

The Beartooth Absarokee Ride Summer 2016

*Phillip Odden, Else Bigton and Alyssa Matthews
riding Marcy, Frode and Ildar*



Beartooth Mountains ride 2016

By Phil Odden 8/31/2016

Montana is my favorite State. To get to the Montana border from our farm in northwest Wisconsin takes about 12 hours of driving, pulling a horse trailer with three Fjord horses. Then another 6 hours to get to the fun parts of Montana, where the majestic mountains rise up from the river-laced valley floors. The Chevy diesel pickup truck has enough power and room to pull the trailer and haul the gear necessary for our annual horse adventure in the great American West. My dear wife Else and I had tested most of the equipment and two of the three horses on prior trips. As they say out West, it wasn't our first rodeo, but then we were not lifetime rodeo veterans either.

Montana is a large Western state with a notably big blue sky by day and bright shining stars by night with diverse landscapes. We passed through rolling dry prairies with rough, sage-covered, canyoned river breaks. Then came lush, green, irrigated valleys flanked by mountains textured with evergreen trees. In the distance we saw the majestic faces of the Rocky Mountains looming in hues of purple-gray against the distant horizon.

My love of horses came naturally as a young boy growing up on a hard-working dairy farm. The wild-eyed red Welch Pony was a welcome distraction and competent match for my brother and I, with regard to mischief and blind courage, for everyday adventure on the farm.

As a kid I always preferred the sweet smell of horse manure to cow manure. Having to deal with far too much cow manure on the end of a broad five tined fork clenched in boney boy hands, the smell of the horse meant bare-back freedom on four quick legs and the chance to escape to wild pastures and wood lots with time to dream. Dreaming of riding in the Rocky Mountains came easy, especially while studying the high clouds in the summer sky that came to us from the West. It was written all over them and it didn't take a righteous English teacher to read the message.

Bordering on our golden years, Else decided to learn to ride a horse starting about four years ago, against her better judgment. Riding a horse had always seemed intimidating to her but after supporting my endeavors in breeding, training, riding, and driving Fjord horses since 1997 she took courage and climbed on my best Fjord mare Marcy. Marcy, at age 13, is a champion driving horse who has won several championship ribbons in single and pair driving among all breeds of ponies at nationally recognized American Driving Society shows.

She has done light draft work on our farm and functioned masterfully as a pack horse on high-elevation elk hunting trips in Colorado and Montana. Marcy has always been willing to take care of Else but it still takes good riding skills on Else's part to make her do it.

Their relationship is based on the fact that Else is management and Marcy is labor. Husbands and wives can and often do negotiate that sort of thing, but with horses it can't be negotiable if you want a safe and pleasant outcome.



Alyssa, in her late twenties, grew up riding horses as a kid. Horses have always been central in her life. In Colorado she teaches and trains horsemanship skills and riding at a barn near the city of Evergreen. Alyssa and I share common horse-training philosophy rooted in classic Dressage training with aspects of natural horsemanship.

Currently we have 8 well-trained Fjords on our farm from which to choose for driving and riding. My first passion in horses is driven dressage and I have become well known in the Midwest for driving two horses as a pair or team. Because 10 days after our return from our riding adventure I was signed up for a Pleasure Driving show at Villa Louis on the Wisconsin banks of the mighty Mississippi, I decided to take my two red dun fjord geldings, Odden's Frode and Odden's Ildar. The driving pair would need exercise and muscle building rather than languishing in the pasture while we were gone for two weeks.



Frode, calm and collected at age 11, has lots of miles in the packsaddle and riding saddle under his girth. He had driven in pairs with both Marcy and Ildar. But Ildar, age 7, was green to riding and had never been to the mountains in his life. Last fall he had three weeks of initial riding training. I had taken him on a couple short trail rides near home before we left. The goal with Ildar, in addition to keeping him conditioned and in shape, was to see both how he would do on mountain trails and how he would manage the stress of traveling with unfamiliar and often marginal accommodations.

Our first ride was on the West fork of the Boulder River into the Absakora and Beartooth Wilderness. We had to cross private ranch land to enter the wilderness. Ranch land means cows in Montana, and it was quickly apparent that Ildar was deathly afraid of black cows. Tied to a feeding bunk at the trailhead the first night he couldn't keep his eyes off the marauding beef cows and calves. While Marcy and Frode chowed down on the hay, Ildar danced, snorted, and lost weight as his flanks sucked up and were darkened by sweat.



