

Wild Wednesday, 26 January 2022. Winter Walk in Dells, by Walt Anderson

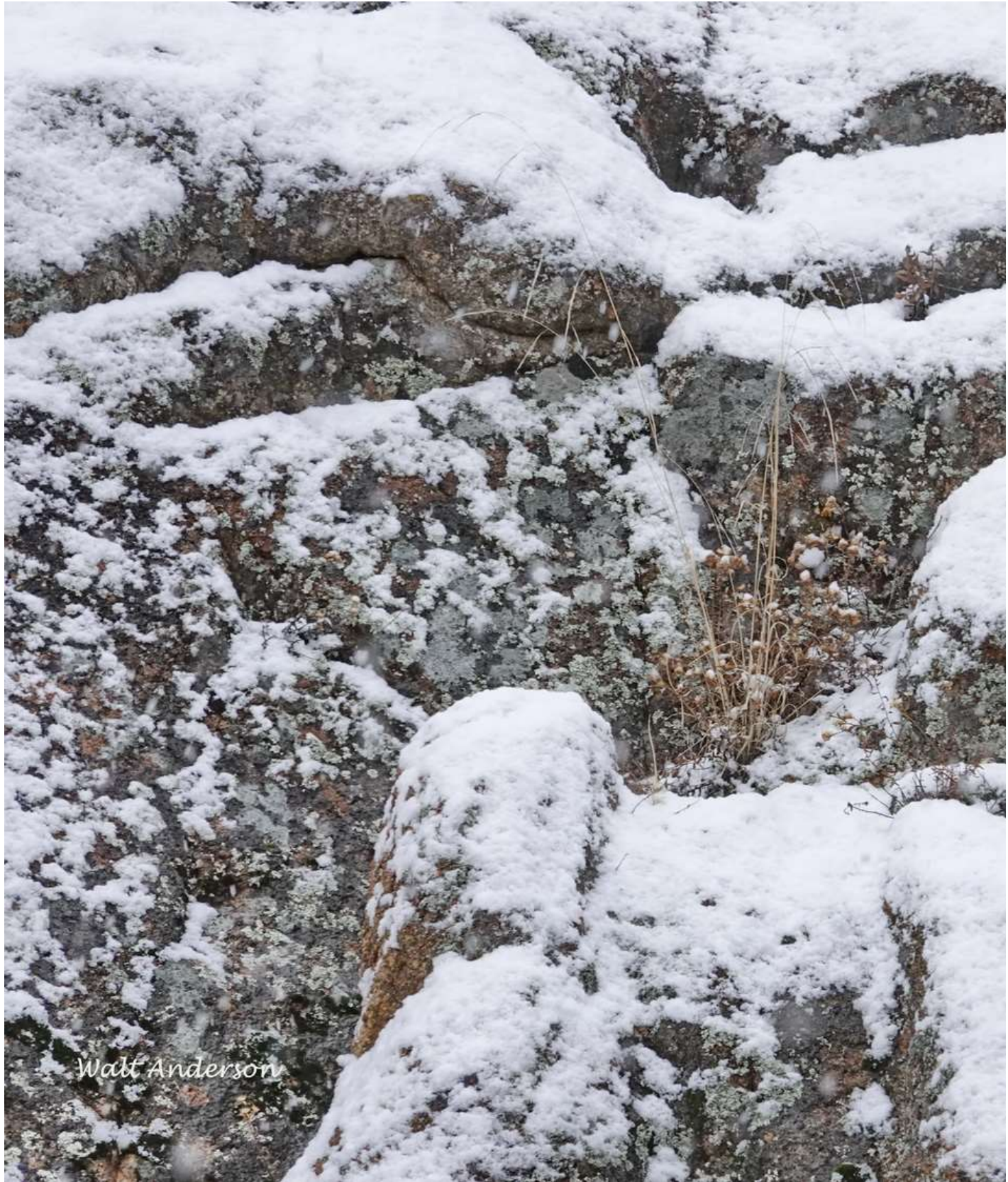
A couple weeks ago, I ventured out into the Granite Dells with no great expectations—just a chance to look for “pennies” as Annie Dillard had advised so wisely. I was thrilled with the riches I found at that time, so on 22 January this past week, I went exploring again. A change in the weather tends to trigger this kind of exploration, and once again, I was almost overwhelmed with all the beauty I discovered. From glistening beads of water to towering spires of granite and everything between, I was reminded once again what a treasure the Granite Dells is. I am thrilled that this past year has seen expanded protection for hundreds of acres, and I will keep working with others who love this ecosystem to seek more protection to build the greater regional park and preserve we dream of. Please join me on this walk, and also get out into nature wherever you live and seek the beauty that is there just waiting for our attention and admiration.



