

Cycling through Southern Arizona's Grasslands

Article by Matthew J. Nelson
Photos by Steve Coleman

As much as I enjoy mountain biking on rugged, remote trails through Arizona's wild lands, there are a few places in our state that are best explored from the seat of a road bicycle. If given the choice, I'll almost always choose the dirt path. But taking a break from the rocks and sand to sail along smooth pavement is a pleasure, especially when there are few cars to share the experience. I also enjoy the way a road ride allows for more time to sit up and look around, absorbing the surroundings instead of focusing on the trail.

If there was ever a "perfect" time of year to enjoy beautiful Southern Arizona while on a bicycle, this is it. Springtime offers clear skies, warm days and abundant bird life. So this month I encourage you to give your fat tires a rest and head south of Tucson for a morning ride through the grasslands.

Our ride begins in Sonoita and travels southeast on country roads toward Fort Huachuca. This is a pleasant ride for bicyclists of all ability levels, as it climbs and descends gradually on paved roads virtually free of traffic. To get started, park in Sonoita and ride south on Hwy. 83 toward Parker Canyon Lake. After ½-mile, the road curves sharply to the east and begins a gradual downhill that sweeps you into the heart of Arizona's grasslands.

The surrounding views are breathtaking. To the east you can admire the rolling Mustang Mountains as they appear to melt into desert. The heavily forested Huachuca Mountains can be seen to the southeast. To the west are the awe-inspiring Santa Rita Mountains with Mt. Wrightson penetrating the sky. All around are fields of waving grasses that make this one of the most unique ecosystems in Santa Cruz County.

The road undulates through the grasslands, passing by old ranches that have been here for more than 100 years. Decrepit, creaking windmills dot the landscape. Highway 83 seems to change direction constantly, allowing you to enjoy the countryside from a variety of angles. While keeping an eye on the road

is important, don't forget to soak up all the amazing sights around you. This is, after all, why you're out here.

Bird lovers will find this ride absolutely enchanting. You'll see a variety of raptors soaring high in the sky and hunting for rodents in the grass. Red-tailed hawks, Northern harriers and American kestrels are the most common, and you're likely to see prairie falcons as well. Grassland sparrows emerge from their hiding places in the tall grass as you ride by, and although identification is difficult (they all look like little brown birds) you can find grasshopper sparrows, savannah sparrows, Baird's sparrows and Cassin's sparrows, to name a few. Ravens are ever present and provide great entertainment with their high-flying antics. Meadowlarks show off their yellow bellies as they flutter by, and provide much of the soundtrack for your ride.

The grasslands are also a good place to view Sonoran pronghorn. You have to have a keen eye to spot them, as the camouflaged mammals often blend perfectly into the landscape. Their white faces and rumps sometimes give them away, as do their large horns. Pronghorns are the fastest runners in North America, reaching speeds of up to 40 m.p.h., but are most commonly seen standing perfectly still. They are a rare and beautiful sight.

After pedaling for about 12 miles you will enter the Coronado National Forest. The road winds gently uphill, bringing you out of the grasslands and into the oak-juniper woodlands. Any uphill pedaling is greatly rewarded by exhilarating downhills on the other side. Just past milepost 18 is the Black Oak Cemetery, a pioneer-family cemetery that makes for a nice side trip. The dirt road on the east side of Highway 83 is ½-mile long, and delivers you to a peaceful graveyard amidst healthy stands of oaks.

A few miles later (17.6 miles from Sonoita), turn left onto Cimarron Road (Forest Road 827). This seldom-traveled country road meanders for almost five miles, taking you through the tiny town of Canelo, crossing over Turkey Creek, and

climbs steeply into the foothills of the Huachuca Mountains. The landscape changes dramatically, as the oaks give way to agave-covered hillsides and impenetrable forests of mesquite and acacia. One last heart-pumping climb will deliver you to the western entrance of Fort Huachuca.

At this point you will have bicycled 22 miles from Sonoita. The Fort's gate and guard kiosk is a great place to turn around and pedal back to where you started. To enter Fort Huachuca you must have photo identification.

For those wanting to pedal more miles, there are a few side trips in the vicinity that I must recommend. The first is Parker Canyon Lake, an enchanting oasis located in the Canelo Hills just 13 miles southeast of Canelo. To get there, ride back to Hwy. 83 and follow it to the road's end. There's a perimeter trail around the lake if you feel energetic enough for a hike. Another rewarding side trip is the beautiful route that takes you through Arizona's wine country and into the town of Elgin. To get there, ride on either Elgin Road or the Elgin-Canelo Road (both are accessible from Hwy. 83) to the quaint town. Wine tasting and fine dining make Elgin an excellent end-of-the-ride destination.

No matter how far or how fast you pedal, a bicycle ride through the grasslands in springtime is an experience unlike any other.

Getting There

From Tucson, drive east on I-10 toward Benson. Take Exit 281 (Highway 83) toward Sonoita and Patagonia. Once you reach the crossroads of Hwy. 83 and 82 at the stop sign in the town of Sonoita, continue south on Hwy. 83. Park at Sonoita Mercantile and begin your ride.

Local Flavors

There's nothing better than a good meal after a long bicycle ride. There are a few great places to eat in Sonoita, and a day trip to this area would not be complete with a visit to either or both of these fine restaurants:

The Grasslands – This world famous German bakery is located on Hwy. 83 just south of the Sonoita crossroads. The Grasslands has a delicious selection of freshly baked breads, muffins, quiches, and much more. They also sell Arizona wines and locally produced honey, jams, jellies, and other preserves.

The Steak Out – One of Southern Arizona's best-known steakhouses is located on Hwy. 82, just east of the crossroads. Locally raised beef and a Wild West-style saloon make The Steak Out a local favorite.

I recommend fueling up at The Grasslands before the ride, then putting the post-ride feedbag on at The Steak Out. *MJN*

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The oak grasslands of the countryside near Canelo are the picture of pastoral peace.