So the first ride, with Alyssa on Frode in the lead, was as close to rodeo as we would experience on the trip. While Frode is overly calm and can be a little sluggish, Ildar has always had plenty of energy and now apparently a very good imagination and self-preservation response to black cows. He danced, snorted, and pranced up the trail and even offered to return to the relative safety of the feeding bunk with a dramatic white-eyed front leg lift and about-face. Fortunately I landed square deep in the saddle with contact on both sides of his mouth. Still the cows were everywhere on and around the trail for the first three miles. We just had to push through. The trail was only wide enough for one horse but Ildar wanted to be right beside his driving partner and dear safety buddy Frode. We were able to keep forward motion in the horses with plenty of leg and a little persuasion from a 2-foot light aspen branch, and things settled down. Eventually during that first ride I was able to teach Ildar that the cows would actually move if we rode toward them. And we even did a short mini cattle drive just to prove the point.



The next day we rode a trail in a different direction, where cattle were not allowed. Else and Marcy joined us. We soon learned that Ildar felt fairly comfortable riding in the middle of the herd with a horse ahead and a horse behind on the narrow mountain trail. With that he was able to relax, even though I needed to stay alert to help him make the correct decisions. Still, even climbing a couple thousand feet of elevation Ildar never ran low on energy and remained on the alert. He was willing to cross the rushing mountain streams, but wasn't willing to drink deeply like the other two horses. Now and again a dark tree stump or dark rock would pique his imagination while the other two never noticed. Giving him the chance to study the situation for a few moments usually solved the problem and we moved on.





Fjords are basically thinking horses rather than reactive horses. When confronted with problems it's best to give them a chance to think about the problem rather than get excited and try to push them beyond their tolerance.

We were on a trail-riding adventure, but we were also on a training mission. In order to have well trained, confident horses the horses need to be trained correctly. Each moment of each day when we work horses we are training and schooling our horses. We are either going forward in the training or sliding backward. In this case I was trying to build confidence in a horse that was trained well to drive but was a green horse to ride. Ildar needed to get used to the smells, sights, and sounds of the West without going into sensory overload.

By the end of the day ride we had covered about 12 miles and climbed 3000 feet of elevation. We crossed several streams, climbed rock outcroppings, and crossed wooden bridges over rushing streams. The scenery was incredible and we were alone on the trails. The horses were again tied to the feeding bunk and Ildar was able to get some rest and eat his hay, though he still noticed the Black Angus across the fence.

The next rides took place on the trails out of East Rosebud Lake in the Beartooth Mountains. We stayed in a third-generation family cabin dating back to the late 1800's. Located on the shore of East Rosebud lake, it had a grand, majestic view of the tall rock faces and spires leading up the Rosebud. These trails were much more challenging than those on the Boulder.

Our horses spent the nights calmly tied in the trailer since there was no other place to keep them. To get to the trailhead we had to lead them through rough ground strewn with round boulders the size of basketballs. Sure-footed horses are amazing. It was like walking your horse over a farm-style rock pile gleaned and piled from rock-rich fields.

Fjords are mountain ponies from Norway. At their best they are sure footed, heavy boned, and sane minded. The west coast of Norway is rocky and steep, so the horses were in their element. All we needed to do was give them a chance to prove it by offering supportive training and guided discipline.

The main trail leading south out of East Rosebud Lake is a well-used trail by hikers and backpackers. Some bring their dogs. There was a little sign of horse at the trail-head, but not much. The trail climbs out of the lake basin onto the high plateau and then down to Cook City on the Northeast corner of Yellowstone National Park. The stunning scenery is among the finest in Montana with two central elements, volcanic rocks and water.



This is grizzly bear country and the US Government wants you to know that.

The trail was steep and rocky much of the time, following the lower river bottom. It had been constructed in the 60's. When the bottoms were too tight with shear rock the trail climbed and switched back on boulder fields with angular rocks the size of refrigerators. Somehow the trail had been leveled and gravel hauled in for footing. As the horses walked the boulder fields it sounded mystically like they were walking on hollow rocks.

Our goal was to reach the plateau at the third lake. The ponies were doing fine but the humans couldn't help but recognize both the thrill and the danger. This is a popular hiking path and hikers could appear anytime and sometimes at the worst possible place. After passing the second lake the trail became more difficult. I recall that we stopped at the foot of a waterfall and at the base of a boulder field that covered the mountainside. Alyssa was in the lead with Frode, with me and my Ildar in the middle while Else took up the rear on Marcy. The up close scenery was stunning in the tight canyon bottom. Alyssa wondered out loud how and where the trail could lead us out. Below us was the rushing river and a boulder field capped by a waterfall.



