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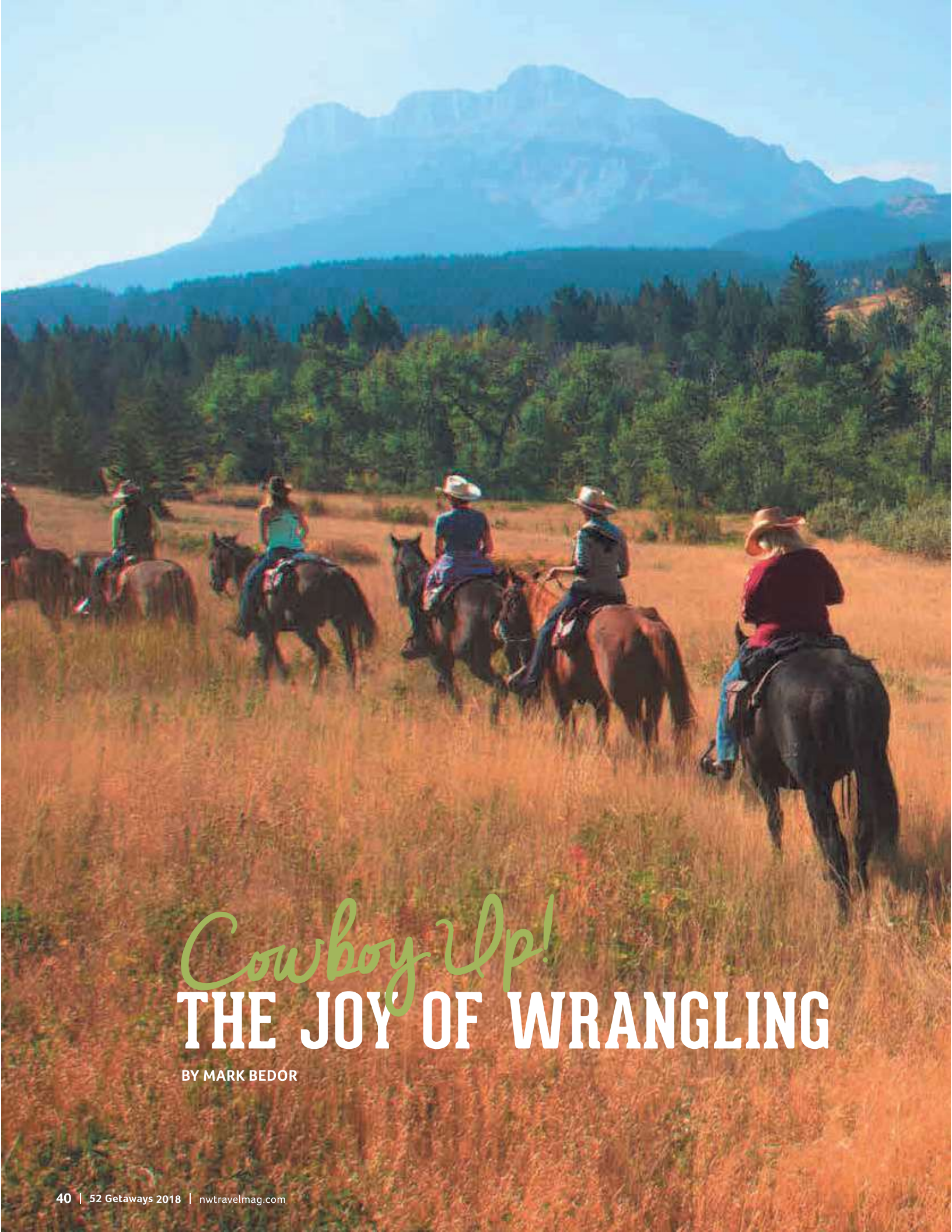
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Cowboy Up!
THE JOY OF WRANGLING

BY MARK BEDOR

A person wearing a black cowboy hat and a blue and green plaid shirt is riding a dark brown horse through a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The horse is facing left. In the background, there is a rolling hillside covered in a mix of green trees and dry, yellowish-brown grass under a clear blue sky.

Summer

14

Augusta, Montana

LEARN MORE

Triple J Wilderness Ranch is located two hours from Great Falls, Montana. The ranch staff can provide airport transportation for your arrival and departure. To book your guest ranch vacation, or perhaps your own stint as a wrangler, visit triplejranch.com. For more information about travel in the Great Falls area, go to visitgreatfallsmontana.org, and for the state of Montana, visitmt.com.

