

Abandoned Llama Rescue in the Goat Rocks Wilderness

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The Goat Rocks Wilderness in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest is situated roughly midway between the prominent Mt. Rainier and Mt. Adams in the southern Washington Cascade mountain range. It has the distinction of being the highest elevation of the popular Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) that stretches from Canada to Mexico. Strikingly rugged and beautiful, it attracts large numbers of backpackers in addition to the many PCT through-hikers.

By early August of 2014, hikers began to notice a solitary brown llama roaming around the area from Snowgrass Flats in the south, an alpine meadow, and what is commonly referred to as “the knife” 3-4 miles to the north – a rocky, very narrow portion of the PCT with steep glaciated slopes on either side. Hiker blogs and online forums began making mention of a “loose llama”. This did not come to my attention until the afternoon of September 17th when an unfamiliar person E-mailed me directly with a link to a [Portland Hikers](#) forum thread with pictures. The llama had no halter or collar. Later the same day Gary Kauffman of Roads End Llamas forwarded to the llama-info chat list a similar contact from another person that may have heard about it via a horse group. Over a month had passed and word was suddenly spreading to llama folks.

While a public discussion ensued on llama-info, I made private contact to a couple of llama people I knew in the area. The closest was Noel McRae, founder of The Backcountry Llama, who resides just a few miles west of there. None recognized or had heard anything about this llama. Noel contacted several more prominent packers in the northwest and received the same response. A Forest Service contact said there was no report of a lost llama from an owner but they were well aware of the llama’s presence. Rangers had observed the llama on numerous occasions and reported she would come right up to them but would run off as soon as they tried to get hold of her. One ranger attempted to find and capture on horseback – an encounter that reportedly didn’t go well when the horse feared for his/her safety near a potentially predatory llama. The llama’s gender was unknown throughout this ordeal but I will use the female pronoun.

An internet search turned up other more recent references to the loose llama made on hiker forums, including a blog post from a group of PCT through-hikers that happened not only upon the llama but in the vicinity found a large red collar on the ground off the trail with the name “Denali” printed on it – the llama’s collar? From here on she would be known as Denali, for lack of any other name. I wrote the person that posted the collar message but never received a reply.

Charley Rosenberry, llama packer from Vashon Island (Puget Sound), volunteered on llama-info to help with a rescue. I contacted Charley privately. That same weekend Maureen O’Neil of Tacoma was hiking in the Goat Rocks and happened to see the llama. The following Monday after receiving word from the Forest Service that they didn’t plan to take any action, she contacted Southwest Llama Rescue about the situation, which was posted to their mailing list. Noel McRae later made contact with the Forest Service to express his disappointment in their lack of timely notification of the loose llama and had passed the word to Jeff Fisker, another llama packer in the Portland area, and others soliciting assistance with a rescue.

Busy schedules didn't allow for a coordinated attempt until the first weekend of October. Having camped at the trailhead the night before, Charley Rosenberry hiked in with a pair of female llamas early Friday morning as far as "the knife" (nearly 9 actual trail miles and 3150' climb one way) – assumed to be a physical barrier – and was already most of the way out as Lisa Wolf (Pack Llama Trail Association President), Gayle Noga and myself hiked in with three of our boys, Rowdy, Marley and Wizard. Charley had not seen the llama but did make contact with a couple of campers in the area who had also not seen anything. The weather was good with above normal temperature for early October and we arrived at the bypass trail camp at dark.

The following morning, equipped with day packs, we each set out in different directions with walkie-talkies, covering the area trails in search of the elusive llama. Lisa took the Goat Lake trail west, I took the east PCT north to the area where Charley had searched, and Gayle was to search the Snowgrass loop interconnecting trails. About three miles away, north of where the Snowgrass Flats trail intersects with the PCT, I observed what turned out to be two PCT through-hikers well off the trail to the east but when they saw I had a llama they quickly approached to ask if I was looking for a loose one. They informed me a llama was over a rise to the east. After calling Gayle and Lisa via radio, my plan was to just park it where the llama could see me and see if she would approach, which I fully expected she would do to check out Rowdy, and simply appear non-threatening and possessing treats while awaiting the arrival of the others. I reached the rise and sure enough, there she was cushed about 150 yards beyond. She stood and struck a stunning pose. Telephoto shot below:



Denali postured and Rowdy began clucking. After a brief exchange she started approaching at a fast walk. Then, my two informants walked up from behind and up to the rise, out of curiosity I suppose. At that point Denali inexplicably froze, then turned away and took off up the hillside and out of sight. I waited, hoping she would just check us out from a high point, but that was the last she was seen. I suggested the two should move on, which they did.

