



The Journey

By Anne Groebner

Sometimes, the hardest part of a journey is the first step...even when the anticipated distance is only a few miles. I have discovered, however, that not taking that first step is far worse. To me, the “not knowing” completely outweighs the “not going.” Adventures offer us chances to overcome fears and find our true strengths. When you arrive at the trailhead and follow a trail that winds through meadows, crosses rivers and climbs mountains, there’s no telling what spectacular scenery is hiding around corners, in the darkness of a dense forest or on the other side of a steep canyon. And you discover that taking a journey has nothing to do with reaching a destination or completing a goal but everything to do with what happens along the way.

There are so many incredible attributes hiding within the Rim Country and the White Mountains of Arizona. We are one of Arizona’s best-kept secrets and I know some locals would like to keep it that way. But, as long as visitors respect the land and pack out what they pack in and leave it the way they found it, I don’t mind exposing this spectacular scenery with hopes that it leaves an impression in their minds... impresses them enough to want to keep it the way it is for future generations.

Many of the small towns that border the Forest Service lands and wilderness areas in the mountains depend on tourism to keep them going. We check the Farmer’s Almanac or the local weather reports and pray for rain in the summer and snow in the winter. Although the White Mountain Apache Tribe makes (man-made) snow for Sunrise, their three-mountain ski hill south of Pinetop, there is nothing like a blanket of deep frozen snow for a ride down its slopes. So, we wait for snow and watch the forecast and get taunted by storms that seem to be heading our way and then fake us out and just skim the tip of the state. Other times, we wake up and there is a blizzard happening right outside our window that we didn’t see coming. And that is mountain weather.

When you don’t get snow in winter, you have to find other things to do and I have found that the most spontaneous trips turn out to be the best journeys. Last weekend, I called Robert Hutchison (author of the “Hangin’ Tree” series in this paper) on Friday night and on Saturday afternoon, I headed to Heber-Overgaard and climbed into a saddle. Located just inside the Overgaard town limits is the Stables at Bison Ranch. Wayne Ramey is the head wrangler and owns about 18 horses. Ramey has been working the ranch for almost six years and hosts some of the best horseback rides on the mountain. Hutchison, also a wrangler, helps Ramey with trail rides. He also coordinated the “Hangin’ Tree” anniversary ride last August in honor of the three boys who were wrongfully hung in 1888 — another great adventure by Hutchison and Ramey who took several horses, trailered them to the Rim Road near the small town of

Forest Lakes and started the journey from the tree where the hanging took place and ended up at the restored gravesite.

Along the way, we witnessed a band of mustangs, part of the Heber Wild Horse sanctuary, put in place in 1971 with the Wild, Free-Roaming Horse and Burros Act. They have been the subject of heated discussions recently and have instigated a diverse group of people with vested interest, including the Apache-Sitgreaves Forest Service Department, the International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros, ranchers and some public citizens to come together and produce a management plan and future protection for the horses. Both Ramey and Hutchison are true advocates for the horses. "The Forest Service and the ranchers want them off the land but I disagree," says Ramey. "They don't stay in one spot for very long. They are moving all the time." Hutchison has written many letters to Arizona State representatives and articles on the subject and is very passionate about saving the herds that roam his backyard.

Recently I watched a film called "Unbranded," that Hutchison recommended, about four young cowboys, just out of college, who adopted and trained 13 mustangs and rode them 3,000 miles from Mexico to Canada through the wildest terrain of the American West. It was an epic journey to prove the wild mustangs' incredible resilience and worth. The film was the brainstorm of Ben Masters, along with the help of three of his friends: Thomas Glover, Ben Thamer and Jonny Fitsimons — all from Texas. They took the 13 horses and trained them for four months at a ranch in Texas; raised around \$179,000 through "Kickstart" and headed to the Mexican border for the start of a journey that took about 159 days. I have to say that I think this film is one of my favorites. The scenery was incredible and the filming was well done.

Throughout the film, they state statistics about the wild mustangs, that there are 50,000 roaming the land under protection. Others reside in government holding pens where they will be either auctioned off or adopted. "When you adopt a mustang," says Fitsimons, "you have to work with them daily for at least the first 90 to 100 days." It's a great responsibility but, judging from the film, worth it. "There is a wild streak deeply rooted in these horse," says Masters "and we have much in common. There's not enough room out there for them or us."

