

≈ PHOTO ESSAY ≈

A Convocation of Eagles

The author and six fellow Cornerstone Morgan Horse Club members venture with their Morgans into Northern Colorado's Flat Tops Wilderness.

As our horses stepped out onto the narrow ledge that formed the trail descending from 11,000 feet elevation, heading back down to the Trappers Lake Trailhead, outstretched brown wings caught my eye, far below our perch, and it occurred to me that our gathering of seven riders, ten horses and a mule were venturing through the realm of the majestic eagle. To the left of the trail, a vertical wall ascended. To the right, nothing but hundreds of feet of air.

The horses moved cautiously along the trail, negotiating jagged outcroppings of rock that formed the base for the path. Occasionally, they would turn their heads, and gaze across the chasm that lay to the side of the narrow trail, likely with the same amazement that mesmerized the riders, but their primary focus

remained on the path before them, and the threatening thunder in the distance. This final leg of the trek was timed to best avoid the likelihood of thunderstorms (and hailstorms!) that frequent the high country, yet the threat was ever present.

By Ric Walker

Most of the horses were unshod, giving them a better feel for the rugged trail. The Morgans' hearty feet never failed during our trek. During the preceding week, those feet carried the riders and their heavy packs in excess of 65 miles, along sometimes-treacherous trails that interlaced the 235,000 acres that make up the Flat Tops Wilderness of Northwestern Colorado.

The first day of the trek had taken the riders to a base camp, at 11,049 feet elevation, in close proximity to live water. Though the trek

Only the reflection of the horses' eyes shine out of the dark of night, as they stand quietly high lined just beyond the campfire's glow.

took place at the end of summer, patches of snow were still evident near our camp, and great pleasure was taken in a snowman that one of the riders created. From the camp, day trips took riders to farther reaches of the wilderness, but we covered only a speck of the vast region.

Rock slides sometimes obscured already challenging trails, where it was best to simply motivate the horses in the direction we desired to travel, and let them negotiate the rocks on their own. Live water crossings were frequent, and the occasional bog presented a real challenge to horses and riders.

During the treks in and out of the wilderness, the packhorses, each loaded with 150 lbs. of supplies, bore the greatest burdens, due to the dead weight on their backs. They visibly enjoyed the day trips because they were allowed to run free and without packs, tagging along with the riders on their excursions. As the riders moved along, the loose packhorses would pause, to graze, or to drink from a stream or lake, and then they would lope to catch up with the others. Willard-Moses, the Morgan mule, ever the character, would pause,

to roll and scratch, and then buck playfully as he made up the gap.

At night, the animals were high-lined at the edge of our camp, and, with the rising sun, they were turned loose to graze the bounteous grasses, mosey down to the stream, for a drink, or to just lie down and bask in the sunshine. During their foraging, they would range as far as a quarter mile from camp but always seemed to stay within eyesight. When it was time to saddle up each day, a couple of riders would walk out to the nearest horse, halter and lead it back to camp. The other horses would follow, as if in a casual parade, always ready for whatever was asked of them.

There was no agenda for the trek. No one was hunting. Efforts were made to catch fresh fish, which were reportedly abundant, but none were killed during the making of this adventure (they weren't biting!). This was simply a gathering of friends and their Morgans (ten horses and a Morgan mule), to share a gentle adventure...and to soar with the eagles!

To view more images from the trip, visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGQIQrnDkYo&feature=youtu.be. ■

DID YOU KNOW? A gathering of eagles is called a "convocation."

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Clockwise from top left: Frequent live water crossings can be a challenge, at first. Horses and riders get used to the challenge quickly because they are a frequent occurrence; First day out both horses and riders take a deep relaxing breath, after negotiating the narrow cliffside trails; Thunderstorms would often greet us, sometimes delaying the day's ride; Fresh bacon and hot biscuits for breakfast; Gathered around the campfire, Dr. Suzanne posed the question, "where is our next adventure?" The campfire witnessed stories of each day's adventures.

