

A veritable moveable feast, it serves up stunning geological landforms, serious climbing, and ridgeline walks next to serene, picturesque Lake Havasu coves that brim with ducks and songbirds.

A Little Slice of Heaven on Lake Havasu



In Arizona, where there's water, there's wildlife. Lake Havasu, on Arizona's west-central border, yields unforgettable views of everything from bighorns to birds. A hike in SARA Park Wash is a memorable way to experience this special area.

EVERYONE I MET ON THE TRAIL said it wasn't going to happen. A recent deluge had deposited deep pools of water in the midst of the slot canyon, rendering the excursion slick and impassable. But they didn't know I had come prepared for those conditions. I wore hiking sandals and quick-dry shorts. I'd been turned away twice in past years in attempts to make it downstream and was determined that the third time would be the proverbial charm.

Such is the challenge of the slot canyon that begins at SARA (Special Activities Recreation Area) Park. Known as the Crack in the Wall and SARA Park Wash, it is one of the more famous and popular slot-canyon hikes of the lower Colorado River. A veritable moveable feast, it serves up stunning geological landforms, serious climbing, and ridgeline walks next to serene, picturesque

Lake Havasu coves that brim with ducks and songbirds. As you glass the dramatic mountain views with binoculars, exhilarating wildlife reveals itself.

Being turned away from the slot in the past was never a disaster because the remainder of the 6-mile loop more than satisfied my day. But today — a sunny, hot February day that would dry me quickly — it was simply time to go for it. I was on my way.

The hike began on SARA parkland; the jurisdiction switched to the Bureau of Land Management about a half mile in. A mile of trails and sandy washes (look for the yellow markers) delivered me to the entrance of the slot. I suggest this clockwise route. Take on the slot while the mind and body are fresh and strong, and gravity is on your side. It's easier to slide down wet, slick rock than to climb from the bottom.

The morning was sublime. A canyon wren's descending trill floated from steep rock walls. Brittlebush bloomed yellow; the ubiquitous paloverde trees and creosote bushes lined the washes as kinglets and gnatcatchers hopped about within their cover. The wash narrowed and steepened as a companion and I approached the slot. A half-dozen members of a hiking club rested on large boulders at the entrance. They had entered, turned around and struggled to climb out on the rope ladder. They warned me away as I descended. Not even one woman's threat of "really dirty water" deterred me.

A rope ladder was affixed to the first major drop of 8-plus feet. The ladder hadn't been there in my previous attempts. I lowered myself and continued, executing a series of careful chimney maneuvers, brac-

If You Go

SARA Park is 1 mile south of Lake Havasu City. At the south boundary of the city, turn onto McCulloch Boulevard and head toward the lake, or take state Route 95 at around mile-marker 175.

Maps are on the bulletin board at the entrance. Be sure to stop and take a look. I photographed them and carried them with me in my camera.

The main parking lot for the slot hike is on the backside of the paved, horseshoe-shaped road that rings the park. There's also a smaller lot that starts you down a different wash, which eventually meets the main trail. Look for the lot with the bulletin board.

Carry water and food. Wear appropriate footwear. Dress for desert conditions. A collapsible hiking stick is recommended. Plan as if you might get lost and 6 miles might turn into 10.

For information and maps of the area, call the Bureau of Land Management in Lake Havasu. Their office is just a few minutes from the hike, at 2610 Sweetwater Avenue. **(928) 505-1200**

Hours: 8 a.m.–4:30 p.m., Monday–Friday

ing my feet against the wall as I passed over pools of water. The rock was smooth, damp and slippery, demanding intense concentration as the sky above narrowed to a slim winding band framed by curved, water-carved stone. Sunlight disappeared.

About 20 minutes in, we came to the large pool that had turned everyone else around. My hiking stick determined it to be waist deep on my 5-foot 4-inch body. The water was ice cold. The bottom, covered with large rocks, made for tenuous footing. I gritted my teeth, took a deep breath and entered, keeping my right hand on the rock wall for stability. There were no finger holds. Ten careful steps later I was across. I rounded a narrow passage and found myself in a dry, open wash.

First things first: I walked a few soaking-wet, chilled steps and sat down on a flat boulder to dry, pulling out the binoculars to watch a kingbird as he made his way from treetop to treetop. Twenty minutes later my dry, warm body continued down the serpentine, rock-sculpted wash. Still following the yellow markers, it was two more scenic miles to the Colorado River and Lake Havasu. A kit fox disappeared around a bend. The lavender blooms of the ironwoods were abuzz with bees.

