

Our First Real Solo Pack Trip into The Bob

In September 2009 we went on our first “gypsy” pack trip into The Bob, five days in the Wilderness by ourselves. It was a thrilling and exhilarating experience. Everything went quite smoothly the first four days, and we were exuberant how well the trip had gone and how competently we had managed for ourselves. That was until the last day when we were reminded that solo pack trips aren’t without risks.

(If you know about pack trips and The Bob, you can skip the next section).



Our two panniers and the top pack

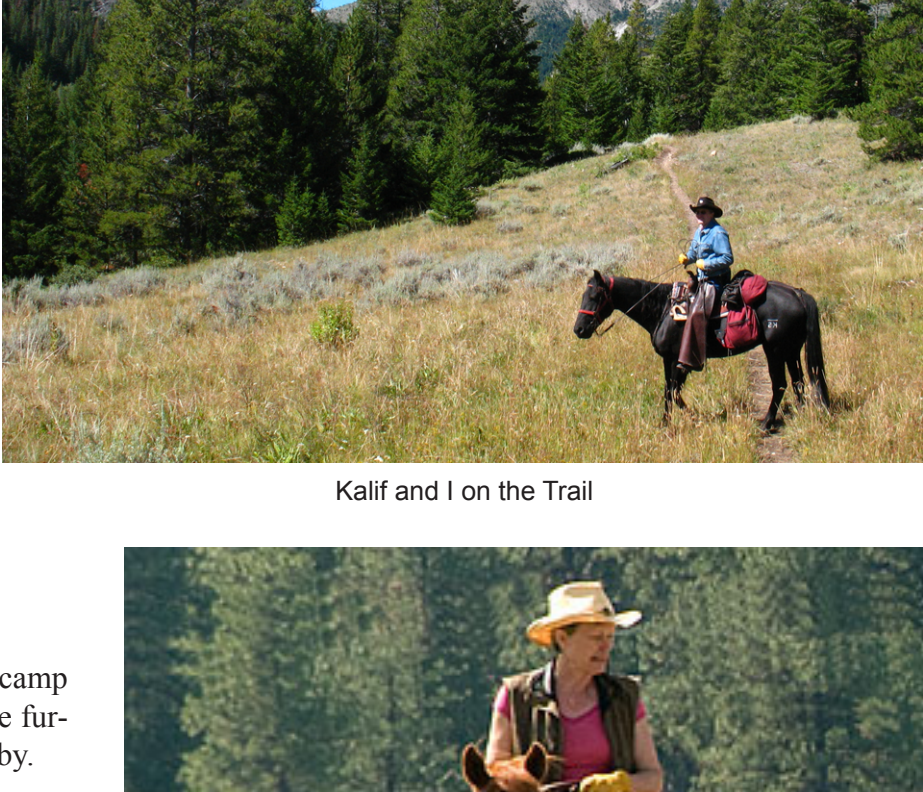
About Pack Trips and The Bob

“**The Bob**” is the Bob Marshall Wilderness, the largest contiguous wilderness area in the U.S. Together with the adjacent Scapegoat Wilderness and the surrounding National Forest it comprises about 3 million acres (roughly 12,000 square kilometers). There are no facilities and very few people in the Wilderness: a few Forest Service rangers and a handful of hikers and riders. No vehicles or motors are allowed, and there is no cell phone coverage. Once you’re in the Wilderness you are totally reliant on just yourselves and whatever you brought with you.

A **pack trip** consists of a riding horse for each person, and at least one pack animal for “stuff”: tent, food, pellets for the horses, sleeping bags, dog food, etc. Beate rode Destry as the lead horse, Lance was the packhorse, and I rode Kalif. Keela, our three-year old Rottweiler, came along as the trail dog. She had a great time, running along, ahead and behind the horses, and collapsing dead-tired in our tent at night. She ended up playing a vital role on the last day of our trip.



