



FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

An ordinary trail ride ends in a harrowing escape as a spreading wildfire cuts off the route home.



By Cindy Casey

I was hungry and tired, and I wanted to be home. The dusty dirt road seemed to never end, and my windshield wipers had to constantly push away the dust to allow me a view of the trailer just ahead. I could only wonder how my horse, Zory, was faring in the trailer behind me, after bouncing through ruts and over rocks hour after hour.

The day had started with a pleasant ride in the Sierra Nevada Forest, on trails about an hour's drive from

my home in central California. How did it end this way? The cause was a wildfire, designated as Sky Fire by the authorities, and it affected 500 acres before it was contained. Looking back, I realize our experience could have been far worse.

I'd noticed some black smoke as I'd prepared to head out that morning last June—an omen you don't overlook on hot, dry summer days in this part of the country. But, after several phone calls, I learned that there had been a structure fire farther down our road and it was under control. It was safe to continue with our plans. I headed up the road and met a couple of friends at the trailhead for a 10-mile ride through some of the most beautiful trails in the country.

The day was lovely and the green grass, flowering bushes and cooler temperatures were a welcome change from our sun-baked home in the foothills. Our route took us by the Nelder Grove of Giant Sequoias,

and as we passed the enormous Bull Buck Tree, a giant sequoia with a diameter of more than 26 feet, one of my companions remarked that this tree had been there long before us and would be there long after us. Thinking of the severe drought we are experiencing I commented, "I hope so."

After our ride, we returned to the trailhead, took the tack off our horses

BUDDIES: The author poses with her Kiger mustang, Zory, a seasoned traveler who weathered the close call with little difficulty.



and started for home. It had been a wonderful trip. But that was about to change. The fire I'd noticed earlier would turn out to be the first of five that would break out in the nearby mountain communities that day, and one of them was now growing out of control.

Still unaware of the danger, I drove the two miles of dirt road that connected with a paved road leading down the mountain toward home. Soon I met two women in a truck towing a horse trailer coming toward me. They flagged me down and said, "There is a fire. It is bad. You cannot get through this way. Turn around."

TROUBLE AHEAD

Then the first of many small miracles occurred: There was actually a place to turn around. The women had devised a plan to turn off onto a forest service dirt road, which would lead to a small community called Sugar Pine. I got in line behind what was becoming a small caravan of six trucks pulling horse trailers, including some big three-horse rigs.

We got onto the forest service road, and within a short distance I was thankful that my vehicle is four-wheel drive. We bounced our way around and through ruts for many miles, stirring up what felt like the Dust Bowl. At this point we had not seen the fire and assumed it was some distance down the mountain. Soon the road forked, and the lead truck chose what appeared to be the most traveled route, which also aimed in the general direction of Sugar Pine.

I started to relax as the road smoothed out and even contained a little gravel. We had to be almost to civilization. Suddenly the caravan came to a stop. The road was a dead end.

We all got out to assess the situation.

Clearly, the fire had started much higher up the mountain than we had thought, and it had gained strength during the time we were getting our trailers turned around.

TOO CLOSE: Dust and smoke from the wildfire darken the midday air as a ranger meets the caravan trying to escape the wildfire on a forest service road.



Half a dozen horse trailers were lined up on a one-lane road. There was only a small turnaround area at the end, and pines, firs, cedars and brush lined the road on both sides. And there was still a wildfire out there somewhere, potentially headed our way. Our position was pretty much summed up when one woman said, “We are screwed.”

One of my riding companions suggested that we notify someone of where we were and the predicament we faced. No one’s cell phone had anything more than marginal service, but my truck is equipped with OnStar, which fortunately was working well. Within a few minutes OnStar had connected me to someone who worked for the Sierra National Forest and given them our exact location; we were told that law enforcement would be notified. I explained to the forest service person that we were turning around, but we wanted someone to know we were here, in case of trouble.

In the meantime, the other drivers were devising a plan. Somehow, with everyone working together, helping each other back and turn through the brush, we all got turned around. There was even one area that was wide enough to squeeze to the side, allowing the others to pass. This was the second miracle of the day, and no small one at that!

HOLDING STEADY

Fortunately, despite the long, bumpy ride—and all of the backing, turning and other maneuvering over uneven ground—I never heard any scrambling, kicking or whinnying from any of the trailers. All the horses seemed to be riding quietly and faring well.

