

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH

Three breed devotees take on the challenges of backpacking in the Rockies on their trusted Morgans.

Early this year, I mentioned to my good friend, Dan Bailey, of Silver Cross Morgans in Oak Creek, Colorado, that I was seeking a place to experience the wilderness on horseback. Dan suggested that I visit the Flat Tops Wilderness. This was the beginning of a grand adventure, shared with Dan and our mutual friend, Jo Johnson, of Jaquima a Freno Morgan Stock Horses in Sanger, California.

At first, Dan and I discussed making the ride with only two horses and whatever we could pack in overloaded saddlebags. When Jo joined our troop, a whole new dimension was added to our adventure. Dan and I were novices in horse packing. Jo, on the other hand, was an experienced horse trainer and contract packer for the U.S. Forest Service and the California Conservation Corps. When she joined us, she took on a challenge well beyond the rugged wilderness of Northwestern Colorado.

Jo added another dimension to our team: trained packhorses. She hauled two young fillies from California that she had trained, “KW” (JAF Ebony and Gold) and “Dani” (JAF Higuera Daniella).

Though well trained to the packs, neither KW nor Dani had made a previous packing trip into the wilds. Dan and I were also riding green-broke mares, “Dax” (Bucksnot’s Jadzia Dax) and “Orlean” (Battersea Orlean). As it turned out, Jo’s mare, “Sonnetta” (NVS Mi Sonnetta), was the only horse in our party with prior experience on a trip like this. One might have thought the cards were stacked against us when we struck off into the wilderness, but we were all riding Morgans!

**By Ric Walker,
Southern Cross Morgans**

On our first full day, camped at the Trappers Lake Trailhead (9,500 feet elevation), we decided to load the packhorses, and make a day trip. The route would take us about four miles, to Wall Lake (11,005 feet), and then back to the trailhead. We found the trail markings to be rather challenging (some had been targeted by vandals), and we took a wrong turn at one of the crossroads. Shortly after our diversion, we encountered Clementine, an elderly backpacker. As “Clemy” approached us, she asked where we were headed, and we announced that we were riding up to Wall Lake. Clemy advised us that we had taken the wrong trail, and directed us



Ric, Dan and Jo made several short rides to increasing elevations, before stepping off into the wilderness.

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back to the trail crossing, only a couple hundred yards back up the trail. As we turned to backtrack, we were struck by a torrential hailstorm, complete with intense thunder and lightning, right on top of us. This was our horses' first experience with hail, and they were troubled, but it has been said that the art of horsemanship is keeping the horse between you and the ground. In that regard, we were all successful, though there were some anxious moments.

The hail had accumulated on the ground. As we collected ourselves, we decided to call it a day and returned to the lodge because the storm continued to threaten. We pondered how fate had taken us down the wrong trail, and wondered what might have happened if we had stayed on the right track in the first place. That would have put us on the side of the mountain, with hundreds of feet of air falling off to one side of the trail, and the sky falling all around us. Ah, the wonders of the Rocky Mountains in the middle of summer! It's one thing to see a thunderstorm, but to actually experience it from inside the clouds is a whole new world.

The next day, we loaded the panniers onto the packhorses,

saddled-up, and rode off into the Flat Tops Wilderness. Our trek took us south, along the east side of Trappers Lake. Riding along the trails above the lake, we peered down into the gin clear waters, to watch cutthroat trout patrolling the shoreline. The climb was steady, and the trails rocky and steep, as we ascended to 11,645 feet. The scenery was breathtaking, and the horses all managed the rugged trails well, carefully placing their barefoot hooves to find the best footing. KW and Dani maintained a good track, but

Jo kept a close eye on them, and took every opportunity to re-enforce their training, as they negotiated the rough terrain with their loads in excess of 150 pounds.

Near the end of our first day, after crossing a rather large plateau, we found ourselves looking down upon the Valley of the Island Lakes. The lakes rested beyond

the bottom of a cliff, about 500 feet from top to bottom. Looking over the edge, we caught glimpses of the narrow trail, with several hairpin switchbacks, lined with huge boulders all the way to the bottom. While back at the lodge, we had listened to stories of horses lost along this trail. It was time to tighten up, both hands on the steering wheel.

