

Prospector's Trail hike turns up treasures

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What better way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Wilderness Act than by hiking in Charon's Gardens Wilderness Area?

Some of the strangest spectacles on the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge can be found in this jagged, boulder-strewn jumble of peaks and valleys. If you're a novice hiker, you stand a much better chance of seeing them if you're in the company of folks who know all the landmarks like the backs of their hands.

You're in good hands when you're on one of the new Monday morning Mountain Boomer Hikes in the company of Bill Shahan, Randy Hale and Teddy Worthington. Shahan is a retired head of Cameron University's health and physical fitness department, Hale is an environmental educator for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and Worthington is an adjunct professor at Cameron who has been leading her students on refuge hikes for decades.

This particular hike is along "The Prospector's Trail," so called because it's where gold-seekers congregated in the early days of the 20th century. Thinking they were on a path to easy riches, they excavated wherever they saw quartz outcroppings. What little gold they found was not enough to justify all their labor, and eventually they gave up the search.

That they were ever permitted to dig here shows that the rules were far more lax in the days when this was the Wichita Forest Reserve. Things first began changing when President Theodore Roosevelt issued a proclamation on June 2, 1905, declaring this to be the Wichita National Forest and Game Preserve. Another milestone was reached on June 4, 1936, when this sanctuary was established as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Since then the refuge has become more oriented toward the preservation of wildlife and habitat.

The leaders of this hike show that it is possible to enjoy nature without damaging it. Every plant along the way has a story — sometimes more than one. Hold-



MITCH MEADOR/STAFF

A hoop that once held together the wooden staves of a barrel now hangs high in the limbs of this dead tree. It's one of the forgotten legacies of the old-time prospectors in the Wichita Mountains.



MITCH MEADOR/STAFF

Teddy Worthington, left, and Bill Shahan examine pieces of a stove that prospectors abandoned in the Wichita Mountains a century ago.

ing up a sprig of sedge, Hale poses the same question he does to the kids who come to the refuge: "What's unusual about this plant?" It's a guessing game that never grows old.

On a rest stop Joe Moore of Lawton tells a millipede joke, while others chime in with funny recollections from past hikes. Then the journey resumes as Hale shares with hiker Isaac Woelfel how a certain kind of wasp deposits its young on the leaves of post oaks in the form of orange balls of gall. Much later he'll introduce the group to a tiny black ant that when crushed smells like blue cheese.

About two miles in, the group encounters the remains of several pit mines dug more than a century ago. Strange sights abound here — the metal hoop from a long-decayed wooden barrel now hangs high in tree branches, a post oak has climbed skyward inside the hub of a wagon wheel, a cross has been attached to the base of a granite rock for reasons unknown and shards of an old stove and crockery are strewn not far away. The gold-seekers may not have found treasures, but they left some for later generations to ponder.

What Worthington tells her students is worth re-



MITCH MEADOR/STAFF

Bill Shahan holds up the metal rim of a buggy wheel that was left behind when gold-seekers abandoned the Wichita Mountains as a lost cause. A post oak that sprouted inside the wheel was about 3 feet tall when Shahan first noticed it in 1967, and it's grown to over 16 feet.

peating here: "Do not take that. Leave it for somebody else to enjoy."

And when you go on this hike — 4.2 miles round-trip, by Moore's pedometer — be sure to wear good, sturdy hiking shoes and carry at least 16 ounces of water for each hour you'll be on the trail. When your water is half-gone is a good time to turn back, Hale recommends.

Also, take along a high-energy snack, and wear a head covering and loose clothing.

Shahan maintains an impressive pace for a man of 82. He uses a walking stick he made himself, and says it not only helps him maintain balance going from rock to rock but also absorbs up to 30 percent of the energy expended hiking.

Hale and Moore use trekking poles to transfer the load from the hip and back to the arms, prevent falls and maybe even protect against chiggers by sweeping the grass ahead.

Charon's Gardens is one of two units that were coupled together to make up the Wichita Mountains Wilderness Area when it was designated by Congress on Oct. 23, 1970. The Charon's Gardens unit covers 5,723 acres and the North Mountain unit 2,847 acres. Together they comprise a wilderness area 8,570 acres in size.



MITCH MEADOR/STAFF

A bend in the trail from remnants of the gold miners is this plastic cross affixed to the base of a granite rock. Nobody knew it was there until the big fire of September 2011 burned out most of the vegetation in the area, and it's still a mystery who put it there and why.

means groups are limited to 15 in size.

Hale began the hike by sharing the four characteristics of a wilderness area as set forth in the Wilderness Act of 1964:

- It is untrammeled by man and generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable.

- It is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions.

- It is an area of undeveloped federal land without permanent improvements or human habitation and where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.

- It has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.

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LOCAL

Trail yields treasures



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