

Trumpeter (1996)

ISSN: 0832-6193

Walking, Solitude, and the Henry Mountains

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Abbey's world appears mighty big from up here. The storm that shrouds the mountains terminates where the foothills reach the desert, like a hungry sea lapping at a stolid shoreline. In the exposed perspective created by patchwork clouds and spotlights of sunshine, I can see every articulation of the canyonlands and plateau: every mesa, notch, and ridge. Every drybed, hueco, basin, and slot. Every furrow, wrinkle, and pucker whirled by wind or wash of water. I can see every secret the desert ever withheld, the creator's imagination laid bare and naked of all intent and artifice and refulgent under the haunting black of the storm. From where I sit - beneath a stocky limber pine - the hail clatters like a baby's rattle and the rain whistles thinly. Out in the desert the rain refuses to fall.

I have no patience for the desert. I am the antithesis of Abbey in that way. He would sojourn in the high mountains, perhaps to loosen the skin that the sun was curing like jerky, perhaps to live in that frivolous fashion that only a wealth of water can afford, but I can only stay briefly in the desert. I am a tourist, in awe - just as Abbey was - of the intensity of desert forms, but never inclined to remain. The gnats, the blackflies and deerflies, the seep mosquitoes, all plague me. The sandy arroyos, where each step absorbs ten yards of effort, the waterholes few and sparsely located across the sere landscape, wear me slowly and surely down. Only when I have hiked through miles of tattered windfall, spent one night too many listening to the weather lay siege to my tent, or missed the sun for five days running, do I descend to the desert. Even then I cheat, for I often choose the high desert, the Santa Fe country, and the landscape there owes as much to the plains as it does any desert. I am no desert rat but I earnestly listen to those who truly are, and enjoy their travails and tales. No, I am a mountain man down to blood and bone.

In an odd way, though, the mountains symbolize for me ideas and expressions which are distinct from what others who frequent the high country experience. First, and to my mind most importantly, I am afraid of heights. Let it be known that this is no mere wobbly-knee hesitation from lack of practice or ability: I can hump a big load as well as the next person and I have done my service in the high and lonesome. No, this phobia is a real cement-in-your-shoes, riveted-to-the-floor lockdown. I freeze up like a teenager in the backseat of a Chevrolet on a Friday night. Which would not be so bad in and of itself, except that I never know when the fear will spring and pounce. I might be overlooking a trail lip into a ten foot gully, I might be traversing a snowfield above treeline, with

four hundred yards, and no stops, until the bottom.

Take today for instance. I wanted to climb Mt. Ellen, the highest peak in the Henrys. No problem reaching the traverse, then about fifty yards of steep trail before the second and last ridge. From where I examined the last stages of the climb, it all looked like gravy. (How can I deny the reality of the situation? It was a creampuff walkup.) But about sixty yards onto the first ridgeline (really a nice, broad avenue), I was ambushed. Here I was, twenty-five minutes from a view of the entire southwest, Arizona, Colorado, the canyonlands in all their pastel distinction, accursed Lake Powell, and I shanked the climb. Yes, frozen stiff as a board and let me assure the reader that had the last grizzly in Utah been intent on my ass I would have chosen the bruin over the climb faster than you can say Jack Robinson. All I could do was sit down and wonder what might have been. (Least the stale pall of defeat linger for the rest of the essay, I will confess that I did enjoy a stunning view on an earlier climb that day. So, admittedly, the episode was anticlimactic. Perhaps that is what did me in.)

But as countless others before me have pointed out - and described wonderfully - the top is really not the goal. Now I am all for the hiker who sets out in the early morning to ascend countless feet and attain a cloud-hung summit. Good luck! I always say. But in my mountainous wanderings, I find that the prettier the walk the slower I go, and any goals that I may have established for the next few hours recede quietly away, like a landscape when seen through a rearview mirror. Especially if I find a remarkable vantage along the way and undoubtedly so when I have worked up a keen sweat in attaining that vantage. In this respect I will agree with the mountaineer: a view struggled for is ineffably lovelier than that from a car window, or, god damn them all, a scenic byway. So I have some quirks and hangups (at least they seem to be such to me) and for this reason I often prefer to walk alone.

I know, Thoreau, Abbey, and others have sung solitude's praises but here I simply want to explicate a few of my own humble beliefs. I love a good walk in the woods by my lonesome and I believe that everyone could benefit from two or three days by themselves in the backcountry. But at the same time, were I forced to choose between solitude and a companion, I would be hard pressed to decide. On one hand, I might think of my favorite campsite: a shaded draw blessed with clean water and plentiful firewood, a location to which I retreat every autumn in order to watch the aspens, that "perishable currency" as McCarthy deemed them, while they drop their leaves and rustle dryly in the moonlight and the streams run with gold. But I would also have to consider the fine companionship that I have enjoyed on my walks, in particular an older Irish gentleman for whom walking is a stimulant to discussion (and he is conversant upon many topics). And so my decision, like many we are forced to make, depends on the situation.

