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WINTER 2021



# ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

## The Guadalupe Mountains

by Erin E. Hunter

I love the desert. I spent most of my teens living in the dry foothills of Southern California's San Gabriel Mountains. In my twenties, I met my husband while helping to run a trip that takes high schoolers to Joshua Tree National Park and Anza-Borrego State Park, both in Southern California's arid deserts. When he briefly moved to Prescott, Arizona, we explored pine forests and took trips to Sedona to admire the red rocks. And in 2018, I completed a National Parks Service artist-in-residence (AIR) program at Guadalupe Mountains National Park—spending two weeks in the arid Chihuahuan Desert of West Texas.

I've been fortunate enough to do AIR programs on the Grand Canyon's North Rim, in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and at Guadalupe Mountains. Each residency doubled as the perfect family vacation. The experiences introduced us to new places, with hours for hiking and observing, discussing native bees and wildflowers with rangers, and time to draw. Each AIR program culminated in a final painting that captured the spirit of that place.

We arrived in El Paso in late April, loaded too many bags into a rented Hyundai, and set off. A lonely stretch of desert highway connects El Paso and the Guadalupe Mountains. Here, summer thunderstorms provide much of the year's rainfall (unlike California's Mojave and Sonoran Deserts, where it generally only rains in the winter), and so the native wildflowers, yucca, cactus, and agave bloom throughout spring and summer.

The big ol' Texas sky was a rich blue, filled with the fluffy white clouds we don't often get in coastal California. Quite



Artist Erin E. Hunter, whose artwork graces our winter cover, standing beside the Guadalupe Mountains National Park entrance.

the treat for my weather-obsessed husband. The mountains that appeared in the distance loomed above an otherwise flat landscape, the highest point in the whole state. As we sped along, I caught tiny flashes of red—ocotillo was blooming! The familiar red-orange blossoms atop tall, thorny branches made me smile. Ocotillo was one of the first desert plants I learned in Anza-Borrego, on the trip when I met my husband. If it was blooming, we'd see bees, hummingbirds, and other flowering plants.



Above, the artist finds a stand of ocotillo and sketches the bright red blooms in her field notebook. When they burst into bloom, they attract a riot of bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies. Many artist-in-residence programs at the National Parks allow artists to visit with their families. The four-year old is an avid hiker when bribed with gummy bears. If you stop to look in the harsh landscape you find cheerful wildflowers.



Though deserts seem barren and dry, they actually teem with life. Deserts are excellent places for ground-nesting solitary bees; hundreds of native bee species live in the Guadalupe Mountains, along with butterflies, hummingbirds, and other pollinators. When we arrived at our housing area, I noticed evening primrose flowers unfurling in the dusk and knew we'd see sphinx moths, too.

GUMO—as the park is called by the staff—isn't very developed. No roads lead to the peaks or canyons. It's a hiker's park and to see most of its beauty, you need to get there through the power of your own legs. Early in our stay, we hiked the Smith Springs trail. We plodded along among prickly pear cactus and yucca, bribing the four-year-old hiker with gummy bears and carrying our youngest in a backpack. We wandered into a canyon with a clear spring and a canopy of bigtooth maple and blue oak trees. Surrounded by birdsong and little brown butterflies, we ate our lunch here, marveling that these lush green trees shared the same desert terrain as cactus and yucca.



The cheerful color of a western tanager on a bare branch catches the eye as you hike the Guadalupe Mountain range.



The final piece takes shape. Each sketch was done on a separate page of tracing paper. Here you see the final layout, which allows careful tweaking of placement for the perfect composition. The individual drawings were scanned and then assembled in Photoshop. The final design represents wildflowers that were blooming in GUMO during the artist's visit.

Another day we hiked through McKittrick Canyon, renowned for its glorious fall colors. But this spring was impressive too—flowers bloomed along the trailside, western tanagers flashed yellow and red in the trees above us, and springs bubbled up here and there. The kids delighted in seeing lizards and birds everywhere; the grownups marveled at the diversity of landscape, from rocky washes to muddy creek banks to oak groves. In an isolated northern section of the park, we told some fast-paced hikers we were looking for flowers, bees, and butterflies. They said they hadn't seen much before striding away—but they weren't hiking with a four-year-old. Our pace was slow, because we stopped to look at everything.

