HUACHUCA MOUNTAINS

Called by Arizona Highways "a bird-watchers and hikers paradise," the Huachuca Mountains are a storehouse of impressions, a place where history merges quietly into geography and becomes indistinguishable from it. They are located in the desert, the Chihuahuan-Sonoran transition. The American Southwest was a sun-blasted laboratory in which the theory of "survival of the fittest" was reconfirmed. Only those species of man, beast, and flora that could quickly adapt to the inhospitable terrain would triumph. Here the eye is assaulted by a relentless barrage of color and form, shell-bursts of ocotillo, thickets of Spanish bayonets, surreal surprise yucca, volcanic explosions of welded tuff, a blasted landscape of creosote and mesquite. The name for these mountains is pronounced like a sneeze--Wha-CHOO-ka, and may be an Apache Indian word for "Thunder Mountains."

SKY ISLANDS

Life zones are based upon elevation, so that the kind of plants, mammals, and birds that live from the lower Sonoran desert in Mexico to the northern reaches of Canada can be found in a less than two-mile climb up one of Huachuca's higher peaks. These mountains are carpeted with Douglas fir at the highest elevations, Ponderosa pine, and in the foothills with Juniper, Mexican and Emory Oak. In the high desert there are Palo Verde and Manzanita, in the grassy plains, creosote and mesquite. These are plants that guard their juice with an abatis of spike and barb; that manage to survive only on the memory of rain. There are things here that exist no place else--a kind of century plant, the Huachuca Agave; and a species of snake, the Huachuca rattler.

CANADIAN ZONE: Aspen

TRANSITION ZONE: Douglas Fir, Mexican White Pine, Arizona Long-leaf Pine, Arizona Pine

UPPER SONORAN: Mexican Blue Oak, Emory Oak, Arizona Oak, Oak Grass, Canada Rye Grass, Pinon Rice Grass, Juniper, Manzanita, Mountain Mahogany, Pinon, Evergreen Sumac, Arizona Sycamore, Black Walnut, Cottonwood, Rose Rock Agave

LOWER SONORAN: Desert Scrub, Plains Love Grass, Blue Grama, Black Grama, Sacaton Bunchgrass, Velvet Mesquite, Tobosa, Mexican Yucca

CORONADO NATIONAL MONUMENT: Commemorating the first major exploration of the American Southwest by Europeans, the national site at the U.S.-Mexican border, within sight of the valley through which the Coronado Expedition first entered the U.S. in search of the fabled cities of gold.

MILLER CANYON: Miller Peak is the highest point in the Huachucas.

CARR CANYON: With its waterfall and breathtaking views, it is one of the most beautiful canyons in the Huachucas. Visit the Carr House, an interpretive center.

RAMSEY CANYON: A nature preserve managed by the Nature Conservancy where visitors may take in nature's wonders in the form that offer an excellent scenery, wildlife and flora. This is a favorite of North American bird watchers.

GARDEN CANYON: Over 1,000 years ago, the home of the Hohokam Indians and today the site of petroglyphs and archaeological digs. A favorite picnic spot.

FORT HUACHUCA: A National Historic Landmark, and the site of the Fort Huachuca Museum which tells the story of the U.S. Army in the American Southwest.

Photo courtesy Arizona Highways magazine.