

Bandit

Outfitters' Dog Braves Wilderness Forest Fire to Return Home

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Bandit, a four-year-old stock dog cross, braved a 92-mile trip home crossing the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area in Central Montana alone while it was in flames with the Ahorn Fire.

Bandit belongs to Tucker and Amy Mills, owners of Mills Wilderness Adventures in Augusta, Montana, and is beloved by their sons— Turk, eight, and Bryar, ten.



Bandit with his two boys, Bryar and Turk Mills. Photo courtesy Amy and Tucker Mills.



Mother Amy explains that the boys are Bandit's best friends. He is extremely loyal to the boys and Amy doesn't worry about harm coming to them

won't go up to an adult, he loves kids!

"He's got an incredible natural sense," she continues. "We never really trained him; he just knows what to do."

Amy described the circumstances under which Bandit had become separated from their party. "We had guests from Florida

Tucker, who carries a satellite phone, got news that the trail had been closed behind them.

and New York who had come out for a wilderness pack trip experience with

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"Bandit is very independent," she says, "and while he

us. Bandit always goes along on pack trips. He worries about being left behind, so he usually stays by the horses when we stop for the night.

"He knows that when we saddle up, we're ready to go again."

continued...

On Saturday, July 15, the group headed west into the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area from the Benchmark trailhead. They had gotten as far as Indian Creek when the Ahorn Fire blew up. Tucker, who carries a satellite phone, got news that the trail had been closed behind them.”

Away from the fire’s path, the group camped at White River until Thursday, July 19. They then rode out the only way possible to avoid the fire, by continuing west thirty-two miles to the Owl trailhead near Holland Lake in the Seeley-Swan Valley.

There, on Friday, five trucks with horse trailers and a van met them to ferry them back to Augusta. Amy left with the guests in the van, and the rest of the crew began unsaddling and unpacking 30 head of stock, and loading them into the trailers for the long drive home.

However, Bandit, who had been waiting in Tucker’s pickup, wasn’t anywhere to be found when it was time for Tucker to leave. Tucker searched up and down the road, calling his dog, and finally decided that the dog had gotten a ride in one of the other rigs.

Tucker was optimistic that Bandit would greet him when he got home. But the dog didn’t.

“When I went to bed on Friday night, I thought, what are we going to tell our boys if Bandit doesn’t come home,” says Amy.

They called back and said that Bandit had been seen going by, heading east and directly toward the wildfires.



Bandit on a pack trip, overlooking the Chinese Wall in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Photo courtesy Amy and Tucker Mills.

“We called the ranger station the next day and the ranger relayed a message up to White River to keep an eye out for the dog. They called back and said that Bandit had been seen going by, heading east and directly toward the wildfires,” says Amy.

“I turned to Tucker and said, I bet he’ll be home by tomorrow morning.

“When I opened the kitchen door at seven on Sunday morning, there was Bandit on the step. I don’t know how long he had been there. Our St. Bernard was


so happy to see him, he just ran around and around.”

Bandit had somehow gotten through the forest fire, which had burned right up to the trail in that area, on a route he had only been over once, and had traveled 92 miles, the width of the Wilderness, in about a day and a half.

“Amazingly, his pads weren’t even worn and, when I checked him all over, there were no burns or scrapes from wild animals. I offered him food, as he hadn’t had anything to eat since Friday morning, but he wasn’t very interested. He seemed just fine until that afternoon, when he began acting a little stove up and I gave him

an aspirin,” says Amy.

“He’s completely recovered now.”



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