

OUTDOORS

Hiking Jefferson County

Follow animal paths (and wisdom) to Doe Ridge

By VAIA ERRETT

There is a piece of wisdom shared by every elk and mule deer between Boulder and Galena Gulch, where animal survival meets hiker's sense: Every gulch that funnels water down to the Boulder River also cleaves passage up toward Doe Ridge.

Kilborn Gulch is both feeder creek and hiking trail, and it's a good place to eat and hide if you are big game on winter range. Beginning at an elevation of 5,000 feet, the wide dirt path slips along a creek-bottom trench of aspen and juniper saplings bounded by high-sweeping flanks of Douglas fir. From the gulch's ridgetops cresting at around 800 feet above the trail, giant slabs of fractured granite jut out beneath a canopy open enough to invite sloping swaths of grass. When frigid temperatures crust the upland ridges, mule deer seek out the lower cover breached by clearings with easier access to the browse they prefer to supplement their winter fat reserves. Narrow tucks in topography offer routes of escape while rocky perches serve as lookout posts for elk evading predators.

The first mile of trail crosses a 373-acre parcel the U.S. Bureau of Land Management has managed since 1969, when the Kyler Ranch Company relented to the indisputable pageant of elk and mule deer and relinquished grazing privileges on that land. The BLM designates this tract as Big Game Winter Range, reserving the resource exclusively for wintering elk and mule deer by excluding cattle year-round, as well as snowmobiles. Wheeled vehicles are prohibited from Oct. 1 to June 15.

From the small parking area, pass through a gate into a meadow then cross an ATV stile to enter Kilborn Gulch. Step past mud puddles ruffled by butterfly wings flashing periwinkle blue and tangerine. This may be the only water you see as you parallel the gully, its trickle screened by red osier dogwood, Wood's rose and cow parsnip bottoming out into a ribbon of brush up to twenty feet below the trail at times. The route soon winds up to grassy slopes at 0.4 miles peppered with juniper and sage, pussytoes and puccoon, blanket flower, harebell and sulphur-flowered buckwheat.

At about 0.5 miles, watch for a fir tree marked by a white diamond framing a blue arrow, pointing left. The track here becomes faint in tall grass. Aim for the aspens at the opposite end of the clearing.

Just before you hit the 1-mile mark, expect a fence and a second ATV stile where you pass into Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. From here, the

path is overgrown in stretches, especially onward from late July. To maintain your bearings, recall the wisdom of Kilborn Gulch's big game: Water has shaped this ravine on its passage to lower ground and you are cradled by its slopes before you and behind you. Weathered logs lain alongside the trail define the track teeming with the delicate white flowers of yarrow, clover, and false hoary alyssum. Keep your eyes peeled for the scarlet bracts of Indian paintbrush.

At close to 1.5 miles confront a further piece of trail wisdom: Water abides gravity, and big game need no switchbacks. The path here climbs steeply up a bare dirt ramp rutted by seasonal runoff for a tenth of a mile. White fir mingles with Douglas fir and juniper along a short section where the occasional trunk of dead lodgepole pine has fallen across the path. Step over the low barriers, or follow trailside detours that are brief, established, and simple to navigate on foot or horseback.

