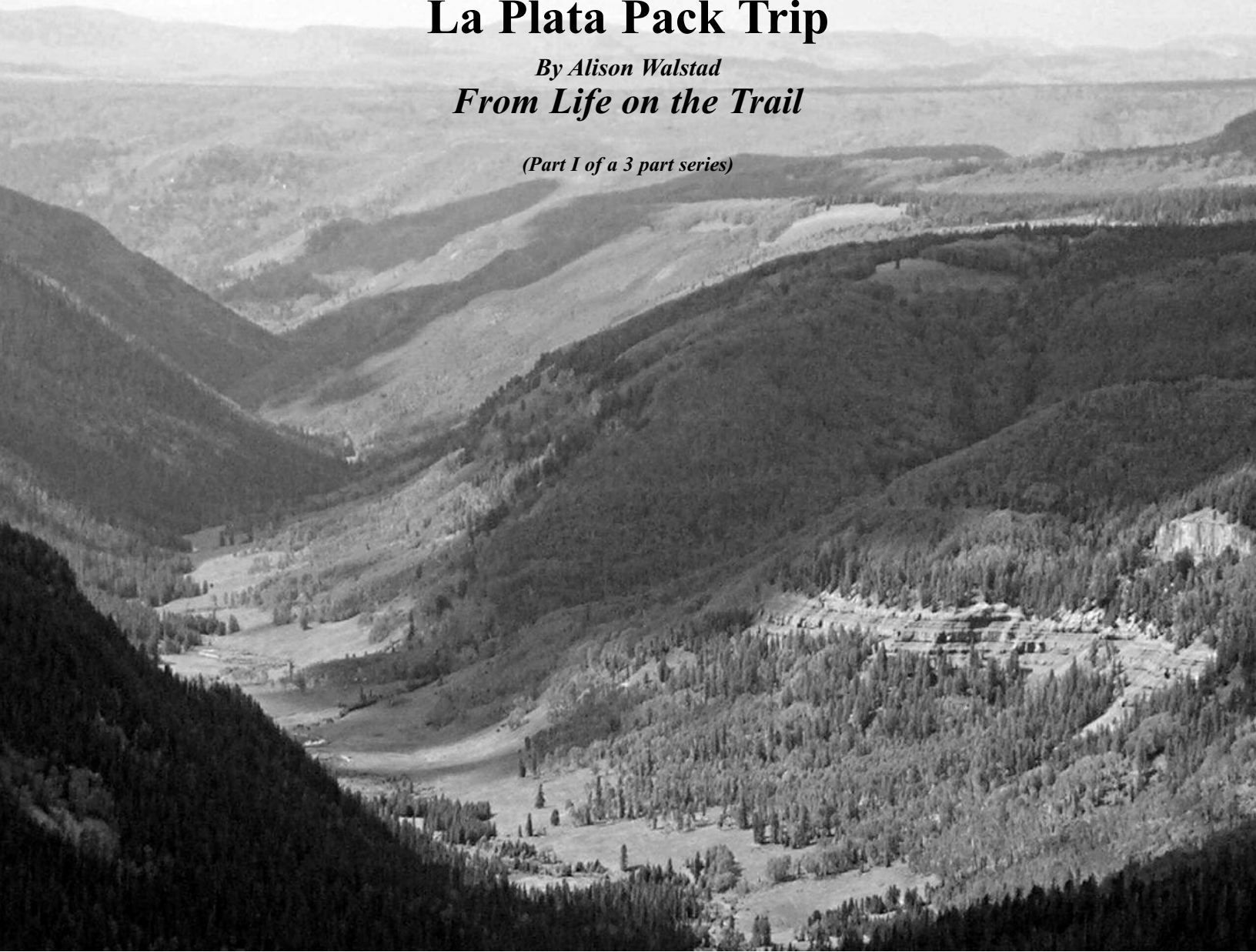


La Plata Pack Trip

*By Alison Walstad
From Life on the Trail*

(Part I of a 3 part series)



Bear Creek Valley

We found ourselves camped in Southwestern Colorado in late August, exploring the La Plata Mountains. Named by the Spanish for the silver contained within the range, the La Platas are situated north and west of Durango, Colorado. We were camped at Transfer Trailhead, located about nine miles north of the quaint cowboy town of Mancos. Ranch corrals are available for a small fee adjoining a campground, and plenty of trails lead into the surrounding aspen meadows, and also along the West Mancos River. According to a trailhead sign, the Colorado Trail could be accessed at a junction some sixteen miles to the east. Wouldn't it be great to ride this section of the Colorado Trail?

