

## **Novice Pack Trip**

August 12-15 2011

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It all started back in April, at Rendezvous. I picked up a flyer that was advertising a Novice Pack Trip sponsored by the High Sierra Unit BCHC. For a minimal amount of money this group invited greenhorns on a trip into the backcountry for four days to teach and literally show them the ropes!! A quick phone call to Nancy Hamill and this very nice lady assured me that indeed they would take us in and teach us how to pack.

Well, sign us up. Best friend Stacy and husband Tim were along for the ride with me as well as our trusty steeds, Tanner, Pete and Joe.

About 2 weeks before we were to leave, we all met for a pre-trip meeting at Lynn Joiner's home, the BCHC State Treasurer. What a great group of people BCHC has. They opened their doors and just made us feel very welcome. We met face to face with Nancy Hamill and Don McDonald, a couple of our teachers in the backcountry. What to bring, what not to bring was all discussed. We were given maps for the area and a very complete and thorough notebook with just about anything and everything someone needed to know to get started packing. Excitement was building and we couldn't wait to begin.

We left our home Thursday morning at 3 am. We were looking at an 8 hour drive with stock, to the Golden Trout Wilderness in the Sequoia National Forest and it has been warm. We arrived at Lewis Camp trailhead about 2pm without a hitch. The trailhead was busy with Forestry packers, because of a backcountry fire and volunteer packers, there to take provisions to the ACE workers. The Forestry packers were taking in food and supplies and packing out trash for the firefighters. This is what BCHC is all about, being of service. At trailhead we meet up with Don McDonald and his sharp looking red mules and very cute horse. From the start, this kind man began teaching us the whats, wheres, and how toos! Soon he introduced us to Bradley and Emily Miles, our hosts at the Cow Camp we will be riding to tomorrow. They were riding and leading 2 pack mules with a trio of dogs circling around. They assured us we will have hot showers awaiting us tomorrow when we ride into their camp. I was a bit confused -- Hot showers in the backcountry??? They rode off down the trail and soon Nancy Hamill and her daughter Alice Kampen hauled in and started unloading stock. Everyone said their "Howdy-Doos" and then we rambled off to our soft beds in the trailers. For the next four days we planned on really roughing it, with sleeping on the ground in our new cowboy bedrolls and using our mini camp pillows.

Friday morning dawned with a red mule with white socks running around the trailhead having a great time. The ACE(American Conservation Experience) man was there to send food, mail and other supplies into the Kern Ranger Station, and is trying to get the mule to come to him with a carrot. The happy mule wants nothing to do with him and continues jumping around camp. Tanner and Pete were stretching their necks as far over their pen as possible, begging for the carrots. "Screw the mule guy -- over here!"

Trailhead was so busy, it looked like LA, only filled with mules, not cars! We drug ourselves out of our warm bedrolls and Nancy, Alice and Don were busy laying out gear getting ready to teach. First though, breakfast with hot coffee, warm bagels, muffins and oatmeal.

After breakfast we got down to work loading the different kinds of pack boxes. Our teachers explained the different panniers such as leatherends, bear proof, soft VS hard and metal braces to haul in ice chests. We weighed and balanced loads with accuracy within ounces. Everyone brought in their gear to take down the mountain and laid it all on a big tarp. We began filling the panniers and learned about top loads and how much a mule can carry, depending on their size and age. Don now mentioned that we need more stuff to fill an almost empty packbox because you want full packs, with nothing rattling around. Out came our big pillows, extra clothing and the not-so-necessary items for extra comfort. Alice, our official cook brought out her ice chests and we redistributed all the food and icepacks into the set that fit into the metal frame, so they ride snug. As I glanced at her goods to pack, I'm checking out the food I see and "By-golly", there's tri-tip, chicken and dumplings, desserts – OMG! I don't eat this good at home!!!

Now we have everything packed and start loading the mules. They show us how to hang the panniers, starting on the offside and to be sure to remember that older mules such as Charlie, get the lighter, softer loads and Don's young red sweet mule Annie get the heavier loads. Soon we have all seven mules packed, manties placed and get a quick lesson on box hitches.

The horses are all saddled and we're ready to head out. Now Tanner, Pete and Joe are very savvy trail horses so that wasn't a worry for us, but we usually all ride together. We split the horses up and Tim rode Pete down with Don and his string, I rode Tanner down with Alice and her string and Stacy rode Joe with Nancy's string. The plan was to send the groups spaced out, so not to have all the dust and not to have the mini herds looking out for the next herd around every corner. I butted Tanner's head right behind Alice's mules and went around to the side, to another outlet for the trailhead to give us some necessary space from Tim and Don's string. Tanner realized his herd buddies were not with him and was a little worried. He was looking up at the trailhead and at every corner, not seeing his stablemates. Soon, he realized his new friends were mules and he better get used to it. Down the trail we went. Huge beautiful trees, nice wide trails, stream crossings and forever views. We traveled the seven miles with hardly a hitch. (Except when Alice's young pack mule Sadie had a jumping, bucking moment because the rear mule said something nasty and smart ass!) We crossed the Little Kern River and admired the suspension bridge that the stock use when the river is too high.