Once we were moving again, our goal was to head back to the fork and take the other road, the one that looked less

traveled. However, this would require a tight hairpin turn, and the first truck and trailer struggled for some time attempting it—which turned out to be our third small miracle. As the truck and trailer was still trying to negotiate the turn, a ranger arrived with lights

ash was falling. Clearly, the fire had started much higher up the mountain than we had thought, and it had gained strength during the time we were getting our trailers turned around. The fire planes were flying close overhead, and the roaring sound only emphasized



flashing—a result, I later learned, of my call to OnStar.

His news was both good and bad. The bad news was, we could not go that way. A car had gone down there and gotten stuck in a patch of deep, gooey mud. The good news: We did not get stuck in the mud, nor did we get stuck in another lineup behind the car, trying to figure out how to turn six rigs around again. So back out the rutted, dusty, bumpy road we went.

That meant, of course, that we were headed back toward the fire. The sky ahead was pitch-black with smoke, and

TIGHT SQUEEZE:
Turning around six horse rigs on a one-lane road required patience and teamwork.

the danger. Heading toward the raging fire was terrifying, but we had no choice. I was not alone in mentally formulating Plan B in case we had to abandon the trucks and trailers. If pressed, I suppose, we’d have tried to ride out on our horses.

As we got closer to the paved road, we found that law enforcement was now out in greater numbers, evacuating campgrounds and setting up barricades

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to direct people to safety. National forest roads can be confusing, even when you've been given verbal directions, but the two women leading our make-shift caravan managed to navigate the several miles of dirt roads without mishap. When our route finally took us away from the fire, it was a tremendous relief to have the smoke in our rearview mirrors.

At last we reached pavement, descended the mountain and turned toward our respective homes. What a thrill it was to be safely back on the main roads, especially as we looked back at the huge billows of smoke from the tremendous fire. I could only think of getting home as soon as possible to get my poor horse out of the trailer.

ONE LAST **SURPRISE**

But the day had one more curve to throw me: I was zipping down the highway when I had to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting a good-sized black bear, who had crossed right in front of my truck. I didn't hear any noise in the trailer as a result of my quick

AMONG GIANTS: The author, aboard Zory, pauses at the base of the Bull Buck Tree, a giant sequoia in the Sierra National Forest that stands 247 feet tall.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: **STICK TOGETHER**

If you're with other people in the same predicament, stay with the group. You'll be able to pool your resources and perhaps benefit from their knowledge of the area. Also, if local authorities need to coordinate an evacuation, it'll go faster and easier if they don't have to search for everyone individually.

braking, so I assume Zory kept his balance one more time.

The bear lumbered away untouched, and then we were home at last!

The usual one-hour drive had taken six hours, but we were both safe. Zory seemed a tiny bit wobbly for his first couple of steps on solid ground, sort of how I would feel when getting off of a boat. I thought he would head straight to his water, but instead he fell right into eating.

Zory is a real trouper about traveling—he has been riding in a trailer since he was 9 months old, and I often take him somewhere twice a week. Usually, he sleeps on the way home. I am grateful for his fortitude. Several times during the trip I had thought about stopping to get some water to him, but ultimately, I'd decided that staying with the caravan and getting out of the





LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: WHAT TO CARRY

• **Communication devices.** Three types of electronics are useful in the backcountry. The most common are those that utilize cell service, like cell phones and the communication systems found in many vehicles. However, you cannot always rely on cell signals in wilderness areas. The second type of device uses GPS satellites to show you where you are; these do not enable you to communicate with anyone, but they can help you locate roads and other topological features around you. The third type of device is a combined location

and communication tool that utilizes satellites. In addition to showing you where you are, they allow limited two-way communications, such as texts, to emergency responders. These can be expensive, but they are the most reliable devices in remote areas.

I can personally vouch for OnStar, a navigation and communication system that comes built-in to General Motors vehicles (although you have to pay for a subscription for the service). You'll also find competing systems, with similar services

that can be installed in any car or truck. OnStar still uses cell service but has a more powerful reception than a cell phone.

When you're riding, keep your phone or other devices in a pocket or fanny pack so they can help you if you're separated from your horse. Having car chargers for all of your electronics is also essential.

• **A paper map.** Use this as a backup and to familiarize yourself with the roads you intend to travel before you go. The Sky Fire emphasized this lesson. As a friend and I were later exploring the area where the fire occurred, we found another road that would have been a much better way out than the way we were sent. Later on, my riding buddy met a deputy who'd been involved in the evacuation that day, and he told her there had been some miscommunication—we had been sent the wrong way! Had we known about the better road during the fire, we would have questioned the people at the barricade who were directing us a different way.

