

*Selway Falls to Lost Horse on Thirty-Years-Later Legs*  
*Hiking across the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, Idaho to Montana*  
by Betsy Kepes

Day One—Selway Falls to Dry Bar -- August 9, 2013

A solo hike is especially lovely when it begins with company. Tom had the day off from the lookout and he wanted to hike the Selway Trail as far up as Cupboard Creek. He remembered a beautiful beach he'd camped on last year when he was lucky to get asked to row a Selway trip.

Jay walked ahead, his eighteen-year-old legs springing along while his old parents shuffled behind him. No, I'll say that Tom and I sauntered along enjoying the morning and the ever-changing views of the river, and of course, as trail crew types, we had to admire the trail construction. There's a place where a curve of cliff hangs over the trail, with the interior of the rock blasted away so the wide trail can stay level. Very impressive, and scenic.

A few miles up the trail we met a hiker, a man even older than us, who'd been volunteering at Elk Summit and had hiked down to East Moose and was on his way out. He looked tired but was chatty and we exchanged addresses.

The Cupboard Creek beach exceeded my expectations --- white sand and cool shade under a huge cedar. We indulged in hours of reading interspersed with multiple dips in the Selway. It seemed we'd discovered a remote tropical isle where life had slowed to a dreamy pace.

Tom was the first one of us to put away his book and jump in for his last swim. He wanted to get back to the beginning of the trail where he hoped Gary Miller and sons Emil and Walker would be arriving for an overnight. (They did. And Tom and Jay and the Millers found a beach very close to the trailhead and enjoyed an evening watching the stars.) Jay and I didn't want the reading vacation to end but we too jumped in for one more swim before I headed upriver while Jay headed down.

I was certainly rested after the leisurely beach day and I decided I could make it to Dry Bar to spend the night. My memory of that bit of the Selway trail had shortened it up considerably and completely erased the fact that it goes very high above the river, up and up and in and out of drainages. Suddenly I wished I'd decided to be an ultralight backpacker rather than one who carried two books, two Walla Walla sweet onions, two packages of tortillas and a huge avocado. (My later self, however, would thank my first-day self for these luxury items.)

As the day faded to dusk I thought of rattlesnakes. Didn't they like to curl up on the trail as the daylight faded? I remembered a story Dave MacDonald had of walking on the Selway trail barefoot, in the dark. A snake was part of that tale, I think.

And a snake became part of my story. It was a beauty with bold black and white stripes. At first it was stretched out on the side of the trail but, disturbed by my footsteps, it coiled and its forked black tongue flicked in and out. I saw its long rattle and was appropriately impressed. When I didn't retreat it flexed its upper body back and forth,

trying to look mean I guess. We had a standoff for a few minutes until I decided to climb up the steep slope above the trail and give the snake some room. Poking it with a stick seemed a less responsible option.

I walked more cautiously after that but didn't see any more snakes. Just before dark I descended to Dry Bar and saw a trail leading into the place where I remembered a campsite from Moose Creek Guard School in 1981. Someone then had pointed out the tree where the crashing DC-3 had sheered off the top. Since then an osprey had built a nest in it. I remember Richard Hildner's dog, Bones, chasing a fawn—not good wilderness ethics—and my shock that we were not supposed to make fire rings and would disperse any extra firewood before we left. No trace? It seemed ridiculous to me. I'd grown up in the Adirondacks where it was good woods manners to leave a pile of dry firewood next to the fire ring for the next camper. (In the years to come I would take pride in leaving each campsite as pristine as possible, even to the point of sprinkling pine needles on the rehabbed fire spot.)

I didn't need a group site to set up my little camp so I looked upstream, hoping for a small sandy beach. I saw one, framed by two big cedar logs, and my tired legs sped up a bit in the effort to get there. After a quick dip in the shallow water I scanned the cloudy sky and set up my tent, a funny little solo object called the "Quarter Dome". That done I leaned against a log, wolfed down a couple of tortillas and cheese, and fell asleep to the melody of the Selway.

