

Ramble Around the Little Ajo Mountains

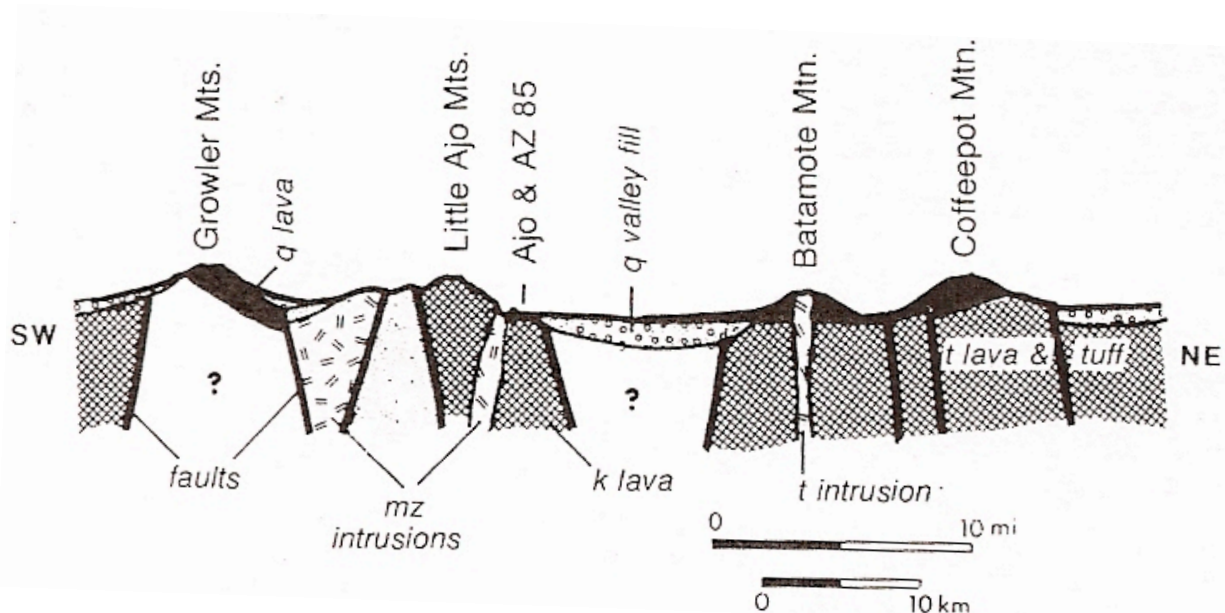
Guided by the CPNHA



Background about North Ajo Peak. The Little Ajo Mountains are a mountain range in southern Arizona, in extreme western Pima County. The town of Ajo, sits on the northeast of this small mountain range. The range is a 13 by 13-mile (21 by 21-km) long range and is connected loosely northwest to Childs Mountain a northwest-southeast running small mountain at the south of Childs Valley. Ajo, is in the center-east of the range, and is famous for the Ajo Mine, an open pit copper mine located in the Little Ajo Mountains. The highest southeast peak in the Little Ajo Mountains is Black Mountain at 3,009 feet (917 m). Three peaks comprise the northeast: Cardigan Peak at 2,922 feet (891 m), to the south west of these lies Ajo Peak-(highest of the range) at 3,220 feet (981 m); and north of it is also North Ajo Peak. This Hike is around North Ajo Peak.



Mountain Formation. These Mountains are in the basin and range province of western Arizona and are remnants resulting from vertical block faulting and subsequent erosion. The southern part of the Little Ajo Range of which North ajo Peak is a part, "contains tilted blocks of precambrian gneiss, Cretaceous-Tertiary (Laramide) intrusive rocks and some Cretaceous or Tertiary volcanic rocks, tipped every which way by Basin and Range faulting. Like other ranges in this part of Arizona, these mountains were once completely covered with valley gravel and volcanic flows that have now been eroded off" (Chronic-Roadside Geology of AZ)



Prepare for the Hike. This is a moderately strenuous hike over broken terrain with many washes to cross. Substantial shoes, a small pack to carry a lunch, and one to two liters of water are a must. A hiking stick or pole and a hand lens may help as well. The hike is just over four miles long and there are many opportunities to photograph the interesting flora and the geologic formations. Set aside at least five hours to give time to interpret the landscape. Guides to Arizona desert plants and geology would be good resources and they can be purchased in the Cabeza Prieta Bookshop at the Refuge before you leave.

