

# Mountains OR Horses?

## From Yearning to Learning and Beyond

BY TANIA MILLEN

*ABOVE:  
Big creek crossings  
were scary for the  
riders, but didn't  
seem to bother  
the horses.*

The horses were tired and hungry, and we needed to find them good feed. We had travelled all day in the alpine, over shale ridges and snow patches, through meadows that were just greening up, and finally over a pass between two rocky promontories. Route finding had gone well, but the last trail — dropping 1000 feet down into a pass — eluded us. We ended up in the bottom of a bowl above 400 foot cliffs, taking the brunt of a nasty wind. There was one clump of scraggly spruce to shield the horses from the oncoming thunderstorm, where they would have to be tied overnight or we'd lose them on the back trail. While Jane scrambled to set up camp, Doug and I charged back up to the ridgeline 800 feet above to try to find our route before the storm arrived. As we carefully peered down a steep shale slope with binoculars, a 10,000 foot mammoth of snow-crusted rock and ice towered over us and the wind tried to blow us off the ridge. Way down in the valley below was a thin ribbon of trail. We'd found the route.

But let me back up a bit. I've done lots of horsey

things, from Pony Club to eventing, foxhunting to polo, racing to performance events, but I'd never been packing. I've also spent lots of time in the mountains hiking, camping, skiing, and climbing, but it's never enough. Someday, I planned to do my own pack trips so that I wouldn't have to choose between mountains or horses. That day came in 2010.

After researching packing courses, I chose Stan Walchuk's Blue Creek Outfitting (BCO) in McBride, BC. I'd watched Stan's Cordillera video and wanted to meet the legend! Perhaps more importantly, I was looking for hands-on experience from someone who knew a whole lot about packing in northern BC. Stan was the man. And Stan rents out his horses for people to self-guide their own trips, so he's worth knowing.

Camp started on a Sunday afternoon in June, ending the following Saturday. It's interesting, albeit a bit daunting, meeting 12 strangers for the first time, all with different expectations, personalities, and skills, knowing

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you'll be living and learning with them for a week. Fortunately, it was a great group. People came from all over: the Lower Mainland, Okanagan, Northwest BC, and Alberta. Ages ranged from teens to fifties, and everyone had different levels of horse experience, from coaches to those who had never sat on a horse before. But everyone was there for one reason: to learn to pack horses.

The schedule was relaxed but well planned. Monday morning we started working our way through BCO's Trail Riding, Packing and Training manual. Following lunch, we did some hands-on learning and horses were assigned. The horses live on 80 acres surrounding a corral and cabins. They are large-hoofed and solidly built, primarily Fjord mixed with Morgan and draft breeds. Experienced riders were assigned greener horses, keen riders got livelier horses, and beginners were assigned quiet horses. Amidst dust and laughter, we all round-penned our assigned steeds and worked on ground manners. Dinner was followed by a self-guided trail ride. It was a new experience to be in a long line of riders on a narrow trail, not knowing what the front or back of the horse train was doing.

The next few days continued in the same vein: book learning followed by practical sessions and trail rides. There was lots of time to practice new skills.

Our group was really keen. One morning, we were so excited about learning to tie packs on horses that we started trying to work it out from the manual. Imagine 12 people gathered around one horse all trying to get in on the action. We had ropes going everywhere, people gesticulating and giving advice, instructions read out loud, and lots of "No, no, it goes like this..." The horses must have been rolling their eyes. Stan sure laughed.

Finally the time came for the self-guided overnight trip. Our

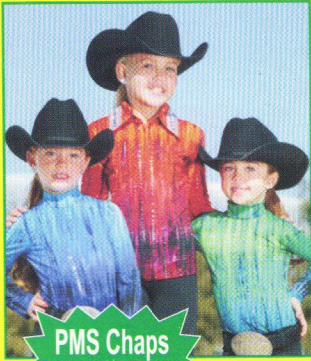


ABOVE: Riding through the burn was difficult as there was no shade and plenty of bugs, and it was easy to lose the trail.