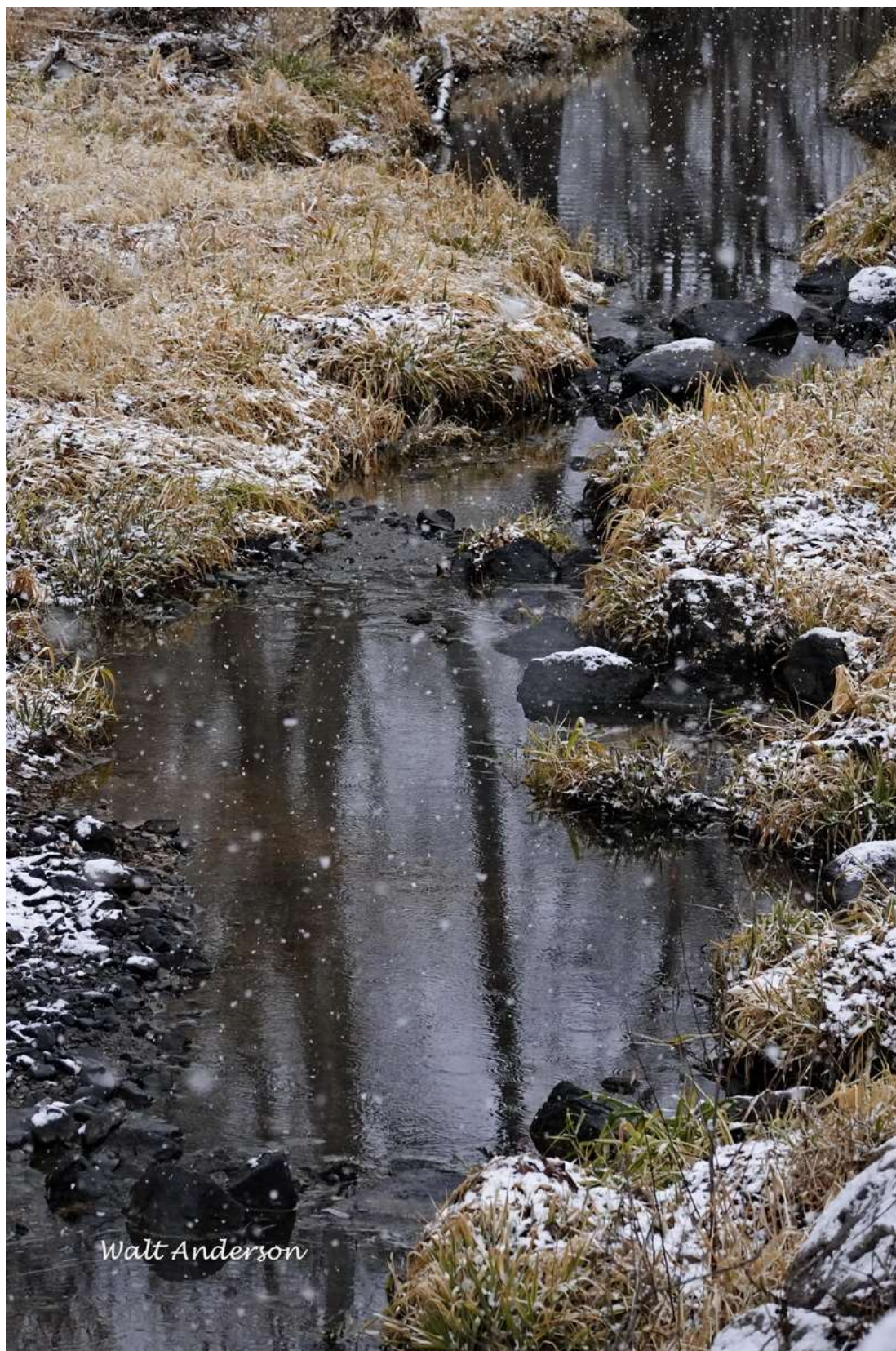
Snow had begun just before dawn, but since the temperature was above freezing, I know the opportunity to experience it would not last long. I head out with camera in hand as soon as it is light enough.