With no return of the llama, Lisa, Wizard, Rowdy and I spent the rest of the day scanning with binoculars and scouring the rugged slopes to no avail until nearly nightfall, walking for many miles. She seemingly vanished into thin air. Tracks indicated she kept going higher, far up the slopes to the south. I learned from some nearby campers that prior to my arrival my two "informants" had spent well over an hour (they said two hours) chasing her, armed with twine. To the campers they spoke of riches thinking they could take this llama into town to sell for big bucks. The llama had been out in the open earlier in the day but had been chased out of view. Needless to say, thanks to that our chances of actually securing this llama were pretty hopeless from the start.

We had to leave the next day since I didn't have any time off from work. The miles of hiking the day before at least provided important information. Out of view of any trails, I discovered numerous bean piles, a bedding area and many tracks. With this I was armed with a strategy for a return trip to camp with staked out llamas at this out-of-sight spot Denali frequented.

On the way back we posted our contact information for sightings at the Snowgrass and Berry Patch trailheads.

Second hand information had been received, presumably due to an unofficial comment made by a forest ranger to a camper, that the Forest Service planned to shoot this llama rather than let him overwinter, fearing disease transmission to the mountain goats in this area. Hunting season was getting underway. The weather was changing and this rugged area with lots of deadfall in the lower elevations (treeless in the upper) is known for very heavy snowfall, often with over a foot at a time and tens of feet over winter. Time was running out.

Coordination of another expedition started right away with the first opportunity for multiple people to make the journey three weeks away – the last weekend of October. Noel McRae, Jeff Fisker, Charley Rosenberry, Maureen O'Neil and myself volunteered. I could travel as early as Friday, Jeff and Noel could do early Saturday morning, while Charley and Maureen would arrive Saturday afternoon. Charley had a rope corral. I had portable fencing. I'll spare you the sundry details but each of us had to overcome many complications leading up to this second attempt.

Due to the posted trailhead notice, each weekend I received a report from a hiker that they observed the llama in the same area I had seen her, which was encouraging. Some tried to approach the llama but she would not let anyone get close without moving away. The picture below was sent from a hiker, taken from the PCT. I've added an arrow to point out Denali in case you can't see her.



As our departure time approached the weather report was not looking good for the entire week, with further deterioration forecast through the weekend. Sunday's forecast was 99% chance of precipitation all day and night. My expectation was that Denali would not be an easy catch due to being on her own for so long, being chased repeatedly by people, and judging by her recent observed behavior. I figured we would have only one chance and once spooked she would be gone, at least for the day. This was likely our last weekend to catch her and if unsuccessful there would probably be nothing more we could do. I planned for a slow and methodical approach, camping in the llama's turf overnight, not jeopardizing the capture with a rushed attempt, and allowing some time to locate her and gain trust while awaiting the arrival of assistance. Friday had the least precipitation in the forecast for a more comfortable establishment of a camp, with Friday and Saturday evenings at 90% precipitation, and would provide more time if I hiked in early to await the arrival of the others.

Hedging my bet due to no third chance, I also packed a blowgun with two tranquilizer darts in the event we could get only within a short distance and corralling didn't work out. Darts are problematic in llamas because dense fiber can slide the sleeve off the side-port needle before penetration.

Noel had to bow out due to recent hand surgery but offered his nearby yurt as an overnight camp for those who needed it. I headed out Friday to spend the night in the wet mountains with my hiking buddy Rowdy so I'd have Saturday morning to search, etc. From the Packwood area of White Pass I could see that the higher elevations were already covered in snow. This concerned me as that could drive Denali out of the area where I was expecting to find her, in search of food – all the more reason to get in early and pin down her location.

We hit the trail in the early afternoon from the eerily vacant trailhead. All tracks had been swept away by recent rains. It was completely overcast with thick, low clouds and wet with passing occasional light sprinkles, but the forest trees dripped continually. Already at this elevation a cloud would sometimes envelop us in fog, moving on the slight breeze, then pass. As long as we were hiking it didn't feel cold and it was very quiet, dark and tranquil actually, but the skies threatened continually.

We reached the snowline before the bypass trail intersection and kept moving, with the heavy drips from the trees progressively joined by slushballs. I was thankful for my wide brimmed hat. The wind was slight but very gradually increasing, causing the trees to occasionally sway and release a barrage. The open Snowgrass Flats offered a welcome break from the pelting, but time was running out and we needed to reach camp.

