

Why is the Catclaw Acacia nicknamed "Wait-A-Minute Bush" See page 3

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PINNACLE PEAK PARK Newsletter

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Harris's Antelope Squirrel

By Diane McCoy-Berney



There are three species of the Squirrel Family at Pinnacle Peak Park. Only one of these species, the Harris's Antelope Squirrel, is seen year-round in the Sonoran Desert where daytime temperature can exceed 100 plus degrees during six months of the year. How does this busy little six-inch (as measured from nose to rump), quarter-pound squirrel remain active during the hottest time of the year in the Sonoran Desert?

The Harris's Antelope Squirrel makes the most of its arid desert home. It is often mistaken for a chipmunk; however, chipmunks live in cooler forest climates, have upright ears and most have prominent facial striping. The Harris's Antelope Squirrel lacks facial stripes. It is a solitary, ground-dwelling rodent possessing strong, well-developed forearms and hands, with ears placed low on its head. These true ground squirrels are excellent diggers, excavating their own underground burrows and escape tunnels, usually in the soil beneath desert trees and shrubs. Their burrows provide protective retreats that are cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.

Laboriously, the pods are shelled before being transported in the squirrel's large cheek pouches. One study revealed a squirrel with 44 mesquite beans stuffed into its cheek pouches! Back at the burrow, the seeds are released from its cheek pouches and cached for consumption at a later date; perhaps a wet, winter day. Interestingly, the Harris's Antelope Squirrel is lean and stores very little body fat; another reason for year-round activity.

Cooling Down

How does the Harris's Antelope Squirrel "keep its cool" in the desert? It tolerates a body temperature up to 107 degrees. Being small, it has a high surface-to-body mass ratio that helps expel heat. An analogy: a cupcake from the oven cools quicker than a bundt cake!

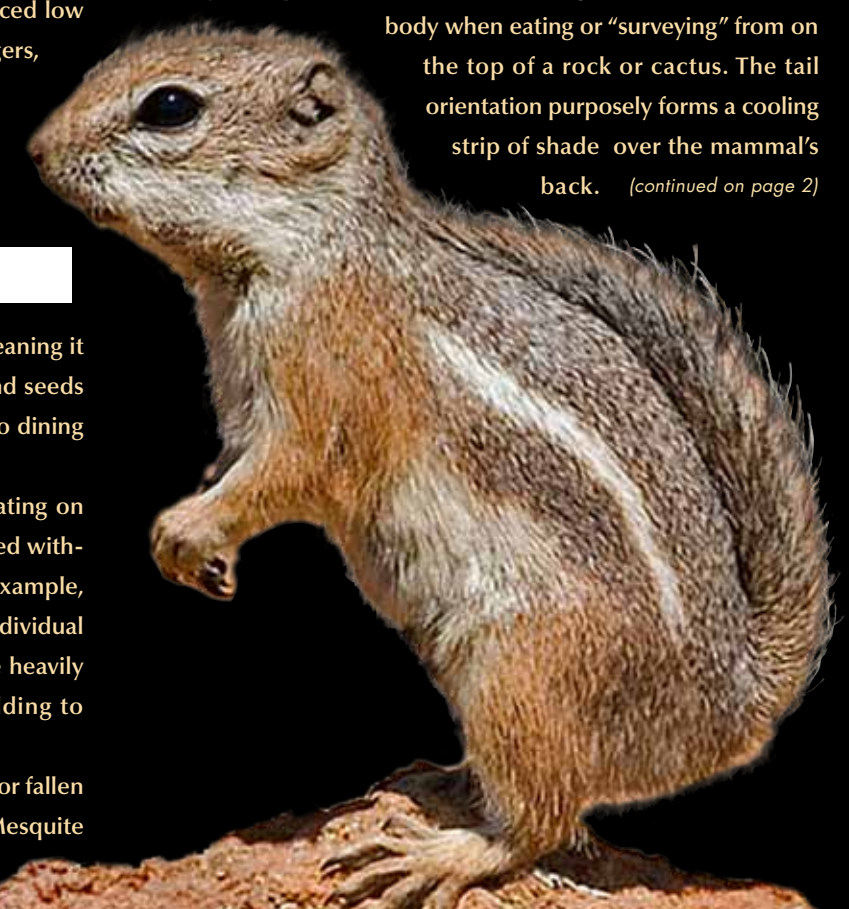
Further, the squirrel's signature bushy tail is positioned vertically and parasol-like when running or curved over the body when eating or "surveying" from on the top of a rock or cactus. The tail orientation purposely forms a cooling strip of shade over the mammal's back. *(continued on page 2)*

Daytime Forager

The Harris's Antelope Squirrel is a diurnal mammal, meaning it is active during the day. Although they eat mostly fruit and seeds of various desert plants, these squirrels are omnivores, also dining on insects, small rodents and carrion.