PHOTO: TANIA MILLEN

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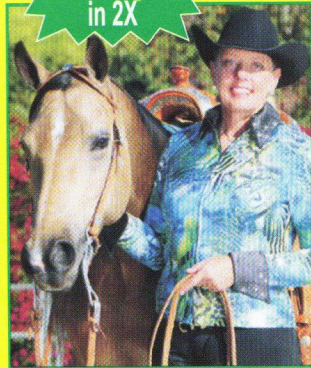
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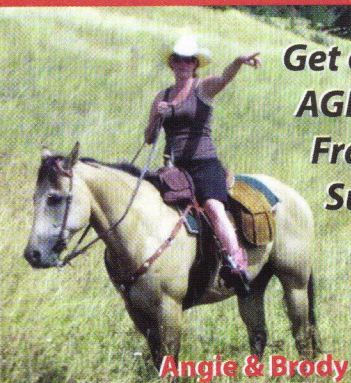
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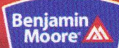
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group had decided to ride up a little-used hiking trail on the north side of the valley. Being keeners, everyone assigned themselves tasks. Some made a massive group breakfast while others caught horses and packed gear. It was chaos and Stan wisely stayed out of the way. However, we all made it to the trailhead, got our horses tacked and loaded, and headed out.

We started up an old mining road in deluges of rain and fleeting sunshine. The road turned into a narrow, steep, switch-backing hiking trail. At alpine, it was snowing sideways and there was no feed or shelter for the horses, so we voted to go down.

On the way down, one of the pack horses slipped off the trail and disappeared. Amazingly, he nonchalantly clambered back onto the trail lower down and continued. Later, when discussing our journey, Stan admitted that if the trail was any steeper, horses would be unable to traverse it. It was a good lesson.

The next day, groups of riders meandered up the road to a well known snowmobiling spot with alpine meadows, lakes, and a public cabin. The view was stunning. Nothing beats riding horses in the mountains with new friends.

Friday evening my mind was working overtime. How could I learn these skills, then not do a trip? To heck with work, I wanted to be in the mountains with horses! An opportunist at heart, Saturday morning I started planning. Two other people at camp were keen to do a trip and, after discussing possible locations, we decided on a remote trail along the BC-Alberta border starting in a few short weeks. I committed, not knowing what my boss would say.

I convinced the boss and shortly three of us were back at BCO, sorting gear. Our route went east from the Holmes River, through Jasper National Park, and down the Moose River. With six horses,

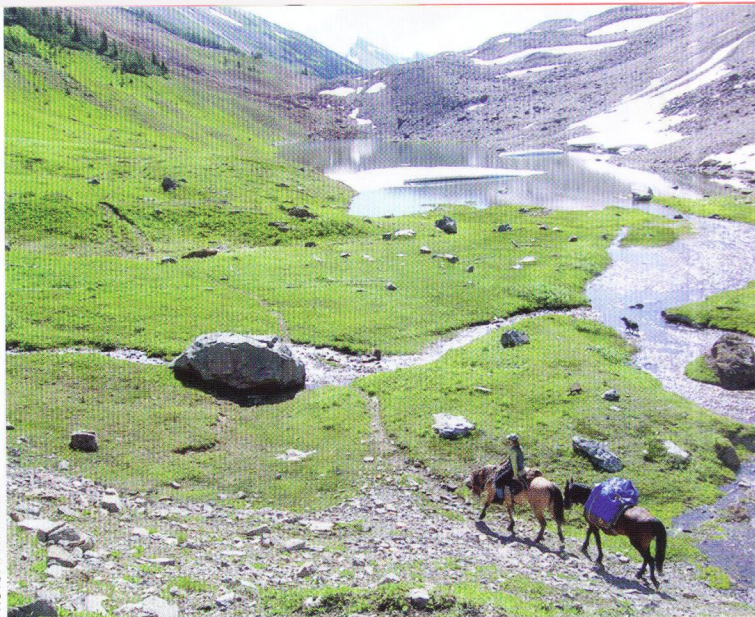


PHOTO: TANIA MILLEN

ABOVE: The ride to Moose Pass and the Moose River.

