

THE  
MOUNTAIN  
BIKE  
JOURNAL

# mountainflyer



\$9.95 US/\$10.95 CAN DISPLAY UNTIL MAR. 17, 2019



59

THE WINTER ISSUE

IN MEMORY KYLE EBBETT  
HER OWN HERO BROOKLYN BELL  
OF THE LAND FOUR BIKEPACKERS' FOODLESS ODYSSEY  
LIFE LESSONS FROM THE ARIZONA TRAIL



# RIDING WITH THE DAMNED

A LOOK AT THE WEST'S WATER CRISIS VIA THE ARIZONA TRAIL

Words by Ian Catto | Images by Whitton Feer



• Ian descends off of Oracle Ridge at sunrise, the reward for the grueling road climb up Mt. Lemmon the day before. Mt. Lemmon is an oasis along the southern portion of the 750-mile AZT, a hot, dry part of the Desert Southwest that cannot naturally sustain the wasteful water practices of the growing population.

**M**y father would play Johnny Cash often when I was young, so I grew a liking for his music as a kid. His voice is deep and intense, but his lyrics are poetic and entertaining. One song is particularly dramatic and has been a favorite in my family for as long as I can remember. "Ghost Riders in the Sky" perils one cowboy's encounter with hell, which is embodied as the damned chasing a herd of cattle for eternity. The song ends with the cowboy being warned by one of the passing damned cowboys to change himself into a better man lest he be subjected to the same fate.

Today, our society, just as the cowboy, is staring into its own worst nightmare with the Western water crisis, and I was able to clearly see the cowboy's warnings while bikepacking the Arizona Trail in spring 2018. The Arizona Trail spans from the southern border to the northern border of the Sunset State and crosses through harsh deserts, big mountains and the Grand Canyon. The landscape in its natural state is arid and rugged, defined by a lack of water. Species survive and thrive, but a growing population of roughly 40 million is depleting the main water source—the finite Colorado River.

For our high school senior project, my friend and photographer Whitton Feer and I decided to bike a portion of the Arizona Trail to investigate the effects of the Western U.S. water crisis and to photograph the invaluable public lands of the Desert Southwest. In today's sensitive discussion about land management and protection, we felt it was impossible to fully understand water conservation and public lands unless we experienced it for ourselves. We wanted to be well-equipped to advocate for the protection of public lands by connecting ourselves to them and experiencing what they offer in our industrially driven society. After all, the best way to understand something is to let it beat you within an inch of your dignity.

*An old cowboy went riding out one dark and windy day  
Upon a ridge he rested as he went along his way  
When all at once a mighty herd of red eyed cows he saw  
A-plowing through the ragged sky and up the cloudy draw*

Whitton was ready, but I wasn't. I was sick and nervous. Arizona isn't the first place that comes to mind when I think about where to spend the month of May. Actually it's much closer to the last. In the Denver airport, I checked the forecast for Phoenix; we could expect temperatures in the upper 90s and 100s, and it would get hotter by the day. This information was not ideal, given that I was feverish and poorly rested. We planned to ride at night and sleep in the day. It was the first time I'd carefully planned the details and logistics of a trip. Little did I know, I would have to let go of all that careful planning.

Our travel day started at 5:30 a.m. in our hometown of Carbondale, Colo., and included about five hours of improvised bike maintenance to fix a derailleur that broke while shipping the bikes. The "day" ended at 2 the next morning somewhere near the Mexican border. We were dropped off in southern Arizona, and after riding 20 miles in the dark, found a good spot to sleep. We woke up five hours later in a sweat. Our tarp was perched on a ridge that looked south toward the border and a long empty basin below. This was my first peek in the daylight of our environment, and my first glimpse at what to expect in the days to come. It was desolate and unwelcoming. The only hospitable part about this region was the locals. We were offered a place to sleep at every corner of Patagonia, the

first town we encountered. One man insisted on paying for a lot for us at an RV campsite and didn't stop trying until we finally gave in.

