

Wind River Range

– Dan Styer

When I turned sixty years old, I set a goal for myself: I had been backpacking, with great pleasure and great satisfaction, at least once each year since I had turned fourteen, but in these eighty backpack trips I had visited only fourteen states of the United States. I resolved to expand the range of my experience by backpacking at least once in each of the fifty states.

For some states, it was easy to select a place to backpack – I had long wanted to visit Isle Royale in Michigan, and had no great desire for wilderness travel elsewhere in that state. For other states it was hard – Rhode Island and Delaware don't have many wild places to visit. But some states presented the opposite problem: Where should I travel in Wyoming? Yellowstone, the Tetons, the Bighorns, Absaroka-Beartooth, Wind River Range, Salt River Range, the Red Desert, Thunder Basin, Medicine Bow ... the possibilities seemed endless. I decided only when I read the 2012 essay "Ode to My Mentors" by Terry Tempest Williams. She described "a seven-day backpacking trip in the Wind River Range. ... High in the Titcomb Basin, Wyoming's highest peak was in view: Gannett. We watched a coyote run up the snow field very near to its summit, stop, sit, and look out at the view. In that moment, any boundaries I felt as a human being toward other creatures dissolved." I invited my brother Bill to accompany me and we set dates. While recording them in my Sierra Club engagement calendar, I found that the photograph opposite our departure date was of Titcomb Basin.

Day 1: 11 August 2022

It is raining when Bill and I start out from the Elkhart Park trailhead. Even before leaving the trailhead, I realize that this will be a different sort of wilderness experience for me: In 2014 I walked for eight days in Nevada's Jarbidge Wilderness, passing flower-strewn meadows, hundreds of elk, and zero people. While I exalted in the solitude, I also felt sorry for all those people who were missing all that beauty. There are more than 200 vehicles at the Elkhart Park trailhead, with license plates from across North America, so I know I'll have no repeat of my Jarbidge sorrow. We chat with a couple and with a group of ten men, pull on our packs and our rain gear, then step into the wilderness.

There are conifer trees, rocky cliffs, meadows spangled with wildflowers. At places we see massive tree blowdowns, but the trail is neatly cleared. (Thank you, Forest Service trail crew!) Soon the rain stops. There are many people – couples, families, horse packers, solitary hikers, two women wearing skirts – and many dogs. The packs say a great deal about the hikers – some hold fishing poles, some hold climbing helmets, some hold elaborate cameras attached to their shoulder straps. We stop for an early lunch at the aptly named "Photographers Point". The view is outstanding, but so is the parade of human visitors. Most memorable is a family with two young girls and with two llamas.



According to my notes “This is the most classically beautiful alpine wilderness I’ve ever walked: distant peaks, waterfalls, lakes, flowering meadows, rocks, conifer forests.” At every stream crossing we look for the bird American Dipper (Water Ouzel), denizen of high-altitude rushing streams, “the only songbird that regularly swims”.

About 1:00 pm we find a carpet of six-inch-high Broom Huckleberry shrubs, with delicious ripe red berries. We walk a few yards off the trail, sample the berries, and nap.



Encounter a family with a young woman who says that Titcomb Basin is so extraordinary that it seems to be not a part of this Earth. Make camp between Hobbs Lake and Seneca Lake.

Wildflowers first seen today: Chiming Bells, Mountain Harebell, Yellow Stonecrop, Willowherb, Broom Huckleberry, Fireweed.

Day 2: 12 August 2022

It rains during the night, but in our tent we stay safe and dry. Early in our day's walk, we pass a grizzled old packer on a horse, leading a single mule, who tells us that in two miles the scenery becomes spectacular. This amuses us, who feel that the scenery has been spectacular from the start.

Seneca Lake is indeed spectacular, with fir-tree-dotted granite cliffs plunging directly into bright blue waters. Pica call from the talus slopes. A couple rests on the trailside and, as we walk by, I happen to identify a few wildflowers for Bill. Noting my interest, they ask whether I know the name of a plant with a foot-tall stalk and a spray of magenta flowers at its peak, "like Bee Balm", which they had seen the previous day high in Indian Basin. I pull out my *Alpine Flower Finder* by Janet Wingate and show several possibilities, but none are exact matches.

A young woman walking with an Australian Shepherd tells us that she's not normally emotional, but that Titcomb Basin's beauty made her cry. We encounter more Asians and more Hispanics than we had on our first day. Also a string of ten older people – even older than us at 68 and 67 years – each of which leads a llama down a steep slope.

