

THE SWARM

If only Alfred Hitchcock had been a touring cyclist

by Willie Weir

It was the quintessentially perfect ending destination for a touring cyclist — a crystal-clear mountain lake. Timpanogas Lake to be more specific, elevation 5,300 feet. Located off the summit of an unpaved road in the Willamette National Forest in Oregon. Blue skies, warm sun, and no wind. Not a ripple on the lake. And to top it off, my buddy Thomas and I had it all to ourselves. Dozens of campsites available but not a single camper. It was perfect.

Possibly too perfect. Like the beginning of a horror film, which always open with some impossibly happy family or scene with a lilting soundtrack. You know it's going to quickly go sour.

I swatted at a mosquito on my hand. Then one buzzed my ear. You can count on having mosquitoes at a mountain lake, but this was late afternoon and we were in the bright sun.

"We can't camp here," I said. "If there are lots of mosquitoes out now, imagine what it will be like at dusk."

Thomas agreed, and as much as we hated to leave the idyllic location, we pedaled back up the road to higher ground. But first we filtered a five-liter bag of water.

We found a flat spot under some trees at the crest of a hill. The site was bumpy and uncomfortable, but there was a breeze.

We got down to the business of setting up camp. The panniers came off the bikes. The ground tarp was laid out on the flattest patch of bumpy ground. I worked on setting up the tent. Thomas got out the stove to cook dinner.

The site was far from mosquito free — the forest calm intermittently interrupted by our slaps, swats, and cursing

I crossed over to pick up the rain fly and accidentally kicked over our water bag, which wasn't tightly closed. All five liters spilled out and disappeared under a blanket of pine needles. And as

Murphy's Law would have it, all of our water bottles were empty.

Damn. I grabbed the bag and headed back toward the lake. It wasn't far to the water's edge. A half mile at most.

It was still a half an hour before sunset, but the thick stand of Douglas-firs had already cast deep shadows.

I walked briskly. There appeared to be no mosquitoes at all — until I glanced behind me and an errant shaft of orange/yellow light illuminated a

cloud of what had to be two hundred mosquitoes trailing me. It looked like one of those dark clouds of cartoon bees chasing Yogi Bear and Boo Boo.

I laughed — but it was a nervous laugh.

Kneeling down by the water's edge, I

tossed the hose of the water filter out like a fishing bobber and began to pump. I

looked down. 20 mosquitoes had lit on my hands alone. I swatted again and again.

I gave up pumping. This was crazy. I'd be a mass of bites before I pumped enough water.

I recalled seeing one of those big campsite water pumps. I jogged down the path.

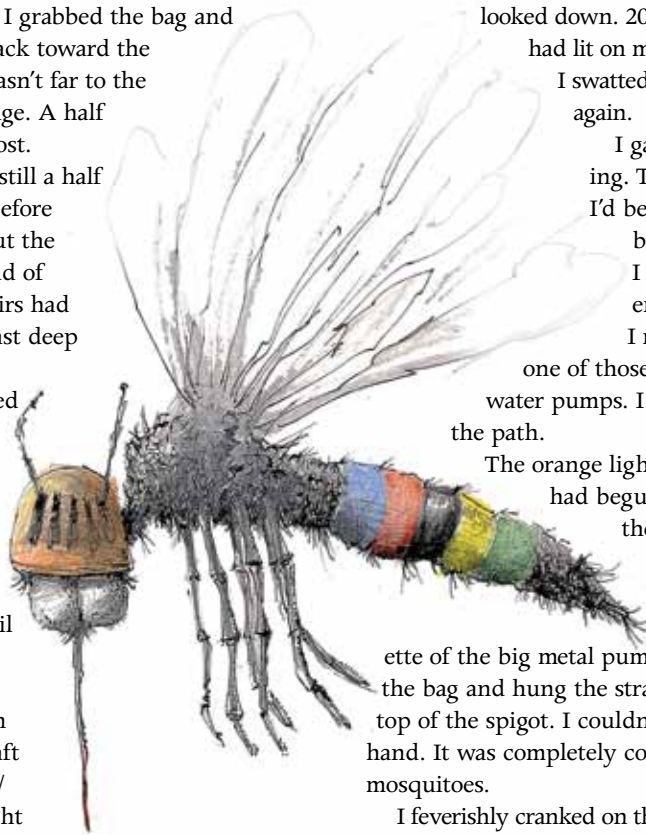
The orange light of sunset had begun to turn to the cold blue of dusk.

I saw the silhouette

of the big metal pump. I opened the bag and hung the strap across the top of the spigot. I couldn't see my hand. It was completely covered with mosquitoes.

I feverishly cranked on the handle. Water came gushing out and filled the bag in seconds. Mission accomplished, and I knelt down to close and secure the seal.

It was only then that I heard the sound. It had been masked by the sound of my boots crunching through gravel, the swooshing of my jacket, the loud squeaks of the pump.



But now ... now I heard a loud hum that felt as if the earth itself was screaming. A horde, no, a hurricane of mosquitoes.

I'm not squeamish. I don't freak out at spiders or scurrying cockroaches. I remember watching Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* when I was a kid. It was laughable. Why would anyone be afraid of birds? Even as Tippi Hedren ran down the streets of Bodega Bay in terror, with gulls (or were they crows?) bombarding her, I remember thinking, "Really? This is a scary film? Give me a break!"

But now I was about to live my own Hitchcockian horror film.

The mosquitoes descended on me in a frenzied cloud of hungry, buzzing fury. They went for my eyes. My nostrils. A thick stream flew into my ears like swallows into a chimney.

I ran. Not with an efficient gate, but an arm-flailing, body-twitching completely panicked freak-out run that would make Alfred Hitchcock break into a wide grin.

But only 50 yards into my run, I sucked in a mosquito. I coughed and instinctively gasped for air — and two more entered my windpipe.

Gagging, I doubled over and dropped to my knees. I violently coughed and spat out two of the carcasses and wiped the other off my tongue with the back of my hand. I screamed. My arms waved above my head. From a distance, someone might have thought I was on fire.

That inner voice that speaks to you in these situations yelled,

"Willie!! If you don't calm down they are going to find your body next to this quiet little mountain lake and your friends and relatives are going to have to explain that you died from mosquito-induced asphyxiation."

I put my forehead on the ground, covered my head with my jacket and began to slow my breathing.

The whine of the mosquitoes was maddening. Horrifying.

"Remember. Mosquitoes are smaller than seagulls or crows. It's only a 10 minute walk up that hill. They can't possibly suck you dry. Now get up and walk, don't run."

I followed the advice of that inner voice and slowly got to my feet. I walked with a determined, yet controlled pace while I spit and blew off dive-bombing

mosquitoes.

The sound was crazy. It was as if my head were a hive of bees.

Walk. Blow. Spit. Repeat.

When I walked into camp, the swarm had lessened, but I had still brought 500 mosquitoes with me.

I secured the water bag and Thomas and I jogged out to the middle of the road where we spent the next 20 minutes killing mosquitoes on each other. Five and 10 at a swat.

We ate dinner in the relative safety of our tent. The low whining drone of millions of mosquitoes below us at the lake provided the music for our meal.

The morning brought sun, birdcalls, and that peaceful feeling one has in the forest.

We packed up our tent and our panniers and began our descent out of the mountains. I looked back at the turn off for the lake.

It was so calm and serene. Just like that final shot of so many a horror film. **AC**

Willie Weir is the author of Travels with Willie and Spokesongs, and is a well-known commentator on KUOW in Seattle, Washington.



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