

## Trip Report, Big Bend, Jan 14-23, 2024

Nine club members and two guests made the journey to Big Bend National Park in Texas for a week of camping and hiking. The club members were Buddy Arnold, James Anderson, Bruce Lee, Jerry Schneider, Al Johnson, Michele Ritter, Rick Harris, Brenda Harris, and Henry Mahler. Guests were Nina and Jerry Barrow. Rick and Brenda pulled their RV and stayed in the Rio Grande Campground while the others stayed in a group site in the Chisos Campground. The Chisos campground is more conveniently located to most of the hiking trails than other camping sites in the park. Four of the hikers flew to the Midland AP, and rented a vehicle and drove the four hours to the park. The other hikers drove vehicles to the site.



From left to right, Brenda Harris, Buddy Arnold, Al Johnson, Jerry Barrow, Nina Barrow, Michele Ritter, James Anderson, Henry Mahler, Jerry Schneider, Rick Harris, and Bruce Lee.

This is a beautiful area with a variety of habitat and hiking opportunities. We were blessed with good weather for the most part with a couple of very cold mornings (one at about 18 degrees!), but it was sunny most days and the dry desert air warmed up nicely for most of our hiking. To help keep us warm, Michele brought a propane heater that was a real treat on the cold mornings and cool evenings. Here are a few pictures of our campsite which was surrounded by beautiful peaks. We were treated to gorgeous sunsets most nights. The area has one of the darkest sky areas in the US making for wonderful star gazing. Al Johnson took some great photos of the night sky.



Groups Site O in Chisos Basin Campground. Supposed to hold up to 14; our 9 was about right.



Looking at "The Window" from our campsite. We hiked the trail day 2 of hiking.





The window at sunset from the Chisos Basin Campground.



Toll Mountain from our campsite in the afternoon sun.



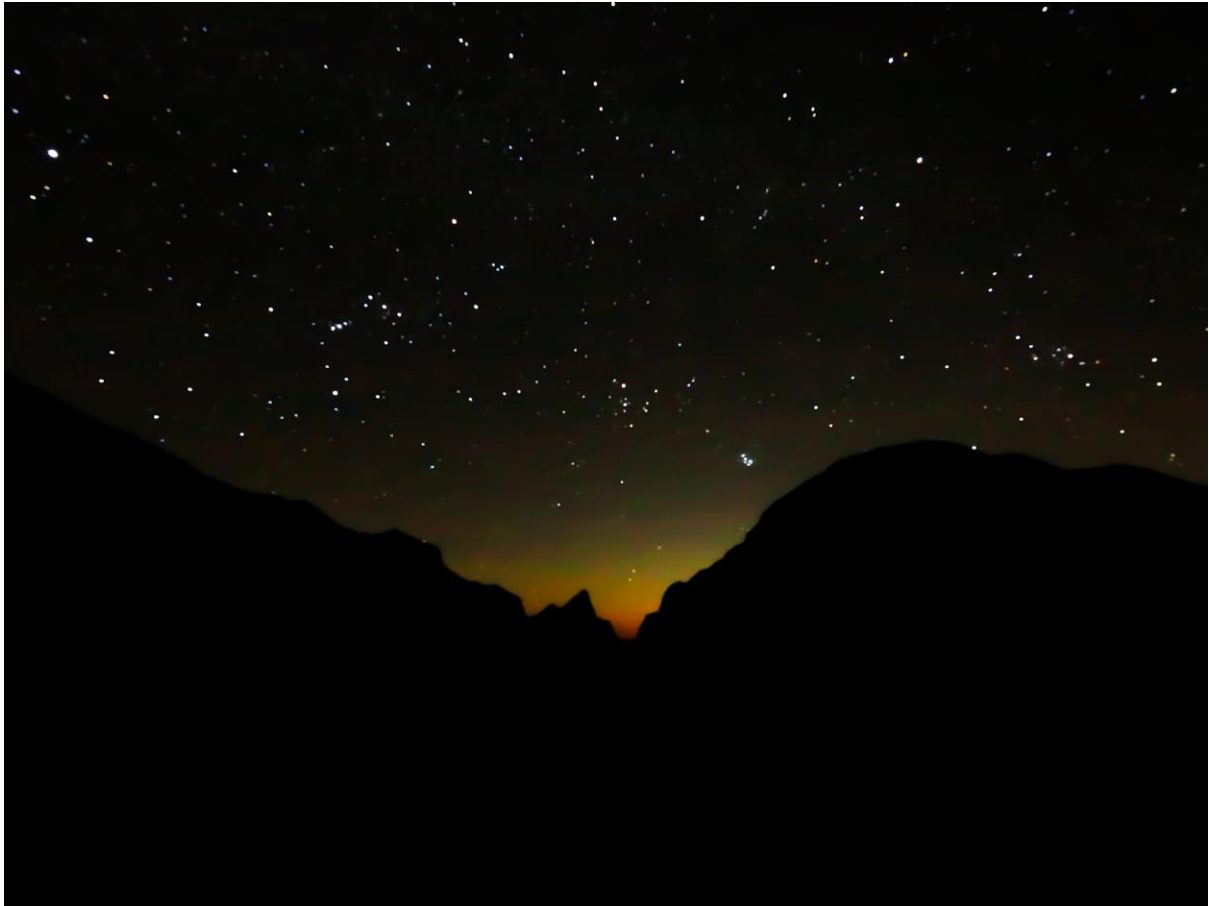


The site had a nice cover and five tables provided as well as food storage. There was a heated restroom and potable water near the site. No showers in this campground. Coin operated showers are available in the Rio Grande Campground about 20 miles away. A camp store was nearby with ice and supplies, a visitors center, and restaurant.