Should you decide to explore the deserts of southern Arizona, you'd immediately feel as if the landscape doesn't care about you, and you'd be right. This section of trail was hot and windy, with plentiful steep hills up which we pushed our bikes. There was minimal shade, and zero water. We moved for hours through loose, dry creek beds and difficult hiking trails. I felt unwelcome in this desert backcountry, just as the landscape intended. The southern deserts of Arizona are not accommodating to human visitors, which made Whitton and me feel pretty insignificant. At first, it was a frustrating feeling, but I eventually grew to respect this inhospitality. I realized that these public lands are beautiful because it is just land. It is not "designated recreational land" manicured for my selfish desires. There's nothing to suggest that I belong there. The desert is unapologetically itself.

Humans try to civilize this terrain with golf courses, green parks with non-native flowering plants, large municipalities and other amenities, but in doing so we sacrifice critical resources, including water. The Colorado River is the most endangered river in North America, and its water quantity is decreasing at an exponential rate due to population growth. Denver's population is growing at an astonishing rate and hit 2.7 million in 2013. The metropolis is expected to grow by another 56 percent in the next 25 years. Environmental reporter Abraham Lustgarten, who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-nominated investigative series "Killing the Colorado," reports that several tunnels already have been drilled to divert Colorado River water beneath the Continental Divide to Denver to satisfy its increased population.

With water rights and demands for the Colorado River simultaneously increasing in California, Arizona, Nevada and Mexico, the future of the Colorado River does not look promising. The demand for

water across the West has left reservoirs well below normal levels. Lake Mead in Nevada, for example, is especially endangered. "The last time the lake was at full capacity, with water levels 1,225 feet above sea level, was in 1983," according to The Washington Post. "Currently, demand on Lake Mead has been removing more water than is being replenished, resulting in a deficit of about 1.2 million acre-feet, or about 400 billion gallons, each year."

By pouring water over the desert to make it less hostile we drain water from the rivers and create hotter, dryer and more hostile ecosystems in other areas. Perhaps humans are simply too fragile for this landscape.

I realized this while sitting under a small tree eating my last Clif bar and drinking my last sips of water in the 100-degree afternoon sun. The temperatures some days were 10 degrees hotter than the May average, and I'd officially never felt so beaten down by the weather. It was time to leave.

*Their brands were still on fire and their hooves were made of steel  
Their horns were black and shiny and their hot breath he could feel  
A bolt of fear went through him as they thundered through the sky  
For he saw the riders coming hard and he heard their mournful cry*





- [Top] Southern Arizona greets riders with hot temps, sharp plants and no shade.
- [Bottom] Ian portages his bike on the 5,000-foot descent into the Grand Canyon.



- [Top] The pines of Mt. Lemmon offer shade and cooler temps.
- [Bottom] Proper gear for the trip: Why Cycles S7 loaded down with Defiant Pack frame bags propped against an abandoned structure on the side of a windy state highway.

We sat in a pastry shop called Ovens of Patagonia for hours after riding all morning and afternoon. We severely underestimated how long it would take to get there from our camp, and we ended up riding straight through the heat of the day. I drank a slushy at the shop; it was an emotional experience. We sat in silence, contemplating our decision to embark on this trip at all. Whitton was exhausted from the barren and repeating landscape. It was hotter than expected, and we had just received beta that the water sources ahead were more sparse than usual. Continuing through the southern section of the AZT would be reckless. The importance of water to our existence was never more clear. We wouldn't see any more of Arizona if we pushed through the southern portion without ample water. We decided to get a shuttle to the base of Mt. Lemmon the next morning.

Mt. Lemmon offered relief from the desert, which we felt no shame in appreciating. However, during our five-hour-long road climb to the quaint community of Summerhaven, I couldn't stop thinking about the looming fire danger on the mountain. Mt. Lemmon's flammability resem-

else in Arizona," according to environmental journalist Lustgarten. He reports that inefficient water transport processes from the Colorado to municipalities result in unnecessary water loss. For instance, in Arizona alone, six percent of the river's total flow is lost to seepage and evaporation. Sitting at the top of the very arid Mt. Lemmon, looking over the natural oven that is southern Arizona, I reflected on the human impact to our natural resources.