Lance ready to be packed



Kalif and I on the Trail

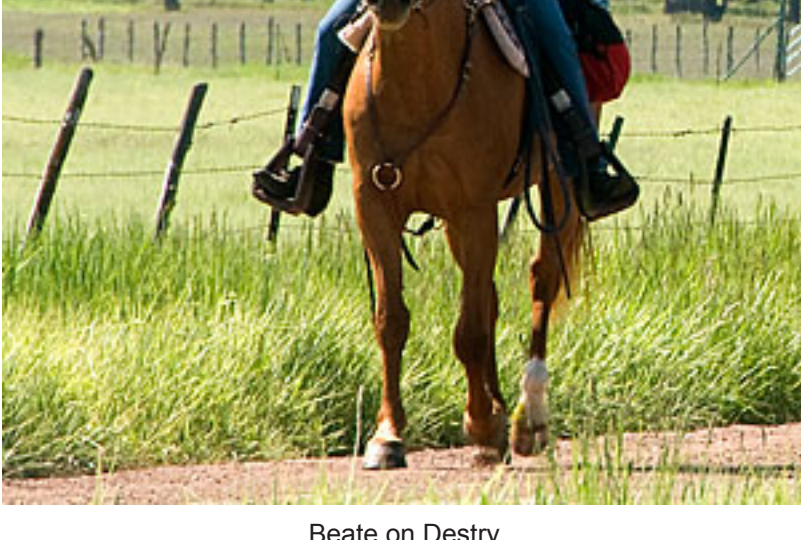
When you plan to **camp in the Wilderness** there are three basic requirements for a camp site: you need two sturdy live trees, wide enough apart to tie a highline (see picture further down), you need enough grass as feed for the horses, and you need water nearby.

A **highline** is a strong rope tied between two trees, about 7’ (2.5 meters) high, to which you tie the horses’ halters when they’re not grazing. The line has to be tight with no slack, and the knots have to be sure to hold, otherwise you can have a wreck with horses getting hurt or a run-away pack string. Being stuck without horses in the middle of the wilderness by yourself is not fun.

Our Trip

Our prior solo pack trips had been three-day trips and close to the trailhead, one or two hours from where people park their horse trailers, trucks and cars. If we couldn’t find a place to camp we could always turn around, and if something went wrong, like a horse ran off or somebody got hurt, we could walk out to get help if necessary.

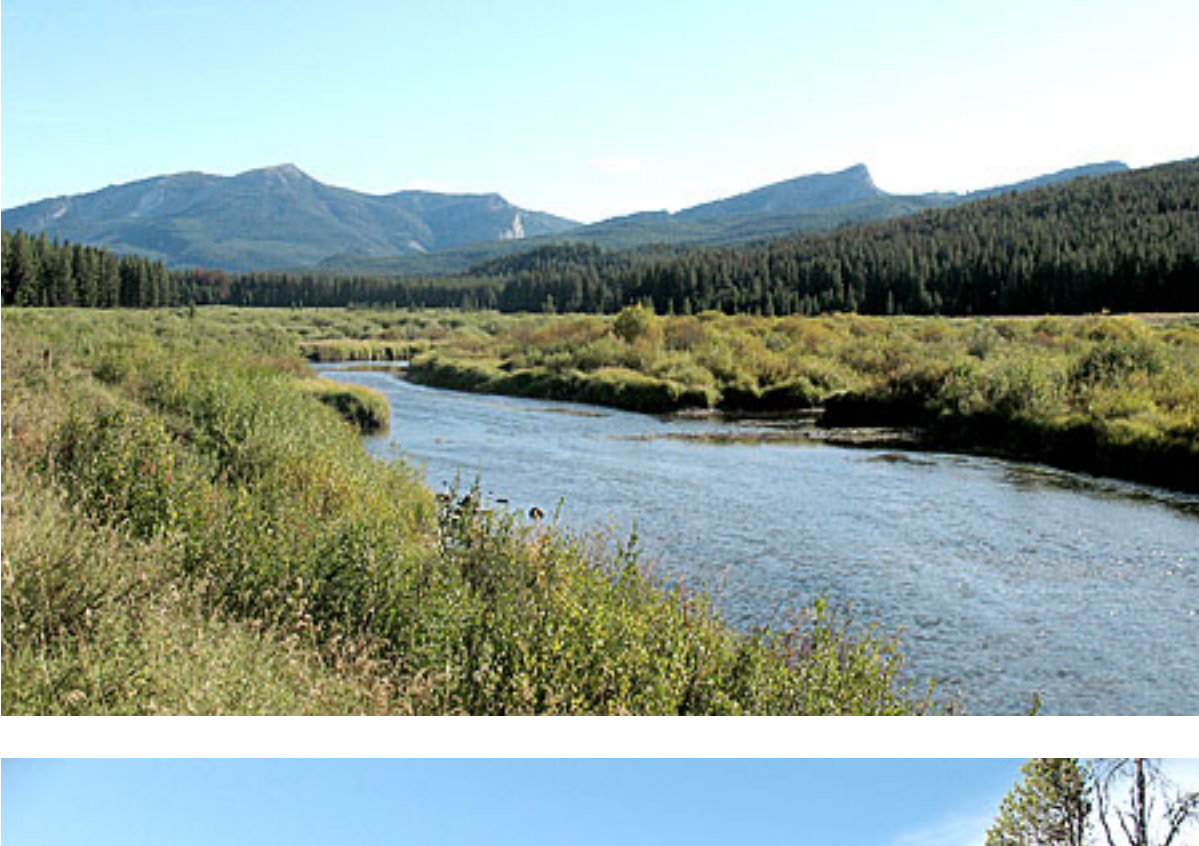
This time we were traveling much further into The Bob. At the evening of each day we would *have* to find a camp site; there could be no turning back. We had prepared ourselves and asked friends about potential camp sites around our intended destinations, and they also knew generally where we were headed. If we hadn’t come out after five days our friends would have alerted the Forest Service.



