

# Terror on the John Day

by T. J. Hanson, Ph.D.

I know not what strange force compels me to take pen in hand and transcribe the events, the horrifying, terrifying events, of a night last May on the John Day River. It is with hesitation that I begin this narrative—a tale of a night that is best forgotten.

Our original trip had been planned for the upper reaches of the Owyhee River, near the southeast corner of Oregon. We began organizing the logistics six months earlier, with an expected sojourn of two weeks in the wild canyons of that remote desert river. But the best of plans do not always weigh in. Floating the Owyhee is dependent upon a good flow, which in turn is dependent upon a good snow pack in the mountains where this river finds its source. This year the snow pack was below normal, and the Owyhee was down—too low to risk becoming stranded with 5,000 pounds of gear and not enough water to float it on.

Faced with this change in conditions, our small party of six rafts and seven people was forced to find an alternate river. With two weeks already allocated for our excursion, we decided to float the full length of the John Day watershed. The put-in would be near the Ukiah-Dale State Wayside, on the North Fork of the John Day, and the take-out would be at Cottonwood, on the main John Day. The total float would be approximately 203 miles, 58 on the North Fork and the remainder on the main stem. With this change in plans, we looked forward to a tranquil two-week trip. Departing from an elevation of 2,600 feet in the forested Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon, we would descend to the juniper and sagebrush desert of 650 feet elevation, about 40 miles from the confluence with the Columbia River.

We set out. The struggles of moving a loaded raft downriver competed with our daily needs for food, shelter, clothing, and rest. We battled the elements of nature to stay warm and dry, well-fed, and vigorous. Although river winds and wild, unpredictable whitewater taxed our very beings during our daily downriver treks, the evenings and nights provided a refuge from this toil. A warm campfire, along with gourmet meals and desserts, provided the needed respite. With sturdy tents, secure against the ravages of the elements, we spent our nights snug in our sleeping bags with visions of the morrow—blue skies, beautiful scenery, and a wild, untamed river.

Indeed, all went well for the first half of the journey. On the seventh or eighth day out we decided to remain in camp, rather than continuing downriver. Normally, this would signal a relaxing day of food, friends, and short hikes. However, the group I was traveling with preferred backcountry vistas of breathtaking proportion. Our hike that day provided an elevation gain of about 1,200 feet through broken country where no trail existed to ease the way. Upon returning from this venture, we amused ourselves around camp. I repaired some equipment, took an ice-cold bath in the river, and lubed the oarlocks on my cataraft with a waterproof silicon gel lubricant. The day concluded with a delicious repast and a warm, friendly campfire.

I retired early that evening, exhausted from the day of hiking. The sun set at about 8:00PM, and I was looking forward to a crisp, cold night—a good night for sleeping. The hardness of my ground pad went unnoticed as I drifted into sleep within minutes after lying down.

I don't know how long I slept—three hours, perhaps five. I awoke to a faint sound—the sound of something moving in the dark. I lay motionless, trying to discern the source. Was I unconsciously wriggling my toes? No, not that. Was it my breathing? Or perhaps the uncertain rustling of the rain fly in the wind? No, neither of those. There was no wind. Again I lis-

tened carefully. It was faint, but in the dead quiet of night came a definite "scratch scratch ... slither slither."

I sat up and continued to listen. My movement must have frightened whatever was making the noise. I could no longer hear it.

I lay back down to resume my night's rest, only to be disturbed again by a "scratch scratch ... slither slither." The sound was that of a slow, calculating movement—the type of sound made by creatures that crawl on their bellies. Yes, that was it! A snake! There was a snake in my tent!

I sat up and located a small light. Scanning the interior of the tent floor, I was unable to find this unwanted visitor. I moved some stuff sacks around, checking all the possible hiding places. Much to my disappointment, there was no snake.

I extinguished the light and lay back down, now more confused than ever. Something had to have made that sound. Did I have a scorpion in the tent? Possibly. Earlier that day I had killed a black widow spider rappelling down from the tent ceiling. Out here on the desert, a scorpion was certainly a possibility. I lay there in the dark, pondering my fate. Wondering just how painful a scorpion sting would be. I closed my eyes to regain the slumber I so dearly needed. However, my nocturnal friend was not done. Again I listened:

"Scratch scratch ... slither slither."

A rodent? Yes, that must be it! Some small furry creature had invaded my fortress and was probably searching my stuff sacks for a tiny scrap of food. I probably missed seeing this unwanted guest since I was focused on finding a snake, not a mouse or a shrew. Again I sat up, turned on a light, and began searching the tent.

As I did so, I was reminded of the stories my mother told when I was a youngster. Stories of when she was a combat nurse in the South Pacific during World War II. With only tent accommodations for three years, she and her fellow nurses would cover their heads with netting to prevent rats from running across their faces at night. Would I, too, have to resort to using netting?

