



WEDNESDAY
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Sight to see: Superstitions' super saguaro

Slogging through the muck, soaked to the skin, feet screaming in pain as we tramped over sharp rocks, the same thought kept pounding in my head over and over again:

This better be some damn cactus.

The hike began when I saw a story about the national champion saguaro. The former champion had died, it seems, and a search had been conducted to pick a replacement. Six made the cut: two in Pima County, three in Maricopa County and one in Pinal County. All will be listed in the 1998 National Register of Big Trees as co-champions.



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But, come on, a six-way tie? That wouldn't do.

I wanted to see the best.

So I called Ken Morrow, a Queen Creek resident who is on the Big Trees committee (and measured four of the winners himself), and asked him if he would take me to see his personal favorite. I envisioned a nice little ride down a dirt road. Maybe something so rigorous as to require a four-wheel-drive vehicle, but probably not.

Well...

Turns out the 200-year-old cactus, nicknamed "50 in 1" by Morrow's friend, Mike Hallen, who nominated it, lies about 4½ miles down rugged, rocky, hilly trails in the Superstition Wilderness Area of Tonto National Forest.

Oh well, if you have to work a little, you'll probably appreciate it more, I figured. So I met Morrow, Hallen, Morrow's brother Jim and Jim's girlfriend's son, Mike, Saturday morning at a gas station in the Gold Canyon area. We piled into Hallen's truck for the short ride to the trail-



Bill Goodykoontz/The Arizona Republic

"50 in 1," a co-national champion saguaro, dwarfs (from right) Mike Hallen, Ken Morrow and their young friend, Mike.

Goodykoontz: Champion saguaro worth watery, wearying trek

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head. All well and good.

Except for the weather.

How many days a year does it really, truly pour rain in the Phoenix area? Six? Seven? I don't know, but Saturday was one of them. The word "waterproof" quickly became a cruel joke. It rained so hard that water flowed like tiny waterfalls down portions of the trail.

Big-tree bonding

And it was still fun, after a fashion. Not because of the beauty of the hike, which was considerable. Not because of the size and shape of the saguaro, both monstrously impressive. Not, certainly, because of the weather.

No, it was because these guys are so excited and dedicated and downright thrilled with the outdoors that, while you couldn't exactly ignore

the driving rain, you at least felt bad complaining about it.

These guys love trees.

"Big trees in general elicit a feeling of kinship," Ken Morrow said. "Everyone likes big trees. Everyone remembers a tree from their childhood they liked to climb. There is an inbred biological connection with these things."

This being Arizona, the saguaro holds a special place for them.

"It's a symbol of Arizona," Hallen said.

"It's an icon of the Southwest," Morrow continued. "The only problem is, you can't hug a saguaro."

We started at the Peralta Trail head and hiked on the Bluff Spring Trail for about 3½ miles. We then took the Dutchman's Trail for about a mile, and there, in front of Bluff Spring Mountain, stood 50 in 1.

For a novice like me, the biggest effort went into not falling down, followed closely by the struggle to

not start crying because my feet hurt so badly.

Yet a guy like Hallen can almost float over a difficult trail, seemingly paying little attention to his footing. It allows him to concentrate on other things. Which is how he discovered 50 in 1.

Crowning glory

"I was with three other guys," he said, recalling the fateful hike. "One guy was ahead. I walked over a rise and then there was this huge cactus down below us."

"I was in awe. I just stood there pointing."

Hallen and Morrow, who have spent many recent weekends either hunting or measuring big trees, trekked out to the cactus. Morrow liked what he saw.

"The tree itself is real nice," he said. "Although it's not the tallest, it has the fullest crown. . . . It's just so dense and full."

That it is. At least 50 arms, each as thick as a man, rise from the trunk (thus Hallen's nickname). It's an enormous spray of prickly green limbs towering over everything around it — almost 40 feet of saguaro stretching skyward.

I'm the first to admit, to me a cactus is pretty much a cactus. But this was different. As you may have guessed, I'm not exactly an outdoorsman, but I'd recommend this trip. Although I would suggest checking the weather forecast first.

We slogged back the way we had come in, slushing through puddles and racing the advancing darkness. We piled back into Hallen's truck, sore and soggy.

And triumphant, in a way. We had worked hard to see 50 in 1, and in the end, it was worth the effort.

Some damn cactus indeed.

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