The rock face on our side of the river started just above the boulder field and stretched vertically to the heavens. There was no obvious way out of the canyon. We were in awe.

After studying the terrain I could see only one possibility and sure enough far above us a short section of trail could be seen. And then back a hundred yards a shear rock cliff with a hint of a trail at the base. All we needed to do was follow the trail. Simple as that. So we switch backed up the bolder field to where we approached the ledge. The first steps onto the ledge turned out to be flat uphill rock with precious little purchase texture for our



horse's shoes.

Two of the horses were shod with carbide spikes on the heels of each shoe. Marcy had drillteck, an aggressive carbide crystal welded to the toes and heels of her shoes.

That ledge proved to be fairly easy and uneventful, except for the feeling of exposure to the drop below. It was best not to think about what could happen but rather to make things happen for the good of our horses and the three brave and foolish souls on board.

Certainly, the dramatic sense of exposure can be an overwhelming feeling. Clearly, falling off the cliff onto boulders would end in certain pain and death. No doubt. But all along the way there were opportunities to fall 10 to 20 feet from the narrow trails onto the same hard and unforgiving structure. We soon learned to dismiss the fear of those falls due to our trust in our ponies and our ability to ride them. The fear was real in the same way as Ildar's fear of the black cows. To ride difficult trails involves first conquering your own fear, then helping your horse to conquer its fear through trust in you as the supreme, level-headed leader.

Just below the third lake the trail again skirted along narrow ledges. These were longer than before and included tight little turns into the mountain wall. Alyssa was again in the lead with me and Ildar close on his heels. I tried not to crowd her but Ildar was seeking the comfort of his mentor and buddy Frode. Frode took Alyssa into the rock wall, recognizing the danger below the ledge. It was good to know that the horses understood the danger of falling off the ledge but crowding the rock wall was hard on the rider's knees. Alyssa had to hold Frode away from the wall with her hand for a few strides until she could control him with her inside leg and bridle.





Then just as we reached the tightest spot we came face-to-face with two gentlemen backpackers. Backpackers know and comply with the rule to give way to the horses, but there was no place for them to go. Alyssa light, young, and nimble, calmly told the hikers that we were going to pass very closely and not to move. They sucked in their breath and pressed their packs into the rock wall while placing their hiking staffs between them and our horses. Alyssa and Frode calmly walked past the hikers and in a flash she stepped off Frode choosing to lead him rather than ride. Her nerves were shot. The chance meeting face to face with the hikers on the most vulnerable and dangerous section of the trail was filled with drama. Else and I chose to ride it out. A few steps and we were past the drama of the confrontation and making our descent from the ledge down a couple of short switchbacks, onto the short and noisy approach to the wooden bridge that spans the waterfall. The approach to the bridge required a deft little hairpin turn. It looked like we were headed right into the river. On the far side of the bridge the trail is again very narrow but only for about 30 feet. Then the trail was to flatten out into the third lake. We hadn't had lunch and I had planned to eat at the third lake, just below the plateau.

Else quickly decided that the relatively soft surface of the wooden bridge, which was truly level and flat, in contrast to angular granite, was the safest place to be. She could see the narrow ledge trail close by on the other side of the bridge. Alyssa took one look at that narrow trail and became unconcerned about lunch- time, even though it was long past time to eat.

We had come a long way on a very challenging trail. With two votes to one, what could I do but agree to turn back. We had pushed our forward courage as far as we could. But we still needed courage to get back down. We huddled together on the wooden bridge over the noisy crashing water of the falls and took joy in what we had done, thinking of the challenging ride



back down. Going down steep terrain can be more difficult than climbing up. And of course the ponies were getting more tired.

But in no time at all we made our way the 8 miles back to camp. Else had her after-five red wine, even though it was only 4:30. And I took a big slug of my best whiskey right from the bottle and then another.

The ponies were no worse for wear. Frode had one small ding on his shoulder from a brush with the rock wall at the second ledge. They gladly climbed on the trailer, were fed, watered, and received a bonus in soaked beat pulp for their effort and in preparation for the next day's ride, a 16 miler with 4000 feet of elevation climb.