© Mark Bedor



I've always wanted to be a wrangler on a ranch—a real working cowboy. All my life it was just a fantasy, but last September my dream finally came true. At first, I didn't realize it'd be a 9:00 to 5:00 job—in bed by 9:00, up at 5:00, at the barn by 6:00, and go-go-go all day long, at times even into the evening.

My work day at Montana's Triple J Wilderness Guest Ranch began as I stepped out of my comfortable apartment above the picturesque log lodge and into the quiet of the early morning. Zip, the ranch border collie, would run up out of the dark to greet me. Stars twinkled in the fading night sky as I set off on my commute—a brisk quarter-mile hike to the barn. Coming from California sea level, I could feel the 5,200-foot altitude. But I could also taste the cool, clean mountain air. It was like delicious spring water. The vigorous start to the day made me glad for my gym membership. My strength and endurance would be tested every day I was there.

I hired on at this Rocky Mountain hideaway for the month of September as a late-season replacement for the recently departed summer staff of college students. Aidan Foxley was the lone hold-over, a very

capable 18-year-old, whose firefighter school would begin later in the month. He and I were the only two wranglers. But September is “Adults Only” month at the small, family-run ranch. Only a dozen or so guests were there at that time of year. And with ranch owner Ernie Barker also saddling and leading rides, we could handle the load.

Working as a wrangler, you earn your keep. In the early morning darkness, we caught and haltered a dozen or so horses and saddled them for the day's ride. The herd knew the drill, and most of the horses were very cooperative. But a few played hard to get, like the gorgeous palomino Hondo. But he's worth the effort. Guests love this responsive and fast horse. Cash was another favorite. He and his buddy Bender were also known for their ability to untie themselves from the rail. You had to make sure those guys were well-secured, or they'd wander off.

As the sun lit up the corral, the work went quickly—catch, halter, brush, saddle and then tie the horses to the feed trough. The Triple J supplements its feed with an aquatic fodder system that turns barley seed into a sod-like grass fodder in just six days. The horses love it, and Ernie says it's very good for his animals.

But operating the fodder machine is a wet, messy chore that's especially nasty when your fingers sting from morning temps in the 30s. But hey! No whining! Ever! I just did my best to get the job done quickly while still doing it right.

Happily, there was an immediate reward to make me forget my pain: Breakfast! Even at 7:30, Chef John Nipper displayed his artistry. His food is so good, it's tough not to overeat. But it's also tough to turn down eggs Benedict, pancakes, a delicious breakfast skillet and glazed bacon. And it was equally challenging not to overindulge at lunch and dinner on John's delectable roast turkey, sensational salmon and the best burgers ever, courtesy of the grass-fed beef raised by the ranching family of Ernie's wife Kim. Not to mention the desserts!

Despite all that food, I lost five pounds by September's end. I never stopped moving. Saddling horses. Pitching hay. Hauling firewood. Riding for hours, hopping up and down from the horse a dozen times checking cinches, fetching hats blown off by the wind, helping guests on and off their horses, getting the gate and whatever else needed to be done.

My wife Marilyn joined me on this adventure, helping in the lodge, serving meals, doing dishes, making beds, plus a myriad of other tasks. By 8:00 in the evening, we were both ready to drop.

But it was all worth it. There is a great sense of satisfaction to see people fall in love with the Triple J, nestled in a gorgeous mountain valley in Montana's rugged Northern Rockies. The days' horseback rides took us from mountaintop vistas to fast lopes on wide-open prairies. We forded the Sun River, rode

spectacular cliffside trails alongside a mountain lake, watched as bald eagles rode the wind, and woke up to snow covered pine trees on September 15th.

But the best part was the laughter. I've never heard people laugh so much, every day, including the crew. Especially at breakfast. The owners and ranch hands ate breakfast an hour before the guests, and we quickly bonded—like-minded friends who love the West, love the ranch and love sharing it.

And the horses were a handsome, well-behaved string on the daily rides.

It was amazing to see the same horse satisfy riders of vastly different abilities. Good old Cash was one of the go-to guys. He had a sixth sense—full of go for the experts and could babysit rookie riders as well.

Few months in my life have ever been so satisfying. Ernie calls it, "The joy of dude ranching."

It's hard, demanding, relentless work, critical to the well-being of the horses, the guests and the ranch itself. And very rewarding.

Back at my desk in Los Angeles, I'm missing Montana. I'll be back at the Triple J next September. 🐾

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