to Pena Blanca Lake campground. Along the way I visited with Christina Jewett, a fellow retiree from USDA-PPQ. We caught



up on a little reminiscing from our work at PPQ, but after a good cup of coffee, it was time to head off and get camp set up. The campground at Pena Blanca was very nice, the paved road up from Rio Rico ends here at the lake. I got camp set up, and it was time to go explore the lake. It was full of water for the first time in a while! Birds were returning from their winter in Mexico and further south. Saw a scarlet tanager. A “birder” later told me I was lucky to see one, as it was still early in the season. Collected a good series of pygmy grasshoppers (*Paratettix mexicana*) along the moist area of mud along the

shore.

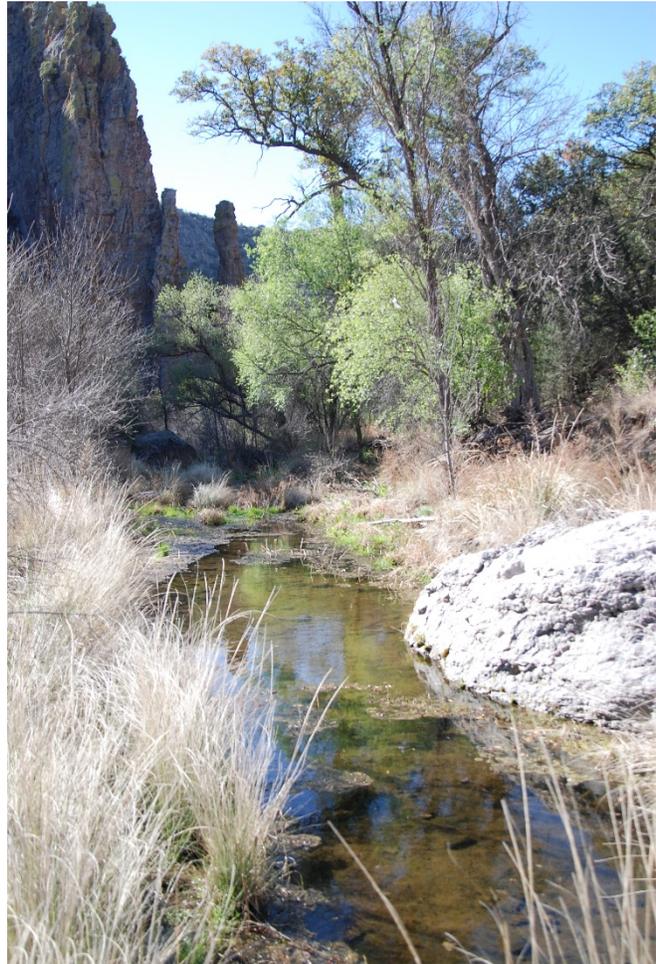
The next spot was Mount Atascosa Trail. I knew there wasn't time to climb to the top of Mt. Atascosa, but I was going to go as far as time allowed. Along the trail, I met a grandfather and his grandson as they came back down. They told me I was barely halfway up. I picked a saddle in the hills, not much further to call my destination. I hadn't seen but a couple grasshopper nymphs along the way, but coming down, caught two nice adult red-shanked grasshoppers (*Xanthippus corallipes*). When I got back to the trailhead, the grandfather and grandson were standing outside their pickup. Their keys were inside the truck. They had removed the radio antenna and pried a window open enough to try pushing on the lock button. The antenna was too flexible to get the door unlocked. My insect net hoop ended up doing



the trick, as it is a very stiff wire. The road from Pena Blanca Lake to Arivica is dirt, but in good condition. It is the main road along the border and is patrolled heavily by the US Border Patrol. From the tent, all night, the Patrol could be heard driving down the road. The best I could figure, during the night, they patrolled in pairs, with one pickup following the first, by about, 1 minute. Being tired, I slept well in the cool night air of the Arizona desert. It was a misnomer to call this desert, the mountain and hill near Mt. Atascosa were thick grasslands and oaks.

