

No one knows if it was a member of the Washburn Expedition or a writer who first called the place Wonderland, but the

name stuck. Today we know it as Yellowstone National Park. And there's no better way to see it than from the back of a horse.

By EDWARD PITTMAN

Photography by JAY DICKMAN

# WONDERLAND

*I've stood in some mighty-mouthed hollow,  
That's plumb-full of bush to the brim;  
I've watched the big, husky sun swallow  
In crimson and gold, and grow dim,  
Till the moon set the pearly peaks gleaming,  
And the stars tumbled out, neck and crop;  
And I've thought that I surely was dreaming  
With the peace o' the world piled on top.  
— Robert Service*



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAY DICKMAN

# RELAND

*I've stood in some mighty-mouthed hollow,  
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More than a century ago explorers and writers first named the land that was to become Yellowstone National Park. Entranced by the abundant wildlife and almost supernatural geysers and bubbling

mud pits, they called it Wonderland. There is so much life there: in cold streams where rainbow and cutthroat trout skitter in the twilight, in the trees where gray jays and Clark nutcrackers jostle each other for the highest limbs, in the high meadows where the elk dance their mating dance. There's no other place like it. But after

*Sparks from the crackling  
campfire rose on the chill air to mingle with the stars (above).*

*The spicy scents of lodgepole pines and sage  
tickled our noses on the trail toward the snow-dusted majesty of Electric  
Peak (below). Kirk (opposite), a rodeo champ, rancher, outdoorsman,  
and cowboy poet, has been on or around horses all his life.*

*Although he's studying to be a chiropractor,  
he said he can't imagine a life away from the great outdoors.*

six days on the trail, I had something else on my mind besides the grandeur of nature: I don't think anyone ever had a backside as saddlesore as mine.

Riding every other day, we entered Yellowstone through Gallatin Pass, crossing over the Gallatin River into the Big Horn Valley. The hillsides were covered with blackened lodgepole pines burned in the big fire of 1988, interspersed with new growth. The first day was a three-hour ride to get us used to being in the saddle. We rode through a valley littered with volcanic boulders, leftovers from the Ice Age. It was autumn, and the meadows covered in spring and summer with a carpet of flowers displayed only a few stray Indian paintbrushes,



## Want to Go?

Steve Gamble has been leading tours into Yellowstone for eight years. He can match personalities and agendas like no one else can. If you want to bring the whole family, come by yourself, or take a special someone, Gamble can arrange a trip that's just right for you. Call him at Yellowstone Mountain Guides in Bozeman, Montana, at (406) 388-0148. Gamble provides you with a list of things to bring, but there are a few additional items you might consider: Insulated sock liners help keep your toes warm during cold snaps; and Tingley's rubber overshoes will keep your Lucchese custom lizard boots from rotting off after crossing an unexpected stream. Think in layers. Anoraks lined with Thinsulate and high-tech long johns work better than bulky wool sweaters. And long johns have another benefit: They protect you from saddlesoreness better than jeans alone. Don't forget a hat. Cowboy hats will give you that authentic look, and the felt is good for warmth when heading through a mountain pass. Just make sure you attach a tie-down strap, or your hat will beat you to the bottom. Shutterbugs might be tempted to bring bags of equipment, but consider the Kodak Funsaver disposable cameras — the panoramic model captures great shots of those long vistas. A rain slicker is included on Gamble's list, but mine stayed at the hotel as Gamble furnished the group with his own versions.

## Where to Stay

Chances are you'll spend the night before you hit the trail at the Voss Inn bed and breakfast, owned by Bruce and Frankee Muller, in Bozeman, Montana. Gamble is happy to make the reservations, and the inn (a restored 100-year-old mansion) is a wonderful alternative to chain hotels. Call (406) 587-0982. And don't be in too much of a hurry to get out of town after the last roundup. Spend your final night in Big Sky Country in the historic Gallatin Gateway Inn in Gallatin Gateway, Montana. Call (406) 763-4672.









their red petals twitching in the breeze.

