

Boundary Trail

Cows are way scarier than bears and other such truths.

The Boundary Trail maintenance project would be the first SBBCHI project where I would leave my camper at home. An unusually hectic weekend meant turning this project into a day ride. Fortunately, the Payette National Forest is practically in my backyard. The Boundary trailhead is an easy 50 miles haul from my driveway. I loaded Jack early Saturday morning for the haul up 95 to the Seid Creek turnoff. Being camper-less would turn out to be the “first” of several for me during this National Trails Day weekend.

Rob had hauled up the night before. He was setting up his awning when I pulled into the trailhead. He quickly made breakfast of sausage and scrambled eggs while we waited for Nancy, the only other member signed up for the project. When Nancy didn't show by her designated time of 9:00 AM – Rob and I swung into the saddle and hit the trail.

The first downed tree of the project would be our only tree. What lacked in quantity was made up for in quality. Our 20” saws fell several inches short of making a clean cut through the diameter of the ponderosa pine uprooted across the trail. We cut wedges from both ends of the middle section laying across the trail and undercut the bottom. The mid section was too heavy to roll easily without a handy lever Rob made from a 4 inch lodge-pole.

We contemplated which trail to take at the junction. We could either take E. Fork Pine Creek to Fox Prairie and Buck's Cabin or stay on Boundary Trail to the junction of Big Flat Trail No. 352. We decided to make a loop out of Boundary Trail to Big Flat Junction. This direction

had the added benefit of enabling us to check on a section of trail we retreaded three years earlier.

The retreaded section of trail had been a success. The crunch of packed river gravel beneath our horses' hooves was the sound of satisfaction from a day's hard work. We had ripped out 30 yards of soggy corrugate logs long since rotted by years of bog and runoff. We hauled yards and yards of sand and gravel from the nearby creek as fill and line both sides with small boulders. The bog had not reclaimed our hard work.

"So, Rob...what makes this the right trail and not that one down there?" I asked as I pointed to the fork of the trail leading along the creek. "This one has horse tracks on it." He said. Oh...Ok, I thought. I'm not sure what that means, but that trail down there sure looks more like a real trail to me. "What do I know?" I shrugged. I'm just along for the ride.

The "trail" climbed mostly straight up the side of Cuddy Mountain. No switchbacks, no markers, nada. Just some obscure hoof prints Rob was determined to follow. "This has got to be the trail. I'm still following horse tracks." He said. "All that proves is we are not the first really stupid people to be up here." I said to myself. At least I meant to say it to myself. The trail quickly became more of a quasi game trail occasionally intersected with cattle crossings. Really stupid cattle. Rob mumbled something about expecting to run into salt for cattle. That must have been the reason for the horse tracks. I mumbled we were more likely to run into a lone mountain goat that had lost his way and ended up on the wrong side of the mountain.

We weaved our way across the face through gnarled limbs of tangled bushes like a couple of outback bushwhackers. We dismounted to save the horses. A girl could really use a machete at a time like this. I burned holes in the back of Rob's salmon colored vented hiking shirt and

wondered if he could feel it! Dude...not everybody is built like a daddy long legs! Rob glanced back several times. “How’s your knee holding up?” He would ask. “Just great, can’t feel a thing.” I answered. “My heart, however, may explode any moment.” Another comment I meant to say to myself.

We tethered the horses at the top of a 6800ft. ridge and sat under the cool shade of a large pine. I split my water with my dog and shared an apple with Jack. At this point, Rob showed less faith in the elusive horse tracks “WE” had followed. I pointed out that unless he had a mouse in his pocket, there was no WE involved here. This one was all you, my friend.

After lunch it was time to pull out the big guns. While Rob studied a map and GPS I fired up my brand spanking new Garmin. Well, would you look at that! The Boundary Trail Head I had marked before leaving camp was a mere inch and a quarter from our current location. Not only that...but there was an inviting little cabin awaiting our return!

Wait...What’s that ...a mountain? I wonder which mountain that is. Zooming in on my GPS did not reveal the name of the mountain sitting between us and the trailhead. Would that be Cuddy Mountain? I thought we were on Cuddy Mountain. Snow covered peaks loomed in the far horizon. I chuckled with an uncomfortable hint of hysteria, “Hopefully this little mountain on my GPS isn’t the Eagle Caps! Of course it wasn’t the Eagle Caps between us and the trailhead. I often use humor to mask nervousness or fear and apparently frustration, exhaustion and anxiety as well!

We rode through groves of pine thickets when we could and led when we couldn’t. We would pop out of a thicket only to be turned back by a wall of impenetrable brush. Rob handed me Payette’s reins while he scouted ahead. Several minutes of rummaging through thicket and brush

brought him back. “This is where we go back the way we came; nothing but a sheer wall of rock down to the canyon floor going that way.”

Brilliant idea; wish someone would have thought of that about 5 miles back! *insert sarcasm*

Rob could see a section of a trail at the bottom of the canyon heading east. He was sure that was the section of Boundary Trail we would have ridden had “we” (there was that mouse again) not chosen to take off on a wild horse hoof chase. He pointed to the side of a grassy, sheer ridge. “If we sashay our way down that ridge, we will meet up with that trail!” He said with confidence. “Good luck” I said. “I’ll meet you at the trail head. I’m not going down that sashaying or otherwise. I’m going back the way we came.” Rob let me lead for awhile before politely maneuvering my trek down the hill into a more gentle ascent. He probably didn’t think I noticed. It was a good compromise that led us safely to the bottom of the ravine. Unfortunately, we were not out of the woods yet.