The Harris's RV. It is too big for the Chisos Campground so they camped at Rio Grande campsite about 20 miles away, which has full hookups available. Rio Grande at about 1500 feet elevation and Chisos at over 5000 feet, so weather can be a lot different.





One of Al Johnson's beautiful sky photos looking toward the window.

The first day of hiking, we did the Lost Mine Trail, about 5 miles with about 1500 feet of elevation gain. There were very nice views throughout the hike, with some considering this the best overall hike in the park.







Buddy Arnold with Tell Mountain in Background.

After the hike, we met back at the campground and had hot drinks and ate the King Cake that Michele brought from New Orleans. We discussed and planned hikes for the rest of the week. We then went to the restaurant at Chisos Basin for a nice dinner.

Our first hike for day two of hiking was the Windows Trail. We could see “the window” between the mountain peaks from our campsite. The hike was about 5 miles with about 1000 feet of elevation gain. Hiking through a valley, then along a dry creek bed, we reached a slot canyon that led to the end of the hike. During wet periods, the hike ends in a waterfall.



WINDOW TRAIL  
3.0 Mi. Roundtrip  
Lodge - Store 0.6 Mi.  
Campground 0.7 Mi.

Big Bend National Park  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

**Trail Rules**

Smoking, open fires, and alcohol are not permitted

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Hiking through the valley.



Into the slot canyon.





End of the Windows Trail.





Our hike that afternoon was the Ward Spring Trail, a total hike of about 2.5 miles and 500 feet of elevation change. The spring itself was not impressive, but it has an interesting history supplying water for livestock in prior ranching days. There were some interesting



geologic formations and overlooks during the hike.









Our third day, the group split with one group (Buddy, Bruce, James, and the Barrows) tackling the strenuous Emory Peak Trail with about 3000 feet elevation gain and about 10 miles total distance. This is the tallest peak in the park at about 7800 feet. The rest of the group decided to visit the little Mexican Village of Bouquillas. The residents make crafts for visitors and they had lunch there.



Emory Peak hikers at a meadows area where backpackers can camp.



View from trail looking toward Mexico.





Bruce Lee and Jerry Barrow on the trail.



James trying to reach the peak through a rugged bolder field. The rest of us decided not to risk it, and were satisfied to be close to the top.

The group that went to Bouquillas enjoyed their day buying crafts and had a nice lunch there.





On the fourth day, we decided to do the hike to the hot springs area (Ernst Riddle Trail) starting near the Rio Grande Campground. This was about 6 miles total with about 700 feet of elevation gain. We viewed the ruins of a old hotel and community that was centered around the hot springs of 104 degrees thought to have healing properties at one time. Henry brought his gear and spent some time in the spring while the rest viewed the ruins. We saw a large head of sheep and some deer along the trail.







View of the Rio Grande





Hot springs. This had a cover over it when the hotel was in operation many years ago.





Ruins of old hotel.



Nini and Jerry overlooking the river.





The return hike was very warm getting close to 80 degrees with no shade along the way.

That afternoon, we used the coin operated facility at the Rio Grande Camp store for much needed showers after four days of hiking. Afterward, we spent some time at the Harris's campsite and enjoyed cold drinks and snacks before returning to our group site at the Chisos Basin.

The fifth day of hiking, Henry decided he wanted to do the Emory Peak hike on his own (he had gone to Mexico on Wed.). Since the hike usually has many hikers on it, we decided it was OK for him to go alone. He finished the hike in good form and was glad he did it. The rest of the group did the Chimneys Trail that morning, about 4 miles total with about 400 feet of elevation gain. The highlight of the hike were the Indian drawings on the chimney formations.









Group on the trail.



The south chimney is on the left with most of the Indian writings.





Indian writings.



Indian scrapings.





Al (Snappy) Johnson doing his “Rocky” pose.

That afternoon, we took a short hike of about 1 mile to the ruins of the Homer Wilson Ranch. In its heyday, the ranch had thousands of sheep and goats.





Old house from trailhead.



The trails the next day were the Mule Ear Trail in the morning and Santa Elena Canyon in the afternoon. The Mule Ear Trail is named after the geologic formation that looks like mule ears. It was about 4 miles total with about 600 feet of elevation change. There is a spring near the end, one of the few sources of water we came across. Backpackers usually have to stash water along their route or just carry a lot.





Mules ears formation.



Rock walls at end of Mule Ear Trail

The hike that afternoon was the Santa Elena Canyon hike, a “must see” if you go to Big Bend. It is a slot canyon through which the Rio Grande flows. It is about 2 miles total with 350 feet or so of elevation gain.







