

2012 PNW BCL Rendezvous

The annual Pacific Northwest Backcountry Llama Rendezvous was held the last weekend of June 2012, organized by Rattlesnake Ridge Ranch (RRR) with assistance from volunteers. Every couple of years we like to change the venue to spread out the travel opportunities (and burden) for attendees, as well as keeping things fresh for regular participants.



The first RRR-organized backcountry rendezvous and Pack Llama Trial Association double pack trial was held June 2006 at Godman Springs Campground in the Wenaha-Tucannon (Blue Mountains) of SE Washington. With the exception of a large rental cabin at this site, camping was primitive.

The next two years in June more upscale accommodations were visited at Emigrant Springs in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon – renting a recently remodeled community building with a large commercial kitchen. This made large scale food preparation considerably easier. RV sites with full hookups, cabins and corrals were available. Hiking trails extend around the camp but there were restrictions on where we could go with the llamas inside the campground. A post-rendezvous pack trip in the Wallowas was organized for those so inclined, targeted at intermediate to advanced packers.

The following year we moved to Ensign Ranch near Cle Elum, Washington, another plush and well groomed resort and equestrian camp in central Washington next to the Cascade mountain range, camping along the Yakima River. Changed to September when the campground isn't packed with campers, this site provided scenic and colorful driving trails and diverse accommodations such as tent camping, various cabins, lodge, bunkhouse, RV sites, teepees, outdoor amphitheater, swimming hole, lake, canoes, and more. There were no access restrictions in the 325 acre camp and lots of surrounding hiking trails. PLTA double Pack Trials were again added to the agenda with lots of challenging and varied obstacles, along with continuation of the post rendezvous pack trip – this time to Pete Lake in the Salmon La Sac region of the Cascades.

The next two years in June saw us in central Oregon's Blue Mountain Scenic Byway at Cutsforth Park near Heppner, which again provided a commercial kitchen and meeting hall, along with small cabins, RV hookups, corrals, playground, stream and fishing pond, and hiking trails. There were no restrictions on movement. PLTA double pack trials were moved to the Fall and focus shifted more towards first-timers and investigators, with a nearby beginners pack trip immediately following that elicited positive feedback from participants.

This year, as part of the change in venue we decided to return to our backcountry roots while continuing to provide mentoring for newcomers. Emphasis shifted to the beginners pack trip, making it part of rendezvous rather than a postscript. The plan was to gather in a large meadow next to the Tillamook, Oregon fairgrounds the first day and then pack into the nearby Bayocean Peninsula the next. This is an easy three mile hike on quite level ground, providing seclusion and very limited places a wayward llama could go should one wander off. It's a relatively narrow strip of land that separates Tillamook Bay from the Pacific Ocean, with few pathways mostly bordered by water or dense brush and trees. Beyond the walk-through gates one can also travel by cart.

Tillamook is famous for their dairy culture, producing many Tillamook-branded dairy products such as ice creams and cheeses distributed around the country, and though a small town it is a popular tourist destination.

We set out for Tillamook Thursday morning thinking there would be ample time to set up camp and prepare for the Friday official start of rendezvous. Unfortunately, one of the two truck and trailer combinations developed electrical problems on the way, delaying our arrival until about 12:30AM Friday morning – after some of the rendezvous participants had arrived. The grounds were wet from rain and more rain threatened, so our 15' X-Teepee tent was hastily erected for shelter and serve as camp lodge and the llamas tied out for the night. We managed to get bedded down before the skies opened up.

With continued off and on showers Friday morning, one of the llama trailers was cleaned out and a camp kitchen set up inside for meal preparation. As is typical for rendezvous, there was no shortage of food and helping hands. A variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, some harvested just the day before, accompanied eggs, pancakes, hash browns, sausage and juice.

Repairs continued on the truck and trailer following a parts run. Scouting of boat launches took place for the pack trip support boat. Additional rain shelters were erected. The fairgrounds had a rodeo scheduled this weekend, but with the unusually wet conditions this time of year – even by coastal Oregon standards – participants pulled out at the last minute not wanting to risk injury to their horses and many events were subsequently cancelled. The prepared but vacant stables were offered to rendezvous participants by the fair superintendent, which we took advantage of to keep the twenty-six llamas dry and comfortable.

A spaghetti lunch was provided. Attendees continued to arrive throughout the day. Debra Langley-Boyer conducted a Dutch Oven cooking seminar early evening, which resulted in lots of tasty dishes – inclusive of main, side and dessert – to accompany a prepared buffalo stew dinner. With the additional potluck contributions there was plenty of delicious food to go around. A Leave-No-Trace display was prominent throughout Friday's activities.



