

Horseback Adventures > Spanish Peaks



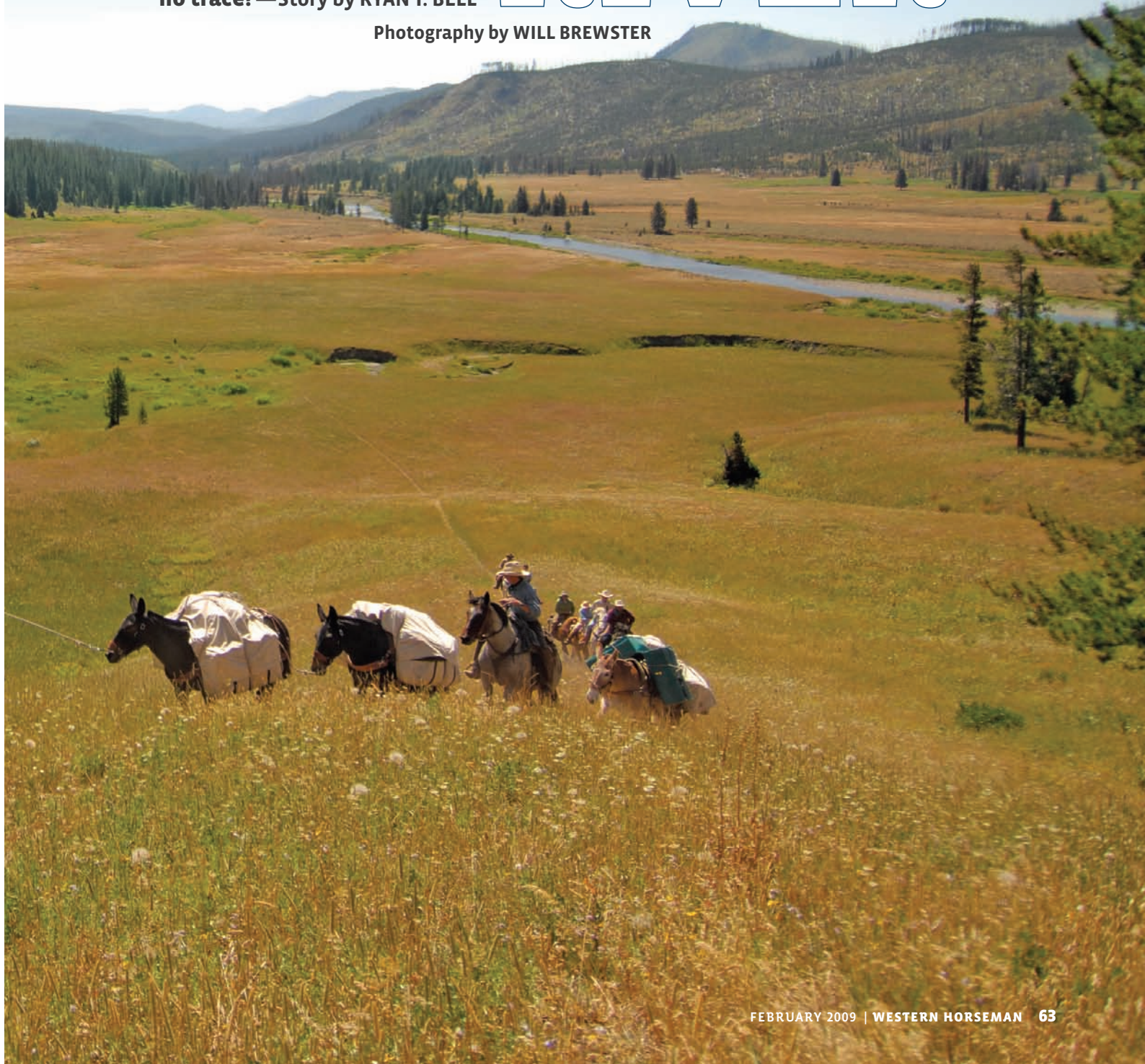
» The Spanish Peaks pack string climbs out of the Snake River Valley, 20 years after the Yellowstone fires of 1988 inflicted their damage. The mountains in the background show a mosaic of patterns left by the fire.



