



## A Ride Through the Aspens

by Sabrina Carlson

On September 30, 2016, nine members of the Flagstaff Junior Academy Mountain Biking Club headed for Forest Road 418 on the San Francisco Peaks Passage (Passage 34) of the Arizona Trail to embark on one of the most inspiring and wonderful rides of the year.

After all the bikes were checked, lubed, and tires aired up and we talked about proper trail etiquette, LNT practices and safety, we loaded the vans to head up to the trailhead. Once all the bikes were reassembled, we were ready to climb, climb, climb. The route from FR 418 toward Aspen Corner is all uphill. The climb is gradual, but unrelenting. Many of the riders in the club have excellent fitness and handled the climb without trouble. A few found themselves in new territory with that level of exertion.

We rode through the rapidly changing leaves, and waist high ferns that have now turned brown with the fading of the summer season – out of the aspen and into the mixed conifers. At 8,500 feet, the north facing aspect of the hillsides are dark, rich, damp, and teeming with plants and animals uncommon in our high desert environment.



At the Bismarck Lake junction, we stopped for a well-deserved rest and snack break. Those who were tired we happy to relax while those with energy to spare rode up and down the trail waiting for others to be ready to ride once again. We gathered the group to have them share their experiences so far. Some found the climb exhilarating, some found it challenging, all found the trail beautiful and inspiring and everyone agreed that the way back down would be incredible. Just as we were preparing to leave, a passing hunter informed us that he had seen a bear in the direction we were headed earlier in the day. While we doubted a bear would come very close to a noisy group of teenagers, it was fun to think it might be watching us ride past.



After our break we rode up a bit more. We paused to look out over Hart Prairie and the Nature Conservancy Preserve. Always a spectacular view no matter which side you view it from! After pedaling through a section of trail so covered in golden leaves that the path was almost completely obscured, it was time to turn around. With light fading faster in the autumn evenings, we were out of time to make it all the way to Aspen Corner, but we had seen endless splendor already and now would have the fun of a long, fast, winding descent back to the vans.

A finer piece of trail or group of young friends to ride with would be hard to find anywhere.



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