

## Dirt Skiing the Marble Mountains

**M**axwell's Lost River Trailblazer, my eleven-year-old Brittany, pulls on the 30-foot retractable lead like he's a damned Malamute in the Iditarod sled dog race. He's hauling me up a trail that slices through a forest of Shasta red fir and Douglas fir parallel to Canyon Creek. Then the path forks. We bear to the left and climb over a broad ridge to the Red Rock Creek drainage.

I feel as if I'm behind a ski boat hanging on for dear life. The trail is a blur; never mind the panoptic vistas that appear from time to time through openings in the forest. If I glanced over at them, I'd go ass over teakettle off the trail and down the slope into the manzanita, pack and all. It feels as if we're doing about four miles per hour, but later calculations put our trail speed at a little over two miles per hour. The Old Guy actually canters up some slopes.

Even as old as he is, managing Blazer takes some concentration. Only another dog could explain why he insists on peeing off his right side with his head pointing downhill. To accomplish that when we're headed uphill, he must reverse course, walk downhill, pee on his right side, then pirouette to his left, wrapping the leash around the bedding sausage on top of his pack. My 35-pound pack makes bending over to unwind the mess a chore. Why can't he just pee every 75 yards on the right side going uphill? The mysteries of the Brittany mind. Then he dunks himself and his pack in every stream that cuts the trail. Although balanced when both are dry, the saddlebags list to starboard when wet, forcing me to shift a package of kibble or something to balance things out.

It is mid morning in late August and we're two miles from the Lover's Camp Trailhead at the beginning of a three-day sojourn to the Marble Mountain Wilderness in northern California. The road from Fort Jones to the trailhead rambled across patchwork quilts of emerald-colored alfalfa fields and neat cattle ranches of the Scott Valley set against dark ridges that faded to blue in the distance. Our route will loop some twenty-miles through the northeastern portion of this wilderness: a sampling that should afford views of the limestone geology that makes this corner of the Cascade Mountains unique. We hope to see park-like sub alpine meadows surrounded by Shasta Red fir and noble fir; Marble Mountain lying on the western horizon like some Mesozoic leviathan with its limestone bones bleaching in the stinging alpine sun; shallow lakes that invite a late afternoon swim; a fleeting glimpse perhaps, of Sasquatch.

As we gain elevation, the red fir forest opens up to a series of meadows ringed with aspens and poplar trees. The breeze flowing across them carries a rich fragrance of anise mixed with tarweed, laced from time to time with the acrid stench of fresh cow patties. The flower show is complex: a tapestry of sky blue daisy-like flowers, shooting stars, Indian paintbrush,



bright white sprays, purple flowers, yellow daisy-like flowers. The quaking aspens will be luminous in the fall, their leaves spinning in the wind like gold coins.

Five miles of steady uphill brings us to the crest of the main east-west ridge and the intersection with the celebrated Pacific Crest Trail. A left turn takes us east along the southern flank of the ridge. After chugging along the undulating trail for several miles, the unseasonably warm and humid weather compounded by the unobstructed rays of the sun angling in from the southwest begin to take their toll. Late summer in these mountains is supposed to be crisp and dry. This isn't crisp and dry; it feels like Belize. I keep the Brittany well watered, since he persists in pulling me up and down even the steepest sections of trail. After two more miles of uncomfortably hot humping, we leave the main trail and bushwhack through a thick stand of lodge pole pine, contouring carefully along the side of a broad ridge, using the compass and altimeter to keep us found. A third of a mile along the azimuth brings us to Gem and Jewel Lakes—little more than potholes perched on a level bench where the ridge abuts a fractured escarpment of rust colored granite.

Our search for a decent campsite forces us across a slope covered with Manzanita brush and boulders. More than once Blazer ends up suspended by his pack in the springy branches, dog-paddling thin air. I rescue him by his harness straps and set him down on terra firma, amazed at his determination to plow through the stuff without a whimper of complaint.



The biggest of the five lakes is flanked by a nice meadow that separates it from the last pond where salamanders sinuate along the caramel colored bottoms of the ponds near drowned tree trunks, kicking up puffs of silt with their tails. The cliff above us glows ochre and rust in the rays of the westering sun. It is deeply fractured, with a ravine cleaving it all the way to the top. These meadows, tiny though they are, are tightly woven—like golf course putting greens. A ginclear rivulet draining the high ridge warbles a tune to itself as it meanders through the meadow: a much more appetizing water source than the salamander aquarium we passed. My altimeter reads 6800 feet. The country drops off abruptly to the east, affording a nice view in that direction. This will be our home for the next 20 hours.