Park visitors often observe these agile squirrels navigating on dangerous cactus spines to nibble or snatch a flower or seed without being impaled! When climbing buckhorn cholla, for example, a squirrel carefully positions its feet one at a time on individual cactus spines, like climbing a ladder. It is thought that the heavily haired soles of its feet provide enough protective padding to enable such a climb.

The Harris's Antelope Squirrel will also "ground forage" for fallen seed pods of desert legumes such as the PaloVerde and Mesquite



The Friends of Pinnacle Peak Park

is dedicated to assist in maintaining the wonderful character of the Park and to support improvements and educational activities through fundraising.

The Friends of Pinnacle Peak Park Newsletter is published four times a year and is viewable on the website. Distribution of the newsletter continues to be made at the Park and selected sites in North Scottsdale.

Friends of Pinnacle Peak Park is a non-profit, 501(c)3 organization. Tax deductible contributions supporting the Friends mission may be mailed to the address below or made through the website.

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www.pinnaclepeakpark.com

This Newsletter is published by the Friends of Pinnacle Peak Park. We welcome participation in the form of story ideas, letters and comments. e-mail: Editor@MattLucky.com

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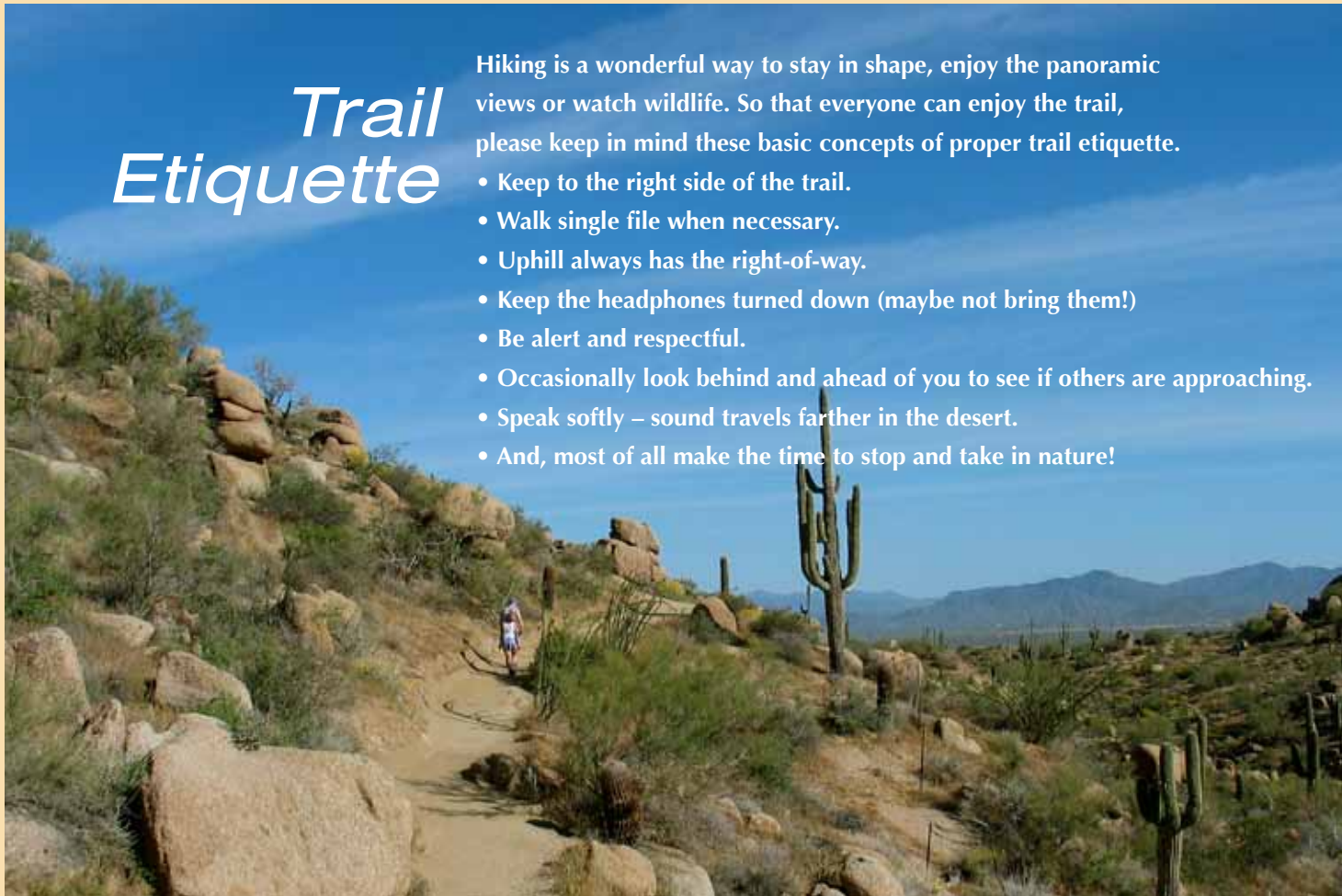
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Telephone: 480-312-0990

