

Kennally Creek Campground – Needles Trail Project Saddle up and Ride



I have to admit, I was a little disgruntled when I heard the Cabin Creek project had been moved to Needles Trail above Kennally Creek Campground. I knew how to get to Cabin Creek. I drove up a week earlier to scope it out. My new smart phone's GPS, "Andy" took me right to the campground without missing a beat or expecting me to drive down game trails. The area seemed ok to me. There was ample room to park for several big rigs and stock water was close enough to make due. I took note of the amenities, cut a load of wood on the way out and followed Andy's directions for the quickest way home.



Unbeknownst to me, Rob was scoping out the area at the same time. He wasn't happy with the old logging road trail that wound through a burn or the less than ideal water situation. He was right, it wasn't the prettiest place on the mountain and if you're going to spend the weekend working your butt off it might as well be on trails with at least minor aesthetic appeal. I grumbled and frowned when I read the email from Rob that he had moved the project. For the first time since joining the chapter I had a heads up on where I was going and how to get there and Rob goes and jerks the rug out. Later I was glad he did.

I had settled on breaking in my new Stihl cutting firewood over the weekend and skipping the project when Linda E. phoned. In less than 3 minutes she talked me into bagging the firewood cutting idea and joining them at Kennally Creek. It could have been Linda's beautiful description of the area or the "you are too going and we are not taking no for an answer" tone in her voice. Whichever, I was hauling Jack down 95 and listening to Andy's confident instructions on when to expect a left turn onto Paddy Flat Rd.

For me the most harrowing part of these projects begins when the pavement ends and the steep, curvy, narrow, wash board of a pot-hole infestation begins. Buckle up baby – it's going to be a bumpy ride. Paddy Flat Rd. to Kennally Creek was a welcome exception. The road is smooth, plenty wide for vehicles to pass and not nearly as steep as most. The anticipation was killing me. The road had to turn ugly. They

always do. It did not. Clear to the end of Paddy flat rd. and straight into Kennally Creek campground...not one white knuckle moment.

Linda hadn't lied. It is a beautiful area. Kennally creek runs along the edge of a large campground with numerous camping spots complete with personal fire pits and robust picnic tables. A centrally located vault toilet graces the center of camp along with a cast iron hand pump perfect for drawing dish water and developing muscular biceps.

Stock is not allowed in camp of course, but that was not a problem. A nice horse camp sits just outside of the official campgrounds with hitching posts and plenty of shaded areas for high-lines. Rob parked on one end of the parking lot and I on the other leaving plenty of room for the folks who had signed up. We explored the area and waited for the others. By early evening the rest of our crew pulled into camp.

You can't keep a backcountry horseman down. Enter Charles Chick – the personification of that very sentence. Chick sort of slid out the door of his Ford pickup and limped across the lot into camp. Blood soaked denim the size of a grapefruit stained the outside of his left knee.



“What happened?”

“I got kicked.”

“What did the doctor say?”

“I didn't go to the doctor.”

“You didn't go to the doctor? Are you crazy?”

“I don't want to go to the doctor. I want to ride.”

“But you're still bleeding! You probably need stitches!”

“I don't need no stinking stitches. I got staples! Wanna see 'em?!”

“OMG – did you put them in yourself? You put them in yourself didn't you?”

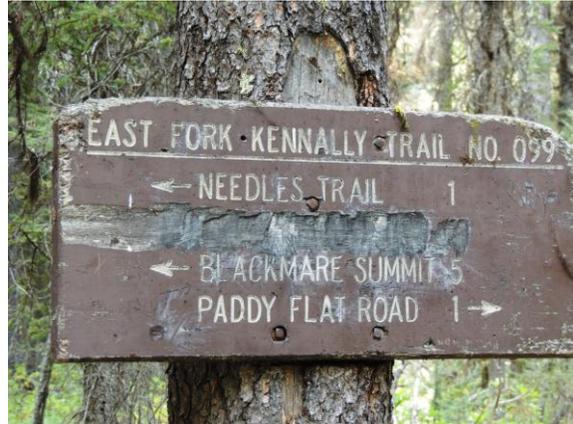
“No, Lorraine wouldn't let me. Our neighbor lady is a PA. She stapled it up for me. Now I can ride!”

“Well, Okay then Chick – but if you are going to ride with us – would you please stop bleeding. You're going to attract bears.”

We all pretended like he wouldn't get any sympathy from us that weekend and yet somehow – Chick's coffee cup never seemed to need refilling and he always had the largest slice of gluten free dessert. It was like...magic.

Daylight Saturday morning the troops begin to stir. “6:15 AM! You told me we had to set our alarms for 6:15 AM!” Linda was not happy with Rob. He told her we had to set our alarms for 6:15AM and be in the saddle to ride by 8:00 AM. It was closer to 10:00 AM before we hit the trail. Linda had a look in her eye every time she glanced at Rob that pretty much said she was going to get even with him before the weekend was over.