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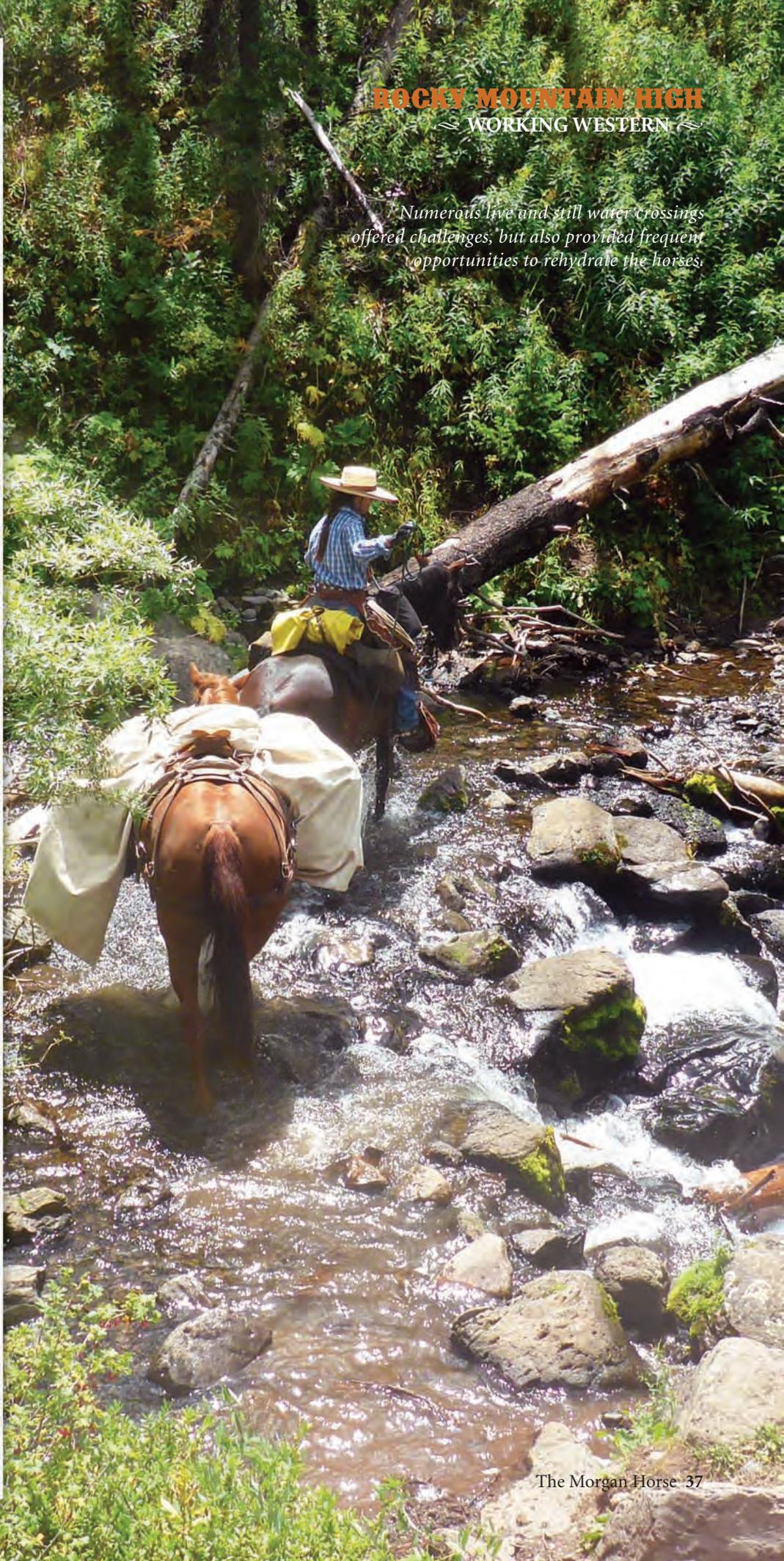
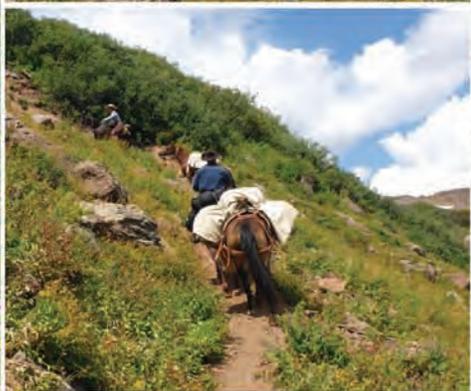
Jo and Dan emerging from an inside look at the only hailstorm encountered during our trek.



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Numerous live and still water crossings offered challenges, but also provided frequent opportunities to rehydrate the horses.



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PREPARING HORSE'S HOOVES FOR MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

The Morgans we rode into the Flat Tops were barefoot, with one exception. My mare, Orlean, wore boots during two rides. The sole purpose of this was to desensitize her to the boots, in case they are ever needed.

Any horse, of any breed, might experience hoof injuries in the rocky terrain we encountered, if their hooves are not accustomed to those conditions. A horse that lives in soft, wet pasture might not endure the challenges our horses faced, without prior conditioning.

