

Raven in a Ravine

by Rik Scairpon

This past August I took six of my Boy Scouts on a high adventure backpack trip for seven days over the North Cascades, through Cloudy and Suiattle Passes. We began our trek in Holden, off of Lake Chelan, and were headed to a camp at Sulphur Creek on the Suiattle River. This is very rugged, mountainous terrain, and in many places the trails are narrow and rocky.

We were on the last day of our adventure, headed to the car camp at Sulphur Creek, where we were to be picked up the following morning. With about two miles to go, our group encountered four horses, three with riders, and one carrying packs. Even though we get out on quite a few back country treks, my Scouts are all city boys, and we do not encounter horses very often, except for at summer camp. We have, however, attended and received certification in back country skills through the Scouting Ahead - Leave No Trace program. A section of this program teaches the participants how to handle horse encounters in the wilderness, so we knew that we should move to the downhill side of the stock to let the horses pass. The reason for this is that most horses will "spook" at things they do not understand; people with backpacks are scary to the horses, so we want them to be able to look down on us so we appeared smaller and non-threatening. Well, the trail was extremely narrow and fell off very quickly on the downhill side. Therefore, as the tour leader, I made the decision for us to move uphill, and to squat or sit down to appear smaller to the horses. Fortunately, this worked well and the horses passed with very little nervousness.

Once our crew had all gotten up and resumed hiking, only moments passed before we heard one of the riders, a woman, scream and a very loud crash and thud! I knew immediately what had happened, and all sorts of pictures began flashing through my mind. We dropped our packs, and my assistant Debbie, and I ran back up the trail about 100 yards, only to discover that the most awful of our imagined pictures had indeed happened: one of the horses had fallen off the trail and was lying on his side in a ravine about 25 or 30 feet below the trail. Debbie was very much shaken by the sight, and drew the same conclusion I had, the horse was dead! I called to the rider, and asked if he was all right. He was working on the horse, attempting to release the saddle, when the horse, Raven, started to try to get on his feet. This was a heart warming

sight to all the onlookers and the other horse riders as well.

After quick introductions, I learned from one of the riders, Deanne, what had happened: Mark, her husband, had bailed out of the saddle immediately when Raven began to fall. Mark landed on the first six or eight feet off the steep trail, right before the 25 foot cliff. Mark's split second thinking is the only thing that prevented any serious human injury.

Now things started happening quickly. Raven had two rather serious cuts, one on the inside of his rear thigh that was bleeding quite a bit. I yelled down to Mark to put direct pressure on the wound and not take it off (hooray for Boy Scout first aid training!) I also began talking and planning strategies with the third rider, Tim. Our first concern was to get the other three horses back down the trail to a wider, safer place and to prevent compounding the situation. One of my Scouts, Tim and I led the horses back to where the rest of our crew was, where we tied the horses up in a safe spot. We left the majority of the Boy Scouts there to care for the horses. Meanwhile, Deanne had dug out the horse first aid kit, but it did not have any bandages, just some leg tape. Deanne and Debbie headed down the mountainside (in a safer but still pretty steep spot) and began to determine what treatments to administer to poor Raven. Debbie knew she had two arm slings in her first aid kit, so I went back to her equipment and got her day pack to send down the ravine. I stationed two scouts on the down hill part of the trail to stop and warn other hikers or horses before they came to where all the action was.

So what do you think was needed after the bleeding stopped? You may have guessed it: treat for shock! This is easier said than done, as a horse is not going to lie down and rest, so we just put his saddle pad, blanket, and a rain poncho over him to help keep him warm. The first fifteen to thirty minutes were very scary for all of us, as we watched this magnificent animal sweat profusely, the water just pouring off his body. Debbie and Deanne stayed with Raven and comforted him while Tim and Mark began to look for a way out of the ravine.

While the horsemen began cutting a trail out of the steep cut, several boys and I began the task of hauling up the saddle, pack, and other gear that Raven had been carrying. Here's where my

experience training the new Scouts came in handy, tying bowlines to the gear while the Scouts hauled it all up the cliff. It was most important to me to not endanger any of the boys' safety, so they were instructed to stay on the trail while the adults handled the ravine end of things. It was a real team effort, and the equipment was soon piled at the edge of the trail. I then went on to help the horsemen work on the new trail.

After about an hour or so of cutting the trail up out of the ravine, Mark brought Raven over to the new trail and began to coax him up the trail. They had not gone more than ten feet or so when Mark fell, halting the progress, and after a few seconds of teetering, Raven fell backwards and back into the ravine! I witnessed this, and it just tore at my heart to see the horse suffer again. Fortunately, Raven immediately got back on his feet, and did not appear to have suffered any additional injuries. There certainly was a mental effect however: both Tim and Mark could not persuade that stallion to move one single inch! He just planted his feet and that was it.

Realizing there was nothing else my group could do, I decided to continue our trek out. I questioned Deanne, to find out if there was someone we could either try to call or arrange some kind of contact for her (I had already determined that there was no cellular phone service this deep in the back country.) She explained that her cousin Brian and his family had mentioned that they were going to try to get up to Sulphur Creek for the weekend. She gave me his phone number and a description of his truck and horse trailer, and so, with that, we pressed on to trail's end.

When we entered the Sulphur Creek campground, I went down to the horse camp. Much to my surprise and delight, there was the truck and trailer Deanne had described. I was happy to discover Brian and his family, his friend Joe, and six horses. I quickly told him the story and recommended he head out with a spare horse. It did not take very long for Brian and Joe to get saddled up and on the trail. My Scouts and I continued on to the campground and set up camp. Later that evening, after dinner, Debbie and I decided to take a walk over to the horse camp. Since none of the horsemen had returned yet, we sat for a bit and re-told the story around the campfire. About a half hour later, the sight we all had hoped for came true: in strolled Mark and Raven, both looking ragged and tired, and Raven certainly looking sad, but under his own power! Mark told us that they had been so happy to see Brian and Joe, and it was only with the four of them working that they were able to get Raven out. They had already decided they would have to spend the night out in the ravine and were setting up camp when help had arrived.

The next day, I again walked back to the horse camp, and chatted with Mark and Deanne. They told me that they were convinced that we had "saved their lives". I explained that was not really so, that we had simply "done what Boy Scouts do".

(Note: I placed a follow-up call the next month, and Raven is doing all right, he is still real sore and slow, but coming back to health!)

(This incident occurred in August 1995. The story was originally published in the Washington Trails Association magazine, Signposts for Northwest Trails, January 1996.)

The End