

BACKPACKING WITH SALUKIS



It was one week before we were to leave for the backpacking trip, and 3 weeks since Koa's foot surgery, so it was time to let him run. Koa and Maka were brothers who joined our home one year before when they were 8 weeks old and they had grown up to be beautiful spirited salukis. Koa recently had developed a growth on the side of one of his toes, a pea sized lump that tended to get raw and it was not a good thing for the granite trails of the high Sierra. Anticipating our imminent trip, we elected to have the lesion excised. The side of the toe and the adjacent web were sewn with dissolvable sutures, which Koa managed to remove within a couple of days. "Don't let him chew his bandage or run" was the vet's advice. One might as well tell your pet fish not to swim. Our ultimate solution was bandages covered by a vinyl boot taped to his leg and lots of doggie valium. We often had to keep Maka away to avoid the incitement of excitement, which left Maka feeling punished and lonely for his best friend.



The open wounds healed slowly, but by 3 weeks they looked pretty good. We ceremoniously turned the two dogs loose together on our three acres and their exuberance running together was a delight to watch. Koa pounded the earth, pushing off as he ran like he was trying to achieve flight. That was until he suddenly winced and started limping. He had torn open the toe web in a gaping wound where it had just healed. After 3 weeks of tortuous discipline keeping him and Maka calm, we were at our wits end. “Ok, that’s it, the trip is off”, we agreed. With only a week to go we didn’t expect him to be ready to hike and run on trails and rocks. We got him sewn up again, drugged him with sedatives and went to bed, both depressed and frustrated. Lying in the dark we debated. We wouldn’t leave Koa home and just take Maka camping. The two litter mates were inseparable companions. We could just spend the 3 days at the Rock Creek Lodge cabins where we go to acclimate to the altitude, and keep Koa on a leash, but even day hiking seemed unfair to have Koa leashed and Maka not. The whole point of the trip was to go where these guys could be free to run and play.



The next morning over breakfast we decided to go ahead as planned, allowing Koa the best chance to heal again, but being willing to abort the trip at any point if it wasn't working out. Being a physician myself, I added local anesthetic, sutures and extra bandages to my backpacking supplies.

This was Maka's and Koa's first backpack trip. We have taken our two previous salukis backpacking and hiking before and had wonderful experiences. Bahjah had died 3 years ago, and Rafiiq was too old now to go so would stay home with a house sitter friend. We sometimes hike elsewhere, but our undeniable preference is the high Sierra above 10,000 feet. The Sierra Nevada range is a long north-south oriented mass of granite lifted as a massive wedge shape block, sloping gently up from the west but dropping abruptly on the east side. Along highway 395 which follows this eastern escarpment, the mountains dramatically rise up in sheer granite walls and towering peaks thousands of feet above the high desert floor below.



My love of the high elevations has been at times frustrated by being prone to altitude sickness. We ultimately arrived at a delightful solution when we discovered Rock Creek Lodge, rustic cabins at 9,400 ft. where dogs are welcome, and which include showers, small kitchens and gourmet dinners served in the dining hall. The road continues up to 10,000 ft. where a wonderful easy trail leads into Little Lakes Valley, past alpine lakes, wildflower studded meadows, and crystal streams, with the splendor of high sierra peaks rimming the whole valley. By spending the nights at the moderate elevation and days above 10,000 ft. gradually increasing my activity level, I am ready to tackle the high elevations with a full pack within 3-4 days.



At first I took Maka hiking up in Little Lakes Valley alone while Koa stayed on leash around the cabins with Kathy. By the third day Koa's foot was looking well healed and it was time again to let him run, since the next day we were to head for the wilderness. Once we moved up the trail far enough from the parking lot, we unleashed them and they took off like race horses at the starting gun. All the painful discipline and frustration restraining them as Koa healed became well worth the effort as we watched their playful reunion. Their excitement was contagious as they cavorted up and back along the trail, raced around meadows and splashed through streams. I had to be careful not to over exert myself trying to keep up with their enthusiasm while still trying to adjust gradually to the altitude.



Our backpack trip started up out of Bishop, California, at North Lake, at 9255 ft. elevation. We were only going 3 ½ miles the first day but were ascending 1700 ft. in elevation to Piute Lake. The dogs had only tried on their packs briefly at home, yet after strapping them on for the hike they hardly seemed to notice. Perhaps it was the grandeur of the stunning scenery immediately surrounding us as we began our climb up the trail. More likely it was the overwhelming and abundant sights and scents at trail level that commanded their attention. We chose this area for our trip for several reasons. We love the high Sierra where the alpine terrain, above the forests, is open and vast. The sense of freedom to go where you choose, with spectacular vistas extending hundreds of miles before you is exhilarating. Cross-country travel, leaving the well-worn trails (and most of the people) behind, is not at all difficult in this incredible environment. It is a topography of contrasts and an immense range of scale. Your eye might be drawn to the tiniest of wildflowers in a manicured lawn by a tinkling sandy bottom stream. One's gaze moves up past immense boulders, casually placed by receding glaciers like abstract sculptures in a museum garden, to craggy and precipitous granite peaks towering thousands of feet directly above, and then off and beyond, to layers of distant ridges of similar peaks, miles off into the distance. Although there are hundreds of square miles of Sierra wilderness, much of the best are off limits to dogs. No dogs are allowed in any of the national park wildernesses. That still leaves plenty of land to explore. The finest, in our opinion, lies between King's Canyon and Yosemite National parks, in the heart of the highest Sierra.