Day 2—Dry Bar to Moose Creek Ranger Station --- August 10,2013

I got an early start and decided to have breakfast at Three Links. My bowl of dry milk and granola would taste better if I got some miles under my belt first. Somehow I felt less old in the morning, as if by getting a good night's sleep my body had "younged" a bit. I wasn't as stiff, my legs had a bit more spring to them and the pack felt lighter. (This would not last for more than an hour.)

The Three Links bridge over the Selway has always been a welcome sight, a mid-point mark in the hike in or out of Moose Creek. I walked out onto it, the boards a bit worn and warped. When were they last replaced, I wondered. And did Penny and Emil do the job? I heard sounds of a group camping on the far side of the river, decided I didn't feel like being sociable, and kept on going.

I wasn't the only one on the move. At a place where the hillside above the trail was very steep I turned a corner to see a canine working its way down the slope, too scrawny to be a wolf I thought, casting it as a coyote. It made it to the trail, sniffed it a bit, and trotted upriver. It didn't see or smell me and behaved like a wild animal out for a morning stroll. Just as I was processing that rare sight, I saw another canine coming down the hillside, this one a small pup. It was impossibly cute—big paws and gangly legs splaying out as it headed down. At the trail it too stopped to sniff and then followed its mother.

I wanted to see more of that cute pup and without consciously making a plan I walked a few steps forward and started to sing a musical howl, two notes back and forth. It was apparently an intriguing melody because the pup trotted back around the corner to see what was going on. We stared at each other for a moment—the little coyote standing its ground. I tried to memorize its features—wide pointed ears, bright black eyes and a long inquisitive nose. Then it turned around and fled back to mama.

Of course I too hurried around the next corner but both animals were gone—probably hiding somewhere in the brush to watch me pass by.

My mood inflated after that encounter, as it always does after I have the luck to see real wild animals, animals that don't hang around at the edges of the human world. Had that little pup spied on other human beings as they walked along the Selway trail or was I its first sighting of a human? And wolves. It was lucky to have survived as wolves are the newly returned top dog in the Selway-Bitterroot and they do not tolerate coyotes in their range.

The trail miles ticked by, with stops for breakfast and later a snack. That part of the Selway Trail is slim on sandy beaches so I knew I would have to wait to find a good place to swim. I finally found a semi-sandy beach at Jake Creek, just before the bridge over Moose Creek. After a dip (not a deep swimming hole but still the clear, cool water of the Selway) I settled under a big tree with yet another luxury item, my Thermarest chair. I first saw a Moose Creeker using one of these about fifteen years ago when we hiked from Elk Summit down to the East Moose cedars with Rob McLeod and Linda Pieterenin. That evening Linda set up her Thermarest chair. I think I made some exclamation of disbelief. Linda defended herself, saying something like, "Hey, I'm getting older. I need a few luxuries." Hear, hear.

My lunch tortilla and cheese reminded me of John Polisar. In the 1980's he ate tortillas for most of his meals, back at a time when I'm not sure tortillas were even available in the grocery store in my hometown back east. He'd slather peanut butter and jelly on a big white tortilla and chow down while the rest of us ate Club crackers with cheese. It had seemed an odd and slightly exotic meal choice to me back then. Now, after working on the trail for a month, organic sprouted wheat tortillas were my gourmet treat, a welcome change from Wasa and Ry-Krisp.

So many Moose Creek memories! And now I was a stone's throw away from the Moose Creek Station and suddenly not so eager to get there. No self-respecting Moose Creeker would arrive from the trail in early afternoon. Even though I wasn't working I had to put in a full day of leisure. I sat under the big tree and read from my Ursula LeGuin sci-fi book while I nibbled at a bag of chocolate-covered ginger (yet another luxury item!).

Soon it became almost unbearably hot and humid. What was this, Georgia? I walked across the pebbles to take another dip and looked up. A wall of cloud to the south looked full of purpose as it came closer. I made sure my raincoat was near the top of my pack and sat down to read a bit more before what I thought would be another brief thunderstorm, one with perhaps a sprinkling of rain.