Wednesday morning, my 4th day on the road, I packed up camp quickly and headed for Sycamore Canyon. This is a famous spot for birds and birders, and I did get to see a brilliant red and green elegant trogon flying through the canyon treetops. Caught a good variety of diving beetles in the periodic pools of water along the canyon. The stream was flowing, but went underground along the way. Many of the pools were full of “minnows” and these were likely the Sonoran chub, an endangered species, known from only a few streams in this area. It was nice to see the fish doing well, but pools with fish, did not

have insects. I hiked downstream to an area where bedrock in Sycamore canyon forced all the water above ground. It became an actual flowing stream with small water falls over the slickrock of the canyon. While walking back up the canyon, I saw only a couple other people hiking. The country looks wild and isolated and a little preparation is important. The day was too cool for rattlesnakes and despite all the sign warning of smugglers, I never felt unsafe. The only snake I had seen was a rosy boa, sunning himself along the road. Leaving Sycamore Canyon, I made a quick stop at Lake Arivica. Lots of birders, caravans of birders...at the lake. I asked one couple out birding, where they were from and was told, they “are not from anywhere and are permanently on the road,” looking for birds. They were curious about my collecting insects, and told me they had ran into other insect collectors in the Chiricahua Mountains where they had “passed the last monsoon season.” Crossed the Tohono O’Odham Nation and on to Gila Bend for the night.



I had spent a month at Gila Bend in 1996, working on a project for an exotic disease of wheat (Karnal bunt). The fungus had just been found in the US for the first time. It ended up that it was soon found in New Mexico and Texas. It can still be found, but through maintaining clean seed and other techniques, the fungi has been eliminated from Texas and New Mexico, and can be found in very few fields in Arizona. Gila Bend is not much of a town, but has a “famous” motel, the Space Age Inn. That’s where I stayed in 1996, so that is where I stayed again.



Near Gila Bend is the Paint Rock Historic Site. Despite having spent a month in Gila Bend, I had never made it to Paint Rock, and decided it was time. It is worth the side trip off the interstate. I have never seen rocks so completely covered with pictographs and petroglyphs.

The trip between Gila Bend and Yuma is pretty much creosote bush desert. One highlight is Dateland, Arizona and I have never made it past, without stopping in for a “date shake.” Over the years they have changed from mixing each date shake individually, to a

large soft ice cream dispenser to pour the date shake into the cup, but still a very good treat to have in the middle of the desert. On to Yuma, and a quick trip below sea level as I-8 passes El Centro, California, over the hill (Laguna Mountains) and back down to sea level at San Diego, California.

I spent 4 days in San Diego with family, and I won't bore you with the details, but if you get to San Diego, go to Dos Palmas Café on Adams Ave for coffee and paninis. Say hi to Laura and Valentin, who run the café and also are my daughter and son-in-law. The only collecting I did in San Diego was one morning, hiking in the chaparral hills along the San Diego River. I had been searching for a grasshopper named *Dracotettix montrosus*, for a few years but had been looking in the wrong places in eastern San Diego



County. An entomologist had told me, I should be looking on the west side of the mountains in San Diego County. I finally found one! Well the truth is, I didn't find it, as I walked right over where it was sitting in the trail. My son spotted it and quickly asked “if this was a grasshopper?” It's now in the entomological museum collection at Colorado State University. They are not rare, just hard to find and

unusual in collections.

The way back to Fort Collins was a long two day drive. Tuesday morning, after loading up on coffee at Dos Palmas Café, headed up I-15 to Los Angeles, Las Vegas and to Saint George, Utah. The only significant stop was at Zzyzx Springs, near Baker, California. I like the name and have seen herds of desert bighorn sheep at the springs before. There were not any sheep there this time but a very large populations of a grasshopper (*Nebulatettix pallidus*) in the wet areas near the spring. The next day, I

drove 700 miles from Saint George to Fort Collins. Guess I was ready to get home after 11 days on the road!