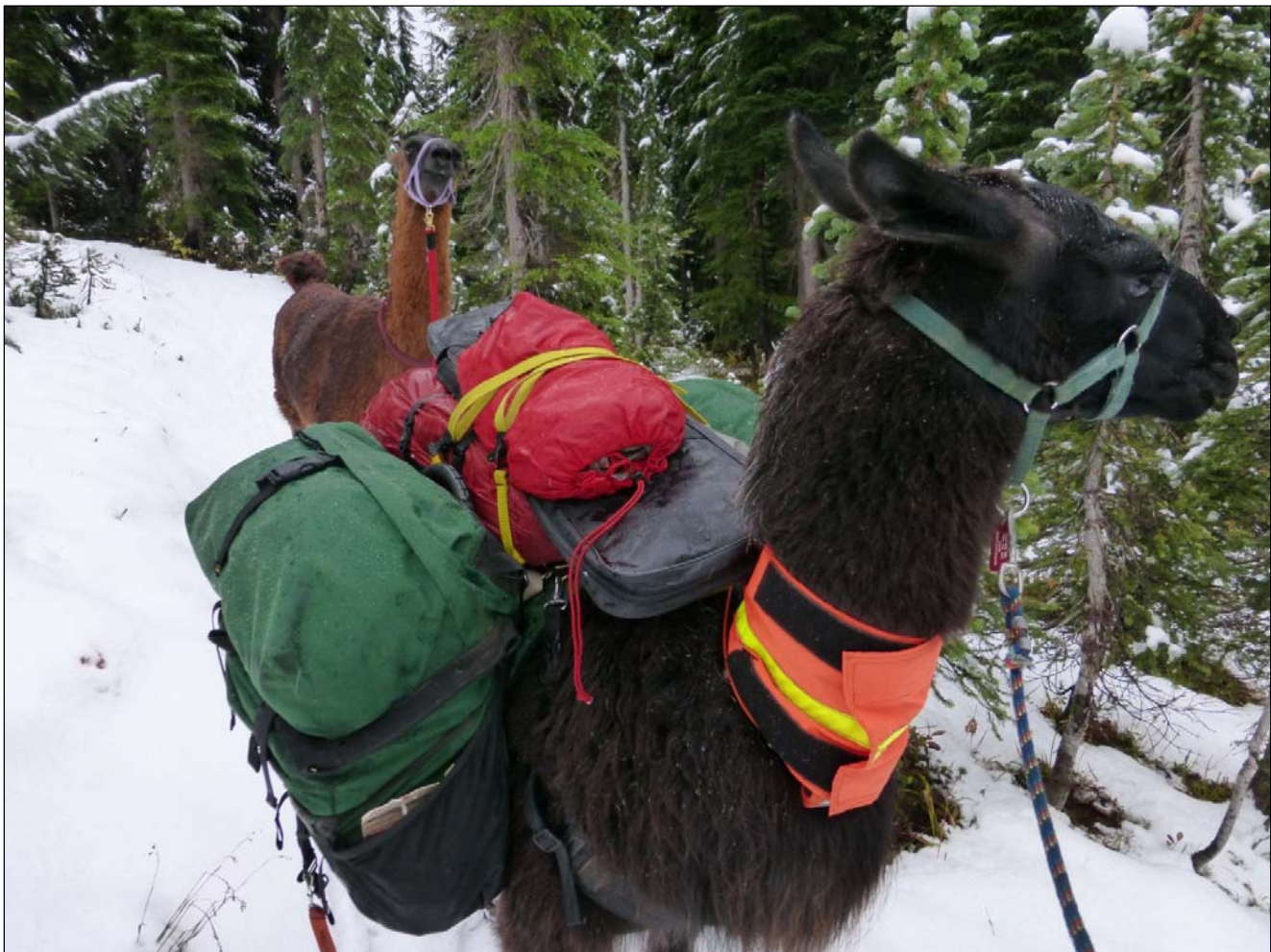
As we continued to climb back into the trees, observing occasional small deer tracks, we came upon a set of llama prints in the snow, crossing perpendicular to the trail. Further on, they crossed again in the opposite direction. This was rather unexpected as the high meadow she had been staying in the past several weeks was still about a mile away. Knowing the trail would soon switch back to cross again in the direction of the tracks, I hoped to pick up the tracks again further up the trail. As we made the bend and climbed towards a rise about fifty yards ahead, still in the trees, with the only sound the crunching of snow underfoot and Rowdy's slight jingle of ID tag, a llama suddenly and silently sprang into view over the rise coming to a broadside stop on top, having arrived at a fast pace. She had obviously heard us approach.