Wind. Gentle at first, but a wind that quickly picked up speed. I stood up to get my raincoat and my Thermarest chair blew toward the river. The trees along Jake Creek swayed as if they were doing a wild dance and branches cracked off, traveled through the air for a few seconds before they hit the ground. Then across the Selway, in a recent burn, I heard trees thudding as they hit the ground. The wind grew wilder and a big boulder tumbled down from the hillside above the trail, bouncing in heavy arcs to the river.

The bouncing boulder astonished me. Surely the wind wasn't THAT strong, able to move big rocks? I thought about making a run for it to get to the station but it seemed most prudent to stand under my protective tall tree (was it a spruce? I can't remember)

and to keep my head swiveling in all directions to see what might come hurtling through the air next.

I don't know how long the hurricane force winds lasted but I don't think it was more than a few minutes. Gradually the trees stopped thrashing and debris stopped swirling around. I let myself take a big breath then hefted my pack to go up to the station.

The trail was covered in debris—sticks and leaves that had been torn off the brush. Just before the Moose Creek bridge a green grand fir lay across the trail. I felt naked without an axe and noticed that the small end would be a nice chop. Someone at the station would be dispatched for this.

I indulged in more nostalgia as I crossed the bridge and looked upstream to the swimming hole and the Shissler Trail. I knew the lookout was empty due to some kind of hiring snafu. It didn't seem right not to have a pair of eyes watching out for Moose Creek. The lookout would have been a fine vantage point to watch the big wind make its way onto the district. If it had been me up there, I might have even made a batch of popcorn, hoping to see some lightning in the show.

The wide trail after the bridge is still a beautiful ramp up to the airstrip and I think I was holding my breath as I walked through the campground, empty except for one plane. The memories were crowded here—the time in Guard School when we got cross cut practice by sawing down “hazard trees”, the time Robin brought a big box of pilot leftovers up to the cookhouse for us all to scavenge, the many times we walked this way with air mattresses from the fire cache, chilled after riding down Moose Creek.

And then the first view of the airstrip, the long grassy expanse with mountains framing both ends. It still takes my breath away. A weed crew gridded the airstrip a couple of years ago to spray the knapweed and the field looked surprisingly healthy, with actual grass growing in it. Before they sprayed it was almost all knapweed and unfit for grazing or haying. I'm not sure what I think about herbicides in the wilderness but they are using them along the trails and it seems to be helping get rid of aggressive invasive plants.

I followed a couple of people and a dog as they walked over to the cabins. For those of you who haven't been to Moose Creek in a few years, it's changed, of course, but most of the cabins are still there and most of them are being used in the summer. The Montana Conservation Corps, the MCC, sets up shop in the bunkhouses and Anna, the wilderness ranger, lives in what was Penny and Emil's cabin. The volunteer station guards live in the Ranger's cabin and the cookhouse is still the center of the station social life—with picnic tables out back.

New faces at Moose Creek always cause a stir and I found myself talking with the two with the dog—a pilot and his passenger. They marveled at the big wind and were thankful their plane hadn't tipped over. A couple of men who'd just finished their contract trail work talked shop with me and I said hello to Anna. I'd met her a couple of years ago when I had hiked in to Moose Creek to do some volunteer work.

I set up camp on the porch of the fire cache—a primo camping spot I remembered from years ago. While the MCC crew made supper in the cookhouse I sat in my Thermarest chair and listened to a gentle rain drip down the cedar shakes to the ground. The cookhouse screen door slammed now and then with a familiar bang and next to me a horse and mule stood in the corral. This is what a wilderness station should be, I remember thinking. A place that is functional and beautiful and outside of time.

Before dark Anna came by and let her horse and mule out onto the airstrip, the task that Ian Barlow used to do every evening. The animals circled and snorted, showing off. After she'd shut the gate she asked if I'd like a beer. Of course! Do you mind if it's warm? Not at all! We sat together, legs dangling off the porch, and exchanged stories. Anna is a warm, gentle person who does an excellent job organizing life at the station. Her dog, Lucy, lay on the boards of the porch, happy for a scratch. Anna made me feel welcomed and connected to the present Moose Creek and I think she enjoyed my tales of the past. We talked as the light faded and a kerosene lamp shone from the windows of the cookhouse. It was good to be back, if only for a night.

