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Secretive Society Keeps Watch Over Arizona's Holy Grail of Cactus

Members of the Crested Saguaro Society guard the location of rare specimens in the Sonoran Desert, a task made more urgent by population growth

By Eliza Collins [Follow](#) / *Photographs by Ash Ponders for The Wall Street Journal*

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PIMA COUNTY, Ariz.—Millions of saguaro cactuses grow in the Sonoran Desert, yet only an estimated one in 200,000 exhibits the spectacular crown of the crested saguaro.

Its rare beauty spawned the needle-in-a-haystack mission of Arizona's secretive Crested Saguaro Society. With the zeal of birders, the society's 10 members are out to find as many of the crested saguaro as time and energy allow. They hunt in a desert that stretches across 100,000 or so square miles.

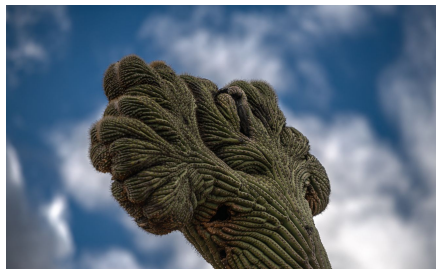
“It becomes a little bit of an obsession,” said Pat Hammes, a 77-year-old retired courtroom clerk from Tucson, Ariz. She estimated that she and her late partner, Bob Cardell, spent eight hours a day, two days a week for more than six years to locate some 2,200 of the rare cactuses.

The saguaro, the largest cactus in the U.S., often grow to 40 feet, according to the National Park Service, and one 78-footer set the record. When they reach the age of 60 to 80 years old, a rare few grow the scalloped crest that sets them apart. Biologists have yet to discover exactly why. The widest crest recorded by the society was 17 feet, though members still argue over the measurement was logged accurately.

The group estimates that its members have spent about 100,000 hours on the prowl since the effort began in 2005.

On a recent scouting trip, Joe Orman found four crested saguaros near Tucson. He recorded their GPS coordinates and checked them against a list of roughly 3,300 crested saguaros the society has tallied.

“We’ve been skunked many times,” Mr. Orman said. “We’re out in the field, and we think, ‘Oh, we found this wonderful new crested saguaro.’ And then we go back and look on the website or check the coordinates or talk to Pat and it’s already been found 15 years ago.”





Crested Saguaro Society member Joe Orman. Right, the crest of one of the most well-known crested saguaros, located in Pima County, Ariz.

To Mr. Orman's delight, these four were new discoveries. That gave Mr. Orman naming rights, according to Crested Saguaro Society tradition.

Some favorite society names include "Once in a Lifetime," "How about a Hug?" and "Magnifico." A Wall Street Journal reporter who joined a recent society expedition had one named in her honor, "Eliza."

As a security measure, Mr. Orman, 62, a retired aerospace engineer in Prescott, Ariz., and Theodore Coddling, 62, a retired public administrator in Tucson, Ariz., are the only two members with access to the society's full database. The idea is to protect the locations from would-be poachers or vandals.

When Mr. Cardell was alive, he used to load new location discoveries onto CDs and thumb drives, Mr. Coddling said. Then Mr. Cardell would hand them to the person running the database.

"Bob liked to look you in the eyeballs when he shared information," Mr. Coddling said. The group has turned down requests even from researchers to share the list. "We have trust issues," he said.



Society member Theodore Coddington, center, updates the location and current height of a crested saguaro in Pima County, Ariz.

The society is prickly about admitting new members, seeking only those with sufficient passion and prudence. Some in the group said they had to first share their discoveries before they were considered for membership.

Mr. Orman ignores anyone who writes to the website to ask about joining, he said. He wants the group to first agree on a way to vet the motives and character of aspirants. Members are debating nondisclosure agreements. Yet without new

non-disclosure agreements. For without new members, they know they risk losing hard-won secrets.

“We’re the keepers of the Holy Grail,” Mr. Orman said. “Unless we can find some younger people to join the society and then share that database with them, it’s just gonna die with us.”

Their mission has some urgency. Society members worry about the expansion of the state’s metropolitan regions, and the tramping about of newly arrived hikers and looky-loos. A crowd of even the most respectful admirers can inadvertently damage delicate cactus roots. Removing saguaros requires a permit, but that doesn’t stop cactus poachers who risk arrest.



Society member Harry Ford exploring the desert southeast of Florence, Ariz. Right, a closeup of a regular saguaro cactus.

On a recent scouting trip, Ms. Hammes was surprised to stumble upon several crested saguaro that she and Mr. Cardell had logged years ago. The cactuses, at the time surrounded by open desert, are now part of a suburban community.

Ms. Hammes has tips for the crested-saguaro curious: Climb to a desert area's highest peak and look around with binoculars. The south side of a mountain generally has more of them than the north side. If you find a crested saguaro, another one is likely growing within a quarter-mile radius.

Mr. Coddling, whose love for crested saguaro predates his marriage, has his wife keep her eyes peeled when she hikes or bikes in the desert.



Members of the Crested Saguaro Society checking a crested saguaro cactus in Sahuarita, Ariz.

PHOTO: ASH PONDER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

He gave her earrings shaped like crested saguaros after he stumbled across an artist who sold them. He also had a pin made for himself. Whenever he finds crested saguaro merchandise, he said, he buys two.

Even the most patient family can tire of their loved one's cactus crush. Mr. Orman said his daughters

and friends beg for hikes where they don't have to look for crested saguaros.

Harry Ford, 75, a retired financial services CEO in SaddleBrooke, Ariz., said that isn't realistic.

"It's impossible to stop," Mr. Ford said. "Once you start, you're addicted."

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