



## **Shoulder Season Sports in the White Mountains**

**By Dan Groebner**

Many local White Mountain residents consider the season we are currently enjoying as the “shoulder season” that occurs on either side of more busy periods, namely skiing and the summer escape from the heat of the valley deserts which usually involves lots of golf. After the leaves drop but before the snow does is our current status, at least when this article went to press. Similarly, the season after the snow melts and before all our radiant green leaves emerge is another under-appreciated time of the year. Most people prefer waiting out these stretches in warm cabins or even by migrating to lower elevations to barely bearable conditions (by most locals’ standards).

These “in-between” seasons get a bad rap just because they might not be considered “ideal” or “popular.” However, with small adaptations to your regular gear and way of thinking, you can enjoy the White Mountains and Rim Country without the crowds. You can see unique wildlife not observed any other time of the year. And the whole family can enjoy deals with lodging and local services which may offer discounts during their slow times.

The following is a brief list of activities and adaptations for the season. This certainly is not a complete review so feel free to forward any of your favorite ideas to the publisher.

**Hiking:** With leaves off trees, wildlife is easier to see these days. You're not going to hear much for bird calls but you may get a glimpse of some rare migratory bird just passing through, like a pelican, loon, harrier or rough-legged hawk. Other than being prepared for more chilly weather with the possibility of freezing rain, hiking during this time of year may need other adaptations since you may go through active hunting areas. You are still safer than hiking in many large cities or along a highway but you can reduce your risk of danger with a few simple common sense tips: Hike on trails within a quarter mile of residences or through Woodland Park, Show Low Park or Fool Hollow Recreation Area where it is illegal to hunt. Wear bright colors and make conversation so as not to surprise anybody and be aware around water holes, tanks and streams where hunters may be concentrated. Keep dogs leashed or at very close proximity since they can look like some legally hunted wild animals. Give them a brightly colored bandana or vest that distinguishes them from even the best dressed coyote or bear.

**Hunting:** Speaking of hunting, you didn't have to draw a big game tag to get out and enjoy some of Nature's bounty. All's you need is a hunting license to pursue some dusky or blue grouse (season closes on Nov. 12, 2017), as well as rabbits and squirrels. Quail hunting can be found within a couple hours' drive at lower elevations if you need a serious change of scenery. This is also a great time to take a Hunter Education Course or develop other outdoor skills. Visit [www.azgfd.gov/OutdoorSkills](http://www.azgfd.gov/OutdoorSkills) for more details and to register for events.

**Fishing:** Getting a fishing line wet at this time of year can be exciting with the cooler water temperatures and mixing of lake waters stimulating fish activity. Many big, summer hold-over fish are trying to fatten up for the long winter ahead and feeding on the surface where you get to see all the action involved with catching a fish. Pick up the latest Arizona Wildlife Views magazine for a story by Rory Aikens to get more late season fishing tips on our local Rim Lakes.

**Geocaching:** Have you ever wanted to go on a high-tech treasure hunt? Then you have to try geocaching where you use a portable GPS (global position system) to find "caches" in the form of containers ranging in size from a tube the diameter of a pencil to a large metal ammo box. Each cache is described on the internet at [geocaching.com](http://geocaching.com) with its location in GPS coordinates, difficulty rating in finding the cache and what the cache might contain. Many caches encourage you to leave something of a token in the cache if you remove something. Some caches contain "travel bugs" whose entire goal in life can be to travel to as many different caches as possible, being transported by enthusiastic traveling geocaching people. This sport can become competitive if you track your discovered caches on the internet where some people have visited thousands! This is a great way to look up a few caches in an area you've always wanted to hike but just didn't have enough reasons to go there. Now you do!

**Bird feeding:** Setting up a bird feeder this time of year can help some of those hungry feathered friends as they find their way to their winter hangouts in warmer areas. Fall birds can be a challenge to identify sometimes as many have lost their colorful breeding plumage. However, they make up for lack of color with much more intense feeding bouts trying to gather up as many calories as possible for the long winter or strenuous journey south. Keep your feeders going all winter long and you'll always have birds to watch. A pair of binoculars and a bird identification book are all you need to start a life list of birds that you've seen.

Star gazing: Since the sun is going down sooner and most of our stormy monsoon weather has passed, we now often have crystal clear dry skies. This is a great time to learn some constellations or, with the help of a new phone app, look for passing satellites, space junk and the International Space Station! Be prepared to be confused at first since the thin air of the White Mountains reveals so many more stars that blend almost like a mist between the brightest constellations.

Camping: The best time for camping in the White Mountains can be in the fall since you're not dealing with monsoon showers at all hours of the day or with fire restrictions due to dry conditions before the monsoon rains start. The cool nights have taken care of most insects and other pests like snakes and bears are more interested in getting holed up for the winter. Best of all, the crowds of people have mostly migrated down hill so all the best camp sites are available.

Canoeing and kayaking: These activities always require a life jacket even during the summer and, for the cooler seasons, you'll want to look at fleece and weatherproof shells since any splashed water will chill your body significantly. Wool blend or neoprene gloves and socks will keep your extremities comfortable. More focus on keeping afloat may be needed since swamping your boat and getting soaking wet will quickly bring on hypothermia if you don't get dry immediately. A dry bag with an extra set of warm clothes is always a good idea.

Biking: Dry trails, cool weather and few crowds create some of the best conditions for our White Mountain bike trails which traverse through grassy meadows, aspen groves, ponderosa stands and even spruce-fir forests. The highest elevation trails will soon become snowmobile paths so keep your eye on the weather and don't expect any snowplowing on our forest roads. Goggles, gloves and a face covering will keep you comfortable even if you're not training for a race and ride at a relaxed pace. You don't want to have to use the brakes on that long beautiful down-slope just because your eyes are watering from the blast of frigid air!! Youngsters usually cool off faster, even if they don't complain because they're having so much fun, so keep checking their extremities if it gets cold.

Target shooting: This sport can prepare you for a hunt or help take some of the sting out of not getting drawn for the 12<sup>th</sup> year in a row. Luckily, we have a number of shooting ranges available in the area, including the new Second Knoll Shooting Range with pistol bays and a 100-yard range (928 205-3609), the White Mountain Bowhunter's Range near the Silver Creek Fish Hatchery (928 242-1285), as well as the White Mountain Trap and Skeet Club near White Mountain Lakes (928 369-1155) and the St. John's Shooting Range (928 337-2254). Please take advantage of these facilities if you can and avoid using small cinder pits where other people might be hunting or hiking.

So, when you really think about it, we truly live in a 4-season outdoor wonderland if you dress and prepare appropriately, depending on the conditions. For now, let the golf clubs collect a little more dust, keep the skis stowed in the closet or garage and discover a new shoulder season activity to keep things limber and avoid the preliminary symptoms of cabin fever.