

Moderns meet the ancient on Picketwire ride



Bill Harris

Outdoors

To take advantage of this fall's wonderful weather I joined up with a couple of friends to visit canyon country. But instead of heading west or south, we pointed our vehicle east.

The reader's first reaction might be "Why drive east? There's only mountains." Well, our destination was beyond the mountains. Some 75 miles from the Rockies, far out on the plains is a little-known and rarely-visited canyonlands area called "Picketwire."

After driving south from La Junta over miles and miles of rolling plains, we encountered a deep defile lined with piñon and juniper trees and covered with desert grasses, cactus and cholla. The defile has been created by the Purgatoire River and its small tributaries. Picketwire is an Anglo corruption of the river named by early day French fur trappers.

My traveling companions were Jon Horn and Alan Reed. The general purpose of our adventure was to do some birding in a place where we hadn't birded before. The goal was to find birds that we don't normally see in western Colorado. A secondary goal was to enter Picketwire Canyon on our mountain bikes along an abandoned road.

Jon and Alan had spent some time in Picketwire Canyon more than 20 years ago as part of a team of archaeologists working for Alpine Archaeological Consultants doing cultural resource inventories. Their memories of specifics had faded somewhat, but they remembered enough to get us headed in the right direction.

The day started out cool as we entered the canyon from the Withers Trailhead. The first quarter mile of the trail



COURTESY PHOTO

Alan Reed and Jon Horn on the Picketwire Trail.

was down a steep, rocky pitch that was impossible to ride. As we neared the canyon floor the old two track leveled off and smoothed out. We set a brisk pace to stay warm.

Several miles in we encountered the remains of an old homestead. Jon and I poked around the site, as Alan scanned the slope above it for any rock art. Much of the prehistoric rock art in Picketwire is found on large rocks that have fallen from the canyon rim.

Immediately he spotted a large well-patinated rock with glyphs on it. We quickly scrambled up to the rock to get a better view.

Alan immediately recognized one of the petroglyphs he noted during the inventories. The petroglyph is of an apparent human head with four spikes radiating from it. It was done in relief, that is, the figure had been created by removing the patina from the

rocky matrix. The remaining patina creates the image. On most other rock art I've seen the patina has been removed to create the image.

The rock art was placed on a rock tilted at an angle exposed to the elements. It included animal motifs; several shield figures, human forms holding a bow in one hand and a club-like object in the other and a hand print done in relief. The rock art panel is one of the most interesting and well-done panels I've ever seen.

We were soon back on our bikes cruising along at a comfortable pace. We stopped to check out an abandoned homestead and a dilapidated church. Adjacent to the church was a small cemetery with several grave stones. The names on the grave stones were Hispanic and dated to the late 1890s.

Jon had done some research regarding settlers in the canyon. He documented several

Hispanic sheep ranches that were established in the 1860s and 1870s. By the 1890s, Anglo cattle ranchers and farmers dominated the scene until the 1930s. Dust Bowl conditions pretty much put an end to agriculture in the area. The U.S. government bought out many of the homesteads to rest the land. Today the area is part of the Comanche Grasslands.

Further down the trail we noticed two birds perched on the side of an old telephone pole. As we glassed the pair with our binoculars the black and white pattern of ladder-backed woodpecker came into view. A little later we spotted several canyon towhees. The southeast plains is the only place in Colorado the two species can be found.

Viewing the two new Colorado species was fun, but the best birding experience of the day was watching a bazaar of prairie falcons. Four falcons appeared along the cliffs above

us gliding, diving and banking at high speed. They interacted in a playful manner, calling out to each other then disappearing as quickly as they had appeared.

The next stop on our ride was the Picketwire Dinosaur Track site. Down cutting along the river exposed a layer of limestone that had the preserved impressions of dinosaur tracks. There are hundreds of tracks of large sauropods and carnivorous dinosaurs estimated to be 150 million years old. The site is one of the largest in the world.

The afternoon warmed up as we cranked on. We were greeted by a large, brown tarantula as we pushed our bikes up the steep, rocky pitch that led to our vehicle.

It was a fitting end to a perfect fall day exploring Picketwire Canyon.

Bill Harris is the author of "Bicycling the Uncompaghe Plateau." He has traveled the backcountry of the Colorado Plateau since 1976.

COLORADO PARKS AND WILDLIFE NEWS

Snowmobile avalanche workshop slated; safety reminders given

Colorado Parks and Wildlife reminds snowmobilers to travel safely this winter and to review state regulations that apply to this recreational activity.

To help snowmobilers in southwest Colorado, a maintenance and basic avalanche workshop will be held from noon to 3 p.m., Dec. 14, at the Ridgway State Park Visitors Center.

To register for the class at Ridgway State Park, call 626-5822, or RSVP to Andrew.dean@state.co.us.

General safety tips include a thorough inspection of your snow machine and mechanical maintenance. Carry extra belts and spark plugs, along with the owner's manual, in case in-field repairs are necessary.

Weather can vary significantly during any day, so inspect your clothing and other safety equipment to assure that you'll be safe and warm.

