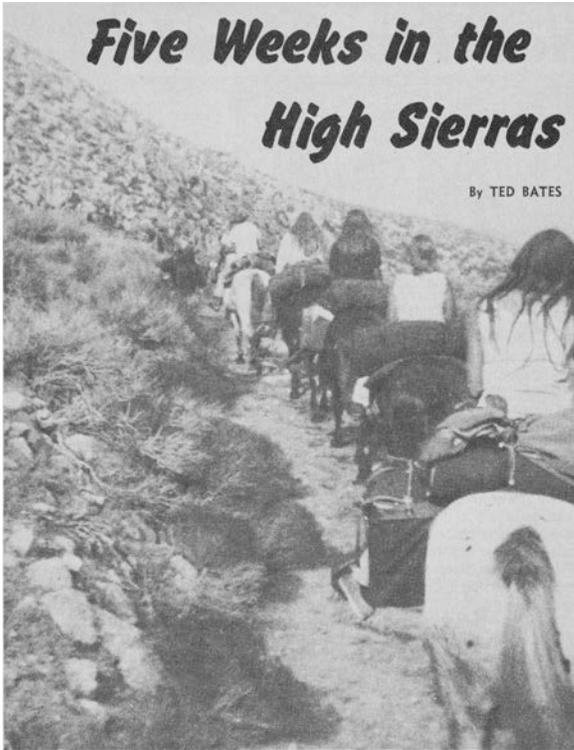


# Five Weeks in the High Sierras

By Ted Bates

It was the first day after summer school, and I found myself heading with my horse Gambler for a five-week working vacation in the High Sierras. I was sharing the back of a truck with ten other kids and eight horses.



A mountain vacation is coming to an end as the group nears the end of the ride back to the pack station.

John Slaughter was bringing a group of riders up from his stable in Los Angeles for a week-long pack trip. He had recently leased the Sam Lewis Pack Station (now called the Sierra Lady) near Olancho, California.

We came up in his big truck. In the back of the truck there were three mattresses arranged like bunkbeds on which ten people could ride comfortably. Behind this were eight horses lined up side by side, separated from the mattresses by a strong divider.

In this odd method of transportation we traveled out of Los Angeles and into the Mojave Desert. About 175 miles north a dirt road turned off of Highway 395 and led to the pack station nestled at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. From here we would pack into the high cabins in the Sequoia National Forest.

We finally pulled in about 1 in the morning. I decided to

walk around and get the feel of the place. I wandered over to a parked truck and somehow managed to get my foot stuck in a bucket. I clanked it around and knocked it against the truck

until a weary face popped out of a concealed sleeping bag and groaned, "Who's making all that racket?" This was when I met Tad, who was running the outfit.

So I left the scene fast and crawled in my sleeping bag where I would be comparatively safe from causing any more commotion. Only a few hours later John woke everyone. I ate a quick breakfast and then went out to the corral with John and his workers to saddle the horses.

The packs John used were different from the standard type and easier to handle. Actually they look like over-grown saddlebags. Each side of the pack is made so that a large wastebasket can be used as an insert. The inserts give the pack shape so that it doesn't become bulky and distorted. The weight is distributed evenly on each side, and then the pack is set behind the cantle of the saddle. A strap is connected at the bottom of both sides and then run under the horse's belly and tied snugly to the cinch ring on opposite sides. This keeps the pack forward and off the horse's kidneys. Also it won't bounce around.

A sleeping bag is set on top and tied down tight to the pack with the saddle's long latigo straps. The pack normally contains the rider's own gear, which is usually light enough that the rider can ride the same horse. One horse is loaded with heavier packs that include grain and food. Rifles are also loaded on him, and he is led up the trail.

John also does his own shoeing. He works with his packers for about three months and then turns most of the shoeing over to them.

When we were packed and finally ready to head up to the high cabins, John decided he had something to tell us. We were just thrilled to learn that a bear had ransacked the cabins the week before. Later, when we got there, we found chili bean cans where the bear had squeezed the sides until the tops popped off.

At the start we packed up a 15-mile trail to the high cabins. The first ten miles were an upward trek to the summit, which could be seen from the pack station. The summit was the highest point between the pack station and the camp. The trail started up along a riverbed in a canyon basin. The clean desert scenery rapidly changed as the desert basin dropped further below. There were three places where people could fill their canteens with cool spring water and stretch a little before the next part of the ride.