The character of the rocks changes when the skies are gray, and the snow is flying. Vertical cliffs remain exposed, while rounded surfaces take on a frosted coating.



An intimate landscape of falling snow, lichen patches, and dried grass.



Walt Anderson

Pleasing contrasts develop as snow falls on Granite Creek.



Shy Wood Ducks appear ahead in the creek. I take a quick shot and realize it is way too dark to get a sharp image. It's an interesting abstraction, but I decide to bump the ISO setting on my camera up to 1250. I know that quality will suffer, but I hope at least to get a reasonably accurate shot of a duck.



Much better. Snow starts to build up on the back of this handsome drake. He's nervous, so I pretend to be a stump. Not that I can really stump a wary Woodie!



His lady friend has a little crown of snow on her pretty head. Notice the gorgeous iridescence in her wing feathers.



I move away from the creek into the high rises of granite. Light snow is falling when I find this Red-tailed Hawk in a weathered snag.



Nearby, a flock of 30 Chipping Sparrows appears, but only one stays long enough for a quick portrait.



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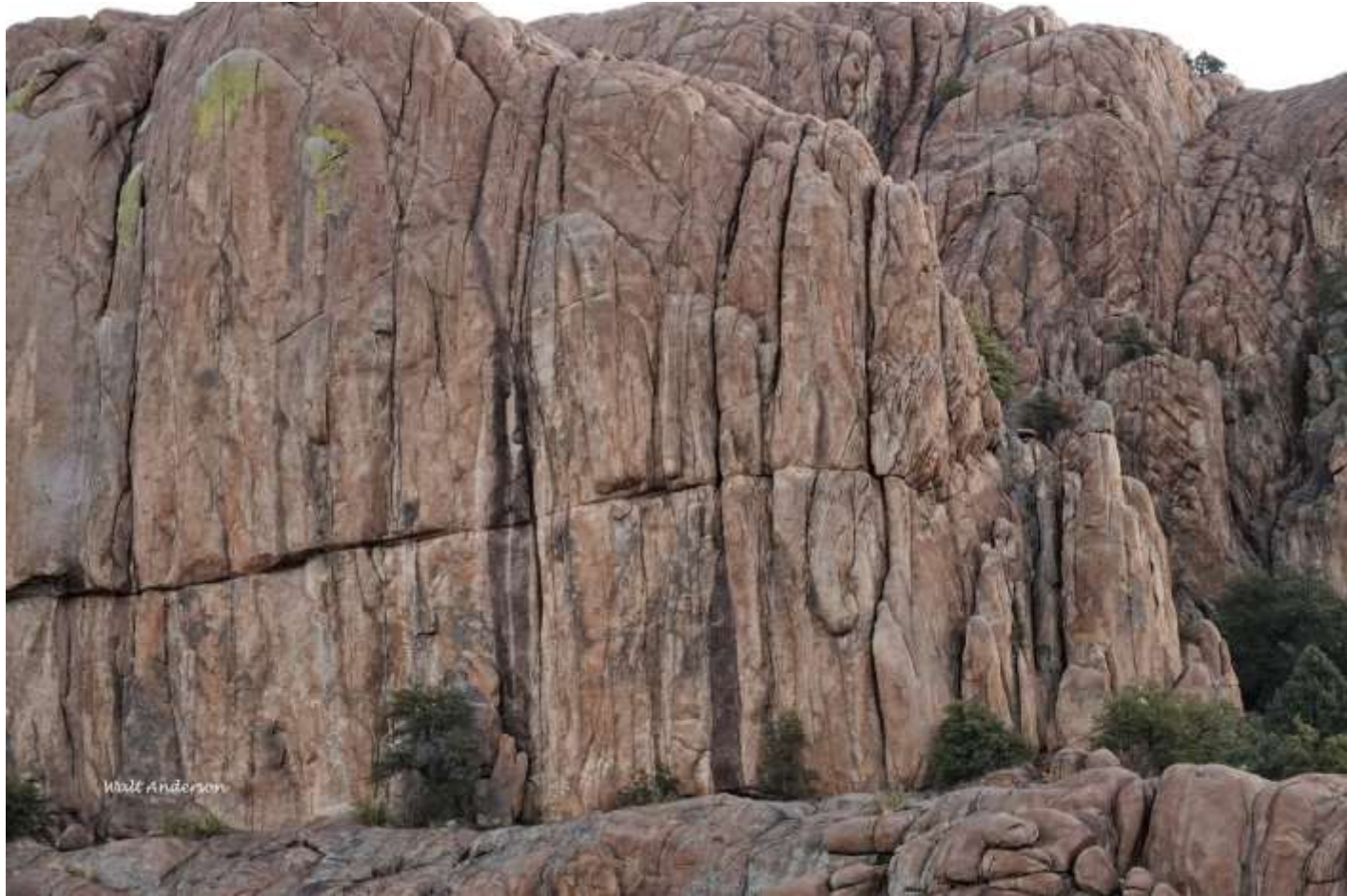
Imagine all the stresses that this 1.4 billion-year-old granite has felt! It's beginning to show its age (I can relate), but there is great beauty in this weathered surface.