We drop our loads and stretch out on the plush meadow grass while the sweat evaporates off our backs and the sun shoots orange rays at a low angle between the tree trunks. It is tempting to drift off to the sound of trickling water, but there is work to be done before sunset. Soon the mountain stove is put-putting along with a frenetic pulse, heating the water we will need for soup and the main dish—pasta with peas and onions. Two gallons of water scooped from the rivulet hang in a bag from the nearest lodge pole pine. Like a caterpillar cocoon, the Moss tent stands ready for our weary bodies.

Lying on the grass in the Fiberfill/Gore-Tex parka Claire stitched together with her old sewing machine some years ago, Blazer resembles a gourmet Thai wrap. As I watch his paws begin to twitch, and reflect on his spirited performance today, I agree with Claire that he is the best Brittany of the three we've owned over 30 years. When I bought him from Marilyn Maxwell, a well-known breeder in Montara, California, she assured me that his lineage contained excellent show and field performers. She was right on both counts. Unlike the rough double coat of his cousin Max, Blazer's fur is like fine silk: at 36 pounds he is the ideal size. The only thing missing from his genetic blueprint is a suitcase handle midway along his spine to make car travel more convenient. You can't have everything.



He was five months old already when I presented him to Claire one rainy night in 1988. Our initial apprehensions about skipping the puppy phase evaporated when we realized he was the opposite of Max's headstrong, boisterous, Alpha dog, live-fast and die-young persona. Our first outing after his arrival at our home in Mill Valley was an evening walk along the trace of the Northwestern Pacific Railway to familiarize him with his surroundings. The autumn storm had left cool dry air in its wake and a frisky breeze slapped overhead branches into wild gesticulations. More than once on the two-mile walk Blazer dived between my feet, whimpering in fright at some imagined terror. I knew then that our husbandry of this dog would be vastly different than our warden-like experience with Max. He turned out to be responsive and obedient, with a more affectionate approach to humans.

You couldn't ask for a better canine trail companion. His initiation to wilderness travel at an early age triggered some interesting reactions. On the second day of a cross-country traverse of the Crystal Range in Desolation Wilderness just west of Lake Tahoe, we settled into a camp at nine thousand feet near a jewel-like tarn upholstered with fine meadow grass. A copse of feathery hemlock trees encircled by willow brush was the centerpiece. As Claire and I staked out the tent and fluffed up our sleeping bags, we noticed the Brittany scuffling around in hemlock and willow branches at the edge of the meadow. We watched him circle and circle, as some dogs will do before they lie down (perhaps a vestige of their genetic linkage to wolves who typically scour out a nest in the snow with such antics). He chewed off protruding branches and circled some more until he had his bivouac just right. Then he lay down and tucked into a tight doughnut, looking for all the world like a big chipmunk asleep in his nest. When we moved him over to the tent, we saw what might have triggered all this wild behavior—a swatch of coyote undercoat snagged on a nearby hemlock branch.

As I watch Blazer snoozing, I think back to some family members of the species *Canis Familiaris* who weren't so compliant or easy to deal with. Take Zeke for example, a stunningly beautiful Siberian Husky I acquired as a puppy while I was working as a manager at a recreational development in the California Gold Country in 1968. A year later Bill, a college classmate, joined me, my younger brother Rob and Zeke on a four-day hike up the Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne River in Yosemite National Park. We knew we were breaking the rules by taking Zeke along because dogs were *verboten* then as they are today. But rules didn't apply to

impetuous youth. We fitted him with saddlebags my wife had sewn out of Navy surplus gas mask bags and took him along. Disaster struck 100 yards from our intended campsite on the main trail that runs parallel to the river. Zeke came scooting out of a darkening grove of lodge pole pine, skidded to a stop at our feet and began howling, whimpering, and pawing at his muzzle. Even in the dim light I could see he had a face full of porcupine quills. We dropped our packs and while Bill held him down I spent the better part of an hour plucking the quills from his face, his lips, the roof of his mouth, and his lower jaw. Several had broken off and, lacking tweezers or pliers, I had to extract them with my teeth. We set up camp, gave Zeke a couple of aspirins, and covered him with a parka. He slept through the night and woke up in the morning covered with an early frost, seeming no worse the wear.

