

Another Day at the Office

Riding, packing and sleeping out under the stars in **Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness** is all part of the job for the wranglers of the **Triple J Wilderness Ranch**.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK BEDOR



THE MINI FLASHLIGHT I HAVE strapped to my forehead cuts a narrow beam of light through the darkness of the tent as I struggle in the morning cold to seat my contact lenses for the day. My contact solution isn't designed for high-mountain mornings, and my increasingly numb fingers are no help.

But daylight's burnin', so I abandon the quest and stumble outside into the wet dew. Though it's only 5 a.m. in Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness, the workday has already begun for the Triple J Wilderness Ranch wranglers.

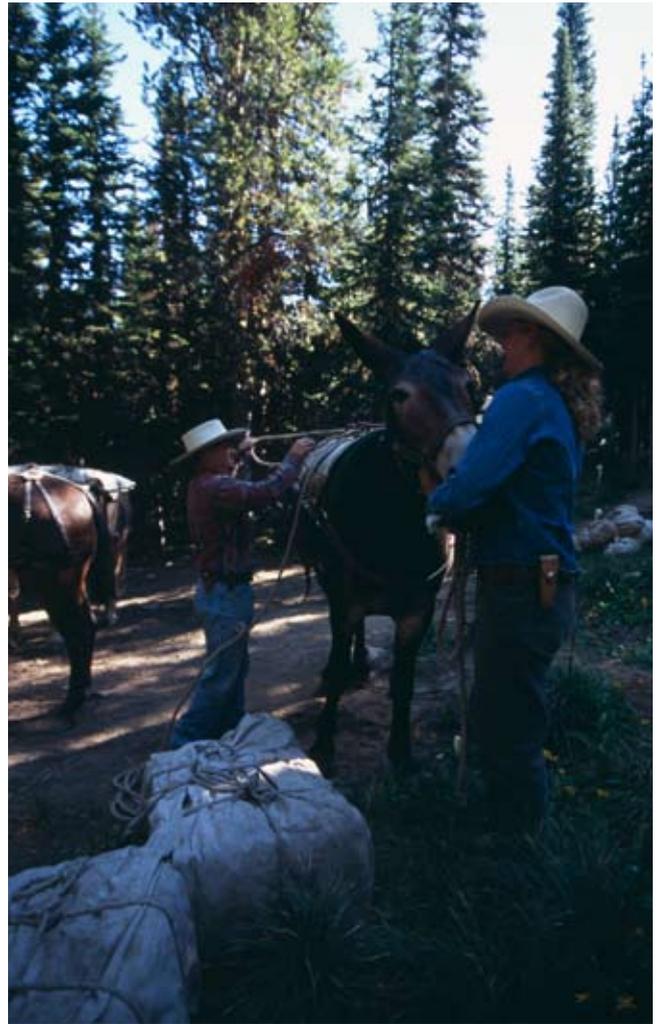
I'm awake at this dark hour to experience a typical day in the life of a wrangler. Five pros from the Triple J are leading me and four other guests on a nine-day horseback adventure through this nearly 1 million acres of roadless wilderness, affectionately known as "the Bob."

You really have to hustle to keep up with this backcountry crew. By the time I step outside, they already have a fire going and the horses saddled. Buck Wood Steve Love, and Sharlee Goss mount up and move our herd of pack mules and dude horses from their overnight corral to a nearby



pasture for an early morning graze. Meanwhile, Tim Love tends to the fire, and Hannah Mattingly works on breakfast, all while the other guests enjoy warm slumber in their cozy sleeping bags.

My horse, Banjo, has a definite opinion about being left behind. He is tied to a tree as the rest of the animals trot off, and as I swing into the saddle, it's all I can do to keep my steed from bolting after his buddies. Looking at the abundance of rocks mingled in this grassy meadow, I quickly decide it would be best to not risk a buck-off so far from the nearest



▲ Hannah Mattingly keeps a mule calm while Steve Love adjusts a pack saddle. Mantying is often a two-person chore, as mules are more independently minded than are horses. According to Love, a mule's instinct for self-preservation makes him an excellent choice for the trail.

