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Reavis Ranch roundup
3 routes take backpackers to Superstition valley steeped in lore, history

By John Stanley

Some of the wildest, most scenic and secluded lands in Arizona stand a scant 40 miles east of downtown Phoenix.

The Superstition Wilderness holds nearly 160,000 acres of backcountry beauty, with dramatic cliffs, rugged canyons, sweeping vistas and mesmerizing rock formations. It also boasts legends of lost mines, tales of prospectors and reports of murder most foul.

Add to that its proximity to the Valley and it's no wonder the Superstitions are one of the most heavily visited wilderness areas in the state.

Yet most visitors see only a small part of it. The Superstitions are ringed by a dozen trailheads, but two - the Peralta Trailhead on the southwestern side and the First Water Trailhead on the western side - account for 95 percent of the visitation, according to the Tonto National Forest, which oversees the wilderness.

But there's much more to the Superstitions than that. The eastern side seems an entirely different world, higher in elevation and much softer, its rolling hills carpeted with thick stands of piñon, sumac, manzanita, alligator juniper, Emory oak, even towering ponderosa pines in some places. There are plenty of cliffs, canyons and craggy rocks, but they're not nearly as dramatic or numerous as those in the western half.

And because the eastern trailheads are harder to reach, you'll find far fewer hikers, giving you more of a wilderness experience.

Reavis Ranch

The central feature of the eastern Superstitions is Reavis Ranch, a remote, secluded valley named for Elisha Reavis, the recluse whose unkempt beard and ever-present rifle earned him a reputation as an eccentric to be avoided. Some folks said he only pretended to be insane so that people would leave him alone and was, in fact, well-educated and a generous host. In the 1870s, he built a farm and orchard along the creek that runs through the valley, and sold vegetables and fruit to nearby towns and mining camps. His grave stands just a few yards off one of the main trails into the area.

Although much of the land along Reavis Creek is brushy, there are still some good camping spots.

Slabs of crumbling concrete and rusty scraps of metal lie scattered across the valley. Giant sycamore trees dot the creek banks. By moonlight they create a Tim Burton-esque tableau, a string of giant skeletal hands reaching into the sky. Scattered apple trees still stand in the area, too, remnants of Reavis' long-abandoned orchard.

3 trails

You could do an out-and-back day hike to the ranch, but it would be a tough trek and you wouldn't get to enjoy the sights. Each of the three main trails that lead to the ranch makes a terrific outing for backpackers and horse campers.

Reavis Ranch Trail (northern segment)

At 9 miles, this is the longest route to Reavis Ranch. In some ways, though, it's the easiest, following an old jeep trail that climbs steadily, but mostly at a gentle grade, gaining about 1,500 feet as it winds past Castle Dome, the prominent rock knob southeast of the trailhead. The high point of the trail comes beyond Castle Dome, about half a mile before you reach Windy Pass.

Beyond, the trail runs generally east for about 2 miles, then bends sharply south, paralleling a fence as it enters Reavis Valley.

Reavis Ranch Trail (southern segment)

This is the shortest, most direct route into Reavis Ranch, but it's a genuinely tough hike, with lots of up and down along 6.6 miles.

The Reavis Ranch Trail heads northwest from the Rogers Trough Trailhead, past junctions with the West Pinto and the Rogers Canyon trails. Nearly 3 miles from the trailhead, the route begins a long, steep, switchbacking climb up to Reavis Saddle, a wide, rocky, open area surrounded by manzanita, alligator juniper and scrub oak - a good turnaround point for day hikers.

Beyond the saddle, the trail slopes gently downhill to Reavis Ranch, past ponderosa pines and huge alligator junipers and through thick fields of lovegrass, planted to control erosion after a 1966 fire. You'll pass the Fire Line Trail, at the southern end of Reavis Ranch, about 3 miles past the saddle.

Reavis Gap Trail

The least-traveled route to Reavis Ranch starts from a remote trailhead on the northeastern side of the Superstitions and traverses a terrifically scenic 6.7 miles to the ranch.

Begin at the Campaign Trailhead (called the Upper Horrell Trailhead on some maps) and walk about an eighth of a mile, passing through a gate, to the well-signed Campaign Trail, which branches off to the right and crosses a creek.

After you pass the Reeves Mountain School, a combination organic farm and spiritual sanctuary, the trail drops back down to Campaign Creek, a lovely riparian ribbon lined with cottonwoods, sycamores and a few walnut trees.

You'll come to the junction with the Reavis Gap Trail about 1.2 miles from the trailhead. From here, the Reavis Gap Trail goes west about 2.2 miles to the Two Bar Ridge Trail, gaining nearly 1,400 feet. Stay on the Reavis Gap and continue about three-quarters of a mile past the trail junction to the Pine Creek area, a reasonable destination for day hikers. Reavis Ranch is a tough 2.5 miles farther.

Reach the reporter at john.stanley@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-4414.