I still break out in a cold sweat when I remember that Blazer himself nearly became the victim of a miscalculation in tilted terrain of the Emigrant Wilderness near Sonora Pass several years ago. Claire and I were pursuing an ambitious cross-country traverse of 10,000-foot Granite Dome when we encountered some tricky ground—a short wall flanking a gap through which our route would descend to remote and lovely Iceland Lake. Halfway up the wall, I climbed across a fissure in the granite that must have been almost a foot wide at the top, tapering down into darkness. Right behind me, Blazer lunged upward, spun out, and fell into the crack, wedged by his pack. Then I realized my mistake in not removing his wet and slippery leather Australian sheep dog boots before we began the climb. Had he not been wearing his pack, he probably would have dropped into the crack out of reach and become inextricably wedged. Knowing the intensity of Claire’s feelings for Blazer, I would now call Bend, Oregon home if I had not been able to extricate him.

Blazer’s cousin Max, the wild head middle Brittany, nearly trashed himself and gave us heart attacks during an unsuccessful attempt on Mount Shasta some years ago. Again boots were the culprit. Our climbing party had strapped on crampons, hoisted packs, and were getting ready for the ascent when we heard shusha, shusha, shusha, shusha, out across the icy ravine. It didn’t sound like anything we had ever heard in the mountains. Then we spotted Max, who had decided to start for the summit on his own. Wearing his rubber hunting boots, he had worked his way out to a steep section, started to slide, then maintained his position by frantically spinning his wheels. That was the shusha, shusha sound. I rushed out to save him before he ran out of gas and slid all the way back down to the trailhead several miles away.

Another close call involved Canis Latrans, the wily coyote. It was 1959 and Bill Parker, one of my Los Altos High School buds, joined brother Rob and I for an overnight hike to Black Mountain, which dominates the skyline west of what is now known as Silicon Valley. Back then if you had to call it anything, you’d call it Apricot Valley. Bill brought along his energetic nondescript mutt and we brought Jipper, a husky-miniature collie mix whose face looked like a raccoon’s. We settled into a comfortable camp under a huge live oak tree at the edge of a meadow that tilted towards the valley. The view from 2300 feet after the sun dropped into the Pacific Ocean was mesmerizing: an inland sea glowing with luminescent jewels stretching from San Jose to San Francisco, with the Hamilton Range forming a dark backdrop.

At three o’clock in the morning, the deepest, blackest part of the night, we awoke to both dogs growling and whining at something very large moving in the brush twenty yards away. My little brother was paralyzed with fear. “What *is* it out there?” he asked in near panic. “There’s

something out there. I'm scared. Can we go home now?" It is a miracle that he ever joined me on another wilderness outing. Our flashlights revealed a 270-degree ring of red eyes glowing back at us from the perimeter of our campsite. We were almost surrounded by whatever it was. More crackling and scuffling sounds came from the chamise. We held the trembling dogs by their collars until the sounds stopped a half-hour later. Then we drifted off into troubled sleep until the eastern sky began to glow a steel gray. After the sun burst over Mt. Hamilton, we felt a little more confident that we would survive the ordeal. Halfway through breakfast, both dogs alerted, then shot down the meadow barking like crazy. They stopped and sniffed at the edge of the brush, tails high and hackles bristling. Then we saw what night had misrepresented as a large monster: a pack of five young coyotes no more than six months old creeping cautiously out of the brush, tails wagging uncertainly. The dogs responded in kind, tentatively touching noses and circling to get a good sniff of their behinds. Meanwhile both Bill and I were preparing to carry back the shredded carcasses of our dogs after the coyotes finished with these domestic intruders. Surprisingly, nothing of the sort happened. Our dogs broke contact and the coyotes drifted away like tawny smoke. We never saw them again.

