

MUSKETS, CANNON BALLS, AND...ANTELOPE!

What comes to mind when you think of Palo Alto Battlefield? Did your list include animals from Asia, a plant native to Madagascar or creatures you expect to see at the beach? If it didn't, then you're in for a surprise. While Palo Alto is the site of the first battle of the U.S.-Mexican War, it is also home to many interesting natural resources. As you tour Palo Alto take a careful look around. Some of these plants and animals were the same as those experienced by soldiers in 1846. Others are more recent arrivals to this site...you may be surprised by what you find.



PALO ALTO'S WILD KINGDOM

You've followed the tracks for several yards now. You've caught a glimpse of something large in the brush. No, you are not on safari. You have just had a run-in with one of our exotic species, the Nilgai. This animal, a native to India and Pakistan, can weigh up to 600 lbs. The males are also known as "blue bulls" because of the tint of the adult male's coat. They have a keen sense of sight and hearing so getting a good look at one requires patience and a bit of luck.

How did the Nilgai get to Palo Alto? After all, it is a very long swim. As it turns out, Nilgai were first released in South Texas in the late 1920's. The exotic animal was imported by the King Ranch in the hopes of diversifying the hunting on the ranch. Since then the animals have thrived in the South Texas environment and have migrated throughout the region. As one of the places that has seen an influx of Nilgai, Palo Alto is working towards on a management plan for this non-native species.

GREAT MOUNDS OF FIRE

As you walk along park trails you might come across what looks like an insignificant earthen mound. Stay away! These mounds are home to thousands of fire ants. Fiercely territorial, fire ants get their name from the painful sting they inflict. The sting site can develop into a pustule which may become infected if scratched. Most of the fire ants you'll encounter at Palo Alto are red imported fire ants. These South American invaders came into the country in soil used for ship ballast and continue to spread across the southern U.S. It is believed that fire ants have affected horned lizard populations through direct attacks or indirectly by driving away the lizard's main food source, the harvester ant. So please heed our advice and stay on all marked trails. The last thing you would want is an army of angry fire ants marching upon you.



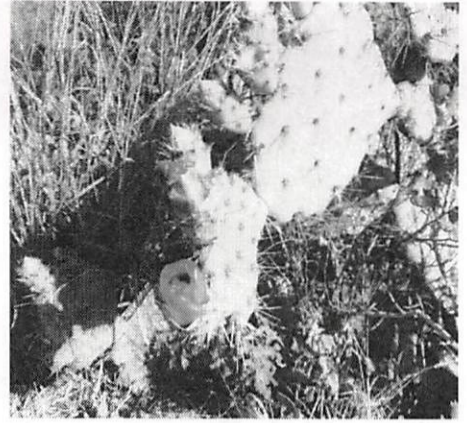
A FIELD OF DREAMS OR NIGHTMARES?

As you drive along the park entrance road, you might notice tall plants with thick leaves and a long stalk of red flowers. These strange succulents are of the genus Kalanchoe and known as "Mother of Thousands". Native to Madagascar, these exotic plants were brought to the region by landscapers and gardeners seeking decorative, drought resistant plants. Mother of Thousands is quite resilient and has flourished in Palo Alto's harsh conditions.

The plants can reach heights of up to 3 feet and produce eye-catching blooms. Their "leaves" are actually stems that sprout small plantlets. Beware! This plant reproduces easily and quickly. All it takes is one small plantlet taking root and before long it can take over an area. It's possible that our cluster of plants hitched a ride on someone's vehicle or clothing. The plants are also toxic, so keep a close eye on pets and children.

HEY WAITER, I ASKED FOR A TUNA SANDWICH!

Dotting Palo Alto Battlefield you will find an abundant growth prickly pear cactus. The cactus is well known for its colorful blooms, in shades of yellow, orange, peach, and red. When the blooms fade, they develop into sweet fruits called "tunas". The pads, also known as "nopalitas", are edible once the spines have been removed. Both items can be found at local grocery stores. Prickly pear are native to the region, but are much more common now than in the past. The plethora of prickly pear on the modern battlefield resulted from decades of activities such as cattle ranching and ground clearing that spread the thorny plant.



SOUTH TEXAS STALWART

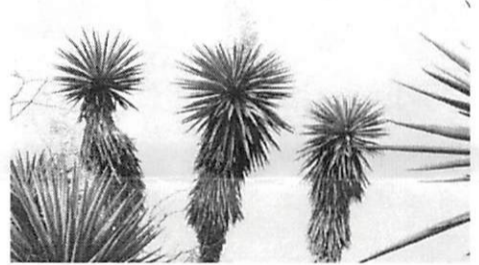


Mesquite and South Texas go hand in hand. The rugged plant is one of the few trees that do well in the area's hot, dry climate. When the trees are young they are flexible enough to bend in the coastal winds and their sharp thorns protect them from grazing animals. As the trees mature, they grow rigid and heavy.

Today Palo Alto Battlefield is interspersed with pockets of mesquite. This was not the case on the day of the battle. The battlefield then was an open prairie, a perfect place for an artillery battle. Over the years, activities like cattle ranching have helped the mesquite spread onto the prairie. Palo Alto Battlefield is looking for ways to remove this hardy plant and restore the battlefield to its original state.

MY, WHAT SHARP LEAVES YOU HAVE

The yucca is a formidable looking plant grows throughout much of South Texas. Yucca can reach heights of up to 20 feet. Its pale blooms mature from December to April. Their sharp pointed leaves offer a safe haven from predators for various bird species. Take proper precautions around yucca or you will quickly discover why they also call it Spanish Dagger. Its sharp leaves can easily pierce through clothing and skin.



WHEN IS A TOAD NOT A TOAD?

When it is a horned toad, of course. The Texas horned lizard is one of our more elusive residents. Because of its appearance it is also known as the horny toad or horned frog even though it is a reptile and not an amphibian. These horned lizards are usually found in arid or semiarid areas with sparse plant cover. Though they have an aggressive appearance, they are docile creatures that pose no threat to people. Harvester ants make up the majority of their diet. The sad news is that loss of habitat and food sources has placed the lizard on the Texas threatened species list. The good news is that preservation of Palo Alto Battlefield has protected a large area of horned lizard habitat.

CRABS, CRABS, EVERYWHERE!

This is what you would say if you found yourself at Palo Alto after a good rain. Palo Alto is home to thousands, maybe even millions of fiddler crabs. The crabs vary in size from 1 to 2 inches, males having one claw larger than the other. The battlefield is only a few feet above sea level and very close to the Gulf of Mexico. Beneath the tall prairie grass wet, salty soil provides the perfect home for these coastal creatures.

The holes that riddle the ground are actually the doorways to the crabs' burrow homes. The crabs build small mud chimneys at the entrances to the muddy homes. In times of dryness, the crabs will burrow down to the muddy depths, sometimes going down as far as 10 to 15 feet. In times of rain they roam about on the surface