As minerals seep from within the tiny fractures in the rock, they can form beautiful dendrites that remind me of fossil imprints of ferns, but this is an inorganic phenomenon. Finding them always give me pleasure.



Large-scale weathering has created shapes that fire my imagination. To me, this face suggests the weariness of a long, hard life. Still, it endures.



The vertical cliffs of the High Rappel Dells show weathering on grand scale. This is the realm of White-throated Swift, Peregrine Falcon, and Rock-climbing Shredder (I guess that's redundant).



Some of the forces that work on breaking down rock are the acids in lichens. If you look closely, you can find a wonderful world of fascinating shapes. Here lichen and moss are competing for the same space.



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Water beads up on cushion mosses as the fresh snow begins to melt.



Higher plants like grasses take advantage of the runoff between lichen-covered rocks.



It's impressive that a pinyon pine can germinate in the leaf litter gathered on bare rock, but unless its roots can find some deeper soil, it will have sprouted in vain. Nevertheless, I have seen mature pinyons standing tall in a narrow crack on a cliff face, so life often finds a way even against extreme odds.



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The wet leaves of Canyon Grape add some rich color to the generally muted winter palette.



Close inspection of mullein leaves shows those intricate stellate hairs magnified by dew drops.



Water also beads on the fine hairs of Horehound.



