

Critic's Choice Essay

23 May 1991: The Limestone Glade

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Today, we're going to have a look at a rather special place I refer to as "my limestone glade". A glade is defined as a "grassy open area in a woods." Now, add to this a thin cover of poor soil on a solid, limestone base, a scattering of stunted elms, hackberries and scrub oaks and a handful of ticks and chiggers. You have a habitat for a surprising variety of wildflowers.

Just to be on the safe side, I went up there Wednesday to make sure I had a name for all the 35 or so species in bloom. To reach this botanical hot spot, drive 4 miles east of Fort Gibson on U.S. 62 to Four Mile Road. Turn north toward Hulbert and go 9 miles. At an old lane on the right, park and get out. Almost immediately you'll be aware of a deliciously minty aroma. The lane is carpeted with tiny lavender flowers on 6-inch stems. This is wild pennyroyal [*Hedeoma drummondii* or *H. pulegioides*] – a real olfactory treat!

The strange-looking flower with the stem running up through the tiered white and purple blooms is lemon mint [*Monarda citriodora*], a not-so-aromatic relative of the pennyroyal. For the nature nut, this place has a lot to offer – including thorny patches of yellow-flowered prickly pear cacti [*Opuntia compressa*]. There also are many scorpions and tarantulas: just look under a few of the loose, flat rocks to find them.

This area is also the most dependable place I know for finding choice birds such as the painted bunting. Roger Tory Peterson describes this bird as "The most gaudily colored North American songbird". There is a pair in this area each summer; the male perched in a tree and singing his bright little warble, and the dull-greenish female on her nest in a nearby bush.

Just to the left of the trail are some low, shrubby plants called stickleaf [*Mentzelia oligosperma*]. The leaves are the original Velcro and will stick to your jeans so thoroughly it's difficult to scrape them off, even

with a knife. Like stick-tights, beggars' lice, and others, they've evolved with dispersal in mind.

Toward the end of the trail there is an area of flat rock with hardly any soil on it. Sedum, called pink stonecrop [*Sedum pulchellum*], and flameflower [*Talinum calycinum*] grow here and thrive in this bare-bones situation. Both of these plants have thick, fleshy leaves that enable them to withstand long dry spells. Another plant here on the glade is agave, or American aloe [*Manfreda virginica*]. Not quite in bloom yet, you can recognize it by the rosettes of thick, fleshy, sharp-pointed leaves. In a couple of weeks the 6- or 7-foot blooming stalks will make them more conspicuous.

And finally, I would say the rarest plant – the one I've found only here in all my searches for plants in eastern Oklahoma – is the western marbleseed [*Onosmodium molle*]. Not very showy, the blooms are a dull whitish color and not anything to write home about. It's the seeds that make the impression. They are like small, whitish-pink pearls – round, shiny and just as hard. Marbleseed is the perfect name.

Ed. Note: I found this spot to be about three miles north of the road from Ft. Gibson dam, or ½ mile south of SH 80 as it turns west on the south side of Hulbert. If you go, remember that this is private land, unfenced because the owner knows that it is used by birders and school groups. [P.F.]

