
On Caring for Spaceship Earth

by: Kay Vargas

WE'RE ALL CREW MEMBERS AND WE'RE ALL STEWARDS

Marshall McLuhan once said, “There are no passengers on spaceship earth. We are all crew.” How right he was! We are all working crew members of spaceship earth, and if we aren't we surely ought to be.

On a slightly overcast, but nonetheless warm November morning, we spend the morning hiking the Harry I. Dalton Trail traversing the Jewel of the Creek Preserve and I begin to learn a little about what being a crew member on spaceship earth means.

Our first find is some nopales (prickly pear pads) that have been scraped and partially eaten by javelina. Personally, I prefer my nopalitos diced, grilled and tossed with a bit of lime juice and olive oil, but I guess javelina aren't that picky.



Jewel of the Creek Preserve
[courtesy Desert Foothills Land Trust]

Once past Geoffrey's Bench and on the trail down to the creek, we come across a large deposit of horse “poop.” Thom Hulen, [former] Conservation Director of the Desert Foothills Land Trust, explains that unless a horse is fed weed-free hay, its poop is usually filled with various kinds of non-native seeds. Fresh manure is a perfect environment in which





photo: Dave Mills

**The Jewel of the Creek Preserve
adjacent to Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area**

those seeds can germinate, one reason why horses are not allowed in the Jewel of the Creek Preserve.

Animal waste is one way that non-native, invasive plants manage to get a foothold in the desert. Wind-borne propagation is another way and is why there are pockets of Bermuda grass in the Jewel. Yes, drought tolerant, invasive, opportunistic, disease and herbicide resistant Bermuda grass. This Bermuda grass most likely originates from local golf courses, parks and soccer fields and arrives in the Jewel via the wind, birds and muddy hiking boots. And, as every gardener knows, Bermuda takes over and is darned near impossible to eradicate.

We pass by an old, unofficial trail that is being filled and revegetated. Thom says that the number and location of trails in the preserves must be limited in order to mitigate the negative impact on the ecosystem. This particular wildcat trail has been partially filled with small to medium rocks, and native grasses are beginning to revegetate it too. Given half a chance, Nature will heal what Man has disturbed.



We forge onward. And then the Jewel gives us a gift. Sunning herself on a rock just ahead is the most gorgeous tarantula I have ever seen. Beige and brown in color, she knows she's beautiful and poses quite prettily for the camera.

We make our way to the stream and cross the bridge. The extreme height of the recent flooding is evident in the debris field that stretches beyond both banks and sometimes pretty high into the trees. Ash and pieces of charred wood, remnants of last summer's Cave Creek Complex Fire¹, mix with dried plant material to create a carpet of sorts along the banks of the creek. It is nature-made, truly organic mulch that will provide nourishment and shelter for a variety of plant and animal life.

We spot more javelina tracks and even some deer tracks in the mud along the banks, but no one except Miss Tarantula and a camera-shy tarantula hawk wasp comes out to say "hi."

We come to an area in which Michael Baker and the wonderful Volunteers for Outside Arizona (VOAZ) have been working. They've used some pretty good-sized, hefty rocks to provide bank stabilization along one area of the trail. In another spot they've used rocks and large, flat stones to build a natural stairway up a previously rough portion of the trail.



The **tarantula hawk** is a species of [spider wasp](#) which hunts [tarantulas](#) as food for its [larvae](#).
[[Wikipedia](#)]

A bit further on, Thom points out the native grass test gardens. Small areas alongside the trail have been sectioned off and protected by chicken-wire fencing. They are used to grow native grasses that can then be used for revegetation.

¹ Ed. Note: June 2005



Unfortunately, our current drought has not been kind to them but a little rain may bring them back.

Near the test gardens is a patch of prickly pear cactus with spots of icky, white paste-like substance dotted across the pads (nopales). Cochineal, Thom says, the stuff used to make red dyes. The cochineal insect feeds on prickly pear and cholla cacti (genus *opuntia* and *cyllindropuntia*). This little bug produces something called carminic acid to keep from becoming lunch for other predatory insects. The acid is extracted from the body of the insect and its eggs to make cochineal dye that is used primarily as a food coloring and for cosmetics. The new trend toward natural dyes has created resurgence in the popularity of cochineal dye.

Now comes the really fun part! Off the main trail we go into a back area of the Jewel to photograph something Thom told me about that I just had to see for myself.

Wildcat dumping is nothing new, otherwise archaeologists would have nothing to find in the field. Pottery sherds are one thing, but vehicle parts are an entirely different matter.

Tucked by a pool in the far reaches of the Jewel is a willow tree with automotive parts wrapped around its trunk! Dumped or abandoned in or around the creek decades ago, the remnants of an old vehicle were likely unearthed by the flooding, moved downstream by the force of the water and ended up around a poor, hapless willow tree. Much of it is now unidentifiable sheet metal, but the remains of a distributor cap, radiator cooling fins and a large part of the chrome bumper are clearly visible.

The first lesson in stewardship: walk gently, pick up after ourselves and take care of the earth.

The word “stewardship” sounds a lot like the environmental equivalent of housekeeping: boring stuff that has to be done, and preferably by someone else. It’s not boring. It’s hard, tremendously rewarding work that must be done regularly to ensure that our beautiful, relatively unspoiled places stay that way. In many ways stewards work to allow nature to function as nature should and in other ways they work to ensure the rest of us have safe and adequate access to natural, open spaces.



Imagine stewards as “moms” with children, and we’re the kids who’ve been leaving our clothes, crumbs and assorted clutter lying about. If we children don’t pick up after ourselves, then mom has to do it or hire someone who will. Otherwise the crumbs, clothes and clutter will continue to accumulate until they overtake the allotted space and even begin to attract invasive, undesirable elements.

Mom, if she’s wise, won’t just go in and clean up the kid’s room. That will merely allow the child to think his or her behavior is acceptable and “someone else” will always be around to pick up after him/her. No, a wise mom will teach her children to pick up after themselves and to have consideration for their environment and for other people.

We’re all crew members on spaceship earth and we are all stewards. We must walk gently, pick up after ourselves and take care of the earth, for if we don’t, who will?

