

B&C PROFESSOR'S CORNER

Old Bigfoot



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Rising to nearly 11,000 feet, Escudilla is one of the highest mountains in Arizona and played an important part in Aldo Leopold's Southeast experience.

As he wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*, "Life in Arizona was bounded underfoot by grama grass, overhead by sky,

and on the horizon by Escudilla.

"To the north of the mountain you road on honey-colored plains. Look up anywhere, anytime, and you saw Escudilla."

He went on to discuss wildlife, hunting, cruising timber on the mountain, and the reason Escudilla was special: Old Bigfoot, one of the last grizzly bears in the Southwest. No one saw Old Bigfoot other than his tracks and evidence of livestock killed but he was the main source of conversation around campfires.

Leopold wandered the peaks of Escudilla when "progress" visited this corner of Arizona with automobiles, discussions of women's suffrage, telephones, and a government trapper—one that shot Old Bigfoot. In four short pages, Leopold's essay on Escudilla moves the reader from the pristine to the contemporary, where "progress" eliminated part of that which was held dear—the top of the ecological pyramid. If you haven't read this essay yet, do so. If you have read it, re-read it. It is short, but wisdom-laden. After Old Bigfoot was shot and hauled off to the National Museum, Leopold concluded by saying, "Escudilla still hangs on the horizon, but when you see it you no longer think of bear. It's only a mountain now."

His essay is a lamentation over the reduction of the top carnivores and the price humanity pays for "progress." Each autumn I took my wildlife students to Escudilla for numerous reasons: the history of the mountain, the wildlife, and to leave progress behind. When Leopold wrote of Escudilla, progress was sneaking into the canyons and crevices of the mountain, but more than 80 years later, humans have done a pretty good job of shutting the door and keeping the mountain intact. The telephone lines Leopold wrote of are gone and replaced with wireless communication; but as we ascended the mountain I had everyone divorce themselves from iPods, cell phones and any other electronic device. When we reached the top, I asked all students to find a spot where they could be alone and simply sit in silence for 15 minutes. For many this was the first time they had ever been so isolated from humans. Many commented on that short part of the trip as the best 15 minutes they could remember. We could all do with more isolation from humanity to connect to the world.

A second exercise was to identify as many mammals (and sign) as possible in 30 minutes. The one that identified the most was awarded the Rand Award (Rand was Aldo Leopold's first name)—a copy of *A Sand County Almanac*. The rest of the visit looked at land use on Escudilla, and we discussed whether it was still special or "only a mountain."

Much of the area is now wilderness, and even though cattle still graze the flats and slopes, the mountain is still home to the deer, turkey, and pinon jays mentioned in the essay. And the road punched in by progress is still there but is closed by nature in winter. Compared to other mountains, Escudilla is relatively intact and recently one of the chips in the ecological pyramid has been patched—not Old Bigfoot's relatives, but close.

Wolves were extirpated from the Southwest in the 1950s, but were translocated back over 40 years later. They were not placed on Escudilla but were thought to have occupied the mountain, which was verified by B&C Fellow, Jerod Merkle. The following are from Jerod's field notes while working with the Interagency Wolf Field Team in summer 2005 in Alpine, Arizona.

18 June 2005

Interagency Field Team (IFT) field office receives call from Dave Denali about a wolf sighting on Terry Flat, Escudilla Mountain. He says two wolves chased his dogs out of the woods while he was hiking.

I went out and met him and he took me to the spot where he had seen them. This was an island of thick forest in the large Terry Flat meadow. Sure enough, as we were in the area, we spotted 2 Mexican wolves running back and forth in a certain area. They did not run away, but stayed in the same area, pacing back and forth. We then decided to retreat.

27 June 2005

I went back to the spot where the wolves were spotted. I sat on a hill just north of the area, so I had a good view of the spot. I sat there for about an hour before I caught the glimpse of a puppy in the meadow just north of the patch of thick forest. I then proceeded to see another puppy. They were playing around in the meadow. Then the adults appeared... and were walking around in the area where the puppies were. They milled around for a bit in the open area, and then went back into the island of thick forest where they disappeared.

These field notes represent the first documentation of wolves on Escudilla in over 50 years. Will Old Bigfoot's relatives follow? Not likely in the near future but some said the same about wolf restoration in the United States not that long ago.

All of the top predators are not back on Escudilla, but the chips are being filled in and thoughts of grizzly bear have indeed returned to campfire discussions. Escudilla is certainly more than "just a mountain". I think even Rand would agree. ■

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