

IN THE SHADOW OF ESCUDILLA

By Terry Wagner



Terry Wagner, center, with his two grandsons, Clayton and Carson Washburn

On an unknown day millions of years ago, the ground trembled with huge shock waves as a heaving monster roared to the surface of a much younger earth. Huge rock bluffs pushed their way to the surface as super heated missiles shot towards the heavens. Rivers of red liquid rock raced to fill ancient streambeds and the eastern reaches of the Mogollon were marked forever with the scars of an enormous volcanic eruption. A giant bowl in the earth was the resulting legacy of that ancient time atop a profound, blue-green mound on the horizon nearly 11,000 feet high. Francisco Vasquez De Coronado passed through its shadow on his quest for the Seven Cities of Cibola in 1540. Aldo Leopold, the father of modern wildlife ecology said that "life in Arizona was bounded under foot by gramma grass, overhead by sky and on the horizon by Escudilla."

Escudilla Mountain is the horizon in extreme, eastern Arizona and it is difficult to place yourself where it can't be seen. Located about four and a half

miles north of the town of Alpine Arizona in the central eastern part of the state, Escudilla (Spanish for Bowl) has captured the imagination of visitors for generations. In the early 1980's it was considered the plumb for picking of the

Arizona logging industry. It was also the apple of the eye of many environmentalists. The two factions began a long battle over the logging the minute the United States Forest Service began marking trees for a logging contract. Public meetings over the logging of Escudilla drew media attention and resulted in Congressional hearings over the issue. Many felt that the area was so unspoiled that the "entire mountain should be declared a wilderness area." So wrote a local Alpine resident at the time who testified before a Congressional committee in an effort to halt the logging. Logging industry spokesman and others claimed the forest would not survive unless trees were harvested as part of a planned timber management program.

Finally in an effort to reach a compromise in 1984, Congress created the 5200 acre Escudilla Wilderness and the logging proceeded. Prior to the logging, access to the west face of the mountain was by a steep, rutted, dirt road that went nearly straight up the mountain. The logging resulted in the current USFS Rd 8056 which is the access to the wilderness area and the six-mile loop around Terry Flat located well below the summit of Escudilla. The wilderness area is tra-



Escudilla Mountain

versed by Escudilla trail #308 which has been designated as a National Scenic Trail and scenic it is. The trail is open to saddle stock and hikers only. Mountain bikes and motorized traffic are prohibited in the wilderness area.

The best time to ride Escudilla is between May and October. Many feel the most spectacular time of the year is in the fall when the leaves change color in their preparation for winter. In 1951 a forest fire raged across 23,000 acres of the North Slope. This area has grown back in a giant stand of Aspen trees, and their vibrant fall colors are what poems are written about.

Access to Escudilla can be reached by turning east on USFS Rd 8056 between mile post 420 and 421 on U.S. Highway 191 just north of Alpine, Arizona. Follow this road for about five miles, passing Hulsey Lake on the way, and you will come to the trailhead. The road has a few short steep grades and curves toward the top but is well maintained. Parking for horse trailers is limited and is more like a wide spot in the road. You may have to go past the trailhead and ride back to the start of the trail.

The trail to the summit is about a six mile round trip and starts at what appears to be a log skid trail under a canopy of Aspen trees. It comes out on a broad hillside with spectacular panoramic views of Terry Flat and the Apache Sitgreaves Forest.

The trail returns to the trees and opens once again about half way to the top in a meadow which is the upper end of Tool Box Draw. The lower end of this draw will make you understand why a local hunter once referred to Escudilla as the "biggest boulder in the state of Arizona."

Going over Profanity Ridge you will finally reach a 45-foot high USFS fire lookout tower. The tower is manned "24 sevens" during the fire season. Words can't begin to describe the view from the area around the tower, and no camera can capture the world as seen from there.

The trailhead is situated at about 9,500 feet in elevation and the actual summit of the mountain is 11,912 feet. The trip to the tower climbs about 1300 feet in the three-mile trip. The actual summit of the mountain is about a half mile north of the lookout tower but is rather anti-climatic as it is in a thicket of trees with none of



*Clayton and Carson
below the Escudilla fire tower*

the spectacular views of the area around the tower or from the trail.

Wildlife is abundant in the area including mule deer, elk, and black bear. I have seen more black bear just trail riding Escudilla than any other area. The record for bear sightings was three in one day.

Besides the wilderness trail, the entire mountain is a trail riding adventure. Terry Flat offers incredible scenery and the great stands of fir and spruce are like none you will find anywhere else in Arizona. The lower western slope offers



Sandy Wagner with grandsons, Clayton and Carson

and New Mexico state line.

When you go through Alpine, you can stop at the Alpine Ranger Station and obtain maps of Escudilla and check with the rangers on road conditions and weather. Lightning during the summer monsoon season can be a force to reckon with when near the top of Escudilla.

If hunting is your thing, Escudilla has some good Blue Grouse hunting in the fall, along with good hunting in the fall for deer, elk and turkey in season.

Escudilla presents great opportunities for the wildlife photographer as well. Escudilla is only a small part of the two million acre Apache Sitgreaves National Forest which is a major part of the outdoors in eastern Arizona. On a trip last summer, two of my grandsons, Clayton and Carson Washburn got their first close up look at the Escudilla fire tower, and their descriptions included mostly the word "awesome."

quiet relaxing rides through stands of Ponderosa Pines and the area is closed to motorized traffic most of the summer as a wildlife area.

The eastern side of Escudilla can be reached east of the town of Alpine off

U.S. Highway 180 at the junction of USFS road 275. Turn north and follow the road past the USFS administration areas and you will find great riding in Stone Creek with first class views of Turner Peak which straddles the Arizona

To contact Terry Wagner for more information on riding in this area e-mail: terrywagner@wildblue.net

