

Clark Mountain Wonderland

On his first trip to Clark Mountain, in 1922, Edmund Jaeger discovered two plants unknown to botanists until then, and a new species of land snail. There are other wonders on this rarely-explored limestone peak in the Mojave Desert—broad-tailed hummingbirds with bell-like song, pygmy century plants and fragrant pentstemon gardens. Desert readers are invited on another trek on desert trails with a naturalist.

By EDMUND JAEGER

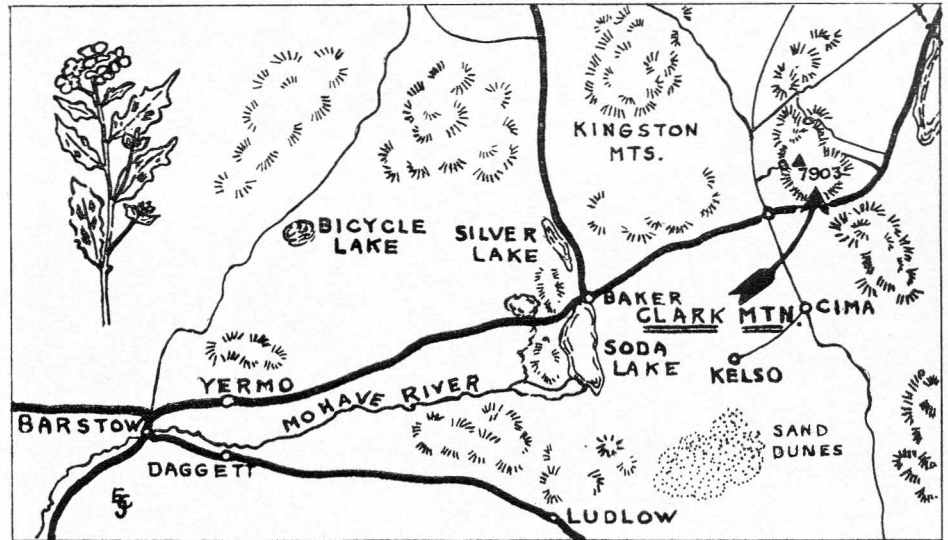
Photos courtesy Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden

Map by the Author

FAR AWAY toward the Mojave Desert's northeastern borders lies a picturesque steep-sided mountain of somber gray, banded limestone. Clark Mountain rises majestically almost a mile above the desert floor and in winter sometimes carries on its summit a cap of whitest snow. Until a few years ago it was known intimately only to the few surveyors, miners and prospectors who climbed up the bottoms of its tortuous, precipitous canyons or probed its rough rocky sides for minerals—gold, copper, zinc and tungsten.

This massive mountain rising so precipitously from the desert floor and crowned with a forest of dwarf conifers intrigued me the very first time I saw it. A search of records convinced me that it must be practically unknown to botanists and zoologists; its very isolation pointed to its being a place where all sorts of interesting natural history discoveries might be made. Mountains of limestone almost always harbor peculiar species of both plants and animals; that I had learned by first hand experience when in 1912 I botanized and hunted birds and mollusks in the high, picturesque Spring Mountain Range, 25 miles northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada. I longed to be the first naturalist who should explore and bring home plant and animal treasures from Clark Mountain.

I made my first ascent in the late spring of 1922. Not knowing a better way of attack I approached this strange desert highland from Pachalka Spring (5000 feet elevation) on its steep west side. I learned later that there is a better way to go up on the eastern slope. It was a long tough climb

