

“MEMENTO MORI”

By ROB BETTASO

Periodically, our electric company mails out a summary of precipitation values for the year. In this portion of the White Mountains, generally the driest time is mid to late spring. In other words, now.

Given our current temperate weather, I have been mountain biking the local Apache-Sitgreaves (A-S) National Forest Trail System as much as possible. Later in our warm season, when the monsoons kick in, the trails can become a quagmire, making biking nearly impossible. Additionally, in a few more weeks, the trails will see much greater hiking and equestrian use from visiting desert dwellers -- up in the High Country to escape the heat.

Over the years, I have hiked the nearby Panorama Trail (PT) a few times and have always meant to give it a spin on my bike. This spring, I decided the time had come to pedal the PT. So, on a recent morning, I aired up my bike's tires, lubed the chain, put a few items in a day pack and set off for what I expected would be a leisurely half-day jaunt.

Distance-wise, the PT is a very reasonable ride as, at its longest, it is only a 9.5-mile loop. At two points along the Trail, you can reduce the mileage by taking an authorized and well-marked short-cut. The Forest Service trail guide ranks the difficulty of biking the PT as “moderate” (as distinguished from their two other descriptors -- “easy” and “difficult”).

As the guide states: difficulty rankings are based on a trail's length, its change in elevation and the types of terrain. Obviously, the guide cannot possibly be expected to rank one's individual fitness, attitudes or abilities (including, but not limited to, one's strength, stamina, agility, skills, nerve or judgment).

During my college days in Missoula, Montana, a wise person once told me that the best possible advice he could give me for my proposed, week-long backpacking trip into the Bob Marshall Wilderness was to “know my limits.” Over the ensuing years, I have sometimes heeded that advice and sometimes not. Invariably, my tightest scrapes have always occurred when I neglected to follow said counsel.

When I entered my forties, long ago, I truly began to respect the wisdom of those words. I also came to realize that just knowing one's limits was no guarantee that a well-planned, realistic outing might not spiral out of control due to an entirely unpredictable turn of events -- a freak storm, a twisted ankle, a broken piece of critical gear or wildlife behaving badly, to name just a few.

As such, I found that, by my fifties, when the infirmities of aging begin to make one cautious, I was doing less and less white-water river running and remote wilderness back-packing trips. Instead, I was taking more day hikes, lazy river floats and weekend car-camping excursions. The call of an adrenaline rush was long gone and in its place, I had found new kinds of excitement, simply by taking slow strolls through still woods or in conducting a thorough examination of a short stretch of an unfettered stream.

In some respects, I suppose I could say that, with the passing years, I have rediscovered the joys of my boyhood -- by slowing down, taking my time and paying close attention to the commonplace miracles of nature. And yet, while riding a bike is a quintessentially youthful way of enjoying the outdoors, most “mountain bike” trail rides I have taken tend to be very physically demanding and sometimes, downright unpleasant.

Well, in these pages, at this particular point in life, I am happy to report that for me, biking the PT represents an appropriate blend of easy do-ability coupled with occasional moderate thrills. And so, let me now briefly relate the story of a late April ride along the Panorama Trail.

When I pulled into the trailhead parking area, I was a little concerned as a Ford pick-up and a large horse trailer were already parked there; their occupants apparently somewhere along the Trail. No matter, I thought, the PT is designed for all manner of non-motorized recreational use and, although I've never cared to ride a horse, I do consider the equestrian option to be a proud tradition and a noble way to traverse our public lands.

That said, after a short distance, once the initial cherry stem stretch of the PT connects into the looping portion of the Trail, I opted to proceed in the direction that wasn't festooned with fresh horse dung. However, this meant that I was soon pedaling hard, as the Trail quickly ascends an incline that takes one to the saddle between the two summits of

Twin Knolls. From the saddle, the view stretched all the way to the San Francisco Peaks (near Flagstaff) as the air was clear and afforded maximum visibility in all directions.

Where the Trail runs along the slopes of Twin Knolls, the path is fairly smooth. This is a good thing as the Trail is also narrow and drops off abruptly along one side such that a nasty tumble downhill might result should one lose control of one's wheels. After descending the Knolls, the PT levels but is frequently studded with malpais rocks of various sizes that are sometimes loose and at other times embedded into the soil. Both types of substrate can be treacherous and I had to keep my wits about me to avoid a spill.

The long East-West axis of the PT is a joy to ride as it gently rolls through the pinyon-juniper woodlands and is relatively quiet. There are other portions of the Trail where timber cutting can be quite loud and, in a few places, the clap of gunfire from improvised shooting ranges also mars the aural soundscape.

As I bounced along the Trail, jays and juncos darted across my field of vision while whiptail and fence lizards flung themselves off the Trail and into the adjacent duff. I stopped occasionally to enjoy the views because, when you're in motion, you have to keep your eyes glued to the Trail. A few old two-tracker routes bisect the PT here and there but, given the frequent posting of white diamond trail markers, there is little chance of proceeding down the wrong path.

When I reached quarter-mile marker number 20, I stopped to guzzle from my water bottle and eat a granola bar. Satisfied, I then decided to stretch my legs by taking a short stroll down to a small, muddy pond identified on the map as "Porter Tank." Several Lesser Goldfinches were feeding in the weeds that grew around the margin of the pond but otherwise, all was still and nothing disturbed the pond's placid surface.

As I walked back to my bike, I stooped to admire the lavender petals of a Woodhouse's Phlox, a common sight in the White Mountains at this time of year. While I'm not sure who this flower was named after, it wouldn't surprise me at all to learn that it was the same naturalist whose name also distinguishes a species of toad. What an accomplishment, I thought, to have your name given to two perfect marvels of nature. As far as I'm concerned, one can do nothing more important in life than to achieve such an honor.

Saddling up, I headed south along a section of the PT that is perhaps the most challenging stretch for bike riding. The Trail in this reach contains several short but steep portions that are rocky enough to make progress exceedingly difficult. In a few spots, I had to get off my bike and push it along the Trail. A clear case of "knowing one's limits." With summer right around the corner, the last thing I want is to be grounded for weeks while recovering from a broken collarbone or some bruised ribs.

After a couple of miles heading south (in a portion of the PT that I have dubbed The Stegosaurus' Spine), the route turns and runs along the north side of Porter Mountain. The last couple of miles are easy riding but the Trail does cross through a dense stand of Ponderosa that is currently being thinned by A-S contractors. As such, wood chips decorate portions of the Trail and, should they be cutting when you pass by this area, you may want ear plugs. Not that I'm complaining, as it does seem to me that thinning in this chunk of the forest is well advised.

I close the circle of the loop portion of the PT and head back along its cherry stem to the parking lot. It was a superb ride and I know that I will do it several more times this year to see the PT as it transitions from spring to summer and into fall. On some of my future visits, I plan to explore the two "connector trails" -- the Flume and the Sawmill connectors, that link the Panorama and Timber Mesa loop trails.

When not pedaling along the approximately 25 miles of trails that adorn the A-S Forest north of Porter Mountain Road (aka County Route 45), there are no less than another eight official A-S loop trails plus connectors in the Lakeside Ranger District alone, several of which I have yet to ride. Naturally, some of these various loop trails are designated as "easy;" others as "moderate" and the remainder as "difficult."

At my age, I think I will focus my limited energies on those first two categories. At least until they come up with a cure for getting old....