Day 3—Moose Creek Station to the Salmon Hole --- August 11, 2013

I left early, at daybreak, donating a few items to the MCC crew—a sweet onion and a couple of Power Bars—a way to slightly lighten my load for the next stretch of the Selway Trail. The wind of the day before had brought down some big trees in the first mile upriver. I didn't have a radio with me to tell anyone but I expected to see a trail crew when I got to the Bear Creek Trail. I kept a count of the blow down and climbed over or around each blockade.

The stretch of the Selway River between Moose Creek and Shearer has some impressive cliffs and ridges. I found myself staring over at the other side of the river and looking for animals on the bare, steep slopes but I didn't have the luck of any more wildlife sightings. I'd walk for about an hour, until my backpack felt like a ton of bricks, then I'd stop to have a drink of water or a snack—the reward system at work. And it was always in the first few minutes after each rest stop that my soul was able to soar the highest—the weight on my back didn't dig in to my shoulders yet and I'd had a chance to rest. These were the times when I realized how lucky I was to be able to walk once again the long length of the Selway Trail, to set my own pace on my journey to Montana.

Pettibone beach lured me in for a long rest stop. Just as I was taking off my pack I heard thrashing in the brush above the trail and a horseman appeared, leading a horse and a mule. I yelled hello and he stopped. “There are quite a number of trees down up ahead”, I told him. “Do you have a saw?” He nodded and headed on. ( I found out later that he was the new wilderness coordinator at Moose Creek and had a terrible time getting through the new blowdown on the trail. Once or twice he had to take his boxes off the mule to get it under trees.)

I watched the little pack string walk along the river trail then turned to the river. I knew I wouldn't see any kayakers as the road was closed in to Paradise due to a fire, and the water was very low by mid-August. It was still good enough for taking a dip and I found some shade for a reading break. It wasn't as peaceful as I'd hoped as another thunderstorm rumbled and spitted out some rain. Fortunately this storm didn't have the winds of the day before.

By late afternoon I was on my way, and once again I underestimated the time it would take me to hike the next stretch of trail, to the trail junction at Bear Creek. I walked through areas that must have burned a year earlier, much of the ground still black but with touches of green growing through it. At one place the trail overlooks a bend where the river is wide and shallow, a completely different character than the deep still waters farther downriver, or the frothing rapids below Moose Creek.

I thought I might see the trail crew at the Bear Creek bridge as I knew there'd been a crew there doing reconstruction but it was quiet at the trail junction. I walked out onto the bridge to admire the new work—new boards and a shored-up support system. In the camp spot below the bridge I saw a pile of coolers and horse gear so I knew they hadn't been gone long. At Moose Creek I'd learned that the crew was planning to go up the Bear Creek trail to fix up some wet spots in the trail.

I didn't have time to linger as it was getting close to dusk again. Oh, it's not far at all up to the Salmon Hole, I told myself, just a mile or so. Ha! What was I thinking? The trail went on and on, through a burn. I wasn't in the mood any more for char and destruction. I wanted to see the Salmon Hole and a good camping place near it. I put my head down and walked as fast as I could, lifting up my pack with my hands when I couldn't bear the weight on my shoulders. After a few miles (how many? Is it five or six up to the Salmon Hole?) I gave up on getting to my goal-oriented destination and started looking for any camp spot at all. Not easy to find in a burned area along the steep side of a big creek.

