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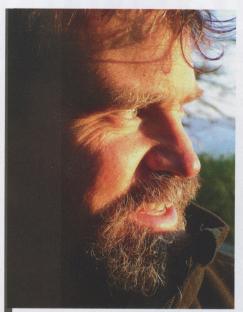
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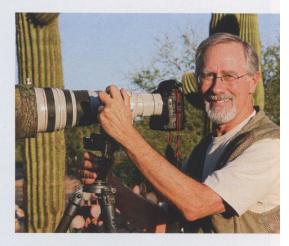


CRAIG CHILDS

Writer Craig Childs is an avid adventurer, but one journey really stands out -amultiday 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 diamondback 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.



ANNETTE McGIVNEY

Giant centipedes, snakes and hungry bears didn't scare writer Annette McGivney (see To Hellsgate 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 "We managed to do the trip when it was not too hot and not too cold, and all the critters were either withdrawn from the cooler nights or happily occupied with gorging themselves on a profusion of prickly pear fruit," McGivney says.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



HERE WERE PLENTY of sensible reasons to not go backpacking in Hellsgate Wilderness. For starters, the name raised suspicions that it could be a Godforsaken place. And then there was the fact that hungry bears stressed by drought were trying to eat people. The Hellsgate Trailhead, just east of Payson, was closed last June after three separate incidents at the nearby Ponderosa Campground — a bear there had put its jaws around the heads of campers (all of whom survived) as they slept.

There was also the possibility of being swept away by a monsoon-induced flash flood. Or succumbing to heatstroke during a long, hard hike in triple-digit temperatures. The spare and discouraging description of the wilderness on the Tonto National Forest website only threw up more red flags: "While the hiker faces several moderate to steep climbs on the route to Hell's Gate," it cautioned, "the real challenge is getting back out."

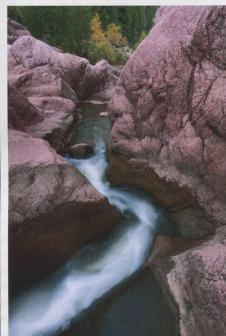
When I called the Tonto National Forest office in Payson last July to inquire about the bear situation, the recreation specialist added this: "Be aware that the area contains a very high concentration of snakes."

Yet, despite all of the ominous warnings, I was infatuated with Hellsgate. It was a place I'd eyeballed on the map and always wanted to see. Located at the base of the Mogollon Rim, almost at the dead center of Arizona and bisected by the

perennial waters of Tonto Creek, this 37,000-acre roadless wilderness possessed an irresistible combination for me: water in the desert and remote, rugged canyons. Every new bit of negative information only made me more determined. I had to go. I planned my backpacking trip, prudently I thought, for the last week in September. It would be after the threat of flash floods had passed and, I'd hoped, when the hungry bears and tripledigit summer temperatures had retreated.

But three days before my departure, news of other hazards in Hellsgate stopped me in my tracks. Friend and photographer Elias Butler had just returned from what he intended to be a three-day stay. Instead, after a grueling 12 hours in

"The Great
American Desert
is an awful place.
Even if you
survive, which
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you will have a
miserable time."



LEFT: Tonto Creek passes through "Hell's Gate," providing a cool respite for hikers. **ABOVE:** Tonto Creek cascades over pink granite below Bear Flat in the Hellsgate Wilderness.

Hellsgate, he hiked out as quickly as possible. "The heat coming off the rock walls was like a furnace," he said, noting it was 90 degrees by 9 a.m. "And there were so many swarming gnats I couldn't leave my tent. I wanted to get in the water, but I couldn't." He said that a recent rainstorm had filled Tonto Creek with silt and made it too murky to swim in and difficult to filter for drinking. His creekside camp was also invaded by ants and giant centipedes. It was a cauldron of biting and stinging critters that was so unpleasant even a dedicated wilderness traveler like Elias was chased away.

"THE GREAT American Desert is an awful place," Edward Abbey wrote in his book *The Journey Home*. "People get hurt, get sick, get lost out there. Even if you survive, which is not certain, you will have a miserable time. The desert is for movies and God-intoxicated mystics, not for family recreation."