On these backcountry trips coyotes have always been a seldom-seen, almost phantom-like presence. While cross-country skiing in the Upper Truckee Valley one gorgeous spring day we watched a lone coyote traverse the snowy flanks of Red Lake Peak at almost ten thousand feet. What it hoped to find up there baffled us, unless it was the sheer exuberance of cruising the ridges in such stunningly beautiful weather. Their soprano keening never fails to send a thrill down my spine as I listen from within the flickering ring of campfire light either alone or with a companion. But wily coyote may be pushing his luck. Not satisfied with the natural menu of mice, rats, ground squirrels, gophers, rabbits, insects, reptiles of all types, amphibians, fruits and birds, they've developed a taste for lamb and calf steaks. Recently coyotes have begun to test the wild land/urban interface by making off with Fluffy's kibble and more frequently it seems, Fluffy herself, along with the family cat for dessert. In southern Marin County, we hear them at night on a ridge near our home where they've established a territory and appear to be raising families—5 to 7 pups born in the spring. At dusk one evening we saw the big male sashaying past our garden gate on Underhill Road swinging his bushy tale, bold as hell. So far the neighbors have tolerated the demise of a Bichon Frise, the near-death experience of Hanna, Blazer's little Welsh Springer Spaniel heartthrob, and the tasting of a squiggly yellow lab named Sophie while she was minding her own business tied up in her driveway.



At 7:30pm, my thermometer tells me it is sixty degrees—still uncomfortably warm. Jupiter floats incandescent in the eastern sky, bedecked with jewels. The one-eighth waxing moon casts a soft pearly light across our campsite, illuminating the trunk of a huge Western white pine growing out of a boulder complex on the far side of the meadow. The feel of this saucer-shaped green tucked into the side of the ridge is isolation of the benevolent variety—privacy without a feeling of vulnerability: quite the opposite, actually. A site closer to the Pacific

Crest Trail would generate anxieties about casual drop-ins—types who plod along on the main drag, heads down, then crash on the shoulder at the end of the day without any effort to conceal their camp.

The Brittany and I settle into the small tent, him in his Gore-Tex fiberfill parka and I in my summer sleeping bag, back to back against whatever bumps the night might produce. By now he smells like a 36-pound bran muffin that's gone bad, or a bag of wet Fritos Corn Chips. Although generally he's a pretty sound sleeper, inevitably he will dig his claws into my back or whimper his way through a particularly vivid dream; but I won't mind because the nine hours of snoozing slowly will erase the sleep deficit we incur at home. We will tuck scary thoughts about wilderness mishaps like the backpacker they found stone dead in his sleeping bag with his skull crunched like a ripe melon by a black bear, or an encounter with the enigmatic Sasquatch, into the penumbra of sleep. The velvet mallet descends on both our heads and the night passes seamlessly, uneventfully, punctuated only by the usual heart-thumpers: a pinecone grenade dropped by a Douglas squirrel, an anonymous rustling in the brush by the lake.

At 7:00am the thermometer reads forty-six degrees. I sweated out of my summer sleeping bag several times during the night, even though I had shifted most of the down to the other side in anticipation of the warmer temperatures. The silence here is profound, broken only by a small orange helicopter clattering overhead yesterday and today a gigantic Yellow Sikorsky cargo chopper with a fuselage that looks like a rectangular piece fell out of it: probably part of a logging operation. As the sun warms the meadow, flies buzz, a few mosquitoes hum, the grasshoppers ricochet around, making a clackity racket. Once in a while an alarmingly large bumblebee cruises by, generating a hum that sounds like human voices. My ears pricked up several times before I realized what it was.

Over a breakfast of tea, dried fruit, granola, and Neutro Lamb and Rice dog kibble, we scan the area with a new perspective afforded by the brightening eastern sky. The first order of business is an exploratory side trip to some lakes that look intriguing on the map. It takes us forty-five minutes to drop down the trail to Summit Lake and Summit Meadow Lake, both of which lie at the base of a seven hundred-foot gray cliff. At Summit Meadow lake, the skinny-dipping is about as good as you can expect this side of Cancun; you tiptoe across pieces of bark and grassy hummocks to avoid the black muck, then step into the lake, only to sink six inches into organic silt. The drowned skeletons of red firs are greasy with algae. This lake is only about four feet deep, a fact you realize after you flail out to the center, stop, and realize you can stand up on the squishy bottom. The lake is refreshing, not uncomfortably cold, laced with horizontal bands of warmer water. It is slowly becoming a meadow through the process of eutrophication.