The next two rides were quite a bit longer, over the Big Horn Pass, past Panther Creek, and down into Gardners Hole, a valley at the headwaters of the

Gardner River named during the 1830s after fur-trapper Johnson Gardner. The last ride took us out of Gardners Hole, up through switchbacks and over Electric Pass, and past Sportsman's Lake, where the aspens were brilliant gold. The last two rides were a great impetus to explore the park in other ways: hiking, fishing,

*Around a hearty meal at the dinner table (above) guests shared their stories of the day.*

*In the interior of the park the animals were like wraiths: They appeared out of nowhere (below), grazed for a moment, and vanished into the trees. Fly-fishing on the Gallatin River (right) isn't really about catching fish. It's about the warm sun on your back, the pull of the river on your line, and the rainbow sparkle of the wily trout.*

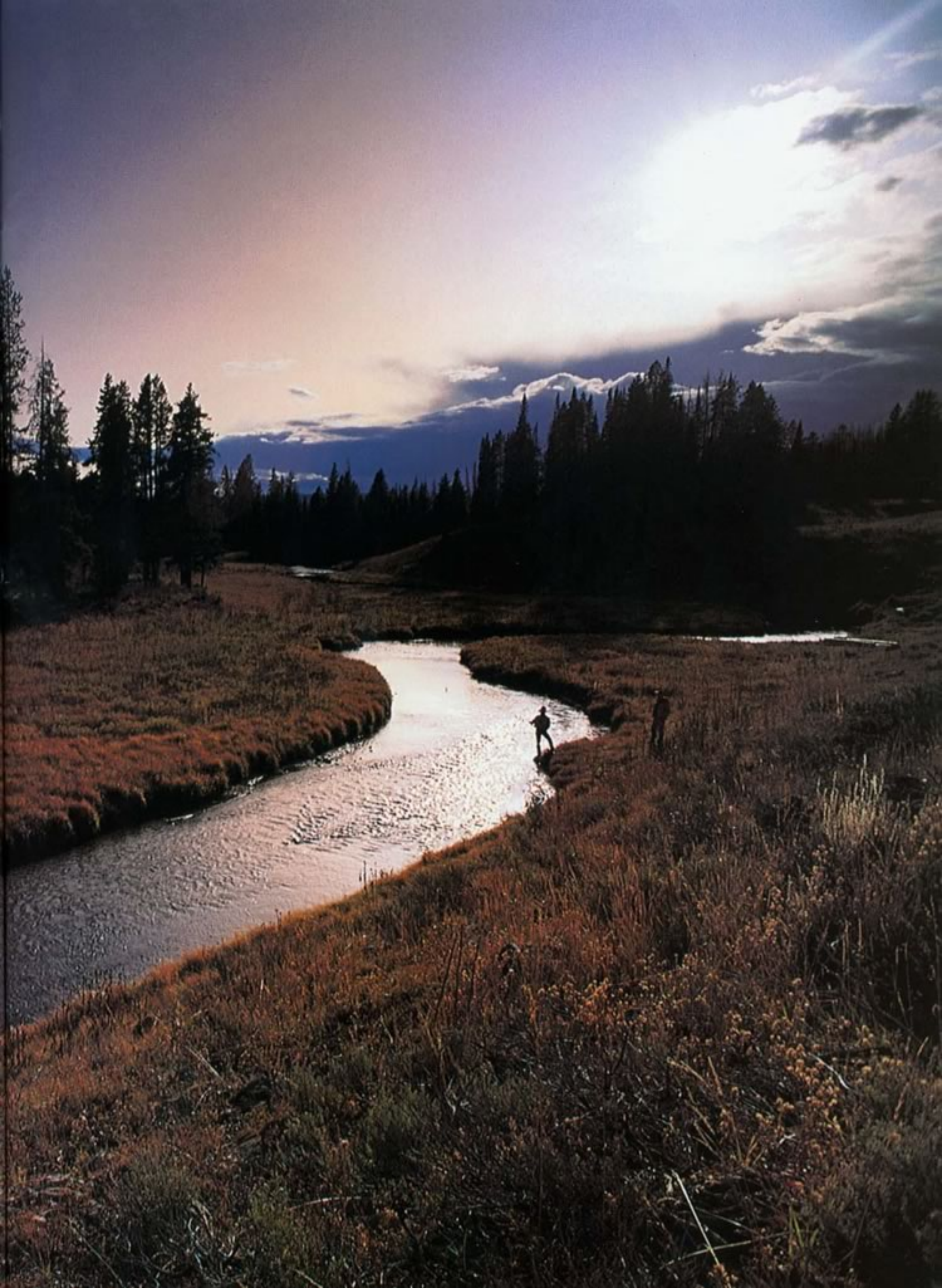
climbing Electric Peak, searching for critters. After seven hours in the saddle, the last thing I wanted to do was sit down.

