

# Pinal

Winter 2016

**Ways**

## Recreation Activity Guide

How and where to enjoy  
the cooler temperatures

Then & Now

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# See Pinal's great outdoors ... from

*Story and photos by  
Darren Barakat*

**P**inal County is remarkable for its abundance of hiking opportunities, and even in the cooler temperatures of fall and winter many great trails are nearly empty.

Key hiking destinations include Picacho, Lost Dutchman, and Oracle State Parks, the Tonto and Coronado National Forests at opposite ends of the county, and localities such as Superior, Apache Junction, Casa Grande and Gold Canyon. More remote trails are available at the Superstition and Table Top Wilderness areas, and 100 miles of the Arizona National Scenic Trail winds through Pinal.

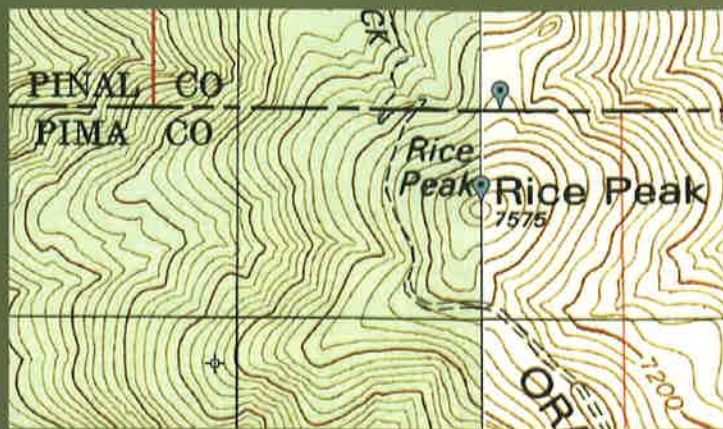
"I think we have some good hiking opportunities, definitely," said Kent Taylor, director of Open Space and Trails for Pinal County government. "We have a pretty amazing county, and that's one way to see it."

Another way in which Pinal County is unusual is that reaching its highest point above sea level is more complicated than climbing to the top of a mountain or hill, although that will get you pretty close.

The summit of Rice Peak in Pima County is 7,575 feet above sea level and about 700 feet south of the Pinal County line. The highest point in Pinal is around 7,300 feet on the downward slope of Rice Peak, north and slightly east of the summit, on the county line.

My wife and I decided to experience some Pinal hiking by trying to reach the county high point on a recent Saturday with clear skies and temperatures in the 70s and 80s.

Peppersauce Campground is about a 20-minute drive southeast of Oracle. The road turns to packed dirt around the time you enter the Coronado National Forest. If you are driving a regular passenger car, we learned that you