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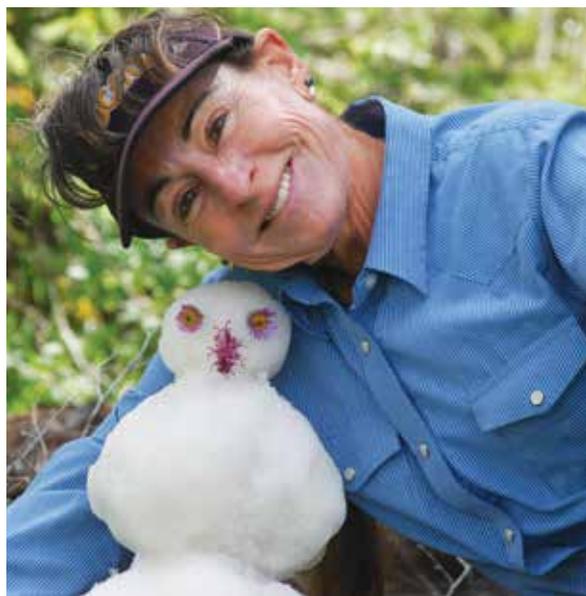




Clockwise from far top left: Looking back up the trail gives another perspective of how steep it was; Steeper and narrower trails ahead, the riders leave plenty of room for their fellow riders; Honor and Willard pause for a drink in a quiet stream. Both humans and horses must make every effort to rehydrate in the dry mountain air; Negotiating a rock slide with packhorses making their own way; Dan and Ana pausing before negotiating another narrow trail. It's important to give your horse a chance to catch its breath. They are the ones carrying the loads; Packs, saddles, and gear stowed for another night. Manties were used to protect everything from the frequent rains; Dan and Ana Bailey ascending the narrow trail with vertical walls, above and below.



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Clockwise from top right: This was the first packing trip for all four of our pack animals. They all took on the challenges without hesitation; Steep trails call for frequent switchbacks and rules of the road prohibit cutting corners; Jo and her August snowman!; A stream crossing surrounded by fire kill from the 2002 “Big Fish Fire” that claimed 17,000 acres of the wilderness. The standing dead trees are a constant threat of the sky falling, and the deadfalls protrude into the trails, like spears; In the meadows, both horses and riders would relax, taking time to graze on the luscious grasses, or on the wondrous vistas.



RIDERS

JO JOHNSON, Jaquima a Freno Morgan Stock Horses • Sanger, California *riding* JAF Lequoia Wakanda (JAF Sunrise Surfer Dude x Triple S Nita) • 2010 chestnut gelding

MICHAEL JEPSEN, Montara, California *riding* Treasure Donna (Treasure Paladin x Crystalbrook Guine) • 2003 chestnut mare

DR. SUZANNE AVERY, DVM, Kansas Bluestem Morgans • Westmoreland, KS • Kansas *riding* Kansas Enduring Honor (Adiel's Stetson X Burchtree Roxanne) • 2009 Black Gelding

DAN BAILEY, Silver Cross Morgans • Oak Creek, Colorado *riding* Bucksnots Jadzia Dax (Sereno Vermont Jazz x Bucksnots Dusky Rosebud) • 2006 chestnut mare

ANA BAILEY • Oak Creek, CO • *riding* Do More BS Bodacious Babs (Bessia's Black Eagle x W A R Indycaducy) • 2007 black mare

JEANNE DAVIDSON, Murrieta, California *riding* Juzanella (Dusty Joe x Miss Terrific) • 2002 chestnut mare

RIC WALKER, Southern Cross Morgans • Mount Enterprise, Texas *riding* Battersea Orlean (Caduceus Nicholas x Battersea Jolie) • 1998 chestnut mare

SUPPORTING ROLES (THE PACK STOCK)

JaF Tonalea Nizhoni (JaF Sunrise Surfer Dude x Hideaway Starlight Moon) • 2010 palomino filly

JaF Teneiya Heima (JaF Sunrise Surfer Dude x Red Range Chamisa) • 2010 palomino filly

JaF Okemah Chante' (JaF Sunrise Surfer Dude x Ranchboss Foxy Roxie) • 2010 buckskin filly

KS Bluestem Willard-Moses (Mammoth Jack X KS Bluestem Herod O Correl) • 2009 Black 100% Foundation Morgan Mule