

March

The Moonlit Trail

In the early 1980s I lived, worked and rode in the forests of the South Carolina Lowcountry. For the trail horseman, this narrow band of topography that begins at the ocean's edge is a paradise from late-October through March. That can change, however, depending on how late it becomes cool enough to suppress the mosquitoes and how early it is warm enough to usher in the midges, gnats and deerflies.

By most measures, it can get cold in the Lowcountry in the winter time. But the temperature alone can be deceiving as the humidity can make only relatively cold air chill one to the bone. Some riders, and likely all horses, have a preference for the cool or cold temperatures over the insect riddled, sauna environment of the warm to hot months.

March truly opens spring there. When the days are sufficiently warm, spring peepers begin calling from their shallow water haunts. Songbird and hawk migrations are beginning. Red-shouldered hawks are beginning their prenuptial displays as males can be seen in diving, swooping, climbing aerial antics while plaintively calling to the object of their affection.

Eagles and newly arrived migrant osprey may be working on nests by the end of the month. Red-cockaded woodpeckers are ready to begin the nesting season. Gobblers are calling and strutting for all of the hens they can gather around them. The deer look awkward in the heavy winter coats on really warm days.

The sight and smell of wood smoke is common as forest workers are striving to meet their year's quota of winter acreage burned. Riding through these forests, one may encounter substantial amounts of blackened forest floor left by recent burns. Within a few weeks that same area will be producing lush green grasses, herbs and fresh

sprouts of shrubs and trees, all high in protein that will be required by pregnant and lactating does and the oncoming fawn crop.

While March weather in the Lowcountry lives up to its widespread reputation as being unpredictable, many riders know that this is also the month of premium days and nights for the trail experience. Clear sunny days are shirt-sleeve weather. Nights require a jacket. When clear, dry days are followed by clear, cool nights, the best night rides of the year are in the offing.

In the years that I worked and rode on Hobcaw Barony plantation in Georgetown County, there were more than 100 miles of roads and trails open to my horse and me. The plantation was a working forest, which along with its marshlands, was also used for a great deal of university research. But almost all of the traffic associated with those activities occurred during the day. At night the landscape was largely free of people, and I and my horse could be one with the land - uninterrupted for many hours and many miles.

The roads were white, fine sands that seemed to reflect even the faintest rays of light. While the forest might remain dark on clear, starlit nights, the white sand roads were totally visible and inviting to the rider.

The premier night rides were made when a waxing moon was past its second quarter. When this goddess of the nighttime heavens reached her full array of radiance, early in the evening she would rise from the ocean like a monarch ascending her throne. The white sands mirrored her loveliness. The shadows of the trees provoked a sense of silent, reverent bowing.

Creatures of the night were softly astir. Occasionally I heard the calls of screech owls or barred owls. If it was a particularly warm night, tree frogs might be calling. Occasionally, my horse would hesitate as it saw or smelled one or more deer, raccoons or wild hogs in the shadows where I could not see.

As my horse and I moved easily and quietly over the sand, I could feel the sanctity of this time and place. The solitude uplifted my very soul. The spiritual presence of those who had created a cultural history here was palpable. The wonder of it all pervaded everything, everywhere.

The moonlit trails had to be experienced in order to be dreamed. Maybe they had to be dreamed to first bring one to them for the experience. Moonlight riders are romanticists, and the love of such times and places is a great romance. Like all great romances, the fullness of such a ride defies language.

Now, reaching back across the many years since I rode the white sand roads of Hobcaw, I can still see the outlines of great pines silhouetted against the background of a moonlit sky. I can sense the deep shadows of great live oaks that have witnessed more moonlight than I can dream. I still see the maze of moonlight and shadows on the forest floor where one might fantasize Gulliver's Lilliputians playing hide-and-seek. I can still smell the wisps of wood smoke in the cool night air.

Riding in that spectacle I often had conflicting senses of witnessing indescribable beauty and the role of being an intruder. I often let go my reins and lifted both arms heavenward in praise to it and its Creator, but the gesture always seemed inadequate.

I shall never return to the moonlit sand trails of Hobcaw. As Leopold once warned, "It is only in the mind that shining adventure [romance] remains forever bright."¹ To return would risk tarnishing memories too lovely to be diluted by the modern context.

¹ Leopold, A. 1949 (1989). *The green lagoons*. pages 141-149 in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Over the years I have heard many proclaim the wonders of Hobcaw Barony. I agree with all of their proclamations while silently reflecting that none has in solitude *felt* it from the back of a good horse as a full moon lit the white sands of the trail.