The trail eventually left the wash, headed up a small steep hill and dropped into Balanced Rock Cove, a stunning inlet of volcanic rock towers, reeds and water. American coots and ring-necked ducks floated about as a fisherman trolled the cattail edges of the shoreline from his motorboat. Suddenly his line jerked and he reeled in a 16-inch largemouth bass as an osprey, also called a "fish eagle," glided above. The fisherman collected his catch with a net, removed the hook and returned his prize to the water. "Catch and release," he said as he passed by. He was out there for the joy of it.

A Bureau of Land Management campground and picnic area, Balanced Rock has many places along the shore from which to fish or picnic. There is also a formal shelter and camp area if one wants to hike up and around to the opposite side. There is a \$10 fee for day use at the cove if you intend to spend considerable time. My friend and I ate lunch on a shoreline rock, then lay back

and basked in the sun at the edge of Lake Havasu. Havasu, which means "blue-green waters," didn't disappoint. It soothed the eye, relaxed the soul.

The trail markers split into blue and yellow at the cove. Yellow took you back to the slot, blue climbed from the cove to an upper ridge trail to complete the loop to the parking lot. It's a stunning route of narrow ridgelines with 75-foot drops, rock uplifts and scenic views across miles of water and craggy, desert mountains.

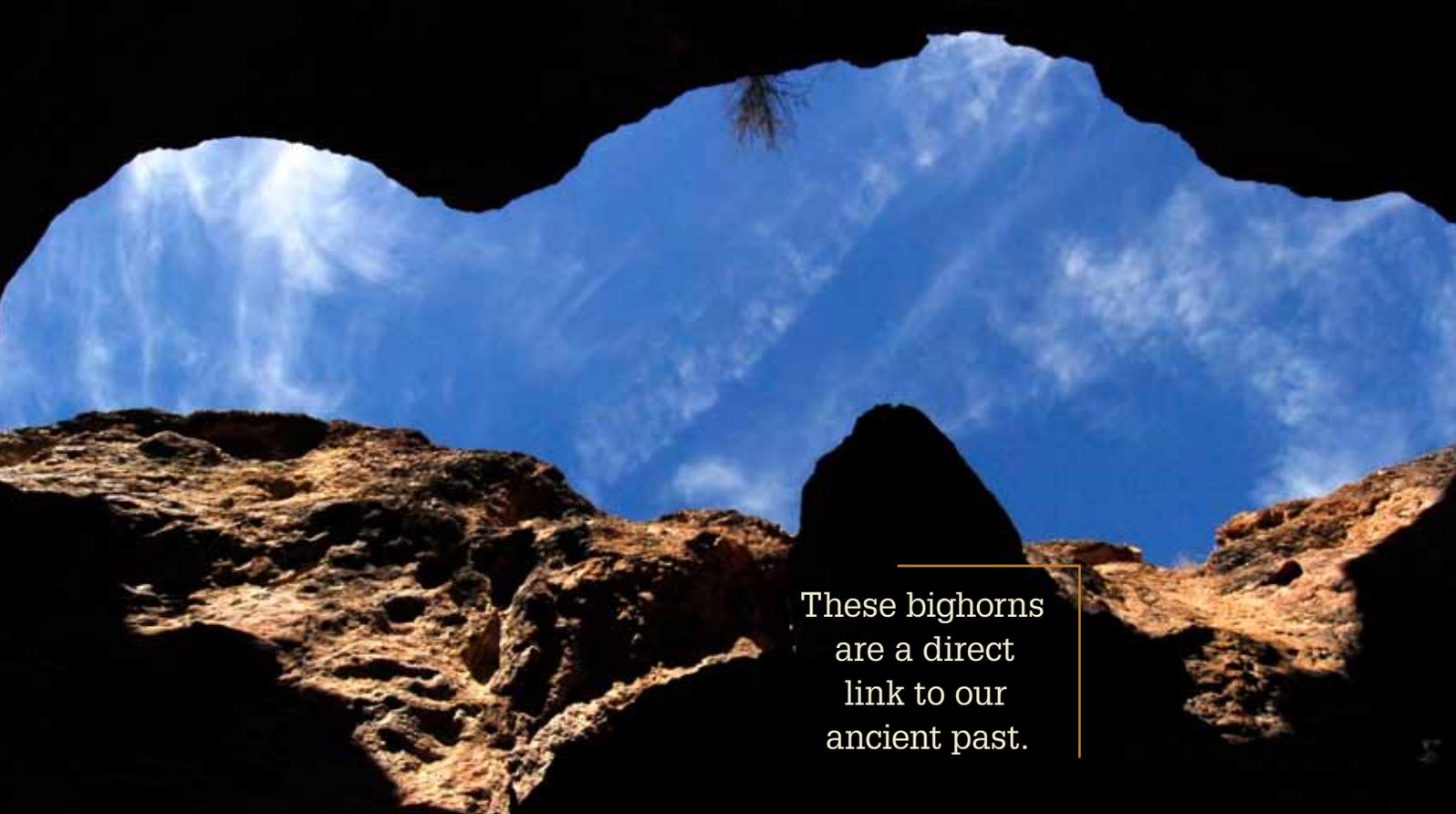
Look carefully to the right and you can see the slot canyon split the rock below. If luck is with you, your eye will catch the gentle movement of the denizens of these mountains, the desert bighorns. Their white rear ends are what usually give them away. In the past I've spied them lying in the sun on south-facing cliffs. This day, four ewes crossed a patch of smooth slick-rock, jumping down from a boulder. I took a seat on the stony ground and watched them make their wary way across the rock.