After a thorough scouring of every nook and cranny in my tent and gear, I was convinced that my actions must have frightened the visitor away. Yet I was unable to locate an entrance or exit hole. How had this varmint gotten in? More importantly, how could he have escaped without my notice?

I extinguished the light and lay back down. All was still, and the blackness of night gave no token of an intruder. Convinced I was now finally alone, I rolled over on my side and closed my eyes.

"Scratch scratch ... slither slither."

I jumped up with my light in hand. Surely, there was a small snake inside my pillow! This item (two jackets stuffed into a pillowcase) was the only one I had not yet examined. In a wild, frantic effort, I dumped the jackets onto the tent floor, ready to throttle the first pair of eyes that peered out from under them.

I flipped the garments over, then back again. He had to be in there! I laid both jackets flat on the tent floor, then pushed my hands down each arm, expecting my antagonist to make a desperate attempt to escape. There was nothing in the sleeves. I did the same with the jacket bodies, even going so far as to check in each pocket. Still nothing.

How could this critter not be in the tent? I distinctly heard it—and it wasn't a dream. I was wide awake and the noise was real. I sat back on my heels, looking at the jackets, then around at my disheveled tent. My normally exquisite housekeeping now resembled a pre-school romper room.

I scanned the ceiling. Was there a bat in my tent? We had seen bats earlier in the evening, and one could have navigated its way through the open door when I was removing my boots. The beam of my flashlight streaked across the tent ceiling as I looked for a furry creature peering at me with upside-down eyes. If it was a bat, there was certainly not enough room in this tent for the both of us. I jiggled the loft storage shelf, thinking he might be hanging from one of its ties. Nothing, no trace—there was no trace of a bat or any other varmint.

Yet, I was not alone. I was sure of that. Something else was in the tent. I eliminated the possibility of a lizard simply from logic. If there were a lizard in the tent, I would have encountered it during my previous search. Also, lizards are fast, they don't slither. There was something in that tent that I could only detect with sound. Sight, touch, taste, and smell were useless. Was my mind playing tricks on me? Perhaps there was some unseen force in the tent, an entity from a world unlike the one to which I was accustomed.

Is this how it began in Roswell? Had some poor hapless soul been camped out on the New Mexico desert when alien ships began to arrive? Maybe Kimberly, Oregon, would become the next Roswell, New Mexico. There would be new motels with billboards huckstering the unwary traveler to spend a night with slithering sounds. Maybe the billboards would even bear a distorted caricature of my horrified expression, just before the aliens carried me off to their orbital labs.

I returned to the problem at hand. Aliens?—not a chance. This was something far more sinister. Were others in my party playing a joke on me? I checked a small digital travel clock; it was 2:00AM. The six people I was travelling with were too reserved to play such a joke, and certainly not in the middle of the night. I dropped this scenario from my list of possibilities.

I extinguished the light and lay back down. As I stared into the blackness of night, I could once again hear the sound. Faint, very faint. I rolled over on my side and pressed my ear to the pillow. The sound grew more distinct. It was suddenly clear now, very clear.

"Scratch scratch ... slither slither."

I lay motionless, just listening. Again I reviewed my list of possibilities, searching for any omission. I had eliminated the possibility of varmints in the tent—there were no snakes, lizards, bats, scorpions, or rodents. I continued to listen.

"Scratch scratch ... slither slither."

It was under my tent! Of course! Why hadn't I thought of that earlier? Reptiles, specifically snakes, can detect sources of heat. And this was rattlesnake country. A few days before I'd had to chip ice off my tent in the morning. And the temperature tonight was again in the thirties. Apparently, some snake has zeroed in on the heat signature of my body and had crawled under the tent for warmth! Again I sat up and turned on my light.

I stretched out the tent floor material, looking for any sign of a cylindrical body, especially one that was moving. While shifting around the tent to check each square foot, I thought about where I had stored my field knife. It would be needed to cut the snake's head off. Of course, I'd have to slice a hole in my tent floor, but that could be repaired. Spending the remainder of the night with a dead snake under the tent was of little concern. This had

gone beyond a mere irritation. I no longer cared that snakes provide a valuable service in controlling rodent populations. My night's rest had to be regained! The snake must die!

My excitement died quickly as I was unable to locate any moving form. The tent floor was flat and smooth over every square inch. Once again my mind filled with confusion. There was a sound, but no source—not even a ghostly image to complete the horror. Were the ancient Indian tribes of this canyon coming back to claim their river? I was ready to accept any explanation.

