

Sawtooth Pack Trip – July 2014



On July 19 five members of Squaw Butte meet at the Grandjean trailhead to start a seven day pack trip in the Sawtooth Wilderness. The trip was conceived the previous year while on a pack trip in the White Clouds and was planned over the next twelve months. Originally eight members indicated an interest in going but due to other commitments had to drop out. In June the trip was put in doubt when my lead horse Payette kicked through a fence and did his best to cripple himself.

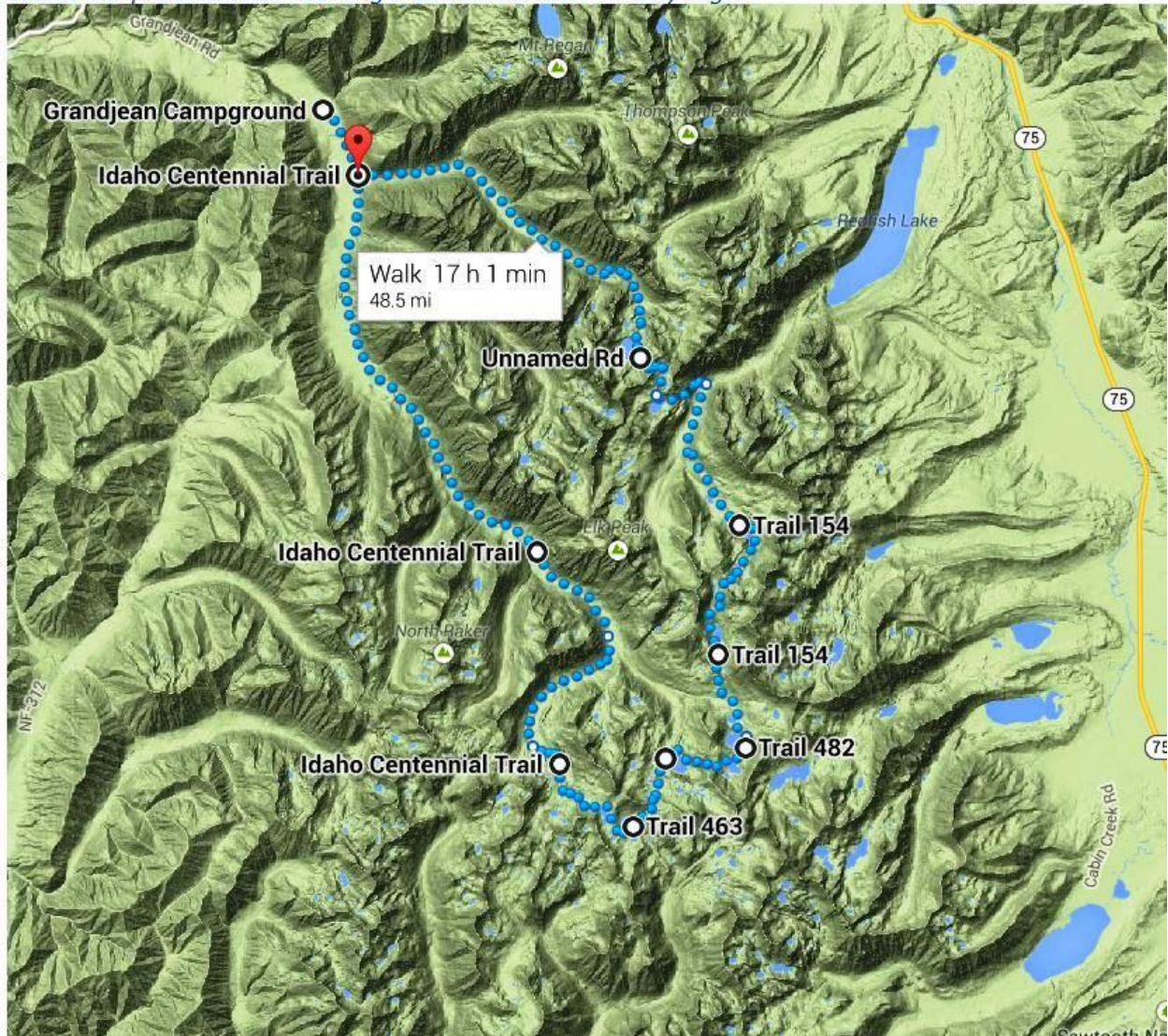


Payette was very lucky in that no vital structures were damaged and as he is young, he heals quickly and while not exactly at 100% was in good enough shape to go with his friends on the trip. Squaw Butte Shelly Duff joined us on her first pack trip. During the trip Shelly went from a newbie to a packer babe, learning how to build loads and sling them with basket hitches. She worked with Bill Selkirk who is an expert at getting loads to match in weight. Shelly also learned about stock management in the backcountry. Charles and Lorraine chick have been on past pack trips with me in the Sawtooth's and white clouds, and have refine their packing skills and set of equipment that they bring.