Right now, here in the Henry Mountains, I prefer solitude. The view to which I am witness is panoramic, and I will not attempt to illustrate what I see any further. I gaze out over the desert and then turn one hundred and eighty

degrees in order to enjoy the mountains and my thoughts begin to drift. A few ideas begin to interrupt my contemplation. While I am having a spectacular time, I cannot help but wonder what a few minor management changes might do towards restoring wildness in the Henrys. Yes, wildness. A shrinking commodity in the lower forty-eight and that is regrettable, because with a little concerted effort - and some agency cooperation - we might have a lot more land capable of sustaining "multiple uses."

Take the Henrys as a convenient example. Not many people live near them, and as far as I can gather from the map, there are few trails in the mountains. But there are roads and their presence creates many problems. So let us close them. People will argue that closing roads denies them access to the mountains (or deserts, whatever) and unless they are missing legs, stop listening to them. One of the few undeniable truths that exist in this country is that a man with a strong pair of walkers is not denied anything, especially on public land. However, I will address their feeble objection here. For this segment of the population (the minority), access often involves firearms, alcohol, beer and soda cans, and other trash that belongs in a landfill and not the backcountry. If they picked up the shell casings and swisscheesed gas containers, the fragmented bottles, I would not object. But they leave them, along with enormous fire rings, sawed tree limbs, and denuded campsites. They have not shown the ability to act properly and so the privilege, not the right, to camp within the confines of our public lands will be denied them. The wild country of the United States can be many things, but it will not be a shooting range, haphazard woodlot, or dump.

Supposing we were able to close the roads or at least close them beyond certain points, say the campground at which I am staying. Well, two birds will have been slain and only one stone spent. These roads are infrequently more than one vehicle wide and they would serve admirably as foot trails (as well as bicycling or babystroller paths) and ski and snow shoeing routes (a use currently available). Imagine: an already existing network of easily navigable trails into the backcountry, with no worry about carborne delinquents or ORV hotrodders ruining the fun. We could construct a few ski huts to encourage people to see how the December sun shines while rising over the Colorado Plateau (as if we need to encourage such an activity). Why, we might even allow soapbox derbies to race on the closed roads, as long as they pushed the cars to the top under their own steam (and watched for the baby carriages on the way down).

But the roadhogs will squeal and cry that removing roads into the mountains will prohibit mining or cattle drives. Do not worry, the whining will not last long; these people have limited lung capacities (that's why they are so dependent on vehicles). But if you feel obligated to offer a response, begin with those trouble-making miners and their ridiculous earth-moving machinery. They are not welcome. There can be no vacillating on this issue. Our country has suffered enough at the hands of hack hobby miners meddling around with their amateurish, profligate techniques. The Henrys are chock full of mines and before miners

start objecting that we are infringing upon their right to chase after illusory mineral strikes, let me say that they are infringing upon our right to have water free from heavy metals and silt, unmarred vistas, and mountainsides protected from landslides. The miners want to destroy land? Let them buy private land at fair market value and have at it.

As for cowboys, I can never understand why they get so anxious when we mention road closures - what happened to their horses? At any rate, we can allow the cowboys to run responsibly-sized herds of cattle in the mountains, as long as the cowboys promise to behave themselves and not spend their idle hours exterminating predators or ruining riparian areas.

And I do not want to hear any more of this nonsense about privatization of our public lands so that resources can be "utilized." The only resource that we are concerned with is wildness, and that will not benefit from selling off federal holdings. While the cold truth is that the federals have not practised a kinder, gentler form of land management, there is hope for reform. If people begin to care and act in good faith, the managers of this land in the Henrys, the Bureau of Land Management (the Bureau of Livestock and Mining in practice), can become the Bureau of Lovely Mountains. And we can all enjoy the change.

But enough of that - better to save such digressions for human company. Solitude beckons, and solitude is why I have come here. The mountains have slipped their caul of storm and the sky is reborn, a clean blue slate spreading into the distance. I have walked the ridgelines of the Henrys, seen the range glowing like a great green jewel in the vast desert. The clouds have parted and blessed me with a view as expansive and promising as life itself; the drainages are dripping wet in the wake of the storm, and the thin black line of a creekbed below me is as tempting as an appealing thought. Enough of the sky, I think. Time to descend into the thick timber and enter the dark heart of solitude and the secret things therein.

Citation Format

Kroll, Andrew J. (1996) Walking, Solitude, and the Henry Mountains *Trumpeter*: 13, 2.
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