All kidding aside, there's no better way to see Yellowstone than from the back of a horse. That's the way Teddy Roosevelt first saw the park in the 1880s. We weren't in the same league as Roosevelt and his ilk, but we managed. With me on the trip were George, Doug, and Tom, three attorneys from back east. We were here for the elk rut, a week-long stretch in the fall when the elk mate and the sound of their bugling, a cross between a flute and a scream, seems to come from a thousand different directions. "I wanted to experience the park more on its own terms, in the way it was meant to be experienced," said George. "The

*Continued on page 50*









idea of a pack trip intrigued me. You can get far away from the roads, from the people. You can see parts of the park that are inaccessible any other way."

Our backcountry bliss could have turned into a race from becoming bear food were it not for Steve, owner of Yellowstone Mountain Guides, and his wranglers, Kirk and Norman. Kirk has been an outdoorsman his whole life. His first love was cowboying, and he figures he's done just about everything one can do on horseback. "I can't imagine a life away from horses," he said. "And I don't care how many times you've seen an elk or a deer, it's still exciting. It's nice to be able to share that with the guests."

Jim Pratt, a member of the **Summit Club** in **Birmingham, Alabama**, said he appreciated the efforts made by Steve and his crew: "Yellowstone is one of the prettiest places on the face of the earth, and I've yet to be with anyone who makes it more fun." Pratt has been to Yellowstone six times with Steve and company, and he usually brings the whole family.

Of course, one of the primary ideas behind a vacation is getting away. In the interior of Yellowstone you're nowhere near telephones or fax machines — you're in the *wilderness*. "You're so far away from everything here, whereas on car trips you're back in the middle of civilization at the end of the day," said Tom. "On my last vacation I had to call in to work every morning. When I was in Yellowstone I couldn't call in, and they couldn't reach me. I liked that."

The first day, while riding into the park, we saw our first elk: They were half a mile away at least, on the other side of the valley: just a handful of brown dots with legs. But we saw them turn toward us, their antlers rising and falling as they grazed. After a few minutes they stopped grazing and filed one by one into the trees.

On the morning of the second day we crawled out of our tents very early to look for elk. But it wasn't early enough, explained Steve, looking up at the hint of light in the sky. The bugle of the first elk, sounding not more than 100 yards away, taunted us and pulled us on. We climbed up and down the mountain, through dew-drenched brush and dense

carpets of pine needles, over trickling creeks (some of us ended up going *through* a creek or two), slipping on muddy banks, crouching to listen for the elk we knew were not more than a few dozen yards away. We tried to be quiet while we followed the call of an animal that we never saw that morning. But we knew the elk were close by: Their dung (or scat) was everywhere.

Although we roughed it in the park like explorers of yore, the cuisine was much improved since the days of Truman Everts, who was lost in the backcountry when he became separated from the Washburn Expedition in 1870. After losing his glasses Everts wandered for almost a month, eating only thistles before he was found. It took a pint of bear oil to relieve his system of the fiber from the spiny plants, and in honor of his intestinal ordeal the plant was named Everts Thistle.

Steve's culinary roots don't include anything from the thistle family, and this onetime chef for a guest ranch made sure no one ate chili and gritty flapjacks. Lunches were light, but everyone got a great start at breakfast with tangy links of elk chorizo, spicy ham, eggs any which way, almond-maple granola, strudel baked over the coals in a Dutch oven, and much more.