*At alpine, it was snowing sideways and there was no feed or shelter for the horses, so we voted to go down.*

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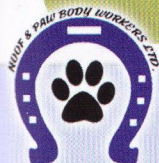
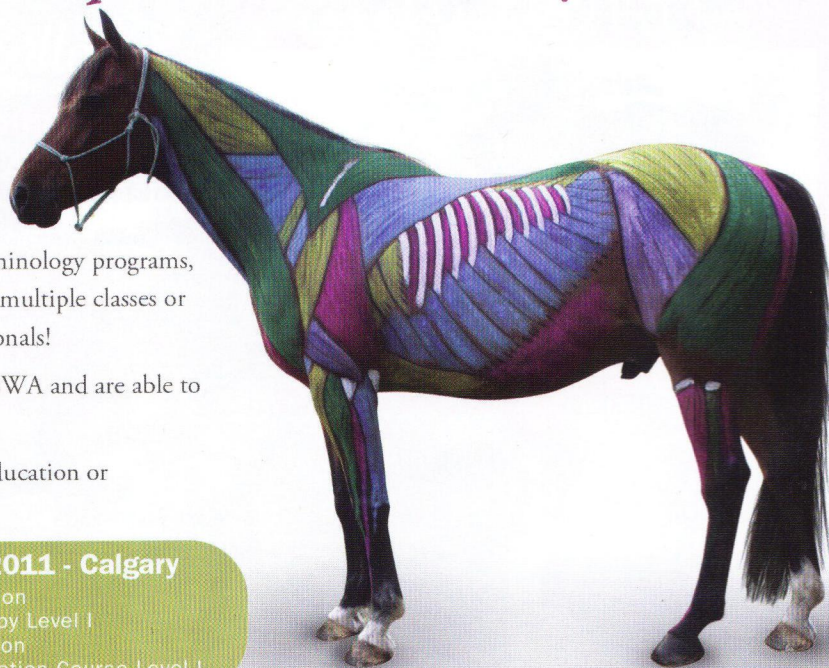
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we headed up to subalpine and the route finding began. By the end of the second day, we were in the bottom of a bowl, looking for feed for our tired, hungry horses. The third day we found a route down the shale slope, and camped to let the horses feed. It was tough hanging about in nice weather. If the weather changed, poor visibility would make the ride over the shoulder of Mount Bess difficult.

Sure enough, it stormed all night and we woke to low cloud and rain. However, after careful route-finding, we crossed the continental divide at 6700 feet. The trail down from the divide was steep, with slick clay footing. We each led two 1200 lb horses on foot, sliding down the trail, trying to stay upright while the horses confidently picked their way down. The storm made the creeks run thick and grey with silt, so it was difficult to tell the depth of the water. The first big creek crossing was nerve-wracking for the riders, but didn't faze the surefooted horses.

Over the next few days we travelled east to the Moose River valley in fantastic sunny weather. The Moose River meanders across fluvial plains, surrounded by muskeg and blackened tree trunks from a huge forest fire. There was no shade and the horseflies loved us.

It's an understatement to say that riding through a burn is difficult. It's a nightmare, particularly if you lose the trail, as we did. Prior to the trip, a park warden advised

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PHOTO: TANIA MILLEN

*ABOVE: Tania reads a map. While finding the trail was sometimes hard, the group successfully completed their trip made possible by Blue Creek Outfitting.*





ABOVE: Crossing a creek with beautiful Rocky Mountain scenery in the background.



PHOTOS: TANIA MILLEN

LEFT: Tania crosses a bridge over a fast running creek.

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that the trail was cleared on the west side of the valley. This gem of information directed our efforts in finding the trail when we were lost.

As we rode out to the trailhead on our last day, I thought about how, if the trip had been guided, it would have been the vacation of a lifetime, albeit much easier. But the skills that we learned at BCO and their well-trained horses had allowed us to undertake this deeply satisfying adventure on our own.

Of course, the great thing about skills is that you can apply them again and again. So we will be renting gear and horses again in 2011 and have many more trips in the planning stages. I no longer have to choose between mountains or horses, although my boss remains in the dark.



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