

so miles away—walking into a monster flash-and-boom thunderstorm that ripped through and soaked us clear down to our skivvies.

Next morning—the last Modern Man would be with me—we learned from a passing dayhiker that the shelter at which the honeymooning couple was staying had been hit by lightning the previous evening, likely during the same squall that had drenched us. The young wife had been killed. The husband had been paralyzed on one side. He barely survived. It was all over the local news, the dayhiker said.

Before taking his leave, the dayhiker looked at me and asked, “What the f*** happened to your eye?”

At that point, my injury seemed mighty inconsequential.

It is an understatement to say our

descent into Fontana Village was somber and reflective. Though the day was beautiful, and though the birds were chirping brightly, there was no way to mentally tamp down thoughts regarding the cruel interface between fate and coincidence.

Modern man and I drifted apart after that trip, as if the distance might bury the bad memories. And my eye? It took a long time, but it eventually healed. Though sometimes I wonder if that trip caused other lasting effects. I maybe spend more time glancing toward the heavens than I used to, but that’s something that likely comes with age, whether you’re on the trail or not.

M. John Fayhee, one-time editor of the Mountain Gazette and author of 12 books, advocates whittling the ends of trekking sticks until they’re nice and round.

Mutiny

Optimism isn’t a weather forecast.

By Annette McGivney

We stood in a circle around the seal. It was lying motionless, but still breathing, on a stretch of beach along Northern California’s Lost Coast. It looked up at us with big, sad eyes.

“It’s clearly suffering. I think we should kill it,” said John Harlin, this magazine’s Northwest editor at the time.

“What! Are you kidding?” answered contributing editor Mike Lanza.

He was not kidding. “I could just pound its head with a rock,” Harlin said. “You know, like a mercy killing.”

It was late November 2001 and the first day of a four-day trip to test gear. Our group of seven had set out that morning from Mattole Beach, some of us carrying more trepidation than others. It was the off-season for the Lost Coast and a storm was in the forecast. But even in the best weather, traversing the wilderness beach requires timing the tides for safe passage below stretches of rocky headlands. Throw in a storm surge and the route becomes impassable—or interesting, depending on how you look at things.

Rocky Mountain Editor Steve Howe had his take: “This is a bad omen,” he said as we stared down at the seal with the sun beating on its silky black skin. Howe said keeping to the plan was foolhardy. But then, Howe’s a bit of a grumbler. And never mind we were testing down bags, teepees, tarps, and lightweight rainshells. “We are carrying all the wrong gear for this place,” Howe added, as if he was going to talk the rest of us out of it.

Not a chance. Our group was dominated by the three horsemen of optimism. There was Jonathan Dorn, the editor-in-chief whose meteorological instinct deviated so far from Howe’s that he was testing an ultralight poncho as both shell and shelter. Gear Editor Dennis Lewon was so unconcerned that he’d packed wood-burning camp stoves. And then there was Harlin, who regularly sought out the world’s most difficult mountaineering routes because, for him, the greater the challenge, the greater the fun. Fortunately for the seal, Harlin’s zeal for euthanasia didn’t pass group muster. We hiked beneath blue skies to our campsite along Cooskie Creek.

The next morning, we woke to a pounding storm. Vindication for Howe, but to his credit, he didn’t gloat. “Howe and Harlin have gone to see if there is a better way around the headlands!” Dorn shouted over the teepee-rattling gusts.

The scouts returned with bad news: There was no high route. Being more of a worst-case-scenario kind of person myself, I thought we should heed yesterday’s omen. “Well, we should stay here and wait it out,” I said. Howe agreed. Two others were on the fence. The optimists argued that if we got out of camp right then, we could cross the headland stretch when the tide was at its lowest. Positivity prevailed.

The several-mile traverse between Cooskie and Randall Creeks was worse than even I had imagined. A storm surge had pinned churning surf to cliffs. We struggled across slippery rocks where every oncoming wave felt like a fire hose. I planted my trekking poles between rocks to avoid being swept out to sea and looked back at our crew. Lewon was

READER FAILS

Rain pummeled a 3-day trip that I took with my brother in the central Cascades, so we decided to turn around. Unfortunately, all the streams we had crossed on the way in were now raging. The first one we came to was about 6 or 7 feet wide, but only about a foot deep. I went first. One step from the far bank, I sank in to my waist and fell on my back with my 40 pound pack dragging me under. My brother was laughing so hard I had to save myself.

—BRANDON CLARK



laughing. Howe was fuming. And Dorn had salvaged a buoy rope to secure his poncho around his waist. Meanwhile, the storm runoff caused rocks to drop from the cliffs overhead like mortar rounds.

Eventually we reached sanctuary—a treeless bluff well above the surf and lashed by the hurricane-force winds. Somehow, in the middle of this vast stretch, was a cabin. It was the only wind-break in sight and so we huddled on the porch to consider our options.

