

Rambling Through The Winds: How two buddies and their Andean sidekicks found true happiness in the Wind River Range.

By David Roberts

WE HAD MANAGED TO LOSE THE trail in scratchy evergreen forest, and Cope Red was balking. The obstacle in his path was a mere threefoot-wide rivulet running through the underbrush. I pulled hard on his lead rope, but Cope declined to budge. Behind him, linked to his saddle by a short lead, Hot Shot munched grass in stolid bemusement.

"Balking, lying down, or spitting are signs of an ill-trained and possibly spoiled llama," it had said in my primer. A quick skim of Stanlynn Daugherty's *Packing with Llamas*, as well as a two-hour lesson from Scott Woodruff, the guide based in Lander, Wyoming, who had rented us his llamas, amounted to the sum of our experience with these remarkable animals.

"Come on, Cope, damn it, " I muttered, hoping to coax him across the water. But my heart wasn't in my hectoring: How could I blame a llama for refusing to bushwhack with 85 pounds in his saddlebags and some idiot yanking on his head? Then suddenly he launched himself across the brook, pack and all; I had to scramble to escape his landing. The rope from Cope's saddle jerked Hot Shot away from his grazing, and in lumbering chain-reaction our second llama leapt the stream too, his 105-pound load snapping branches as it came.

Jon Krakauer and I were on our way to Stough Creek, a high basin in Wyoming's Wind River Range, our favorite mountains in the contiguous United States. We had each been in the Wind Rivers four times before. Twenty-two years earlier, I had groaned under 80 pounds myself as a friend and I hauled niggardly quantities of freeze-dried cardboard pork chops along with our climbing gear to the Cirque of the Towers. But in 1968 we had had the Cirque to ourselves for eight days at the end of June, as you could never hope to today, any more than you could drink the waters of Lonesome Lake untreated or put in a new route almost anywhere you aimed.

Jon had horse packed a few times in his youth; I had never before allowed dumb creatures to aid my access to the mountains. But with the creeping infirmities of what could no longer be euphemistically called anything less than middle age, it seemed time. As Daugherty had gently put it in her how-to book, "Many llama owners today are former backpackers, some of whom are no longer able to carry as much." Though Jon and I had heard all about llamatrekking with guides, we chose to hire a pair of the fuzzy ruminants and blunder our way guideless to timberline as we made our own discovery of llama lore.

Before the trip, everyone I had talked to had a llama tip to offer. "You know what you're supposed to do if llamas are being really difficult?" an editor had confided to me over lunch in a chic Boston restaurant. "Get up very close and breathe on them. They love that." She had sipped her Evian and sighed, "Don't we all?"

Now I realized that my friend had had it backward. On the trail, Cope Red and Hot Shot gamboled along. I gave Cope's lead to Jon and took Hot Shot myself. In his eagerness, Hot Shot threatened to tread on my heels. Daugherty had several paragraphs on what to do when tailgated by a llama, but I had forgotten their gist. If I so much as hesitated in my steps, Hot Shot laid his muzzle on my shoulder and breathed moistly, encouraging me onward.

IT WAS KODACHROME DAY IN LATE July, with a stiff breeze from the west and nineteenth-century visibility. The Wind River peaks are the antithesis of the nearby Tetons, rising from the surrounding plains not in one melodramatic postcard thrust, but in a subtle matrix of plateaus and grassy, winding valleys. It is remarkably difficult, in fact, to divine the range's inner secrets as you drive the lonely, straight highways parallel to the mountains that crease the sagebrush prairie. Yet every hike into the Wind Rivers is arcadian, thanks to the granite that informs the foothills-giant boulders adrift in the woods, huge level slabs underfoot, stained with darting black water streaks. Some of the best rock east of Yosemite builds sharp, steep headwalls here. In untroubled sleep, full of green ambition, climbers dream of such places.