We split into two groups for the day. Half of us would work on Needles trail with the saws while the other half went on a day ride and scoped out Blackmare Summit. Rob, Devon, Linda and I rode Needles. LouAnn, Gary, Shelley, Chick and Lorraine headed for Blackmare. At least Chick had the sense to not try and climb on and off a horse all day with that leg oozing. As for bears – they were on their own.



We ran out of time long before we ran out of trail to clear. It was the most trees we cut all season thus far and we barely made it 2/3 of the way up Needles. A couple of the cuts were challenging but we felt good knowing we had left a large section of trail accessible and safe for hikers, bikers and equestrians alike.

The others beat us back to camp by two hours. LouAnn took pity on us and had a hot shower set up and waiting for anyone who wanted to rinse the sawdust out of their underwear. Count me in! I can't speak for the others, but I had sawdust where sawdust ought not to be.

Linda was not the only one who refused to set their alarm for 6:15AM Sunday. It was closer to 7:00 AM when the crew made their way around the community kitchen (aka Rob's trailer). If anyone had the dying urge to cut more logs, they didn't speak up. Besides, Linda and I had our hearts set on riding the nine miles to Kennally Lake. The Forest Service proclaimed the trail to Kennally was open to the top. We had earned a nice, leisurely day ride into a pristine mountain lake.

Five of us were saddled and on the trail by 10:30 AM. Shelley and Gary planned to explore on their own and Chick and Lorraine would remain in camp. Chick's knee had stopped bleeding for the most part, but remained stiff and swollen. Rob, Devon, Linda, Lou Ann and I set out for Kennally Lake.

With bridges and beautiful creek crossing, the first 8 miles of trail to Kennally Lake could not have been nicer. There were no death defying cliffs to negotiate – no hoof wrenching rocky hills to climb and no deadfall to weave around. The most difficult thing we negotiated was a water logged pole bridge over a bog that the horses took in stride. Aside from a few grouse making an appearance, the most exciting thing we encountered was a hiker and his dog. The horses suddenly forgot they all lived with dogs and decided this one was going to eat them. Even that little episode passed quickly and we were forward bound in no time.



The first eight miles was an excellent trail for training. The mare Linda rode was not comfortable with water and would not drink out of anything but a bucket. By day's end – Penny was crossing streams and sucking down water out of every creek we crossed.

And that is how the first eight miles went; the ninth mile, not so much. Eight miles of carefree innocence was about to end. The trail began to climb – every hundred feet steeper and rockier than the last. The horses dug in and crawled up the trail – occasionally loosening large rocks that rolled under the hooves of the climbers below. Any time a mule drops to their knees you know it's rough. Lilly, Devon's sweat, surefooted mule had enough. Devon bailed off and led her. Rob and I also dismounted. I don't know how my horse did it. I couldn't walk up it and keep pace in front of him. I climbed back on and promised an extra cookie to every animal that got us to the top alive.

Rob and LouAnn lost confidence that a lake existed. Rob was more reserved than normal and Lou Ann commenced to non-stop belly aching.

Lou Ann: "Are we there yet?"

Linda: "It's just around the next corner, Lou Ann."

Lou Ann: "Is it just around the next corner, Rob?"

Rob: "I don't know."

Lou Ann: "You don't know? Haven't you been here before?"

Rob: "No."

Lou Ann: "There's no freaking lake up here."

Lou Ann: "This is just stupid. I want to turn back."

Laurie: "You guys can turn back if you want to – I'm getting to the damn lake."

Linda: "Me too."

Devon: "This Lake better be worth it."

Lou Ann: "No lake is worth this. I want to go back."

Devon: "Do you think it's spectacular?"

Laurie: "I think it's probably dried up."

Laurie: "...but I'm going to see it anyway."

Rob: "If this trail gets any worse we are turning back."

Laurie looks at Linda – Linda looks at Laurie:

Laurie: "I'm not going back, are you going back?"

Linda: "I'm not going back."

Where the hell is the lake? We had finally leveled out on top. The trail ended and no lake in sight. Somebody pointed to a sign nailed to a tree:



No trail. No Lake. Just a wooden sign nailed to a tree. How's that for spectacular, Devon?

Laurie: "I told you it was dried up."

Rob: "This is as far as we go. It's already 2:30 PM"

Lou Ann: “My thighs are quivering and it has nothing to do with an orgasmic experience.”

Everyone dismounted except Linda and me.

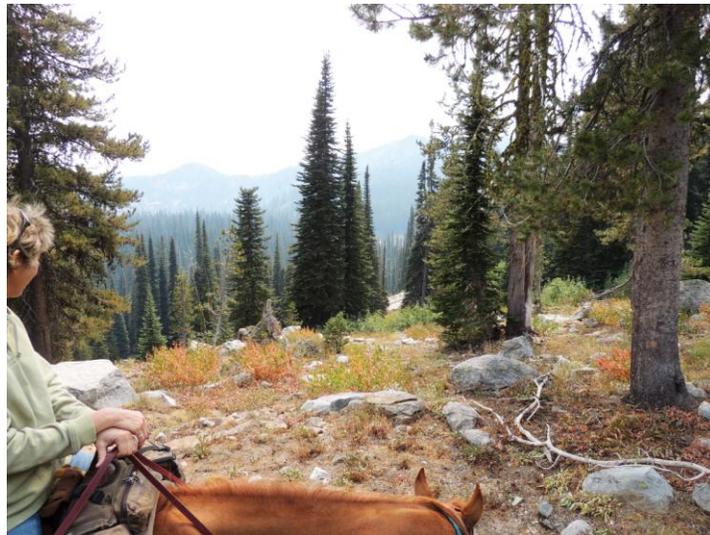
“You guys enjoy lunch – we are going to ride around until we find the lake.”