Trail Etiquette

Hiking is a wonderful way to stay in shape, enjoy the panoramic views or watch wildlife. So that everyone can enjoy the trail, please keep in mind these basic concepts of proper trail etiquette.

- Keep to the right side of the trail.
- Walk single file when necessary.
- Uphill always has the right-of-way.
- Keep the headphones turned down (maybe not bring them!).
- Be alert and respectful.
- Occasionally look behind and ahead of you to see if others are approaching.
- Speak softly – sound travels farther in the desert.
- And, most of all make the time to stop and take in nature!

PHOTO: FRANK BIONDO



Wait-A-Minute

Catclaw Acacia (*Acacia greggii*) gets its name from the stout, quarter-inch recurved thorns scattered along the stems. In the summer, these thorns are hidden by small, gray-green leaves that are composed of tiny leaflets which are deciduous (they are shed) in winter. Two-inch long catkins (caterpillar-like cluster) of fragrant, cream-colored flowers occur mainly in spring. They are followed by flat, curved pods that resemble Fritos.

It is unlikely you will have a “run in” with this large shrub (or small tree) in the Park because the Park is so well maintained. (There is a good signed specimen along the trail near marker 16.) But try hiking through a patch of catclaw and you’ll know how it got its name!



PHOTOS: DAWE MILLS

Catclaw Acacia has a memorable nickname too. The thorns, in the shape of a cat’s claw, tend to hook onto passers-by. The hooked person must stop to remove the thorns carefully to avoid injury or shredded clothing. Often the hiker will say “wait a minute” to his fellow hikers. Hence the nickname “wait-a-minute bush.” *By Matt Lucky*

Harris's Antelope Squirrel

(continued from page 2)



Finally, frequent periods of foraging for food must be well-balanced with periods of cooling. When it is time to cool off, the squirrel can be observed resting flat on its belly, spread-eagle in the shade and on the ground where it rids itself of extra body heat. When a comfortable temperature returns, the squirrel is ready to resume daytime foraging. If frightened, the Harris’s Antelope Squirrel will flee with the tail in an upright position, similar to the tail position of an American Antelope (Pronghorn) when fleeing; hence the name “Antelope Squirrel”.

EVENTS

Call the Park (480-312-0990) to plan a guided hike, or sign up for the Full Moon hike or Astronomy talk. Watch for notice of other events at the trailhead. Sign up at PinnaclePeakPark.com to receive the newsletter and event announcements by email. You can also find us on Facebook - search “Friends of Pinnacle Peak Park”.



Never underestimate your water requirement

The slightest bit of dehydration will cause a decrease in your physical performance. If allowed to worsen, it can lead to much more serious problems. Keep in mind that you will require more water if the hike is hot/unshaded, and also if the hike is at altitude. Make sure you bring more than enough. If you’re not sure if you’re drinking too much or too little water, weigh yourself before and after -- you should weigh the same; if you weigh less, you’ve lost weight due to dehydration.

VOLUNTEER



SUE FAY

PHOTO: FRANK BIONDO

You can find the “2009 Volunteer of the Year” most Saturdays either on the trail or at the front desk. Sue Fay is a real “people person.” She really enjoys the interaction with hikers and the opportunity to help others on the trail. The trail is great exercise too. It is “not too hard, nor too easy, and there are sections that I really have to push myself!”

After a career teaching at Saguaro High School, she now finds time to travel to places like Japan, Egypt and Africa. And she loves spending time with her sons and their families, which includes one grandson and two on the way.

When elementary schools have group hikes at the Park, Sue enjoys helping staff members with the third and fourth grade children. “Volunteering is fun. It feels good to give back to the community.”

Next Saturday when you visit the Park be sure to say “Hello!” Thank you Sue!

Please help support the Friends mission

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Contribution Category (circle one) Jojoba \$40 • Teddy Bear \$50 • Compass Barrel \$75 • Ocotillo \$200-499 • Saguaro \$500+

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