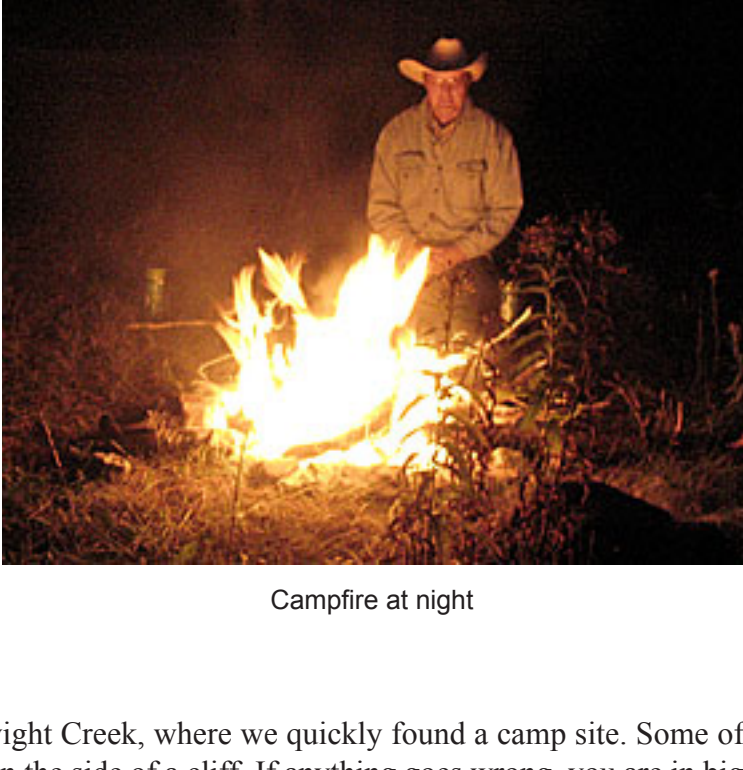
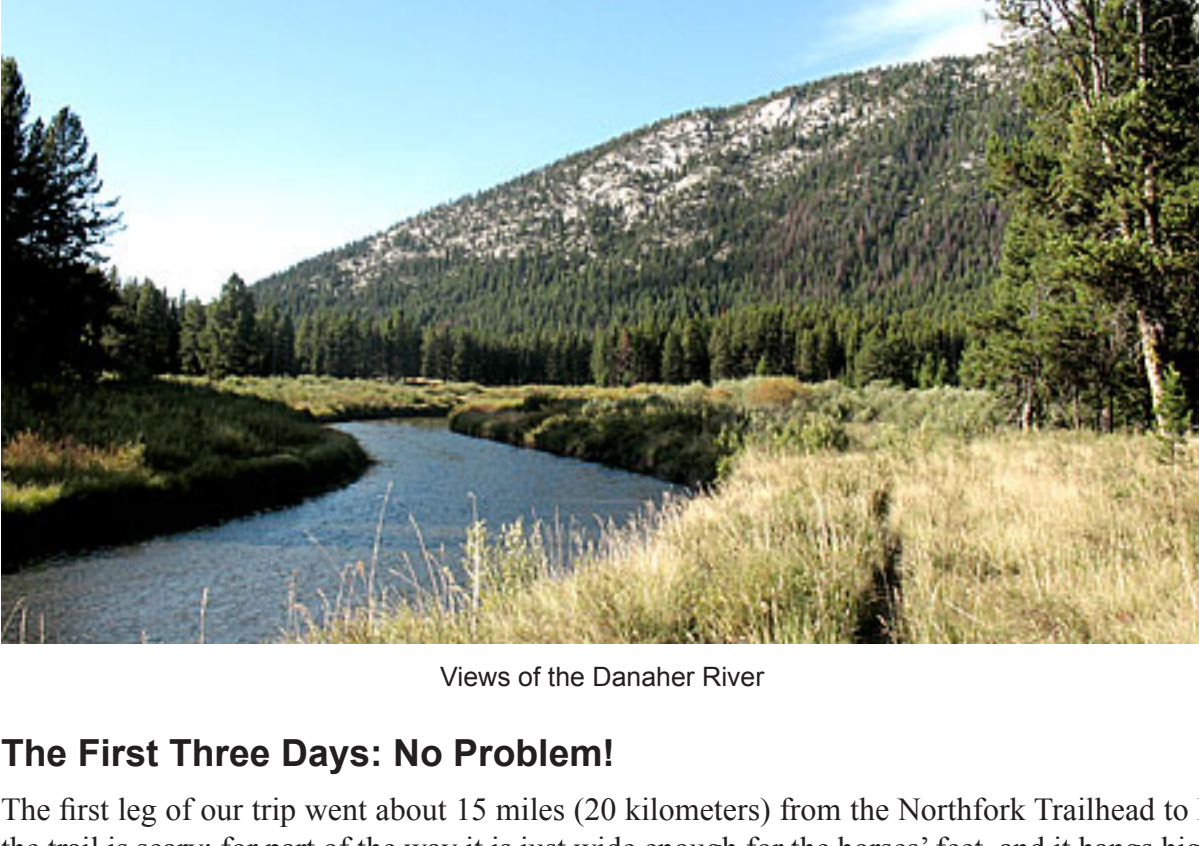
Beate on Destry