**Ten people, 17 stock animals
and 1,400 pounds of supplies.
Is it possible to travel through
Yellowstone National Park—
to one of the most remote locations
in the United States—and leave
no trace?—Story by RYAN T. BELL**

UP SNAKE RIVER

Photography by WILL BREWSTER



THERE'S A POINT DURING A PACK TRIP WHEN IT SEEMS

Matt Henningsen leads a string of mules into camp. Pristine locales like this still exist thanks to careful management by Yellowstone National Park rangers, and visitors' adherence to leave-no-trace principles.

THAT LIFE CAN'T GET ANY BETTER.

T

HERE WAS A GOOD REASON why I stood on the shoulder of Highway 191 with my saddle, a duffel bag and my Appaloosa mare, Gravelly, at 6:30 in the morning. We were hitch-hiking—sort of. At the beginning of a leave-no-trace pack trip into Yellowstone, it seemed appropriate to car pool. Matt Henningsen, outfitting manager for the Club at Spanish Peaks, a Montana resort, had agreed to pick me up on his way into the park. His truck and trailer pulled up at 7 a.m. sharp.

“We’ve got a tight schedule to keep, if we want to be on the trail by noon,” he told me.

We stowed my gear in the truck bed, loaded Gravelly into the trailer, and were gone inside of five minutes.

Two hours later, we pulled into the South Boundary Trailhead parking lot, on the opposite side of the park. Henningsen and crew—wrangler Sam Hauke, fishing guide Aaron Wert and camp chef Chad Winstead—readied the mules and gear. In the background, a stream of cars and RVs poured through the south entrance gate. Ninety percent of them would stay on the roads and walking paths of Yellowstone’s front country. The din of their engines killed our leave-no-trace vibe, but we would shed their exhaust soon enough.

A truck pulled out of the traffic and parked next to us. It was photographer Will Brewster. He was dressed in the Montanan fashion that says: “If it weren’t for my day job, I’d be out cowboying.” He wore a tattered cowboy hat, oilskin vest, packer boots and faded jeans. After introductions, Brewster joined the packing crew, anxious like the rest of us to get backcountry-bound.

Also along for the trip were Nick and Jane Wyr of La Hoya Beach, California, and Steve and Sabrina Sigourney of Big Sky, Montana. They were repeat clients of Henningsen’s, who had joined him on other forays into Yellowstone. When he suggested the idea of packing up Snake River, where jumbo-sized trout were rumored to live, these avid fly-fishermen were in.

With everyone saddled to go, Matt plunged into the river at the lead of a seven-mule pack string. Their white canvas loads bobbed and rocked as they went, looking like the sails of the Spanish armada at sea. They splashed out of the water on the opposite shore, where the backcountry of Yellowstone begins.



Below: Standing around a campfire at dawn is a memorable experience, but firewood can be scarce in campsites that suffer overuse. Visitors are advised to save precious wood for moments when a campfire is truly needed for warmth.



“WE JUST NEED TO BUILD A PASTURE BIG ENOUGH FOR THE ALPHA MARES. THE GELDINGS AND MULES WILL FREE-GRAZE OUTSIDE.”



Wranglers saddle horses inside a polywire corral while the mules and other horses finish their breakfast nosebags of sweet feed.



Camp chef Chad Winstead prepares lobster tail and steak over an open fire. His secret for building the perfect cooking fire is to pack along a bag of charcoal briquets. They produce even heat and cut down on the amount of firewood that needs to be gathered around camp.

WHEN YOU IMAGINE YELLOWSTONE’S BACKCOUNTRY, you picture a vast expanse of untouched land. However, horseback travelers have crossed the region for centuries. Native American hunting parties used the Bannock Trail to search for buffalo. The trail indentations created by their Indian ponies are still visible today.

The long-lasting effect of livestock on the land was apparent when we rode into camp that afternoon. The site was perched on a bluff overlooking the Snake River and surrounded by what appeared to be grass meadows perfect for grazing. On closer inspection, however, the grass quality was poor. Short, leafy plant species known as *forbes* covered the ground, crowding out the native grasses that had fattened buffalo and elk for centuries. We weren’t the first stock users to camp here, but the grazing practices of previous tenants had overused the land.

“Let’s check the grass on the other side of the river,” Sam said.