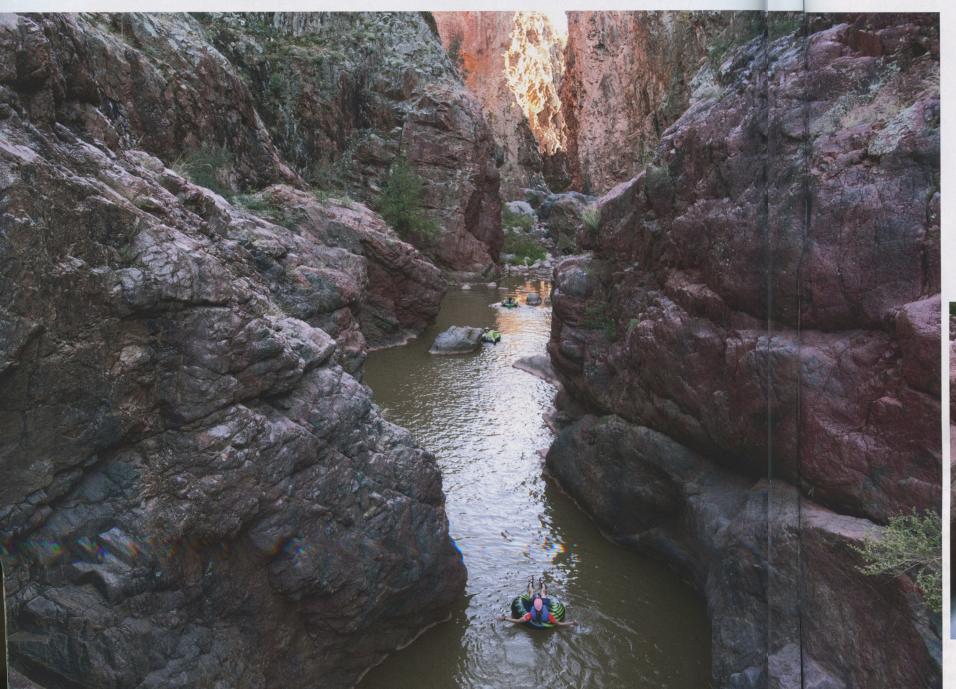
This is why, when I finally do hike into Hellsgate Wilderness, I take my 15-year-old son, Austin. I suspect Hellsgate is the kind of unruly, wild country that Abbey relished. And I want to share the experience of exploring it — which I hope will not be entirely miserable — with Austin. After Elias' experience, I rescheduled my hike for the third weekend in October, when the potential for human-friendly conditions would be at its greatest. Joining us on the three-day hike are Elias (undaunted by his previous trip) and my friend Karen Pugliesi.

Hoisting heavy packs loaded with extra water and rubber inner tubes for canyoneering, we set out from the Hellsgate Trailhead on a Friday afternoon (the bear closure had been lifted in September) and head into the forest, where cows watch us from a distance. It's nearly 8 miles on Hellsgate Trail 37 to the bottom of Tonto Creek Canyon and the actual place named Hell's Gate. Our plan is to hike halfway on the first day and camp on a ridge overlooking the canyon. But, due to our late start and heavy packs, darkness falls before we reach the ridge. We set up our tents, instead, in a small clearing in the forest, a place we name "cow pie camp" for all the droppings we have to kick out of the way.

After dinner, in the chill of late fall, we huddle around a fire and talk about what we might see tomorrow when we finally arrive at Hell's Gate. I share a story about a friend who hiked years ago into the wilderness and was camped along the creek on a hot summer night and slept without a tent on top of his sleeping bag. He awoke with his face itching and discovered he'd been bitten head-to-toe by blood-sucking conenosed "kissing" bugs.

"Oh my god!" Karen exclaims as we all laugh and shiver. "And we're going to this place!"

The next day we follow Trail 37 on a rocky route that transitions from an old jeep road into a hiking path. The temperature warms to a pleasant 70 degrees as we wind through the oak and manzanita scrubland of Little Green Valley and then contour around the head of Salt Lick Canyon. To the north is the towering escarpment of the Mogollon Rim, and somewhere to the south, in the unseen depths of Tonto Creek Canyon, is Hell's Gate. As we walk, I notice piles of bear scat the size of dinner plates along the trail, and it's riddled with prickly pear seeds. After the monsoon, the desert is ripe with fruit, and many species are gorging on this bounty. Purple prickly pear



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 Hellsgate 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 Hellsgate 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 Hellsgate.

"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





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-wheeldrive 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

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 lateafternoon 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.