

PAINING THE BACKCOUNTRY GREEN ON HORSEBACK

by Jo Johnson

For me, one of the greatest pleasures in life is riding my horses in the mountains. I love being deep in the backcountry with stock, and I love visiting with the other people I occasionally come across. As a Wilderness Rider for the Back Country Horsemen of California, I love spreading the message about Leave No Trace principles. And it feels good, knowing that when I leave, no one can tell I was ever there.

Packing in the Wilderness is always a wonderful thing. I have to admit though, that being in the Wilderness for a reason - that is, having a specific purpose, can make a week-long pack trip seem even better... more fulfilling, somehow. So when I got a call from one of my Park Service contacts asking if I would spend several days handling some backcountry patrol duties for them in and around Hockett Meadow, Sequoia National Park, I jumped at the opportunity.

This particular request came about following an accident suffered by the Park's Wilderness Ranger, the ramifications of which prevented him from being able to complete the summer's duties over the long Labor Day holiday. Hockett Bowl, with its many lakes and incredible, rugged terrain is a very popular backcountry destination for many, and especially so during holiday periods when folks can plan to spend more time enjoying everything the area has to offer.

Most of the mountain trips I've been on recently have been to assist the Forest Service with packing for trail maintenance or fire suppression crews, but this one was geared toward actually patrolling a large area that had the potential for heavy use during the week that spans Labor Day. Thus it took on a slightly different aspect.

My function on this trip would be to maintain a Park Service presence, to check the condition of



the various trails and campsites, and issue Wilderness Permits when needed. If necessary, I was to assist folks who might experience a medical emergency, become lost, or just generally want some assistance with camp sites, understanding about bears and lions, or any other of a myriad of issues that can come up when one is in the back country.

I was provided with a Park Service uniform shirt, a radio, instructed to check in every morning and evening during the week, and given a key to the Park Service cabin that is located in Hockett Meadow. I invited my good friend Ruthie Heuer (also a BCHC Wilderness Rider) and her son Luke, to join me, and we began our planning.



Having the use of the cabin was a special treat after spending most of the summer sleeping outdoors. But make no mistake - this is a rural cabin. Beautiful, snug and warm... but the only indoor plumbing is a very antique hand-operated water pump at the kitchen sink. The outhouse was almost one hundred yards away.



I took 3 of my Morgan horses; my favorite stallion as my saddle horse, and the two geldings I have used all summer in the mountains - one young gelding as the saddle horse for Ruthie, and the other for my pack animal. Luke rode Ruthie's mare, Rose, and they also brought a pack mule so we could haul weed-free pelleted feed to supplement the pasture grass and keep our stock happy and healthy.



So off the three of us went, our gear and food loaded on our pack stock. It was an all-afternoon ride to get clear in to the Hockett Bowl. The trail was spectacular, and oftentimes it felt like we were basically clinging to the mountainside as we looked down the long steep dropoffs into gorgeous, deep canyons. Some of the trail was carved into solid granite, and I was thinking how glad I was that my horses were barefoot as I find a barefoot horse

tends to get much better purchase on rocks, than one with shoes on does. There was no scrambling or slipping from the Morgans! My young stock have never had shoes on and they have been used hard all summer, so I wasn't concerned about them in the least.

The three of us arrived at the Park Service cabin a little before sundown. I rode out to check the pasture fence to make sure it was secure and to make sure there was water in the little creek for our stock, while Ruthie and Luke unpacked our food and gear.

We unsaddled the two geldings, Ruthie's molly mule, and Luke's saddle horse (a mare) and turned them all out together with my stallion, Josh, for the week of our stay. Fortunately, the mares were not in heat so Josh was spared a week of nights on a highline. Truly, having a Park Service-maintained pasture was a luxury.

Next morning we saddled up, loaded our two pack animals with tools, maps, and Leave No Trace information for any interested folks we might meet, and off we went. Our first stop was a heavily used horse camp, appropriately called Rock Creek. At this point, I should have started to get a clue about what lay in store for us.



