

Crested beauties



JULY 15, 2006 12:00 AM • BY DOUG KREUTZ ARIZONA DAILY STAR

They call it the "crest quest." Tucsonans Bob Cardell and Pat Hammes spend their weekends journeying deep into the deserts of Southern Arizona in search of rare crested saguaro cacti.

So far, they have tracked down and photographed more than 400 crested, or cristate, saguaros — specimens sporting bizarre and sometimes beautiful fan-shaped crests that make them stand out from their prickly brethren.

To share their finds, Cardell and Hammes will present a free program at 7 p.m. Tuesday. (See box on Page XX for details.)

"It's a challenge to find these things. That's what gets us out there every weekend," says Hammes. "It's also just a lot of fun."

Fun, as defined by Hammes and Cardell, involves bone-jarring backcountry travel in an all-terrain vehicle and endless miles of hiking — all the while scanning ridges, peaks and canyons for yet another misshapen saguaro.

"Our tools of the trade are really good binoculars, lots of patience, bullheaded tenacity and a lot of luck," says Cardell, an avid hiker and longtime guide with the Southern Arizona Hiking Club.

"Our crest quest has taken us to many beautiful, remote locations we probably never would have visited otherwise," Cardell says. "Our ultimate goal is simply to locate as many of these beauties as we can for as long as we are able."

Possible causes for the formation of crests include genetic quirks, frost damage or growth changes brought on by insects, lightning strikes or bacterial infections. Scientists say they haven't yet found a definitive cause.

Cardell and Hammes, who is also a hiking club member, launched their quest in February 2005 after coming across numerous crested saguaros on desert treks.

They've learned of some cristate saguaros from friends in the club and found out about a few others on Internet sites. But they've discovered most of their 415 or more specimens in the course of more than 100 excursions by vehicle and on foot.

Cardell says that to qualify for the list, a saguaro must have a clearly visible crest and be documentable with a photograph and GPS coordinates to pinpoint its location.

"We've got GPS coordinates for all of them," Cardell says, but he declines to make exact locations public for fear that "cactus rustlers" might go after some of the rare saguaros.

The quest has its perils.

Some of the crested saguaros grow in terrain so rugged that it takes endurance, good balance and steady nerves to get into position for photos and GPS readings.

Then there's the rattlesnake issue.

Hammes and Cardell often see individual snakes, but on one trek they came upon a den of diamondback rattlers. The couple counted more than 20 diamondbacks around the den, and Hammes posed blithely for a photo on a rock just above the slithering mass.

"We've also come across owl nests, a roadrunner nest — all kinds of things," Hammes says.

How many cristate saguaros might there be in all of Arizona?

"I'd like to get a thousand," Cardell says. "I think there's a thousand out there.

"But there's more to the quest than just saguaros," he adds. "One of the best things about it is the precious time we spend together."

- What: A photo presentation and talk called "Beautiful and Amazing Cristate Saguaro Cacti of Arizona." The program, sponsored by the Southern Arizona Hiking Club, will be presented by club members Bob Cardell and Pat Hammes.

- When: 7 p.m. Tuesday

- Where: Pima County Medical Society Auditorium, 5199 E. Farness Drive. It's southeast of East Grant Road and North Rosemont Boulevard.

- Cost: Free

- Information: 751-4513