As we hiked, I considered how painting these wildflowers and pollinators might capture a sense of place. The Grand Canyon's North Rim was a higher elevation and densely forested; Hot Springs gave one the sense of being enfolded in lush green foliage. My main sensation here was one of openness, with a big sky and sweeping landscape. I sketched the flowers I saw blooming, and settled on a round frame with an open top, filled with pollinating insects and a hummingbird.

Wildflowers are good field sketching subjects. They hold still as you draw. Bees and birds, on the other hand, aren't so compliant. Thankfully, GUMO has a wide-ranging collection of insect specimens. Using them, I drew various bees and butterflies along with a lovely little sand wasp I'd watched while sketching verbena flowers. I sent photos and videos of bees I encountered to Vince Tepedino, an emeritus entomologist from Logan Bee Lab, and he shared species names and



The *Diadasia* bee Erin Hunter received in the mail from the Logan Bee Lab. This bee can be seen sketched in, but not yet colored, pollinating the yellow opuntia flower in the lower right of the painting (depicted here as a work in progress). As you can see in the final version we feature on this issue's cover, it hovers right over the central disk, eager to collect pollen.


suggestions to help round out my catalog of insects. I drew the hummingbird, a female black-chinned, from photos and videos.

Each sketch was done on a separate page of tracing paper, which I scanned and assembled into a Photoshop layout. I shared my process as one of two public presentations that I gave as the GUMO artist-in-residence, explaining how I would transfer the composition to watercolor paper and paint it in acrylic. I never painted at GUMO—somehow, the days slipped by with hikes, research, sketching, and hanging out with park staff, many of whom lived in the same neighborhood where we stayed.

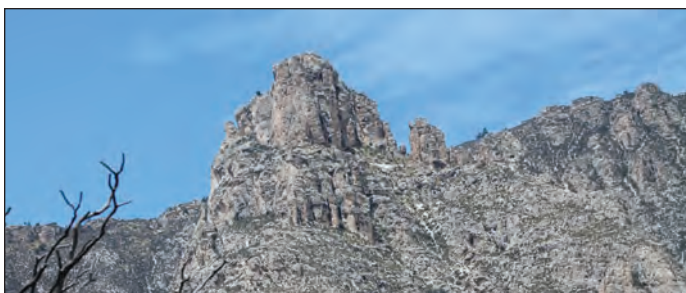
Once home in coastal California's June gloom, I thought of that big open Texas sky and began painting my desert composition. But I struggled with one aspect. Vince Tepedino had suggested including a *Diadasia* bee as the pollinator for the yellow opuntia flower in the lower right of the painting, but I couldn't find a specimen or good photos anywhere. Vince kindly offered to send one from Logan Bee Lab, with

the understanding that I'd add it to the GUMO collection when I finished my painting. Weeks later, a tiny package arrived in the mail—a carefully wrapped *Diadasia* specimen. I drew and studied that bee from every angle before adding it to my painting. It's still the coolest thing I've ever gotten in the mail.

Each flower in the painting—claret cup and opuntia cactus, thistle, ocotillo, yucca, mallow, evening primrose, Apache plume, paintbrush, various composite flowers—was one I saw in bloom during my time at GUMO. I directly observed the insects and hummingbirds, too. They're all there, if you look.

Some people who saw the finished product were surprised that all this glorious flora and fauna came from the severe West Texas desert. It's true that the flowers and insects are ephemeral. It's easy to miss these tiny creatures if you're moving too fast. But, if your timing is right and you have the luxury to sit quietly and observe, you'll be rewarded with the rich diversity of desert life. 

**Erin E. Hunter** is a scientific illustrator with a huge fondness for pollinators. She's also one of our field reporters, contributing stories to our social media channels.



The Guadalupe Mountain range

