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Backpack Trek: The Next Generation

By DEAN NELSON

EVERY year the same topic comes up at the end of our Yosemite backpacking trips.

Should we take our kids next time?

The group I backpack with is made up of guys. Not Nascar-type guys. No Jeremiah Johnsons. It wouldn't have dawned on any of us to cut off an arm with a pocketknife to extract ourselves from a thousand-pound boulder. None of us subscribe to Outside magazine. I was the only one who had read "Into Thin Air."

The trip is the highlight of the year for some of the group, usually seven of us. One is a social worker in an emergency room, another a theological seminary president. There are a software salesman, a high school teacher, the president of a food company and the manager of a university supercomputer. When we're out in this kind of expansive beauty, expending extraordinary effort, none of us think about work.

Or home.

And yet.

We all have teenagers. After five years of dancing around the issue, our discussion about including them turned serious last year.

"This is my last summer with my daughter before she goes away to college," one dad said.

Another, lifting up his pack, which weighed about 50 pounds, seemed doubtful.

"Can our kids carry these for a week?"

"Especially on the steep climbs, like to Cloud's Rest?" another skeptic said. "That's almost 10,000 feet."

There was some general murmuring that, despite all of our children being involved in sports, they were mostly pampered and were rarely required to do anything physically extreme.

And how would they react to something like the night before?

It was early in our weeklong trip, and not all of our food would fit into the bear canisters. We did what campers have done in Yosemite since before John Muir hiked there: We hung our beef jerky, trail mix, candy and so on in a bag over a branch of a tree too high for a bear to reach from the ground and too far out for a bear to climb without the branch breaking.

Not 200 feet away was one of the largest bears I had ever seen on these trips. Maybe 600, 700 pounds? The black bear stood patiently, watching us hang the food. None of us would have been surprised if the bear had pulled a pencil from behind its ear or a calculator from a fur-lined pocket. We chased it off by throwing rocks, but knew it'd be back.

Still, we were confident that the bear was too big to go out on a limb, literally, for our food.

The sounds around the campfire that night were mostly the wind coming through the trees and wolves' howls ricocheting through the granite peaks. Then the chaos of crashing, snapping and growling erupted.

We grabbed flashlights and rocks and ran to the commotion. The bear had climbed the tree, breaking branches on its way, and was partway out on the branch toward our food. It was oblivious to our spotlights and the baseball-size rocks we were throwing. The bear's mouth opened fully and it chomped on the branch. It broke on the second chomp -- "Jurassic Park" and "Jaws" in the same terrifying beast.

In the two seconds it took for the branch to crash to the ground, the bear slid down the trunk like a fireman. But it made one miscalculation. Our seminary president got to the branch first and dragged it away. The bear took a couple of steps toward the departing branch, and then sized up the rest of us while we continued to yell and bombard it with rocks.

The roar the bear sent in our direction told us what it was thinking. It then slowly turned and ambled back into the forest.

It visited our campsite several more times that night, I assume because it could not face its brethren after being bested by a theologian. Each time we repelled it with rocks and noise.

How would our children have reacted to an episode like that? Would they have been so terrified that they had to be airlifted out in straitjackets?

I tried to imagine whether my own kids would want to come on the trip. I knew my 16-year-old son would be game. He's gone with me to Africa, Kosovo and Macedonia under rugged conditions. But my 13-year-old daughter? No way. She belongs to a Girl Scout troop that recently rented rooms at an Embassy Suites in La Jolla, went to a mall and a movie, and called it a camping trip.

There was something else at stake, though. This annual trip was almost a religious experience for us. Would it be the same for our kids?

We voted to give it a try.

Last summer five teenagers -- four boys and a girl -- came with us. The first day they were way ahead of us on the trail. For them, life is a sprint. The real excitement started just before dark. One of the boys went into the woods to relieve himself and soon came hurtling into the campsite, his eyes bulging and his skin colorless. In a croaking voice, he spoke one word, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Bear."

There it was, at the edge of our campsite. We chased it off, but we knew it would be back. It was the same place where we encountered last year's T. Rex. There was no way to know if it was the same bear, but bears are territorial, and the behavior was similar: check us out before sundown as if to make it clear who the landlord was. And then come in the middle of the night to collect the rent.

When the bear came back, it didn't get much, since the food was in canisters. The kids' initial terror dissipated quickly. We watched the sky from our sleeping bags, counted shooting stars and let the moon nearly blind us as it crested.

We hiked Cloud's Rest one day, and Half Dome the next. When my son went out onto a finger of rock suspended over 9,500 feet, I panicked a little.

"Come on back," I said.

"Why?" he said, as he inched farther out.

"Because if you go off that thing, I have to follow you. Your mom told me to not bother coming back if something happened to you."

He shrugged and came back. I resumed breathing.

The last night, the dads sat by the fire and listened to the five-way conversation going on where the kids had arranged their sleeping bags, like vinyl spokes on an invisible wheel, their heads in the hub. It was a teenage asterisk. They were talking, actually yelling, about what they were going to do when they got to the valley floor.

"The longest shower ever," said one.

"Ice cream," shouted another.

"Listen to my CD's."

We were glad they had come with us, and not just because they pumped all the water and gathered the firewood. The worst of their ailments were blisters and a bee sting. At some point in the week, all of the kids had thanked their fathers for including them.

"Should we bring our wives next time?" someone asked.

It got quiet. Even the kids waited to hear the answer.

We decided to talk about it again next year.

And maybe for a few more after that.

Correction: May 9, 2004, Sunday An essay on April 18 about a group of men backpacking in Yosemite National Park with their children misidentified the animals they heard howling. The sounds probably came from coyotes; there are no wolves in Yosemite.

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