◀◀ The 1,009,356-acre Bob Marshall Wilderness straddles the Continental Divide in northwestern Montana and boasts elevations up 9,000 feet at its mountain summits.

road. I step off and lead Banjo on foot, and we finally catch up to the rest of the grazing herd.

As the first rays of the sun light up a towering rock formation known as the Chinese Wall, I grab my camera and fire away. This is a moment I might never see again, and I definitely want to remember it.

On this brisk summer morning in the heart of Montana, the lure of the wrangler life becomes as clear as the brightening sky.

"Not many people get to come back here," says Steve. "Lots of people get to see the Empire State Building. I don't care if I see the Empire State Building."

I don't either. "God's greatest sculpture," as a character in the film *Jeremiah Johnson* called the Rockies, is in all her glory this morning. The Chinese Wall we're camped under looks like a giant version of the man-made structure it's named after. The sunrise paints the formation's towering cliffs in shades of radiant orange.



We've ridden two days through some very rugged country to earn this memorable sight. And it wouldn't happen without a lot of very hard work by our five wranglers.

COMBINE THE SKILLS OF A BAGGAGE HANDLER, expert rider, riding instructor, wilderness guide, cook, packer, saddler and emergency medical technician, and be willing to do all that for 12 to 16 hours a day (and sometimes all night), and you have what it takes to be a wrangler on a wilderness pack trip. You need excellent people skills, as well, and the work is only seasonal, so you have to find something else to do in the winter.

This morning's a good example. After enjoying another hearty, hot breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon and coffee prepared by our 18-year-old camp cook, Hannah, we guests pack up our 40-pound duffel bags and drop them off with the wranglers. Our possessions and about a ton of other gear are then all wrapped in canvas tarps known as manties. The bundles must be of equal weight so they balance properly on the pack saddles carried by our 13 mules and one pack horse.

This job takes a while. Steve's brother, Tim, will guide the other four guests for the day, and they ride out of camp about 9 that morning. But Steve, Hannah, Sharlee and Buck still have plenty of work to do before we hit the trail.

Bundling the gear is a predictable chore. Loading it on the mules is not. Mules all have distinct personalities, and there's one on this trip named Bashful who earned his name. Hannah is holding Bashful's lead rope as Sharlee puts on the pack saddle, when Bashful suddenly jerks the rope out of Hannah's hand and goes bucking off into a nearby meadow, tossing off the pack saddle along the way. All other work comes to a stop as Buck, Steve and the two young women team up to corral the uncooperative beast.

It takes a bit of effort, but Bashful is finally back under the saddle again and loaded up for the day. Each mule starts out this trip with about 150 pounds of gear balanced on its back, including tents, clothes, food, kitchen gear, horse

 Buck Wood enjoys some downtime in the shade as he waters the stock along the trail.



 Steve and Buck graze the horses as sunrise lights up the Chinese Wall.

feed, saws, axes, and repair kits, and even a 90-pound wood-burning stove.

It's one heck of a workout getting all that gear mantied, loaded up and balanced just right so it doesn't come crashing off a mule somewhere down the trail. And it all must be unpacked and set up again at the end of our day-long ride.

As Bashful demonstrated, mules are much more independently minded than are horses, and perhaps more dangerous, as well. Buck says horses tend to be people pleasers, but mules could care less about humans. They're interested only in their own survival.

"That's what makes them good on the trail, though," says Buck. "They make sure they don't hurt themselves."

And, contrary to popular belief, Buck says mules really aren't more sure-footed than horses. They just pay more attention to what they're doing. And, they're less panicky than horses if a pack should come loose.

"If they get in a wreck, they'll just sit there and let you fix them," says Steve. "Horses'll just kill themselves."

While you must be very careful around the hind feet of both, you need to pay special attention to a cranky mule.

