

Goatpacking in Hikers Heaven!

O/N/ December 2009

Everybody loves a goatpacker, right?!!!

by Larry Robinson

This one has been circling-to-land* in the airspace of my brain for some time, but I wasn't sure how to present it without being too negative. But since I haven't gotten any lightning strokes of brilliance to light the way, I guess I'll just plunge right into it.

I first have to say that I am *NOT* Mr. Experience when it comes to goatpacking, only having dragged these wonderful little animals out into the woods for about 5 years now. There are others that have been at it a lot longer. John Mionczynski from Wyoming, considered the originator of goatpacking in North America, George Bogdan, the one who more or less brought goatpacking to Idaho, and Carolyn Eddy, Estacada, Oregon who is our guru and expert on all affairs 'goat'.

That having been said, I have tried to keep these guys (the goats) busy since they have become useful and until this year have managed to put in about 100+ miles each year exploring the mountains of Idaho. And the places we go do seem to be as close to heaven as we will experience here on earth, do they not?

The core question then, becomes, will everybody you run into be as wildly enthusiastic as you are about your goats? Well, most are, or at least do their best to be accommodating. *But not all*. And therein lies the rub. There are a few out there that will be openly hostile to you for bringing your guys into the wilderness. The reasons vary, but the experience is never pleasant.

One lady posted to the group that a 'horse person' had told her that 'she had no right to bring those animals into the woods and she needed to get them the he— out of there', which, sadly, she did. Truly, horses were the first pack animals, but I'm not convinced that our goats don't have a place, just because they are the 'Johnny-come-latelys'. (I gotta say, for the record, that I would *NOT* have taken my guys the he— out of there as she did!)

And so we get to my personal experiences, remembering that I haven't been at it that long:

A couple or three years ago, I was dragging 2 of my guys along on a trip to Red Mountain here in Idaho. I had not been there before, but I managed to come out more or less right where I wanted to (off-trail work here), and that was at the middle lake in this group. Unfortunately there was another gentleman already camped there... with his wife and two dogs. As I sidled up with my 2 goats, the wife was in the tent holding onto one dog, which was barking his fool head off, and the gentleman was holding onto another dog who, likewise, was barking his fool head off. He only had one thing to say to me, and that was, "Oh, packgoats." The condescension fairly dripped off his voice and I could perceive that this was *NOT* a goat supporter. Interestingly, my goats were not barking, nor were they making any disruption of any kind... truly the dogs were making enough for everyone.

However this experience led me to take on the hike to the upper lake, which I was not wildly enthusiastic about since I had set my heart on camping at the middle lake, but off we all went. And to be quite honest, it was definitely for the better, as the upper lake was prettier, and I, and my guys, were the only ones there that night. It doesn't get any better than that, does it?

Fast forward to a year or so ago, and I was hiking into my favorite hot springs, which I described in my August 09 article. *I love this place!* I could build a cabin here and be happy for the rest of the time that God gives me. But since that is not possible, I do my best to hike in when I hopefully will not have a lot of company. Sadly, this particular year, it was not to be. There was quite a gaggle there, all from one group, but enough to cause waaaay more activity at this hot springs than I was comfortable with. I tried to maintain a low profile, didn't go into the HS where they were, and generally tried to keep out of the way. But that was not good enough for this group, and eventually I heard one gentleman (probably the primary one in this group with an axe to grind) make a very unkind comment about the goats. I kept my peace until he came through where I was on his way fishing. I let him know that I had heard what he had to say and responded thusly,

"You know, I am 68 years old. I have carried thousands of pounds on my back over time. I *DO NOT* have to apologize for using a pack animal at this point in my life. In reality, I am using the most environmentally friendly animal that it is possible to pack with, and I am still doing the hiking myself in spite of my age!"

He practically did a 'wheelie' backpedaling, which was fun, but I doubt seriously that I changed his mind in the long-term.

The bottom line? Not everyone will appreciate your animals. If you do everything that you can to minimize the impact, you have done your part. NEVER, like the lady I described above, let anyone, just because they are overqualified in 'attitude' convince you to leave the woods. You have every right to be there and your goats have the right to be there with you. And I am convinced that the goats enjoy it way more than the horses! Have fun!

** Aviation terminology. Although this pilot was forced out of the cockpit some years back due to economics, he just can't seem to give it all up and still hopes. He spent a lot of time flying the Idaho backcountry, and has a lot more flying stories than goat ones... but he's working to create plenty of goat ones!*

