

Guadalupe Peak, TX, 8,749 ft. – June 8, 2013, HP #15: Watching for Rattlesnakes

Friday morning, I got up at my regular time of seven o'clock. Following nine hours at work, I drove from Springville Utah to the Salt Lake City International Airport to catch a flight to El Paso Texas via Phoenix Arizona. I arrived in El Paso just before midnight, feeling sleepy, and picked up a rental car.

Leaving the airport, I located an open store and bought some groceries. Next, I found Highway 180/62 and drove east 110 miles to Guadalupe Mountains National Park. On the way I encountered an Inland Checkpoint (aka Interior Checkpoint) operated by the US Border Patrol – something I was not aware existed.

As I approached, I assumed it was a weigh station, but as I entered I had a strange feeling I was crossing the border. As I stopped the car an officer approached. I asked if I was at a border crossing. I was told Federal regulations allow Border Patrol to operate check points within 100 miles of the Country's borders. I was asked where I was going, and the officer seemed a bit surprised due to the late hour. He also inquired where I would be staying. I answered, I would sleep in the car. After a while, another officer with a dog walked behind the car. I assumed the dog was sniffing for drugs. Before leaving I was asked to state my country of citizenship. Pleased with my answer I was sent on my way.

By 3:00 a.m. I arrived at the Pine Springs Campground, and spent some time looking around, getting food ready, and organizing my pack for the pending hike to the highpoint of Texas. The hike rises just over 3,000 vertical feet in 4.25 miles. I figured I could definitely cover that in three hours up and two and a half hours down. At the latest, I wanted to have it completed and leave the National Park before 2:00 p.m., allowing plenty of time to get back to the airport for my return flight that same day.

With dawn still an hour and a half away, I laid back the car seat and dozed off. As if on cue, I woke up an hour later. I put on my boots and anticipating dawn's imminent arrival I put away my headlamp as I grabbed my pack and started up the trail. The time was 5:15 a.m. Soon the eastern sky, behind me, began to fill with tones of yellow and orange, as I scampered up a series of switchbacks. The temperature was pleasant, permitting me to feel comfortable in a t-shirt.

A mile and a half into the hike, I calculated I was covering a half mile every 15 minutes. Nearly three miles into the trek my first glimpse of Guadalupe Peak was had. Shortly thereafter the trail veered northwest along a ridgeline before being intersected by a spur trail to a backcountry camping area at just over 8,000 feet. I notice a purple sleeping bag in the campground, but I did not see its owner.

Next, I came to a bridge as the trail turned abruptly to the southwest. The bridge does not span a gap but instead widens the path along a cliffed-out section allowing for the passage of horses. Once again the trail began another section of switchbacks, becoming steeper while awarding

expansive views. Rounding a corner, a few minutes past seven, a stainless-steel pyramid decorating the peak presented itself. I had reached the top of Texas in under two hours. Along the way I did not drink any water, very unusual for me.



According to Wikipedia the stainless-steel pyramid, “was erected by American Airlines in 1958 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Butterfield Overland Mail [Carrier], a stagecoach route that passed south of the mountain.” Placed on the summit when the mountain was privately owned, it was allowed it to remain after the area became government property in 1972.

The monument stands about six feet tall, with the American Airlines eagle logo on one side. Another side remembers the Pony Express riders contracted to the overland mail outfit. The third side displays a compass with the Boy Scouts fleur-de-lis symbol representing north. To honor pioneer mail service flights, in the center of the compass is an old-school pilot donning an aviator hat and goggles.

I encountered no one during the hike up, and the summit was unpopulated as well. At this early morning hour, the sky in all directions was a cloud-free brilliant blue.

At the base of the monument sat a green ammunition box. Inside I found a summit registry, browsing it as I ate my breakfast sandwich. Several entries mentioned the lack of views due to hazy conditions - not the case this morning.

Around 7:40 a.m. I mistakenly thought I heard voices coming up the trail, which prompted me to prepare to leave. With time to spare, I decided to visit a sub-peak to the south. Known as El Capitan, the sub-peak is positioned 664 feet below the Texas highpoint. Due to the nature of the landscape, to get to it requires descending 900 feet and then climbing up to it. There was no trail to follow through the arid terrain, and I worried about encountering rattlesnakes.

Within an hour, I came across another green ammunition box, exactly like the one on Guadalupe Peak. Inside was the El Capitan summit registry. I was expecting the summit to be closer to the sheer drop-off of the south face instead of this location along the west face. Looking around, the terrain did not appear higher elsewhere. I added my name and the current date to the registry, noticing the next most recent entry dated back a few months. The views off the west facing cliff face were breathtaking, and the view back to the north, made Guadalupe Peak more impressive. I could see two hikers had arrived at the stainless-steel monument a beeline mile away.

Starting out in the morning, the trailhead sign had listed an El Capitan Trail, along with the Guadalupe Peak Trail I had used. As such, I hoped I would encounter a trail leading from El

Capitan back to where I had parked the car. I later learned the El Capitan Trail leads through Chihuahuan desert to the southern base of El Capitan, but not to its summit where I stood. Instead, I retraced my steps back up to the Texas highpoint, being less watchful of rattlesnakes.

Once back on the Guadalupe Peak trail, I made good time as I descended. All five groups heading up whom I crossed paths with were friendly. I glanced over at El Capitan a few times and questioned if the summit register was really on its highpoint. The temperature remained pleasant, with the occasional strong wind gust typical of the area. By 11:15 a.m. I was back at my rental car having reached two peaks in less time than I had budgeted for the state highpoint alone.

Unaware of what else around might be of interest, I decided to head back to El Paso where I could get some more food and hopefully catch a nap at the airport prior to my 6:30 p.m. flight. As I headed west on Highway 180/62, I looked back at the peaks noticing the sky had filled with dust; gone were the clear views I had enjoyed in the early morning.

On the outskirts of El Paso, I stopped to purchase some fruit and juice before continuing into the city. Tired and not really interested in looking around, I just filled up the car with gas in preparation for returning it. It was close to 2:00 p.m. when I walked across the parking lot to the airport having dropped off the car. Entering the airport, I stopped at the first restroom to change out of my hiking gear. By the time I checked-in, cleared TSA, and found my gate it was after 3:00 p.m. I tried to sleep sitting at the gate, but found that to be uncomfortable, so I moved to a couch near one of the TVs. I managed to doze in and out for the next 45 minutes.

Eventually it was time for my flight to Phoenix and from there to Salt Lake City. I arrived in Salt Lake City close to 11:00 p.m. and was home a few minutes after midnight. After 41.5 hours of no real sleep I was exhausted, and my bed was a welcome sight.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/mmxFea7wveB9FnB77>