No mountains in North America more abound in lakes. Upper Stough Creek, where Jon and I were headed, is a brachiated seven-square-mile basin packed with 47 lakes full of blue water and flitting trout. The Wind Rivers are a large range 110 miles long from Togwotee Pass in the northwest to South Pass in the southeast, and as much as 30 miles wide far bigger than the Tetons to the northwest. There are still cirques here that go years without visitors, and many a tower that has yet to be climbed.

Some of the trails follow old Indian paths. Before the white men came, the Shoshone claimed the territory west of the range, while the Crow dominated to the east. The Indians most familiar with the mountains, however, were the little-known Sheepeaters, who hunted elk and bill;horn sheep in the alpine meadows, using dogs and travois rather than horses. Pacifists by nature, they may have headed for the mountains to escape their warlike neighbors. Togwotee Pass, the gap that separates the Wind Rivers from the Absaroka Range to the north, memorializes the last Sheepeater chief.

Mountain men knew the Wind Rivers. John Colter, the blithe loner who has been credited with "discovering" Yellowstone, may have been the first white man to see them. Two of the highest peaks (scholars quibble about just which ones) were ascended early, one by the shadowy armyman-turned-fur-trader Benjamin Bonneville in 1833, the other by the well-documented John C. Fremont in 1842. Yet the range was bypassed during the main thrusts of exploration and commerce. So it remains today: a wilderness that, given its beauty, is strikingly under-visited.

Blissful though Jon and I found our surroundings, and however congenial our woolly companions (as Daugherty likes to call them), we had had a hard time getting out of the town of Lander. The night before our journey, in search of the kind of send-off that sailors crave on the eve of an Arctic voyage, we had cruised past the empty-looking Stockgrowers Bar to alight in the One-Shot Lounge, where a clutch of citizens was watching TV over pitchers of beer. I asked the bartender about NOLS, the National Outdoor Leadership School, which is based in town. "Some of the locals leave when they come in," she told me grimly. "They're diffurnt. We're western."

That is Wyoming in a nutshell. In the late sixties, on their way into the Wind Rivers, some of my climbing friends, hippie types from the East, had been pinned to the ground by cowboys, who clipped their hair with sheep shears.

In 1963, as a college kid fresh off Mount McKinley, I had landed a job teaching for Outward Bound in Colorado. One fellow instuctor, Paul Petzoldt, was a hero of mine, for he had led the first ascent of the north face of Grand Teton way back in 1936 and two years later had spearheaded the first American attempt on K2, which got within 2,000 feet of the summit. Petzoldt had vanished for a decade-some said the bottle was his hideout-but had resurfaced at Outward Bound clean and raring to go, his bushy white eyebrows arched and his burly physique trimmed down. This preppy academy in the Elk Mountains, however, was not his cup of tea; Petzoldt was Wyoming cowboy to the core. Around the campfire that summer, he would shake his head and say, "Now, I know a place up in Wyoming where you could run a *real* wilderness school."

Petzoldt launched NOLS in 1965, and for a long time people agreed that it was the best thing of its kind in America. But *his* own board of directors kicked him out, and by 1990 his former Lander neighbors were turning up their noses at the "NOLSies." How were they diffurnt? Sometimes, the locals said, they came in from a month in the wilds without taking a bath. The girls often didn't shave their legs. As far as the citizens of Lander could tell, the students were all spoiled, rich eastern kids. The instructors periodically took over the OneShot with their whooping and slam dancing. For the locals, it was either leave or fight.

After the One-Shot, on the way back to our motel, Jon and I stopped in for a last drink at Nemo's Long branch Saloon. Here it was "Ladies' Night," and the only word to describe it was *wild*. The women were clearly in charge, orchestrating the mayhem with a rowdiness that truck drivers might

envy. Female barkeeps and customers alike were tossing back shots of butter" scotch schnapps between beers or mixing up vile melanges of Kahlua, vodka, schnapps, and Grand Marnier. A brawny fellow wore a T -shirt that read, ALCOHOL IS A DISEASE-GET YOUR SHOTS HERE-NEMO'S. One very drunk woman stood up every half hour or so, whistled with fingers and front teeth, and delivered, in the cadence of a champion hog-caller, an extended boast about what the girls from Powder River like to do. Another woman, celebrating her birthday a night early, was outlining the details of her upcoming bachelorette party, which would star several homegrown male strippers. I had a shouted conversation with a man from the Wind River Indian Reservation whose mother was Shoshone, father Arapaho. "Sure," he said of the tribal mix, "we fight it out all the time."