Going into The Bob for the first time by yourself is exhilarating and scary. Being totally reliant on yourselves gives you an intense sense of freedom and independence, but in the back of your mind you’re always aware that there are risks: risk of injuries, problems with horses, wild animals and most years (though not this year) lightening storms and forest fires, all adding an undercurrent of adrenaline. The Bob is populated with grizzlies, blackbears, wolves, mountain lions, coyotes, etc. Actual attacks are rare, but they do happen occasionally. We always carry bear spray, which is a pepper spray that severely stings eyes and nose. You hope the wind isn’t blowing *at* you if you have to use it.

Our ultimate destination was the Danaher Valley, my favorite part of The Bob, which I have ridden many times with [Bandit](#) when we were on pack trips with the Rich Ranch. It is a beautiful river valley; one of the few parts of The Bob that miraculously still has no fire damage. The trail is magical: for hours it winds through wetlands, prairie, forest, and grasslands. Eight years ago while riding that trail on Bandit the essential pieces of the [Bobbit](#) story came to me, told around the campfire that night for the first time.



Views of the Danaher River



Campfire at night

The First Three Days: No Problem!

The first leg of our trip went about 15 miles (20 kilometers) from the Northfork Trailhead to Dwight Creek, where we quickly found a camp site. Some of the trail is scary; for part of the way it is just wide enough for the horses’ feet, and it hangs high on the side of a cliff. If anything goes wrong, you are in big trouble. Our packs consisted of two canvass bags strapped on either side of Lance (“panniers”), which have to be evenly balanced, and a top pack on his back (see pictures further up). Our top pack kept sliding and we had to re-arrange it four times until it was steady. Fortunately, it held during the trickiest parts of the trail.

On our second day we continued into the Danaher Valley and camped for two days at a beautiful camp site at Bar Creek, where we had stayed years ago. There was plenty of feed, sturdy trees, and the creek was right at the camp site with a nice waterhole. We woke up every morning to great weather, watching the sun come up, surrounded by mountains which reflected the early sunlight; it was incredibly beautiful!

