

Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Backpacking, 2015

– Dan Styer

(Trip dates: 28 July – 4 August 2015.)

Dusk at a ridgetop backpack campsite. Already I am in my sleeping bag and lying on the ground. My brother Bill stands twenty yards away, brushing his teeth. He says “Something’s flying: a bird or a bat.”

I look around and see nothing. Then a movement from the direction opposite Bill. Coming to rest on a Lodgepole Pine branch is a huge Barred Owl. Bill shines his flashlight on the owl and for long seconds we watch each other. Then the owl lifts from his perch ... and flies straight toward Bill!

Bill ducks, but he doesn’t need to – the owl swerves out of the light beam and descends toward me, but then swoops off into the night.

Hours later I awaken and peer over to the same branch. The moonlight shows that the owl has returned. I think “This is only the first night of our eight-day backpacking trip, yet I know that this episode will be the highlight of the entire journey.”

Indeed it almost was. My brother and I were returning to Idaho’s Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness for our fifth backpacking trip there in the last ten years. The Selway-Bitterroot is the second-largest designated Wilderness area in the contiguous 48 states, larger than the state of Delaware, and our four previous long trips had only scratched the surface, as this one would. We knew that our trip would be spectacular as well as difficult.



Shasta Lake, Morning Light

And it was: After our owl night we went swimming in Lottie Lake, in Shasta Lake, and in upper Two Lakes (where we swam with a Cutthroat Trout). We had great views from Huckleberry Butte, Stanley Butte, and Fish Lake Saddle. We encountered horrible trail near Rhoda Creek: eroded, brushy, littered with blowdowns from an old burn. (It was so hot that I nearly passed out.) In addition to the owl, we saw an American Dipper, playful Spotted Sandpipers, Grouse, a bright-red Cassin's Finch – and for symmetry I heard a Barred Owl hoot on our final night. And wildflowers! Fireweed, Mountain Boykinia, Rattlesnake Orchid, Parry Gentian, Partridge Foot, red and yellow Monkey Flowers, *Corydalis caseana*, yellow Roundleaf Violet. Ferns. Luscious huckleberries in the upper reaches of the Boulder Creek Valley, where we surprised a bear who was also partaking in huckleberries. Solitude: on our eight-day trip, we saw others only on the first, seventh, and final days – our three days closest to the road. Difficult climbs in oppressive heat. A frosty morning. Biting flies. Unlocatable trails. Ancient forests.

On our next-to-last day we walked down the Boulder Creek Trail to a trail intersection. There we waited about an hour, and were rewarded when Bill’s daughter Emily, granddaughter Maya (aged five years), and their energetic little dog Cubby walked up. The day was pleasantly cool, the trail was well-maintained. The five of us forded Boulder Creek, then walked up through ancient forest to Stanley Hot Springs.

The hot springs offered a great place to soak and clean after seven tough days in the wilderness. Emily provided apples for our first fresh fruit in a week. Maya and Cubby – and Emily as well – provided joy. Maya searched the woods near our selected campsite and proclaimed one magnificent Douglas Fir to be the “King of the Forest”. I snoozed on the ground, and upon waking I proclaimed this day to be “One of the best days of my life.”



Maya, Cubby, and the “King of the Forest” (photo by Emily)

For this night, Bill had carried a dehydrated Lasagna casserole for a week. But Emily had brought in a box of macaroni and cheese. I cooked both dinners and we enjoyed them both. Then came Emily's surprise: marshmallows to roast!

There followed more soaking, a night of sound sleep, still more soaking, and a five-mile walk back to the trailhead. Maya organized us into telling stories, singing songs, and reciting poems, but for me the recitation was already clear: the next-to-highlight of our journey was the exotic owl encounter, but the highlight was the familiar warm love of family in the wilderness.



Great Uncle Dan and Maya (photo by Emily)