The dancing was enlivened by a choreographic fillip I had never seen before, best described in the local vernacular: "Yeah, -----'s flashin' her tits again." As new boys in town, Jon and I received a generous reception, especially once we had established that we were not NOLSies. By last call, the world was a warm, lascivious blur, at least for me, though Jon would later sanctimoniously claim that he had switched to club soda at around 1:30. At dawn, the thought of a hike, even abetted by llamas, was obscene. I agreed to confront the trailhead only after a transfusion at Daylight Donuts and the usual vow never to touch the hard stuff again.

BY LATE MORNING I FELT ALL right. After the snafu in the underbrush, our llamas had trooped like troupers. Hot Shot was a 340-pound, four-year-old piebald that Woodruff had raised himself. Cope Red was an oldster of nine, smaller and calmer than his accomplice; "Cope" came from the one-glance town on the eastern Colorado plains where he had been raised, "Red" from his auburn coat. On the trail, Hot Shot was faster than his friend, so in the time-honored tradition of Himalayan expeditions we put Cope in the lead, opting for seasoned maturity over impetuous youth. Oddly, Cope was the more squeamish llama: He would step daintily around puddles, or even leap across them, while Hot Shot plodded on through.

We ran into a few other groups on the trail, some including kids, who were dazzled to giddiness at the sight of our llamas. Allover Colorado, Washington, Oregon, and California, the llama-trekking business is booming, but in Wyoming it's still considered by the locals to be a mite weird. Woodruff has many a tale to tell of edgy encounters with old-time horsepackers who find the presence of these Peruvian freaks in the back country a bad joke. He makes it a point to stop and answer idle questions from onlookers, and he trucks around Lander in a pickup with his animals prominently displayed.

Cute though they were, our llamas did not much like to be touched, especially on the neck or head. When miffed, they would lay their long ears flat. At inexplicable intervals, one or both of them would start to hum. A high-pitched mew full of question marks, it was a very strange sound, especially coming from so large a beast. "It sounds like the Wookiee in *Star Wars*," said Jon. The hum, writes Daugherty, "may indicate a variety of feelings such as anxiety, curiosity, or discomfort." Our llamas had hummed steadily through the inadvertent bushwhack; they would hum again as we coaxed them to ford the Wind Rivers' rocky streams or bash through the krummholz. Yet at other times they would hum for no apparent reason, swiveling their heads alertly and giving us that very cinematic expression; We know something you don't.

Llama guides-though not Woodruff have been known to wax smug over their creatures' ecological superiority to horses on the trail, and with good reason. A horse's hooves will mash a wet path into an ungodly mess; a llama's soft-padded feet leave less of a print than a Vibram sole does. Instead of steaming piles of equine dump, llamas leave behind discreet mounds of dry, hard pellets that could pass for deer's. They need only a modicum of carried feed, a barley-oats-molasses gorp they'll take from your hand. Most of their food comes from the vegetation along the trail, and, as Daugherty notes, "They rarely kill the plants they eat, preferring to nibble a morsel here and a bite there." Llamas can go days without water, will start when disturbed but will seldom bolt, and will pass a night tethered to a picket stake without a peep.

The virtues of these stoic beasts had, in short, won me over. I haven't owned a dog or a cat since I was eight; I don't really like animals, except for dinner. But on the trail I fell into the pet-lover's gooey solicitude, talking baby-talk to a llama: "Whassa matter, Cope? What is it, old

boy?