It wasn't quite totally dark when I finally saw the last turn and climbed up to the viewing spot above the Salmon Hole. Halleluia! I didn't have time, or daylight, to look for fish so I found a sand bar above the Salmon Hole and swung my pack off, thrilled to be done with carrying it for the day. Fearing more rain, I set up my little tent then took off my boots to let my bare feet enjoy the soft sand. For the first time in three days, I decided to have a hot dinner and so got out my headlamp and set up Lee's Jet Boil stove to make boiling water for instant lentil soup. Ah, so good to have a hot meal. And what a place to drink it in! Bear Creek chortled over some small rapids and the sand bar was luxurious—deep, fine sand like being at the ocean on a sand dune. Once again, I felt blessed by beneficent gods and goddesses to have been given the chance to travel through this wild beauty.

The day wasn't completely done with giving me a few surprises. I'd just gotten settled in my narrow little tent when I heard a huge smacking sound outside, a big enough noise that I jumped. Then I laughed. A beaver! I would have never expected beaver here. It smacked its tail again, and again, obviously annoyed by the intruder on the sand bar. I wish you no harm, I said, the words I've heard Carol Holmes say when she encounters wildlife in the woods. Goodnight.

#### Day 4—Salmon Hole to Granite Creek campsite August 12, 2013

Now I've come to an embarrassing moment in my story. I woke up to a clear sky and cool temperatures at my creekside campsite. As soon as I had my boots on I clambered over the rocks to get a look into the Salmon Hole. I had memories of seeing huge fish circling around in the deep water.

I stood by the edge of the pool, peering into the water. A few small fish swam around and I waited to see the larger ones. And waited. And waited. Disappointed, I decided I must have missed the spawning season. I turned to go back to my campsite but looked one more time out across the pool.

A shark's fin swam by on the far side of the creek. I think my eyes popped open. The water roiled and another fin rose to the surface then slowly eased back under the water. Feeling like an idiot, I realized I'd been looking in the wrong place for the salmon. I scrambled up to the viewing point above the hole and counted at least a dozen BIG

reddish-brown fish clustered in a group, holding their position with their heads upstream. Every once in a while one of the fish would change its position and rise to the surface. I think I was holding my breath—it was so completely magical to see such large and magnificent fish in this small creek.

I could have watched the fish for hours, but I had another long day of walking ahead of me. Back at my sandbar I looked for signs of beaver and found no tracks, no lodge and no chewed branches. Maybe the beaver of the evening before was also making a pilgrimage to the Salmon Hole and was ticked off that I had disturbed its wilderness experience. I can't blame it. Imagine swimming all the way up to the Salmon Hole only to find a tent on the sand bar!

A big fire along the Bear Creek trail has completely altered the valley above the Salmon Hole. It now looks a bit like Wyoming—a wide-open valley with some grasses and weeds but no trees at all. In one place the trail was lined with six-foot tall mullein stalks and it was like walking through a strange jungle. The open landscape means there are wonderful views of Bear Creek and its sinuous curves and the hills that rise on both sides of it. With the morning sun and the sparkling water and the wide horizon it was a perfect hiking moment, a “the hills are alive with the sound of music” scene.

The perfection didn't, of course, last forever. Past the Cub Creek turn off, the Bear Creek trail used to lead into a deep forest. Now it is still a deep forest, but a burned one. Hundreds of dead trees extend on both sides of the trail, and of course many of them had fallen down in the big wind two days earlier. I sympathized with the trail crew who would have to clear them all out.

Just as I was getting accustomed to the rhythm of walking through, over or around the blow down I turned the corner and saw smoke and flames in the trail. My mind quickly filed it as an active forest fire. What?

I stopped to figure it out. When lightning struck a big cedar it burned the core of the tree until it crashed across the trail. A good portion of the lower trunk smoldered, some places with crackling flames. It represented a new form of blow down for me, rather like jumping through a flaming hoop. I decided to walk around it.

The brush came up to my knees, nothing difficult, but as I walked above the burned stump and headed back toward the trail I felt points of pain on my legs, then my arms. My brain needed a couple of seconds to figure out I'd stepped on a hornets' nest and then I was galloping back to the trail and running up it, swatting at my arms and yelling bad words. The hornets in my pant legs needed to be exterminated with heavy thwacks and when I had most of them gone I sat down on the side of the trail to take a few deep breaths. A quick survey tallied about a dozen stings. I concentrated on calming down and looked over at the flaming tree. Some of the burning areas had lovely coals. I could make a cheese quesadilla, but the thought of returning to the swarming hornets cancelled out any hunger I had.