One of my personal goals for the week was to clean and repair all the camp sites in and around the Hockett Bowl, and hopefully to leave them all absolutely pristine and in accordance with Leave No Trace principles - but once I saw how badly damaged this first camp site was, I began to wonder if that wasn't an overly optimistic plan! Ideally, of course, when we camp - with or without stock - we try to minimize our impact on the land and when we leave, we try to make the site look as though we hadn't even been there. I love this quote from the LNT Horse Use booklet, *"Think of it as doing right, riding with grace and style, moving through country like a ghost rider, enjoying and seeing the land, but not scarring it"*. (Gregg Kroll)



At this campsite, though, there were numerous piles of manure left, little bits of trash scattered over a half acre, and inappropriate fire pits built against rocks that were now permanently scarred from the fires. Worse yet, it seemed as though every tree had huge deep holes around them from tied stock animals that had obviously been pawing. The Park Service's hitching rails had holes so deep around them that the three of us looked at each other and said "oh, my Kingdom for a Bobcat!" But here in the Park, wheeled vehicles and power tools are prohibited - not even a wheelbarrow may be used.

Thank goodness for Ruthie's 26-year old son, Luke. He works harder than most folks can, and without him Ruthie and I might STILL be out there, scattering manure piles, shoveling rocks and dirt, and cleaning and repairing fire pits. As it was, it still took us several hours to fully repair and recondition the campsite, and to pick up all the stray trash.



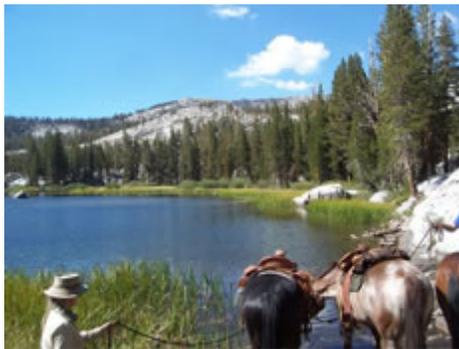
Thrilled with how our work turned out, we loaded the tools back on the animals and headed off to another campsite, where we were met with an only slightly less severe scene to that of the previous camp.

So this was how we spent our days, working off the calories from the outstanding food we ate every morning and night, seeing some of the most beautiful and rugged country that is to be found in this area, and riding as many as 22 miles a day.



I had never been to this area of the Park before, and what little I knew about it was by reputation - and everything I had heard was good. Well, I was about to find out that the folks who had shared their information with me had neglected to mention how incredibly rocky many of the trails were. Now, a 22-mile ride in mountainous terrain can be a tough deal, in and of itself. Add the work we completed each day and the time we spent chatting with and educating Park visitors, and those days were long. We started early and got back to the cabin at dusk, most nights. Plus we had to keep a sharp eye out for bears as we often spotted them across the meadow in the mornings and evenings.

Fortunately, none of them bothered us. What did add interest to our days, were the rocky trails.



As it turned out, about 70% of all those miles we rode every day were on trails so rocky that oftentimes there were just little spots for a horse to place a hoof, in between what sometimes seemed like boulders. Much of the horses' trail time was spent virtually placing each and every hoof carefully in between rocks, or picking through shale. This was definitely not a place I would recommend for breaking in a green trail horse!

Adding to the difficulty of "rock-hopping" was the elevation. One trail took us from our 8,500 ft elevation at the cabin, up to the 10,000 ft elevation of Blossom Lake.

As it happens, this was also the most rugged trail we rode that week and we were pleased and proud of how well our stock handled it - they were happy to go, and most importantly the next morning they once again met us at the pasture gate, ready and willing to go on another "field trip".

During the course of the week, the three of us succeeded in cleaning and repairing 5 camp sites - some were stock camps and some were not. The important thing is, they will be in great shape for the adventures people will have there, next year.

We met several groups of backpackers and we enjoyed our visits with them immensely. We saw some spectacular country, and lots of wildlife. And we were blessed with great weather, and gorgeous sunrises and sunsets.

This was certainly a memorable, fun, and productive week. It reminded me of another terrific quote, this one from Theodore Roosevelt: *"It was a land of vast silent spaces, of lonely rivers, and of plains where the wild game stared at the passing horseman. We knew toil and hardship but we felt the beat of hardy life in our veins, and ours was the glory of work and the joy of living."*