One evening while at dinner at Rock Creek someone asked us "why take dogs backpacking?". During the first couple of days in the wilderness, which are always the hardest, we asked ourselves the same question. Hiking on the east side of the Sierras gets one up into the high country quickly because the trailheads start up high. However there is a price to pay. The first day's hike is steep, one has a full pack with all the food and fuel one will use, and one is not yet used to the altitude and exertion. It is grueling. In order to have two salukis along we take a tent that is twice as large and twice as heavy as we would otherwise. They carried most but not all of their food. We had to take an extra "bear can", a plastic bear proof barrel to store the food in, to accommodate the dog food. We have to be vigilant and respectful of other people, dogs and pack animals, and ready to leash the pups when necessary, not always an easy task when they are excited about what's up ahead. They bring dirt and sand into the tent and we sleep on our foam pads with sleeping bags spread over us, one to a dog, rather than sleeping inside the bags. Fortunately, the body temperature of the salukis more than compensates.



So why bring dogs backpacking? The high Sierra wilderness is a saluki playground! We have salukis, not just because they are beautiful to look at, or because they are charming dogs to live with, but also because they have a spirit that is undeniable. There are so few places one can go with dogs where they are allowed to run free, off leash, and where it is also fun and safe for them. The high Sierras, with hundreds of miles of open space are a paradise for running hounds. With packs they hike well on the trails, though still take the occasional detour up the hillside or chase after a marmot scurrying to his hole. They run ahead, then back to check our progress, ears flapping and tails wagging. There are frequent streams and lakes for a cool drink along the way. Once camp is set up, there are meadows to race through, rocks and streams to leap, and lakes to wade in. They love meadows! In the high Sierras there are lovely lawns sprinkled with flowers and laced with Zen garden streams. I watched Maka with delight, seeming to choose routes through the meadows at top speed that included obstacles to leap over.



Small snow fields are irresistible to them, cavorting and skidding, and chasing each other. They quickly change gears as they come off the snow, prancing lightly over adjacent rocky ground, then pop up to full speed across the snow again, tumbling and kicking up sprays of snow.



They are agile as mountain goats on the granite, carefully negotiating fields of boulders and talus, finding their way across. Crossing streams, they sometimes leap rock to rock, but will also wade across even up to their knees. I was delighted and surprised when at one crossing, they both, with their packs on, carefully crossed the stream on a

12" wide log, probably 15 feet long and 4 feet above the water. I was planning on carrying them across, but before I got my pack off they were on their way.



The dogs seem to accept and understand that we are their home. Where we are they are comfortable and happy. They took to the tent as if it were their favorite couch back home.



Allowed to wander and explore beyond camp at will, they never go far, at least according to their concept of space. While we may not always be able to see them, I have confidence that they always know where we are. In the high Sierra, that can sometimes be quite a distance since there is a vast openness to the landscape. They have an innate sense of where they have been and how to get back it seems.



On the day that we hiked out of the wilderness it was raining and we did an epic march to make it out in one day. After a few hours of hiking, we passed the lake where we camped the first night, 5 days prior. The dogs left the trail and made a bee-line for the site of that campsite, presumably hoping to find the shelter of the tent that was once there. Much of this trip was off trail, cross-country, which is easily negotiated in the open spaces of this beautiful land. Never-the-less, in anticipation of a long hike out, we did a day hike to map out a route across some of the terrain that would follow easier contours through rocks and gullies.



On the actual hike out, Maka surprised me several times leading me in the path previously chosen, despite my faulty memory suggesting a different route.



We chose mid-August to be in the high Sierra for the annual Perseids meteor showers. The shooting stars are best seen after midnight, so two nights in a row Kathy and I got up, out of the tent, and moved our sleeping bags to a sandy spot outside to watch the skies for a while. Ever loyal, or perhaps just preferring our shared warmth, the pups also left the comfort of the tent and snuggled between our legs. Such is the nature of our relationship with these wonderful dogs. We share love and experiences, undemanding, with little expectation, yet by choice living close and with common affection.



I admit that it is my visual orientation as an artist that also made me choose salukis. I love to just feast my eyes on these deliciously gorgeous beasts. Ours are definitely champion quality dogs living in a “pet home”, and I have the same pride in ownership of such exquisite specimens of hounds as if they had a wall full of trophies. I wouldn't have wanted anything less. It is the whole saluki package of beauty, joy, and loving companionship that endears me to them.

Why bring dogs backpacking? There is no greater pleasure than sharing time with these animals in the natural element of the wild outdoors, in a place that allows them the opportunity to run to their hearts' content, with a joy that is undeniable, and the freedom to go where they want, and yet they choose us to be with. It is for me the ultimate experience for which I chose salukis.

