

Summer of Fun

Jo Johnson

I don't know about you, but for me, the summer's mountain time and packing didn't get a very early start this year. Usually I am gone in May, but with the late storms all my packing plans seemed to get pushed farther and farther back on the calendar. Finally though, the first of July I got the call to load up and go. In truth, it was really good for me that things did hold off so long, because I had a lot of work to do to get things ready.

Most of you know I raise and train Morgan horses, and then when they are ready, I sell them. I love to use my colts whenever I can on the pack string, because it just gets them so doggoned gentle and solid. Well, it can be a pretty tough deal to get 4 young, green colts ready to pack and string, but this year I wanted to put together 10 head; two strings of 4 pack animals and 2 riding horses, and take them into the Snow Mountain Wilderness to work for a few weeks.

For my strings, I finally decided on 4 seasoned animals and 6 youngsters. Of these 4 seasoned horses, two would be used for riding and leading the strings, and two for packing. The remaining six colts were so green that if they'd stood still on somebody's lawn you couldn't have spotted 'em. Of these six youngsters, 3 had maybe 90 rides, one had just 20, and the other two haven't even been ridden yet. But they all took to the packing deal like they'd read the book.



Now, in my experience it is one thing to get a colt gentle, desensitized, and well halter trained so that he or she can handle the demands of packing and everything that entails. It is another whole project to get them to string together. Especially when the ratio of experienced to inexperienced in each string is 1-to-3. Consequently, rest assured that I was a busier rather than a kitten in a sandbox, getting things lined out and working well. When the dust settled, I wound up with a string of colts and a string of fillies.

Once I was finally able to get started actually working, I headed off to the Snow Mountain Wilderness (Mendocino National Forest), for some serious packing with the CCC. While last year was spent with almost continuous back-to-back CCC spikes, this year was easier: essentially 8 days of volunteer packing, 6 days off; then 8 days packing/6 days off; then another 8 days packing...and the last day we loaded up and moved everything to another section of the Mendocino for another spike the next day. As always, I was excited about being back with the CCC folks, and also very much looking forward to the time alone in the mountains in between spikes. There is just something so spiritual about that, and I have learned that it really doesn't matter all that much where I am, so long as it is in the mountains *somewhere*.



So off I scampered, headin' North up the freeway with the boys' string loaded in my rig. I can only haul 5 head in my 4-horse trailer, and I only needed one string for the first week of work anyway ... plus I thought it would be a nice trial run for the boys. Which it was. There were a few issues at first – it is certainly true that no matter how good things look here when I'm schooling them things are different when ya get the ponies up into the high country! Cold nights and crisp mornings, different scenery and smells, high-powered Elk Grove feed, being tied to a highline for weeks on end ... it all adds up. They'd bow their necks and snort at the tents, and shudder when a covey of quail would fly up from next to their feet. They'd get bored and nip at the colt in front of them as we were traveling down the trail. They'd forget all the stringing practice we did beforehand and get pushy with the colt ahead of them. And although they waded right on into the creeks, they'd pretend the little rivulets from still-wet springs were death-defying rivers full of horse-eating creatures that hadn't had a decent meal yet this year. Mostly it was just entertaining, though. And thankfully they handled all of their sometimes-crazy loads with aplomb. No one spooked when they forgot they were packing and bumped into trees, no one bucked or did anything silly with a load, and not a load was lost or damaged.



That first week I packed with Ken Graves, then he left and a few days later my good friend Lindy McDowell brought my 2nd string up to me. She and I spent a couple of days together, riding and seeing the country. Lindy worked on the East side at McGee and Mammoth Lakes Pack Stations, and also guided in the Sierra National Forest for the Cunningham's pack stations at Edison Lake and Florence Lakes. She really enjoyed the Snow Mountain Wilderness as it is different from what she'd seen before, much more open and with views to the coastline. Then in the late afternoons Lindy and I spent several hours doing some major cleanup of an old campsite up the creek from my camp. There were cans, bottles, trash of all descriptions (the weirdest being stashes of used plastic tampon dispensers.....did the person who left them there actually THINK those would decompose before the next few thousand years??), and spent cartridges littering the ground. We filled two 55-gallon trash bags and the Forest Service folks hauled them out.

