

Through the Seasons with Wild Deuce



With the Rocky Mountains as a backdrop, the turning leaves paint a gorgeous landscape that signals the transition from summer to winter in Alberta. Head further west now to Wild Deuce Retreats & Outfitting's mountain base camp west of Rocky Mountain House. Brenda Winder and Terri McKinney, who founded Wild Deuce in 2003, are loading our horses on the trailers. Terri's husband Chuck and our wrangler Scott are taking down canvas tents. Our cook shacks and tack sheds are skeletal frames waiting for spring to be recovered. We're lost without our camp chef Rachel. Soon the snow will cover our forest floor and the mountain peaks around us. Paints a bleak picture doesn't it?

Not from our point of view!



For us at Wild Deuce the approach of winter may signal an end to our summer pack trip season but fall and winter are exciting seasons for us! We start with our Working Mountain Horse Competition and Sale in late September. Then we move on into planning and preparing for the spring season, including buying and especially riding - our new horses. We can't wait to see the sun sparkling off fresh snow thrown up



from hooves as we canter through the trees. It might be a little cooler outside and the days a little shorter, but that doesn't mean we can't have fun! And the fun you can have on a horse during the winter season is endless!

Ending the Season at our Camps

Our mountain base camp, located west of Rocky Mountain House, is ours via a lease. Day rides, our three day retreats and Mountain Cattle Call trips are staged out of our base camp. Our five day pack trips are conducted out of more remote camps which are several hours riding further into the mountains. We have a permit for use of our remote camps which grants us exclusive use of them for our season. With that comes responsibility: to live and operate in the wilderness is a privilege. We take all the steps we can at our camps to leave them the way we found them. For example: we don't tie horses to trees, as they can mess up the root system. We put high-lines between trees, using old cinches on the ends instead of rope which will dig into the bark. All trash and recyclable items are hauled out. We typically have 20-25 horses at our remote camps. With the exception of a couple riding horses kept on the high line, we put bells on the horses and turn them out to graze after we're done riding. This minimizes livestock impact – the forest floor is fairly fragile and confined livestock can really make a mess of it in short order. With the horses free to roam, their grazing is also spread out over several square miles so they don't over-eat one area. "This is our home," says Scott, "we have a great appreciation for it and we need to preserve it for future generations. We strive to educate our guests along the trail so that their future camping and riding endeavors are more environmental friendly." At the end of our pack trip season – generally early September - we haul all of our gear out with pack horses and wagon, to be brought back the following spring. Once all our gear is back at our base camp, for the most part everything is loaded into trailers and stored at the ranches for the winter. Brenda and Terri then take ten days for their OWN pack trip – just the two of them along with our sale horses.

Fall, Winter and that White Stuff!

After we've moved out of camp, we start gearing up for our annual Working Mountain Horse Competition and Sale, which is held just north of Camrose on the last weekend in September. That in itself takes weeks of preparation for just three days!



Our Competition and Sale is a great place for us and select consignors to showcase and sell trail horses and conversely a great place for anyone looking for a trail or ranch horse to buy. Of course we don't sell *all* of our horses – some are keepers. Also not every horse is going to work out or be happy in our mountain environment. If this is the case, we ensure the horse is sold to a good home where they can excel in a discipline they are more suited to. Our horses have gone on to compete in many English and Western events including Mounted Shooting! Those horses have a solid foundation that was built in the mountains. "It is a part of the business," Brenda says," but we find it difficult to part with our sale horses. In our operation we become very intimate with our equine friends – we literally eat and sleep with them every day. It builds a much stronger connection than you'd get riding your horse a couple times a month and turning them out in the pasture in between. So it's sad to see them go...but the flip side of the coin is knowing the new owners of our horses are going to have many years of enjoyable riding. But now we need some new horses!"

When choosing our horses we look for those that are around 4 years of age, minimum 15 hands, good feet, big boned with a strong build and most importantly...a kind eye. Horses that we can both ride and pack are also an asset. Color and registration do not matter here; more importantly we need a *thinking* horse, which takes us into training. We train with our horses all year round. We start our horses with our own foundation training including extensive round penning and riding. And since it is winter...riding in the bush with the snow is great training! Last winter we discovered that pulling skiers behind the horses can be great fun...and this year we've advanced to snowboards! Chuck explains, "I found a pair of used skis and boots for sale, but it turned out cowboy boots fit better into the bindings! We used a pair of old stirrups tied to a ranch rope for hand holds on the skier end, dallied onto the saddle horn and then...hang on! It's a good workout for the horses and gets them used to having a load and a job to do." We also attend local events like ranch roping, penning, sorting and other training to give them a broad range of experience. We start putting pack strings together in the winter to train the horses to the packing environment as well.



