

# Sprucedale's Epic Ride

Photos and text by Anne Groebner

Over 200 years ago (1809), the first herd of sheep hoofed it across the Heber/Reno Driveway and began a traditional transition from warm winter pastures in the Valley to the cool summer pastures in the White Mountains. The bi-annual crossing ended in 2011 when indigenous (wild) sheep were in danger of transmission of diseases from their domestic relatives. This week, the Driveway was brought back into the limelight when Whitney Wiltbank, Sprucedale Ranch manager, his brother Billy, trail boss, and several other staff members from the Ranch accomplished the same drive of over 250 miles, not with sheep but with horses. Starting about a mile away from the Superstition Mountains, they skirted around Saguaro Lake (up the old way), up by Pumpkin Center, then Young, Forest Lakes, Clay Springs, Heber, around Show Low, down the side of Blue Ridge to Greens Peak, Sunrise and then Big Lake, the last leg of their journey to their final destination, Sprucedale Guest Ranch.

Sprucedale Ranch has been in the Wiltbank family for over 40 years. The Ranch is a summer destination for families looking for a southwestern ranch experience, including horseback riding, fishing and cowboy cooking...They also host cattle and horse drives about three times a year, Dave and Sharon Heaps, of Oro Valley, discovered the Ranch when they were searching for some type of outdoor adventure. "We sold our boat last year and found out we needed something to do," said Dave. His wife Sharon won a raffle for horseback riding lessons so they both signed up. They ventured off to Colorado and Montana and did some cattle drives there and then looked closer to home and found Sprucedale and what Dave calls "Whitney's Epic Ride." Dave signed up and rode along from day one. Sharon, however, didn't come until Thursday night but they saddled her up on Friday morning and she helped finish the drive. This was Sharon's first trip to the White Mountains. "When I left Tucson at 9:00 a.m., the thermometer read 97 degrees" (compared to 70s in the mountains).

Steve Vincent and his family have been coming to Sprucedale for over ten years. When he heard about Whitney's ride, he said, "I called but they were all sold out." He came anyway and helped out with the base camp. He told me, "I have a country heart and a city wife." He did explain that his wife loved the country too but she still likes her theater, malls and for some reason...traffic. Steve would love to retire here.

I found it pretty amazing that there were so many young wranglers on the trip. Chip Eisley, base camp supervisor brought his son, Derring, a wrangler at the ranch and Cimarron Madrid has worked at the Ranch for about five years and works with kids who are visiting the Ranch. Emma Wiltbank is Whitney's oldest daughter (4th generation) and started riding horses when she was 2 to 3 years old. People come from as far away as England and the Netherlands. I watched each

guest rider and staff member as they corralled the horses, saddled them and climbed on board for their last leg of a long journey. They will end up at the Sprucedale Ranch, where some good southwestern cowboy cooking is waiting...including grass-fed beef steaks. I watched as they left the corrals behind Big Lake and crossed the meadow into a sparsely forested vale until they were out of sight. I'm sure they will be tired but I am also sure they will miss the fresh air, starry nights and, most of all, the camaraderie they encountered once they reach the end of the trail.

For more information about Sprucedale Ranch, call 928-333-4984 or visit [www.sprucedaleranch.com](http://www.sprucedaleranch.com).