

2013 Pacific Northwest Backcountry Llama Rendezvous



The 2013 Pacific Northwest Backcountry Llama Rendezvous once again brought together aficionados of the working llama, this time to the starkly beautiful and topologically extreme Steens Mountain Wilderness of southeastern Oregon. This area is noted for wide open high altitude playas cut east to west by several parallel deep glacial gorges. Steens Mountain runs north to south thirty miles, separating the western highlands from the east with a mile high cliff, demarking the arid Alvord Desert to the east – a dry inland sea. It's the largest fault-block mountain in the northern Great Basin of the United States. The west-side ecology is shrub-steppe, with juniper forests and groves of aspen and cottonwood.

This is in marked contrast to last year's PNW rendezvous in the coastal Tillamook, Oregon area, where we were nearly rained out, but it's been an intentional feature of rendezvous to change the location to keep things fresh and provide varied travel opportunities from year to year for participants.

Due to the distances involved, successful planning and implementation of rendezvous this year was dependent upon local support, and that's where the Burns Llama Trailblazers stepped up to provide the necessary legwork required to put together a successful program – scouting the area for up-to-date conditions, interfacing with the local office of the US Bureau of Land Management, arranging for local guides and on-site medical support, and more.

Although rendezvous didn't officially begin until Friday afternoon of July 19, most people arrived Thursday, anxious to get an early start. Nobody reported any mishaps on the way, though travel did take a little longer than some anticipated with the curvy roads. The last twenty miles is gravel. The South Steens campground is remote. The nearest town, Frenchglen, population 12, is an hour and a half away. The nearest town of any size, Burns, population 2800, is two and a half hours away. Road conditions were good, with the gravel portion smooth for the most part, but very dusty. A slight breeze kept most of the dust at bay for followers.

The South Steens equine camp has corrals, tie racks, picnic tables and fireplaces. A solar powered well house provided fresh water, and a clean and well provisioned vault toilet rounded out the accommodations. Situated at 5300 feet elevation, Friday morning several of us made a day trip to the top of Steens Mountain at 9773 feet to get a view of the surrounding terrain. One can see into four states from the mountain and overlook the nearby lakes. The views are truly spectacular. (When exerting oneself a person can also feel the oxygen deprivation that occurs at altitude with heavier than normal breathing.)



Back in time for the official start of rendezvous (and customized porcupine meatball dinner) the schedule was adjusted in response to the higher than expected temperatures. This area is noted for summer storms that can dump rain, snow or hail that may abruptly drop temperatures from 75F to very cold. That was one of the main reasons the date was set later in the year compared to previous events. Unfortunately, we hit an abnormal heat wave. Daytime highs were in the upper nineties, with clear sunny skies. The mid-morning hike departures were moved to early morning, so everyone was required to rise early to saddle up. Personal sack lunches were prepared for the hikes from a wide variety of supplied fare for the llamas to carry and two guided groups organized to keep size below the wilderness requirements. (Steens has a twelve person limit, with up to eighteen stock, per group.)



A cross country llama hike to the historic Riddle Brothers Ranch included a guided discussion of common plants along the way, the risk (if any) to llamas, local ecology and controversial management efforts to control the spread of juniper and revitalize the aspen. Cattle and sheep grazing have been discontinued in the Steens Wilderness area – a rarity in the western states. Lisa Wolf, botanist, was a wealth of information.

Midway, Carla Burnside, a local archeologist, presented what is currently known about the history of indigenous people and how they lived, very successfully, in this demanding region (until the arrival of devastating diseases, followed by conflict with white settlers). We toured an archeological site, viewing artifacts, while the llamas munched grass in a nearby meadow.

Most folks continued on to Riddle Ranch, which was an active horse and cattle homestead beginning in 1896 until the passing of the last Riddle brother in 1950. The two story wood plank house, outbuildings and fencing still stand, filled with numerous artifacts and visitors are free to walk through them (please shut the door behind you), gaining a glimpse of early pioneering life in the wild west. The ranch is now a 1,120 acre historic district.

All the llamas did great.

Back at camp in time to avail ourselves of some afternoon shade, cool drinks and snacks, Guy Sheeter, a former BLM

wildlife biologist, presented information about the local wildlife and management history. This was followed by a discussion led by Becky Cunningham on pack llama nutrition and conditioning.

Dick Jenkins, local historian and longtime resident, arrived early evening to regale us with colorful local stories of the wild west, filled with intrigue and drama – true life accounts worthy of a Hollywood movie. Some of this history is contained in published books.

A potluck dinner was enjoyed by all and Camelid Theater included a twenty minute episode of Oregon Field Guide produced by Oregon Public Broadcasting, first aired a few months ago. It featured a six day llama trek into the central Cascade Mountains. One of the rendezvous attendees participated on that trek so was able to provide some background. It is a very positive and well produced segment.

Sunday started with a hearty breakfast of pancakes, eggs, bacon (lots of), fruit and more. The llamas were again taken on a hike, this time to the Blitzen trailhead for obstacle training. Anne Sheeter described and demonstrated the levels of obstacle difficulty in basic, advanced and master pack trials, and everyone got a chance to try them out. Again, the llamas did great.