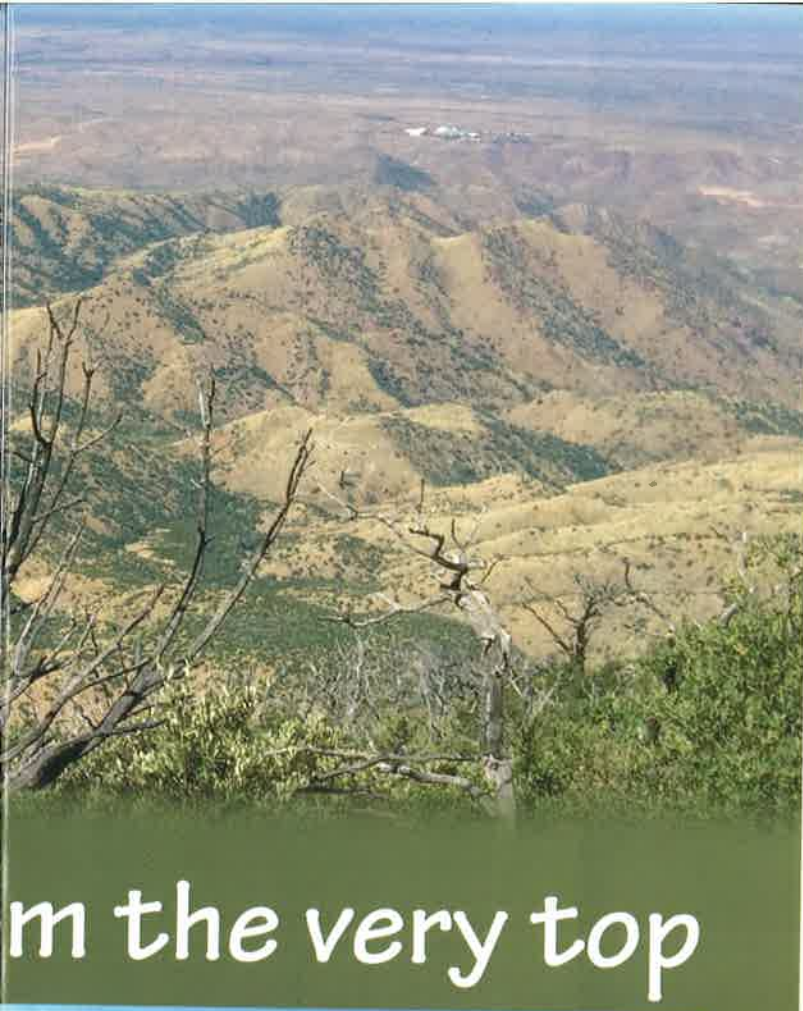


should park and start hiking at Peppersauce. A rugged 4-wheel drive vehicle can make it a ways farther.

I tried to drive our 2011 Hyundai Tucson beyond Peppersauce. I knew it was a mistake by about the third time I heard the screeching sound of brittle, thorny tree branches scratching the side of the car, even before I saw the look on my wife's face. After about a half-mile I turned back and parked a couple hundred feet from the campground.

From an elevation of 4,620 feet at the campground, we began our climb at 8 a.m. A sign said Rice Peak was 7 miles away, but some written reports say it's more like 6. We were the only hikers in sight. Ten minutes in, four people in two ATVs drove past. They were the last human beings we saw for almost six hours. A few minutes later, three cows and a calf standing 40 feet off the trail startled us.

We saw a mix of mountain and desert vegetation. Near Peppersauce, tall trees shielded us from the sun. Later, big and small leafy shrubs; juniper bushes; pricklypear



m the very top



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grass-like plants surrounded the trail. As we got higher, a few creepy-looking dead trees, appropriate for the Halloween season, reached out to us.

Butterflies circled and followed us up. Most were yellow, but a few had brilliant, multi-colored wings.

After an hour, the trees got smaller, and the shade disappeared. Golden hills dotted with brownish green shrubs towered to the north, and deep, narrow washes led downward from the trail.

We heard some rustling in the trees to the left. Although there was too much vegetation for a clear view, I saw what looked like two large, brown animals, probably cows. I think. I hope. At least that's what I told my wife.

Two hours in we had gained 1,820 feet in elevation. We reached a crest at the top of a long, steep incline and a sign indicating we were turning onto the Arizona Trail.

The Arizona National Scenic Trail stretches about 800 miles through the state. Theoretically, an adventurous soul could walk it from the Mexican border all the way to Utah, but there are challenges, like the nasty-looking barbed wire fence that cut off the trail to the north.

"There's that fence and about 100 more," said Shawn Redfield, trail director of the Arizona Trail Association, which maintains the trail. "It isn't a walk in the park." But the view is beautiful, and our path took us south, away from the barbed wire, along Oracle Ridge.

The views on both sides were expansive, with villages, valleys, and mountains thousands of feet down and dozens of miles away in the distance. This section of trail was fairly flat, but it got steeper as we got closer to Rice Peak.

Three hours in, after an early 15-minute lunch, we reached the Pinal-Pima County line. It's not marked, but we knew because it intersects the trail between the sharpest two turns. The highest point in Pinal

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County is about 600 feet to the east. I thought about accessing it directly from there instead of from Rice Peak, but to leave the trail it was too steep and the vegetation too impenetrable, especially for someone in gym shorts.

Either way, finding the highest point in Pinal County would be difficult.

Scott Surgent, a hiker and author who wrote a book called "The County High Points of Arizona," has attempted to reach the Pinal high point twice by descending north from Rice Peak.

"It's a little like searching for an Easter egg in heavy brush," he warned me.

On his first trip, in 1999, he couldn't find the spot, which is marked by a cairn and a sign-in book. In 2003, he also couldn't find it, partly because there was too much snow on the ground.

Another question is whether the cairn is really Pinal's highest point, although topographical maps narrow it down to a tiny patch of land below the summit.

