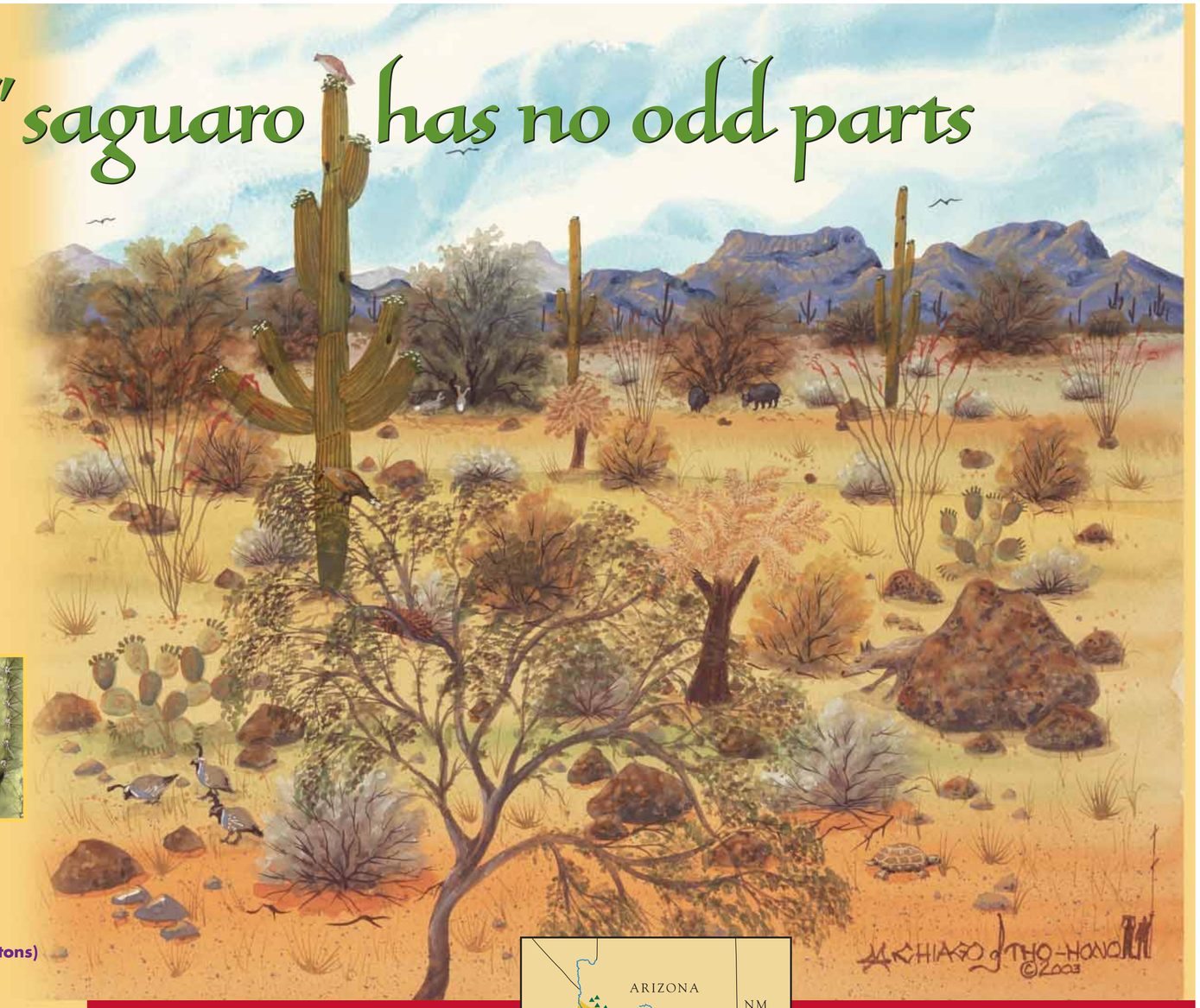
"Strange" saguaro has no odd parts

"The tall, branching, and twisted columns of the giant saguaro cactus are all about me and through binoculars I can see them striding half-way up the nearest mountain side. They are the most obviously strange, the most plainly theatrical feature of the landscape."

—Joseph Wood Krutch, naturalist



The "strange" saguaro is superbly adapted to its desert environment. A warm desert plant, saguaros evolved along with the Sonoran Desert, appearing in the Tucson area only about 8,000 years ago. The species' unique features allow it to take advantage of sporadic rainfall; withstand intense sun, heat, and cold; and repel hungry desert creatures:

Accordion-like pleats allow the saguaro to expand and contract with water intake and loss.

A waxy coating on the plant's skin restricts the loss of water.

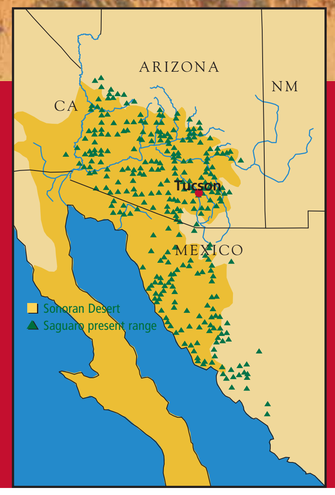
Roots—some just below the surface—spread as far or farther than the plant is tall, allowing the saguaro to gather moisture from even the lightest rainfall.

In fact, a saguaro can weigh 6 to 8 tons (5.5 to 7 metric tons) and 90 percent of that weight will be water!

On young saguaros, a long spine in the center of each spine-cluster acts as a "drip tip," directing rainwater to the roots. On saguaros of all ages, **spines** shield the plants' surfaces from sun. Of course, spines also provide protection from destructive critters. Though woodpeckers and flickers burrow nests in mature cacti (despite the sharp barbs!), saguaros survive and thrive in their challenging habitat.

Where grows the saguaro?

Desert mountain slopes, foothills, and outwash plains—these are the places you'll see saguaros. Their range extends farther north than any other columnar cacti, however, in this part of their range they do best on warm south-facing slopes where frost tends to be less severe.



In rocky, gravelly, or well-drained soil, from sea level to approximately 4,000 ft / 1,219 m, saguaros are the northern Sonoran Desert's signature plant.

Despite common depictions to the contrary, saguaros are not native to Texas or New Mexico.

Saguaro "drip tip" and Saguaro holes photos © Linda Bugg
Saguaro pleat photo © Jackie Stein
Saguaro range map based on Ecology of the Saguaro: II, Steenbergh and Lowe, National Park Service Scientific Monograph Series No. 8, 1977
The Desert Year, Joseph Wood Krutch, University of Arizona Press, 1985