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Interview: Michael Muir "You Can Still Get to the Top of the Mountain"

When it comes to the outdoors, there's no stopping a Muir.

By **Reed McManus**

Don't get between a dedicated horseman and his passion for riding. For Michael Muir, great-grandson of the Sierra Club's founder, even multiple sclerosis couldn't drive him away.

A rancher and horse breeder with the requisite weathered face and drooping mustache, Muir grew up in Dixon, California, a small farming town 40 miles from the old family house in Martinez, which is now designated the John Muir National Historic Site. When Muir's MS made it too difficult for him to balance on a horse 13 years ago, he took up driving--carriages, that is. Since then, he has ridden far and wide, including a cross-country journey and a horse-drawn reenactment of his great-grandfather's 1,000-mile walk from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico.

The outdoorsman recently teamed up with the Muir Heritage Land Trust, an organization devoted to preserving open space in sprawling Contra Costa County, east of San Francisco. The group, along with another land trust in adjacent Solano County, offers beautiful, city-accessible locations where Muir and his team of volunteers can host horse-and-buggy rides for the disabled, introducing (or reintroducing) them to a wild world they had assumed was beyond their reach.

Sierra joined Muir for a carriage ride high atop an oak-studded ridge on the Muir Trust's 158-acre Dutra Ranch, where we watched red-tailed hawks and passing storm clouds above and suburbs lapping at the base of the tawny hills below. But perched on an Amish-built carriage meandering beneath spreading trees, you'd swear you had left the 21st century far behind.

Sierra: What prompted your first long-distance carriage trip?

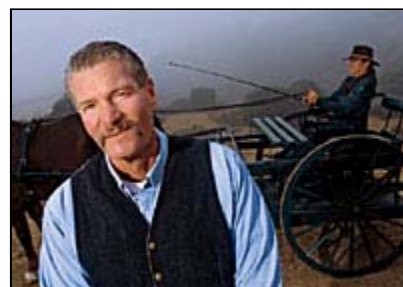
Michael Muir: I started thinking about my great-great-grandmother, John Muir's mother-in-law, who came from Honey Grove, Texas, to Mission San Diego in 1849. I dug up her diary, read it, and said, "I can do this." I planned the trip backwards, from the mission to Honey Grove, and then to keep going the way my family came--through Kentucky, Tennessee, and on to Virginia. I decided to end in Washington, D.C., and try to meet senators and the president and raise bazillions of dollars for disabled carriage-driving. I spent ten months in 2001 with a crew of disabled people from all over the world doing that trip. And I decided to try to keep this horse-journey thing going. I went across northern Europe the next year, and in 2003 my friend Cindy and I reenacted John Muir's walk to the Gulf.

Sierra: With just the two of you, that must have been difficult.

Muir: It was a huge undertaking. The whole trip took something like 87 days. But nothing stops Cindy. She's 63 years old and totally independent. She's got hand controls in her car, she skates, and she drives horses. Even after she became paraplegic, she was a foxhunter riding in an adaptive saddle.

We were on top of a mountain in Georgia, and there was this wild storm in the night. I slept in the carriage with a tarp over it. I was huddled in there with two dogs, and when I woke up in the morning, there was a river running through the campsite six inches deep. Cindy's tent was almost floating. I unzipped it and asked, "Are you having fun yet?" And she said, "I've never had more fun in my life!" Coming down off the mountain, the horse was belly-deep fording the river. It was great.

Sierra: How did others react to you?



To make the outdoors accessible to all, Michael Muir has teamed up with land trusts and volunteers like carriage driver Susan Hassett.

Muir: People got such a kick out of the carriage. And then they'd blink when they saw that we were driving from a wheelchair. They couldn't do enough for us. Part of the adventure is not knowing where you're going to sleep. And that's really following in the steps of John Muir: He always just headed out, jumped over the back fence with raisins in his pocket and some stale bread. He never knew where he was going to lay his head.

Sierra: But now you're staying local.

Muir: We've gone 7,000 miles in seven countries, and it's led to this project, getting the disabled into nature closer to home. I want the energy that we developed to spread to as many people as possible, to give them a little hint of what we get to enjoy. Hook a five-wheelchair trolley to a team, and I can take people to the top of this hill, where they'll have 360-degree views of the Bay Area. It's sensational.

Sierra: How has access improved under the Americans With Disabilities Act?

Muir: People realize that they have a responsibility to make things accessible. It's a fair thing to ask. And there's a lot going on. We were planning a wagon train up in the extreme northeast corner of California, over Fandango Pass in the Warner Mountains. We pulled into a really remote campsite and thought, "This is one place where we could circle the wagons." It turns out they already had a restroom that's wheelchair-accessible. That was nice to see.

There are just a few little things that make it easier for us. Where there's a cattle guard or gate, can a wheelchair get through it? If people think about this when they build, we don't have to retrofit.

Sierra: Who signs up for your trips?

Muir: We're really a diverse bunch. This week, we had a dozen blind people and 15 people from an assisted-living center who were mostly elderly. We use bigger carriages that carry six at a time and drive them with a pair of horses.

Anybody who has mobility issues is welcome to come. These people get used to staying indoors. They get in a routine and don't think in terms of going out on a hike. But people love to be outside and experience nature--especially when that's been taken away from them. Imagine what it's like when you're wheelchair-bound and the boundaries of your life are defined by a chair.

We show people with disabilities what's possible. We like to go to rehabilitation hospitals and meet those who are either newly diagnosed with some kind of devastating illness or adjusting to a catastrophic accident that has left them paraplegic or quadriplegic. We bring people with us who have been through the same situation and who are now active drivers. We show them what they can do, and we take them out and say, "OK, life is going to be different. You're going to have to do things differently, but your life is not over. You can still get to the top of the mountain--you just have to do it another way." We're trying to bridge the gaps to make it possible.

Sierra: You sound like a missionary.

Muir: Yeah, and my great-grandfather was a missionary for wilderness. He wanted people to see it and enjoy it, and he knew how good it was for them to have the opportunity to shed civilization and be out in nature. That's especially important for people who are housebound or wheelchair-bound.

At least I have somebody to blame it on. Having John Muir for a great-grandfather has helped. When I've gone off the beaten path, I know he's been there before.

Reed McManus is a senior editor at Sierra.

ON THE WEB

For more, go to muirheritagelandtrust.org and solanolandtrust.org.

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[Up to Top](#)