

# ARIZONA HIGHWAYS

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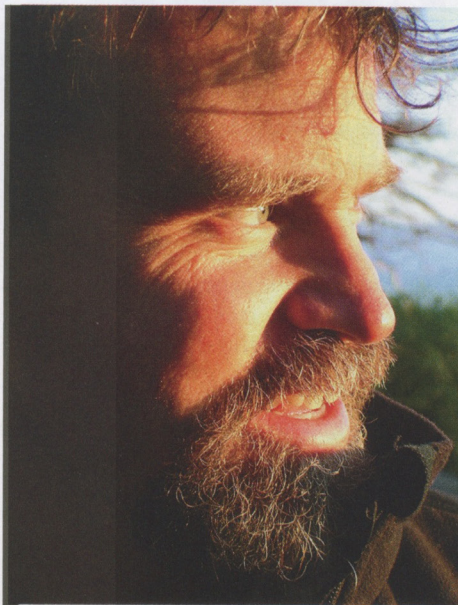


## ARIZONA HIGHWAYS TELEVISION



ELLEN BARNES

If you like what you see in this magazine every month, check out *Arizona Highways Television*, an Emmy Award-winning program hosted by former news anchor Robin Sewell. For broadcast times, visit our website, [www.arizonahighways.com](http://www.arizonahighways.com), and click the *Arizona Highways Television* link on our home page.

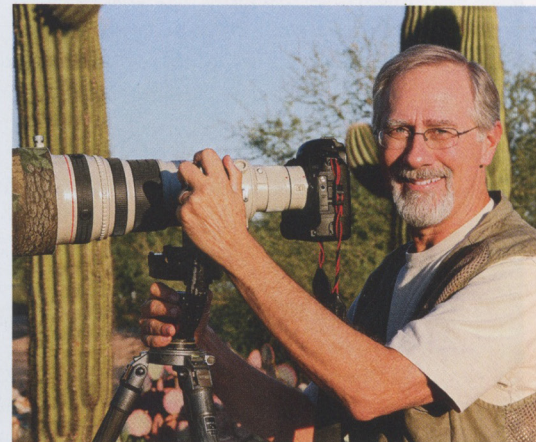


### CRAIG CHILDS

Writer Craig Childs is an avid adventurer, but one journey really stands out — a multiday excursion in the Mexican desert, complete with rattlesnake encounters. Childs relates his close calls with sidewinders in *This Bites!* (page 40). Although he hasn't yet been bitten, Childs has written many books about his treks into the wild, including *The Animal Dialogues*, which gives readers a glimpse at his close encounters with a variety of wildlife. Childs is a frequent contributor to *Arizona Highways*. His work has also appeared in *The New York Times* and *Outside*.

### BRUCE D. TAUBERT

Bruce Taubert is no stranger to Arizona's wildlife. As a biologist-photographer, he's come very close to things that crawl and slither, including the Western diamond-back and sidewinder rattlesnakes you'll see in *This Bites!* (page 40). "I love to photograph bats, hummingbirds, snakes and nocturnal animals of all types," Taubert says. "The more difficult a photograph is to make, the more I want to make it." Taubert's work has also appeared in *Arizona Wildlife Views* and *WildBird*.



ELIAS BUTLER

### ANNETTE MCGIVNEY

Giant centipedes, snakes and hungry bears didn't scare writer Annette McGivney (see *To Hellgate and Back*, page 44). "We managed to do the trip when it was not too hot and not too cold, and all the critters were either withdrawn from the cooler nights or happily occupied with gorging themselves on a profusion of prickly pear fruit," McGivney says. "It was heavenly down at the creek and swimming through the narrow gorge of Hell's Gate. I took my son because I wanted him to experience true wilderness, and he did." McGivney's work has also been published in *Backpacker*, *Outside* and *The New York Times Magazine*.

— KELLY VAUGHN KRAMER











fruit covers the ground, along with blue juniper berries, yellow cholla fruit and piñon pine cones full of nuts.

Steadily climbing as the heat rises, we emerge at Apache Ridge and the signed boundary of Hellgate Wilderness. We sit beneath an ancient alligator juniper to eat lunch and soak in the sprawling panorama. To the west are the Mazatzal Mountains, and to the south, perhaps 100 miles away, are the distinct summits of Four Peaks. And somewhere down there is a city named Phoenix with more than 3 million people. But from our 5,000-foot-high perch, the wilderness unfolds, uninterrupted in every direction.

As we descend below the ridge and hike toward Tonto Creek, the top of the canyon harboring Hell's Gate comes into view. It looks like the Earth has been slashed straight through with a machete. The walls are sheer and dark and pressed together. The canyon might appear ominous if we were not so hungry for shade.

"I can't wait to get in the water," Austin says. The temperature is now somewhere in the 80s. He's hot and tired from carrying his backpack. He's also skeptical about my promise that the discomfort of the hike will suddenly become worth it once we get to the creek.

