



**Michael S. (Mickey) Fulp
M.Sc., C.P.G.**

MercenaryGeologist.com
contact@mercenarygeologist.com

Another Dandy Day in the Desert

A Monday Morning Musing from Mickey the Mercenary Geologist

Contact@MercenaryGeologist.com

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The high desert of central New Mexico is a special place. In any given year, there are untold days of sunny blue skies, light breezes; and moderate temperatures. My adopted home is called “The Land of Enchantment for good reason.

Recently, I went off the beaten path a bit and posted photos from a spring day in the desert and wildflowers in bloom. Today, I continue that theme with some geology thrown in for good measure. My partner on a Sunday excursion was Tim Tessendorf, ex-geologist and a member of the Albuquerque Gem and Mineral Club.

Let’s start with our destination, the extinct volcanic plug *Cabazon Peak*, or “big head” in Spanish. It is a prominent landmark northwest of Albuquerque. Aficionados of *Breaking Bad* will remember this location from season three where the cousins made a crawling pilgrimage to “*Santa Muerte*” prior to coming north from Mexico:



Cabazon Peak: Pliocene Basalt Plug Flanked by Cretaceous Sandstones and Shales

We tried to get to the village of Cabezon where the scenes were filmed, but it is on private land behind locked gates and inaccessible to the casual *turista*.

The access road to the peak goes along the west flank and then up the south side to a trail head. The trail wraps around the base followed by a long steep scramble to the top. At 9:30 am, it was already hot and quickly getting hotter so we decided to postpone the 3-4 hour round trip for a fall or winter day.

Our journey continued south on a decent dirt road toward two well-known collecting locales for rock hounds. We followed the east side of the Rio Puerco valley and the western edge of the Rio Grande Rift. Eroded basalt volcanos are abundant in the area with only their feeder necks remaining:



View Southwest from Cabezon toward Mt. Taylor Volcanic Field

Our next stop was at the edge of a low mesa overlooking a tributary arroyo to the Rio Puerco. This locale contains abundant tiny sharks' teeth in a coarse-grained, friable, bluff-forming bed of the Mesa Verde sandstone. Tim guided me to the outcrop:



And provided the proper tool for digging:



That resulted in my take for a mere 10 minutes of work:



At this locale, the mesa top was covered with a low shrub in bloom:



Our journey continued down from the mesa and then up the arroyo a couple of clicks where there is another collecting locale in the Mesa Verde group. The sandstones contain unique banded concretions ranging up to basketball-size and filled with calcite and occasional iron oxide minerals:



This is very dry country but we had a relatively wet winter and there were lots of blooms, including this gaudy prickly pear:



These yellow wildflowers grow along the dirt road:



We then drove back to the main road west of the Rio Puerco and continued south. Our intended destination was the village of Marquez but we encountered locked gates. After talking to a local rancher working on his water well in the arroyo, we soon realized, *“You can’t get there from here anymore.”*

It seems odd that a state-maintained paved road called “NM 279” has two entry points via four-lane highways: one on the south at I-40 and one on the north from NM 550. However, each is now just a spur road and they no longer connect via a maintained public road.

You can drive north from Laguna to Marquez and south from San Luis to Cabezon but there is a 45 km gap in between that may or may not be accessible and/or passable.

It seems that this has occurred since a government reclamation project on the Rio Puerco in the early 2000s resulted in aggressive access restrictions on federal lands within the basin.

In the West where the *federales* are the largest land holder, we are saddled with more and more BLM road closures and wilderness study areas. For the most part, these lands are what geologists commonly map as Qsd, aka “the Quaternary Stinking Desert”, with little to no recreational value.

So can anyone blame New Mexico’s hard-working ranchers who now lock gates to keep the eco-fascist government bureaucrats and the soon-to-follow legion of Fanta Se-based, Subaru-driving, Oakley-goggled, purple fleece-wearing enviro-tourists of alternative sexual orientations out of their private businesses? I think not.

That’s my acerbic diatribe for the day; now let’s get on with the travelogue.