We were recently asked, "How do you make a trail horse so good that the wilderness is as comfortable to him as a paddock?" Well, it's not possible to *make* a horse comfortable in the wilderness by training him in the pen; however we start that training off by building a solid foundation of trust and respect. We then have the basis to do anything in the wilderness – crossing rivers and obstacles, encountering other people, animals, even mountain bikes and off road vehicles.

Remember that our horses live at our base camp and remote camps for the majority of the year. When not at either of these locations they are on large partially forested pastures. The horses are constantly exposed to all the elements, sounds and smells of the wilderness and the other creatures that occupy it...all of the time. So when we do trail rides, pack trips or work cattle with our guests – the horses *are* in their natural environment. Terri adds, “Think about where we live: we have no TV, satellite, Playstations or the like. The *horses* are our entertainment and our life. The countless hours we spend with them gives them miles and maturity they could not attain any other way.”



We use natural horsemanship methods and start our training in the round pen in the fall, winter and



spring with our new horses. In May we start offering our horsemanship and training clinics to the public. It's not difficult to train a horse to load in the trailer or walk across a muddy creek or any number of things, but we've all seen people struggle and fight with their horse to accomplish it. In many cases, the next time they approach the same obstacle, they go through the same fight. The horse either doesn't trust you or he doesn't respect you as the leader. Our training focuses on establishing that trust and respect between horse and rider so that when your horse encounters anything unknown, scary or new they turn to you to deal with the situation instead of panicking and reacting blindly. In our operation, a horse that thinks

that way is essential. It happens sometimes in the pack string that one or more horses get tangled up around a tree or themselves. Can you imagine the scene if they started to panic and pull? That can lead to an unsafe situation for the horses and any people around. Instead our horses wait for us to come and set things straight.



In June we move back out to our base camp and start setting up. In addition to our own camps, we have trails to clear and maintain. Some locations we ride to are fairly remote so there is not much traffic at all; we rarely run into any other groups. Because the trails don't see much traffic most of our trail maintenance is clearing deadfall to make it safer when we have guests out. “Last year three of us headed out on horseback with a chainsaw on one of our pack horses and cleared trail,” says Chuck, “There is trust right there – we just ground tie our horses while we cut and haul deadfall.” However we won't clear

everything - a clean tree that's crossing the trail is a good obstacle for the horses when it's not too high off the ground. You've seen it before – a tree falls across the trail and people just figure out another way around it – thus making another trail. We try to help preserve the forest by keeping *one* trail clear instead of creating new ones. There are also several water crossings, so we monitor river levels in the spring and after a rain.

Tacking up for spring! It makes sense that the tack we use has to match our environment. “We need a saddle that has a good breast collar and rear cinch for climbs and descents. On our rides each rider has saddle bags for lunches, cameras, personal items - and of course we carry our first aid gear as well. Riders also have slickers or rain gear tied to the back of the saddle for the odd rainy day. We need a saddle that can log many riding hours with low maintenance, and also be used for roping cattle, pulling logs or any variety of work,” says Terri. The western saddle meets all of these requirements. Admittedly, western is part of the culture, but that culture developed out of the same necessities that we realize. Spring is also the time to get our tack in order. “Like I mentioned before – on a pack trip, we'll typically have 20 – 25 horses. That means we have pack saddles or riding saddles for each one. So now it's time to go through our saddles, bits and bridles and make sure everything is in order,” says Scott. The crew of Wild Deuce does ride and train all winter, so most of our gear doesn't sit unused; however there isn't a handy tack shop just around the corner when we're way out in the mountains – so inspecting, repairing or replacing gear before the start of the season is essential.

Now we've got horses trained, our camps are set up, our gear is ready...it's time to ride! We'll start our season off with Horsemanship Clinics in May, and in June we'll start riding out of our Mountain Base camp. July, August and early September will see us riding through tens of thousands of acres of pristine mountain wilderness, exploring trails, mountain lakes, rivers and working cattle.

Come and join us!



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