

Be Like a River

The Thompson Trail #629

By Anne Groebner

There's something special about hiking along the banks of a river. The sounds of its water flowing and rushing across boulders is soothing to listen to and it makes me feel calm and relaxed. The Thompson Trail, located off Forest Road 116 behind Big Lake and close to the Thompson Ranch, follows the West Fork of the Black River and is one of my favorite hikes around April and May and then later in the summer after the monsoon season. It is always flowing pretty well and the willows and wildflowers are beginning to bud and bloom in the spring and, later in the summer, you can feast on raspberries and strawberries. The Trail travels close to the riverbank but rises up and over tree roots and through boggy meadows occasionally. Piles of river rocks make up cairns that sit like guardians on the hidden sections of the Trail and provide guidance. There is plenty of wildlife that survive off the riparian wetland. We saw a blue heron fly past us a few times and some Ruddy ducks but there's a lot of scat and tracks that tell us that others are near and probably watching.

About two miles into the Trail, we met Robert Hansen and his Golden Lab Waylon (his brother's name is Willie). He was carrying a tall walking stick with a rubber horse boot attached to the top (a treasure he found along the way). He told us he is from Santa Fe and had just come back from his daughter's college graduation in Tucson. The White Mountains, he said, is always a favorite stop on his way back home. He told us that he had seen a wolf earlier that morning which made me wonder if we would see one too — to see a wolf in the wild is pretty rare.

As I hiked downstream, I thought about the symbolism of a river. It always finds its way to its destination whether it flows in a straight line, around corners or over huge boulders. It keeps flowing. What I have discovered is that, in our daily lives, it's only a struggle when we try to paddle upstream. It's when we turn our boats around and go with the flow that amazing things happen. Oh, yeah...and you have to let go of the oars.

The trail is about 6.5 miles roundtrip and connects with the West Fork Trail #628. Because of the sensitivity of the wetlands, the riverbank trail is only open to foot travel. Horses and bikes can take the old railroad berm located upslope which follows the river but at a distance. There are rock structures or fish barriers known as "gabions," that are designed to allow fish to swim downstream but not upstream. This keeps the exotics and non-native trout from the upper reaches of the river — they create some incredible waterfalls and FYI: there is "blue ribbon" fishing to be found along the West Fork of the Black River.

To find the Thompson Trail, follow Rt. 260 to Rt. 273 (turn right at the Sunrise billboard) and continue on this road until you get to FR 116. Turn right and stay on FR 116 until you see the kiosk on the right. Park at the kiosk and walk across the street to the beginning of the Trail, which is marked by a sign.

For more information, go to <http://www.fs.usda.gov> or call the Springerville Ranger District at (928) 333-6200.

USGS Maps: 280NW, Big Lake, AZ; 280SW, Big Lake, AZ.

"It starts out so cheerily upon its course; it is so clear and pure, so sparkling with sunshine and spirit. It dashes down mountain valleys, gurgles under boulders, swirls over waterfalls, flashes through ravines and gorges. With its sweep and glide and its silvery laugh it seems to lead a merry life." — **John C. Van Dyke (about rivers)**