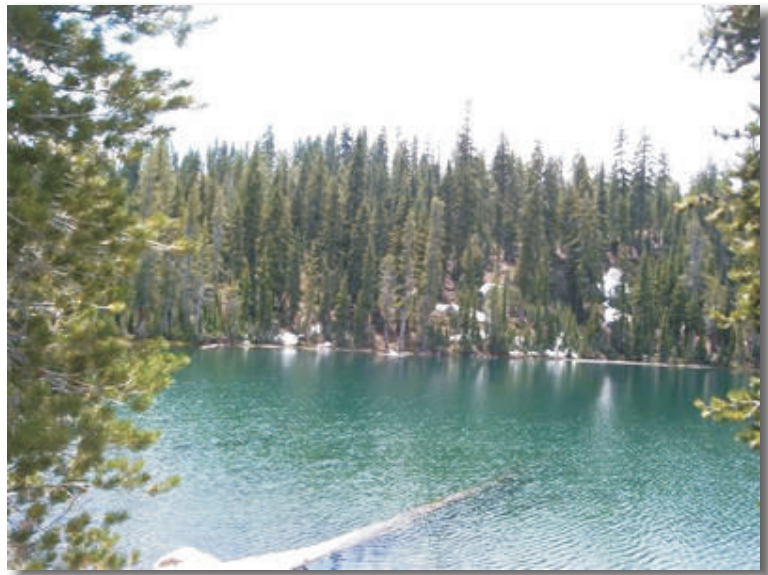


# Footfalls in the Forest

by Jo Johnson

There is something incredibly thought provoking about the softness of a forest. As powerful as it is, with the immense trees and the huge boulders, the rivers and the wildlife, the sometimes sudden and violent changes in weather.....there is still such a beauty in its peacefulness.

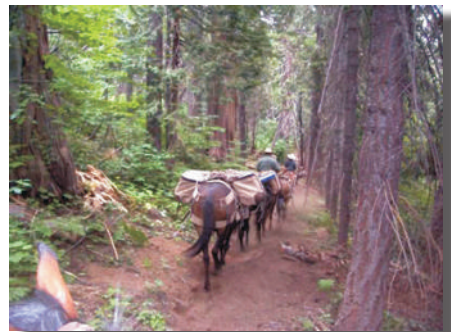


While doing some volunteer packing with the USFS in Lassen National Park a few weeks ago, I could not help but become caught up in this softness. As we rode along, pack animals strung out behind us, it was occasionally difficult to keep my mind on the work at hand. The sound of the creeks running over the rocks was mesmerizing, and the lakes these creeks ran into were beautiful beyond description - with their crystal clear water that made me want to jump in, just to find out how much I could see if I dove deep under water. Mostly though, I became caught up in the hushed tones of my horse's hooves in the often-deep bed of pine needles we found in many places on the trail.



The forest is deeply romantic for me. I feel close to the earth, close to God, and close to my animals. It helps me to look inside myself, to wonder at the passion these beautiful places bring to the forefront of my thoughts. I love the smell of the pines and the decaying logs, and the rain on the dirt. And I love the tunnel-like feel of those portions of trail where there are so many trees you cannot see the sun overhead. I find there is something particularly enticing about riding beneath this thick canopy of trees, with their ever-swirling shadows on the trail. It feels so quiet, so personal, almost like being hugged by God.

And the deep forest duff .....there is nothing else quite like it.



The sound of a horse's hooves in the duff is something I will treasure forever. It comes to me when I need solace. It is wonderfully soothing. It is a something that is really nothing, in that its beauty is in its lack of being "there", its non-intrusiveness .....instead, the duff is all about softness.

I have often felt that the sound of a horse's hooves can be a special thing in and of itself. It is so easy to lose oneself in the pattern, and let your mind wander with the rhythm. Picture a spectacular setting such as Lassen offers..... with its snow capped mountains, the volcanic outcroppings..... perhaps you can even see

steam emitting from the earth.

Now add the opposing influence of the immense pine trees overhead - softening and shadowing everything beneath them. And most of all - the luxuriousness of the duff from the fallen pine needles and rotting logs. Suddenly it all feels gentle, subdued. The rhythm of your horse's footfalls has taken on a completely different feeling.



You can probably hear a bird or two - perhaps a wood peewee calling, off in the distance. But the foremost thing you notice is the lack of noise. Your horses' footfalls have become muffled. No longer do you hear the occasional clang of a shoe. In fact, it is so quiet that you start to concentrate on that softness, that tranquility.

This softness in such a potentially harsh place is captivating. It is such a dichotomy - and so incredibly sensuous. To experience it alone is to experience it in its totality. But then you yearn to share it with someone you care about - and in so doing, you find it almost impossible not to break the silence that IS such a part of that beauty.



There is much to be gained by remaining silent and enjoying the romantic aspects of the forest, with its wonderful softness and sensuality, as your horse travels through on muffled hooves. Or you might choose to speak up, albeit in hushed tones, and share with your companion this awareness of the almost spiritual connection one can feel in these circumstances. Either way, you have enjoyed one of the most wonderful gifts we have available to us.

The forest is more addicting than a roller coaster ride, more thought provoking than great poetry, and more romantic than ....well, I'm sure you know.



***Please read the poem "The Endless Pool", written by our good friend Ken Graves and reproduced here with his permission.***

***<http://www.jafmorganstockhorses.com/Articles/The%20Endless%20Pool.pdf>***