As we came around the mountain, into Trout Meadow, we saw a huge fenced meadow/pasture, with quite a herd of mules and horses grazing. I saw Pete, Tim's Paint running with his tail up enjoying his freedom. Walking along the side of the pasture, on a trail, we came to a gate announcing we had arrived at Cow Camp. I opened the gate and stepped down into a stream and saw this forever narrow boardwalk/bridge heading to some old outbuildings and tents which is Bradley and Emily's Cow Camp. The idea is to jump out of the stream onto the boardwalk and head in.

Well, Alice's big buckskin mare, Cat, said "NO" and then Tanner asked if I was crazy and would much rather jump around in the bogs on either side of the boardwalk. Soon, behind us, came Nancy & Stacy. Nancy walked her little gelding, Okie, into the stream and then jumped right up, onto the boardwalk, with her string of three mules kinda scrambling around behind her before they decided it would be much easier to walk on the slabs of wood. Tanner fell in behind the mules, then came Stacy on Joe and Alice and her string. Note to self: It is always good to have a brave horse around to lead the pack.

We rode into camp and were greeted by Don, Tim and Emily and Bradley our camp hosts. Everyone made it in safely and we began unpacking mules. Stacy is excited! She couldn't wait to tell

us that she crossed the suspension bridge on Joe, with Nancy & her string. Lucky dog I bet that was fun!! The horses were tired and behaved themselves really well on the trail. Stacy walked around to unpack the stocking legged red mule, (Yes the same one running around trailhead!) and this little mule, with a back foot, made the slowest side swipe at Stacy I have ever seen. Stacy wasn't hurt, but we now have a new appreciation for mules and their control of their feet. We turned all the animals out in the big pasture to let them sort themselves out.

Now, back in camp we investigated the 100 hundred year old, one room building where we put all the food. Above the window is a sign that says "Surveyed in 1882" – WOW!!. Bradley and Emily have made lots of improvements to the camp, with a wood stove to cook on as it heats water for the kitchen, solar lighting, shade covering over a huge handmade table. Oh yeah, and a HOT outdoor shower overlooking a gorge where the stream flows and the meadow full of our stock peacefully grazing. This is roughing it??? There is also a huge tent with a wood floor and cots, a two holer outhouse and scenery that only the Almighty can create.

That night we sat down to an excellent dinner thanks to Alice, great conversation and the wonderment of how we have been so lucky and blessed to be able to do this.

The next day after a fantastic breakfast of biscuits, gravy, eggs and bacon, we brought up the mules and had a solid morning of packing, learning box hitches and how to pack funny loads. All three of us have learned the box hitch in different ways. Then after lunch we planned on a ride. We brought the horses up and lo and behold two of our horses had pulled a shoe running like mustangs thru the bogs in the pasture. Tanner is the only one who has all four, but he has cut his head below his ear and has a pretty good gash there -- Silly city horses. I rode out with Bradley and Emily for a relaxing trail ride. That evening we had a dinner of tri-tip, a rousing game of Mexican Dominos and an impromptu classroom on packing and gentle use. It's great having conversations with new people as you learn new things, hear new stories and of course, a few new jokes. Don is passionate about having new people in the backcountry, learning the old traditions and fulfilling the BCHC purpose. Both Nancy and Alice are knowledgeable teachers with generous spirits to help you learn. Bradley and Emily were great, with their unbelievable hospitality, stories and history of the area. What an awesome week-end!!

Sunday was more of the same, with a hike to the Ranger Station, learning the ways of the backcountry and generally enjoying the day. Our horses were learning that to get a drink, they just had to walk down to the creek and get one! Tanner, who always likes to snatch and grab grass on the trail, but now has grass up to his knees in the meadow and our guys spent most of their time, hanging out in the dirt corner of the Meadow. Go figure!! Another great meal, good times and soon off to bed we all went, to enjoy the peaceful night full of beautiful stars.

Monday morning we had breakfast, washed the dishes and than laid out our gear to load the mules. After stuffing and loading up the panniers, we all got to practice our box hitches once again and headed out the trail. Alice allowed me to lead one of her mules and I looked like a real packer. Down the narrow boardwalk, Tanner takes the lead and away we go. We make trailhead with no mishaps, just smarter horses and confidence that we really can do this. Thank you to Nancy Hamill, Alice Kampen, Don McDonald, Bradley and Emily Miles for your generosity, kindness, wealth of information and conviction that we can get this done!