The trip we planned was a challenging one, a grand loop from Grandjean, up Barron Creek Canyon, over the pass into Redfish canyon, passed Cramer lake, over another pass into the South Fork of the Payette drainage, passed Ardeth lake, over another pass riding past Spangler and Bennett lakes following the head waters of the Payette to Elk lake and then back to Grandjean. In all we passed twenty named lakes, crossed five major passes and were in four different river drainages. Along the way we crossed mountain creeks, bridges, rock fields and snow fields. We rode some of the most challenging trails in the Sawtooth's, some better suited for mountaineers then horses and mules.

This is our planned route starting with Barron Lake Sunday Night



We packed and moved every day but one, on Thursday we stayed at Ardeth Lake as both stock and humans were beat and needed a day off. I had started the trip with a chest cold and by mid week it had turned into walking pneumonia. This made it very hard to catch my breath at the altitudes we were working. All the lakes we camped at were over 8000 feet and all but one of the passes was over 9200. This country is some of the most amazing in the lower 48 states, but to see it requires experienced trail

horses and riders. The trails are very challenging in their own right, but due to very poor trail conditions were even more so. Most of the trails were choked with downfall, requiring step over's or work a rounds. We had both saddle saws and the chapters cross cut saw with us. Our plan was to only cut what we could not safely get around or over. In all we cut around fifty trees and limbs, but had to figure out hundreds. Some of the work rounds were dangerous and great care needed to be taken. We were very lucky, we didn't suffer any injuries to our stock or riders. Other we met on the trail were not so lucky. A family of grandfather, two sons and three grand kids, started with seven horses, and had to lead three out with injuries.



Grandjean to Barron Lake – Like all first days, getting away from the trail head is the challenge, we were on the trail by 10:30 and had perfect weather as we worked our way up Barron canyon. Packs rode well and the stock figured out the best order. I rode Payette, knowing I needed an experience trail horse in the lead, and lead my new horse Tucker. He had packed before but was not experienced and had no relationship with Payette so was not sure he wanted to follow all that much. He had also been a pasture pet for the last couple of years and was not in all that good shape. This all came to a head when we got on the switch backs at the canyon head and he started balking at the turns. It took a couple of days but by the end of the trip they had teamed up and Tucker was starting to be an experienced packer.



My pack horse Moosely took it upon himself to be in charge of stock order while on the trail and often showed the other horses the best way to cross creeks or step over logs. Only once did he get it wrong, picking the most difficult spot and getting himself hung on another logs on the other side. He knocked the pack cock-eyed but no other damage.



We could have spent the whole trip cutting out logs, if we had done so; it is likely we would not have gotten much farther than Barron Lake. There were times though when it was not an option. When we could we used saddle saws as they were quick and didn't require the set-up of the cross cut. But when they wouldn't do, having the large saw made the difference in being able to continue and having to turn back. One thing we noticed, when using the cross cut, only

one person got a good place to stand the other was always in a very awkward spot to work.



After down trees, snow was our biggest concern. There were still snow fields in the passes that covered the trail. Depending on the slope and footing this could be a real problem. We were very lucky that we were able to find safe passage through the snow areas and that the trails through the passes were generally in pretty good shape with very little erosion. We were also very lucky that we didn't meet any other pack stock in these areas as there was no place to pass or turn around. We did meet a number of hikers but they were all very cooperative and we had no

issues or conflicts. We often exchanged trail information and also explained what BCHI was and they seemed interested. One hiker was a horse woman and will be looking for a chapter to join.



Weather was typical mountain, with afternoon rain showers and one night a terrific lighting show. We also had cool sunny days, with breezes that kept the bugs off. Speaking of bugs, take fly wipe, we had horsefly and at night mosquitoes that seemed to like Deet. We had excellent camp sites at Barron, Cramer, Ardeth and Elk lakes, a marginal one at Alpine Lake. We rode by excellent sites at Spangler and just below Rock Slide Lake. Take pellets to feed, some lakes are no grazing and none, except Elk had an excess of stock feed. We saw a lot of deer, most very tame walking right through camp; we also saw a lot of rodents and birds. Fishing was ok, better if you used spinners that fly's.

This was an amazing trip, but the trail conditions made it very challenging. I talked to the sawtooth trail ranger, and she said that the trail work is now contracted out and from what I can see, they are not doing much. To see more [pictures of this trip](#) check out the Squaw Butte Website.

Useful books and maps

Sawtooth & White Cloud Mountains ISBN 193378311-7 - available REI

Exploring the Sawtooth's – Sawtooth Society ISBN 978-0-615-65448-5

A field guide to Plants of the Boise Foothills - available D&B