Linda and I took off in search of the lake while the others broke for lunch. It wasn't much of a trail – but it was a trail. Ten minutes of weaving around, over and under logs, we came to a ridge overlooking the timbered draw.

“There it is! There's the lake! I think that's the lake...do you think that's it?”

Way down amongst the trees we could barely make out a small body of water.

“Kind of small...looks more like a pond.”



About that time we heard one of the guys let out a hoot. They had found the lake while Linda and I, in our stubbornness and determination – wandered around the forest on a wild goose chase.

“Let's not tell them we couldn't find it. I mean *technically* we found it; we just didn't ride *up* to it. We rode around and above it. That counts, right?”

“Hi guys, pretty lake huh? Yes-sir-eee - real nice view of it from up there. You ought to check it out sometime. You know – on our next trip up here.”

To their credit – not one of them threw a solid object at our heads.

Linda and I hobbled our horses and headed off on foot to check out the lake. The others were kind enough to point us in the right direction without one single, “We told you so.”

I can't speak for anybody else – but it was worth it. I may have seen prettier high mountain lakes, but not many. Grassy meadow stretched from the timberline to the lake shore where fish jumped here and there in search of food. The boulders protruding from the water's edge beckoned a person to wade out to them and rest upon their granite surface. I wish we had more time. I'm coming back.



What goes up must come down. It's the law of physics. None of us were looking forward to the mile long stretch of hell back down that mountain. Ask any horseman and most will tell you they would rather go up than down any day. The safest thing was to put the slowest walker in the lead. Jack picked his way carefully down the mountain as the others followed. I'd look back periodically to make sure everyone was still upright and following. Rob waved, "Good pace...keep it up." Lou Ann's saddle had slipped too far forward and over Brandy's left shoulder. There was no safe place to adjust. I took Brandy's lead and ponied her to a safe spot while Lou walked. I stopped Brandy on the first semi-level spot available. Lou Ann readjusted and climbed back into the saddle for the rest of the decent.

Did somebody say, "That wasn't so bad?" They ought not to have said that. There is an unspoken law of circumstance and nature. Never mock Mother Nature. Ever. The first droplets of rain that bounced off my saddle horn seemed innocuous enough. The wind picked up followed by thunder, lightning and hail. Not to be outdone, rain soon took the place of its frozen cousin. Stuck in a thunderstorm on horseback is not something a person looks forward to. There was nothing we could do about it but hunker down and ride it out.

Rob had enough of poking down the trail behind Jack. We were off the mountain and there was no excuse not to haul ass back to the trailers and out of the storm. There aren't many horses that can out-walk Payette. Rob cut in front of me and Jack and the race was on.

Five soaked, tired riders rode into camp at 6:30 PM. The campground was deserted except for our rigs. I looked around at my drenched companions – a smile on every face. We tease each other a lot. We can get away with it because we like each other. Somebody reading this who doesn't know us might get a different impression. They would be wrong.



We tease Lou Ann about her belly aching. Those who don't know her might mistake her demeanor for weakness. Far from it. Part of Lou's charm lies in her unintentional humor. She has a knack for poking fun of herself in an unassuming manner. Most of the belly aching and complaining is part of that humor. Whether she will admit to it or not, Lou Ann is a closet Rambo.

Rob was born to take responsibility for everyone and everything around him. His top priority is the safety of those he takes on these projects. If he comes off as stoic in my stories – it's only because I know the truth. He cares for each of us. We take it for granted when we go into the backcountry with Rob that he will get us out alive and recoverable.



From what I know of Devon, he is a hard worker – he's dependable and he's a thinker. If he is not the most vocal of the group it's because he's there in the background waiting and watching. When something goes wrong, he's the first to jump in and remedy the situation without drama. The kind of person you trust to watch your back.

Linda and I have decided we must be related. We seem to share the same sense of daring adventure. The similarities may end there. Linda is efficient and on top of things. She's the one you turn to when you can't find your shoes. Me...I'm the one who can't find my shoes.



I hope I don't come off as reckless. I know my limits and I know the limits of my horse. I would never intentionally push either to the point of no return, but if we don't challenge ourselves and push beyond our comfort zone, what kind of life are we living? Life is to be experience! We are given a limited amount of time on this earth to experience all that we can – why further hinder that time by self imposed limits of our own making.

Don't let experiences pass you by...saddle up and ride.



The End