And no one missed dinner, the big meal of the day. Feasts included elk steaks, spicy Sichuan stir-fried elk tenderloin, and seafood pasta with shrimp and scallops. But nothing prepared us for the meal we had the final night: butterflied leg of lamb infused with mint, new potatoes rissole, and sautéed mushrooms with green onion. After eating our fill of the lamb, accompanied by a 1988 Charles Krug Cabernet, we made room for the apple and apricot cobbler. Why the emphasis on food? "Because I have to eat it, too," Steve explained.

Personal hygiene can be interesting in the wilds. Along with fax machines and board meetings, we left hot showers and the rest of the benefits of modern plumbing at the trailhead as well. But it just didn't seem to matter. Kay Reimler, a member of the **Tower Club** in **Charlotte, North Carolina**, who has been on trips with Steve at least once a year for the past five years, described: "Out there I got dirt under my fingernails, I didn't have hot water for a week,

and I *loved* it." We bathed in cold, clear streams, although Steve offered a solar shower as an alternative.

"Having never camped before in my life, I'll never forget the first time I used the box," said Doug, referring to the latrines provided at most campsites. They took some getting used to, but fortunately we never had to resort to a practice of the elk: When elk get ready for a night on the town, they roll around in wallows — large, mud-filled depressions in the earth — that they have just perfumed with their own urine.

Day hikes or day rides were popular on our trip, but fly-fishing in the cold streams filled with rainbow, cutbow, cutthroat, and brown trout was a highlight. Steve said the secret to fly-fishing is not necessarily catching fish; "It's having fun and enjoying the stream."

I didn't want philosophy; I wanted to catch a fish. Patty, Steve's wife (who joined us for the first leg of the trip), gave me the tip I needed to catch a whopper. "Some people like to fish big pools," she said, "but I like to fish where the faster water moves into slower water." Tom turned out to be the real fisherman, and he looked the part from the start — outfitted in just about every article of outdoor clothing from the Eddie Bauer catalog. Although he snagged his share of Timothy grass in the beginning, his fly spent more time in the water than anyone else's, and he caught the most fish.

There's really nothing like the feeling of fishing in Yellowstone. Reimler put it this way: "When you look up from the stream, and the aspens are a brilliant yellow against the dense blue of the Montana sky, you know you're exactly where you want to be."

But there were times when we couldn't have our heads in the clouds, such as when we rode through areas frequented by bears. Steve had his mind made up concerning the effectiveness of bear bells (jingle bells attached to clothing meant to warn away bears): "The difference between grizzly bear scat and black bear scat," he explained, "is that grizzly bear scat has little bells in it."

On the fifth day, before heading into the switchbacks of Electric Pass, we spotted the real thing: a grizzly on the move, heading away from us, crashing through the trees. It was a big male, its silvery guard hairs standing on end on its back.

The grizzly bear is a fierce animal, much respected and given a wide berth. Adult grizzlies can weigh up to 700 pounds and stand up to 7½ feet tall. And they can easily outrun a man.

Animals are elusive in the interior of the park. You won't find bears willing to pose for photographs for half a candy bar like you can in public areas of the park. The animals are like wraiths: coyotes lope along ridgelines before dropping out of sight into a ravine, and you see only the fresh paw prints of a mountain lion in the mud of a trail. But once in a while we hit the jackpot: "We hiked up a hill behind the camp," said George, "and a bull elk appeared over the crest of the hill. He just stood there, looking at us. He was magnificent."

The nights passed easily in the park, each moment distinct and separate: The whine of an occasional mosquito was like a peculiar instrument in a symphony heard only in a dream, and the sparks from the campfire rose on the night breeze, their glow mingling with the light of the just-risen moon. Each night we gathered around the fire while Steve told us about the early days of the park. We learned that the trail we rode the first day was once the Bannock Trail, named for the Bannock Indians who used it in the 1800s to reach the interior of the park. One night Steve read from *Journal of a Trapper*, the celebrated account of Osborne Russell's travels through the west. And the last night we had a poetry reading. Steve read the work of naturalist poet Robert Service, I read some of my work, and Kirk revealed his penchant for cowboy poetry. "It was more than a vacation," said Pratt. "It was an educational experience."