At my urging, Blazer paddles out twenty yards but soon becomes alarmed at being so far from solid ground and



paddles back to shore, shaking himself vigorously after hauling himself up onto the grassy banks. We thought at first his aversion to water was a puppy thing, but he never grew out of it. Max was the swimmer. He saw water as a challenge to his athletic prowess, which was considerable. Claire and I delighted in watching him “power paddle” through any body of water we happened to encounter on an excursion. His stroke was so energetic that his shoulders literally rose up out of the water, creating a bow wave. Blazer has to be coaxed into water over his head unless he’s overheated. We lie in the fragrant meadow grass and heather on the shore, watching the sunlight slant down through red firs to ignite the lime green surface of the lake. The sun is warm and soon we are dry, the Brittany with Rastafarian curls forming along his flanks and ears.

It would be delightful to lie here in the grass and watch the shadows lengthen, but duty calls; our next camp is seven miles away. We climb back up the switchbacks then out through the thick timber to our base camp. After a light lunch we pack up, leaving our presence in the delicate meadow undetectable—even down to the tiniest piece of tinfoil and floss. As I anticipated from the trip in yesterday, the first three miles of the Pacific Crest Trail are rocky and hot. Epic views of distant ridges receding in shades of blue to the south, the deep gash cut by Wooley Creek on its westward plunge to the Salmon River, lure the eye to the horizon, compensating somewhat for our discomfort. We’re moving west along the south flank of an east-west ridge through intermittent old growth Shasta red fir and beautiful rust and beige meadows bedecked with flowers of every size and color. A light southerly breeze helps alleviate the natural heat we generate on the move, compounded by the ambient temperature of the air.



At the junction with the Sky High Lake Trail, Blazer’s thermostat goes off the chart. He throws himself into some low fir branches and pants like a steam engine, tongue hanging out like a crimson dishrag. It is hanging down so far, I wouldn’t be surprised if it fell out of his mouth onto the dirt. I give him a quarter bottle of water and pour the rest on his head. For some reason my feet feel uncomfortable today, especially the right big and little toes—as if a tiny gnome has hopped into my boot and is sanding away with an emery board. The pad of my left foot feels like Wolfgang Puck has pounded it with one of those toothed hardwood mallets he uses for tenderizing steaks.

Fully recovered by now, Blazer yanks me unmercifully down the steep trail for a mile to Frying Pan Lake. He’s pulling about seven to ten pounds on the downhill vector, making my ankles, knees, hips and feet feel as if I have that much more weight in my pack. Then there’s the breaking action necessary to keep him from pulling me off balance. Maybe that has something to do with the condition of my feet.

By the time we settle on a broad, rocky moraine between Lower Sky High Lake and Frying Pan Lake, it is 5:00pm and we’re both wasted. Upper Sky High Lake is a saucer-shaped tarn at the base of a steep ridge. The shoreline is covered with thick willow brush that obviates

any campsites. A raft of Mallards drifts along the far shore. Lower Sky High Lake is set in a bowl to the east of us, with no view. I like it better here on this lonely dry ridge where we can see Black Marble Mountain dominating the western horizon and Canyon Creek Valley dropping away to the north. Meadow grass, lupine, and a dry plant that has turned a rust color with the season cover the volcanic soil. This country has the feel of Oregon about it—the spiky noble firs evoking a sense of the north woods. Where the ridges and peaks break



through the mantle of forest or ground cover, you see the bare bones of dark basalt, granite, or marble. The marble formations are the most intriguing.

While mushroom soup simmers on the mountain stove, I watch alpenglow cast pastel hues on the flanks of 7500-foot Black Marble Mountain, the centerpiece of this unusual wilderness. The guidebook tells me that I am looking at a piece of the ocean floor—compressed sediments that rose up nearly 400 million years ago along with granitic plutons to form the Marbles, the Siskiyou and the Trinities to the south. A rising ocean surrounded the uplifted country, turning it into a huge island. After the waters receded, glaciers bulldozed, ground and polished the peaks and valleys to their present configurations.

The weather has remained stable, hostage to the autumn high-pressure bubble that develops over the northwest this time of year. However, I wouldn't mind an old-fashioned storm with menacing thunderheads bearing down on us, pregnant with rain, grumbling and growling, charged with electrons and hunting for a promontory to strike with the sky fire of Zeus. Some hail would be nice, timed of course to avoid mealtime.