Throughout our days there, that sign post for the Colorado Trail kept popping up in our minds, like a little itch that refused to go away. I knew that, sooner or later, we'd head off to scratch that itch. We had been wanting to explore more of the 468 mile trail which travels through eight mountain ranges on its' journey from Durango, to Denver, Colorado. A quick check of the calendar revealed that; sooner, would be much better than, later.



Colorado Columbine, a native plant and the state flower of Colorado.

The warm season was coming to an end, and before too long, the weather would be in control of our destiny. Summer in the high country of the Rocky Mountains doesn't last long. Often, the mountain passes are covered in snow until the first or second week of July, and beginning in early September, winter storms are a real possibility. The window of opportunity for exploring above timberline can often be only eight to twelve weeks long.

Although the Colorado Trail could be accessed via the West Mancos Trail, we decided to take a round about approach, by traveling up Bear Creek. We had been advised that Bear Creek was a long and scenic valley, and was well worth riding. A check of the map showed that we could reach the Bear Creek trailhead from our location at Transfer, by riding about fourteen miles north, on the Morrison Trail. Fourteen miles is a reasonable day's journey for us in moderate terrain and since we had the extra time available, we thought, why not use it to do some exploring?

After countless layers of corral dust were brushed off the Delta Force, and two weeks worth of supplies were loaded onto the animals, we left with happy hearts. In our early days as "wilderness



Alison Walstad and the Delta Force; Ruby, Doc and Mesquite

gypsies", we began jokingly referring to our three head of stock as the Delta Force. After riding three thousand miles on them in the last three years, we are so confident in our animals we feel we can go almost anywhere on them. They are a tough, strong, fit, smart, savvy, willing, capable, and cohesive team. And just who are they? Ruby, a 13 year old sorrel molly, Doc, a twenty something dark john, and Mesquite, a bay 13year old quarter horse whom the mules adore. We can ride and pack all three, but usually pack the horse and ride the two mules. We've all been together for a long time; Mike and me, and the animals, and now we were heading off again to do what we all like to do best—pack into the backcountry!

We gazed fondly over our shoulders as we rode out into the warm morning sun, and looked upon our camp. We had been there long enough to regard it as home. As we travel the west, each new camp site becomes endearing, with its' own individual charms and memories. Any time we depart for new horizons, we feel an almost nostalgic pang of homesickness for the temporary residence left behind.

Our journey down the Morrison Trail was a pleasant one. The terrain consisted of gently rolling mesa tops, alternating between

forests and meadows; a veritable waltz in the park compared to some of the extreme terrain we had ridden in the previous few weeks. Aspen trees were the dominant plant community, and their quaking leaves were just beginning their fall color change. A palate of hues ranging from greens to gold, and reds to bronze, painted the autumn landscape against a backdrop of the deep azure blue sky that represents the quintessential. Colorado. The trail was crisscrossed by various ATV tracks, but the intersections were very well marked, and we had no difficulty in finding our way. The La Plata mountains are not designated as wilderness, per se, and multiple uses coexist. However, certain sections, such as, The West Mancos River, Bear Creek, The Colorado Trail, and Hermosa Creek, are managed as road less areas, and have restrictions against motorized vehicle travel.

We reached the Bear Creek Trailhead, and traveled on up the valley a few miles to circumvent a private ranch. Leaving the trail to cross the creek, we made our camp in a meadow, tucked away, and hidden out of sight. The sky had been so clear that evening, we decided to sleep out under the stars. Fatigue and laziness prompted the decision not to set up the tent, and we paid the price for our lethargy about four o'clock in the morning when the pitter patter of little rain drops sent us scurrying for cover, under the tarp. Fortunately, the storm didn't amount to much, and we awoke to a beautiful new day.