I glanced around the tent once more, extinguished the light, and lay down. Motionless, I listened intently. There it was—a faint sound, as if coming from across a distant valley. I rolled over on my side and pressed my ear to the pillow. The sound grew louder and clearer.

Then it came to me. I threw the pillow aside and pressed my ear to the tent floor. Louder still, like sounds filtering up from an underground cavern. Yes, it was under my tent! In fact, it was under the ground. A mole! A mole was burrowing under my tent!

I jumped up, turned on the light, and shined it on the position from whence the sound emanated. To verify my suspicions I placed my hands flat against the tent floor, feeling the ground. Yes! There was movement! The mole was directly under my head and the sound was telescoping up through my pillow. That's why the sound was more distinct when I was lying down, and clearer when I was lying on my side.

A mole! All this trouble for a mole? My earlier brainstorm for setting up my tent on soft soil no longer seemed like such a great idea. That ground was prime mole territory. Seven mole species exist in North America, of which only one occurs in central Oregon, the Coast mole, a little brown varmint of about four or five inches long. That creature of eternal darkness clearly shows no respect for us non-nocturnal beings. His excavations at 2:00AM were an unacceptable addition to my nomadic accommodations. *If this critter thinks he's going to outsmart me*, I thought, *he had better think twice!*

Outsmart a human? Ha! How vast could the cranial capacity of a mole be? Surely it is only the tiniest fraction of that of a human. The mole is one of the smallest of mammals. The unmitigated gall of that mole! Thinking he could outsmart a human—humans, who have put men on the moon, cured polio, and produced Gold Bond Medicated Powder. *This mole doesn't have a chance!* I thought. *By sheer force I can overpower this devilish rodent.*

With a clenched fist I pounded the ground, no doubt sending shock waves through his tunnels that would register a 9.0 on the Mole's Richter Scale. I pounded the ground 10, 15, over 20 times. By then, I surmised the mole would be evacuating the tunnel in a mad scramble to save his life. The excavations would probably be declared unsafe and closed by the mole's civil defense authorities in lieu of safer digs. I could imagine an alarm going off in the tunnel as the lone miner scrambled to safety. It would be a night that mole would not soon forget. Mess with a human? Ha! He would be lucky to escape with his little brown hide!

I stretched the tent floor, and looked for any sign of movement. Again I placed my hands flat on the ground, feeling for any motion. There was none. The mole was gone. He was probably ten feet from my tent by now, moving in whatever direction his escape route went—as long as it was away from the pounding.

I sat back on my heels, thinking that my actions would send fear of collapsing tunnels into the hearts of moles everywhere. Buried alive with only grubs and worms for company! Could there be a crueller fate? Even Fortunato had a cask of Amontillado with which to wile away his final demise.

I extinguished the light and lay back down, secure in the knowledge that I was truly alone. Five minutes went by, then ten. The silence of the night was unbroken, and it felt good. I rolled over on my side to regain the visions of peaceful drifts through beautiful canyons. Sleep was near, with only the sound of my heartbeat to break the silence. Then:

"Scratch, scratch ... slither, slither."

My eyes snapped open! Sleep was gone! The mole must die!

"Fiend," I cried, "or foe. Thy Satan hath sent thee from the boiling cauldrons below!"

Again I pounded the tent floor—now with the fury of a mountain squall. I had not bothered to turn on my light. I knew the location of the enemy, there was no need for illumination. I dented the ground beneath my tent, moving outward from a point directly under my pillow. Surely this would end the torturous scratching and allow me a peaceful night's rest. If there were additional tunnels, I wanted to collapse them too. There would be no escape! All exits would be cut off! Death by suffocation or simply being squished—it didn't matter. This was a fight to the finish.

I stopped my pounding long enough to listen for any sound. I heard none. I started pounding again. After another minute of my brutal frontal assault, I felt secure that the mole had either escaped or been mortally wounded. Either way, his nocturnal stirrings had been silenced. He would not be around to disturb future rafters or me. The John Day River, or at least this river campsite, would be safe for future generations of weary travelers. I wiped the sweat from my brow and took a deep breath. There was Manifest Destiny in my pride as I lay back down. This tent site was mine and mine alone.

I closed my eyes while grinning at my victory. Mess with a human? Ha!

Five minutes went by, then ten. Soon I was drifting off to sleep. Visions of the surreal had just begun to form when:

"Scratch scratch ... slither slither."

I lay for a few moments, helpless, a verse inspired by countless river trials taking shape in my mind.

Somewhere kayakers are playing,  
surfing the waves in delight.  
Somewhere rafters are singing,  
around a campfire light.  
I've seen strange things on my rafting trips,  
strange as strange can be.  
But now and then I think the River Gods  
have simply got it in for me.

Sighing, I got up and moved my sleeping bag to another corner of the tent. The mole had won!