Then the day Lindy left, the gentleman who was helping me with the next week's packing arrived with his wife. I don't know if any of you are lucky enough to have met Rene' and Debbie Duykaerts, but they are wonderful packers/horsemen/cooks and all-around incredible people. They stayed with me for 9 days and we just had a ton of fun! Rene' is an extraordinary storyteller and has a truly amazing depth of knowledge about a variety of subjects – from world history and politics, to hair-raising buckarooing and packing tales ... and he loves to visit about all of it. There were times I literally had to tear myself away so we could get our work done. But when he packs, it is all business and teaching. Rene' is a born teacher and talks and demonstrates things in a wonderfully clear manner as he works.



So although some of the loads were quite challenging – as they always are when packing CCC gear - thanks to Rene's skill we got everything safely in to the CCC camp, and then back out again. Rene' towed one of my strings and I took the other, with Debbie occasionally leading a pack horse as well. And as if all that wasn't enough, Rene' and Debbie also spent hours picking up even more stuff from that old camp site – another couple big bags' worth plus a nasty old broken ice chest that was full of ugly water and mosquito larvae.



In between all this we made some recon rides, and kept up with some of the logistical issues that crop up when one has stock in the mountains. Disposal of horse poop was a huge part of all my days, but especially so when I was alone. Believe me, adhering to LNT ethics while taking care of 10 head of horses is no picnic, and in fact the very basics of survival (the horses' and mine) was a full time job with that much stock. On my in-camp days I'd clean the horse area every time I checked on and watered the ponies – 4 or 5 times a day, not counting feeding times. One wonderful side effect from being so diligent about the horse poop was that I had

almost no flies. We had several highlines set up, and there were an abundance of trees we could tie to. I was able to move the stock around a fair amount and mix things up, and fortunately pawing holes to China was not an issue. Instead, the horses were happy to have a chance to lie down when they could!



I was extremely fortunate that the USFS had brought in a couple of water troughs for the stock, so I didn't have to be so concerned about my horses damaging the ground around the creek. I had plenty of feed so didn't need to graze – which was good as the only grazing was along the creek bank. As for the human issues, since I was going to be camped there for 5 weeks, I dug latrines at a few different sites. This method worked extremely well for this particular area. For showering, I had my shower tent and solar shower set up. But I discovered that the nearby creek had a wonderful pool, and although it was incredibly cold, I found myself actually getting used to it. I couldn't use soap there, but nevertheless the water itself was fabulously refreshing. And thanks to the gorgeous Leopard Lillies around the pool, it had a tropical feel even though my ... *ummm*..... let's see **toes** were numb!



As for cooking, when Rene' and Debbie were there we BBQ'd, using some of the wood that was readily available on the ground. We had use of a wonderful fire pan so didn't need a fire ring. When I was alone, though, I mostly just used my little propane stove, or ate leftovers.

The toughest part was having to keep all those young, energetic horses cooped up. I felt so bad that they couldn't play and buck and gallop around when we were "off duty". Initially Bill and Laurie Knispell had very generously offered me the use of their place in Upper Lake, which looked to be only about a 2 to 3 hour drive on dirt roads to my camping spot at West Crockett Campground. This would have been a fabulous thing, for my horses to be able to spend each of our 6-days-off periods there – but as it turned out the road was impassable for anything but a high clearance 4x4, and absolutely out of the question for a trailer. Drat! The best I was able to manage was one 3-day trip out for the stock, but that at least was better than nothing. Of course it took me the better part of an entire day to get all 10 head out, and another whole day to get them back in if one includes the flat tire I got on the dirt road ... but the colts loved it and I felt good about them being pastured for a few days.

The last week of packing in Snow Mountain Wilderness was the best. For the last spike there, Ken returned for a couple of days at a time and once again we were blessed that things went so well. We had to travel quite a bit farther now, since with each spike the CCC crews had been working their way deeper into the Wilderness. That made the days longer, but what a way to spend them! From up top the views were just gorgeous – clear to the coastline to the West, range after range after range of mountains to the South, and on to Mount Shasta to the North.



It is a wonderful way to live, packing in the mountains for so long at a time. You might expect to get lonely, or wonder if you'll get scared, or think you'll miss running water or a toilet or a

shower so badly that you can't wait to escape back to them. You might think you can't work another hour because you are so exhausted and your muscles all ache.

You might think you can't go another minute in clothes so dirty they can stand up by themselves, or wonder if you'll EVER get the dirt out from under your fingernails. You might get to missing fresh food, or ice cream or Starbucks or dinner in a restaurant. But I find that humans can be wonderfully adaptable as long as there's something in it for them. For me, being in the mountains is what's "in it" for me.

