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Paired up with her mare, Shyla, and gelding, Takoda (left), Gillian Larson tackles long-distance rides most wouldn't dream of attempting.

ADVENTURES

Going the Distance

Gillian Larson “thru-rides” long-distance backcountry trails alone with a bold self-reliance, and it’s a passion she wants to share.

By **KATE BRADLEY BYARS**

OFFICIALLY, GILLIAN LARSON and her two Quarter Horses have trekked 6,589 miles across the United States. Unofficially, it is more like 9,000 miles with preparation rides and shorter treks to get into shape for long trails.

This 27-year-old from Topanga, California, doesn't fit the image of a seasoned long-distance rider and packer. Larson's megawatt smile, auburn hair—often braided in pigtails—and lanky stride better suit a carefree college student, which is what she was when she rode her first trail.

Looking for an adventure to gap her undergraduate and graduate student years, Larson launched a dream with a plan, albeit a naïve one—to “thru-ride” horseback the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail. Coined from a term used by hikers, “thru-hiking” thru-riding is completing an entire trail during a calendar year, but not necessarily in consecutive days.

Instead of backpacking through Europe like many graduates, Larson aimed at a solo adventure that could have dire consequences. The Pacific Crest Trail begins in Southern California

at the United States border with Mexico, and traverses arid desert and frigid mountain peaks through the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountain ranges on its way through California, Oregon and Washington to the Canadian border. People have died on the PCT due to everything from treacherous terrain to extreme weather. In 2017, the Pacific Crest Trail Association granted 6,069 permits for the trail, and, of those, only three were for horseback riders thru-riding.

Since that first trek in 2014, Larson's riding résumé now includes two completions of the Pacific Crest Trail, the Arizona and Colorado trails, and in 2018, the Continental Divide Trail, all ridden aboard her mare, “Shyla,” and gelding, “Takoda.”

While the PCT may be the most popular hiking trail, the Arizona and Colorado trails offer travelers even more scenic views, and with that, increased dangers. The mountains are covered in snow and ice, and the deserts barren,

making water scarce. To ride these trails safely, and keep horses safe, it takes planning prior to departure and self-reliance while on the trail.

"Part of what attracted me to thru-riding was that it was hard. I wanted to see if I was cut of that cloth," she says. "I was able to ride, but this was extreme, and I wanted to see if I could push myself to do something uncomfortable. It built on that innate stubbornness I do have. I saw what I was made of out there."

She didn't start her quest with a bulky bank account or plan to make a career with her horses; rather, Larson took the "trail and error" route to achieve her dream.

DISCOVERING THE PACIFIC

There are more English riding instructors than Western in Topanga. Jodi Johnson, Larson's mom, was an avid hunter-jumper rider who moved into dressage, and Larson inherited her mother's love of horses.

"From the beginning I hoped she would share this love. I grew up enamored with horses and knew it would be fun to share with her," says Johnson, an English professor at Pierce Community College in nearby Los Angeles. "She has had her own passion and own way of following it."

A nature-loving child, Larson often camped with her family, but not in the backcountry. Their camping was closer to the car and less self-reliant. It came as a surprise to Johnson that Larson chose a horseback riding adventure to fill the time she had between graduating from California Polytechnic State University and pursuing a master of science in ecology and evolution at Cal State Northridge.

"I read an article in the *LA Times* about a woman who set the speed record on the Pacific Crest Trail. I had never known there was a trail from Mexico to Canada, and my first question was if horses were allowed on the trail," Larson says. "As soon as I learned of it, it was an instantaneous decision. That was it—that was what I was doing for my grand adventure between undergrad and graduate school."

She would take her Quarter Horse mare, Shyla (registered as Wimpy Tan Zan), and the mare's offspring, the gelding Takoda. The two buckskin horses balanced each other: Larson planned to ride Shyla, who is nervous and always on the go, and to use the laid-back but trustworthy gelding as a packhorse.

