

HIKING & TRAILS

# 70 days in the wilderness: Idaho couple explores Central Idaho with llamas

BY CINDY CHOJNACKY *SPECIAL TO THE IDAHO STATESMAN*  
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Sarah Michael heads up the trail with a pack llama during her summer hike in the wilderness. COURTESY PHOTO



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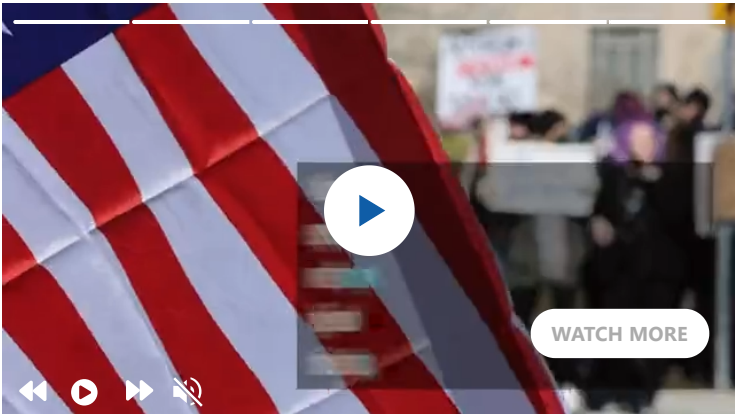
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Ketchum adventurers Bob Jonas and Sarah Michael did a 70-day “walkabout” this summer through Central Idaho’s Smoky, Sawtooth, Salmon River, White Cloud, Boulder and Pioneer mountain ranges — despite challenges from the aftermath of a snowy winter, and aided by llamas.

“I’m done carrying a heavy backpack,” said the 75-year-old Jonas, who suffers cervical degeneration in his neck that he attributes to radiation treatment for cancer decades ago and backpacking heavy loads during almost 30 years as an outfitter and mountain guide. He hikes in a fisherman’s vest today. “It distributes weight better than a day pack,” he said.

The llamas, rented from Wilderness Ridge Trail Llamas in Idaho Falls, carried up to 70 pounds each, allowing up to 12 days hiking between 10 resupplies. Wilderness Ridge owner Beau Baty swapped out fresh llamas four times during the trip.

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On July 5, Jonas and Michael began in the Smoky Mountains west of Hailey. For 10 days they were joined by Dennis Duenas, the Wilderness Ridge field program manager who helped the llamas and trekkers adjust to each other.

The first challenge was heat — which impaired the woolly llamas during the Smoky leg.

“Temperatures the first day were 90-100,” Jonas said. “The llamas, like me, were panting. We stopped around noon for three hours to let them cool off.” The trek would be slowed and rerouted several times because of heat, downed timber, high water, snow, fires and injury.

## HEAVY SNOW

The next challenge came in the Sawtooths — high water in the canyons and deep snow. These barriers forced the couple and three family members, including Jonas’ daughter, Ketchum Mayor Nina Jonas, to do routes on the north end of the range instead of their planned south-to-north traverse. Here, they first encountered downed logs from recent fires and the wet, snowy winter, which would hamper much of the trek. Llamas cannot crawl over logs like people. Bob and Sarah had to bushwhack around numerous logs across the trail or cut them with handsaws. Often, their progress slowed to less than a mile an hour. “If I did this trip again, I would try to stay in regular touch with the Forest Service for trail status updates,” Michael said.

Communication with Forest Service wilderness rangers and trail crews before and during the trek was imperative. The upper Middle Fork Trail from Cape Horn to Velvet Falls went smoothly. “The trail crew had been working just ahead of us,” Michael said. But after Velvet Falls, trail work stopped. “Something changed,” Michael said. “The crew went elsewhere, probably to fight fire.”

