



Rattlesnake and Bear



By Sue “Sister Sue” Kettles

Rattlesnake and Bear was selected from the stories posted on www.pcttrailside reader.com, a website devoted to sharing stories and photos from the PCT. Please consider submitting your trail story, photos, poetry, or drawing from your PCT experience to pcttrailside reader@gmail.com.

By the time Papa Bear and I made it to Joshua Tree Spring, we were incredibly hot, insatiably thirsty and super tired. So we found a bit of wonderful shade and took a short, sweet nap.

It was August 2008, and we had started at Walker Pass and planned to leave the trail at Kearsarge Pass. Drew “Papa Bear” Hendel and I had met a few years earlier in Southern California while section hiking from Cajon Pass to Agua Dulce. Like me, he was also trying to complete the PCT in sections. He lives in Seattle, and I see him every year at Kick Off.

We knew this High Sierra route would be pretty dry this late in the summer. So we got dropped off after dark and hiked by the magical moonlight. After maybe four miles or so, we set up a dry camp. The next day, we got an early start in an attempt to beat the heat and make Joshua Tree Spring, the first water in that section.

When I woke up from my nap, I meandered a few yards down to the spring and sat down on the rock to get spring water, which flows from a pipe into a horse trough.

As I looked to my right, I saw a rattlesnake slithering away from the rock I was sitting on. I guess I had interrupted his nap or trampled his hunting grounds. It was foolish of me not to have seen him. In my sleepy daze I wasn’t thinking very snake smart.

I jumped up and started yelling to Papa Bear: “Rattlesnake! You gotta come look...”

My shrieking must have awakened the bear that had been sleeping in the tree above us. As we watched the snake move slowly away, the bear lumbered from its perch. Papa Bear grabbed a handful of rocks. But this junior bear had little interest in us. He moseyed slowly down to the spring and kept walking away. Papa Bear and I just looked at each other with big smiles, each asking the other without words: did that just happen?

We decided to camp away from the bear tree, so we ate our lunch and, after it cooled a bit, headed up the trail.

I feel so blessed and fortunate for my experiences and to have seen these things.

My husband, Alex, and I live in Portland, Ore. I discovered the PCT in 1985, when the last of our four kids were born. An article in The Oregonian newspaper told about someone who hiked “this trail from Mexico to Canada” in one summer.

I just sat there with my mouth open and cried. I thought that by the time I would be free to do the whole thing, I surely would be decrepit and not able to move anymore, ravaged by cancer or whatever you get as you get old. I knew that it would be at least 18 years

before I felt the freedom to pursue something like that. You know how old 50 sounds to a 25-year-old? (Thank God, instead of what I imagined, I actually grew stronger in so many ways through all the years.)

When I read that story, I knew nothing of backpacking. I had been on day hikes and car camping. I talked Alex into going on a backpacking trip from Mount Hood to Cascade Locks on the Columbia River. He’s a big strong guy but had no backpacking experience either.

We pretty much did everything wrong. We packed all we could imagine we would need: massive parkas, a stove we hadn’t started to see if it still worked, huge sleeping bags and many changes of clothes. We bought most of our gear at garage sales. It was old and heavy. I wore boots that fit exactly. I think I even hiked in jeans.

At Timberline Lodge, I put my pack on for the first time. I think it weighed about 70 pounds. I remember thinking: “Holy cow! How am I gonna do this?”

By the time we got to camp, I had wrenched my knee and blackened a few toenails. I had about a dozen blisters and my shoulders had this “numb thing” going on. We had brought steaks to cook and, of course, the stove didn’t work. We threw the steaks in the bushes and ate gorp.

We woke to cold, wet weather. I could hardly move, my feet hurt so badly and my knee couldn’t take any more hills. We decided to creep back up to Timberline Lodge. If we had been smart enough to bring a map, we would have been able to see that we were close to Ramona Falls and a much easier exit. The weather got so bad our rain ponchos flew over our heads as we walked. By the time we made it back to the lodge, a full-blown snowstorm was taking place. Honestly ... I was dejected and heartbroken. I thought my dream was over before it even got started. But then, about three weeks later, I decided I just had to learn how to do this thing, so I signed up for an outdoor class at our local community college. The next summer, I took my first three-week hike through the southern half of Washington. And every year after that, I learned more and more – and the gear got lighter and lighter. I asked for new gear every time a birthday or Christmas came around.

I placated my dreams by hiking for one to three weeks each August somewhere on the PCT, trying to piece it all together.

In 2011, I finally set out to do the whole trail in a single season, but unfortunately it was one of the highest snow years on record. I ended up hiking about 1,000 miles – I got to Walker Pass and decided to wait for snowmelt. Then in August, I started again at Donner Pass and headed to Ashland.

As the 2011 season ended, I was just 20 miles shy of section-hiking the whole trail. I had a small piece to do between Vermillion Valley Resort and Muir Trail Ranch in the High Sierras. When I was doing the John Muir Trail section over two years, I got sick both times and had to hike out early. That little 20-mile section remained all I needed to complete the entire section hike.

In April 2012, I started at the Mexican border with my daughter Katie for a second attempt at thru-hiking. On June 21, I completed



Left: Forrester Pass

Above: Heart’s Pass

that last 20-mile section in the Sierras. There were many tears there. I had walked every mile of the PCT.

But by the time we got thru the High Sierras, I had lost 25 pounds. We left the trail at Sonora Pass for two weeks so I could try to put on some weight, which I would need in order to finish. We went back on trail at Dunsmuir, since we had so recently hiked the Donner Pass section to Ashland, just 11 months earlier.

We hiked on toward Mt. Hood, and on a reroute around the Olallie Lake fire, I fell pretty hard on the Breitenbush Trail and partially tore a tendon in my left knee. Katie continued into Washington without me.

Despite my injury, my daughter Lori and I joined Katie to hike the final 30 miles to the Canadian border. We stood at the border monument together. After spending five months in a tent together, it was an amazing feeling to be finished.

It took me 20 years to section hike the PCT, but I still have a dream. I would like to do every step of the trail in one season. I hang on to hope, and the possibility of a low snow year.

It’s in my blood now.