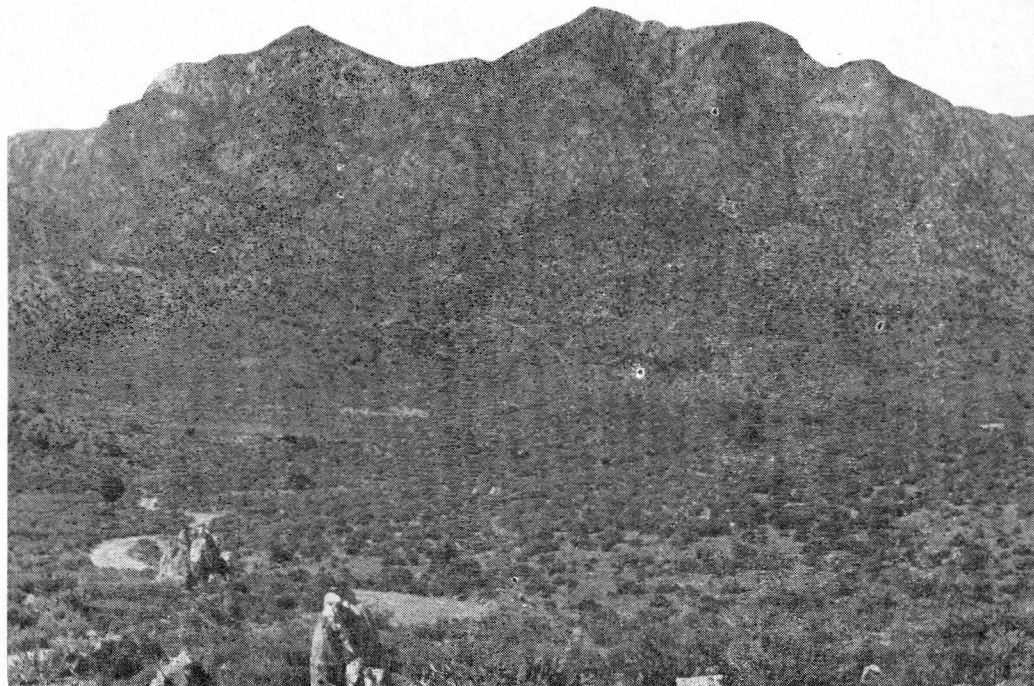


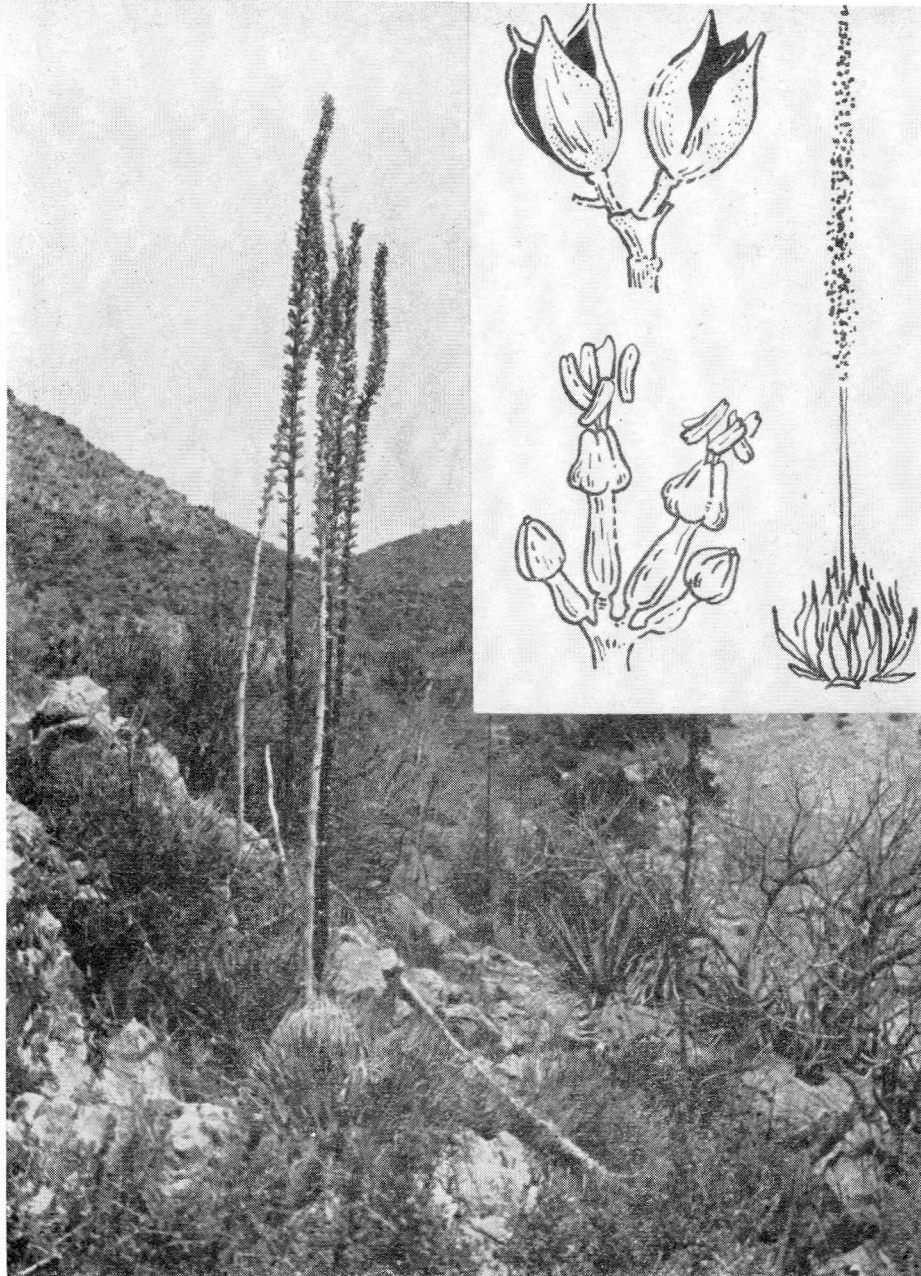
through a canyon that seemed to go almost straight up. It abounded in high, dry water falls and rock-choked channels. I took two husky students with me, and we struggled on foot and at times on all fours like bears, sometimes on hands and knees, for four long hours before we reached the summit. The climb was made more difficult because we had to carry cameras and botanical collecting cans and press in addition to water and food.