Before you head out, study a map and become familiar with the area where you'll be traveling.

Early in the season, be aware of snow depths in your riding areas. Two feet of light snow isn't usually enough to hold a snowmobile, but it is enough to obscure stumps, fallen trees, rocks and other hazards. Always check local snow and weather conditions.

Avalanches are a constant concern for all backcountry travelers. Last year two snowmobilers in Colorado were killed in avalanches.

Nationwide, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, more snowmobilers die in avalanches than any other single winter activity.

CPW recommends that snowmobilers take an avalanche safety course, and always carry shovels, probes and avalanche beacons — and know how to use them.

Snowmobilers also should be familiar with the American Council of Snowmobile Associations Code of Ethics.

The code recommends that you: know state and local rules and regulations; help others who are in distress; respect all other backcountry users; respect private and public property; never harass wildlife; do no damage to vegetation or natural features.

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife web site provides complete information for snowmobilers, including: rules and regulations, safety tips, links to web sites of other snowmobile clubs, accident reporting procedures, links to annual registration materials for resident and non-residents, and links to trail system web sites.

The web site address: <http://cpw.state.co.us/thingsToDo/Pages/SnowmobileHelpfulLinks.aspx>.

Audubon Society presents talk on birds of Costa Rica

The birds of the tiny Central American country of Costa Rica will be the subject of an Audubon Society presentation at the Bill Heddles Recreation Center in Delta on Dec. 4.

Costa Rica has more than 900 species of birds, more than the entire

continent of North America, even though it is only one-fifth the size of Colorado.

It hosts one of the rarest and most exotic birds in the world, the resplendent quetzal.

Local bird watcher Paul Tickner, who has made birding trips to nu-

merous countries around the world including three to Costa Rica, will make the presentation.

The hour-long program will start at 7 p.m. and is free to the public.

For more information, contact Geoff Tischbein at 626-5002, or geofftischbein@gmail.com.

Long road to recovery for long-eared owl

STAFF REPORT

Team effort by private individuals, veterinarians and wildlife rehabilitators saved the life of a long-eared owl this past summer, reports Brenda Miller of Roubideau Rim Wildlife Rescue.

A homeowner on Dave Wood Road found the male owl injured on Aug. 8; she was able to capture it and place it into a carrier. As she left, she spotted the owl's mate sitting on the ground by the carrier door.

An X-ray at Bettie Hooley's Morningstar Veterinary Clinic revealed two broken wing bones.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife volunteer Willy Reynolds drove from Durango to fetch the long-eared owl and a great horned owl that was ready for a flight cage in Durango.

At the Durango Veterinary Clinic, Chuck Hawman was able to stabilize the breaks with pins to hold the bones together.

A raptor rehabber in Durango cared for the bird for several weeks, until Miller transported it back to Montrose County, where it spent several months in rehab at Roubideau Rim Wildlife Rescue.

Slowly but surely, over the course of 3.5 months, the bird improved, graduating from a carrier to larger cages until it was finally able to go into a 35-foot flight cage to build up its stamina and cardiovascular strength.

The Dave Wood Road property owner informed Miller that the female owl was still around, hooting for her mate. Although the male was recently released exactly where he was found, Miller does not yet know whether the pair was reunited.

She said that long-eared owls, which are "very high strung," often have difficulty in a rehab setting, and can die from the stress of being handled and/or confined. They can injure themselves in attempts to



COURTESY PHOTO/BEN JOHNSON

A long-eared owl that was found injured in August unfurls its wings.

escape the cage.

Roubideau Rim Wildlife Rescue is seeking people willing to help its efforts in saving injured wildlife and raptors. It needs to build some small indoor, heated cages for birds, and a large flight cage — 40 feet by at least 100 feet long, and between 16 to 20 feet high — by the end of May, 2015.

Large raptors, water fowl and vultures have been going to a rehabber in Durango, but she is moving soon, Miller reports.

The RRWR also needs volunteers who have the time to get online and search for grants/foundations that could be applied to for funding to build these cages for the birds. A minimum of \$8,000 will be needed to build a simple chain link flight cage, with the help of volunteer labor.

The RRWR also continues searching for a land donation or long-term lease to build a wildlife rehabilitation facility and educational center. A

minimum of 10 acres on or very near a maintained road is ideal.

The Black Canyon Regional Land Trust is willing to write the first conservation easement in the state for a wildlife rehab/education facility. The rescue wants to involve the public more in learning about, and caring for our wildlife.

For more information and to offer ideas, please contact Miller at rrwildliferehab@gmail.com or call 970-209-5946.

Other opportunities include remembering the wildlife and the volunteer rehabilitators on Giving Tuesday, Dec. 2, and Colorado Gives on Dec. 9.

Donations to RRWR can be mailed to P.O. Box 750, Olathe, CO, 81425. Anonymous donations can be sent to Vectra Bank, 1200 Townsend Ave., Montrose, CO, 81401; or visit the Facebook page at <http://bit.ly/RRWR-Facebook>.