This hike is guided by our volunteers and this is not a set of directions to undertake it on your own. Please join our scheduled trip.

Highlights of the Hike. The Hike begins in a parking area approximately one-half mile from the Ajo loop road at N32° 20.791' and W 112° 54.214'. Be watchful for evidence of the fauna of the Sonoran Desert. Scat and tracks of deer, coyote, jack rabbits and javelina abound but you will not likely see these animals as they hear and see you and are retiring creatures. The desert soil is full of holes and if you have a mirror you may use it to shine sunlight into them and may be rewarded with a tarantula or other creature looking back! The approach to the peak from the east rises up the bajada and you will see a transition of desert plants from primarily bursage and creosote bush at the lower elevations to saguaro and organ pipe cactus higher up. If you are watchful you may see elephant trees, mammillaria cactus, limber bush, and mormon tea. Close to the rock formations a hand lens will reveal the composition to be of granitic inclusions in a matrix. This is tuff a rock formed from the deposits of a volcanic eruption. Note this structure now as you will see a somewhat different rock on the west side of the ridge. Proceed around the ridge being careful on the scree slope and especially on the descents and climbs through the washes which drain the range. Pay attention to the cholla which are easily picked up on your shoes or clothing and do not try to remove them with your fingers. The western side of the ridge presents a different composition of rock, intrusively formed. Look closely at the boulders on the talus slope and notice the fresh surfaces. are dull red with compact crystals. The crystal size is an indicator of the rate of cooling. Relatively larger crystals indicate slower cooling.