Relying heavily on hiker blogs for suggestions on personal gear, Larson prepared as best she could for the trip.

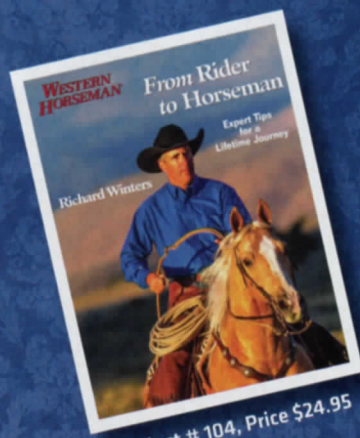


Trial and error helped Larson get to the point where she is now comfortable riding long-distance trails.

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ABOVE: Takoda typically follows Larson and Shyla on his own, with no rope to connect the two horses.

LEFT: Shyla and Takoda pack through the Gila National Forest in New Mexico as part of the 2018 Continental Divide Trail ride.



"On my first ride I was on a tight budget [and had to use what I had]. I had lightweight gear, but bulky. I rode with a backpack most of the time and my saddlebags were bulky," Larson says. "I knew that my horses weren't very big and I didn't want to over-burden them. I purchased a lot of stuff off eBay. The way I did it the first time wasn't the smartest. I was starting grad school, which technically began August 18, and I was on a deadline. The entire ride I was rushing to make it back."

On April 12, 2014, Gillian stepped out on the southern Pacific Crest Trail, leaving the Mexican border to leapfrog from one trailhead to the next, with her truck and trailer serving as a base camp with extra supplies. Her mother

supported Larson's travels both emotionally and physically, helping to move the truck and trailer or resupply her daughter when it was within driving distance of Johnson's Los Angeles-based job.

"We started so completely ignorant of what we were facing, which was probably a good thing! If we had known more, we may not have tried," Johnson says. "I didn't want to throw cold water on it because I had had too much of that from my parents when I was young, and I didn't want to be a roadblock. I could only do so much to help, and knew she would have to figure it out on her own."

Larson dealt with a shortage of forage feed available in desert areas, encountered too much snow to traverse in the

high country, and survived one near-hypothermic night in Northern California. Though snow forced her to leave a stretch of trail undone, she rode across the border to Canada on August 31, 2014.

"I had to leave a section of trail in California undone. I was going out three to four days at a time to finish it up the first two weeks of grad school. It worked out, barely," Larson says.

While her fellow students were eager to learn and focused on school, Larson dreamed of long stretches of open trail and mountains. Her first ride on the PCT changed her life.

FINE-TUNED PURSUIT

Larson remained in school on scholarship and worked as a teacher's assistant.

It took her nearly two years to save up the more than \$10,000 she needed to fund a second try at the PCT in 2016. During that time she focused on improving her logistics. She wouldn't have her mother's help this time.

"She did it, and all of it—border to border—but she felt it was by the skin of her teeth. I know she wanted to do it in a better way," Johnson says. "I thought it

was out of her system. I thought she'd take a few months and get over it, but she didn't.

"I told her I couldn't help as much because [for the first ride] I took six weeks off in the summer. I said I couldn't do it again and turn my life over to helping her do something she already did. And she did figure it out."

With two trucks and trailers, Larson developed a better system to ride from Point A to Point B, resupply and rest, and then move on. She also adapted her gear.

"I invested in compressible and compact gear that wouldn't take up as much space and still be lightweight," she says. "I've gone through about four saddles. Now, I ride in a Tucker endurance-style saddle because it is similar to Western saddles but lightweight. Also, I found having a horn on a Western saddle was an unnecessary pain. [Often when] I would go under low trees, the only thing that didn't make it was the horn."

"If we are going a long distance between resupply, I will also carry a backpack. I'm decently small enough that if I carry extra, it doesn't affect Shyla," she adds.

Larson also settled on a Phillips Form Fitter packsaddle for Takoda because it's adjustable.

