

Ruta del Jefe

By Daniel Sharp

Sarah Swallow rode up to find a locked gate. Her heart sank. A sign on the gate had a number to call, so Sarah picked up her phone and dialed. A journalist and adventurer, Swallow had first visited the Sky Islands region southeast of Tucson, Arizona at a gravel camp in 2013 and instantly fell in love with the terrain, which feels more like African grassland than typical Sonoran desert. After months of plotting and planning a new route highlighting this stunning part of America, she'd arrived here, seemingly cut-off from her dreams of a new route and race.

Throughout her scouting, she had already become aware of other, very real obstacles. Border guards, border checkpoints, and a massive wall under construction. Among the rolling hills and fields of native grasses, she even found bits of clothing and met actual migrants in need of help. As much as she wanted to focus on the sheer beauty of the place, she found it impossible to ignore the environmental and humanitarian crises at play around her. She had quickly realized this gorgeous region had a serious dark side.

On the other end of the phone was Christina Francois. The locked gate was the back entrance to the Appleton-Whittell research ranch (AWRR), a private facility managed by the Audubon Society who are the current stewards of part of the region, fighting to protect the native ecosystems that have existed well before there were borders. Francois, the newly hired director of the ranch, was not only open to visitors, she welcomed Swallow at the gate. Swallow's explorations had already awakened her awareness of the human and wildlife consequences of the US immigration policies, and how small an obstacle one gate was for her. She was coming to realize that it is not enough to just ride your bike through this region, and in Francois, she'd found a like-minded ally.

Inspired, Swallow did more research into the issues affecting the area. The foremost: pending Rosemont open pit copper mine and the expanded construction of the Mexican border wall and their environmental and human implications. And so, "Ruta del Jefe" grew into more than another gravel event or bikepacking route. Francois offered the AWRR as a base-- not just for hosting the race, but as a platform for furthering their shared mission to educate others about the land.

Swallow got to work inviting six different groups that work in the area to come speak to the riders and opened registration. Last year was the inaugural running of the event and 30 riders participated. This year the event was capped at 100 riders and registration filled in less than ten minutes. To register, riders were given a choice of donating \$100 to one of the six groups that would be speaking. Swallow wasn't looking to make money, she was starting a movement.

The Friday afternoon of the "Ruta del Jefe" riders trickled in to the Ranch and checked in. Participants were drawn to the Ruta by the combination of gorgeous grassland riding, sunshine, and environmental and political activism. For them this event was recreation, but for most who cross the land it is a matter of scant resources and survival. Some folks chose to camp out, some slept in their vans, and the rest piled into the deluxe bunkhouses the ranch offers for educational events. Swallow was joined by her sister Mary Lytle and parents Pete and Lennice Lytle. Friday night staff and riders shared a vegetarian meal cooked up by everyone's favorite online personality and romanceur, Benedict (aka @ultraromance) and his parents joined him in the kitchen as well-- truly a family affair. Dinner was followed by local beers and

the old time string band sounds of Dan Levenson and the Cat Mountain Rounders. This was a labor of love and the organizers had gone to great lengths to make sure a good time was had by all. Friday night was also dedicated to the issues and the different groups doing work in the area spoke candidly about what is at stake.

April Ignacio of Indivisible Tohono, a grassroots organization working on issues that affect the Tohono O'odham Nation and those that affect the Natives within the state of Arizona and federally, spoke first. The US and Mexico border bisects the Tohono O'odham Nation. Ignacio shared images of the checkpoints to get from one side to the other of their own land and shared stories of bullying that happens from border patrol, who have access to the entire nation-- including drone surveillance. She is the architect of the data collection for missing and murdered indigenous women in Arizona. Indivisible Tohono also created workshops called "A Call to Men" to raise awareness about domestic violence, as 85% of the deaths of native women that have been murdered were at the hands of their partners.

Francois spoke next about the complicated history of the Ranch and its conversion from a working cattle ranch to a center for conservation research. It's not lost on the AWRR that a significant part of their funding comes from Rio Tinto, one of the worlds largest metals and mining corporations.

