

# FRIENDS

OF RANCHO SANTA ANA BOTANIC GARDEN

winter 2006  
volume 21  
number 1

## TRAVELS WITH TRAVIS

*W*e were wary when we learned we'd be flying to Baja to get some grass. My folks won the "Backpack with a Botanist" excursion at RSABG's *Garden with A View* auction—my husband David and I received it as a gift. Dr. Travis Columbus and graduate student Gilberto Ocampo met us at Baja Sur's La Paz Airport on October 29 for an adventurous



Karen Telleen-Lawton, author of "Travels with Travis" and husband, David, hiking in Baja.

week with their favorite families: Poaceae and Portulacaceae.

David and I had our own agendas. Driving Baja had long been on his travel list. I was curious to see the native habitat of boojum trees, the funny-looking ocotillo cousins prominently featured in the Huntington Botanical Gardens' Desert Collection. Both of us relished

a fly-on-the-cactus view of plant collecting.

The first morning we bounced over an undulating dirt road to the Sierra de la Laguna Reserve east of Todos Santos. The desert landscape was thick with *Bursera* trees, cardón (*Pachycereus pringlei*), and palo Adán (*Fouquieria diguetii*), as well as smaller scrub species. It was 10:55 a.m. and over 90 degrees when we finally shouldered our backpacks. Travis projected a nine-hour hike to our cabin on the backside of the steep Sierras.

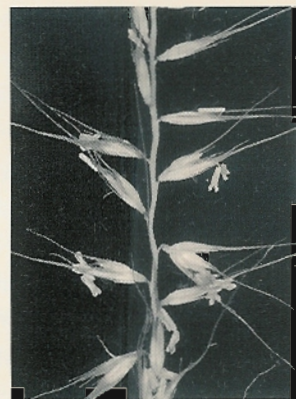
The trail consisted of eroded decomposed granite, softened by frequent additions of burro manure. Travis marked our progress by calling a water break every 100 vertical meters, then every fifty. I composed limericks to distract my mind.

One survives:

*Although not strictly a class  
We came to study the grass  
Melica with awns  
In bunches, not lawns  
And occasionally sprinkled with frass.*

As the afternoon passed to evening, we considered our options. Washing, eating, and sleeping appealed to each of us in different degrees. We finally dragged ourselves over the crest with the help of headlamps, camping short of our target. Sleep was the only thing any of us desired by then.

The second morning's hike to the cabin wound through a lush forest of statuesque madrone trees (*Arbutus peninsularis*), pines (*Pinus lagunae*), and occasional cottonwoods (*Populus brandegeei*). Following a hand-drawn map, we picked our way through a meadow, between two boulders, and hugged a ridge. An hour



*Aegopogon cenchroides* var. *breviglumis*, target plant on recent Baja collection trip

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Sunset over Pacific—Baja trip

(All Baja trip photographs courtesy of Travis Columbus.)

later we reached a tiny, thatch-covered cabin stocked with pots, kerosene stove, and a lifetime supply of mice droppings.

The cabin stood at the edge of an oak savannah next to a riparian habitat of *Ribes*, acacias, calliandras, and toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*). Travis soon collected his target species, *Aegopogon cenchroides* var. *breviglumis*, by a spring. At first glance it seemed like any grass, but we came to appreciate its finer attributes: yellow anthers and delicate purple stigmas. This grass is so different from the rest of the *A. cenchroides* species that his research may reclassify as a unique species.

Travis and Gilberto processed specimens that afternoon, explaining the procedure of clipping grass leaves, flowers, and stems into bits and pressing them or preserving them for DNA sampling. After a night of hooting and screeching owls and breakfast with a bouquet of *Tagetes*, evening primrose, and *salvia*, we headed back. Though we boiled only enough water for a downhill trek, we shared it in penurious portions with desperate incoming hikers who'd run out. By the time we collapsed out of our packs in the late afternoon, we were walking zombies.

Older and wiser, I checked the topography before agreeing to the next hike. The map revealed a short distance across densely packed elevation lines. I opted to journal in the shade of mesquite trees on a rancho, conversing

occasionally in hard-knock Spanish with the owner.

The others, propelled by biophilia, machismo, or both, scaled the trail-less, cactus-rich mountainside topped by 30 vertical feet of sliding scree. After collecting, they straggled back at 10:30 p.m., clothing torn and bloody, guided by a campfire obligingly set by the ranch family.

The following day we reached Santa Rosalia, an old French mining town famous for its prefabricated metal church designed by Alexandre Gustaf Eiffel. Then we turned away from the Gulf of California, heading across the peninsula and into the heart of boojum country. Named for fantasy trees in Lewis Carroll's "The Hunting of the Snark," they appear as upside down carrots, their hairy "roots" planted in the air. The forest looks eerily post-wildfire.

Our last night in Ensenada we enjoyed margaritas and chile rellenos while reminiscing about the life of a botanist: the harsh beauty, hard-earned botanical treasures, long drives, and acquaintances with local people and places. We learned, importantly, that the dirt is in the details.

*Beware the Jabberwock, my son!*

By Karen Telleen-Lawton  
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