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## Wild Warning: Fishing bear country with llamas

By KRIS MILLGATE Tight Line Media Aug 20, 2019



Access Wild uses llamas to haul camp into the backcountry. Many of the llamas are raised in Ririe.

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There's a washing machine in the lead and a salad chopper as caboose.

The washing machine is a stove bouncing inside saddlebags strapped around Quincy. Quincy is a llama. The salad chopper is a mouth munching grass. That's Marshall, another llama. The pack train includes a pair of guides, a handful of hikers and nearly a dozen llamas heading into Yellowstone's backyard through a roadless corner in eastern Idaho.

Bechler Meadows is their final destination. They plan to fish remote rivers, hike dusty trails and soak in hot pools. Sounds ideal with llamas hauling all the weight. Well, all of it but the canister of bear spray. Everyone carries a can because this isn't a mild adventure. This is fishing in bear country. The kind of country you count by nights instead of days.

## **Night One**

Bravery wanes as dark washes over the meadow on the first night. It's clear and cold, but the frigid atmosphere isn't temperature related. It's wildlife induced.

"I've never camped or hiked where there's grizzly bears," said Cade Rees, first-time fly fisher. "Walking around at night to go to the bathroom is a no for me." Rees quit liquids a few hours ago, tapering his odds of an evening evacuation. The group leader, with no fear of night beasts, is still hydrating. He's also hanging food, and anything else that smells, out of reach. Bears that get into food get into trouble.

"I have to do this. If I don't, I know what happens to the bears," said Thomas Baumeister, Access Wild co-owner and outfitter. "Three encounters and they'll start raiding campsites. The area will close while the bear is tracked and then the bear will be killed." Grizzlies are on the endangered species list. The population, federally protected since 1975, increased from less than 200 in the 1980s to more than 700 today in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). The GYE includes portions of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming plus Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks.

More than four million people visit Yellowstone annually, most of them by automobile. Far from the crowd in cars, there's only foot and hoof traffic allowed in Bechler and it's a long way from help.

"I Googled bear spray versus a gun before I came," said Rees. "When it comes right down to the moment, you're probably better off using bear spray."

## **Night Two**

Brooks Hansen is cooking fish for dinner on night two. He's in charge of meals on this trip. Pancakes sandwiched peanut butter cups for breakfast. Halibut he caught in Alaska and hauled in on llama is for dinner. He feeds hikers well. Just hikers. Not bears.

"I have to be a lot more careful," said Hansen, Camp Chef communications manager. "I can't accidentally spill onions and cheese on the ground when making omelets for everyone. If I do, it all has to be cleaned up."

His stoves have to be wiped down daily too. Bleach erases the scent of edibles so the cook tops don't have to hang, but everything else does and it's a chore. All smells must hang 10 feet high with 4 feet of clearance on both sides.

"Have you tried to throw a rope 10 feet up and not get hit when the bag comes down?" Baumeister said. "It's comical."

Even more comical is what's accidentally left out of the hanging heap. Propane canister the first night. Hand sanitizer the second. First toss tanks. The bottle of germ-killing gel hits the bottom of the bags, shoots back like a boomerang and sends everyone scattering. Second toss doesn't even graze its target. No surprise. This is a game best played before dark, but it never is. Third toss by the light of two headlamps is a direct hit. The bottle lands on top of the pile where it spends the night with today's garbage and tomorrow's groceries plus toothpaste, liquor and lip balm.

### **Night Three**

Llamas make this crazy loo-loo-loo call when a grizzly enters camp. On the last night, Marshall is loo-loo-looing shortly after Rees catches his first trout on a fly. A rainbow. Hansen taught him how to cast, but the fun is over. The joke about applying scented lip balm before the tube goes up the hang isn't funny anymore. The mouths in camp smell like fruit and wax. Marshall smells like the llama cookies he ate all day and he's still loo-loo-looing.

"We put the llamas around the tents for a reason," Baumeister said. "We take advantage of llamas as our alert system. If a grizzly comes in, the llamas will know it before we do."

Baumeister laughs at his guest's lack-of-sleep confession while packing up the next morning. He heard Marshall in the night too. It was ah-choo not loo-loo. Marshall was sneezing. By sunrise light, the scary night seems silly, but moments of serious wild warning are a reality in Yellowstone.

Risk awareness weighs heavy on the llama train as it leaves. This time the group marches between a hummer and a hider. The hummer is Marshall. He hums when he's going home. The hider is Joaquin, a younger llama with less experience. He thinks sitting down helps him hide from the hike. The sit happens twice in the last few miles. The exit parade hears elk scream twice in those last few miles too.

Summer is falling, bulls are bugling and bears are bulking up. They'll den up by December and run-ins with humans will subside for a few months. Grizzlies will return to Bechler in June and a few adventurous explorers will follow close on their heels with llamas in the lead and bear spray in hand.

*Outdoor journalist Kris Millgate is based in Idaho where she runs trail and chases trout. Sometimes she even catches them when she doesn't have a camera, or a kid, on her back. Her first book 'My Place Among Men' is available now. See more of her work at [www.tightlinemedia.com](http://www.tightlinemedia.com)*

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