On our third day we stayed at Bar Creek and took a day ride to Camp Creek and back, about 18 miles. We traveled through breathtaking countryside and marveled at the beauty and solitude of The Bob. The next morning we packed our gear and headed back, planning to camp that night at the same spot at Dwight Creek as on the way out. We were happy and congratulated ourselves how smoothly everything had gone. All of which goes to prove that, as we say in the Old Country, that “you shouldn’t praise the day before the evening is over.”

That Fateful Last Night (1): Trouble at the Highline



Example of a calm highline

When we got to Dwight Creek another group was camped near “our” spot, a commercial outfit called “Paws Up;” they were building an enormous hunting camp, and their horses and mules were grazing freely. We were afraid of our horses getting mixed up with their herd and perhaps taking off with them, so we started to look for another camp site and finally found one. It was obvious that it had been a much-used camp years ago, maybe even somebody’s hunting camp, but now many of the trees had died, and we had a hard time finding two live trees for the highline. Strangely, both Beate and I had a gloomy feeling, an ominous foreboding. We tied Lance and Kalif to the highline and let Destry graze.

In his usual fashion Destry ran around, kicking exuberantly, ran off for a while, and then came back a little later followed by two mules he had apparently befriended! Destry is very social. Keela and Beate chased the mules off, and we realized that the other camp’s stock was grazing close to where we had settled. I knew this would be a restless night.

Then we went on a 20 minute walk to see if we could find another camp site, but we couldn’t. When we returned everything looked good, and we started unpacking our gear. Suddenly there was a commotion on the highline. Lance had finished eating and wanted to get next to his buddy, Destry, on the highline. He had tried to push Kalif aside and somehow had got caught in Kalif’s halter rope. Both Kalif and Lance were on the ground, the highline was still tied to the trees, but pulled down to the ground and wound tightly around Lance’s hind legs, strangling his legs. Lance was thrashing in panic, and Kalif was biting him to get him away from him, but neither could move. It was a frightening scene – every horse owner’s blackest nightmare! I raced over with my trusty Leatherman, the cowboy’s essential tool, and cut the highline. The ropes went slack and Kalif got up, but Lance was still lying on the ground. There were cuts on his legs and blood.

My heart sank: Lance might have broken his legs, in which case he couldn’t walk. This was a horse we loved, he had been our faithful companion, especially Beate’s, for many years; he was well-trained and part of our herd. I would have to shoot him; you can’t let him lie there to die slowly and be eaten alive by predators. Then once you have a dead horse on the ground, you have to leave the camp site and find another camp, because it wouldn’t be long before the bears and wolves arrived, attracted by the smell. It was getting late, just before dark. A wave of panic went through me. Suddenly Lance got up, and I heaved a sight of relief. But he stood on only three legs, pulling one up. “Oh, no,” I thought, “the leg is broken.” Then Lance put weight on that leg too and stood on four legs! I was relieved beyond description. We walked him around, and he seemed OK. We didn’t know yet whether he could carry a load, but at worst we could leave our gear behind and walk him out. Fortunately this was our last camp. It turned out that the cuts were not that deep and Beate doctored them. We were relieved but completely frazzled. This is how close you can come to total disaster in a matter of seconds! How incredibly lucky that we didn’t take that walk 30 minutes later.

