

# Hiking the Dead Forest

By Anne Groebner

Escudilla Mountain is haunted by its past. I am convinced that when you hike through what's left of its ancient forest, the spirits of many past injustices impress their anger or sadness to every traveler who will listen... I heard it. It started with an eerie whisper and then a whistle through the trees and finally a roar of high winds creeping up and over the Mountain ...and it sounded a lot like a train off in the distance moving closer and closer, as you stop and listen with intrepidity. It is so loud, that even Katie, a canine companion, stopped and turned her head to listen. It is a warning. "Turn back," it says, "there is danger ahead." Of course, I listened but I had tried to reach the top earlier this summer and was stopped by a monsoon thunder shower and I was determined to make it this time. I had no idea what I'd find on the trail. A trail that ran through a forest of dead trees. Their silvery, smooth trunks that barely supported empty branches singed with the blackness that fires leave behind.

In the year 2011, one of the largest wildfires in Arizona's history, The Wallow Fire, burned over 535,000 acres across Apache, Greenlee, Graham and Navajo Counties destroying just about everything in its path. Escudilla Mountain, a giant in the midst of the Apache Forest, fought a brave fight but lost the battle against a fire that took over a month to contain. At the beginning of the trail, we hiked through dense and beautiful tunnels of golden aspens — some I assume are the same trees that lined this trail before the Wallow Fire. It is an area that even the fire must have realized was too beautiful to burn. As you walk past a post with a stick of a sign that, in its original rugged but readable form stated that there was only one more mile to the top, you start to see areas where the fire stole the beauty from the mountain. Thousands of towering toothpick-shaped snags still stand baring the agony of human error.

Nearing the dead trees, we started hearing the wind gently whistling through the empty spaces that once were filled with golden leaves that would shimmer in the sun. The starkness that the empty silver trunks displayed saddened me. The higher we hiked, the wind increased and the trees started creaking and moaning instead of emitting the light whistle we heard below. We could hear a roaring in the distance as it climbed up the other side of the mountain but had no idea what was in store as we reached the top. The light winds we experienced earlier had turned into gale winds that made it difficult to even stand at the foot of the fire tower and look out over the top. Walking through thousands of dead trees with wind speeds of this caliber, was a recipe for disaster and we knew we had to get back down the mountain fast.

As we started our decent, the creaking of the trees got louder and louder. We picked up our pace but, just as we left the first leg of the trail, we heard a loud crack and turned just in time to see a large dead tree fall with tremendous speed and noise, straight across the trail we had just tread. I felt like I couldn't walk fast enough and, at one point, I started to jog a bit. Fearing I would twist an ankle on the rocks that covered the trail, I knew accuracy, not speed, would get me through the trees and back to safety. The noise that the trees made sounded like angry voices warning me that I shouldn't be there — it wasn't safe. Once the trail exited the stands of dead trees and I was back out in the open meadow, the wind was back to a light breeze and I was relieved. I looked back at the large stands of dead trees and I felt the spirit of the mountain was letting me know how angry it is that the fire took away its beauty. I wanted it to know that I was angry too.

Escudilla Mountain has a great history. It was home to the last grizzly bear (Big Foot) in Arizona and was written about by Aldo Leopold in his book, "A Sand County Almanac." It was used as a fire lookout by the Forest Service for years and, as the third highest mountain in Arizona, hikers from around the country come to reach its peak. The fire tower still stands, but is fenced off and is no longer in service. There is still a lot of work to be done to restore Escudilla to its natural state. Most of it will be done by Mother Nature. Eventually, the dead trees will tumble and feed the new growth and, in many years from now, all of the scenic trails of Escudilla will once again be amazing. Just for the record... I still found beauty in those old dead trees.

Note: If you hike Escudilla Mountain, check the weather report before you go. Avoid thunderstorms and wind. In the United States, over 100 people are killed by falling trees and 33 people are killed and 234 people are injured by lightning strikes - annually.