Steve Brown shared the most recent federal court ruling that the Forest Service illegally sold mining permits to the Canadian HudBay mining company after his organization, [Save the Scenic Santa Ritas](#), fought the proposed Rosemont open pit mine. The mining company has appealed to the 9th circuit court, so the fight isn't over yet. Brown spoke about his deep love for the land and encouraged us to "Stay involved. Stay engaged. Vote. Speak out."

There are other, painful narratives that exist in Southern Arizona, namely that of thousands of refugees are forced to their deaths in the desert. Carrot Quinn and Sofie Seymour of [No More Deaths](#) expanded beyond the white narrative that the land has been washed by. 7000 bodies have been recovered along the border, and the actual number is estimated at between 10 and 15,000 migrant deaths. They encouraged everyone to learn the indigenous history of the areas where they recreate, as the lands have long been stewarded by indigenous peoples, and learn about the other narratives besides the white narrative of land management and colonization

From the moment Trump took office, Randy Serraglio of the Center for Biological Diversity and it's lawyers have been working feverishly to oppose every attempt he's made to worsen climate change, kill wildlife, endanger public health and destroy public lands. President Trump's expanded border wall now cuts through sensitive ecosystems, disrupts animal migration patterns, causes catastrophic flooding, and divides communities and tribal nations. So far the Center has filed 193 suits against Trump.

Finally, Mathew Nelson of the Arizona Trail Association explained that his group exists so that folks can have transformative experiences on public lands. He encouraged, "Now is the time for activism. Now is the time to get stoked to go for a bike ride, to feel healthy and then be motivated to get involved. Because when groups like us come together phenomenal things can happen and when we as an industry, where conservation and recreation meet, we could be the most powerful force in the country. We just have to come together to do it. So our collective challenge is how to get involved and get in front of elected officials...start at the local level and work your way up. People need to start hearing from the recreation community."

Saturday morning low clouds hugged the surrounding peaks as a light rain fell. Riders gathered their gear, sipped hot coffee and reconsidered their rides planned for the day. The majority of the riders had planned to tackle the 125 mile route in one day, but with the wet weather, many had trimmed their plans and decided to head out on one of Swallow's many smaller routes.

The weather had been forecast to be light rain so it wasn't a surprise to wake up to grey skies, but motivating to pedal out on the horizon proved to be just the first challenge of the day. Scott Simmons of Durango, CO was the first finisher of the 125 route. Simmons arrived solo, his minimal kit saturated with the rain that had turned into a downpour by afternoon, and was violently shivering. He was grateful to have finished at all, as his hands stopped working in the cold and was unable to brake properly.

Simmons wasn't the only one caught out in the weather. Swallow's father's group planned a 63 mile route to Gardner Canyon Rd. Down in the canyon the weather turned. They decided to cut the ride short and head for Sonoita where they had stopped at a Shell station to resupply earlier. "I was shaking already and made the decision to stay put and wait for rescue. The rest of our crew, my daughter Mary, sister Jenny and friend Dan Ripburger debated whether they should ride directly back to the ranch or not. Eventually they decided to go and left the store only to return stating the weather had gotten worse." Lytle shared. "At this point Andie, the lady running the store, realized we were all starting to shake. She gave us large hot chocolates and went to her car and returned with warm blankets. She offered to provide food from the lunch counter and searched for an electrical outlet to connect a heater to - she did all this while tending to the regular customers. She was an angel." y t

It's not lost on anyone that while this land is beautiful, it can also be brutal. This was a choice to head out into uncomfortable circumstances for the day, and the migrants passing through this area are rarely greeted with hot drinks, blankets and shelter.

For Effie Bourgin, this ride was a huge accomplishment, as the 125 mile route was her first century and she did it under miserable circumstances with her friend Hannah Dhonau. Bourgin summarized the entire event this way, "My experience riding Ruta Del Jefe was immensely joyful, difficult, and humbling. I am overwhelmed by the privileges I have been granted by our society. The privilege to choose to spend 14 hours in the cold and wet. The privilege to own technical gear to stand up to the elements. The privilege of passing border patrol without being stopped because I am a white woman. The privilege of having a body able to continue moving, even under duress. I am many things but mostly I am grateful for the opportunity to learn and to engage with this corner of the world."