When the sting of the bites had subsided a bit I stood up and continued up the trail. The next trial, not far from the flaming tree, was a piece of trail with a massive number of big trees across it. The pile-up stacked up over my head. After I pulled myself up onto one of the lower levels of blow down I could see that a trail crew had begun to cut through but had stopped, probably in a huge log that had pinched shut. I saw boot prints in the muddy trail and imagined maybe they had stopped for lunch and would be nearby. I could tell them about the flaming obstacle, warn them about the hornets.

This idea spurred me on and I hauled myself over and through the tangled mess. As I kept walking I saw more footprints and horse tracks. Yes, they must be just ahead.

I'm embarrassed to say I walked for a couple more hours before it dawned on me that the trail crew wasn't anywhere near by, that they had left the woods, heading out to Lost Horse, probably to get reinforcements. I knew it was the middle of a hitch, but they had planned on making cribbing and working on eliminating wet areas in the tread. They had re-construction tools with them as the trail had been logged out by another trail crew. They didn't have the proper tools to cut through miles of new blowdown.

Here's an interesting thing about being a solo hiker—it is fine until you think you might meet someone, even someone you don't know. I spent long minutes imagining our conversation, the “wasn't that wind something?” and the joking and swearing about the work that would need to be done to clear the trail, a big fire extinguisher being the best tool for the flaming cedar. At every bend in the trail I leaned forward, hoping to see the trail crew campsite or a pile of tools next to the trail.

I don't think I really gave up on seeing them until I got to the big campsite at Granite Creek, a place I remembered from three years early when I'd come up this trail as part of a Selway-Bitterroot Foundation trail crew. It was still early, just after 6pm, but I needed to stop. I was tired, and discouraged, and lonely. I remembered camping in this spot, in the rain, with three young men who'd become friends, the campfire, the stories.

A wash-up in the creek helped restore my good spirits. Bear Creek cascades along behind the campsite, its clear water bending past smooth rocks and pooling in calm eddies. With my body cooled and cleaner I walked back up to the campsite and it didn't look as tromped, it looked more like a good place to set up camp, and I'd have time to write in my journal and read before dark. I even made soup and a cup of tea. My body thanked me for the early stop. After four days of steady hiking, it was luxurious to stretch out on my Thermo-rest before the sun had gone down. I didn't read many pages in my book before it drooped in my hand and I turned off my headlamp.

Day Five—Granite Creek to Lost Horse--- August 13, 2013

I woke before daylight, ready for an early start. I'd told Lee I'd meet him at Lost Horse at 1pm, but we hadn't specified Mountain Time or Pacific Time. Of course I had more miles to walk than I remembered, and the last few were all uphill.

But I didn't want to hurry through the cedars. Those old, old trees have a magnificent dignity, and it was shocking to see that a recent fire had burned some of them. I hurried through that part of the trail.

I found myself stopping often to look up and stand next to a particularly fantastic tree and to put my arms around a small part of its wide girth. And it's always so subdued and gently dim in an old cedar forest, like the inside of a vast cathedral. Even though I knew I should pick up the pace, I stopped to rest or snack every hour or so, leaning against a tree, soaking in the old growth aura. When the trail at last headed up toward the pass and out of the cedars I followed switchbacks up out of the valley and found thimbleberries and huckleberries to suck on as I walked. I'd kept a slightly curved cedar branch as a walking stick, its bark soft and the wood springy.

Higher and higher and out of the trees to the cliffs that surround this part of the trail. I wasn't moving fast, but steadily and as I neared the road I heard Lee give our “hoo



hoo”, an owl-like call. It was wonderful to hear that familiar sound. He laughed when he saw me with my stick and called me an old woman. I didn’t care. I’d made my wilderness traverse; my legs had carried me to Montana.