WE CAMPED THE FIRST NIGHT in a clearing with a picture-window view across a big nameless lake. Dinner was smoked oysters, steak, and a surprising zinfandel. The next day Jon found us an idyllic base camp in a grove of bristlecone pines right at timberline, around 10,700 feet. To camp even this far in was to outdistance virtually any other overnight visitor to the relatively popular Stough Creek Lakes; as far as we could tell, no one else had ever pitched a tent in our grove. Around this camp was a superb collection of rocks: nicely spaced boot and sock-drying slabs, a cooking rock flat as a picnic table, and a massive cube we called The Throne, on which the noncook could sit to supervise the pancake flipper. Yes, we had pancakes for breakfast, and sometimes for lunch.

For a whole day we hiked in and out of one cirque after another, appraising possible routes, stopping to boulder on crags as well designed as artificial climbing walls. In the afternoon I started fishing. Despite four decades' practice, I would not call myself a devoted or particularly talented angler. I've gone as long as five years without taking out a rod. Each time I start again, I am smitten by the absurdity of the sport. There is something like golf about it—all that gear and know-how and men-will-be-boys folderol about an essentially inane pursuit. And then, lulled by the rhythm of casting into eddies and retrieving across wind ripples, by the dance of the fly above the darting silver shapes, I fall into a trance as complete as comes over me when climbing. Never does time pass so unobserved, never does one so forget the sorrows and duties of humdrum life.

I caught eight trout in an hour and a half, and put four back. My keepers were of three different kinds—brook, cutthroat, and golden, the last of which I had never caught before. Back in camp, we feasted on asparagus soup, shrimp risotto, trout fried in butter, and a young French burgundy.

That the Wind Rivers are an angler's paradise is chiefly owing to their most famous old codger, Finis Mitchell, who as a boy in 1906 settled on the fringe of the wilderness. During the Depression, desperate for gainful employment, Finis and his wife, Emma, concocted Mitchell's Fishing Camp at Big Sandy Opening on the southeastern tip of the range. The only problem was, no more than five lakes in the whole range appeared to have trout in them.

Undaunted, Mitchell packed 2.5 million trout into 314 different lakes over the next seven years, hauling them from a state hatchery in milk cans that he covered with burlap, slung from horseback, and jostled at regular intervals to oxygenate the water. Within a short time Mitchell was catching what he called "monsters," the offspring of his own transplants. One such specimen, he wrote, "looked like you had blowed him up with a pump he was so fat."

All this hiking, fishing, and bouldering took its toll, and I was glad I had included another novelty in our supplies: one of those hinged ensolite-and-nylon camp chairs I had eyed suspiciously in climbing stores. Now I found myself spending an inordinate amount of time seated in the contraption, using it even inside the tent, where it made reading by headlamp almost a pleasure.

One evening just before dinner, as I sat in my camp chair atop The Throne while Jon pattered away on the cooking rock, I lapsed into a pensive, nostalgic mood. Was I really happier, I wondered, eating steak and sipping wine in a dry grove at timberline than I had been in my Spartan heyday, huddled over a Primus stove on a stormlashed glacier in Alaska, tuning snow into water and oatmeal into mush? Could I feel as good strolling packless into the Wind Rivers with hired llamas bent beneath crushing loads as I had when I righteously humped my own impedimenta up to Lonesome Lake at age 25? Was basking in a camp chair really better than hunkering in an igloo? Were ease, comfort, and luxury the true ingredients for fun in the mountains?

The answer was yes.
I snapped back to reality. "Pass the frogs'

legs, Jon," I bellowed without getting up.

JOE KELSEY'S GUIDE TO THE range, *Climbing and Hiking in the Wind River Mountains*, lists only one climb, an easy one, on record in Stough Creek Basin. Jon and I saw plenty of routes to do all around us, but those that were not trivial looked hard and dangerous. Eight years before, we had climbed together out of Deep Lake, several valleys to the northwest, where the granite walls of Haystack and East Temple and Steeple Peak are riven with clean cracks affording some of the great classic climbs in the range. Here in Stough Creek, however, the rock is mostly quartz diorite, a gray, plated stuff seamed with white horizontal dikes-beautiful to look at, but lousy for protection.

