

Saguaro

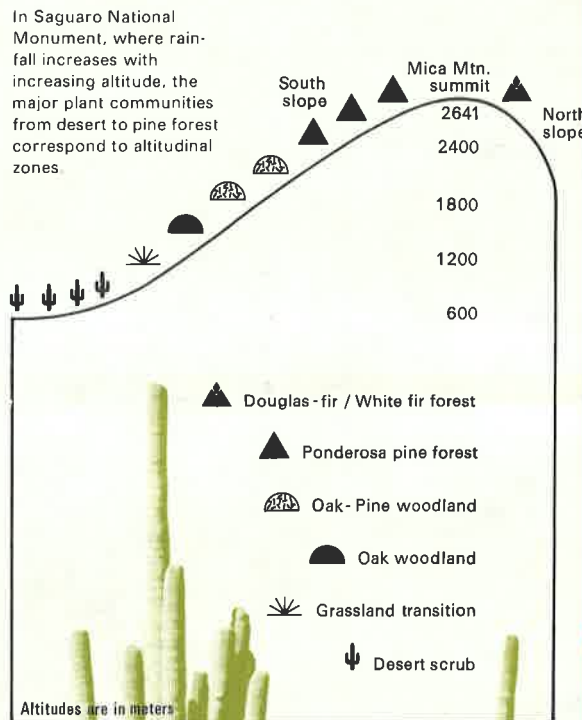
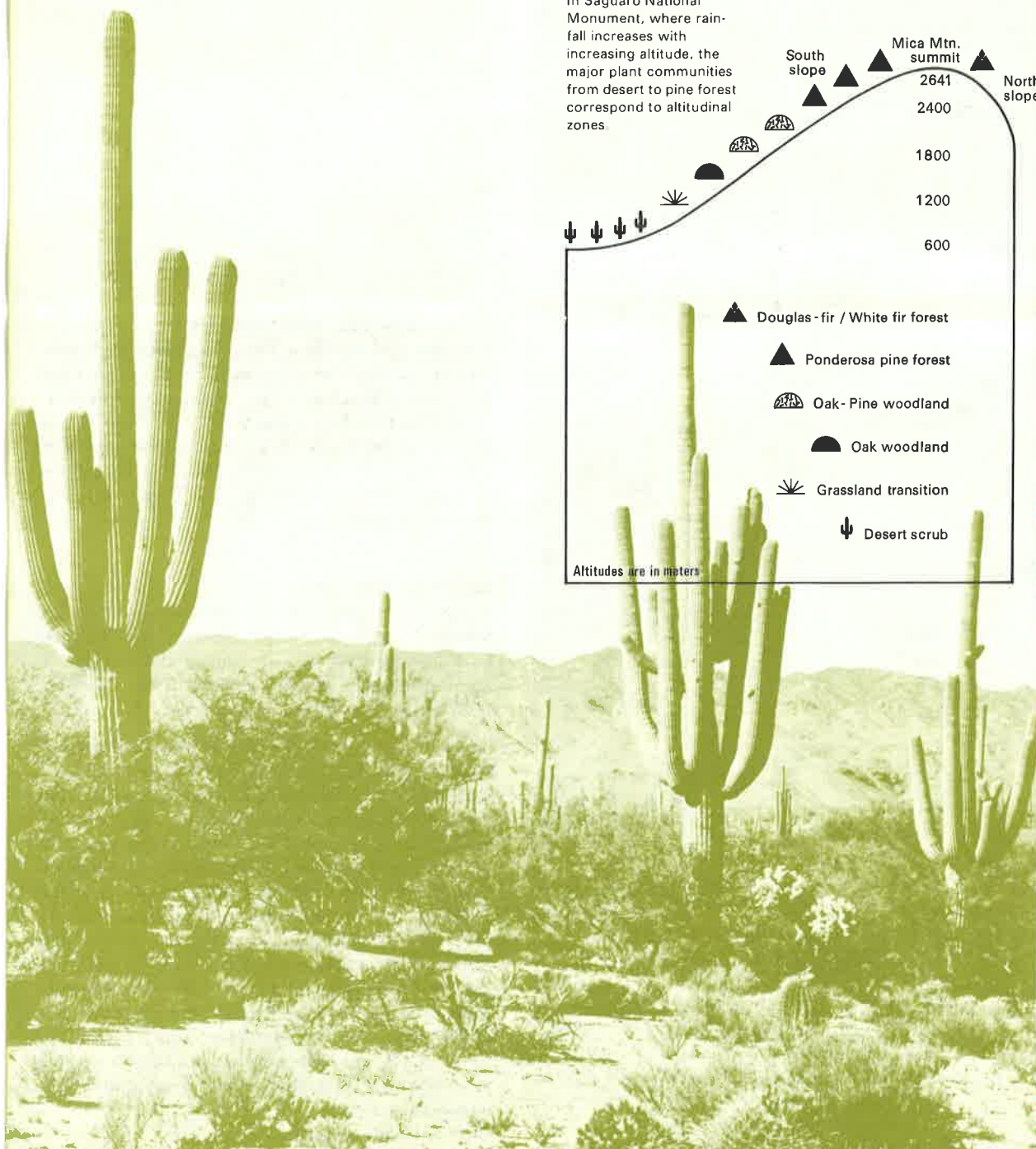
NATIONAL MONUMENT • ARIZONA

