

Book Review

Reviewed by Richard Spellenberg, Professor Emeritus of the Department of Biology, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM, and author of a number of field guides including the *National Audubon Society: Field Guide to North American Wildflowers: Western Region* and Wynn Anderson, Curator of Botany at the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas.

This remote region of North America has produced mineral wealth for several centuries, yet European botanists began their exploration of this remote region of North America only a century and a half ago. Great botanical projects produced published scientific compendia that encompassed all the plants on the deserts of either side of the massive mountain range drained by the rivers of the Barranca del Cobre, but difficult access to the mountains limited plant exploration until the late 20th century. It remains one of the last frontiers of North America to be botanically explored, the canyons, slopes and mountains, stream sides, cienegas, and cliffs revealing a bewildering variety of plants, some still unknown to science, and there remains no single work that allows for their identification.

Linda Ford's book is a breakthrough, making knowable for the first time, for both English- and Spanish-speaking people, some of the showiest plants of the region. Here we find the shimmering blue Eye of the Viper, the succulent Agritos, the robust and yet delicately fringed Basket Flower, the dazzling red La India, a relative to our garden zinnias, and more than a hundred more plants to be found in the barranca country, each presented with good descriptions and color photographs.

The book is organized for easy use, by color, a standard arrangement for wildflower books aimed at the amateur naturalist. Within each section flowers are ordered by easily observed features such as symmetry and clustering. Each two-page spread usually covers two species, an English text on the left page providing vernacular names when known, the scientific name, features for identification, habitat, geographic range, and a comment, often where the plant was photographed. Adjacent to this text is a Spanish

translation. The right page of the spread most often has two photos of each species, one showing habit of the plant – a very helpful aspect of this book – and a second of a close-up of the flower. In the front matter there is an introduction to the barranca region, a good map of the area, and an illustrated glossary explaining features of flowers and leaves,

The two of us enjoy botanically exploring the barranca country any time our mutual schedules permit, and we know first hand how difficult it is to identify and learn the plants of this fascinating region. There are no scientific references that compile and help identify all the plants that grow there – one is obligated to rely on spotty and highly technical literature. This is where this book is a break through – making more than 100 plants accessible to all. In this regard, Ms. Ford generously credits the fine work of Daniel Atha of the New York Botanical Garden for assisting with many of the plant identifications. We have used the book in the field, and it is indeed useful. Given this, the book is not perfect. Several plates and descriptions are of species “not yet identified.” Some of those we know – page 90 is *Lobelia laxiflora*, and we struggled for quite a while to identify *Xanthocephalum eradiatum* on page 60. There are a few misidentifications, such as the yellow daisy *Wedelia hispida*, more probably *W. chihuahuana*, but still a person learns correctly a “wedelia.” And the white flowered morning-glory on page 20 is *Ipomoea tenuiloba*, unidentified because morning-glories are so diverse and difficult botanically – it is correctly placed in the family Convolvulaceae, but this is not in the “familia de la jicama” as the translation states, the edible jicama being the root of a species of the bean family (“familia del frijol”). Errors are minor and not particularly distracting, and there is plenty of white space for the serious student of wildflowers to make notes, and to relate corrections to the author for her future use in subsequent editions of this or other publications.

This book was produced by a person who loves the wild grandeur of the barranca country, and its amicable people. Admirably, she began a personal project that developed into the first wildflower book ever for a region increasingly visited by tourists from the United States, Europe, Mexico and elsewhere. The book is worth every cent one spends on it, providing opportunity to enjoy even more a visit to this spectacular mountainous portion of Mexico.