

Title:

The Longest Mile - Spring Training and Treasure in Montana's Bitterroot Mountains

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994

Summary:

The longest mile: a springtime training hike into the Bitterroot Range leads to Montana mountain treasure!

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Article Body:

Who would have thought it! It was a perfect spring day in the Bitterroot Range of Montana. My trail was a generally easy hike up Bass Creek from the Charles Water's Recreation Area and campground. We were only going one mile up the trail, to that beaver pond where the canyon widens out, the trail levels out, and there are some perfect spots to sit and enjoy the peaks that rise up around you. It was hard to believe the mile up that trail was so long!

Our journey started in the Bass Creek Campground near the campground host's site. We always visit with them, sharing Pom Stories. Their two pomeranians and our little pom guy Koda came from the same family in Nampa, Idaho. So every jaunt through the Bass Creek Campground is like a family reunion.

Finally we hit the trail up through the campground, and halfway through I dashed back to the car to get the camera. Once I caught up again, our group headed from the campground and up the Bass Creek Trail. Since it was springtime, I had no idea what to expect along the trail. Many years I've started too early and run into snow and iced trails, making a challenging and much abbreviated journey. One year we encountered snow banks that promptly cut the trek even shorter.

This jaunt at the beginning of May seemed later in the spring though, because the trail was completely dry, warm, sunny, and gorgeous - absolutely gorgeous. It's always exciting to hit our traditional trail of spring and discover that it is open, ready and genuinely a place to get out and stretch the legs. So onward we went. My wife Ev, son Geno, and our friends John and Jane charged on up the

trail. More accurately, we were alternatively dragged by their big wild eyed young border collie, Woody, and involved in corralling our 2 little pomeranians, Tina and Koda as they raced about in their wild enthusiasm. They do treasure taking to the trails.

Regardless, the rush of spring and our first run on a Bitterroot trail prompted our entire crowd to race along that first third of a mile. We quickly arrived at the cliffs with the awesome overhang rocks above the trail, where the fallen rocks had formed pools and waterfalls along the creek. It's a remarkable spot on the creek with a small sandy shore and a deep fishing pool. It has often afforded a perfect turnaround place for those with small children in years past, or now with the little dogs.

Considering the effort ahead as the trail immediately takes a sharp upward bent from that point, it was often quite reasonable to turn back at that point. That wasn't for John and I though as we persisted onward. Afterall, we were only a third of a mile up the trail, and I really did want to get the spring workout. The amazing thing, and I still puzzle over it, is why the next 2/3rds of a mile were such a long, long ways compared to the first third, especially considering the ongoing winter weekend workouts!.

We made it up the first incline without missing a beat. The trail levels off for a bit, and wonderful pools are visible along the creek some distance below. Beautiful area all around and we picked up the pace a bit, charging on up the next stretch of incline. The Bass Creek Trail follows that pattern for a while, alternating degrees of levelness with yet another incline stretch, into what seems like an endless series of progressions as we made our way along.

In fact, that series of inclines did begin to seem endless as I now "worked" my way up the trail, under the 30 pound pack, trying to keep up with John. He questioned the whole pack thing, which I once again explained was a training tool..., like a millstone around the neck. Regardless, why did it have to be so hard!

Each incline looked like the famous last incline finally leading to the breakover point. The narrow canyon would widen, the beaver pond would come into view, and the trail would level out - our short term destination for the first spring trek into the Bitterroot Range. Lo and behold, instead we would round a corner, and another uphill climb lay ahead, leading around yet another corner along the stream.

It didn't go on forever - it just seemed that way. At last we topped that final incline, rounded the last corner, and the meadows and pond filled the canyon

bottom ahead of us. A truly wonderful mountain setting, the pond is surrounded by tall pines and marsh, with a breathtaking set of ountain ridges rising in the background. An access trail leads down to the ponds edge, with a perfect spot by the water to enjoy our lunch. A wonderful slice of Montana Bitterroot Range backcountry surrounds you in that perfect mountain setting. Great pictures of the scene and trail are in our website gallery at <http://www.montanaadventure.com/> .

The journey back down tells the tale. I'm always surprised heading back down this trail at the steepness of the incline that we came up. Then we realize that there really was a reason for all that huffing and puffing. Such a wonderful first jaunt into the Bitterroot Range though, and one that I've taken almost everyone I know on as an "easy outing". It's just hard to imagine why that is such a long, long mile! The trail's access road leads straight to the mountains from Highway 93, around 25 miles south of Missoula, Montana, half way between Florence and Stevensville. Great places to stay for your explorations in this area are available north in Lolo and Missoula, and south in Hamilton, Montana, and easily available through the website at <http://www.montanaadventure.com/out/state/us-mt.html> . Happy Trails!