But what a rewarding climb it was! And how wonderful was the superb view our summit position afforded of the broad, shrub-dotted, mysterious surrounding desert; how rich in gleanings of flora and fauna new to the world of science.

The top-most point of Clark Mountain is a small pile of rough rocks; yet in that limited area of not more than a hundred square feet at the crest, I collected that day in a matter of a few

Clark Mountain rises above the Mojave Desert northeast of Baker, California—a challenge to climbers and a wonderland of strange plants and animals for the student of Nature.





Beautiful specimens of the rare pygmy century plant, *Agave utahensis nevadensis*, grow on Clark Mountain's slopes.

minutes two never - before - described plants and a new land mollusk. The finding of the land snail was the most exciting experience. I had predicted to my snail-specialist friend, Dr. S. Stillman Berry of Redlands, that if I could find fir trees growing on limestone atop Clark Mountain I would bring him a brand new snail to describe and name. This fir tree-limestone partnership was a good-luck combination I had learned while collecting in the mountains of southern Nevada.

As I neared the crest I found my firs—and they were growing on limestone! I was elated! The trees were small and there were but a few of them, but under the bed of fallen needles was my long-hoped-for snail. This mollusk proved to be of unusual interest for it was the first of its genus ever to be found on the mainland of California. The specimens I took that day now repose in collections under the euphonious scientific name of *Helminthoglypta californica*.

The two new plants I found were later described and named by Dr. Philip A. Munz of Pomona College.

We saw other interesting things that day. Feeding on wine-colored flowers was the broad-tailed hummingbird heretofore unknown in southeastern California. It is a hummingbird peculiar because of its large size, broad tail and tinkling, bell-like notes. We saw beautiful specimens of the rare, locally distributed pygmy century plant (*Agave utahensis* var. *nevadensis*) and beautiful gardens of Palmer's penstemon, celebrated for its delicate shades of lavender pinks and sweet apple-blossom-like fragrance.

We observed where the yellow belied porcupine, little known, seldom seen in desert California, had left its sign in bark girdled trees. On our way down the mountain we discovered the only specimen of a hackberry tree known to the Mojave Desert. By what means the seed was brought there nobody knows.

A day of wonders it had truly been. After my successes in collecting became known other naturalists soon began to explore this mountain so rich in natural history. Dr. Alden Miller and students of the University of California Museum of Vertebrate Zoology studied it and made a report on its bird, mammal and reptile fauna. Dr. Philip Munz, now of Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Gardens, and others, eagerly examined further its varied flora, and today other botanists as well as students of zoology and historical geology are climbing over Clark Mountain's rough terrain of carboniferous limestones to learn new things about this grand old mountain of the still largely unspoiled, lonely Mojave Desert.

To Clark Mountain's top there are no roads and on its steep juniper-dotted sides there are few trails. It is no place for the novice or for him who seeks easy holiday ramblings; a good mountain it is for those who like strenuous climbing and the chance to be far away from the haunts and works of man.

While there is no direct proof, there is every reason to believe that Clark Mountain was named for the Clark Mining District and this in turn after Senator William Andrew Clark of Montana, famed for his copper mines and well known in eastern Nevada during the years between 1900-1915 as builder, not only of the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad (now the Union Pacific) but also of the Clark Line, which once carried ore between Tonopah, Goldfield, Beatty and waypoints to Las Vegas and Salt Lake City. The official title of this rail line was the Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad. Clark County in nearby Nevada was also named after Senator Clark.

On maps published in the Death Valley Report of 1891, Clark Mountain is called "Clark Peak." Clark Mining District is first mentioned on page 180 in the "Second Report of the State Mineralogist" published by the California State Mining Bureau, December 1, 1880.

The gray face of Clark Mountain is scarred with numerous prospectors' diggings. At a few places may be found actual mine shafts and tunnels. Some mines long ago were worked out and abandoned, others are new workings where loads of pay ore are now being taken out. It is my guess that there are 20 "doodle-bug holes" to every opening that shows signs of any active mining.

Most of the mines are on the south end near the Barstow-Las Vegas road

and on the mountain's northeast extremity where the Coliseum Mine once flourished. This was one of the largest mines opened and operated. Although now abandoned, there is plenty of evidence of past large-scale promotion. All about the properties are seen many weathered half-wrecked miner's shacks, a collapsed commissary, pump house, blacksmith shop and ball mill and numerous radiating roads — a ghost town in miniature. The country all around has been denuded of pinyon trees, curl-leaf mahoganys and junipers to furnish fuel for winter heat for miners' cabins and boilers.

The general barrenness and litter of camp refuse at the mine headquarters has a depressing effect on the mind of persons who are pained to see the destruction of natural beauty.