The steep sides of the canyon came to a severe V at the bottom of the ravine. I could hear the trickle of a small creek lined in impenetrable vegetation. Rob had disappeared. The trail Jack and I had followed came to an abrupt end at a wall of brush and trees. I yelled for Rob, “Where are you?” I heard Rob swear for the first time in all the years we have ridden together. Bushes rustled and snapped.”What does it look like on your side?” He asked. I stared at the barricade of brush while listening to the crashing of bushes and limbs interrupted by an occasional spurt of profanity.” Well...it looks better over here than what it sounds like over there!”

I remember something somebody told me a long time ago. If you are in a situation where you have only one option ...never weaken. Just go for it. I closed my eyes, bent over the saddle horn and buried my face in Jack’s mane. Jack stuck his nose on the ground and pushed his way

through the brush. We stepped out the other side meeting up with the trail. We did it! Moments later, Rob burst through behind us.

It was smooth sailing once we wound our way back to Boundary Trail. It felt like old home week as we trod over the bog crossing and across the foot bridge spanning Pine Creek.

We arrived at the base of Annie's hill. The hill had gotten its name several years ago when my pack mule, Annie, flew down the mountain in an un-tethered frenzy of mule-gone-wild. She bucked, kicked and dashed off the mounting spewing a wake of chain-saws and limb clippers the area of a football field. Backcountry members from around the globe will forever refer to the spot as Annie's Mountain.

Mestena, Rob's pack mare, spent more energy pinning her ears back and glaring at Jack from around her pack saddle than she did trotting all day to keep up with Payette, Rob's mustang. If surliness were an attribute, Mestena would walk away with that trophy. Rob pulled back to let Jack and I take the lead.

We hadn't gotten far up Annie's Mountain. We came around the first set of switchbacks at a blind corner. There grazing on each side of the trail were two plump red cows. Great...cows. I'm not a fan of cows and my nervousness makes Jack nervous. Jack must have been too tired to get terribly excited about a couple of cows and barely gave them a second look. As we rounded the corner closer to the cows, the heifer on the downhill side raised her large round head. A big, round, cinnamon face with a broad nose, beady black eyes and small ears peered at me over the top of a bush. That's no cow. That's a bear. That's two bears, to be exact; one on each side of the trail. Jack and I have encountered elk, deer, grouse, cougar and the ever dreaded llama. My biggest fear next to a llama encounter, was a bear. Here we were face to face with two of

them. I'd heard the horror stories. It never ended well. A horse could smell a bear for miles. If you didn't get bucked off right then and there to be mauled to death, you could expect your horse to freak out, spin out of control and dash to the nearest cliff where it will proceed to commit suicide with you aboard. Jack didn't do anything. I looked behind me to see what kind of rodeo Rob and his string were having. Nothing much there either. My eyes were as big around as that bears face, "Shit..shit...shit..bears! Rob, they are bears! What do we do?" I didn't wait for or hear Rob respond. I stepped out of the saddle on the uphill side. I have no idea why. What chance did I have on foot if a bear charged? I mulled over the situation waiting for Rob to somehow turn them damn bear back into cows which sadly he did not accomplish. I was obviously the only one freaking out and stepped back into the saddle. I watched the bear on the downhill side dash down the mountain. The bear on the uphill side did not follow. I asked Rob again, what do I do? He nonchalantly suggested we head on down the trail. I pointed out that while one bear went downhill – the other one was above us. "Oh, that's not good." He says. "That's not good?" I quipped. "Just keep talking and move along." He says. I usually pray in these situations but all that went through my head was, "never weaken....never weaken."

Jack was tired and kept stopping to fake pee so he could rest. This is a trick he's done since I started riding him. I didn't blame him, I was tired too. Rob took the lead the rest of the way back to camp.

Rob and I sat in the limited shade of the horse trailer sipping on beer and ginger ale. I was thinking the day might have been better topped off with a shot of whisky, but I will take what I can get.

Rob remarked that the day would produce an interesting blog piece. I could not argue with that as I shook my head at him. "You realize I'm not cutting you any slack in the write-up?" He smiled and said he

expected nothing less, however, I should also remember a promise he made when we started riding together years ago: “I made you a promise to always get you out of the wilderness alive. I never said it wouldn’t be an adventure.”

I don’t always feel the need to write a disclaimer for the words and emotions that find their way from my thoughts to print. I’m adding one today. Rob and I have been riding partners long enough that we can joke and even poke a little fun at the others expense. Rob is an experienced packer and has led dozens of crews on various pack trips and projects for many years. His main concern is for the safety and well being of the stock and crew in his charge. This project was no different. We are both aware of the others skills, experience and comfort level. I did not follow blindly up the “wrong trail.” It wasn’t the “wrong” trail at all. It was the trail we both made the decision to travel. The fact that it wasn’t the official trail was of no consequence. You see, if you don’t step off the beaten path now and then and explore new trails – how will you ever know what adventures may have awaited you at the top of the next ridge?