

Seeing the Monahans Sandhills in a Different Light

By Malcolm McElvaney

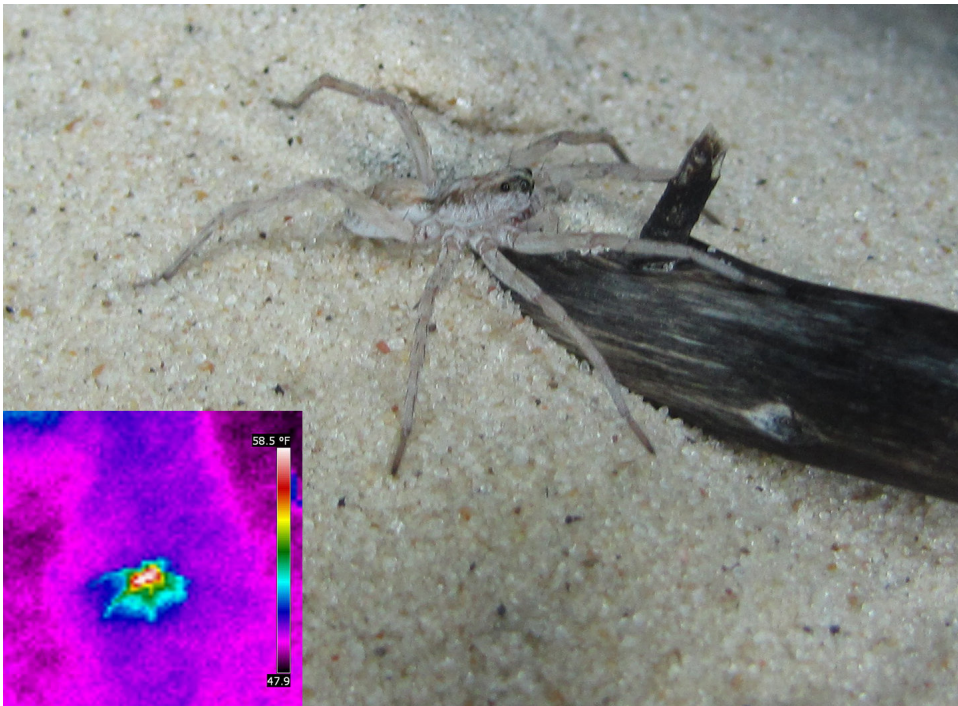


11-20-2010 18:32 – I have been walking the Monahans Sandhills State Park since April of 2007 in the daylight, heat and cold, and even at night all the while my awareness of my surroundings increasing exponentially. Every quest is different and I come away with a unique treasure or two that really make the time and effort worth it. On the evening of November 20 and into November 21 till sun rise I “camped” out at the state park and became totally immersed in the nocturnal world around me as best I could enjoying the constant low light levels of the full moon to guide my way, the cold and moisture laden air and other worldly view that can be only appreciated at night. It always amazes me how completely entrancing the place is as I come back so relaxed and at peace completely recharged, so while I’m still at the “dunes” here is a glimpse of the glimpse I witnessed.

One aspect of the night that could be recorded via photography was the scenery, challenging my photography skills in the process; however, I could only capture a few sounds of my surroundings not much more with all the technology I carried so in the end it still comes down to what I can describe. When I arrived and up to around 5am I could hear the music of the cicada or some kind of crickets in the bushes but sound isn’t so easy to track down and when I got within a few feet the music would stop. Quite often in the pursuit of an elusive subject an unexpected surprise turns up, like in the case of the rodent moving in and out of the cover of the shrubbery along a ridge of sand. I have never seen one in the morning, evening, or night on previous trips so I considered myself lucky and can add it the list of animals at least seen. Part of my experience also could be defined by the lack of light sufficient to allow me to assume what I saw, so the mind filled in the gaps creating possible holes to explore in the shadows of the grass clumps that turn out to

be only shadows and seeing other phantom discoveries. That same light acting like an artist also created many painting using the landscape and moisture and sometimes it felt as if I was in a surreal painting enhancing that other worldly feeling.

I personally have walked the dunes enough to feel comfortable doing this walk but it is amazing how much more alert I was when the wind shifted a branch and the desire to see some kind of animal life, that wasn't there as I looked around. The animal life I did see was the birds, two different types of birds I believe, using the grasses on the ground as cover at least until I got to close to them and they would fly off in as many as three birds at a time. I was trying to find them before they flew away but now I know at least where I can potential look in the future. Closer to sunrise the birds in general did get more active as one would expect. While I could have photographed the multiple prints, I didn't because I only wanted to reach the car after a 12 hour plus walk but the open sands to the NW of the pump jack was full of fresh prints and tracks of animals and birds and the freshly dug out holes of spiders and insects proving that an abundant but very wise population of wild life is out there. Maybe a mystery is better than a picture to keep drawing me in and exploring so one day I can get that one picture but never feel as if I managed to capture all there is to see.



11-20-2010 18:55 – Even with the moonlight to guide me and minimizing the use of bright light to preserve my night vision I started to use my white led light to observe the ground every once in a while. This spider's eyes glowed when light hit them so I decided to get this thermal image and close-up.



11-20-2010 19:25 – The moonlight and moisture created many beautiful scenes that a camera could not capture properly, but while the moon was still low I made this attempt.