Saguaro Resource Management Library

Embracing the southeastern corner of California, southwestern Arizona, most of the Mexican State of Sonora, and most of Baja California is the vast, lonely Sonoran Desert. Two small, picturesque sections of this desert near Tucson, Arizona, have been set aside as Saguaro (pronounced sa-WAR-oh) National Monument. The park was established to protect the superb stand of the giant saguaro cactus. But because of an altitude range of almost 2,000 meters (6,550 feet), this park includes a diversity of habitats. At the lower elevations are found plants and animals similar to those of northwestern Mexico. In the higher elevations of the eastern (Rincon Mountain) section are plant communities that are similar in character to forests of southern Canada and that possess a number of animal species in common with those forests.

The change in vegetation that one encounters in the Rincon Mountain Unit is due to the decrease in temperature and increase in rainfall as one moves upward from the 820-meter (2,700-foot) altitude of the Cactus Forest to the top of Mica Mountain at 2,641 meters (8,666 feet).

The giant saguaro grows in the desert scrub biotic community, which is found up to about 1,200 meters (4,000 feet). Above that is the desert grassland transition community, then the oak and oak-pine woodlands, the ponderosa pine forest, and, on the north slopes below Mica Mountain and Rincon Peak, a Douglas-fir/white fir forest. With the diversity of plant associations there is a variety of animals, some of which are specialized for life in only one of the communities, others of which range throughout the park. You will find that the study of how plants and animals have adapted to life in these arid-to-moist environments and how those in each community are interrelated and interdependent is a most engrossing pursuit.



You need not confine your wildlife-watching to the birds, though they are the most in evidence, with almost two hundred species (some of which are year-round residents). The reptiles, with more than 50 species, are the next-best represented group. There are fewer mammals; this group is represented mostly by bats and nocturnal rodents.



The collared peccary, or javelina, feeds primarily upon pricklypear pads and a variety of other plant and animal foods.

Not surprisingly, there are few amphibians. All groups have some species that occupy all the major altitude zones of the park—desert, foothills, and mountains. You will have to look carefully for those forms that are so specialized that they inhabit only a narrow environmental niche.

There are rewards for the visitor who takes the time to learn the plant communities and the habits of the animal residents.

When you are in the desert-scrub community, look for the desert tortoise, gopher and coach-whip snakes, ground squirrels, peccaries, coyotes, and mule deer; and for such common birds as the Gambel's quail, Gila woodpecker, curve-billed thrasher, and cactus wren. If you hike into the mountains, watch for the Mexican junco, Mexican jay, Steller's jay, and rufous-sided towhee. Cliff chipmunks and white-tailed deer are common mammals of the mountains.

Listen, too, for such sounds as the whistle of the curve-billed thrasher, the churring of the cactus wren, and a yipping coyote chorus. Perhaps these will whet your appetite for exploring Saguaro's life communities.

THE REMARKABLE SAGUARO

By the time it is about 6 meters (20 feet) tall and has developed its first branch, a saguaro has survived approximately 75 years of desert living. It may ultimately reach a height of 15 meters (50 feet) and an age of 200 years.

A mature plant, weighing several tons, can absorb a great deal of water following the first heavy summer rain. During extended dry periods, it gradually uses its stored water, shrinking in girth and decreasing in weight.