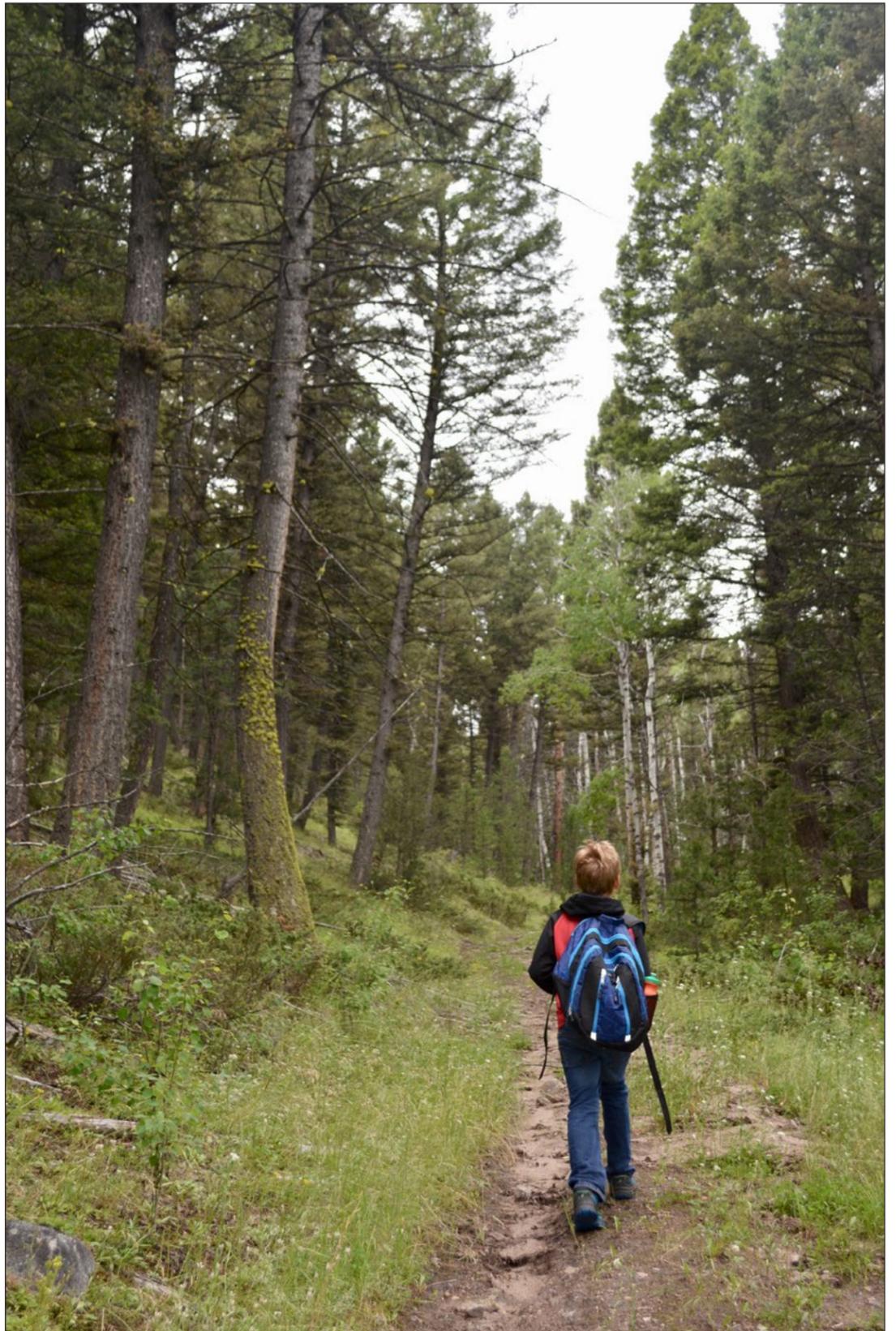
When the trail soon veers right and climbs steeply again, make your final bid for Doe Ridge. Less than 2 miles from the trailhead, the track tops out and fades to nothing more than a silvered impression of bowed grass. A few paces more and you are standing on Doe Ridge Road, open to motorized travel from May 15 through Oct. 15. The gaps between trees are greater, the sky broader through the branches. You have climbed 1,200 feet from your starting point.

If you choose to end your hike here, keep to the gulch and make your way back down the way you came but don't miss the glimpse of blue foothills dissolving with distance above the tree-tops as you begin your descent.

If you wish to extend your hike, follow Doe Ridge Road east or west to explore this upland seam separating the Boulder River drainage from the Little Boulder River and its North Fork. Be sure to note the dark orange tree blaze and the strips of orange flagging tape that mark the undefined junction with Kilborn Gulch. Big game don't need trail markers, but you might.

Head left on Doe Ridge Road through forest for just under a mile and the level gradient opens unexpectedly into expansive meadows of sage and Douglas fir with gently sloping views of the opposite ridgeline before descending more steeply toward the North Fork drainage.

Or, turn right onto Doe Ridge Road to hike the rocky track west. Climb and dip and climb again as the road rucks up and down between hollows that want to be gulches, given more water,



Evan Welch of Cardwell hikes along the tranquil slopes of Douglas fir and aspen that contour Kilborn Gulch on the hike up to Doe Ridge. (Photo by Vaia Errett)

more time. Swainson's thrushes flute unseen from treetops in high summer. The granite slabs of the lower slopes achieve ridgeline glory in boulder mounds slumping like forest temples.

Within 1.5 miles from Kilborn Gulch you are flanked by more juniper, more sky. After another quarter mile, a large clearing opens where Little Galena Trail No. 126 veers away into trees on your right. Continue through the clearing until Doe Ridge Road meets a tight curve of the North Fork Road climbing from your left. Pass a few choice campsites on the meadow's fringe that make for nice picnic spots with views across the Little Boulder Drainage.

On your return, every doe on Doe Ridge may elude your notice. But consider the likelihood that an elk or a deer is marking

your passage as you descend back through its winter haven in Kilborn Gulch.

Vaia Errett is one of seven volunteers serving on the Jef-

erson County Parks, Trails and Recreation Commission, an advisory group to the Board of Commissioners. Send comments to ptrc@jeffersoncounty-mt.gov.

Distance: 2 miles one-way; option to follow Doe Ridge Road east toward meadow views or west toward Galena Park.

Elevation Gain: 1,200 feet

Getting There: *From Boulder:* Drive south on Main Street and turn right on Cattle Drive Road just after crossing the Boulder River. Continue on this dirt road 2.8 miles to the trailhead on your left. Pull up a moderate 8-foot incline to park in the small flat area visible from the road with space for a few vehicles. *From I-15:* Take Exit 160 (High Ore Road) and head east on Cattle Drive Road for 1.6 miles. The dirt road becomes surfaced but rough then changes back to dirt. In the final quarter of a mile, curve under I-15 then over the Boulder River to find the trailhead immediately on your right.