After our descent from Mt. Lemmon, we caught a Greyhound bus to Flagstaff and waited for our bikes to arrive (because they didn't get loaded onto the right bus). Once back on route with our bikes, we rode on a dirt hiker path through Flagstaff, and sang along to songs playing on Whitton's speaker. My gratitude for the outdoors was most present on this nondescript path. The trail weaved through woods and past suburbs, and it was busy with people trying to catch the last opportunity to be in nature for the day. It was a welcome contrast to our days in the hot desert. Our spirits were high, and we were having fun. While singing along to the modern masterpiece "Gucci Flip Flops," I thought back to

IT IS NOT "DESIGNATED RECREATIONAL LAND" MANICURED FOR MY SELFISH DESIRES. THERE'S NOTHING TO SUGGEST THAT I BELONG THERE. THE DESERT IS UNAPOLOGETICALLY ITSELF.



bled that of a matchstick. A desert—which averages temps in the upper 90s and low 100s from June through August—surrounding a bone-dry, pine-forested mountain with a small town on top of it seems like an imminent disaster. Wildfire danger is not limited to Arizona either, as states in the Pacific Northwest and all along the Rocky Mountains have seen an increase in wildfires due to drought and weather changes.

While taking a short snack and water break on the side of the road, we met two brothers who were longtime locals, and who frequently make the drive up the mountain to camp and enjoy the desert views. We asked them if they've noticed a pattern of increasing drought and heat in the years they've lived in Tucson. They both agreed that they have, and the older brother added that the monsoon season seems to be decreasing in length and intensity every year, resulting in increasingly hotter and drier summers. They expressed worry about the water scarcity, and they said the concern is widespread in Tucson.

Beyond Tucson, climate change is a growing threat, reducing the length of winter and resulting in less snowmelt, which feeds the watersheds and affects Colorado River flows. On top of that, transporting water from the Colorado River to modern-day cities in dry desert landscapes has detrimental impact. Calculations show that "moving Colorado River water to central Arizona requires more power than anything

the bike path in my own hometown, a path I often complain about every time I ride it with my school's bike team. This Flagstaff trail gave me a newfound appreciation for bike paths. I realized how blessed I was to always have a quick and easy way to enjoy the outdoors and how a small and rarely considered path can make nature accessible to most everybody, including the elderly, disabled and financially troubled. It's the first corridor to the outdoors, and there is beauty in a seemingly insignificant public path. As I watched people walk past, enjoying the sunset and the view, I felt enormously thankful for my good fortune that allowed me to take this trip. We biked a short way into the dark and fell asleep on the side of a dirt road at a mountain bike trailhead.

*Their faces gaunt, their eyes were blurred, their shirts all soaked with sweat  
He's riding hard to catch that herd, but he ain't caught 'em yet  
'Cause they've got to ride forever on that range up in the sky  
On horses snorting fire  
As they ride on hear their cry*

Empty. The hiker box had no water in it. It was just filled with dozens of empty water jugs. This changed things. Our morning was fun, though, as we slowly descended from the high-altitude temps of

Flagstaff. It felt like regular mountain biking again. The trees were tall and the grass was green enough that we temporarily forgot we were in Arizona. Although still dry, this landscape was a far cry from the scathing desert. Cool air, the snow-capped San Francisco Mountains and critters running around in the trees helped me feel welcome and at ease. I remembered the hospitality of the forest, and we basked in its friendliness. This sierra paradise was short-lived, however, as the trail descended back into the hot, windy desert south of the Grand Canyon.

Upon our discovery that our last opportunity to fill water for 50 miles was in fact absent of water, we decided to abandon the trail and hop on the road. We originally planned to take two or three days to make it to the canyon from Flagstaff, but we decided that it was safest to push to the canyon that day via highway to avoid a "stuck in the middle of the desert with no water" scenario. The result was a monstrous road grind through relentless crosswinds surrounded by uneventful views for the rest of the day. I figured that it was best to put my head down and not attempt to enjoy my surroundings; previous efforts to do so didn't help my morale. Only an occasional bush assured us that we remained on planet Earth. Once in a while, we passed a ranch or an abandoned house. Still, with the canyon at our fingertips, our motivation was high. Fueled by gummy bears and an excitement to stand on the South Rim, we made it to the Grand Canyon right as the sun set. We celebrated with dinner at the nearest taqueria.