These bighorns are a direct link to our ancient past. The gene pool of this particular population, which numbers around 40, has been here for thousands of years. It's the real deal, with no man-made management introductions (unlike the Needles Mountain herd, which also numbers around 40). When your eyes fall upon these sheep, you are privy to a view of the descendents of the animals whose likenesses appear as drawings on rocks and caves in the region.

Bob Henry, a game specialist for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, notes that this small population is under intense pressure. State Route 95, the major north-south transportation route through the area, discourages migratory passage to and from the Aubrey Mountains to the east that would allow for fresh mixing of the gene pools. These bighorns are cut off from the Needles Mountain population by the development of Lake Havasu City. Their traditional migration patterns across the Colorado River are risky if not impossible since the completion of Parker Dam increased the girth of the lake.

In addition, this group of usually solitary creatures is losing its territory to





These bighorns
are a direct
link to our
ancient past.



Deep in the Crack in the Wall, the sky narrows to a slim, winding band framed by curving stone. Wildlife that can be seen on this hike include ducks such as this ring-necked, greater roadrunners, bighorn sheep and ospreys (left to right).

increased numbers of recreationists: the bikers and hikers like me who covet its terrain. The bighorns' protected lands, which extend from SARA Park down to the Bill Williams River National Wildlife Refuge, are the same scenic miles that make a biker's mouth water as he dreams of a miles-long ride south along the lake. With or without extended trail development, more people are sure to come.

There are many side trails that wind their sinuous way through the rocky hills. There is a large arch that sits upon a rocky ridge that beckons one to climb closer. There are bike and hike trails that deliver one to nearby coves with names like Jurassic and Solitude. As spring approaches, you are certain to see the blooms of blue phacelia, Mexican poppies,

Mojave aster and dune evening primrose. Gopher snakes and diamondbacks, while common, are rarely seen, whereas the wily ways of roadrunners and coyotes are a frequent sight.

You can wander for hours, even days on the trails that cut across these lands. The beauty is contagious. Folks along the trail run the gamut from hardcore hikers decked out in Gore-Tex to casual visitors in flat, open-cut sandals. A lean, gorgeous long-distance runner might drop off a ridge and meet you in the wash. Or perhaps you'll come across the couple I met in an arroyo last year. She was a smiling, spry, 60-something mail-order bride from Russia. He was struggling to rest his 80-plus-year-old body upon a rock, encouraging her to continue on her quest

to reach the slot. I helped her with some trail details, intrigued by their sweet story and chutzpah.

Yes, you are likely to see anything on this engaging loop close to Lake Havasu City, including a dripping wet woman with chattering teeth sitting upon a rock to dry, struggling to keep her binoculars still. This is part of the charm. Everyone has a story; above all, the virile curved-horned ram that knelt on his knees on a high mountainside and browsed the first green shoots of spring. 🦅

■ Christina Neelson, avid naturalist and traveler, is the author and/or photographer of six books, including "Living on the Spine," an account of her five-year solo sojourn at the edge of wilderness. Arizona landscapes are her passion.