

Gardner Canyon & Saw Mill Trail Run - April 19, 2009

Contributed by Lutz Dahlke
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Gardner Canyon Trail, not to be confused with the Garden Canyon Trail on the Fort, is located north-east of Sonoita in the Santa Rita Mountain foothills where placer gold (the other shiny metal) was first discovered in Arizona in the late 1800's. This 19 mile loop trail has it all. Dirt and rock trails up and down in the woods with wash outs, mild off-camber situations, a water crossing, a solid rock stair steps section, lots of trees, a gold mine or two, an early 20th century mining camp, and more. The Saw Mill Trail is a scenic 3 mile dead end spur that leaves the GCT near its end. This trail is rated a solid 2.5 with its loose rock covered steep ascends and descends. This trail terminates in a very scenic cool shaded heavy wooded area with a stream.

It was blue skies with temps in the mid 80's when 19 eager Range Riders in 13 4WD vehicles loaded with lawn chairs, pillows, lunches, iced coolers, comfort food, pets, etc. departed Mustang Corners for a day of off-roading and exploring in the eastern foothills of the Santa Rita Mountains north-east of Sonoita off Highway 83.

Run participants included Troy and Janet Weese, Sherry and Mark Nichols, Susan Immes, John and Nancy Balles, Bruce and Georgia McKellar, Peter Cheesley, Gordon and Kathy White, Tim Taylor, Gary Brown, Bruce McKellar Jr., Dave and Vicki Harker, Lutz Dahlke and one other Range Rider (Marty?) who forgot to sign in. The Parade was led by Lutz in Sunshine, with Georgia and Bruce in Precious bringing up the rear.

We departed Hwy 83 pavement onto Gardner Canyon Road and FS 163 where we all aired down more for comfort than for traction. Dave and Vicki went ahead to exercise Madison and Brady away from the crowd. They joined us later on the trail just before we arrived at historic Kentucky Camp. We all stopped there and some of us hiked down a quarter of a mile on the Arizona Trail to examine ruins and the well restored remnants of 100 year old adobe buildings that once made up the headquarters of the Santa Rita Water and Mining Company. We also toured a quaint BnB, that is "Bed and No Breakfast" which is for rent at \$75/night and is used for free by the camp's volunteer workers. Then we continued on FS163 and turned left onto FS 4113 which joins up with FS 4085 later on to make up the Gardner Canyon Trail. There are several other trails that enter and leave the main trail that could easily get one confused on where to go. Our run leader who had earlier explored this run had good notes and kept us right on track. After inadvertently passing the remnants of a gold mine we all stopped in a flat wooded area for lunch. After lunch we continued on and arrived at an intersection where a sign stated Saw Mill Trail 3 miles to the right.. This trail was not part of our original run but since we were running ahead of schedule at this point and Range Riders just love to go exploring we all agreed to "Let's do it". The Saw Mill Trail (FS 4084) is also very scenic and in the woods. It is steeper than the prior trail and was also covered with loose rocks to enhance its pucker factor. Well we all made it with no one requiring a tow including Susan in her stock TJ with street tires which amazed some of us. The most challenging part of the trail was a particular narrow steep section of trail that had a sizable tree growing right in the middle of it forcing everyone to go right very slowly , being careful not to drive off the edge of the narrow road section and get stuck or worse. Going left was not an option since that side was heavily washed out and impassible to most of us. When we asked Susan, a former novice wheeler, how she did on this section her only reply was "What tree ? I didn't see a tree in the middle of the trail."

After leaving the saw mill trail we continued on and turned left at the Gardner Canyon Road to get back to Hwy 83 (7 miles) where we all aired back up for a safe trip home. All in all this run didn't disappoint. With no breakdowns, tows, etc. it was somewhat uneventful. Everyone had a great time.

This fun run was sponsored by your Action Committee and specifically picked for its scenic beauty, historical interest, and moderate difficulty so that club members with stock 4WD vehicles would still be challenged by some of the obstacles but have no problems in conquering them. FYI a fun run is a run were all club members can feel comfortable in participating, not having to worry about damaging their daily driver and where the large rocks are part of the scenery and not on the trail. Also the trail's scenic factor must be 3.5X or more of its difficulty rating.

View the trip photos.

Lutz Dahlke

"Always Tread Lightly" and "Pack It In and Pack More Out"