

# Sharp, wicked encounters of the cat-claw kind

by Helen Fancher

As four of us walked down a desert arroyo one day, we suddenly heard a yelp from the last in line and a call of "wait a minute." She was a newcomer to the desert, and had somehow become entangled with a cat-claw. The more she struggled, the more entangled she became. It took the three of us to release her from the arms of a *Mimosa biuncifera*.

There are two cat-claws which are native to the Sonoran Desert. Both are members of the legume family; and both have been called by early pioneers such as "wait a minute" and "tear blanket."

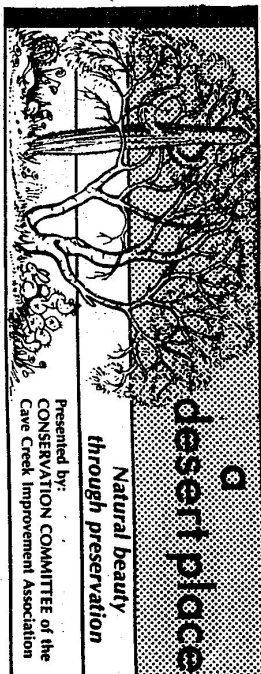
Both also have recurved spines which act like a cat's paw when they come in contact with anything passing by. One of these is a tree, *Acacia greggii*, and the other is a bush, *Mimosa biuncifera*.

*Acacia greggii* was named in honor of Josiah Gregg (1806-1850), a frontier trader and author. His books are considered frontier classics. He traveled widely in Mexico, Arizona and Southern California; and he finally died on an exploring expedition while still a young man. This cat-claw is a spreading, deciduous, small tree of rocky

desert hillside and washes. The yellow flowers are fragrant, and are an important source of high-grade honey.

In mid-August, the light-green seed pods turn reddish. These are used as food by some of the Arizona and Mexican Indians. A gum much like gum arabic exudes from the bark, and is used locally in Mexico.

The highest thorny branches are a favorite nesting site for the verdin, while the lower ones are often a haven for pursued rabbits. The wood is strong, hard and heavy, and is used for handles, trinkets and fuel. It has white sapwood and deep-red heartwood.



Natural beauty through preservation

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CONSERVATION COMMITTEE of the  
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Trees growing in favorable places can be trimmed up to make good shade trees of considerable size.

The largest-known tree occurs in the exotic game pasture of the Department of Game and Fish at Red Rock, N.M. It measures 6 feet, 5 inches in circumference,

and 49 feet, 4 inches in height; with a crown spread of 46 feet. The average desert tree, however, is quite small.

*Mimosa biuncifera* is a rather common bush in the Cave Creek area, as well as in southern New Mexico and Arizona (to as far west and north as Kingman).

The name mimosa is derived from mimos, to mimic — and refers to the rapid, animal-like movements of the leaves. Biuncifera refers to the stout, paired thorns.

Cat-claw mimosa is usually a shrub about 6 feet in height, but may become as tall as 10 feet, 2 inches in diameter in favorable places. It has a pair of recurved spines at the nodes of the twigs. The twice-compound leaves are up to nearly 2 inches long; four to seven pairs of primary leaflets, each with up to 12 pairs of tiny leaflets on the secondary rachis. It can be distinguished from the cat-claw acacia by the pale-pink to whitish flowers which oc-

cur in globose, crowded heads. The flowers on the *Acacia greggii* are yellow and cylindrical in shape.

The seed pods are about 1½ inches long, and are often curved. The sapwood is light yellowish-white and the heart is deep reddish brown.

The mimosas are not important range plants, but may be utilized as a reserve food supply. Deer browse them somewhat, and quail and rodents utilize the seeds. The plants furnish shade and cover to protect the soil.

They are a beautiful, lush green — but remember, don't get too close. Leave that to the birds and small animals.