"You can adjust the angle of the saddle bars," she explains. "It is nice on a long ride because his shape will change. He starts a ride decently chubby then leans out, so it is nice to be able to take out pliers and a Phillips head screwdriver and narrow the tree to refit it to him, which keeps him more comfortable."

Another big change in planning was how Larson looked at the high country and snow. Snow was her biggest roadblock in 2014, so for the 2016 effort she studied satellite images of snowpack to make a guess at when to hit high passes. It is a skill she later relied on for her 2017 ride on the 486-mile Colorado Trail, and again in 2018 when she completed the 3,100-mile Continental Divide Trail.

Larson says she believes that dreamers like herself who admit to not knowing everything about what they are doing make the best students. And often, a successful trip comes from naiveté.

"I think we are a pretty good model of what you can do without a lot of money

or experience. I set up my tent in my backyard and high-lined between two oak trees in my yard. That was my trail prep," she says. "You're always going to be somewhat unprepared for your first ride like this; no one can be fully prepared for what happens on the trail."

"If anything, accepting your own weaknesses allows you to deal with whatever comes your way down the line. The ones that try really hard to pay

attention, adjust with the trail to focus on themselves and their horses, they make it. Don't be afraid to say you don't know everything about what you're doing."

Larson uses her experience to help others. With her first ride, she set up an online blog, the "Pacific Crest Quest," where she documented her trip for other riders to use as a resource. She wanted to fill a gap in her own trail education—hikers had resources, so why not riders?

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"On my first trip, I wondered if I was the only one struggling with saddle fit, snow in June or keeping weight on my horses," Larson says. "I felt that every single person trying to ride a trail like PCT was reinventing the wheel. I have more of a social media following and it's seeming like I can cultivate that into helping people feel more comfortable in the backcountry with their own horses."

THE NEXT TRAIL

Larson is once again hunting another trail to trek. The top three thru-hiking trails—Pacific Crest, Continental Divide and the Appalachian trails—are a "triple crown" for hikers, but the Appalachian doesn't allow horses. So, Larson must find a different jewel to add to her crown.

Larson has taken a break from her studies since finishing the Continental Divide Trail in 2018. Winter months find

her working "odd jobs," such as exercising horses or leading tourists on trail rides in Malibu, California, while saving up for her next ride. She also has been organizing wilderness horsemanship clinics.

"I don't have a bucket list and never have. Doing the Continental Divide wasn't a goal until 12 months ago," she says. "I like going when it feels right. Having an older horse [Shyla], I don't want to commit to something in my head if it's not right for her. I am going to Utah in the spring to teach a few wilderness horse clinics. I'd like to see what I could piece together there."

Regardless of where she rides, Larson will have her mother's support, and Johnson doesn't take that role lightly.

"There are enough obstacles to anyone's dream, but don't be the voice in the back of their head saying they can't do it," Johnson says. "Say, 'I believe in you, love and support you.' It is the attempt, desire and dream that are important. It's been so powerful for me to feel I'm a part of her dream. I feel so privileged to share this; what she has done is pretty remarkable."

In future, Larson would like to bring her mother along.

"My mom is close to retirement and I'm biding my time until she could come on a 'highlight reel' [trip] of my favorite places on the PCT and over in Montana. She's done the dirty work and doesn't always see the backcountry."

Thru-riding backcountry trails horseback is something Larson wants to encourage others to take steps toward achieving, whether it be taking time off to ride a long trail or doing weekend rides.

"There were multiple times where my brain absolutely wanted to quit on the 2014 ride," Larson says. "I was questioning if this was really what I wanted to do. There are so many things out of your control that might make you quit—like weather—so I knew I couldn't be my own enemy. I didn't need my own mental block to be a reason to quit. I stuck with it and so can everyone that wants something bad enough to try it."

To follow Larson's adventures, find her on Instagram @thru_rider or view her blog at pacificcrestquest.org.

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