WE HAD NONETHELESS scouted a few prospective lines when a typical July weather pattern moved in: splendid, clear mornings followed by hail and lightning every afternoon. On the first such day, we sat in the tent, snug and dry, while ball-bearing-size stones drummed on the roof and rang the cooking pots. Jon opened a can of cashews.

"I feel guilty about the llamas," I said,
scooping up a pawful of nuts.

"I'll go check on them," he offered.

"I'll do it," I bluffed, "if I can get out of
this camp chair."

He was back in a minute, hail in his beard. "They're fine," he said. "Like Scott says, they've been around the block."

A bird singing in a tree could set Cope Red humming, but lightning and hail fazed him not at all. When the storm passed, we were amazed to find our llamas with inch-thick rugs of ice on their backs. So well insulated were they that it took several hours for the hail to melt.

On another stormy afternoon, I thumbed through the index of Kelsey's book, where those who first climbed the range's routes are listed. Although some of America's finest mountaineers-Yvon Chouinard, Fred Beckey, Royal Robbins, and Layton Kor, among others-put up bold new routes in the Wind Rivers, the range has not become an invidious, competitive scene like Yosemite, the Bugaboos, or the Diamond of Longs Peak. Indeed, as Chris Jones mentions in an aside in his book *Climbing in North America*, "The Wind Rivers have...contributed little to the development of North American climbing." The range's single finest mountaineering deed was the four-day ascent of the north face of Mount Hooker in 1964 by Robbins, Dick McCracken, and Charlie Raymond. Theirs was a line so pure that to see it even from a great distance sets the heart soaring.

Perusing the names in the back of Kelsey's book, I felt yet another nostalgic glow creep over me. Until the last decade, the list reminded me, climbers in America had still been members of a community. In the fine print, I counted 44 men and women who were my friends or good acquaintances, and each triggered a little jolt of memory. Some had been pioneers, legends whom I considered it a privilege to meet: Robert and Miriam Underhill, Ken Henderson, Hans Kraus, Henry Hall, Paul Petzoldt himself. Others, my nearer coevals, had been the cronies of many a happy lark. With this one I had picked blueberries in the Brooks Range; with that, played blackjack in Reno. With X, I had kayaked on a spring morning in New England; with Y, drunk beer at Emil's after a hard day at the Clinks; with Z, broiled hamburgers on a patio in Aspen. I had listened to yet another play Coliperin on his home-built harpsichord and had cruised the topless bars of Anchorage with another. With yet another, I had even put up new routes in the Wind Rivers.

So the days passed. Seizing the morning hours before the storms rolled in, Jon and I hiked and scrambled up several nameless 12,000-foot peaks, gazing from their summits at sylvan holes that Colter and Fremont had been the first white men to see. We admired slick walls and savage towers that the next generation might climb. We took the llamas on day hikes and bouldered like burglars on the take. When the storms let up, we walked through hail-struck meadows, marveling at me flowers peeping through: paintbrush and aster, lupine and elephantella among the grass; pale columbine and Parry's primrose in rocky nooks; up high, tiny dianthus and forget-me-not. We sent coney and marmots scurrying. At night we lay on our backs and counted satellites and

meteors.

I continued to fish. At one point Jon shocked me by confessing to what he knew was an outdoor heresy: He wasn't crazy about the taste of trout. I switched to barbless hooks and played to shore a 16inch cutthroat, then made a lot of noise that night about how good it tasted.

And we talked. Is there any better talk than that of old friends in the mountains? We weighed the upstart virtues of the Mariners against the vintage skills of the Red Sox. We relived hoary climbs. We speculated as to what makes llamas tick. We convinced ourselves that the disasters of youth had by now sublimed into gilded anecdotes. We anatomized most of our friends and some of our enemies. We wondered aloud about women as we never dared to in civilization.

Then one morning it was time to hike out. With regret, we fetched Cope Red and Hot Shot and saddled them up. Foolishly we had promised others that we would emerge from the Wind Rivers on a certain date. Back home, responsibilities lurked like tax collectors. We had drunk our last bottle of pinot noir. And besides, in one more day it would be Ladies' Night at Nemo's again.