That Fateful Last Night (2): Kalif Runs Off

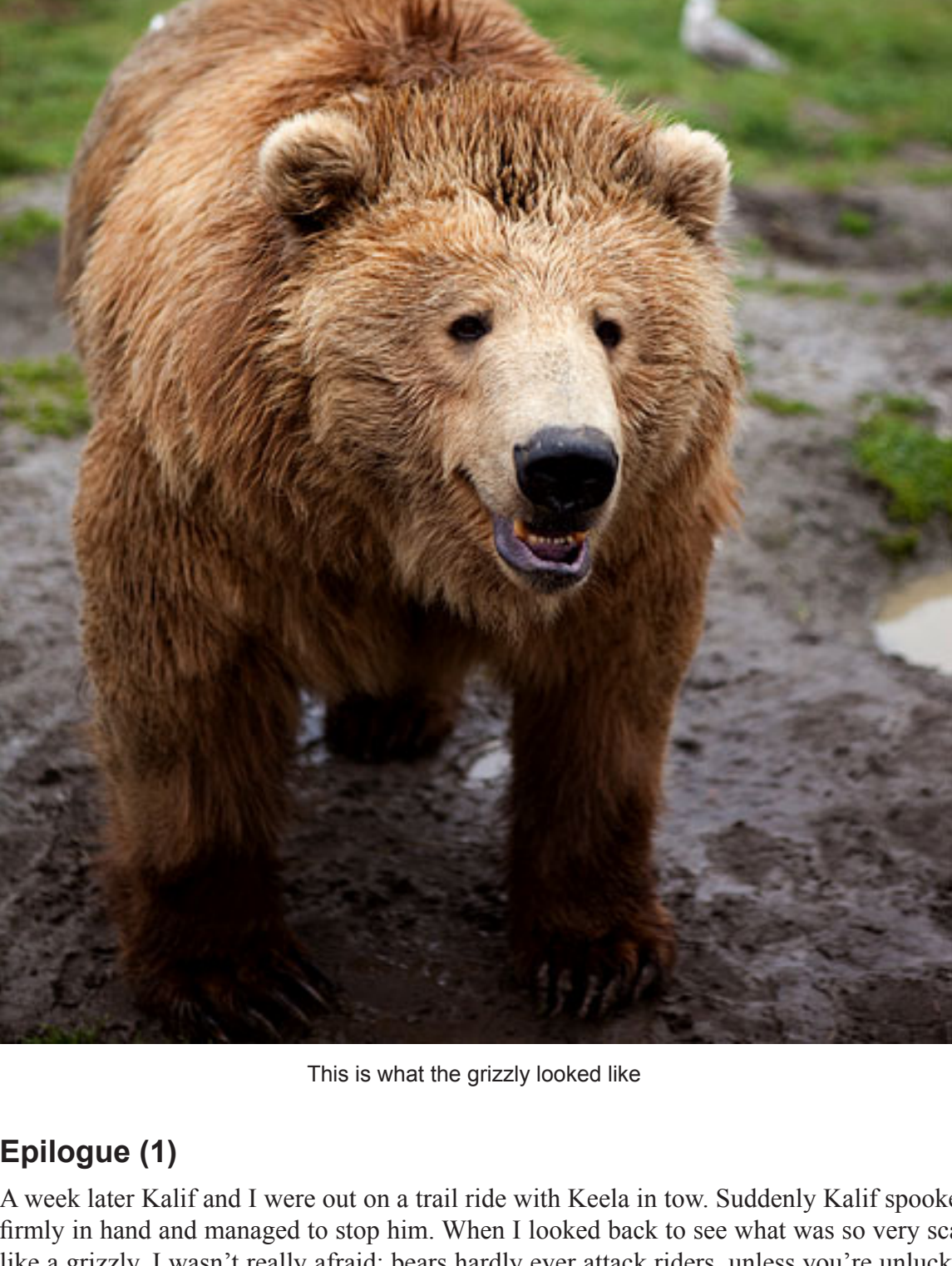
We finished putting up our camp in the dark and let Kalif out to eat, and as always, Kalif grazed around near the campsite when suddenly something spooked him, and he ran off. I wasn’t concerned until I realized that I couldn’t hear his bell anymore. We always put a bell on the horse that is grazing, so we can find him if he ventures too far. Kalif had never been out of earshot before, and given everything that had happened and the fact that there was other stock around, I got worried. Beate tried to calm me down, saying that he would likely return soon. She might have been right, but I was too nervous; I didn’t want to lose the horse I loved so much. So with Keela at our side, we started to walk in the direction he had run. Suddenly I heard a bell; I was about to relax when I realized that *it wasn’t Kalif’s bell!* Now I was really nervous; had he got mixed up with the other herd? We kept walking and suddenly Kalif’s bell rang out, what a sweet sound! We walked towards the sound, and there he was, grazing peacefully. We chased him back in the direction of our camp and thought that the adventure was over.

Then we realized that Keela had disappeared! It was pitch dark, we only had flashlights and there was no sight of her; anything could have happened to her. We turned around, frantically calling, her and after a couple of minutes that seemed like an eternity she suddenly ran up to us. Another sign of relief! Now we were ready to go back to our camp, but *where was it?* We had been moving around so much that we had lost orientation, and we had left camp in a hurry, no bear spray, no gun, nothing. The decision in which direction to walk now was critical: if we walked *away* from the camp we could easily get lost in the Wilderness; we were defenseless, and it was getting cold. I had a vague idea where our camp might be and was willing to gamble on it; Beate said to Keela: “Go home!” and Keela ran ahead of us in the direction where I thought the camp was. Two scary minutes later we saw our campfire! We had lived through quite a half hour: lost a horse, found the horse, lost the dog, found the dog, lost the camp and found the camp! We were drained!

