

**Wyoming Tribune Eagle, March 3, 2016: “A Great Day at Big Bend” Casper Star
Tribune of March 5: “Big Bend a beautiful national park”**

Barely a week in Texas, and already a neighbor bends my ear on the “must-see” places of his home state. One is his studio with its many paintings. Another is Big Bend National Park.

“A visit to Big Bend is something you absolutely should plan,” he said.

Fat chance, I thought. I had just negotiated 1200 miles of driving from Wyoming to southeast Texas. Big Bend in the southwest meant another 1500 miles round trip.

“It’s one of the most remote of all US national parks,” Texas Todd (as I dubbed him) went on. “Those mountains uplifted 75 million years ago. Except for the Chisos in the heart of it. The Chisos are younger.”

“I’m intrigued.” But the road trip to get there? I’d limit myself to visiting his studio, a mile down the county road where I walk the dogs, my son’s two and my own Abby.

“You’ll find more birds in Big Bend than in any other national park in the United States. Would you believe 450 species of birds? Park rangers take you on bird walks.”

“I’ll think about it.”

As luck would have it, a few days later my son informed his family that he would be in Alpine for the better part of the following week, staying in a motel and participating in a wildlife project.

“You could come with me,” he offered me. “Big Bend is within driving distance. You may use the car; I can catch a ride with the wildlife vet.”

“You’re not taking any graduate students?” He sometimes did, I knew, on these occasions.

“They can’t be away from their studies that many days.” Another professor would teach his classes while he was gone.

Texas Todd was peeling down County Road 328 in his pickup when next I walked while the dogs ran. He stopped to chat. By then I had visited his studio and found him to be an artist of note.

“Looks like I’ll make Big Bend after all,” I told him.

“Be sure to hike Window Trail,” he said.

I showed him the hiking boots on my feet.

“Good. You’ll need them.”

Big Bend was everything Todd promised. For example, its topographic variety supports 1,200 plant species. Some of these are found nowhere else in the world.

Humans have passed through this terrain for at least 10,000 years. In times past there travelled Apache, Spanish conquistadores, Comanche, U.S. soldiers, miners, Mexican revolutionaries, and international outlaws and bandits. Today’s warning signs inform travelers that deer, mountain lions, bears, and other wildlife might cross their path.

Window Trail starts out from the center of the park. I arrived on a lovely morning, when the temperature was a balmy 67 degrees. Knowing that it would get warmer, I’d opted for T-shirt and

light jacket, a bottle of water, sun glasses.

Signs inform hikers that the loop spans some five miles of “moderately strenuous” terrain. Projected time frame: three hours. I decided it would take me longer than that. Four hours, maybe?

Turning my back on an expansive Visitor’s Center and an eatery to follow the signs to Window Trail, I encountered a roadrunner atop a flat rock. As I came within 18 inches it stepped leisurely off its perch and strolled into the high grasses. Earlier I’d seen a roadrunner scurry away in great haste. Not so this one.

Window Trail leads across rocks of a complex history. Two seas, one after another, flowed and subsided in the region hundreds of millions of years ago, leaving thick deposits of limestone and shale. The deposits uplifted (along with the Rockies) roughly 75 million years ago, causing a 40-mile-wide trough—most of the present-day park. In its center rise the Chisos Mountains. They formed some 35 million years ago, as volcanoes spewed layer upon layer of ash into the air and squeezed molten rock up through the earth’s crust. Some of the molten rock cooled and hardened underground, later to be exposed by erosion.

Hikers in these mountains are often sheltered by pine, juniper, and oak. The mountainous terrain is up to 20 degrees cooler than the desert floor below.

The fault lines of the trough define the cliffs of Santa Elena Canyon to the west and Sierra del Carmen to the east. These cliffs rise above a Chihuahuan Desert covered with bunchgrasses, creosote bushes, cacti, yucca, and more. As you arrive at your destination, you spy across the expanse an opening of unimaginable depth, where the cliffs approach each other: That’s The Window. It’s so spectacular, I knew I’d have to thank Texas Todd for alerting me.

Left for another day of Big Bend exploration: The Rio Grande with its tributaries, lush floodplains and steep, narrow canyons. That area, in Big Bend’s southernmost corner, would easily form a park all its own.