When we finally cleared the summit those who were camera bugs could not miss snapping a shot of the desert scenery below. The White Mountains could be seen in the distance, changing in hues of yellow, red, and gray as the day passed. From this position you could turn around and see the green pasture and the camp on the other side of a canyon. The rest of the ride was easy. We descended the canyon, crossed the south fork of the Kern River, and soon we arrived at our destination.

Most of the ride was a pretty steep climb, and we wondered how this would affect the horses not used to high altitude. It took them two or three days to adapt to the change so we didn't push them at first. Once they adapted though, it seemed as if they could go forever. I guess it was all that fresh air.

When we reached camp the horses were cooled down and unloaded. Then we turned them into the pasture, which consisted of a few fenced acres. The horses became wild with enthusiasm when they were turned loose. They were used to small corrals, and this big grassy pasture was almost too much.

The pasture looked almost like an oasis. A spring originated in the center and kept the pasture irrigated and the horses watered. In the morning the horses would wander down to the lower end of the pasture by the camp waiting for grain. A pen was built at this end so we could run three or four horses in at a time to be grained.

The camp was laid out with two cabins in the center. Above the cabins a cement case had been set in the ground alongside a stream. It stayed plenty cold and kept food fresh and frozen. A pipe tapped the stream, giving the camp a steady flow of drinking water.

Three trails started from the camp and left in different directions. Riders couldn't miss seeing deer, coveys of quail, and it wasn't rare to see a bear.

I enjoyed roaming through this country alone on my horse. We traveled through thick forests and then moved into mile-long meadows. Sometimes, I would stop along the river and do a little fishing using my lunch for bait.



John shows his method of packing. Notice that the pack is tied forward to keep the weight as far forward as possible.

Gambler enjoyed these rides also. In Los Angeles he was getting pretty sour and just plain bored. In the Sequoias though, I never had to fight him no matter how far I rode.

Of course, just because he wasn't sour doesn't mean that he wasn't ornery in other ways. On one ride we came by some hikers resting near a trail sign. I sort of leaned over to see the sign and make sure I knew where we were. One innocent hiker moved his shiny orange pack, and suddenly I wasn't sitting on my horse any more. Well, I chased that 2-cent cayuse for a least a mile. When I ran, he jogged, and when I walked, he walked, always staying about 20 feet from me. Finally, he got tangled in the reins and waited innocently for me to get him loose.

I didn't hit him or anything. I figured if I did, the next time he wouldn't even give me a chance.

On another ride I headed over the mountainside and into a cattle pasture below, veering away from an angry-looking bull. After Gambler and I had woven our way through the herd we broke out at a fast clip. Suddenly Gambler stopped short. I followed his alert ears and then spotted the bear moving noiselessly through the trees. We just watched as the bear moved off into the woods.

However, the horses and deer didn't seem to even take notice of each other. Many times in the early morning, or in the daytime if no people were around, the deer would jump the fence and graze with the horses. At times, when a few of us wandered quietly into camp, we could watch the horses grazing together and nearby a herd of deer grazing along in harmony.

There were other animals though, which the horses didn't get along with as well as they did with the deer. On one night I left Gambler in the pen. Everyone was in the cabins when we heard some awful snorting. I ran out and turned Gambler into the pasture. It was too dark to see anything, but I never heard hoofs beating so fast as Gambler's were as he ran up to his friends. The next morning we found cat tracks around the pen. Never again did I leave a horse in the pen at night.

If one was not interested in the likes of bears and wildcats, he could always go down to the river only a mile away and do some fishing. Most people found the fishing to be very good. I admit I could have done better myself; although I hooked this big one that somehow wiggled loose.

If for some reason disaster hit our food supply, or someone had the urge for a candy bar, the nearest store was 15 miles away in Kennedy Meadows. There were two different trails leading to the store, so the thirty-mile round trip could at least be eased by different scenery.

The rattlesnakes were a bit of a problem in the mountains. In the camp we caught six rattlesnakes during the five weeks I was up there. They were attracted to our camp by the mice that during the night would run in the rafters, cross our sleeping bags, and gnaw into our food supply. We were really living it wild and had a couple of might fine dinners where rattlesnake was the main course. It wasn't bad.



My horse Gambler enjoys a break after 20 miles of wilderness trail.

All in all it was a pretty soothing vacation, but like all good things it had to come to an end. My heart was still in the Sierras as we drove into Los Angeles. We pulled in after midnight just in time to take a bath, get a little bit of sleep, and start school the next morning.

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