It was even more exciting after midnight. "The bull elk makes this tremendous wailing sound in the middle of the night," said Doug. "It's great when you wake up at 4 a.m. and you hear this sound washing across the meadow." When the moon set on the fourth night, the hazy stripe of the Milky Way was eclipsed by the pink glow of the northern lights shimmering over the treetops.

"The first time I saw that part of the country it was like I had wanted to be there my whole life," recalled Reimler. "It doesn't even matter what time it is; you function more with nature's rhythm."

There *did* seem to be more time up in

the wilderness. We saw so much: elk by the dozens trotting along a narrow strip of cliff hundreds of feet up, a great horned owl who flew just a few feet over our heads, its shadow bigger than my horse. I saw this country from the tops of mountain passes where the wind was so loud I couldn't hear anything but the howl in my ears. I looked down on mountain ranges stretching to every horizon, the hills coated by spiny forests so far below me they looked like carpets, emerald and seamless. I rode on horseback by mountain lakes where cutthroat trout as big as my arm leaped from the water to snatch caddis flies from the still, cool air. And there were forests, burned in the great fire of '88, where the blackened skeletons of trees stood like dark ghosts, guarding a dead gray land to where, just now, the animals are beginning to return.

When the end of the trail was in sight, everyone was strangely quiet, and for a moment the only sounds were the clip-clops of the horses' feet. Somewhere in our heads the old machinery was coming to life — the sound of a clock ticking, of tires whirring on blacktop — and somewhere far off I thought I could hear a telephone beginning to ring.

But there was a stillness I knew I would carry with me: The last night I woke up at 4 a.m. I couldn't sleep, so I put my coat on and climbed out of the tent. High in the sky the clouds rolled by, impossibly fast, as I looked out across the meadow. Only a few feet away what I thought was one of the horses was grazing. It looked up at me, and when it raised its head I saw that it was not a horse at all, but a bull moose. Its rack of horns was almost four feet wide. We stood there staring at each other for five minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, while the night breeze rustled the leaves in the trees and our breath painted the chill air. Neither of us could look away.

I like to think that during those few minutes some sort of information was exchanged, some subtle psychic mumbling that I'll understand someday, perhaps when I'm very old. I suspect it was a simple thought: about life in the wild, about a promise of sorts that, for the most part, eluded my ability to imagine. Then, with a snort, the moose turned, galloped across the meadow, and disappeared into the trees. ●

## CALL OF THE WILD

*Continued from page 35*

from the burner, some wildebeests below scattered as Mike took us up to about 7,000 feet for a spectacular view.

After a smooth landing and a traditional champagne breakfast, we headed back and saw two more prides of lions and a family of a dozen giraffes. On our last game run that afternoon, we encountered more lions, and at dusk we came upon a mother and baby cheetah, becoming privileged observers of their play. On our last evening we feasted on delectable Nile perch, caught by Lois Swager on her Rusinga Island fishing trip with the Jacobsons, and listened to fish tales about the 50-pounder that got away.

The following day we returned to the Nairobi Safari Club, where we met for cocktails, followed by dinner at the famous Carnivore, a restaurant with a huge open charcoal pit on which tiered racks and spits of beef, chicken, veal, lamb, pork, sausages, and daily game specials are cooked. This is the only place in the country that can serve wild game, under special license from the government. None of it is hunted.

On our last day in Kenya we visited the former home of Karen Blixen in the Ngong Hills. (She wrote under the pen name Isak Dinesen.) Now a museum, the house has been restored, and we saw where she wrote her letters from Africa and the veranda where she hung the lantern by the front door to signal Denys Finch-Hatton that she was home.

In the afternoon we stopped at Giraffe Manor, an open-decked two-story "tree-house" where we hand-fed some of the endangered Rothschild giraffes, distinguished by their white legs. Seeing them "up close and personal" emphasized the importance of the work needed to preserve these and other endangered species.

As we prepared to leave Kenya, we wondered about the changes to come. What will our children or grandchildren see if they come in the future? I can only advise that if you can, go now, or go soon. It is the experience of a lifetime, and it will change you.

Writing as Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen once wrote "Ngong, it is written on my heart." Once you've been to Africa, it will be forever written on yours as well. ●