Be aware, though, that national forest maps are not

always accurate. They may show roads that are no longer maintained, or you may encounter roads that do not appear on the map. Plus, there is no way of knowing from a map whether a road is passable for a vehicle towing a trailer.

• **Medications or other personal products.** For instance, I have blood sugar issues and am now stocking my trailer and horse pack with some extra emergency items I might need.

• **Extra food and water.** I keep a 20-gallon tub of water in my truck in the summertime, and although I didn't need it during the Sky Fire ordeal, I was comforted by the fact that it was there. Some nonperishable food stored in the tow vehicle or tack room of your trailer may be a godsend if you're stranded for many hours. Be aware, though, that it is never acceptable to leave food in a vehicle when you're in bear country. Some trailheads have food storage lockers (called "bear boxes") but many do not. Carrying extra food and water is a good idea in the wintertime, as well as the summers, in case you're stranded by ice and snow.

• **Supplies for your horse.** I normally carry a little food for my horse to enjoy on the trip home from a ride, but from now on I will carry an extra flake of hay in case we are out longer than expected.





SAFE AT LAST:

Smoke is still billowing from the wildfire as the author and the other drivers finally reach the highway.

forest before nightfall was my higher priority. Fortunately, he pulled through the ordeal just fine.

I thought again of the earlier comment from my riding companion, "That Bull Buck Tree will be here long after us." Again I thought, "I hope so." The fire was quite close to the Nelder Grove and totally out of control.

I'm sharing this story to encourage others to prepare for the unexpected. It is easy to get complacent when, week after week, we take our horses into the backcountry and just enjoy the day. I know my friends and I won't be taking those uneventful, relaxing rides for granted. We will appreciate each and every one.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE:

TRAILERING

- **Buy an appropriate tow vehicle.**

When shopping for a new truck or SUV, choose one that has the power you'll need to haul the weight of your loaded trailer safely and comfortably. Four-wheel drive is practically essential if you ever leave paved roads—and the chances of that are much higher if you spend time in the backcountry. Also, always keep your vehicle in good repair, with routine oil changes, good tires and other regular maintenance.

- **Always start with a full tank of gas whenever you head to the backcountry.**

- **Keep a well-stocked toolbox on board.** Have on hand pliers, screwdrivers, a hammer, wrenches, a flat-tire repair kit, a flashlight with extra batteries, WD-40, extra fuses, emergency flares or triangles, bungee cords, duct tape, jumper cables,

a jack, a properly inflated spare tire, a fire extinguisher and anything else you might need to deal with mechanical emergencies. Other tools that might come in handy include a shovel, sand or gravel in the winter, trailer-wheel chocks, a trailer aid to assist in changing a flat on a trailer, a coupler lock and a crowbar.

• **Think about safety inside the trailer.** I usually use shipping boots on my horse and was happy that I had done so that day since he could have easily stepped on himself when trying to balance. I also use a breakaway trailer tie. In general, I like rope halters, but I prefer my horse to have a soft, nylon web halter when he's riding in a trailer. If he should need to use the tie for balance, or should he lose his balance, I don't want the knots of a rope halter to put pressure on his face.

Three weeks later, a friend and I drove back to the mountain to explore the dirt roads and see where we had been. It was sad to see all the acres devastated by fire. We were pleased to discover that the bumpy, rutted road had been smoothed out, and gravel had been added. We stopped out at the dead end. This area had been logged, which is why that branch of the road had been improved, and we also discovered places where some of the brush has been masticated with large cutting machines—this often leaves spikes of broken woody trunks sticking out of the ground. And I identified a fourth small miracle that had occurred

that day—one of the rigs had pulled into a masticated area. Thank goodness he did not get a flat tire! My friend, a retired firefighter with years of experience towing and maneuvering large vehicles in tight places, was absolutely astounded that we got everyone turned around and out of that spot.

And, one final update: The Bull Buck Tree still lives, and the Nelder Grove of Giant Sequoias remained untouched by the recent fire. 🌲

About the author: Cindy Casey has been riding backcountry trails for 25 years, and for nearly a decade she participated in weekly long-distance day rides in the Yosemite National Park backcountry. She is currently riding her Kiger mustang, Zory, whom she purchased as a weanling and started herself. She and Zory enjoy shorter, relaxing rides these days, and also are taking dressage lessons. She is the author of *Yosemite on Horseback: Suggested Day Rides in the Backcountry*. She resides in Mariposa, California.