The act of unplugging from the workday routine (up at five twenty in the morning, shower, shave, eat breakfast, drive to the bus, ride to San Francisco, walk three blocks to the office, check out the Dow and NASDAQ on the Charles Schwab stock exchange marquis, arrive at the office at 7:40am, leave at 5:30pm and do it all over again the next day) was an easy personal decision, a not-so-easy social one. Neighbors asked, “You’re going alone, just you and the dog?” Even my wife, an experienced mountaineer wondered, “The Marble Mountains; it’s such a drive: five hours to Mt. Shasta City, then another hour and a half to the trailhead the next day. Count me out.” Then she laid the ultimate caveat on my shoulders: “If something happens to Blazer, just keep going north on Interstate 5. You can build a good life in Oregon. Bend maybe. Or Washington—the San Juans. Just promise me you won’t let him out of your sight. Remember what happened to Max.” Max, our middle Brittany, broke free from voice control one

night near our home in 1988 and ended up flattened by a car along East Blithedale Avenue. Without much use for an inert, two-inch thick Brittany, except as a welcome mat, we buried him on the hill above our house. And that was the end of Blazer's blood cousin at the age of four: the wild head.

Although he didn't want to be direct, my business partner, quite an athlete himself, asked, "So do you take a cell phone with you in case of emergency?" Brother Rob, ten years my junior, has been trashed too many times before and wanted no part of another one of my "ass buster" high country trips. When I poked him verbally about tagging along for old times' sake, he said succinctly, "Can't. Work."

Entering a wilderness such as Marble Mountain on your own engenders a feeling of timelessness. Except for the expanding forehead and rusty joints, I could be twenty years old sitting on this block of basalt watching the cool breeze push ripples across the meadow grass. Except for the trails, a line shack or two, and the grazing Herefords, the mountains, forests and meadows probably look pretty much the way they did thousands of years ago. The constellations, near galactic neighbors and the Milky Way arching in a phosphorescent band overhead certainly haven't changed. Coming out here brings the order of the universe back into focus. It also is remarkable to consider that this complex matrix of plants, rocks, soil, animals and birds functions in exquisite equilibrium without a single microprocessor.

For many people, solo wilderness travel (by that I mean without another human being) not only sharpens the senses, it intensifies the transition through the civilization/wilderness interface part of your mind. Few people can move from, say, downtown San Francisco with all its conveniences and ordered structure to the backcountry of the John Muir Wilderness, for example, without a twinge or two of anxiety about marauding predators, violent weather, getting lost, or sustaining a debilitating injury. For me, dogs have pretty much taken care of the predator part of that equation. With Red or Max or Blazer curled up at my feet, the blackness at the far radius of the campfire light loses its menace. I know that my canine companion will process the sound of that snapping twig at two o'clock in the morning and pronounce it ordinary or threatening by remaining silent, barking, growling, or with body language. These dogs are like little foreign guides who live in cities, but retain the language and customs of their rural brethren: like a Pashtun from Kabul, Afghanistan would interact on your behalf with hill tribes of Paktia.

Once the mantle of preoccupations and anxieties woven from a complex world of computers, digital data, instantaneous satellite telecommunications, microwaves, gridlock traffic, a vertiginous stock market, demanding clients, and electronic smog drops away, a sense of primal silence and wildness seeps into you. John Muir had it right when he wrote: *Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.*

From all except my wife, I sensed an unstated question: "What do you do out there? No VCR, no FAX, no phone, no laptop, no TV, no pager, no instant messaging." A knee-jerk answer would be that getting unplugged from VCRs, FAXes, phones, laptops, TVs, pagers, instant messaging, voice mail, and personal digital assistants is reward enough in itself. Nor for a

few days will I miss the kamikaze bike messengers who delight in missing you by mere inches, playing crosswalk roulette with impatient city drivers, enduring eardrum-shredding emergency vehicles, avoiding persistent and malodorous panhandlers and graffiti sprayed on buildings by mindless cretins, or sidestepping vomit splatters on the pavement. No, the hyper connectivity, the hustle and the bustle will not be missed.

