

## **Arizona Trails**

Horton Creek; <http://www.arizonahikingtrails.com/hikingpages/hortoncreek285.html>

Thanksgiving weekend sounded like good time to get away for a day trip exploring the incredible selection of hiking trails in Arizona. One of the challenges is to make a choice from the wide variety of ecosystems. Arizona's biodiversity is hard to match with the desert, mountains, forest, riparian, grasslands and other eco-systems. The amazing diversity of mammals, reptiles, birds and amphibians is a nature lovers dream.

One of my favorite ecosystems is the riparian habitat and I discovered Horton Springs 16 miles east of Payson on Hwy 260 and Forest Rd 289 at Kohls Ranch.



There is perennial water flow from the spring which winds down from an elevation of about 7,000 ft to the Upper Tonto Creek recreation area at 5,500 ft. There are several waterfalls along the way climbing up the trail to the springs. It is about 4 miles one way climbing about 1500 feet in elevation. The trail starts out along the creek with Willow, Cottonwood, and Sycamore and splendid fall colors we so rarely see in Arizona. It took me back to childhood in the Midwest and East where we always looked forward to the change of seasons. Then finally those precious few weekends came and everyone rushed out to enjoy the awesome beauty of nature. Anticipating the years fall colors was the highlight of the season that would soon bring cold rain, snow and those never ending string of cloudy days.



It was a perfect day for hiking and much of the trail was well marked and easy to follow. The trail climbed along the creek and then veered off and climbed higher in elevation. The habitat kept changing and soon I was in pines and junipers and some old growth forests feeling much like Colorado. After the first mile there were no other hikers and I had the forest to my-self. It was so peaceful and quiet, beautiful in one way and a little disturbing in another.

I was hoping to see some wildlife once I left the hikers. I was hiking along the creek in perfect habitat for mule deer, elk, abert's, arizona grey and rock squirrels and the many birds common to the area. I kept waiting for that photo opportunity but once again came up short for wildlife. I heard a few birds but was unable to locate or identify them. Some common birds include miriam's turkey, band-tailed pigeon, some warblers and acorn woodpeckers. I keep wondering why it seems I see more wildlife in my backyard then in the wild but the views, waterfalls and hike make it a great day where spirit and nature are united.

Finally after about 3 hours I reached the Horton Spring which flows right out of the rocky mountain. It was so funny because I had some great pictures of the creek and waterfalls and scenery and I got to the spring and my camera would not work. I had a loose faceplate and received an error message. I was kind of bummed not to get any pics but sat and enjoyed a snack and water after a long uphill hike. I realized I may be in trouble bringing only 20oz water for 8 miles of hiking. Thank goodness for cool weather and a downhill trek of only about 1.5 hours.

While an I was enjoying the sounds of water rushing out of the spring, I heard a noise and looked up to see a woman riding her horse nearby. I was kind of shocked after seeing no one for hours. We chatted for a minute and then she took her horse over to the spring for a drink. I noticed she was dressed western gear including a holster and revolver. I felt like I was back in time to the days of the old west.



The hike back down was easy and fairly quick. The rocky outcroppings, views through the forest to the vistas along with the sounds of the water flowing down the mountain creek is something I am thankful for and always appreciate. Horton Springs is a great hike for those who really enjoy the riparian and higher elevation habitats and all their diversity. It is continually amazing at the diversity and beauty all throughout Arizona.