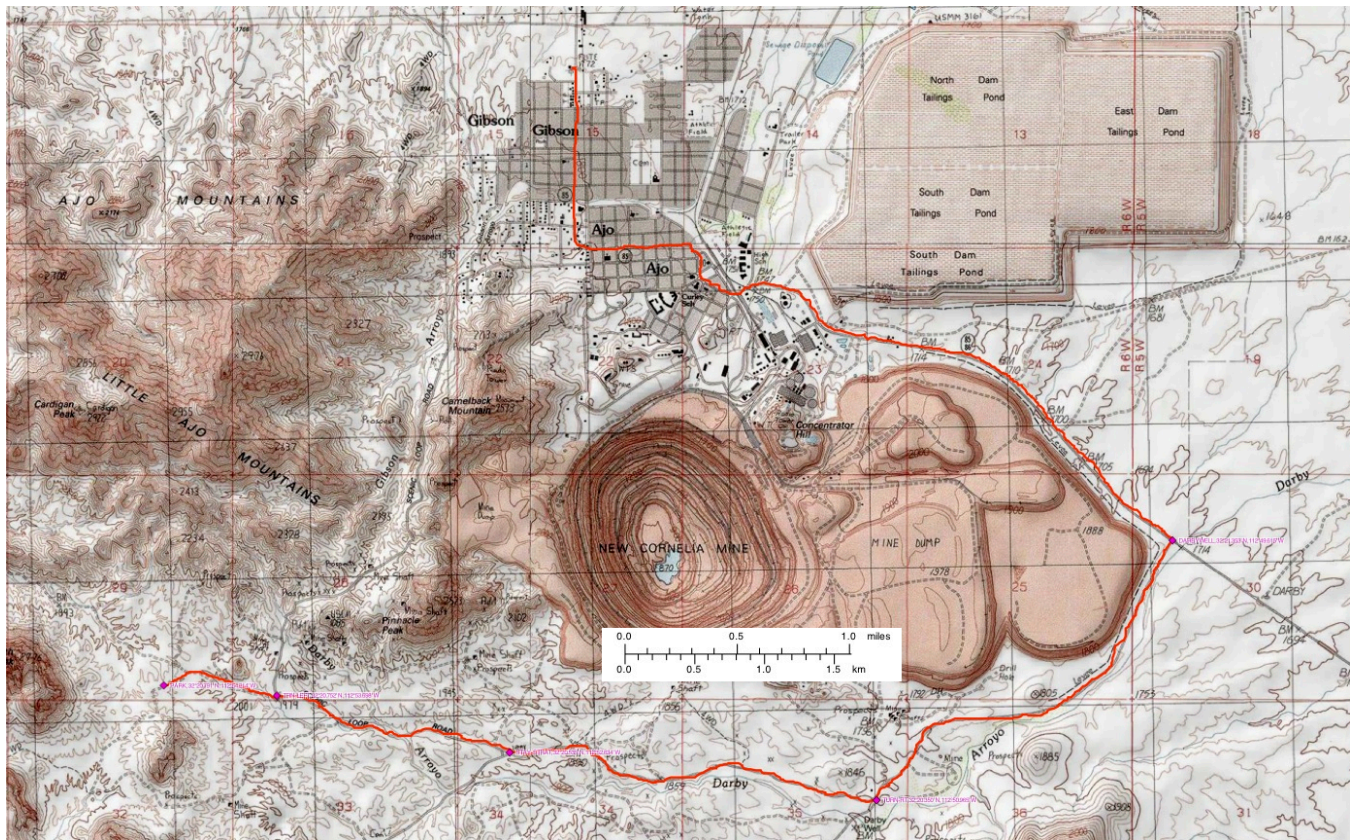
Iron in this rock weathers to a ruddy brown color for the outer centimeter due to the action of atmospheric moisture, rain and heat. The released minerals are also much reduced and you may notice the vegetation is sparse. There are places the contact between the two rocks types can be seen in the formations above you.

The continuation of this hike will take you along a road and through the washes at a lower level. Look for the common trees and bushes of the Sonoran Desert including mesquite and several varieties of palo verde. Arizona jumping bean and bitter condalia line the wash as well.

Views to the Horizon. The vantages of the elevation of this hike allow great views to several significant landmarks . The view north of east will show a particularly flat topped mountain named Hat Mountain. This is sometimes called tabletop by both Ajo residents and visitors but that hill is much further north-east and cannot be seen from here. Slightly south of Hat Mountain is a distant hill with two “humps.” This is Coffee Pot in the Saucedo Mountains east of Ajo town. Near the beginning of the hike look almost directly east and the mine tailings of Ajo’s open pit can easily be picked out from the natural surroundings along the horizon. Turning more to the south-east is Montazuma’s Head a prominent rock formation near the northern entrance to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. When traversing the southern end of N. Ajo Peak look almost directly south and a jagged molar shaped mountain stands out. It is Kino Peak near the Mexican Border and named for father Eustibo Kino an early Spanish Priest and Explorer. To the west behind some intervening unnamed hills lies the Growler Mts. one of several Southeast to Northwest running mountain chains characteristic of the basin and range

topography formed when the Earth's crust was stretched by tectonic forces and causing the crust to break along lines parallel to the current mountain chains and allowing blocks between those faults to sink resulting in a succession of high and low mountains and valleys. Erosion has done the rest.

Getting to North Ajo Peak



Directions from the refuge to N. Ajo Peak

From the Refuge parking lot turn right and follow State Route 85 south through Ajo for 4.2 miles. Turn right onto Darby Well Road just south of the last tailings pile (sign at turn). Continue along Darby Well road 2.0 miles to the intersection of the Ajo Loop Road and turn right. Proceed west on the Loop Road 2.9 miles, take a left turn onto an unmarked desert road and proceed .4 miles to an intersection, turn left. There is a parking area in about .1 miles