

Buck Nekkid in Coyote Gulch

by Curt Mobley

The Russian olive is the tree from hell. It grows like a weed even in poor desert soils. A five-year old tree that sprouted from a seed can have a trunk several inches in diameter and be over ten feet high. In 15 years, a tree can have multiple large trunks and be 30 feet high. The branches are covered with sharp thorns two to three inches long, which stick out in all directions like ice picks. The dense branches crowd out native trees like cottonwoods and willows, and the thorns exclude both wildlife and hikers. The trees were introduced into the United States in the 1800's for windbreaks and erosion control. They soon escaped cultivation and started spreading like kudzu along the river bottoms of the desert southwest. Fifteen years ago they reached the Escalante River in southern Utah.

The remote Escalante was the last major river in the lower 48 states to be discovered by whites. It forms the heart of the Escalante-Grand Staircase National Monument in Utah. This is a magical and spectacular region of colorful sandstone, deep canyons, springs, and prehistoric Native American ruins. It is not a land you get to experience from a car. You have to pay your dues on foot. I have been hiking and exploring and obtaining spiritual rejuvenation there for twenty years. I do not appreciate invasive weed trees destroying what little is left of this unique wilderness, so I kill Russian olives and their evil co-conspirators, tamarisk trees, on sight.

I was with a group of like-minded volunteers working for a week cutting down Russian olives in the remotest section of the Escalante River. Nay, we were less than volunteers. We were actually paying for the privilege of spending eight hours a day in the hot sun fighting thorns and sawing until our arms were like rubber. Our trip had started with an exhausting, hot, dry, ten mile hike across barren sand and slickrock to our first camp on the Escalante. We then worked our way upriver, sawing as we went. Our arms, legs and clothes were soon ripped to shreds by the thorns. Each evening's after-dinner entertainment included comparisons of puncture wounds and scratches. We cut through an estimated 1,000 Russian olive trunks before our term of self-indentured servitude was up. Our reward for a job well done was a 20 mile hike back downriver to our cars.

It was the second day of the hike out. We had been underway for several hours, climbing over and around all sizes of boulders, now wading the river and then caking our wet boots with sand on the next dry section of the route. We finally climbed several hundred feet up a steep ridge and dropped into Coyote Gulch, a tributary of the main Escalante River, which would take us back to our starting point of a week earlier.

After wading a couple more hot, cloudless miles in the shallow stream flowing down Coyote Gulch, we rounded a corner and encountered a postcard-perfect waterfall. The lip of the waterfall was a ledge 50 feet across and 15 feet high. The stream had cut a groove in the sandstone to form an enclosure the size of a phone booth. The stream poured over the ledge and into the phone booth. The streambed below the falls was as large as a stage, perfectly level, and covered by cool, wet sand.

We all stared transfixed by this idyllic scene. Then, responding to some instinctual cue, the packs were dropped and clothes flew through the air. Eleven bodies lined up single-file to wait their turn in the phone booth. The water poured down with such volume and force that half a minute in the phone booth sent you to the back of the line to regain your breath. It was refreshing beyond description.

After a few cycles through the phone booth, some people spread out on convenient boulders to dry in the sun. Others lay in the wet sand and experimented with dermabrasion. I just recall alternating between the warm sun and the cool shower under the waterfall. One of the women, K., had studied ballet. She tried a few tentative jetés across the sand stage. The footing was perfect. Her leaps grew higher and longer. She was soon doing naked cartwheels across the sand. It was an expression of the pure joy of being alive. T. soon tried his own ballet moves. They were less graceful than K's and he stopped short of the cartwheels, but the same spark of life was present in both.

For me, this day went far beyond routine skinny dipping. We were a varied group, six men and five women, 30 to 60 years old, from all walks of life and all backgrounds. We had known each other less than a week. Our physiques ranged from stunningly beautiful to something you would expect to see in the primate house at the zoo. All that was irrelevant. All that mattered was that the sun was warm, the water was cool, and we were alive to enjoy the combination. As we were putting on our clothes, I heard K., who is now an M.D., say to someone, "I've been working 12 hour days and I'm burned out. I need to get outdoors and get naked more often."

I thought back on my fundamentalist years. This would have been the height of sin, cavorting naked like pagan water sprites. Yet for me, this hour was the perfect instance of sinless celebration of life and of the pleasures of the human body. There were no sexual overtones to the nudity. This must have been what the Garden of Eden was like before Adam and Eve chowed down on the forbidden fruit. Alas, I thought, how much better the world would be if only everyone would release themselves from their inhibitions and allow themselves to experience all that life has to offer! Life is not about sitting in an office all day and then dozing in front of the television while you wait for a heart attack to put you out of your misery. Get outdoors and get naked! Get some sun on the places that don't normally see the light of day. Feel the breeze on your skin. Give your self a rubdown with cool sand in a desert stream. Relax—nobody gives a damn about your cellulite. Enjoy your body!