

The Riparian Sponge

Many Hill Country streams are ephemeral, or temporary. Sandy Creek is no different, and even when it appears dry, this riparian area stores water underground and sustains a small stream flow. Many plants like switchgrass, gamagrass, muhly and buttonbush depend on this stored water to survive.

Live Oak Community

Plateau live oak trees (*Quercus fusiformis*), common to the Hill Country, can live to be hundreds of years old. Oak mottes are groupings of small oaks connected by a single root system. See if you can spot the live oaks along the trail. Look closer at the live oak's branches to spot small clumps of ball moss. Ball moss is an epiphyte, taking nothing from the tree as it gets moisture and nutrients from the air.



Rock to Soil

Notice the cracks in the rock and the missing pieces of the granite puzzles. Over millions of years, weathering has cracked, chipped, and whittled away at layers of the granite domes in front of you. It begins with a process called exfoliation, whereby large pieces of granite separate themselves from the granite mass, much like an onion skin. The erosion of granite creates a unique soil environment that allows flora and fauna to thrive and grow in this otherwise dry and rocky landscape.

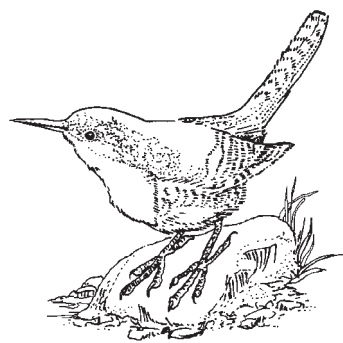
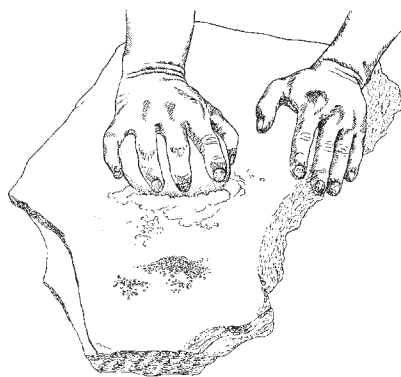


Hold On Tight!

Lichens and mosses establish footholds in nooks and crannies that have just enough space for soil and water to collect in. A variety of lichens that colonize granite surfaces and mosses covering many rocks along the trail. Most commonly you will find the crustose (growing like a crust) lichens painting the rocks red, neon green, black, and bright orange.

The People of Enchanted Rock

Humans have inhabited Central Texas and the areas around Enchanted Rock for over 12,000 years. Native Americans as far back as the Clovis and more recently the Tonkawa, Apache, and Comanche relied on the resources available around the sacred rock. Some plants they found useful were the persimmon and mesquite. They even used depressions in the granite to grind seeds into flour!



Surrounded by Song

Listen for the canyon wren's beautiful cascading song around the base of Little Dome. Other birds common to this area include rock wrens, Bewick's wrens, northern mockingbirds, northern cardinals, black-crested titmice, Carolina chickadees, yellow-rumped warblers and ground doves. Look up and you might see black vultures, turkey vultures, or maybe a red-tailed hawk.

Woods and Water

Many shrubs and larger trees thrive from water available in the sandy soil at the base of the rock. You'll see cedar elm, Texas buckeye, post oak and live oak in this shadier area. Look even closer for the granite mountain wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum tenellum*), a low growing light gray bush found among small granite outcroppings in spring and summer.

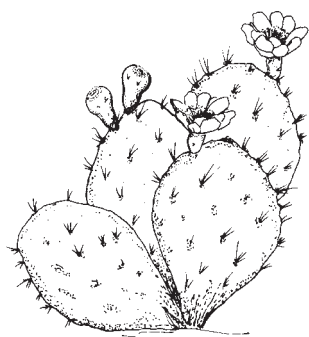


Ferns of Enchanted Rock

Enchanted Rock is home to a surprisingly large number of fern species. Over 25 different ferns have been recorded here. One of the more common ferns, the fairy sword (*Cheilanthes lindheimeri*), grows in the more shaded east side of boulders and shelves where more moisture is available. Another common fern is the ovate cliff-brake fern (*Pellaea ovata*). Like other ferns, it propagates from small spores rather than seeds like many flowering plants.



Cliff-brake fern
by Barney Lipscomb



A Prickly Situation

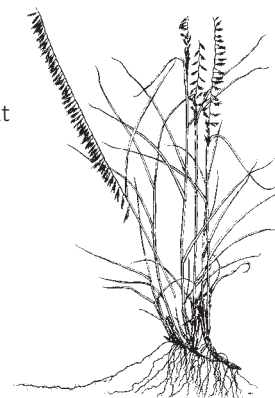
Cacti, like the abundant prickly pear in the area, can provide good cover and food for wildlife. The spines on the cactus provide protection for smaller wildlife, and serve as a nursery to keep plants from being eaten by white-tailed deer. Other prickly friends to look for are the low-growing lace cactus, claret cup cactus, and the "jumping" tasajillo cactus.

The Big Picture

From this vantage point you can see two granite domes, Enchanted Rock to the right and Little Rock to the left. While you may see these as two free-standing rock formations, they are actually part of a larger mass known as a batholith. At over 1.1 billion years in age and extending almost 12 miles to our northwest, the surface area of the Enchanted Rock Batholith has a surface area of over 100 square miles, roughly the size of Amarillo!

Lonestar Grass

Side-oats grama is the Texas State Grass and you can find it growing alongside trails throughout the park. This perennial grass will have reddish-orange flowers when it blooms in June and July and its ripe seeds are a favorite among local bird populations. Switchgrass and little bluestem, two of the "Big Four" grasses of the American tallgrass prairie, can also be found here. Their partners, Indian-grass and big bluestem, are found throughout the park as well.



Underground Seed Bank

What do ants and the grasses along the trail have in common? Along the path you will see red harvester ants (*Pogonomyrmex* sp.). These are large ants living in colonies along the trail that spend their day harvesting seeds from the native grasses around you. Try to spot these ants taking their grass seed harvest to their underground nest.

Mistaken Identity

Texas beargrass (*Nolina texana*) is a large, tough, and wiry plant that grows in thick clumps all around Enchanted Rock. While the name and look of the plant can be deceiving, it's not actually a grass. It belongs to the lily family. The long, graceful "blades" were used by Native Americans to weave baskets and mats.