

A Walk on the Juniper-Pinion Ridges

On the gravel hills behind my house in northern New Mexico, at an altitude of over a mile, the dominant vegetation is pinion pine and a variety of arborescent juniper. As is typical on arid land the shrubby trees grow well spaced with much bare ground between them, an adaptation to a limited supply of water. On the ridges the spacing is greater than in the arroyos dividing them; and the trees^{here} are stunted and they bear many dead branches, an indication of the more intense struggle for survival on high ground. This variety of juniper is especially vulnerable to infestation by a parasitic mistletoe that grows in thick bunches of yellow-green dendroid stems on the branches of the trees. In the low lands where their growth is most luxuriant the pinion pines are not infected, but on the ridges under the effect of reduced resistance by depletion of nutrients and water the mistletoe can become minimally established on the stressed trees. It never acquires the strength, however, on this host to produce fruit, the translucent pink berries that ripen in the fall and are food for wintering robins and Townsend solitaires.

The bare stony areas on the ridges which at first impression appear devoid of vegetation, on closer inspection reveal a wealth of growth of small flowering plants. First to appear in the spring is a tiny yellow composite dotting the surface but never closely massed. The pinkish-orange indian paintbrush blooms early, too and persists throughout the summer. A woody plant with clustered stalks six to eight inches tall produces five petalled lavender blossoms along the stems with filamentous leaves. Clumps of grass grow all summer long sending up tall seed stalks that ripen in the fall. And growing in small rosettes are several varieties of inconspicuous ground hugging plants that remain unnoticed until the first frost turns them bright

scarlet.

A few of these small flowers persist into the fall, even after the purple asters, that bloom with such extravagant abandon in October, have replaced showy heads with puffs of gray seeds. On the ridges in late October and into November, in spite of repeated frosts, a lonely few of the yellow composites may still be found standing on bare stalks; and ^{some of} the lavender blossoms hugging the ground around blackened, desiccated stems and withered leaves, survive these first icy blasts of winter in a final effort to reproduce themselves. Grass blades clustering the bases of scattered tufts of seed stalks, in the early morning sun become bronzed or bright golden spears after all the chlorophyl has been destroyed.