



## Riding the Big Horn Mountains

By Susan Peters



There is something special for me about the Big Horns – a huge national forest on the Wyoming/Montana border. It has drawn me back every year for the past five years. While it is a long drive from Denver (about 500 miles one way), it is a relatively easy drive – all interstate; very little traffic in Wyoming; and no mountain passes until you head up to the Big Horns. I have always gone

the first week of August as I have had great luck with the weather that week. While the drive up in previous years had temperatures of 104 in Sheridan Wyoming at 4:00 in the afternoon, once up in the Big Horns the temperature drops 40 degrees and is very comfortable.

Weather can, unfortunately, make or break a ride – and we got lucky - all week - it would be nice during the day and rain at night - mostly light rain and short duration. This year with all the rain – Wyoming was the greenest and most beautiful I have ever seen it. The flowers were spectacular. In most meadows - every step meant stepping on a bunch of wildflowers. The Indian Paintbrush (Wyoming State Flower) came in a huge range of colors including a brilliant pink, orange, and white.

I headed up early as I wanted to scout out areas for camping. Friday night I stayed in the Fairgrounds in Sheridan, Wyoming. It was county fair time so lots of kids working with their cows, goats, rabbits, sheep, etc. A great opportunity to expose my horse to farm animals. They have a race track that goes all the way around the stadium - so in the morning I saddled up and cantered around the fairgrounds – a real treat to have soft, predictable terrain for cantering.

I left the fairgrounds on Saturday morning and headed up the mountain. I found a good camp spot for our 5 rigs that was only 2.7 miles off the paved highway on a nice gravel road.

was adjacent to our camp site). It was a 15 mile loop that took us up the valley along a creek and back down the other side of the creek. It was a great first day's ride as it was relatively easy with little elevation gain. We stopped in a beautiful aspen grove along the river for lunch.

The wonderful thing about this area is that you have a huge variety of terrain from great open vistas, to meadows, to thick forests. The next day we rode “the open country” and went to the top of Bald Mountain. On the way up we were able to spread out and cantered/trotted/gaited as we wanted. We came across a bull moose in a meadow and then later saw an elk and her baby. The biggest rabbit with the largest ears I have ever seen took one of the dogs riding with us for quite a romp across the mountaintop (I can see where they got the idea for Jackalopes!) The view from the top of Bald Mountain was spectacular and we finally had cell phone service!

The next day we took a completely different trail – the Jaws Trail/Bucking Mule Falls Trail. This trail is 10 miles one way – and then you come back 10 miles by a gravel road. But what a deceptive ten miles!! The first six miles is the Jaws Trail and is designated as a National Trail. It borders

a beautiful creek rising through a canyon. Some of the trail is through wet land – and has wooden boardwalk to protect the trail – an interesting obstacle for the horses. At a lovely meadow – most riders turn around and go back – but the trail goes on to Bucking Mule Falls so we went on.

From that point the trail got much more difficult. We came across the bones, skull, and even hooves with shoes still



The first day - we rode the Little Big Horn Trail (which

attached of a horse next to the trail – and spent some time



# Mountain States Fox Trotter Association

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*On the Trail! On the Rail! On the Ranch! The Missouri Fox Trotter!*

speculating on what happened. Was it shot? Did it get lost during hunting season? Why didn't scavengers scatter the bones?



Trees had fallen down obstructing the trail and we would have to bushwhack around the down trees. We were getting pretty discouraged by all the down trees when we heard a beautiful sound – the sound of chain saws behind us. A group of local families with their kids come up every summer and clear the trails so they can hunt during September/October. By chance, this group was following us on the trail. It sure was nice knowing that they were behind us and if we ran into more trees, we could just stop and wait for them to catch up. Then we got to 3 really tough, steep, long climbs - an uphill, a huge downhill into a canyon - and another huge uphill to get to the trail head. Both horses and riders were tired after doing those hills!! We went to the Falls – which are spectacular. We were happy to take the road (easy) back to camp. The lesson learned here is to trailer to Bucking Mules Fall Trailhead and ride back DOWN the trail – it would still be a tough ride but it would be easier going downhill that coming up the canyon.

Our camping area was very close to the moose migration path so in the evening we could drive over and do some moose sighting. Wednesday we broke camp, went to Burgess Junction (a small resort area) to dump/get water, went to the visitor center - and then onto our second campsite. There are a number of good trails leading out of this campsite – and we explored all of them. Across the valley from our camp area and at the top of the ridge are some beautiful rock formations so in the morning we headed for the rocks. On the way to the rocks we came upon a huge herd of sheep guarded by a Great Pyrenees dog – the Great Pyrenees let us know in no uncertain terms that we were to give his sheep a wide berth. We rode up to and around the rocks and they formed a spectacular setting for some great pictures. As we left the rocks, we ran into the “County Trapper” who warned us to keep the dogs close as he had set leg traps for coyotes. He also told us that the Peruvian shepherd who had been watching the sheep with the Great Pyrenees dog – had quit a week earlier so the dog was guarding the sheep by himself (those dogs are pretty amazing).

On the last day we rode to a small lake called Duncan Lake. Blue dragonflies were enjoying time in the sun when we got to the lake. We rode around the lake and with a little bushwhacking, we found a hidden Lily Pond. Being the adventurous type – we decided to go back to camp a different way and looked at maps and went cross country until we hit a river that took us back to camp.

We barely scratched the surface of exploring the Big Horns. We were riding in the northern part of the National Forest and lots of good riding can be done in the southern part. We hope to head for that part of the Big Horns in the future. ■