“There is no way we can pitch tents in this wind,” said Howe, who added grimly that he was feeling hypothermic.

Lanza, with his jacket wet through, said he was soaked and maybe hypothermic, too. Everyone was shivering.

Howe turned the knob on the door of the cabin. It was unlocked.

“I’m going in,” I said without hesitation. Howe and Lanza followed.

But the three horsemen would have none of it. “That’s breaking and entering,” Dorn said, suddenly glowering.

“What about gear testing?” added Harlin, the seal sadist. “You’re cheating.”

Cheating never felt so good. We were finally out of the wind and rain. Our focus turned from survival to getting comfy. We brewed tea. We claimed bunks. And we laughed as we watched the optimists outside the cabin’s large picture window scurrying around looking for sticks to fuel their wood stove. (They had managed to erect their teepee in the lee of the cabin, which, somehow, was not cheating.)

With nightfall came a temperature drop. The cabin was unheated, while the fire in the teepee had turned it into a sweat lodge. The optimists were sitting shirtless drying their clothes on a line. Our cohort of mutineers briefly visited the teepee and its smug occupants—to warm up. Sitting around the wood stove, we argued about who was smarter. Team Mutiny had the good judgment to get out of a potentially life-threatening situation. But the optimists argued they’d been right since they weren’t dead. They called us quitters.

We woke the next morning to a rainbow arching over the coastal bluffs. The storm had passed. We tidied up the cabin and got the owner’s address from a magazine cover so we could later send him a thank you note with a bottle of whiskey.

The rest of the hike went off without a hitch, notwithstanding a raccoon raid on the last night in which we lost what was left of our food. Once at the Black Sands Beach trailhead, we reflected in our disparate ways on what had gone down.

“Man, that was fun,” Lewon said.

“Well,” Lanza replied, “I’m just thankful Harlin didn’t club me in the head.”

Annette McGivney lives in Arizona, far, far away from the beach.

Legend of the Bear Slayer

A young hiker goes from zero to wilderness hero and back again in record time. *By RJ Thieneman*

My mother insisted that ladies prefer a man in uniform, so I wore my Boy Scout outfit to school on Fridays. Most days girls looked in my direction zero percent of the time, anyway, so I figured the merit badge sash couldn’t hurt. If only there was a badge for love.

The thought was never far away, even on a trip to the Rocky Mountains’ Cimarron Range with nine other 13-year-old boys.

That day began with a bear wandering into our camp for breakfast. Being the first to spot the visitor, it was my duty to remember my training, spring into action, and—bang the cooking pots together. I pretended like I know how it was going to go, and the bear, also on script, moseyed off. Stories around the breakfast fire quickly evolved into a mythical saga. The cooking pots became my weapons. I had vanquished the beast.

Throughout our hike that day, the crew took five-minute breaks every now and then so as to not let the lactic acid build in our legs. Each time we stopped, we were leapfrogged by another crew, only to then passed them again on their break. Our new trail buddies had a decent-size group and a few people our age. But there is one detail that makes them particularly interesting: They were girls.

Each time we passed the band of females, I glanced at one in particular. It was impossible not to. Her golden braids, Kansas City baseball cap, and freckled cheeks made her irresistible. I’m sure she hadn’t bathed in days but still managed to smell like oranges. She smiled and I smiled back.

The girls giggle each time we passed. When enough distance grew between the groups, the boys and I planned a future for this nameless angel and me. How many kids will we have? Where will we grow old together? Maybe she likes Nintendo? It felt like winning the lottery. No one guessed I would meet the girl of my dreams in the middle of a 100-mile hike.

Up ahead: a fork in the trail. Dread washed over me. She and I have come so far. Just as I expected, her crew was heading south. Mine was going north. It was too soon. In this moment, I felt the same tingle I’d felt the first time I laid eyes on her, all those hours ago. The best six hours of my life. I was not going to let her get away.

I summoned the memory of the bear fight from earlier that morning. *I am king of that beast, master of these mountains. People don’t fight off bears only to let the perfect woman get away. You can do this.* I swallowed to wet my mouth and yelled across the canyon toward the trail on the opposite side.

“Hey! Can I have your number?!”

This was it. Everything was out in the open. The birds stopped chirping, the frogs stop ped croaking, even the wind stopped blowing to quiet the trees. No one dared a whisper.

“Sure!” she yelled back.

I tore through my pack for a pen and something to write on while she cupped her hands around her mouth to yell the digits.

“One-eight hundred-IN-YOUR-DREAMS!”

It took a good 30 minutes for our crew to escape the sound of cackling girls. Then, as if on cue, it started to rain. My T-shirt got soaked as we rigged a tarp for cover. I rummaged through my pack to find the only dry layer left: my Boy Scout uniform.

If only I had been wearing it earlier.



Most days girls looked in my direction zero percent of the time, anyway, so I figured the merit badge sash couldn’t hurt.

RJ Thieneman is a writer in Los Angeles. He still sports the neckerchief sometimes.