Saguaros provide food for countless creatures of the desert. Birds eat the fruits and seeds while they are still on the branches, and many animals, including coyotes, mule deer, and peccaries, eat the fruits after they have ripened and fallen to the ground.

Saguaros provide nesting sites and protection for several species of birds. The Gila woodpecker and gilded flicker drill nest holes in the fleshy stems; sap from the exposed tissue dries and forms a hard lining on the wall of the deep pocket. After the woodpeckers and flickers have raised their young, other birds move in—screech owls, sparrow-sized elf owls, purple martins, sparrow hawks, and flycatchers. Larger birds, such as hawks, build their nest among the branches.

SEASONS

Desert temperatures from October through April are generally comfortable, with daily highs often reaching above 20° C (68° F). From May through September temperatures up to 38° C (100° F) are common. An average annual rainfall of 28 centimeters (11 inches) is normally split into two weather patterns: violent summer thunderstorms from July through mid-September, and gentle winter rains from December through mid-March.

WILDFLOWER DISPLAY

Annual wildflowers are usually at their peak in April; blooms may appear any time between February and May. An outstanding wildflower display does not occur every year, for it is dependent on critical amounts of rainfall, sunlight, and warm temperature at favorable times and intervals.



In May and early June, creamy-white blossoms appear in clusters on the ends of the Saguaro's branches.

When these conditions are met, the result is one of nature's grandest spectacles. Outstanding flower years cannot be predicted because there are so many variables. Annual wildflowers also bloom soon after summer rains and usually reach a peak in August. Cacti can bloom even though rainfall has been scarce during winter.

REGULATIONS

By observing the following regulations you can help to preserve the unique natural features while assuring your personal safety and that of other visitors.

Plants, animals, rocks, wood and other natural features must be left undisturbed.

Comply with posted speed limit on scenic drives.

Drive only on established roadways.

No firearms or other weapons are permitted.

Pets must be kept on a leash at all times, and are not allowed on trails.

Place all trash in litter containers.

SAFETY MESSAGE FOR VISITORS

Hiking during extreme spring and summer temperatures can be hazardous. Carry plenty of water, wear a hat, and pace yourself according to your physical condition.

Old mine workings in the Tucson Mountain Unit are highly dangerous. For your safety, stay away from all mine tunnels and shafts.

Be careful to avoid handling or brushing against cactus spines. If a joint of cactus becomes embedded in your skin, try to flip it away by using two sticks or similar objects as levers.

RINCON MOUNTAIN UNIT

Excellent views of an aging saguaro forest, with the majestic Rincon Mountains as a backdrop, are presented in the Rincon Mountain Unit from the Cactus Forest Drive.

Just inside the boundary of the 25,287-hectare (62,499-acre) Rincon Mountain Unit is the visitor center and Park Headquarters building. Stop there for orientation to the life communities you will see along the Scenic Drive and the nature trails. Exhibits show how the plants and animals native to these communities have adapted to their arid environment. From the visitor center you will get a magnificent panoramic view of the desert flatlands sweeping away to the mountains. Studding the desert are thousands of stately saguaros, with lesser plants forming a dense understory. In the distance the pine- and fir-clad ridges of the Santa Catalina Mountains tower more than a mile above the surrounding desert.

The 13-kilometer (8-mile) Cactus Forest Drive will give you a close look at the desert scrub community. From the visitor center parking lot, a paved one-way road winds through the heart of the saguaro forest. At the information desk, you can obtain a self-guiding leaflet describing the saguaro and its ecology. You will have many opportunities to take photographs and to discover some of the hidden sights, sounds, and smells of the desert. A 1½ kilometer (1 mile) nature trail starts from the spur road that leads to the Javelina Picnic Area. (A self-guiding leaflet for this trail is available at the visitor center.) Naturalist walks are conducted during the winter months; schedules are posted in the visitor center and published in the local newspapers.