I immediately and quickly stepped alongside Rowdy and unzipped his upper pannier compartment where I had staged the treat bag, halter and lead. As I released Rowdy, standing at his rear quarter, Denali ran to us and went nose-to-nose with Rowdy. Following introductions, I offered treats which Rowdy first helped himself to, demonstrating there was good stuff in there. She investigated very tentatively, but then dived in and quickly backed off quite a ways with a mouthful. Not one to pass on treats, Rowdy uncharacteristically moved off a

short distance leaving the two of us to do our dance. It seemed he knew just what needed to be done. (After all, I had been telling him all along why we were there.)

As the two of us casually conversed in “llama”, I provided treats and we both moved apart. This went on and she gradually became bolder as I gradually made it less-easy to get to the treats. Over time she had to reach a bit closer and then actually around me to get to them and I kept slightly moving a bit away from her each time, playing hard to get. Eventually she was reaching completely around me, whereupon I made my move. She struggled but I hung on, kept a calm tone and also kept the treat bag in front of her nose as best I could. This could end badly as she quite easily could choose to run and bash me into a tree, but after a bid to get away she relented and dove back into the bag which I lowered to the ground as I exchanged it with the halter in my hand. I slipped it on between mouthfuls while keeping a firm hold on her. In all it took about ten or fifteen minutes as I took my time, not wanting to rush things and blow it, though she concerned me a couple times she appeared as though she was going to take off.

Once I had her lead in hand and retrieved the treat bag, I called Rowdy who promptly returned. I shared some treats with him and pulled the string lead from his pannier and connected Denali to Rowdy, secured his panniers and began to walk to see how she would lead behind him. Thankfully she followed right behind as though she had been doing it all day. It was getting late and I knew that if we headed back at this point it would be dark before we reached the trailhead but if she would lead well that seemed much more appealing than setting up a camp in the wet and deteriorating conditions, even if I ended up sleeping in the horse trailer.



The precipitation and wind continued to increase as we hiked out. Light snow turned to freezing rain, then to a steady light rainfall. In addition to slushballs tree branches occasionally broke off and fell to the ground nearby as we descended, but other than the noise and movement concerning the llamas a bit now and again, stopping to investigate, the trek out was uneventful. She loaded into the borrowed horse trailer fine, where hay was waiting, but although Rowdy welcomed the meal she oddly seemed uninterested (and still has little interest in hay). It wasn't until this time I determined the llama was a female.

After leaving a crude note at both trailheads that the llama was rescued, we drove out to the highway – a 21 mile slow slog through washboarded and potholed dirt road – and headed east through the pass. By this time it was a very heavy downpour and pitch black. I was thankful I had converted our truck to HID headlights for better illumination but sorry the llamas had to ride in a cold, wet trailer instead of our “llama limo” custom E350 bus, which was still in the shop.

By the time we arrived home about midnight, Denali was cold – shivering and hypothermic with a 98.8F body temperature. Her wet fiber, only about an inch or so long, still has sparse undercoat. With the unseasonably warm weather she was not yet prepared for the late but rapidly approaching winter. In Eastern Washington it wasn't raining but a cold wind was blowing from the North. She was placed into a dry shelter with infrared heater and dried with a Circuiteer hot air blower, though it was so humid that she just wouldn't dry completely.

At daybreak she was up and was greeted over the fence by many llamas, eager to meet the new arrival. Intake assessment revealed external and internal parasite issues, none extreme or particularly concerning, and apparent nutritional deficiency with pronounced facial alopecia. Body score was normal. With the cool weather it took another day before she fully recovered from the chill. After only a week she is already visibly responding to the treatments, with new hair just beginning to grow back on her face. She was seen by a vet who pronounced her in good condition and judging by the minimal teeth wear does not appear to be nearly as old as I thought – quite young actually. Large, loose mammaries probably means she has had an offspring though. While the minor conditions are being addressed, she is revealing herself to be a rather friendly and easy to handle gal.

Our rescue ranch is over capacity so Denali is likely destined for a new home, but rest assured she will go to a



good home where her talents are appreciated. Who knows, she may *visit* the Goat Rocks Wilderness again someday – her home a long way from home.



Postscript:

In mid-November Denali was transported to a new home with lots of hilly space with a caretaker that has an active female pack string and a 4-H group that will be providing plenty of regular stimulation. She is very excited to have Denali become part of the herd!