If rocks are not native to your horses' environment, one solution might be to dump a load of gravel along a fence line or path that they frequently travel, or in front of their water trough. Pea gravel in particular can help here, and is known to promote healthy hooves.

Our Morgans proved themselves on the severe rocky trails of the Flat Tops Wilderness, and emerged with sound and healthy hooves.

Jo led the way, with Dani trailing behind. I followed Jo, and Dan took up the rear, leading KW. I was singing one of my favorite country western songs, as I negotiated the treacherous trail, "Rock bottom...ain't no place to be!" No problem finding focus, as you negotiate switchbacks with the front half of your horse hanging out over the precipice. Once again, our Morgans came through. They were sure-footed, and had their noses down to the trail, evaluating every step. I don't know who was more relieved when we reached the bottom of the cliff, the horses, or the riders, but we all made it in good shape, with all accounted for.

We spent four wonderful nights, camped on a rise a couple hundred yards from one of the lakes, at about 11,200 feet. The horses were all high-lined at night, and turned-out to graze during the days. Most of the time, we would hobble a couple horses and the others would stay in close proximity to our little herd. The grass was

good, and the horses had free access to the lake for water.

Back home, many of us see our horses only twice each day, when we feed. Camped in the Flat Tops, we lived with our horses all day long. We hand fed them grain, every morning and evening. We walked them to their water,

Finally, the horses were high-lined, and we retired to our tents, drifting off to sleep to the rhythm of the rain dancing off of the fabric.

to make sure they stayed hydrated. They would occasionally wander into our camp, for a brief visit, and then return to the grass between

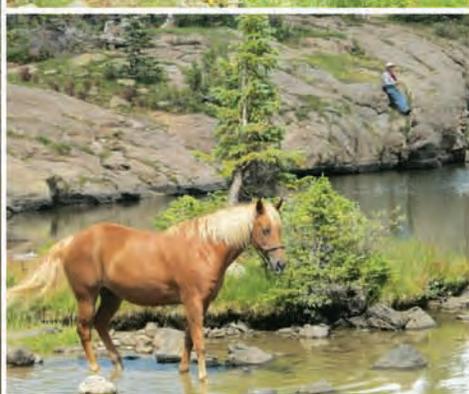
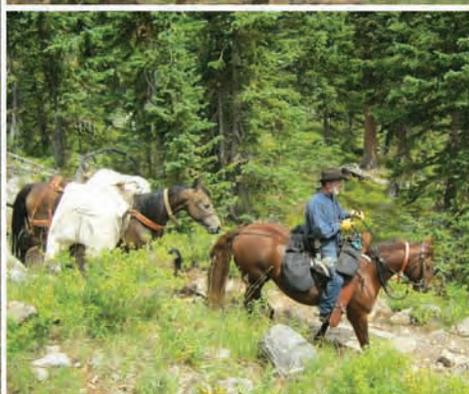
our camp and the lake. Sometimes we found them standing in the waters of the lakes, while we fished for trout. We felt a real connection with our horses in this setting, like we were part of the herd.

In the evenings: floppin' fresh Cutthroat Trout on the grill over the campfire, chilling-out under the ever-changing colors of the setting sun and the high-lined horses resting on the edge of our camp. It came as no surprise that the horses seemed unaffected by the occasional thunderstorm, after our earlier

Man on a ledge—the two foot wide trail takes a left turn at the cliff's edge. A rock dropped from an extended arm would fall several hundred feet before making first contact.

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Brooke and Orlean spending some quality time together at the lodge.



PREPARING YOUR LUNGS FOR MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

At the altitudes where we rode and camped, it is possible that riders will encounter at least some adverse effects of the thin air (lack of oxygen). These effects will undoubtedly appear in the form of mild “short windedness” during activities that would not even be recognized at lower elevations. Some might encounter more serious problems, including life-threatening symptoms. However, it is possible to avoid this risk, with proper planning.

In advance of your trip, check with your doctor. Make sure you are physically fit for your ride. You might consider supplements to increase your red blood cell count. Not to be overlooked is a program of physical conditioning designed both to improve your endurance, and to get you in shape for your trek. Take the time to familiarize yourself with the signs and symptoms of altitude sickness, as well as the appropriate response.

Don't forget your horses! They, too, will benefit from proper conditioning, so don't just haul your ride up to 12,000 feet, and saddle her up, if she has been a pasture ornament for the past year! Get out there, and ride! Conditioning your horse will also help to get you in shape for your adventure.

We chose to move our horses to elevations near that which we planned to visit, to give them time to acclimate prior to their exposure to higher altitudes. Don't forget, you and your horses must drink lots of water, and you might want to consider electrolyte replenishment.

hailstorm experience.