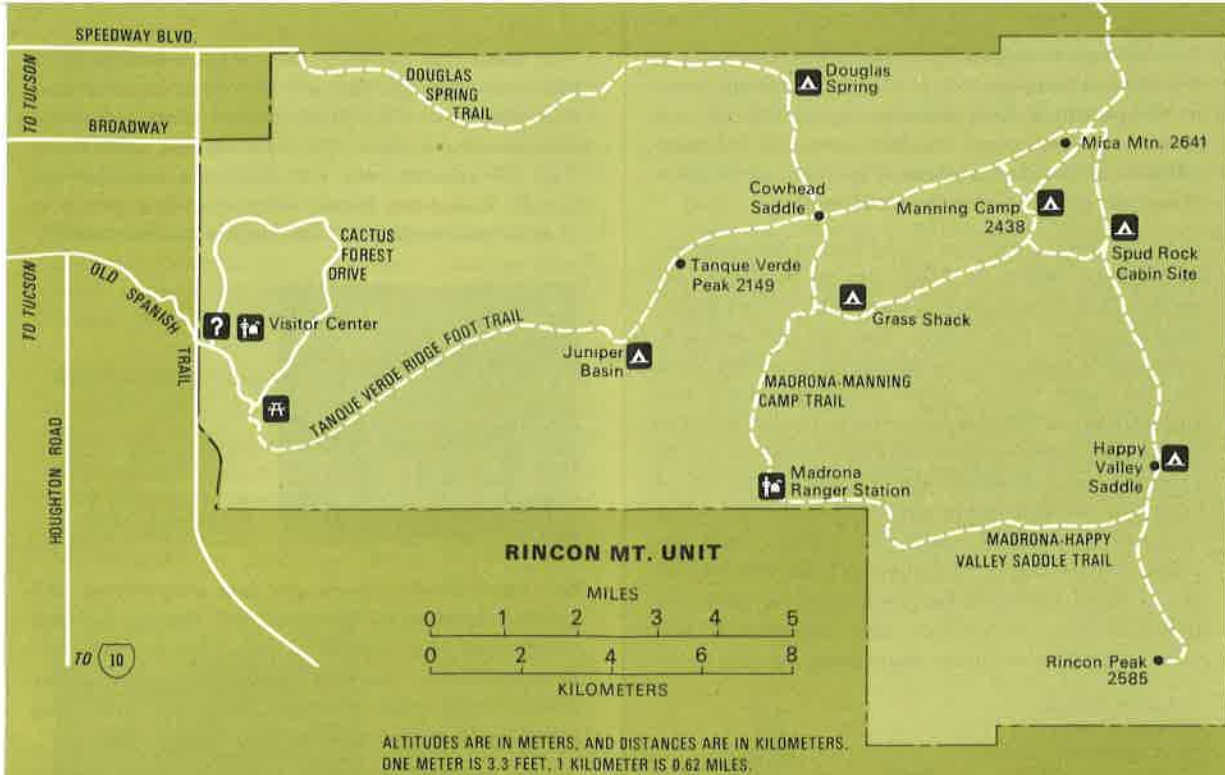
If you are accustomed to strenuous activity, you may want to hike into the forests of the Rincon Mountains. Before starting, check with a park ranger on trail conditions. If you wish to spend one or more nights in the back country, be sure to obtain a camping permit. On a hike from the desert to the crest of the Rincons, you can travel through six distinct plant communities: desert scrub, desert grassland transition, oak woodland, oak-pine woodland, ponderosa pine forest and, on the north slope of Mica Mountain, a Douglas-fir/white fir forest. The color-illustrated handbook, *Saguaro*, describes each of these plant communities and the animal life in them.

TUCSON MOUNTAIN UNIT

In the Tucson Mountain Unit an unusually dense and vigorous cactus forest provides a contrast with the declining stand of old giants seen near Park Headquarters in the Cactus Forest.

Within the 8,558-hectare (21,152-acre) Tucson Mountain Unit, well maintained dirt roads lead to hiking and nature trails, scenic overlooks, and other points of interest. There are picnic sites with tables, shelters, and rest rooms; water and firewood are not available.

On the way to the Tucson Mountain Unit, visit the adjacent Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum to see a fascinating presentation of living plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert.



- Picnic Area
- Ranger Station
- Information Center
- Trail Camp Sites

FOOD, LODGING, AND TRANSPORTATION

Saguaro National Monument does not have rental accommodations or campgrounds, but both units have picnic areas at attractive locations. Restaurants and motels are available in Tucson, which is west of the Rincon Mountain Unit and east of the Tucson Mountain Unit. There is no public transportation to either unit, but cars may be rented in Tucson.

ADMINISTRATION

Saguaro National Monument, established on March 1, 1933, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Rt. 8, Box 695, Tucson, AZ 85730, is in charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service

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