The weather forecast was checked for Saturday which predicted increasing rain through the afternoon into the evening and an improved outlook for Sunday. The fair superintendent invited us to participate in their annual dairy parade through town scheduled for Saturday morning. The rendezvous participants decided they would like to delay the hike to Bayocean until Sunday, hoping for a break in the weather to relocate camp. The parade was therefore a go. Saturday morning after another hearty breakfast the llamas were saddled up with their pack regalia, Sunshine hitched to the cart (decorated with lights), and the llamas quickly pressed

into PR duty. Not knowing the parade route, we didn't really know what we were getting into. As it turned out, the full loop with the return walk back to camp was five miles, which with the pace of the parade took half of the day. Thankfully there was only one rain shower. All the llamas, experienced or not, did great and they were a hit with the crowd – especially the kids. It was good experience for the llamas.

Following lunch the seminars originally planned for Saturday afternoon went on as scheduled. Bob Schimpf presented the background and results of his recently completed llama DNA study, with unexpected findings. A dozen classic llamas with known pedigree going back to early foundation studs in North America were tested for three DNA markers that distinguish guanaco (llama) from vicuña (alpaca). A similar larger study conducted earlier in Peru with llamas and alpacas in general showed 40% of llamas possessing vicuña markers and 92% of alpacas possessing guanaco markers (hybrids). In Bob's population, 100% of the llamas showed vicuña or in-between results on one of those three markers (all the same one), indicating cross-breeding with alpaca in their ancestry – presumably prior to importation. A neighbor's alpaca was included as a control subject and tested as all alpaca (no guanaco). Continued study of a larger sample population in North America would be informative as this small study indicates the percentage of mixed ancestry is much higher in North American llamas than in South America – implying that a disproportionate number of early North American foundation stock were actually hybrids. Perhaps this is true of most llamas exported from South America. A more detailed summary of Bob's findings to date has been submitted for publication in the BCL and Llama Life newsletters, so watch for that.





Lisa Wolf, botanist and plant identification expert, followed with a seminar on identification of toxic plants that llamas may encounter on the trail or meadow. This included general plant and animal characteristics that affect the likelihood of a poisoning incident, and what preventive measures can be taken. After group instruction, folks headed out on a guided “field trip” to identify local flora and assess potential toxicity. This is a vitally important topic for llama packers and while there is a seemingly overwhelming amount of information to absorb, many valuable lessons were learned.

After exercising the brain it was time once again for... more food! Debra put on a camp cuisine demonstration that all could sample on top of the prepared stir-fry dinner and potluck offerings.

Sunday morning after another big breakfast a few folks had to pull out for home, but most packed up for the trek to Bayocean. The hike in went smoothly and conditions were good with camp set up before a light intermittent rain resumed, but not enough to prevent starting an evening campfire. With all the moisture the varied foliage was lush and green. The boat was delayed with mechanical difficulties, arriving late in the day after launching from Garibaldi with a bale of hay, water and other supplies, and then provided boat rides in the bay for the kids. Back at camp with the kitchen set up on a picnic table a campfire was started and a grilled pork chop dinner prepared with fresh fruits, vegetables and rice dishes.



Monday saw a day trip to the ocean beach. With the cool, drizzly weather the Pacific Ocean water felt



uncharacteristically warm and several of the llamas bravely ventured knee deep in the swells. The weather was not conducive to the available kite or Frisbee flying, but those that wanted to did get their feet (and more) wet and explored a bit. Mussels were harvested from the bay afterwards and the kids also went on a productive agate hunt. There was considerable informal discussion around the fire after dinner and an impromptu knot tying session took place with folks teaching one another various knots.

Tuesday was pack out day and although the morning

saw heavy rain it stopped in time to load up and head out. Everyone hiked without incident, sans precipitation, and headed home safely. We got stuck in Portland traffic for two hours (welcome back to “civilization”) and didn’t arrive home until nearly midnight, but otherwise the trip was relatively uneventful.

A big thanks goes out to all the participants! Despite the inclement weather and mechanical difficulties, much was learned and enjoyed by both people and llamas. More photographs can be found on the RRR website.

We are willing to conduct another PLTA pack trial at Cutsforth Park, Oregon in the Fall of 2012 if enough volunteers and participants come forward. Please let us know of your interest.

So what’s in store for a rendezvous in 2013? Sticking to our backcountry roots we’re looking at gathering next in southeastern Oregon, with a trek into the Steens Mountain wilderness. Steens Mountain is known as the largest fault-block mountain (elevation 9733’) in North America and about half of the 900,000 acres of federal land is managed as a protected area and 175,000 acres designated as wilderness. Due to the unpredictable climate of this region rendezvous will likely be moved to a date later than the typical end of June. We welcome your thoughts and suggestions.

Scott & Gayle Noga

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