Overlook. See hikers below for scale.



Into the slot. Mexico to the left.



Guys in slot canyon. Jerry Barrow, Jerry Schneider, Al Johnson, Henry Mahler, Buddy Arnold, and Bruce Lee.





End of trail into the slot.



You can walk across this narrow spot to Mexico. No passport needed!

On the last day of hiking, the group went to Grapevine Hills Trail, about 2 miles total and about 500 feet elevation gain. The road to the trailhead was about 6 miles on a rough gravel road requiring a high clearance vehicle. The trail was easy until the last 0.25 miles which was rocky and strenuous. At end of the trail is the iconic "Balanced Rock" seen in much of the park literature.







Looking up at last 1/4 mile of trail.



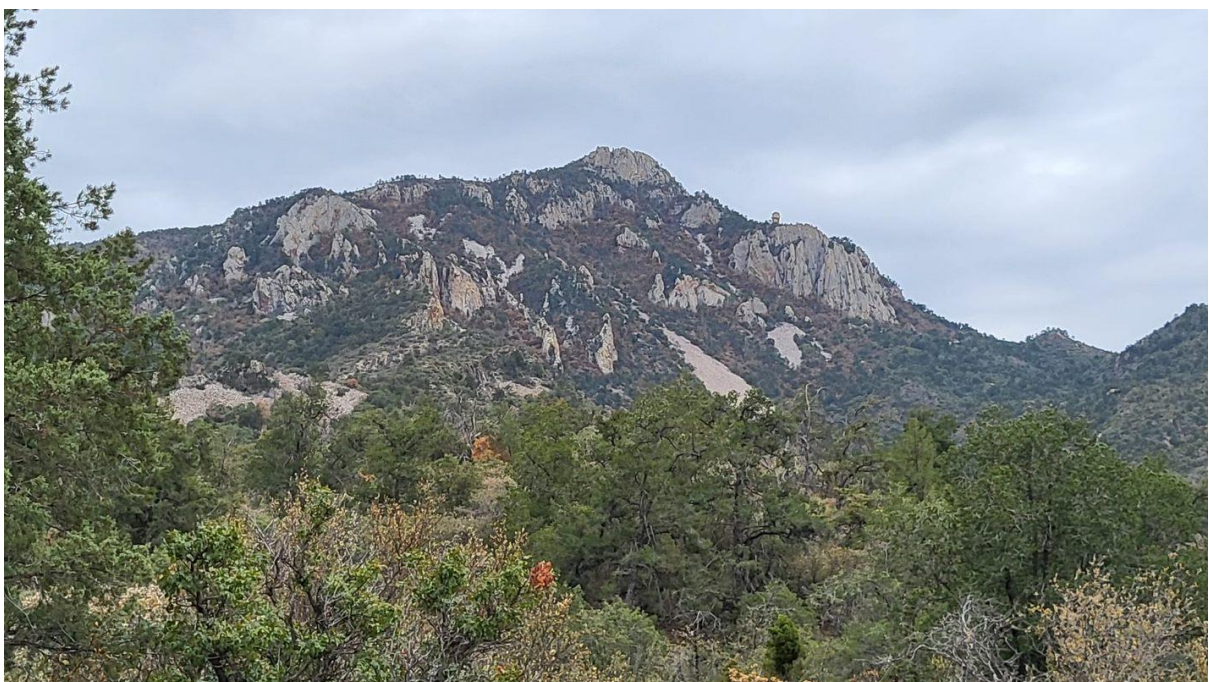
Henry Mahler at Balanced Rock.





That afternoon, a few hikers (Buddy, Henry, Rick and Brenda), hiked about 2 miles up the Laguna Meadows Trail and returned. The others were busy packing their gear for the return home. There were some nice views of the window and other views of the area.

View of Emory Peak from the trail.



View of Emery Peak from trail.



View looking back toward campground.

On the trip out on January 22, the four of us flying out of Midland, stopped at the fossil exhibit in the north part of the park. An interesting stop, especially for kids into dinosaurs.







A Road Runner and Mexican Jay, some of many we saw in the park.

### Summary

I think all the participants enjoyed the variety of hikes and what Big Bend has to offer. While we got to see a lot of the park and some of the most iconic trails, there are still many trails and areas we did not see. We hiked about 50 miles of trails while there are over 150 miles in the park. There are also backpacking opportunities in the park for those interested, but careful planning and logistics like stashing water is required. For me, the ideal times to visit the park is in the Dec-Feb timeframe. We had some cold morning temperatures, but for the most part we had really good hiking weather during the day. Even in March, temperatures can reach 100 at times. Even one of the hikes near the hot springs was almost 80 degrees when we finished that afternoon.



If a club member wants to plan a future trip there, I would highly recommend it. Of all the camping and hiking I have done, this ranks as one of my very favorites. Rick and Brenda Harris have been there several times and can provide more information also. The lodge at Chisos Basin will be torn down later this year and rebuilt, so unless you would want to stay outside the park and drive in, options are for tent camping or RV's for a couple of years.