We forded the Snake and emerged onto a field of girth-cinch-height Timothy. The cattail heads made a drum-roll as they bobbed against our stirrup leathers. Gravelly arched her head down to grab a bite as we rode.

Timothy grass hails from Europe, a long distance from Yellowstone. I later spoke with Mike Ross, a Park Service ranger, who explained how it got there.

“Timothy was planted in the north of Yellowstone as a hay crop to feed bison in the winter,” he said. “But, I doubt that it traveled all the way to the Snake River. More likely, outfitters introduced Timothy in the 1960s and ’70s, back when the Park allowed outfitters to pack in hay bales for supplemental feed. Odds are, the hay had Timothy seeds in it.”

Native species or not, the Timothy field was primo grazing. We returned to camp to report the discovery and found the rest of the crew busy setting up. I rode toward them, but Henningsen signaled for me to stop at a distance.



had already forded with the mules and was unloading fencing supplies from one of their packs when I rode up. The supplies included an ax, fiberglass poles, a roll of electric polywire and a battery-powered charging unit.

“We just need to build a pasture big enough for the alpha mares,” she said. “The geldings and mules will free-graze outside. They won’t go far without their ladies.”

Sam walked the meadow to trace out the fence line, unspooling polywire as she went. I followed, pacing out 25 steps and then pounding a fiberglass pole into the ground using the backside of the ax. With the pasture enclosed, Sam then created an adjacent round corral. A polywire gate swung between the two, in one direction to corral the pasture mares and the other to gather free-grazers on the outside.

“Stay right there,” he said. “One leave-no-trace rule is to keep livestock out of ‘camp core.’ A horse’s hooves can turn it into a dust bowl in no time.”

Looking around, it was obvious that a horse hadn’t been within a hundred yards of camp in recent history. The rule, when abided by everyone, keeps a campsite looking new year after year. Henningsen had gone to the trouble of unloading the mules at a distance, then carrying the panniers into camp.

The guide pointed out some of the other leave-no-trace practices he followed. The tents were assembled on barren ground where previous tents had been located, or on resilient “duff” surfaces under the trees. The cook had spread two scrim ground mats on his working area, one in the dining area underneath a folding table and chairs, another in the cooking area under the propane stoves. Kitchens attract a lot of foot traffic, and the mats prevent soil erosion. Lastly, the empty pack panniers were converted into “bear boxes” for storing items that could attract wildlife. Henningsen threw a lash cinch over a “bear pole” fastened 20 feet in the air between two trees, and hoisted each box up like a piñata, safely out of reach.

Sam was setting up a low-impact grazing pasture across the river, so I grabbed three saddle horses and led them across. Sam

THE NEXT DAY, Michael Curtis, the Yellowstone ranger in charge of the Snake River, rode through camp for a surprise field evaluation. Most everyone was gone fishing except for Sam and Chad, who stayed behind to tend camp.

Curtis put them to the test. First-aid kit? Check. Low-impact camp core? Check. Minimal stock-to-human ratio? Check. In his report, Curtis noted: “A well-managed and -operated camp. Excellent stock management, friendly and easygoing guides. Camp was well set up, clean and organized. All animals were in good condition.”

It’s not like rangers to have an abundance of free time to police outfitter camps. National Parks are notoriously underfunded and short-staffed. Curtis had seen the itinerary Spanish Peaks filed for our Snake River trip, and he made the time to drop by.

That rangers even conduct field evaluations is a credit to Yellowstone’s commitment to leave-no-trace. It didn’t used to be that way. Commercial outfitters used to run roughshod over the park, packing in dozens of mules and horses, erecting “tent cities,” and leaving a razed swath of land in their wake.

In the late 1980s, Yellowstone Park changed the way it managed such operations. They implemented a limited concessions permit that required outfits to


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THE SNAKE RIVER PROVIDES YEAR-ROUND FISHING FOR A WIDE VARIETY OF SPECIES



be licensed by the park. As a condition of the permit, an outfitter had to abide by a list of leave-no-trace initiatives. These included reducing the number of stock they brought into the backcountry, scheduling itineraries with the Park Service to help rangers monitor backcountry use, and a host of in-camp criteria aimed at preserving the backcountry for other users.