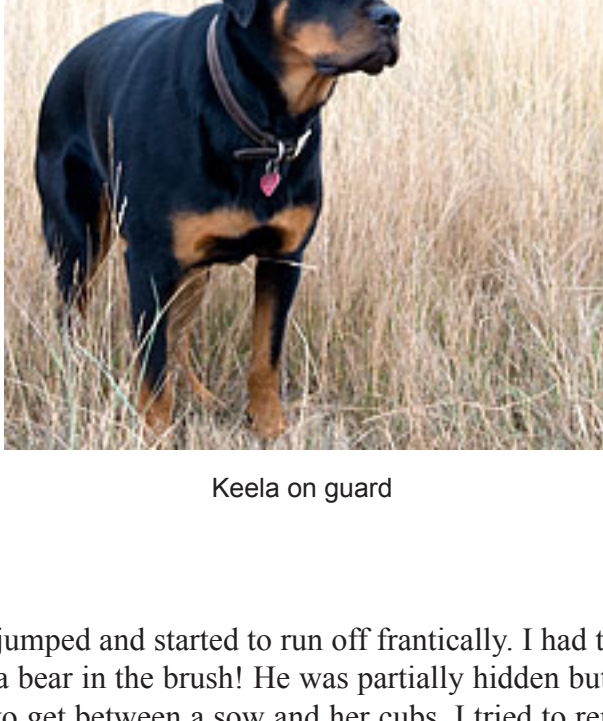
We put up a separate highline for Kalif, no more free grazing, crawled into our sleeping bags and went to sleep. I woke every two hours worried about the horses, went out and checked the highlines. Everything was calm and quiet.

The Final Day: Keela Saves It

We got up the next morning, had breakfast and talked about what a scary day yesterday had been, and how grateful we were that none of the things that *could* have happened, actually did.



This is what the grizzly looked like



Keela on guard

Epilogue (1)

A week later Kalif and I were out on a trail ride with Keela in tow. Suddenly Kalif spooked wildly, jumped and started to run off frantically. I had the reins firmly in hand and managed to stop him. When I looked back to see what was so very scary, I saw a bear in the brush! He was partially hidden but looked like a grizzly. I wasn’t really afraid: bears hardly ever attack riders, unless you’re unlucky enough to eye contact. Suddenly Keela noticed the bear and started to bark furiously. I thought: “Now we’re in big trouble.” — There is a joke that’s kind of standard in these parts. It goes like this:

“You’re being chased by a bear and climb up a tree to get away from him. How can you tell whether it’s a grizzly or a blackbear that’s chasing you?” Answer: “If it’s a blackbear, he’ll climb up after you. If it’s a grizzly, he’ll rip out the tree and shake you down.” (i.e. grizzlies don’t climb)

Fortunately, this turned out to be a blackbear: he scrambled up a tree to get away from this ferocious, barking monster! I had a hard time getting Keela to abandon her prey and continue on our ride. At this point she had come to think of herself as quite the bear wrangler! Kalif was full of adrenaline and took off like a bat out of hell when I gave him the reins. It was fun to see how fast that horse can actually run.



Our Meadow at sunrise, early fall with snow on the mountains – nowhere for grizzlies to hide

Epilogue (2)

Yesterday a friend told us the following story:

There was a near encounter at Double Arrow, a local development of several hundred acres with lot sizes from 2-5 acres and plenty of trees and brush. A woman and her dog, an Australian Ridgeback, ran into a grizzly. The grizzly charged, and the dog who was defending his mistress, got mauled. He survived after getting sown up, 125 stitches. We’re not sure what caused the attack: perhaps the grizzly attacked when he felt challenged by the dog, perhaps the grizzly attacked first. When I heard the story and thought back about our last day in The Bob, I got scared for Keela all over again. If there had not been a creek between her and the bear, she might not be alive today.

Just so you know, things are bit safer where we are. It’s all grassland and you can see far away. Grizzlies can’t hide, and they don’t live on pastures. Everybody around here is very careful about not leaving garbage out; garbage is the main reason why bears become attracted to human habitations. But there are plenty of bears living right around us in the woods: blackbears and grizzlies.