It's important to prepare for a hike, especially a long one. The checklist should at least include plenty of water, some food, the right footwear, clothes to match the weather conditions, and sunscreen. On longer, more remote hikes, detailed, up-to-date maps are also important.







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The computer screen shots I printed in lieu of real maps were of no help when we came upon a split in the trail with no signs. My printouts had showed the way at each of the previous forks in the road. We started out on Forest Road 29, passed 29B, turned onto 4472, then onto 4483 and south on the Arizona Trail.

But now where?

We decided to go left, climbed a steep grade for 10 minutes, and reached a top around 11:30 a.m. It couldn't be Rice Peak because we hadn't gone far enough south, the

throbbing blue dot on my iPhone showed that we were short, and the little metal disc that marks the summit in online photos was nowhere to be found. This must have been a scenic overlook on the way to the top, like a little horn on a pointy-headed demon.

We lacked the time and energy to go much farther, so we decided to descend back to Peppersauce.

The next morning while studying maps and comparing summit photos online to my photos of the scenic overlook, I realized Siri was wrong. The scenic overlook was the top of



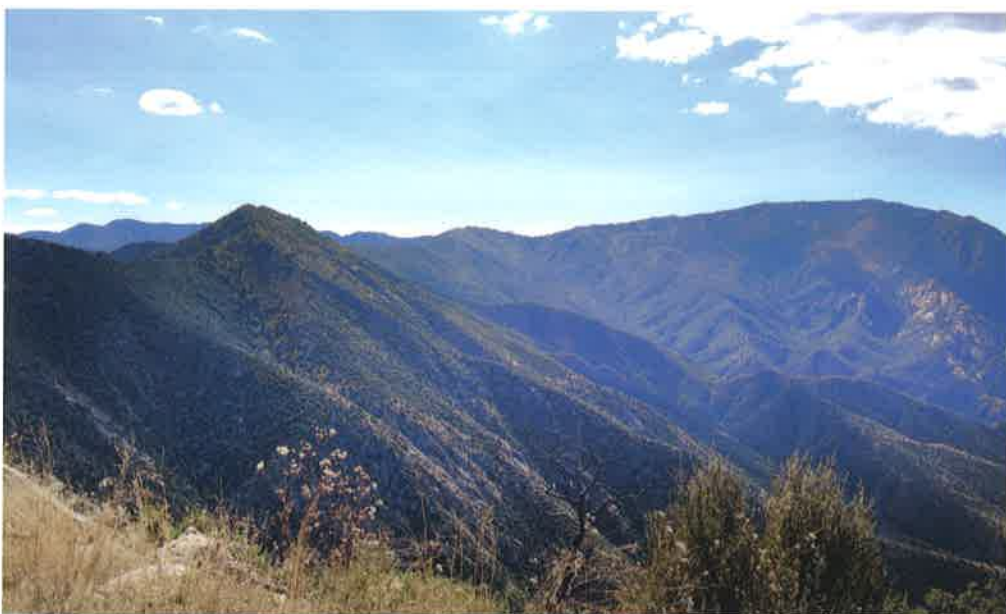
Rice Peak. The giveaway was the distinctive pile of geologic peanut brittle, small rocks lumped together into large rocks.

Although the drop in elevation while hiking down was 2,955 feet, it took us a little more than 2½ hours to arrive back at Peppersauce Campground. The road is full of loose gravel and dirt, and it's easy to slip and fall. You have to step deliberately, which can be difficult after five hours of tough hiking. I averted disaster a couple of times by righting myself as one of my feet gave way.

At 2 p.m. we heard playing children and saw two campers, the first people we'd seen since 8:15 a.m.

Then, a couple more ATVs. The cattle were still there to greet us 15 minutes from the finish line, though this time it was two bulls and a cow. We reached the car at 2:35 p.m. after 6½ hours on the trail.

We had gotten lost on the way to the county high point, but we found a bigger point. As Taylor told me, "Pinal County is a great place for outdoor recreation, whether you are a resident or a visitor, so come enjoy." **LPW**



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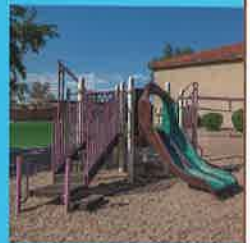


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