

Equines and Estrogen
(My First Packing Trip)
by Lou Ann Gaskell

A three day horse packing trip into the Frank Church Wilderness for girls only? Are you kidding me? Okay, well, why not? Three of the women carry guns, so I decided I would at least be protected from bears. The plan was in place for Janine, Ellen, Laurie, myself, Jessica (18), and Alishia (19) to head out on horseback to camp under the stars, cross beautiful streams, and visit a mountain lake. People from New York pay good money to do this!

Packing for the weekend was challenging as I had to figure out a minimum set of clothing to cover cold, hot, windy, and rainy conditions. I know guys wouldn't have given it this much thought, but I knew I wanted to stay warm above all else.

In anticipation of the trip, I had an anxious, sleepless night on Thursday. I met Ellen, Alishia, and Jessica in Horseshoe Bend Friday morning to caravan to the Elk Meadows trail head. We made our way toward Stanley and turned left at the sign pointing toward Deadwood Reservoir. I was thrilled to know Ellen was leading the way since she'd been to this location in the past. The roads were dusty and the washboards made for tough travel in some places. We finally reached our destination around 12:30 after roadwork delays along the way.

Lunch was next on our agenda, followed by packing 101 lead by three "veteran" packers. I had no idea how much work it would be to get everything to fit on three pack animals. We even had to "ditch" a few items to make it happen. I expect six men could have managed with just one pack horse! A six-pack on one side and a six-pack on another.

By the time we were ready to go, I was already tired. I tried not to whine too much though, and soon we were on our way with 6 females, 2 dogs, 7 horses, and 2 mules. Remember, this was sort of a training pack trip, so we only had to ride about two hours to our campsite. Now, don't start imagining us sitting around sipping foo foo drinks relaxing and looking at scenery. No, no. This was a "different" group of girls. We had to set up tents, string high lines, form a kitchen, fetch water, and start a campfire before night fall. In between, we hobbled horses so they could graze for a while.

Did you know that hobbled horses aren't as dumb as regular horses? Hobbled horses learn fast—how to travel back toward home! Several times, they made their move back across the creek and slowly headed for home. Friday night, Janine's horse and mule wandered so far, she had to ride out to get them. It probably wasn't the best choice that she climbed on my horse bareback and left his lovely girl buddy behind. In the process, she twisted her knee climbing off.

That wasn't enough of an injury, so she climbed atop her horse bareback to cross the creek. That didn't go so well either! Her horse bobbed and she toppled to the ground injuring her ribs and hip. Oh, poor Janine!

Dinner prepared by Janine was a delicious shepherd's pie. Dehydrated ice cream (yup, dehydrated) and snacks were available for dessert ("desert" for Janine). I believe the last light was out by 9:30 or 10:00 the first night.

Now, I'm thinking how nice it will be to sleep in out in the fresh mountain air. But NO...Ellen had to put a cow bell on her horse at 7:30 a.m. No one could sleep through that. Well, maybe Jessica did for a while. Reluctantly, I added clothing to stay warm and headed to breakfast. The next thing Janine concocted I think was made of dehydrated eggs, butter, sausage, and potatoes. It wasn't as bad as it looked. We had cowboy percolated coffee (strong) and Tang to drink.

Preparing for the Saturday ride to Bernard Lake was much easier since all we had to do was saddle horses and make our lunches. Janine and her dog decided to stay in camp to mend while the rest of us took off across the meadow to our next destination. About two-thirds of the way down the trail, my horse, ridden by Jessica, kicked at one of Ellen's horses. Unfortunately, she hit dead on in the middle of Alisia's shin just below a previous injury. She sustained a small gash in her leg. Dr. Ellen was prepared as usual with her first aid kit and Jessica came to the rescue with her CNA experience. Once Alisia realized she wasn't going to gush blood this time, she wanted to continue on our trip.

Parts of the trail had several logs to navigate. There were bridges to cross and a few bogs. At one point, we had to lead our horses across a narrow, but deep stream. I held the end of the rope to allow Jack plenty of room to make his 6 foot leap across a 1 foot stream, but even still, he barely missed me as I slid down in the sand. Okay, this is NOT fun anymore. Ellen's detour wasn't worth the risk. On the way back, I'll take the lesser bog.

The hike up to the lake was rather steep, but not too long. We finally made it to Bernard Lake, a clear mountain lake that few ever visit. We all enjoyed a nice lunch, we relaxed, and took in the beautiful scenery. A group photo was our reward for surviving the trip.