The Yellowstone fires of 1988 represented a demarcation between a century of overuse and the park's leave-no-trace future. The fire affected 793,000 acres; \$120 million was spent on the firefighting effort, and yet the fire crews never had a chance against the perfect storm of flame. It took unseasonable September snow and rain to put the fires out. The moral to the story: let Mother Nature do her job.

After the fire, the landscape quickly rebounded, with lush meadows, forest undergrowth and tree saplings sprouting. When outfitters returned to the backcountry after 1988, they were managed by limited concessions permits and had embraced the leave-no-trace policy.

ON DAY THREE, we departed the Snake River camp, the pack train hoofing its way over a mountain divide from which we enjoyed a bird's-eye view of the valley behind us. The landscape showed the progress of 20 years of healing since the fires. Ranger Mike Ross patrolled the Snake River in 1989, and he told me about witnessing the aftermath.

"It was a mosaic of patterns," Ross said. "In places, the land was scorched from 'hot burns' that took everything. There were places where crown fires burned only the tree



Top: Fishing guide Aaron Wert nets a cutthroat trout out of the Snake River. Fly-fishermen, some of whom wouldn't otherwise ride a horse, brave days in the saddle for a chance to catch this coveted species. **Above:** Required gear for the trip included compact, light-weight fishing equipment.

canopy, and then there were islands of green forests that were spared. It was an eye-opening experience to see how diverse fire can be.”

Out on patrol, Ross had the considerable challenge of clearing trails of innumerable dead-fallen trees. A handsaw and scabbard were permanent fixtures on his saddle. On some rides, he'd clear dozens of trees on his way in and have to clear new-fallen trees on the trip out. And he never dared go out when the wind blew.

With 140,000 acres burned in the Snake River area alone and so many dead trees waiting to fall, it was like riding through a rainstorm of falling anvils. Ross recalled the thunder of dead trees as they tumbled down like a row of dominos.

“I never thought I'd work for the Park Service long enough to ride through forest again,” he said. “But, in recent years, new trees have grown tall enough to provide a little shade on my shoulders when I go on patrol.”

THERE'S A POINT during a pack trip when it seems that life can't get any better. On this trip, it was the “Mount Sheridan moment.” We had ridden into our final base camp along Basin Creek, the horses were out to pasture and the camp chores were complete. Formidable Mount Sheridan loomed in the background, shellacked with a golden sunset.

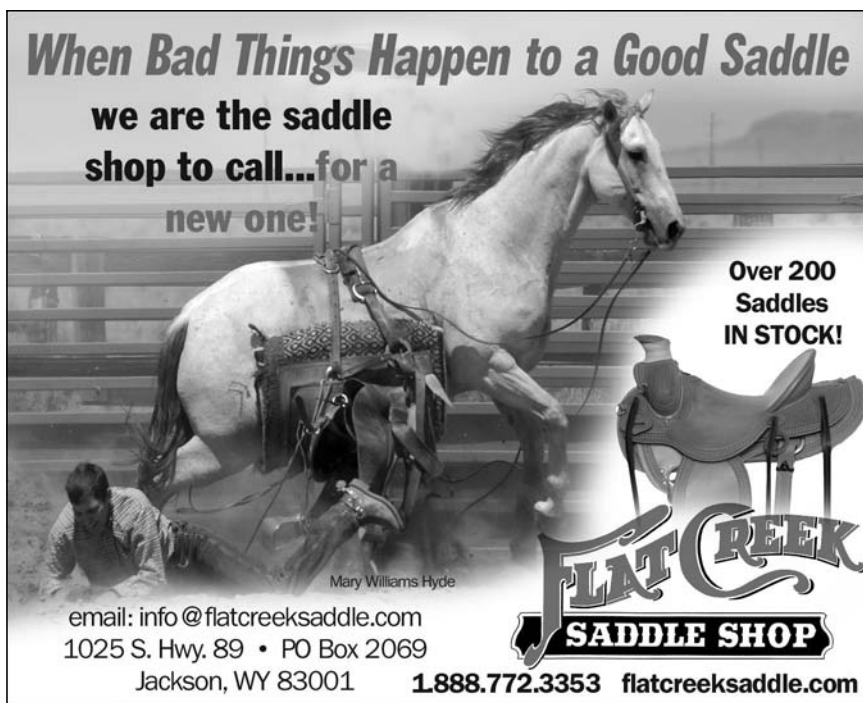
We sat down for a white-tablecloth dinner, under a canopy of 75-foot evergreens. Chef Chad served lobster tail and steak—backcountry surf-and-turf. The ingredients were so fresh, I wondered if a helicopter had flown in supplies. Chad's pantry pannier was a bottomless hole of surprises. We wined and dined until late, and then I lay awake in the tent listening to the bell mares sound the night's progress. The bell's sound was comforting, like a night watchman of old saying, “11 o'clock and all's well.”

