

ON THE WICHITAS

The Quiet Thrill of the Wilderness



One of the joys of explorers down through history has been the special thrill of experiencing nature untouched by man. Fortunately, Congress has set aside wilderness areas throughout the country to try to preserve this experience. The goal of wilderness areas is to preserve land affected primarily by the forces of nature — with as little evidence of human impact as possible. On October 23, 1970, the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge had two areas designated as wilderness: North Mountains and Charons Garden. North Mountain is reserved for use by researchers, but Charons Garden affords you the opportunity for a quiet communion with nature seemingly undisturbed by man.

Actually, you can enjoy a whole range of activities at Charons Garden. You can picnic in the Sunset area adjacent to Charons Gardens. You can increase your knowledge of the refuge through a guided interpretive tour. On a daytime basis only, you can set off along down the Elk Mountain Trail and Wilderness Trail. Lastly you can obtain a permit to backpack through the wilderness area. In all these activities, we only ask that you help maintain the primitive conditions of the area for those who follow you.

Although the Wichita Mountains are not the oldest in the United States, they are far older than the Rocky Mountains or Black Hills. They were formed millions of years ago when the entire mountain range was uplifted from beneath the earth's surface by catastrophic internal forces. Since that upheaval, the rocks have been exposed to the power of inland seas and the constant grinding of winds and rain until today they are smoothed and rounded. The dominant outcropping rock you see here is granite. It is usually pink but may also occur in various shades of red and brown.

If you look closely at these rock outcrops, you will see they are not without life. Tiny plants — lichens — have a foothold on the rocks and change their pink cast to green, orange, yellow and chartreuse. Lichens secrete an acid which causes the rock surface to flake off. As the flakes accumulate, club moss begins to gain a roothold. This moss collects dust, eventually creating enough soil for pioneer grasses, brushy forbs, and trees — largely the cedar and blackjack oak.

As you observe this wilderness carefully, you may come to share these views of Terry and Renny Russell as described in *On the Loose*:

One of the best paying professions is getting ahold of a piece of country in your mind, learning its smell and its moods, sorting out the pieces of view, deciding what grows there and why, how many steps that hill will take, or which contour lines on a map mean better cliffs or mountains. This is the best kind of ownership, and the most permanent.

It feels good to say "I know Charons Garden." But of course you don't — what you do know better is yourself, and Charons Garden has helped.

Charons Garden and North Mountain were the first designated wilderness areas in Oklahoma.