But getting unplugged is only part of the answer the uninitiated flatlanders seek. They want to know what it is that occupies one's time out here. Well, how about watching the night sky develop over the rim of the world like a negative in a tray of chemicals, scanning the dome for the first point of light from a magnitude one star, or a planet, then watching the constellations ignite one by one—Ursus Major, Ursus Minor, Cassiopeia, Leo, the summer triangle, the Pleiades, the polychromatic celestial host that affirm precision and constancy about the universe? How about holding a hot cup of tea in your hand at timberline in some far-flung wilderness while alpenglow fades from the highest spires making them resemble sword tips fresh from the blacksmith's forge? Then there's the Thoreau-like satisfaction of distilling life to its simplest elements consistent with safety and a reasonable level of comfort: carrying all your needs on your back and drawing from the natural surroundings only water and wood for an occasional fire.

Early morning light reveals the mischief of a night visitor; a chipmunk chewed my bootlaces into three pieces, each of which I then must painstakingly knot together before we hit the trail for home. A flock of perky little songbirds about the size of canaries twitters away in the red fir branches over our tent. Searching for a likely dead tree full of grubs, a flicker flashes a brown and white trajectory through the trees. Even at this early hour the day has a frisky feel about it: lighter and less humid than yesterday—more like fall. A light breeze from the north probes the branches of fir trees and corrugates the surface of Frying Pan Lake.



The isolation and privacy of this broad ridge are well worth the price of having to haul 16 pounds of drinking water 200 yards from Frying Pan Lake twice a day. Last night high-pitched laughter echoing up from a campsite at Lower Sky High Lake led me to speculate that a group of girls in their early teens probably were camped along the shoreline. Sure enough, this morning I hear distant chatter, then spot them a quarter mile away hiking with packs past Frying Pan Lake towards the Pacific Crest Trail: four young girls led by an adult female. They are oblivious to my presence. A German shepherd wearing saddlebags walks off lead fourth in line like a docile pack animal. I could no more trust Blazer off lead than I could a wild coyote. In ten minutes he would crest the ridge; in an hour he'd be in the next county. A day later I would be scanning the want ads in Bend, Oregon.

We finish breakfast and begin to pack for the journey home, slowed by a reluctance to leave this beautiful vantage point. Soon we are making our way north and a little east down the

broad back of the moraine through high grass on a compass azimuth that should intersect the Sky High Valley Trail in a third of a mile. More than once I hoist Blazer by the strap on his pack, like a piece of luggage, to help him negotiate the stiff grass, which is knee high to me but over his head. He struggles through it with an expression on his face that conveys grim determination mixed with a perverse glee at coming to grips with and defeating another obstacle thrown in his way.

Sooner than we expected, the ridge drops us onto the dusty trail and we follow it downhill into the cool timber. Right off the bat Blazer starts his Iditarod routine, making me do the Lambada over rocks and roots in the tread of the trail. It is time to put a halt to this foolishness. With full knowledge that rarely can you teach an old dog new tricks, I yank the leash back, forcing him behind me. At the same time I say, "Trace, Blaze. Trace!" For the first few hundred yards he tries to force his way past, first on my left, then on my right. Nothing doing. When my commands lose some effectiveness, I use a little switch on his nose. A few swats keep him back where I want him with the new command: about 18 inches behind the heel of my boot. After a mile we're doing pretty well as a team. On the flats and uphill stretches, I call out, "Hup!" and he trots ahead to the full length of the German-made retractable leash. A sharp "trace" sends him back to the rear. Thus we survive the descent to the trailhead at Lover's Camp.

Angling in from the right a third of a mile from the trailhead, we encounter the Red Rock Valley Trail again, the fork we took two days ago at the beginning of the trip. Visions of a steaming spa at the Tree House Motel in Mt. Shasta City, prawns sautéed in garlic with Basmati rice and a nice crisp salad of baby greens with a light vinaigrette dressing at Michael's Restaurant, a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale so cold that condensation slides in rivulets down the side of the bottle, begin to form in my mind's eye. Just as I quicken my pace, the taut leash jerks me to the right, almost throwing me to the ground. I glance over to see Blazer locked in a classic hunting point directed straight down the fork to the Red Rock Valley Trail. After twenty plus miles, the eleven-year-old dog wants to go around just one more time. Brittanys.