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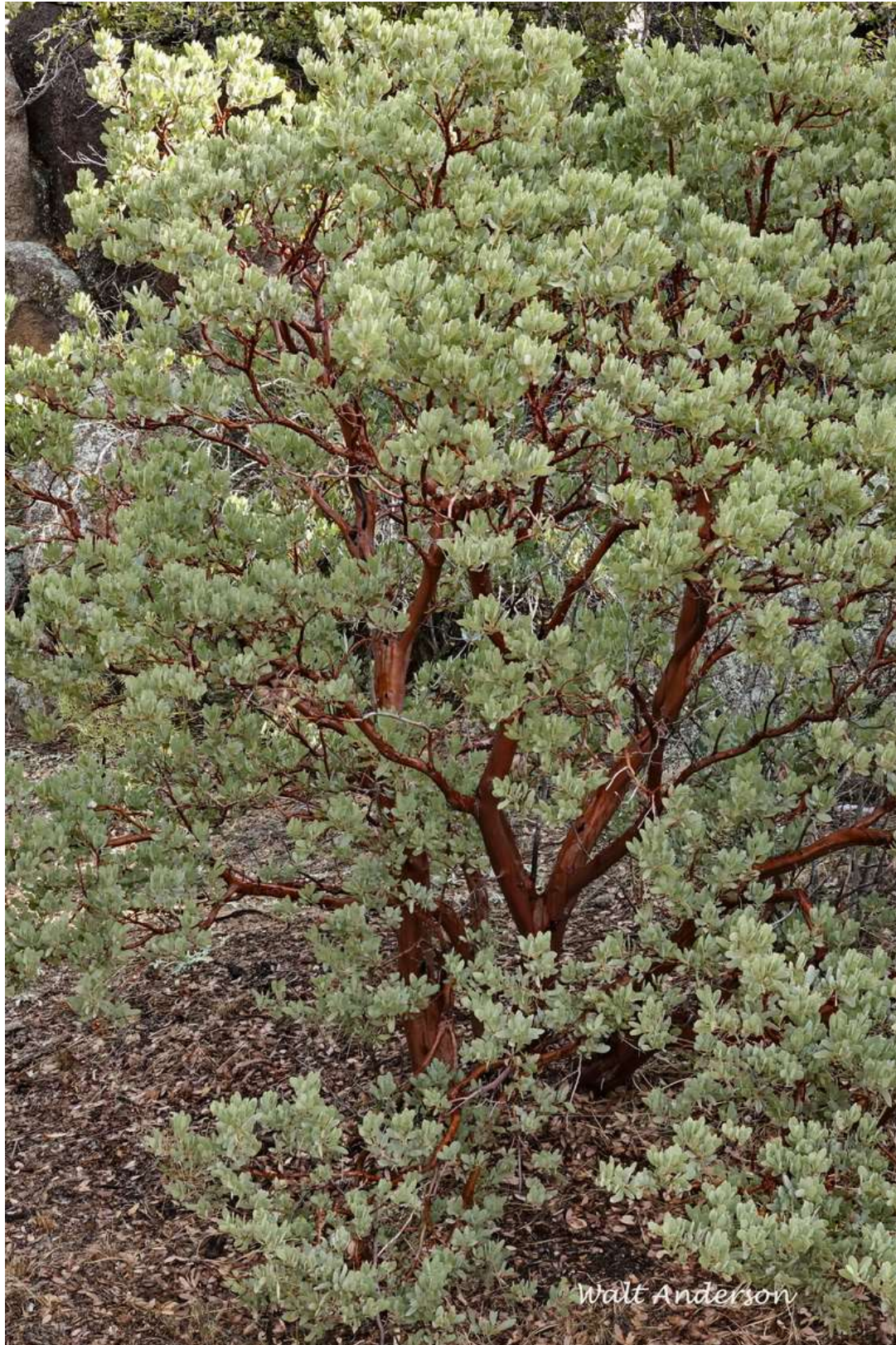
Grass blades also beautifully capture the raindrops.



Have you ever stopped to look closely at a bristlegrass head after rain? Well, I hadn't, but after seeing this intricate sculpture, I will pay more attention in the future.



Rabbitbrush, so beautiful with its yellow blossoms in late summer, has its own loveliness in winter.



Though manzanitas suffered terribly in the path of the destructive hailstorm in July, there are still places in the Dells where they thrive in all their brilliant glory.



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Of course, death can have its own beauty, as this woodpecker-hammered cottonwood snag demonstrates.



Beetle engravings decorate a pinyon snag.