Outfitters are known to sleep through the clanging of bells, but it's the dead quiet that will startle them awake. Like the silence of a missing bell mare, one of the fly-fisherman noticed a conspicuous absence in Yellowstone. Where were the buffalo? We had covered nearly 20 miles in three days, yet we hadn't seen any of the big mammals the park is famous for: buffalo, elk and bears. We'd seen bald eagles, yellow-belly marmots and the Snake River's cutthroat trout, but Yellowstone's mascot was missing.

The winter of 2008 was hard on the park's herd of 4,700 buffalo. More than half of them perished. Still, the 2,300 that survived were a huge improvement over the population of 25 buffalo that remained in 1894. Back then, a buffalo head was worth \$1,500, and poaching was a profitable business. Over the course of the 20th century, Yellowstone nurtured buffalo numbers back into abundance. Last winter's losses were a blow, but at least the buffalo have rebounded to a population that could withstand such a die-off.

In the morning, Will Brewster spotted a lone elk in the mountains, its buckskin hide reflecting the sun. It was evidence that just because the rest of us hadn't seen any big wildlife, it didn't mean they weren't there.

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IN ANDY GARCIA'S 1878 journal *Tough Trip Through Paradise*, he told of an encounter with a gang of Yellowstone horse thieves.

"They had what looked to me to be about 90 head of horses," Garcia wrote. "They were all fine saddle horses—no scrubs in the bunch."

The gang asked him to be their camp cook on a trip to Canada's Northwest Territories, where a \$10 horse sold for \$120.

"I don't know much, but I know enough not to go stealing horses," he told them. "I will see you all in hell before I will have anything to do with those horses."

Horse thieves would rustle in Idaho and Wyoming, then drive their herds through Yellowstone on a trail known as the Thorofare. In the 1800s, the Thorofare was an area of mass transit used by both Native Americans and fur trappers. Today, it bears the opposite distinction—as the most remote location in the lower 48 United States. According to a 2005 U.S. Geological Survey report, the Thorofare trail is a record 30 miles from the nearest paved road.

Our Basin Creek camp was the closest we would get to its most remote point, a feature called Big Game Ridge separating us from it.

IT WAS HOT AND DUSTY as we rode the final leg of our journey. Dirt hung in the air, where the sun cut our shadows into airborne jigsaw puzzle pieces. The trail skirted the base of Mount Sheridan, then the shores of Heart Lake. We passed through the shade of live forests, and then barren stretches where dead trees stood naked against the sky.

On a distant mountain was the remnant of an old dirt road. Vehicles pulling motorboats drove into here until 1961, when Yellowstone banned motorized traffic on Heart Lake. The road was shut down and has since sprouted regrowth and begun to crumble back into the mountainside. Today, Heart Lake is a quiet, pristine, backcountry destination eight miles from a paved road. It's hard to imagine motorboats carving wakes across it.

We rode in to the Heart Lake Trailhead that afternoon, exhausted, covered in dust but wishing the ride could go on. When Matt dismounted, he discovered he'd lost a spur along the way. He figured it had fallen off when he stopped to adjust the packs.

A month later, he received a phone call from a park ranger who found a spur with the initials "MCH" tooled into the leather strap. She looked through the log of outfitters that had traveled the Heart

Lake Trail and found Matt's name. To his surprise, she reunited the lost spur with its mate.

"Now, that," Matt said, "is leave-no-trace." 🐾

Contributing writer Ryan T. Bell chronicles cowboy life and backcountry experiences in his Blog "Route 287." View it online at westernhorseman.com. To learn more about the Club at Spanish Peaks, visit spanish-peaks.com.

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