While we were camping in the National Park campground, prior to entering the wilderness, we made friends with a group of experienced horsemen from Missouri, who were riding the trails, making day trips. Midway through our stay at Island Lakes, they made a special effort to track us down (about a 20-mile round trip), and stopped-by our camp to say hello. They said they followed our trail by the recognizable hoof prints left behind by our barefoot Morgans. Jo is a Master Trainer in Leave No Trace, and explained

that though the barefoot horse leaves a less visible hoof print, it is also less disturbing to the natural environment (*Editor's note: Leave No Trace is a program of the National Outdoor Leadership School. It teaches technical outdoor skills, leadership and environmental ethics*).

On the fifth day, we loaded the horses, and packed out of the valley, back to the plateau. The ride up the cliff side seemed far less fearsome than the descent, but the horses still struggled with their burdens, and we took frequent opportunities to let them rest and catch their breath.

It was eight to ten miles to our final camp on the shores of Wall Lake. We knew the descent from this elevation was treacherous, so we wanted the horses to be rested and fresh for the final day's ride back to the trailhead. They grazed, lakeside, as we set up camp in the midst of another thunderstorm, but we were blessed with an absence of hail. Finally, the horses were high-lined, and we retired to our tents, drifting off to sleep to the rhythm of the rain dancing off of the fabric.

The last day's ride, around the west side of Trappers Lake, was only about five miles, but it was one of the more arduous trails, descending from 11,200 feet back to the Trappers Lake Trailhead along trails carved into vertical cliff walls. The walls extended straight up the mountainside from the trail, but the real challenges were the hundreds of feet of air to the right of the narrow trail, and the presence of seemingly insurmountable boulders imbedded in the trail. There were a couple of rockslide areas, and some of the boulders were three feet in diameter. The packhorses would teeter over the rocks with their dead weight burdens, but always managed to arrive right side up on the other side.

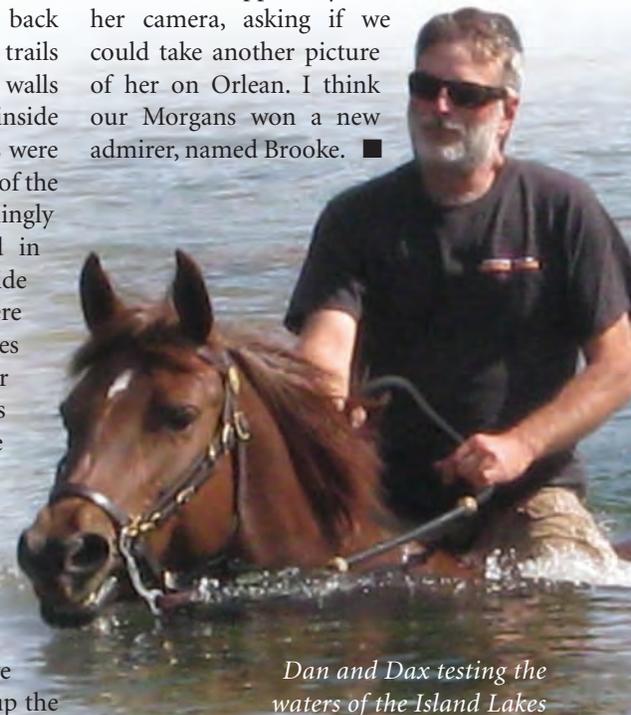
We were all somewhat saddened when we reached the trailhead, and realized that our adventure was over. There were jokes (not entirely in jest) that we should stay another week, or that we should turn around, and head back up the

trail, but we reveled in the knowledge that we had done it and that our Morgans had done it.

It was then that I was reminded of the words of Lieutenant Colonel Hall, at Appomattox, April 9, 1865: “We were charging the enemy when the order came to stop fighting. That was the final word from the men and the horses. How much it sounds like the Morgans! They had done all the work that was set before them, and it was heavy, and they were up and doing and ready to do still more if they had been asked to keep on.”

One of the highs of my personal adventure had nothing to do with the altitude. As we returned from our trek, we were greeted by the bright smile of a young girl, standing at the hitching post in front of Trappers Lake Lodge. She beamed her fascination at the approach of three trail weary riders, but more so at the Morgans. Riding up to where she was standing, I dismounted, and handed her my reins, saying, “Would you mind watching my horse for me?” She proudly held the reins as I stepped into the lodge for a moment. She later stopped by with her camera, asking if we could take another picture of her on Orlean. I think our Morgans won a new admirer, named Brooke. ■

Camped in the Flat Tops, we lived with our horses all day long. We felt a real connection with our horses in this setting, like we were part of the herd.



Dan and Dax testing the waters of the Island Lakes