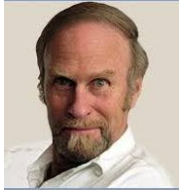


We're Doomed Buffalo Breath: What is That Smell?



By Frosty Wooldridge

“Clean your plate and wash the dishes before you go to bed.”

–Your mother

I camp in the wilds. It's peaceful, aesthetic and spiritual. It is a communion with nature. Whether it's the desert or mountains, I prefer the smell of the wilds.

But wilderness camping has precarious moments.

Sandi and I cranked our way toward Alaska, laboring up mountain grades in the Sawtooth Range of Idaho on Route 75. Late in the day, we came to a river intersecting the highway.

(Ultimate mental, spiritual, physical expression on a bicycle tour.)



“Let's follow that dirt path down along the river,” she said. “I bet we find a good camp spot.”

“Could be good for a bath and campfire,” I added. “Let's do it.”

"I need to adjust my rear derailleur," Sandi said. "Could you give me a hand with it."

"If you'll fix dinner."

"You rat."

"I'll do dishes."

"Deal."

We followed the trail that looked as if it would reach the river, yet be out of sight of the road. Two minutes later, we found ourselves in the perfect campsite. Someone had built a rock fire spit in a clearing with a sandy beach on the river twenty feet away. Plenty of firewood lay around the area.

"I'll grab some wood and start the fire," I said. "I can check your derailleur before it gets dark."

"Okay, I'm taking a bath."

We enjoyed a warm night in June, and mosquitoes didn't seem to be out in force. Sandi washed up while I started a fire. In a few minutes, flames licked the evening air, lighting up the surrounding trees. Darkness crept across the land. I pitched the tent and set up the air mattresses and sleeping bags. I stripped the panniers off the bikes and set them inside. With my tool bag in hand, I bent down to check out Sandi's derailleur. A stretched cable had thrown it off alignment with the freewheel. I tightened it and adjusted the derailleur.

"She'll shift like greased lightning tomorrow," I said to Sandi as she returned to camp.

"The water is lovely," she said. "Hurry up and get a bath before it gets dark. This spot is beautiful."

"Sure is," I said as I grabbed my towel and bottle of

biodegradable soap.

"I'm making spaghetti, so hurry up. It'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

By the time I returned from the river, the steaming pot of spaghetti wafted through the evening air. The flames danced light around the entire area. Sandi poured tomato sauce into a second pan. Minutes later, we gorged ourselves.

"That's it for me," I said, "My tummy's busting at the seams."

"We better wash the pans."

"I'll do it in the morning," I said, getting up.

"What about raccoons?"

"Don't worry about them."

"Okay, if you say so."

We doused the fire and crawled into the tent. One thing about touring through the mountains—my legs were weary. I fell asleep in seconds.

Next morning, the sky brightened on the eastern horizon. It was one of those layered, surging, blazing red sunrises that got stopped by stratus clouds low to the horizon. Bursting through the heavens, it brought color to our world. It burned red on the rippling waters of the river, and contrasted with the lush verdant foliage of the trees.

"Frosty, wake up," Sandi said, nudging me.

"You smell anything?"

"Yeah, it smells like.....oh no, it's...a skunk." I said, squeezing my nose.

"Look outside the flaps," Sandi said.

"What do you mean me...why me?"

"You're closer."

"You and your weird logic," I groaned, looking out the flap. "You guessed it...we've got a big, fat, stinky skunk checking out our campsite. He's waddling around the bikes...now he's headed for the river...now he's climbing up to the bikes again...whoops, now he's sniffing the fire pit.....now he's into the saucepan."

"I told you to wash that thing out."

"You're right. I screwed up....oh good, we're cool. There he goes back to the river.....ah good, he's going into the.....oh, oh, oh no, he's headed over here. He's less than twenty feet away and still coming. I'm gonna' be sick. He's coming right for our front door."

"Quick, close the flap," Sandi whispered.

"If that black and white stink bomb lifts his tail, we're done. We can kiss off this trip for the next month. We won't be able to ride or buy groceries or anything," I said. "Nobody will be able to stand us for a month of Sundays. I think we're doomed."

"We picked a great spot all right," Sandi added. "That skunk smells like something died inside of a garbage can. Stinking stink bomb anyway. How did we ever get into this one?"

"Dirty dishes," I admitted. "But how we gonna' get out of here?"

"See where he is now," Sandi said.

"What is it with you?" I asked. "Do I look like I have F-0-0-L painted across my forehead?"

"Oh, take a peek."

"I'm always the one who..." I grumbled, pulling back the flap.
"Ohhhooooooooo."

I was nose to nose with the skunk. I froze. I couldn't speak. I held my breath. Sandi remained motionless in back of me. The skunk's beady eyes looked through the netting right into mine. If it had been Valentine's Day, we could have kissed. All the while, her glossy black nose kept sniffing the netting, leaving drool marks across it. I was paralyzed with fright as I slowly lowered the flap.

"I saw my life pass before my eyes," I whispered to Sandi.

"You look as if you saw a ghost."

"I'm amazed she didn't unload on me."

"Maybe she got a whiff of your morning buffalo breath and knew she was bested."

"You're so kind to me, Sandi."

"Look out now. See what's happening."

"Oh no, not me, nope, it's your turn."

"Okay, let me see," Sandi said, lifting the tent flap. "I think it's gone.....nope, it's over there by the bikes again...oh, there it goes down along the river.....it's headed along the bank, away from us."

We waited another five minutes, but the waddling stink bomb vanished into the woods. Its essence lay in the air like a barnyard full of chickens. I looked over at Sandi.

"Let's get our gear packed, and get out of here," I said.

"Does that mean you're not gonna' wash dishes?" she said, smirking.

She was right. I had broken the rules of the wilderness, and

we both nearly paid a heavy price for it. It's important to clean dishes and remove all food in a wilderness camp setting. In bear country, food must be hung in a plastic bag 100 yards from camp. It's even important to wash our faces and brush our teeth to remove food odor.

We flash-packed the bikes and tore out of there as if possessed with something akin to FEAR. But there's something different about that kind of feeling. We didn't fear for our lives, but we were afraid of being stunk to high heaven. Reaching the highway, we laughed in relief.

"What was it you said about me having 'buffalo breath'?" I asked Sandi.

"Just kidding," she said.

We headed north into the Sawtooth Range. It was a lovely day for bicycling through the fresh air of the mountains. Now, every time I smell a skunk, I remember that morning by the river.

Still can't figure out how Sandi knows what a buffalo's breath smells like...

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