The ride back down seemed faster and easier. We took the easier way across the one-foot creek and made our way back through the pick-up sticks. In the distance, we heard popping sounds. What on Earth could that be? Could there be shotguns during bow hunting season? Lightning? We weren't sure, but we got a sinking feeling that things just weren't right. It soon became evident that the sounds we were hearing were those of falling dead trees and that a microburst was hitting us from behind. The Sound and the Fury had us running immediately for the open area. Would we also have to survive lightning and rain? Trees began falling around us,

but we were already headed for safer ground where only a few dead trees still stood. Some of us remained on our steeds while others bailed. We were all looking out for each other though. Nearby, Jessica had dismounted and was leading her horse when she suddenly screamed out in pain. Her knee had come out of its socket! I quickly ran over to see if she was okay. The wind was still howling, but she needed help. Apparently, this sort of thing had happened before, and this time, the knee took care of itself. Jessica was able to ride the rest of the way back to camp. The wind died down after about 15 minutes of haunting us all.

The weather brought new energy to the horses and they knew they were headed to camp. The pace across the meadow was faster. We weren't sure what to expect back at our headquarters. Where was Janine? "Janine?" She slowly made her way out of her tent. My tent was on its side and there was a rip in the rain fly. This was the first time I noticed that we had set up the tent under a partially fallen tree being held by one (yep one) limb. Whose idea was it to put the tent there? Why didn't our veteran camper, Ellen, notice that? I moved the tent back a few feet.

We had had a long day and looked forward to Janine's hot home-cooked Thrive dinner that night. What do you mean you only brought one propane bottle? Laurie's dutch oven to the rescue! Alisia promised to make a meal that none could refuse. She heated up chili mixed with corn and some other things. It was quite good, I must admit.

Janine and Laurie hit the hay early that night. I'm not sure what they were thinking since they weren't going to get any sleep anyway. Alishia and Jessica sang country music for Ellen and I. That was a treat. If only we'd had a guitar. We stayed up later singing and talking around the campfire. I'll swear I learned more about teenagers that night than I had raising my own two daughters. I also learned a lot about Emmett, but I've been sworn to secrecy, so don't ask!

I believe we were all in bed Saturday night by 10 or 10:30 even though it seemed much later. Before dozing off, Ellen warned me about reaching for my coat because her gun was next to her cot. I turned on the flashlight to see it pointing RIGHT AT ME! Are you kidding? What do you mean it's loaded? Hey, don't you remember? I'm your best friend. Laughter ensued and we had all the other tent goers chuckling out loud. I pointed the gun away from me, turned out the light, and got some rest.

Again, morning came too early. I was ready to kill the cow bell. Okay Robbin, I'll go in with you to buy Ellen the Swiss version! Whatever the cost, it will be worth it. Up early, no propane, no coffee, no hot cereal. It's granola bars today, folks! I can deal. It's only a couple of hours back to the trailhead where there is REAL food in the campers.

We packed it up, but this time not as carefully. The goal was just to get all the stuff on in the panniers with equal weight on each side. That went well, but I think the manties were less than perfect. The ride back was surprisingly short. I guess that's always the way it is. We tied up,

unsaddled, and enjoyed a nice cold Pepsi with lunch. Okay, okay, we aren't done yet. Remember all the junk we packed up to take with us? We had to fit it all back in our vehicles.

Someone had the great idea to stop at Kirkham Hot Springs near Lowman for a bath. It was enjoyable, I must admit. The warm water was soothing. Janine kept going while five of us splashed around in the springs. I don't think Janine could have managed the rock stairs and slippery rocks involved with this part of the trip.

Jessica rode in the truck with me all the way back to Horseshoe Bend. It was great getting to know her better. We met Ellen prior to filling up the gas tank and Jessica made her way back to Emmett. Unfortunately, my mild headache had turned into a full blown migraine in Horseshoe Bend. It was all I could do to finish the drive home. I called ahead to warn Bill of my unpleasant arrival.

I pulled into the driveway, ran to get into the shower, cleaned up, and went straight to bed for two hours. At least I was clean, and when I woke up, my migraine was gone. I unpacked most of my belongings and proceeded to tell Bill about my first pack trip with a bunch of women. Oh what a weekend!

Thank you, girls.