After three days struggling with downfall, the pair turned back. A friend picked up them and their llamas at Boundary Creek and drove them to the headwaters of Big Creek, where they met the trail crew leader for the Payette section of the Middle Fork who assured them that Big Creek had been cleared from headwaters to the Middle Fork. Instead of downed timber, the hikers enjoyed wilderness wildlife that included four black bear sightings, rattlesnakes and cutthroat trout fishing.

“The llamas were especially alert for bears, which they sighted first. Their restive behavior reminded us we were in wild country,” Jonas said.

## FIRES

At the Big Creek/Middle Fork confluence, the Camas and Ibex fires blew up on the Middle Fork, thwarting a return to Jonas’ and Michael’s original route. So they left the Middle Fork on the Waterfall Trail into the Bighorn Crags. Smoky conditions made a hike along heavily burned upper Waterfall Creek, which Michael called the “valley of the standing dead,” even more depressing.

A friend drove forest roads many hours to meet them at the Crags Trailhead, offering a rest break at her ranch on the East Fork of the Salmon. After the rest, and viewing the solar eclipse with friends, they returned to the Sawtooths to hike from Petit to Redfish lakes, a route blocked by snow and high water early in the trek.

Heavy smoke from wildfires in Idaho and throughout the Northwest and British Columbia blanketed sections of their White Cloud, Jerry Peak and Boulder routes. Sarah fell on a steep section of trail in the White Clouds, injuring her tailbone. Already hampered by a bum knee, she left the trek to recover. She returned for a day and half with public TV's "Outdoor Idaho" crew to help film a llama-trekking clip, part of a story on the Pioneers to be released this December.

## FALL STORMS

After the filming, Jonas continued on with a friend, but after a big September weather front dropped more than a foot of snow on high peaks of their trek and soaking rain at lower elevations, the pair and shivering llamas left the Pioneers on Sept. 15. After the storm break, Jonas scouted a planned final Pioneer leg to Craters of the Moon but decided to end the trek because of snow in the high peaks, threat of more weather, many hunters out, plus the web of roads/ATV tracks and fencing on the route.

"I think we did about 75 percent of the trip originally planned," Jonas said. "That's not counting the extensive scouting before and during the trip." An elaborate resupply plan both facilitated and constrained the trip, along with having friends and family join the trek. "We put ourselves on a schedule, but were a moving target for everyone given all the challenges. We were never able to really rest on trail or resupply where we had planned. The unsung heroes of this story are friends who supported our resupply and were there for us when we had to change routes — transporting us and the llamas to a new trailhead." The couple kept in touch via Delorme's InReach device, which provided tracking and messaging support via satellite and cellphone.

Would they do a trip of this magnitude again? They're not saying. Michael left earlier this month on another kind of trek — a European venture with friends, including short daily hikes, gourmet meals and lodge stays. Bob is "fattening up" at home — eating, sleeping, reading and hot-tubbing. He took time to finish his part of their trail blog, which features pictures and personal thoughts on the walkabout (<https://wild-trails.weebly.com/>).

## Idaho trek raises funds, awareness for leadership program

Bob Jonas and Sarah Michael's trek helped raise funds for Wild Gift, a non-profit that Bob founded to help new leaders balance development with resources and gifts of the natural world. With support pledges of 10 cents to \$2 per mile, the trek raised more than \$12,000 for Wild Gift.

After Jonas sold Sun Valley Trekking, his outfitter and guide business, he started Wild Gift in 2002 to "give back" to the natural world that has given his life meaning and joy. He investigated familiar outdoor leadership models such as Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) that build skills, camaraderie and leadership on long outdoor trips. He wanted a program that went beyond outdoor or environmental leadership and developed young leaders to influence policy in all fields that support stewards of the natural world.

Recruiting from graduates of Hugh O'Brien Leadership Program (HOBY), a community leadership training and service program for U.S. and international high school sophomores, Jonas offered five HOBY graduates a deep wilderness trek in Alaska to develop their vision for a better world. Based on their feedback, Wild Gift became a 17-month program with a three-week wilderness trip to crystallize a vision and business plan implemented with grants of up to \$10,000.

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