

Preserve's trails open hikers' eyes to beauty, history of area

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ALONG GATEWAY LOOP TRAIL

Cool gusts greeted hikers as they started into the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, their hats and visors pulled low over their brows to keep them from flying off.

Wisps of dust danced off every step, as hikers wound their way in the early morning shadows of the McDowell Mountains across a broad alluvial fan at the base of Windgate Pass.

More than 40 hikers followed trail guide Fred Klein of the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy on the non-profit preservationist group's inaugural hike along the new Gateway Loop Trail.

Sunday's 5.5-mile, 3.5-hour trek was part of an expanded program of guided hikes along 21 trails, designed to offer the public a greater variety of terrain and take them deeper than ever into the 20,000-acre preserve.

"You can go for months and months and never repeat a trail," said Klein, the conservancy's hiking coordinator and a retired editor for the *Wall Street Journal* who hikes as much as two or three times a week when the weather is good.

"Rule No. 1 - stay on the trail," Klein insists at the beginning of the hike. "Rule No. 2 - if you have to go, please use the facilities along the trail. They look like rocks and trees, but they do the job."

Hikers set out from the parking lot of a health club southeast of Union Hills Drive and Thompson Peak Parkway.

Trails precede Discovery Center

Eventually, this trailhead will be replaced by the planned Desert Discovery Center, northeast of Bell Road and Thompson Peak Parkway.

The center will enable hikers of all abilities to travel into the preserve as little as a few hundred feet, or use it as a jumping off point for hikes of 10 miles or more.

For now, hikers weaved in and out of several dry washes along part of the new Horseshoe Mountain Trail to link up with the Gateway Loop.

Klein took a moment to explain some of the dangers of hiking in the preserve, avoiding the clingy

clumps of cholla cactus and making sure to drink lots of water.

Even at the base of the McDowells, the elevation is high enough to see most of the Valley, as far south as the Estrella Mountains southwest of Phoenix, and as far west at the White Tank west of Glendale.

Klein maintains a brisk pace even as the trail becomes steeper, the granite heights of Tom's Thumb, a nearly 200-foot pinnacle, looming on the horizon at the top of the McDowells.

Trails provide access to preserve

The past five years have seen the cultivation of several trails on the south side of the preserve, including the Quartz, Taliesin, Lost Dog Wash, Old Jeep, Ringtail and Sunrise trails.

Now, more trails are open on the west side of the McDowells with names like Bell Pass, Desert Park, Levee and Paradise.

These trails will connect with Windgate Pass, Windmill and Prospector trails, providing links into the 4,000-foot elevation at the heart of the mountains, and over the east side to connect with trails in Maricopa County's McDowell Mountain Regional Park.

"People don't realize how many trails there are," Scottsdale Mayor Mary Manross said.

Residents and visitors can't fully appreciate the preserve unless they can hike it, Manross said, and when they do, they get hooked.

Mayor urges more open spaces

"If you experience it once, you'll want to return. When I'm hiking on any of the trails, I am always amazed that this is right in the middle of our city," said the mayor.

Manross said she plans to promote more open space throughout the Valley next year when she becomes chairman of the Maricopa Association of Governments, a coalition of more than 20 cities, towns and Indian tribes.

While Scottsdale and Phoenix have created some of the nation's largest city preserve systems, many of the remaining Valley cities have done little to systematically plan open space as they create more freeways, residential communities and shopping centers, Manross said.

At the top of the Gateway Loop, Len Marcisz, chairman of the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy and a preserve historian, picked up tiny triangles of smooth, brown clay.

"Why do we find pottery shards here?" Marcisz queried the group. He offered several possible explanations, including the likelihood that women would have used these plain, unadorned containers to help gather the seasonal array of fruits and nuts.

Marcisz carefully placed the shards exactly where he found them, standard practice taught by the conservancy stewards who patrol the preserve, and followed the rest of the hikers down the mountain.