Part of their journey takes them through Arizona and they ride through the Catalina Mountains, they flash a sign for the Arizona Trail, mention the Superstitions and then reach the Grand Canyon, where they ride rim to rim and then travel through Utah, the southeast corner of Idaho, Wyoming and then Montana to reach Canada. Masters states that this couldn't happen without public lands. "The future of the wild horses depends on the management choices we make today," says Masters, "and I hope to God that in a hundred years there will still be a backcountry trail to ride from Mexico to Canada. That will require sacrifice, a society willing to face difficult decisions... and a really good horse." There is a solution. It's a spectacular journey and I would highly recommend the 1 hour and 45 minutes of viewing time. Go to www.unbrandedthefilm.com for more information or to order the film.*

The horseback ride I took last weekend took me into the forest-lined open range that surrounds Heber-Overgaard and the sanctuary of the wild mustangs. I usually see them from the road as I pass through on my way to the Valley but they were nowhere to be seen this time, which was disappointing. The stallion of the herd, named Buckskin, is an incredible sight to see. To me they are an Arizona icon, as are the mustangs that reside along the Salt River further south. Keep an eye out when traveling from Forest Lakes to Heber and then from Overgaard to Show Low, there is a great chance you will spot them.

I joined Jason Standley from Lake George, Louisiana on my recent ride at Bison Stables. He and his wife, Dr. Tracey Standley, a professor of journalism at McNeese University, ventured from the Valley to Heber to explore the Rim. Standley has a versed background in riding. He was a wrangler and spent his youth breaking horses and bull riding. Like other visitors to Arizona, they had no idea that there were mountains with pine trees north of the cactus and canyons. He swears, after this trip, that when, and if, he retires, he will return and buy his own cabin in the area.

I rode a horse named Redman that Hutchison claims is a “high hand horse.” Which translates to “high performance.” I usually try to request a semi-calm horse so I can take photos. Redman was well behaved and a true gentleman but I had my camera in one hand, looking for a photo-op, when we came to a hill and Redman hoofed it at a run to the top. I discovered that I have a pretty strong left arm and a strong sense to guard my camera. I stayed in the saddle but told Robert that I didn’t see that coming. He replied that “when I hear the thunder of hoofs in front of me, it’s a clue that my horse will follow suit.”

The Bison Ranch Stables are open year-round, weather permitting. A one-hour ride will cost you \$35; two-hour ride, \$50; three-hour, \$65 and a four-hour trip will run about \$80. Ramey hosts a lunch trip which lasts three to four hours and costs \$100. Ages start at about four-years and they have taken riders up to 92-years depending on physical ability. The best time to ride is from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. During the monsoon season, which is approximately the last part of June through August, the best time is early morning to beat the rain. Contact Wayne Ramey at 928-242-5062.

I truly believe that it’s not the destination that’s important when you are striving to reach a goal or the end of a trail. It’s what happens along the way. It’s the journey that builds character and courage. We just have to take the time to live it every day. If we stop and notice the things that matter the most on our journeys (and often it is the small things), 2018 will be the best year ever. May you find joy and peace on all of your journeys.

*Unbranded awards include:

- #1 iTunes Documentaries for 4 consecutive days
- Audience Award at Banff Mountainfilm, Hot docs International Film Festival, Crested Butte Film Festival, Telluride Mountainfilm, Tallgrass Film Festival, Equus International Film Festival, Waimea Ocean Film Festival, Fairhope Film Festival, Rockport Film Festival, New York Wild, NYC Equus Film Festival, and Wild & Scenic Film Festival.
- Official Selection at Port Townshend Film Festival, Rhode Island Film Festival, The European Outdoor Film Tour, Hot Film Festival, American Conservation Film Festival, Milwaukee Film Festival, Ellensburg Film Festival, Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival and Tulsa Film Festival.

For more information about the wild horses or how you can help go to ISPMB.org (The International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros) or www.heberwildhorses.com.