11-21-2010 00:17 – The moon was almost overhead as I got this shot with the near infrared camera, just barely getting the cotton wood tree. The over all reddish tint is due to near infrared being reflected by the moon; while the overall cloudy appearance is the moisture in the air reflecting the near infrared more than it reflects the visible spectrum.



11-26-2010 00:26 – This is one four cotton wood trees within the park that I know of in the stage of loosing its leaves.

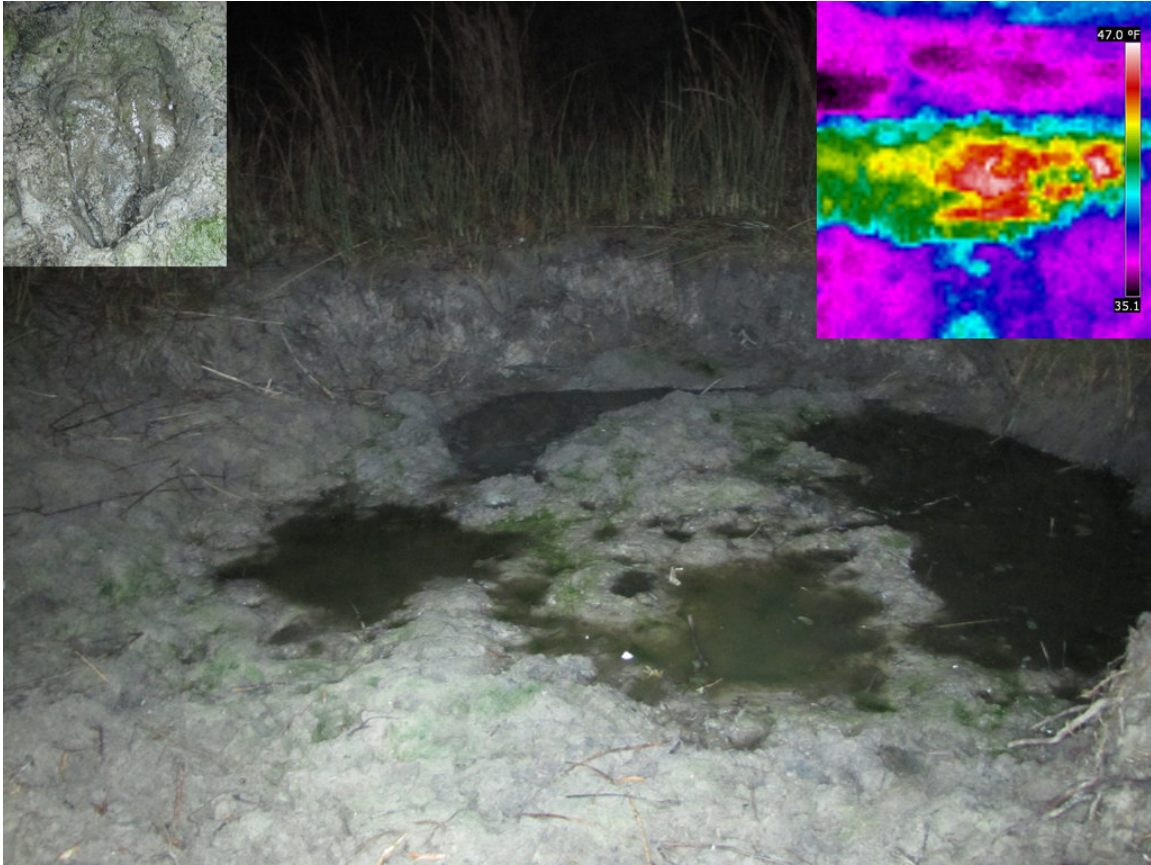


11-21-2010 04:44 – While walking from the cotton wood tree to my next target birds moving about in a vegetated area made me stop and so get this artistic shot in the process. Taken with the modified infrared camera.



11-21-2010 06:10 – At one of the closest seeps you can reach from the pump jack evidence of feral hog activity was found via a thermal imager. As I approached the hole

two bright areas showed up on my thermal imager and caught my attention immediately since the damp sand should have been cold. This area was “warmer” than the rest of the surrounding area and wallowed out located at the edge of wet area and trail coming into the hole.



11-21-2010 06:20 – This second area is what is left of the main pool of water as it has been dug out over time. I found fresh prints and the thermal imager indicated a higher temperature as well.



11-21-2010 06:32 – Artistic opportunity at the pool the feral hogs had been in. In the far upper – right corner is a grasshopper I pulled out of the water and watched start to move again and I caught a feather with water drops as well.



11-21-2010 06:34 – The feather and the water drops on a tight macro along with an unknown organic mass.



11-21-2010 06:44 – The early stages of the sunrise seen over the dunes, with Venus rising.



11-21-2010 06:44 – The moon setting just visible over the edge of the water hole.



11-21-2010 07:05 – The vantage point, in this case the tree, was used to capture the setting moon while in the opposite direction the sun was just minutes away from appearing over the dunes.



11-21-2010 07:05 – sunrise at 07:05



11-21-2010 07:20 – sunrise at 7:20



11-21-2010 07:34 – I took one more shot using the same tree as a vantage point as the sun was just appearing over the dunes.



11-21-2010 07:12 – Mission accomplished as sunrise occurs behind me so my journey is almost over.

It is now 12-05-2010 as I complete this essay and relive the memories, if you would like to contact me you can email me at malcolmm9789@gmail.com.