



Aravaipa ambling

Exploring the Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness involves some wading in the year-round creek.

By ROB JONES WITH KATHLEEN JONES

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Cool rain water courses off my hat and down the back of my neck, continuing down to my neoprene socks. Kathleen and I are pressed against one of the towering volcanic walls of a narrow gorge, yet find little shelter from the surprise morning storm.

Outdoors

Argh.

It is late September, and our early

morning march up Aravaipa Creek is cut short by a 9 a.m. thunderstorm. Wow, it's really raining, hard. We're not enchanted with the prospect of another flood — we're already slogging through stream-side mud and milk chocolate water from a Friday flood two days ago. Noting how the flood rearranged the flotsam and bent the willows and horse-tails, we reconsider going farther into the narrow gorge we just entered when the T-storm pounced.



AT TOP: Aravaipa Canyon near Horse Camp Canyon. ABOVE: Raccoon prints in the mud. (Photos

OUTDOORS

from Page B1

So, we retreat to a camp we saw below and think about options. We get comfortable and set up camp, then nap through two storms, then while away the afternoon in canyon time, beneath much appreciated and stately cottonwood trees. It's a comfy camp, on a bench above the stream, with a ledge of bedrock just the right height for sitting and lounging, and arched over by sheltering trees. Lovely.

It's peaceful, and canyon time stretches a bit longer. We had planned to camp near Horse Camp Canyon, but believe we made the right decision to change plans given the erratic weather. I'm imagining that ambulating Aravaipa will be easier tomorrow.

We've wondered about hiking the Aravaipa since reading something Ed Abbey, a ranger at Aravaipa in the 1970s and famed writer of "Desert Solitaire" said.

"It is among the few places in Arizona with a permanent stream of water and in popular estimation one of the most beautiful. I am giving away no secrets here: Aravaipa Canyon has long been well-known to hikers, campers, horsemen, and hunters from the nearby cities."

The 13-mile long canyon is at 2,600 feet and east of Coolidge and south of Globe. It is on lands managed at both ends by the Nature Conservancy and the creek flows year-round.

The next day, we're bound for Horse Camp Canyon and back.

It's a relative gallop along the broad flood-formed sand and river rock bench near Horse Camp Canyon. We've found a few of these overland routes along the way, yet the remainder of the trek is a bit tedious wade and occasional thrash. Stark contrasts abound. Above are buffy volcanic cliffs — dotted with saguaro and other prickly desert plants — while we wade cool water beneath desert willow, cottonwoods, and sycamore. Glorious.

It's quite hot above, yet cooler in the riparian zone, especially in the shade of towering walls or big trees. The stream level is lower than yesterday and the water quality is improving to murky turbid from milk chocolate shake consistency. A flock of blue-wing teal, a great blue heron, a white-tail deer, a cottontail rabbit, and a few frogs are what we see today. And, a six-person ACE (American Conservation Experience, founded in Flagstaff) crew from Tucson — here to get the invasive perch out of Horse Camp Canyon Spring. I don't see the coatimundi I was hoping for.

It's five hours of hiking and two good breaks and we're back in comfy camp to bathe on warmed polished rock before dinner and another cool night. The alum treatment has worked well, and we have clear water for dinner and drinks.

Our third hiking day is greeted by an-

other cerulean sky and JND (just noticeable difference) more clarity to Aravaipa Creek. Quartz intrusions sparkle in the early angle sunlight. An eared owl rows silently past as we eat our oatmeal.

We enjoy the walk out to the trailhead in a clearing Aravaipa Creek, beneath big shade trees. Even with the plentiful shade, it's growing hot as we approach the west trailhead, now on land managed by the Nature Conservancy. The Nature Conservancy's 9,000-acre Aravaipa Canyon Preserve includes lands at both the east and west ends of the canyon as well as preserve lands, mixed in with public land, on the canyon's south rim.

We've hiked a leisurely 13 miles in the Aravaipa. As we dump cool water from the car over our heads, change clothes, and head for home, we recall that Abbey said it well: "We have earned enough memories, stored enough mental-emotional images in our heads, from one brief day in Aravaipa Canyon, to enrich the urban days to come."

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IF YOU GO...

SUGGESTIONS

Of course, wear wading shoes. Shoes that give decent support (you don't want a sprained ankle in the Aravaipa). Check the USGS stream gauge prior to leaving home — flows of 10 cfs (cubic feet a second) or less present good hiking. Take and use two hiking poles — they provide stability and allow you to probe for possible deep holes when the water is murky. Take alum and a collapsible bucket and know how to use them. You will also want a way to purify water. If using a water filter, I suggest attaching a pre-filter with replaceable filter elements. Take a good camera and a decent map. You need a permit for day hiking or camping (maximum is two nights), which you obtain from the BLM. It's best to use the BLM online advance permit system to reserve your spot.

GEOLOGY

On the west end of the canyon, between Virgus and Hell's Half Acre canyons, the creek cuts through a dark red porphyry (rock containing crystal structures). This rock is considered part of the Pinal Schist group which originated in the Precambrian Era. It is older and harder than the other formations and may be why the stream has cut a narrower channel in this area.

The cavernous, buff-and-brown colored walls you see as you walk through the canyon from the east are composed of Hell Hole Conglomerate, which extends to Parson's Canyon on the south wall and Hell Hole Canyon on the north wall. From here and continuing west, the Galiuro Volcanics begin and shape Paisano Canyon, and from Booger to Horse Camp Canyon. This mid-portion of the canyon displays impressive red, orange and gray walls with columns towering over 1,000 feet.

GETTING THERE

Drive I-17 toward Phoenix, then US 60E toward Globe, taking exit 227 to AZ177, through Winkelman, and another 11 miles south of Winkelman on AZ77, where you will see a sign pointing you East to Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness. After turning off 77, at Central Arizona College, it's 12 miles to the trailhead, about 8 miles of this on dirt.

Alternatively, for a quieter albeit slightly longer (17 miles) drive, take I-40 East to Exit 285, then South on AZ77/US60 to Winkelman, and another 11 miles South of Winkelman — continuing on AZ77, where you will see a sign pointing you East to Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness. After turning off 77, at Central Arizona College, it's 12 miles to the trailhead, about 8 miles of this on dirt.

FULL REPORT

<http://wildernessvagabond.com/aravaipa-2013/aravaipa-2013.htm>

MAP

<http://www.trimbleoutdoors.com/ViewTrip/2441346>