

Botanical sage Michael Powell leads grasslands tour on Mimm's Ranch near Marfa; ranch opens new trail

BY JOHN WATERS, PUBLISHER

On the last Saturday in September, the Dixon Water Foundation formally opened a hiking trail at its Mimm's Ranch property near Marfa.

The opening featured legendary Sul Ross botanist Dr. A. Michael Powell and his assistant/wife Shirley Powell who offered a wildlands grass identification class and a guided hike on the new trail for thirty or so grass devotees in attendance.

Dixon public affairs specialist Megan Wilde introduced Dr. Powell by saying he literally wrote the book on regional grasses. Indeed, in 2000, Powell penned *Grasses of the Trans-Pecos and Adjacent Areas* with illustrations by fellow botanist and Alpine resident Patty Manning. (This volume, as well as Powell's other works on regional botany, is available at Front Street Books, in Alpine.)

The mission of the Dixon Water Foundation is to promote healthy watersheds through sustainable land management, to help ensure that future generations have the water resources they need.

A working ranch, Mimm's utilizes cattle as agents of rangeland disturbance, mimicking the historic symbiotic relationship that existed between wildlife and landscape, such as that between bison and grasslands.

In this case, disturbance can be defined as removing biomass. When cattle eat grass, their root production increases, thereby benefiting soil production, which, in turn, increases soil percolation and allows more rainwater to penetrate and replenish water aquifers.

After about an hour of discussing grass morphology and tips for identifying grass, the Powell's led the group along the new 2.5-mile Overlook Trail, stopping frequently to identify and discuss grasses—and just about every other plant in view.

Pointing to a common Trans-Pecos mesquite tree, in typical good-natured form, Mike Powell suggested anyone who could not identify it would have to “go to the back of the class.” Eagerly encouraging discussion, Powell asked the group, “What else do I see here?”

A few steps further, Powell pointed out a species of plant, *Xanthisma texanum*, replete with characteristic diminutive small yellow flowers, and told the group the plant's genus, with only two chromosomes, has the fewest of any plant on earth.

In attendance was a broad spectrum of Big Bend plant geeks (this reporter included), who relished the opportunity to spend time in the field with the genial author of over 100 scholarly articles and several books, and a 40-year teaching career at Sul Ross.

Mary Beth Garrett of Alpine said she was attending the class “to listen to the sage,” a complementary reference to Dr. Powell.

Also along was Faith Gay, Director of the Marfa International School. Since 2013, the school has partnered with the foundation and enjoys Mimm's Ranch as a living classroom.

The Overlook Trail is open to the public during daylight hours. It is open to foot traffic, only. Dogs should remain on a leash and visitors



Dr. Michael Powell, longtime professor of botany and currently director of the Sul Ross State University's herbarium, lead a group of about thirty people on a grass identification field class September 26 at the Dixon Water Foundation's Mimm's Ranch near Marfa. The 11,000-acre working ranch celebrated the opening of a 2.5-mile hiking trail, along with Powell's workshop and hike. (John Waters, photo)

should remain on the trail and be mindful that Mimm's is a working ranch. The entrance to the ranch and Overlook Trail are located at the north end of Austin Street in Marfa. For more information visit: www.Dixonwater.org or call 432-729-4600



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