

# Dismounted Trail Patrol

A Mediterranean miniature donkey makes friends on the Arizona Trail

**“Did I tell you what 'ass' stands for?”** Leigh Anne

Thrasher asks me in her lilting Texan dialect as we're driving carefully on Catalina Highway. When she's not pulling the trailer on back, with the precious cargo of Jasmine the donkey inside, she admits she drives like a maniac, her pink-polished nails gripping the steering wheel. It's hard to imagine from a sweet-faced 63-year-old in a baby blue sun shirt and muck boots. But 'ass,' she continues, “stands for 'A Simple Servant.'”

We're carting Jasmine up Mount Lemmon to explore Bear Wallow with us because she's a professional hiking buddy; Leigh Anne even made business cards for her, she's so popular on the trail. The pair regularly volunteers for Saguaro National Park, with Jasmine carrying the packs and Leigh Anne walking beside her.

“I always say I'm in the 'dismounted' trail patrol,” Leigh Anne explains. Six years ago she switched from riding the trails to walking with Jasmine. “Our main job is to meet and greet visitors; I always have water and a first aid kit. We pick up trash, which isn't much. And when I run into hikers at the trailhead I give them

suggestions on trails. The Park says we're their eyes and ears.”

It's hard to describe how cute Jasmine is, with her doleful eyes, her silver coat crossed with two black stripes, and her short, barreled stature. She's 38 inches high, technically a bit too tall to be miniature, and that's not including her long perked ears that she manipulates like

antennae to pick up her surroundings.

“Donkeys aren't like horses,” Leigh Anne explains. “Horses can always flee, but donkeys can't; they're not built for it. So what I've learned about them – what Jasmine taught me – is that they have to come to trust you. Before they do, they won't do anything; but once they trust you, they'll do everything for you.”

Case in point: one of the early days when she had Jasmine, Leigh Anne tried to hike her across a small wash with three inches of water flowing in it. Donkeys have an aversion to water because their coats don't produce oils to protect and insulate their skin. And at 350 pounds, all the dragging in the world couldn't coax Jasmine across. Leigh Anne confesses they were out hiking that day for two hours, and never did cross that wash. Once Jasmine warmed up to water crossings, Leigh Anne took her to hike at Seven Falls, a hike that crosses the stream several times, sometimes with the water even up to Jasmine's chest. But when they turned to hike home, Jasmine didn't want to cross until Leigh Anne found the exact path they took before, the one she trusted. Sometimes she'd be just two feet off, Leigh Anne says, and still Jasmine wouldn't relent until she'd found it. “I've had her for six years,” Leigh Anne explains, “and she's so precious now. It took a long time to build that relationship.”

“Not only is she the beast of all my burdens, but she's the beast of my heart burdens. She carries all my cares, and when I'm with her they just melt away.” It seems Jasmine has that effect on people. Leigh Anne talks about folks on the trail who meet Jasmine and are soon after telling Leigh Anne the stories of their lives. One day a woman came running out of her truck to greet Jasmine, hugging her like an old friend, and though Leigh Anne didn't recognize her, the woman said she'd seen the pair on the trail a year before, shortly after her husband had a stroke. She thought of Jasmine as being a small light in that dark time. “You end up with more friends with this donkey than you've ever had in your life,” Leigh Anne says. “The hiking now is icing on the cake,

but meeting all the people is what I really enjoy.”

On our own hike, a soft-beaten trail with a cool canopy of Douglas fir, Jasmine sometimes plods along on the most efficient route, and sometimes she plays games, letting us get a stretch ahead of her so she can run to catch up. I see her bray and jump over logs and buck her hind legs, wild and happy. We meet up with a cowboy in disguise: a man in a white cowboy hat with a looped wooden cane. Leigh Anne introduces Jasmine and soon enough the man tells us that as a boy he used to deliver newspapers on horseback out here in the Wild West. Jasmine brings out the best stories in everyone, and her own story of how she came to Leigh Anne has its own heartbreak and beauty.

Leigh Anne used to ride a mule she loved named Kate, volunteering as mounted trail patrol and logging 3,000 miles in the National Park; she has a pin on her hat to prove it. One day out on trail patrol they crossed a section of trail that someone was trimming; acacia branches were scattered over the ground, and Leigh Anne doesn't know if she got a thorn in her boot or if it was something else, but suddenly Kate took off at a full gallop. Leigh Anne hung on for about a quarter mile before Kate took a bad step and pitched Leigh Anne off. The incident scared her, and it scared her husband that it happened while she was out alone. Leigh Anne realized that to keep riding safely she would need to learn to dismount at a gallop, a skill she wasn't keen to practice. She decided to call it, describing that “this was like life blood not to ride.” She found a woman in New Mexico who could give Kate a loving home. The woman traded her for Jasmine. “I never thought I was going to get over not riding; there were so many tears that I cried. But you never know how life is going to change you.”

Jasmine and Leigh Anne have been working on the Arizona Trail since its beginning. “I got started doing the Arizona Trail because the Arizona Trail got started. I thought, if people came out and put in all this sweat and work, how could you not do it?” In the past few years, the duo has covered 200 miles of the trail in day trips and two-night treks. They've been to the southern stretches by the border and as far north as the Gila River. Jasmine can haul up to 75 pounds, a load that's easily reached with her backpacking food – six pounds of alfalfa cubes a day – and water for both of them at eight pounds a gallon. It rests in packs over a handmade wooden rig that bridges her back. While Leigh Anne sleeps on her bed roll, Jasmine sleeps standing, hitched to a tree with a rope short enough that she can't tangle herself up in the night. Much of the mileage they've actually done twice, with the complicated shuttling of the trailer. “She goes one and a half miles an hour, steady up, steady down. So we don't set any records hiking, but we've survived every one.” With Leigh Anne's sweet Texan smile and Jasmine's steady trust, they've made friends every step of the way. 🌿



Leigh Anne Thrasher smooths back the ears on her donkey Jasmine.