Continuing on up Bear Creek, the next morning, we understood why the locale had been recommended to us, for the further we rode, the more scenic the valley became. Summer rains had encouraged the native grasses, and the earth was a lush carpet of green. We passed by large vermilion red cliffs, clinging to the valley walls, and the rich contrasts of colors and textures made the landscape virtually spring to life.

The only blight in the pristine, idyllic setting was the presence of vast quantities of noxious thistle plants in the meadows. The obnoxious plants dominated the landscape in the open grassy areas. These annoying, invasive weeds had reached their season's peak, and the plants were five and six feet tall. Riding through them was like riding through a dense forest of prickly bushes. Disruptions in the natural ecosystem can occur from past careless management of the land. Drought and overgrazing of native grasses can lead to the spread of non native weed seeds or plants. These plant intruders compete with the natural vegetation, often times winning out. In the past, careless introduction of harmful weeds often occurred because of negligence, or simple ignorance. An example of the latter occurred in the mid twentieth century, with the introduction of Tamarisk, or Salt Cedar. Used as a tool to aid in erosion control, these shrubby trees were planted by government agencies throughout the west, along arroyos and stream beds. Too late, it was learned that the plants suck incredible amounts of precious water from the ground table; as much as 100 gallons per plant, per day! Originally of foreign origin, the Tamarisk took the the West, like a duck to water. The newly introduced Salt Cedars began taking over; dominating and replacing the original natural local vegetation, which had evolved to survive on very little water. The tragic and vexing problem has become monumental, for the plants now number in the millions, and are rapidly infiltrating their way into every watershed, robbing the parched land of its' most precious resource— water. Programs have been developed to try and rid lands these horrific plants, but their numbers are now so overwhelming, that's it's almost a losing battle. In the meantime, the damage being done

is almost incalculable.

There is a greater understanding, now, about the irreparable harm caused by non- native plants in the natural environment, and steps are being taken to try and prevent further ecological pollution by invasive plants. One of these is the requirement that all livestock feeds be certified as weed free. I occasionally hear mule people complain about all of the feed restrictions imposed in the back country in some western states, but they would only need to visit the sad situation in Bear Creek, to see the reasoning behind the regulations. Complying with the rules is not difficult. It just means that mule owners must use, and pack in, processed feed pellets or alfalfa cubes instead of hay. In truth, pellets provide a complete feed and are more convenient to transport, anyway. It's just hard to break that old mind set of thinking that mules need to eat hay. However, it seems to be nearly impossible to find the "weed free certified hay" in any feed stores anyway, so save yourself some frustration and just buy the pellets.

Our comfortable second night's base camp was set up just past the junction of the Grindstone Trail. We had planned to camp in the general vicinity, but when we reached the trail junction we realized that a hunting outfitter had already set up his wall tents there. We took shelter in an aspen grove to let a thunder shower pass, and when it cleared, we journeyed on and found an even better spot to camp just a little farther up the trail. Pitching our tent in a hidden meadow, we were totally secluded and surrounded by trees on all sides. Bear Creek was flowing swiftly alongside the pasture, and we thought it to be one of our best locations of the summer. We stayed and explored out of there for several days.

Although it had rained on us only a little that afternoon, a storm intensified later and it rained steadily throughout the night. We awoke to find that two inches of water filled the empty frying pan. We made ourselves comfortable in the tent, and spent the day relaxing, napping, and reading, to the sounds of a steady drizzle. The Delta Force, always thrilled with a non stop, eating day, devoured the native grasses until they were stuffed like ticks. By afternoon we noticed that the temperature seemed to be dropping, and about four o'clock in the evening it started to snow!

"Yikes, it's only September 4th, and we're getting snowed on!"
To be continued....



Help stop the spread of noxious weeds into the backcountry.



Mike on Ruby packing in the La Plata Mountains of Colorado