After getting shut down at every turn, we drove back north to the paved road and stopped at a major junction on the roadside for lunch, a beer, and photo ops.

Could the paved road that heads to the west and south be an alternative route to Marquez on yet another day in the desert? Hmmm...

Meanwhile, here are a few more pretty flowers to bring the mood down to a *mas tranquilo* level:

Oxeye daisy:



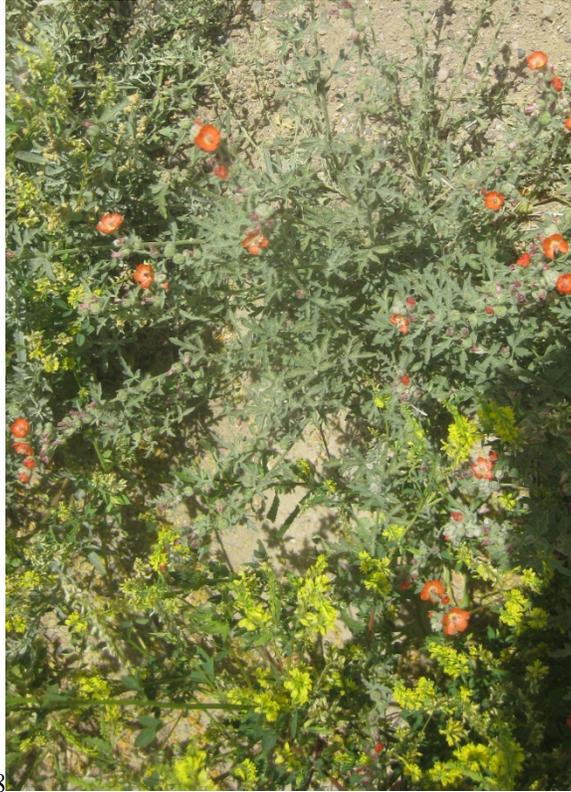
Field bindweed:



A variety of goldenrod:



Globe mallow along with an unknown yellow flower:



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A couple of lavender ones I cannot identify; email if you can help: contact@mercenarygeologist.com.





The day was really heating up so we decided to head for home, drink a cold beer, and catch Sunday Night Baseball on the tube.

On our way back, we stopped at some hot springs just off the highway north of San Ysidro. Back in the '80s, there were depressions carved in the travertine large enough to lie in and be completely submerged. In those heavily-fueled heady days of Albuquerque's downtown bar scene, this was a great after-hours spot to bring a friendly girl on a cold winter's night.

But alas, a few years later the bulldozers came in and covered them up. Now the springs only seep hot water around the flanks of the raised salt grass mound in the center foreground. Despite this man-made attempt to fool Mother Nature, they are still actively depositing travertine:



This ends my story of another dandy day in the desert. Stay tuned for the next episode.

Ciao for now,

Mickey Fulp
Mercenary Geologist



Acknowledgment: Thanks to geologist Bob Marvin for identifying cushion phlox from my previous musing.

The [Mercenary Geologist Michael S. “Mickey” Fulp](#) is a Certified Professional Geologist with a B.Sc. Earth Sciences with honor from the University of Tulsa, and M.Sc. Geology from the University of New Mexico. Mickey has 35 years experience as an exploration geologist and analyst searching for economic deposits of base and precious metals, industrial minerals, uranium, coal, oil and gas, and water in North and South America, Europe, and Asia.

Mickey worked for junior explorers, major mining companies, private companies, and investors as a consulting economic geologist for over 20 years, specializing in geological mapping, property evaluation, and business development. In addition to Mickey’s professional credentials and experience, he is high-altitude proficient, and is bilingual in English and Spanish. From 2003 to 2006, he made four outcrop ore discoveries in Peru, Nevada, Chile, and British Columbia.

Mickey is well-known and highly respected throughout the mining and exploration community due to his ongoing work as an analyst, writer, and speaker.

Contact: Contact@MercenaryGeologist.com

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