The last 2 miles of Trail 37 are brutally steep, plummeting nearly 2,000 feet, with few switchbacks to ease the strain on the knees. The final half-mile is more of a slide, and we have to step sideways on slippery gravel in order to keep from tumbling head over heels. Finally, we land on the smooth round boulders of the creekbed and reach the heart of the wilderness area where Tonto Creek and its main tributary, Haigler Creek, converge. We hop across rocks over the Tonto's rushing waters, drop our packs at a broad, sandy beach, and collapse next to the water.

Austin lets out a big sigh. Karen takes off her boots and socks and presses her feet into the sand. The sky is a crisp blue with feathery wisps of clouds that are framed by the jagged walls of the canyon. A gentle breeze blows, and the golden leaves of a sycamore tree rattle above our heads.

"This doesn't feel like hell," Karen says.

Staring up at the canyon walls where a dam site was once proposed, I think about Bobbie Holaday, who fought to get Hellgate protected under the 1984 Arizona Wilderness Act. She was volunteering for the Arizona Wilderness Coalition's Adopt a Wilderness program in 1981 and noticed that no one had signed up to advocate for the wilderness study area called Hellgate.

"I'd never been there, but I adopted it sight unseen," Holaday told me when I called her after our trip. "Once I hiked to the bottom and saw how spectacular it was, I devoted myself to getting it designated. I explored the area in every direction for the better part of three years." Holaday, who is now a spry 90 years old, had to wrangle with local ranchers and Forest



**LEFT:** Karen Pugliesi examines an ancient metate set within a boulder near Tonto Creek. **BELOW:** Pugliesi floats in Tonto Creek, downstream of the "Hell's Gate."



Service managers. She compiled detailed records of the Tonto and Haigler drainage ecosystems, delivered public slideshows, and led hikes to Hell's Gate to prove that the area with the ominous-sounding name was actually one of Arizona's crown jewels. She won over the ranchers, the land managers and even then-Senator Barry Goldwater.

I asked Holaday if she'd had run-ins with snakes during her time in the wilderness. "I never had any problem," she said. "Perhaps, God whispered to them, 'You leave this lady alone.'" She also told me that the area got its name from ranchers whose cows were stuck in the bottom of the canyon. "It was one hell of a place to try and get a cow out," she laughed.

After lounging on the beach, where we're not visited by a single ant, gnat, kissing bug, centipede or snake, we blow up our inner tubes and summon the energy to visit the narrow section of canyon that is Hell's Gate. It's located up the Tonto,

just above the confluence with Haigler Creek. Getting through the "gate" requires floating or swimming a deep, 100-foot-long pool that squeezes between sheer granite walls.

We plop on top of our tubes and push off. I shriek in the icy water, which, according to the thermometer on Austin's watch, is 48 degrees. We paddle into an ever-narrowing corridor where granite walls rise 1,000 feet and radiate pink in the late-afternoon light. A warm wind pushes us upstream, through the gate, and to the end of a pool where we scramble over slick granite ledges to reach a waterfall.

"Was it worth it?" I ask Austin as we paddle through a second pool that's even narrower, deeper and colder than the first. "Yes!"

EDWARD ABBEY WROTE in his book *Desert Solitaire*, "Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human

spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread."

In this regard, Elias, Karen, Austin and I are fully satiated as we hike back up Trail 37 the next day. The path is still steep and our packs are still heavy, but our mood is upbeat. This is how wilderness works. If it's truly wild, it's a place that allows other species to thrive and may not always be comfortable for humans. But when the timing is right, the experience of being there can be intensely pure and joyful. The sky is bluer. The canyon walls more spectacular. The breeze more soothing. The food more delicious. The bonds with friends and family stronger.

We stop again for lunch on the ridge, sit under a shady oak tree and polish off the rest of our food. Elias picks up pottery shards that we pass around and then drop back onto the ground. When the conversation pauses and we look out at the mountains, I hear a meadowlark singing from a nearby tree. It's the sweetest and most heavenly sound. **AH**

## IF YOU GO

**DIRECTIONS:** From Payson, drive east on State Route 260 for 11 miles to Milepost 263. Turn right just past the marker and drive a half-mile on a graded dirt road to the Hellsgate Trailhead on the right.

**TRAVEL ADVISORY:** Hellsgate Trail 37 can also be reached from the south via the Smoky Hollow Trailhead near Young. However, the 15-mile, four-wheel-drive route to that trailhead is extremely rough.

**SEASON:** Late fall and early spring are most pleasant for trail hiking; however, the canyon pools may be too cold for swimming without a wetsuit.

**INFORMATION:** Payson Ranger District, 928-474-7900 or [www.fs.usda.gov/tonto](http://www.fs.usda.gov/tonto)