*As the riders loped on by him he heard one call his name  
If you want to save your soul from hell a-riding on our range  
Then cowboy change your ways today or with us you will ride  
Trying to catch the devil's herd, across these endless skies*

The Grand Canyon is a very special place. Those fortunate enough to visit often hold onto that first peek into the abyss for the rest of their lives. As we stood atop the South Rim strapping our bikes and gear to our backpacks (in order to hike into and out of the canyon), I was completely thrilled to have returned to a place that I've enjoyed in the past. But as we started to hike down into it, I started to remember why this place brought sadness, too.

The Glen Canyon once astounded visitors upriver with unique depth and geological features. That canyon now lies hundreds of feet below Lake Powell, a result of the Glen Canyon Dam. In the Grand Canyon, the water is pulsed through the dam throughout the day to accommodate for the always-changing energy demands in Las Vegas and other cities in the Southwest. Because the water is released from the bottom of Lake Powell, it does not carry the reddish-brown sediment for which the Colorado River is named. The water in the Grand Canyon is a beautiful, but unnatural, clear blue.

The Glen Canyon Dam is an example of how the entire western U.S. relies heavily on energy collected from hydroelectric power plants and the water collected from the Colorado River, which is one of the most heavily dammed rivers in the world. Seven states and two countries rely on the Colorado River for food, power and water, with agriculture

using most of the diverted water. The very dams that were built to help humankind thrive are causing major ecological effects downstream. In the Colorado's natural, undammed state, seasonal rises in water quantity, known as pulse flows, graced the river each spring with the snowmelt. These pulse flows were crucial to many species living in or near the river, said Peter McBride, author of "The Colorado River, Flowing Through Conflict," and a documentary filmmaker who has dedicated much of his career to saving the river. The lack of this fluctuating flow has caused the near-disappearance of cottonwood trees among many other vital species.

This controlled flow of the Colorado is the main reason that its water no longer reaches the sea. According to McBride, the last time the river reached the sea naturally was 1993. The delta relied on pulse flows to the same extent as the canyons. In the spring, the delta was home to a variety of trees and wildlife that are no longer present. More than 200,000 migratory birds used the delta as a resting ground, and the endangered Totoaba fish, which once used the delta as its spawning grounds, has disappeared due to lack of freshwater, McBride reported.

With increasingly scarce rain and snowfall patterns, continued wasteful agricultural practices and inefficient water diversion methods, the flow rate of the Colorado is expected to drop dramatically, which will leave the power plant with less energy and the entire Western U.S. with less water.

Phantom Ranch sits at the bottom of the canyon, and after a few hours of painful descent, we arrived at the ranch. We ate snacks and drank lemonade at the Canteen and swam in the river. As we relaxed on the beach for a few hours, we watched the tide rise due to the fluctuating energy demands of the Glen Canyon Dam. I felt as if the natural experience that I hoped my effort would reward was compromised by air conditioners in Las Vegas.

The next morning we were exhausted, but we had to hike out of the canyon. Our shoulders were swollen, and our legs were weak, but we managed to grimace and push our way to the top. We watched the sunset over the canyon from the North Rim while eating our dehydrated dinner. Kodak, a friend we had met at the bottom of the canyon, hobbled over to our bench. We shared our dehydrated raspberry crumble dessert and laughed about how badly our bodies hurt.

In the following two days, we biked miles through a recovering wild-fire area. The burnt trees were scattered with yellow flowers and green grass embarking in the long process of natural succession. We rode until the red of the Utah desert, which marked the end of the trail.

On the Arizona Trail, we encountered fire-damaged landscapes, a river controlled by dams and deserts controlled by nothing. We braved above-average temperatures and froze in our sleeping bags a few nights in the mountains. After embarking on a trip that was so multidimensional and unpredictable, I feel prepared to advocate for the wild existence of every public landscape despite their unpredictable future. Experiences that school you the hardest give you the largest platform from which to launch your ambitions. Arizona was an unlikely teacher, but it handed down lessons that won't be left behind on the range.

*—Whitton Feer contributed to this story*





- [Top] The early Arizona light hits Oracle Ridge on Mt. Lemmon. Although the temps are more hospitable on the mountain, locals note a pattern of increasing drought and heat in the entire area, which makes the bone-dry evergreen forest a tinderbox.
- [Bottom] Nearing the end: Ian prepares for a junk food-induced trail nap only 50 miles from the Utah border.