After lunch, sequential seminars followed on pack systems and useful items to pack in them (Scott Noga), how to saddle and comfortably load llamas (Scott Noga, Carolyn Mathews and Joyce O'Halloran), and essential items to carry on person for wilderness survival (Debra Langley-Boyer). Time was then spent on packing for next day's hike into Big Indian Gorge, followed by dinner.

An early morning departure was planned for Monday morning's hike to again avoid the heat as much as possible. Everyone except a couple of the support staff planned to make the trip, but heat convinced a couple more to stay in base camp and relax. Again we split into two groups for the several mile trip, climbing to around 7000 feet, with three wading stream crossings and dispersed into three general camp areas, each with lush, tall meadow grass and stream.

I settled on an isolated small hardpan area (to minimize impact) next to the stream and backed by trees just above a beaver dam, which provided a deeper pool to seek relief from the midday heat. Temperatures were moderated somewhat in the gorge but still quite warm, cooling down considerably at night. After camps were



established hikes were taken up and down the deep gorge, which contained groves of aspen interspersed amongst the sage, waterfalls, and monumental spires of rock. A couple of us happened upon a very young marmot busy digging a new tunnel. He didn't notice anyone standing right over him as he was pushing around all that dirt, but once the dirt was shaken from his face and he suddenly realized he was being very closely observed, the shocked marmot bolted for a nearby burrow (captured on video).

The next day we received an unexpected surprise. It so happened the annual Steen Mountain Runners camp was going on that week at Fish Lake. This is a summer camp for 13-18 year old boys and girls and features a run down Big Indian gorge and back up Little Blitzen gorge. Nearly two hundred runners passed by mid-morning on the trail down the gorge.

The hike out was peaceful and uneventful. Cirrus clouds moved in and filtered the sunlight. Some hiked to Mud Creek for more camping (see addendum), which is in the open country south of Big Indian gorge. Others spent the night back at base camp to get an early start home the following morning.

Following camp dinner as evening temperatures moderated it was time for llama driving, concluding with a beautiful red-orange sunset providing a fitting backdrop to a relaxing evening.

The following day on the way to Burns we drove through Diamond Craters geologic "park", and paid a visit to a historical and unique round barn situated on open range, used around the turn of the last century to train team pull draft horses for the military. An impressive and well stocked visitor's center is nearby, filled with fascinating history books, artifacts and displays.

See <http://www.rattlesnakeridgeranch.com/rendezvous13.htm> for more details and photos.

Thanks go out to all the organizers and participants! Everyone lends a hand to make this annual event possible and we hope to perpetuate a forum for investigators of the working llama while providing an enjoyable time for everyone involved.

All in all, it was a wonderful time and we will likely be back (when it's cooler). What's in store for next year? Please send us your suggestions. Planning is already underway for Estacada, Oregon, the end of June. Mark your calendars!

Scott & Gayle Noga began their association with llamas in 2001 and have been organizing the PNW Backcountry Llama Rendezvous since 2006.

Rendezvous 2013: Mud Creek Outing

The participants of this year's rendezvous had to travel to a remote location this year at the base of the Steens Mountains in Harney County, Oregon. Of the 18 participants in the South Steens Campground, 14 went trekking up the Big Indian trail. After hiking in five to six miles, they split up to stay in three different camping meadows. Due to schedule limitations or the unusually hot weather, most chose to hike out the next day. Not the intrepid Mud Creek contingent though.

Following their knowledgeable, fearless leader, Lisa Wolf, this hardy group of six took their llamas to Mud Creek. They climbed up the side of Big Indian canyon and traveled cross country, off trail. Reaching the top, our leader attempted to find an old jeep trail that has not been used since this area became a wilderness. With the removal of livestock, nature took its course and covered the trail. Despite this, Lisa was able to locate the correct route through the sagebrush and juniper to get us to Mud Creek. Though we departed before seven o'clock, it was a hot hike by the time we reached the creek at lunch time. We stopped in the shade of some junipers to eat while Evan hiked farther down to look at potential camp sites.

He found a lovely meadow along the creek where we parked our belongings for two nights. The next day we hiked down to the Donner and Blitzen River. Carolyn Mathews led the way. We got to a section with no easy way through. Climbing up and especially back down the hill was a hair-raising experience and we felt a bit like goats. Both Evan and Dean regretted not having Oregon fishing licenses when we arrived at the river, as they spotted several likely riffles and holes. After a brisk (icy) dip in the river, the ladies felt much cleaner and refreshed.

We decided our return trip would definitely be by another route. Hiking upstream $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile, Carolyn followed deer tracks to a gap in the rocks and we found ourselves on a plateau. Scrambling over very rocky terrain, we returned to camp. On the way we passed a spring that Lisa and Carolyn had discovered on their evening jaunt the day before.

Finally it was Thursday and time to exit the wilderness. Leaving early again, we followed Lisa as she led us cross country to the jeep track that led back to the campground.