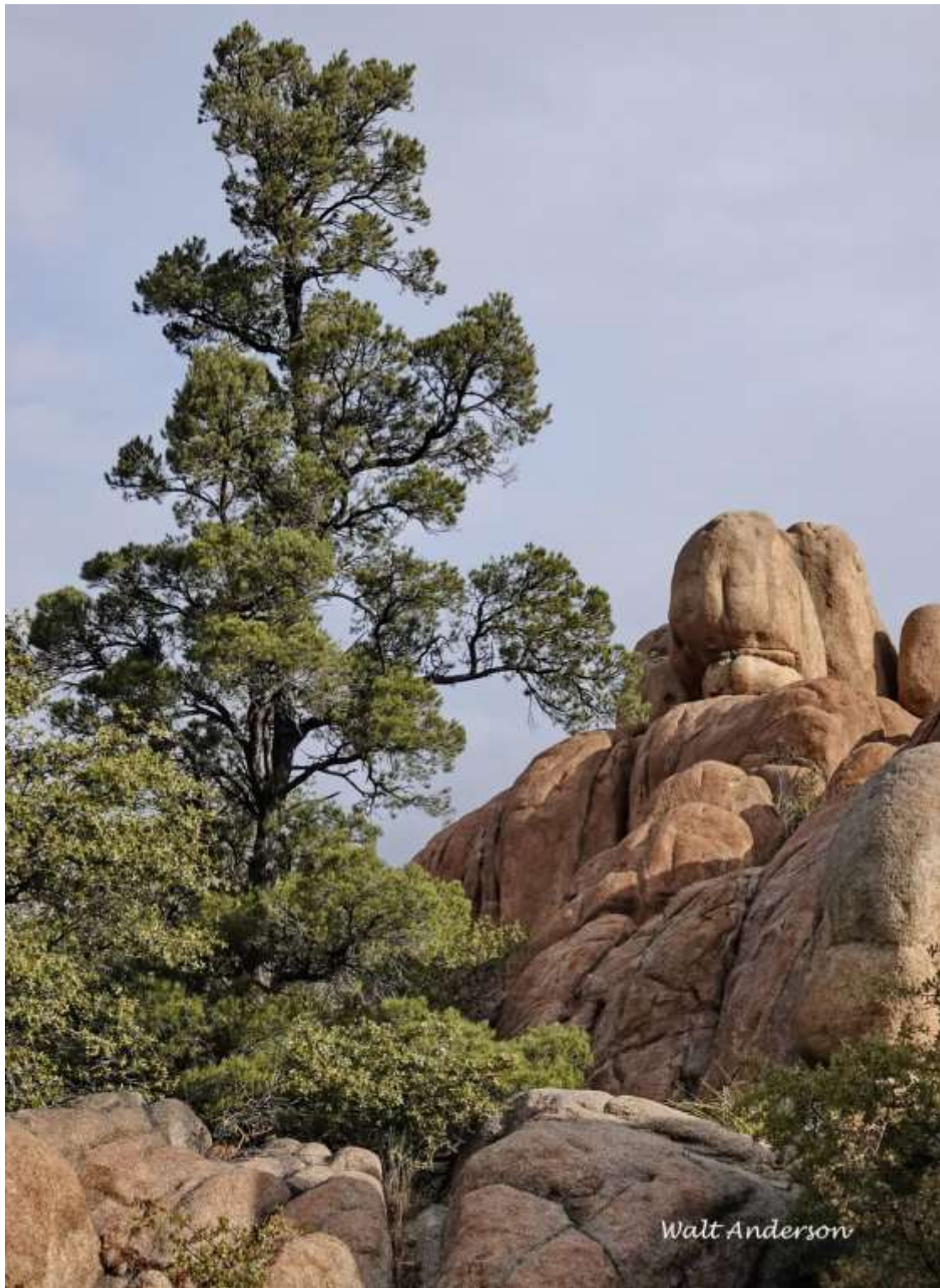


When I get back to Granite Creek, it is now raining. Most of the snow in the area is gone already, but I have managed to capture many of the ephemeral highlights that the storm created. And this is beautiful too!



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I hope that the images I captured on this morning walk will have some ripples of their own as others are moved by the many stories offered freely by the Granite Dells. This is indeed a very special place.



The rain ceases, and the sun bathes the landscape anew. Arizona has many iconic landscapes, but the Granite Dells is closest to my heart, and it is truly worthy of our love and protection. Thank you for joining me on my walk.