"A horse just kicks," Steve explains. "A mule kicks and hits you where he wants to."

BY 10:45, NEARLY SIX HOURS after we first crawled out of bed, the pack train is moving. Except for a rare stop to adjust a pack saddle or a saddle blanket, we won't stop until we reach the next campsite. Hannah's sack lunches go in our saddle bags, ready to eat horseback as the day wears on.

Steve leads seven animals, as does Buck. Each mule in the string is tied to his fellows with a breakaway rope known as a "pig tail." All four wranglers keep an eye on the loads as we ride through the spectacular country under the looming Chinese Wall. These guys know what they're doing, and while we'll stop a time or two to secure a shifted load, the day is just one long and beautiful ride through the wilderness.

Not long after leaving camp, Buck's keen eyesight spots a mountain sheep on a rocky ledge. I strain, but can't pick it out. I'm not too disappointed. It's only our third day on the trail, and we've already seen big horn sheep, lots of elk, white tail deer, and last night we had a couple of mule deer bucks hang around camp the entire evening. They even came back in the morning to pose for pictures when the light was better. The big-eared deer were apparently after the salt left on the saddles by the sweat of our horses.

There's great fishing in this country, too. Our first night's camp was along Bigg's Creek. I'm a novice at trout fishing but caught a 12-inch rainbow on my very first cast. Ohio guests Dave and Susie Scott had good luck, as well, and we enjoyed trout hors d'oeuvres that night around the campfire.

After dinner, Buck led Dave and I to a hill overlooking a natural salt lick about 250 yards away. We watched in fascination as a big elk warily crept out of the surrounding woods to visit the lick. Later, we understood why that animal was so cautious, as we heard the distinct howl of a wolf.

There are other carnivores in this country. Back on the trail, we see the very fresh track of a grizzly bear in the muddy bank of a mountain stream.



 The Triple J crew includes Sharlee Goss, Hannah Mattingly, Steve Love, Buck Wood and Tim Love.

Lying south of Glacier National Park and bordered by two other wilderness areas, the Bob Marshall is one of the most unspoiled areas left in the American West. I'm one of the lucky few who actually gets to see it, but for the wranglers, it's their office.

"Not much money," comments Steve about his work. "But there's a lot of satisfaction."

The 50-something Buck got his first guide license in 1977. He's as good as they get, and one the nicest guys you'll ever meet. Some years he's been in the backcountry from July to Thanksgiving, with just two short breaks. Married and with two grown daughters and a young grandson, he does miss his family, but loves the life of a wrangler.

"I like living in the outdoors, looking at Creation," he shares.

The people are a big attraction, too. These wranglers meet folks from all over the world. Claudia Vorwerk is here from Switzerland on her second nine-day pack trip with the Triple J. This time, she brought her husband, Bernhard Aeschaecher. Neither ride much back home, but in this rugged country the horses rarely get out of a walk and both are having a fine time.

"You have time to observe, look around, see animals if they're around," comments Bernhard.

"And just time to sit and think without rushing," adds Claudia.

The Scotts own a nursery back in Ohio, and Susie is especially enthralled with the wildflowers. Here in mid-summer, we are riding through the peak of the bloom.

"It occurred to me what an absolute privilege it is to get into an area like this and share it with these guys that live up here," she says, as we enjoy a last night around the campfire. "It's just been a total treat."

The wranglers will tell you it's not always a treat. The weather can get rough, the work can be back-breaking, and the horses they ride are always the greenest of the ranch string, getting trained as they put on the miles so that someday they'll be ready for guests. But like the song says, seldom is heard a discouraging word. In fact, what you almost always hear out of this crew are jokes, laughs, never a whine, and while they are human, they almost always have a pleasant disposition.

It's a little different than most workplaces. I wonder if I could get an application. 

Mark Bedor is a California-based writer. For more information on Triple J Wilderness Ranch, visit triplejrancho.com. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.