We continue to the even-more-spectacular Island Lake, situated above treeline. There we eat lunch and bathe. I stand knee-deep in the frigid water and splash my upper body, but Bill is brave enough for full immersion.

Titcomb Basin opens up beyond Island Lake. We pass a snowbank and scoop up refreshing granular snow. There are sweeping rock walls, waterfalls, flowery meadows, and turquoise lakes cloudy with glacial flour. At a small level place between the third and fourth Titcomb Lakes, we set up our home.



Just south of camp stands a little dome with a single rock perched on its summit. After dinner we stroll up near it and look south to the third Titcomb Lake. In the lake is a waterfowl – perhaps a Loon – with five chicks. Talus swooping down from dome to lake hosts Pika and a Marmot. Just before we sleep, clouds wrap the peaks at the Basin’s head. I don’t cry, and I don’t think this landscape otherworldly, but I do silently thank the people who protected this special beauty and those (including Terry Tempest Williams) who led me to it.

Wildflowers first seen today: Cow Parsnip, Golden Aster, Shrubby Potentilla, Alpine Avens, Wild Onion, Colorado Blue Columbine, Little Pink Elephant, Alpine Sorrel, Red Monkeyflower, Shooting Star, Parry’s Primrose.

Day 3: 13 August 2022

Today we will not move camp. Instead we will walk up into Indian Basin, perhaps all the way to the continental divide, then return to the camp we’ve already established in Titcomb Basin.

Before we leave Titcomb Basin, the still air of morning makes for great reflections.



Indian Basin is a wild symphony of water and snow and stone, butterflies and birds and wildflowers. This photo shows the highest point we reached, about 11,400 feet; we didn't make it all the way to the continental divide. You can't see it in the photo, but there's a hummingbird a few feet to the left of Bill's face.



We look for the flower described by the couple at Seneca Lake. I suspect it was Parry's Primrose.



In Indian Basin we meet about ten people: crowded by Jarbidge standards, but much fewer than we saw earlier on this trip; the popularity cutoff seems to come at about Island Lake.

During our walk back to camp it briefly rains and hails; the rice-sized hailstones strike the ground and then bounce up a foot into the air, making the ground seem alive. By the time we go to sleep, we're only slightly cold and damp.

Wildflowers first seen today: Pink Mountain Heath, Old-Man-of-the-Mountain, Leafy Aster, Rosecrown, American Bistort, Marsh Marigold, *Parrya nudicaulis*.

Day 4: 14 August 2022

Rain during the night. Then a stunning sunrise.



While packing up after breakfast, I glance at the dome. I'm startled: instead of one rock at the summit, there are two. Then I'm even more startled: one rock moves around. It's the marmot. We had been watching it, and now it is watching us.



We cross the Indian Basin outlet stream and, as usual, look for the American Dipper. We find instead the tail-pumping American Pipit. Later, while crossing a stream that enters Island Lake, I see a Weasel. It's so fast that it's gone by the time I can tell Bill.

Again we lunch and swim at Island Lake, and this time see a fish jump from the water.

Clouds gather, thunder rolls, and at Little Seneca Lake the sky opens with cold rain and hail. Remarkably, a Hummingbird flits about in the maelstrom. We head up Lost Lake Trail in search of a flat place to camp, set up quickly, and spend a cold afternoon huddled in the tent telling each other stories.

Wildflowers first seen today: Milkvetch, Tall False Dandelion.

Day 5: 15 August 2022

The cold night is followed by a bright morning. We spread out our damp clothes and equipment to dry on sunny flat rocks.



While our stuff dries, we walk the steep trail down to Lost Lake. Here is a small unnamed lake on the way to Lost Lake. Are you tired, yet, of seeing stunning photographs? We never grew tired of the sights.



Lost Lake Trail is narrower, less well-used, less well-maintained (four blowdowns) than the trails we had been following. It is more intimate, more natural. We love it. At the lake itself Bill identifies an American Dipper in flight through its white rump patch.



We return to our campsite, pack up our now-dry equipment, and walk. We meet a couple, perhaps from England, taking a side trip for resupply from their thru-hike of the Continental Divide Trail from Canada to Mexico. We are impressed, but when I tell them that Bill thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine in 1974, they are impressed.

Red-naped Sapsucker. A bolete (like a mushroom but with sponge-like pores rather than gills) a foot across.

At Barbara Lake we encounter a group of about fifteen from Annoor (“the light”) Academy, an Islamic school located in Knoxville, Tennessee. Two of these are African-American, the first we’ve seen on this trip. The women all wear hijab.

We set up camp at Eklund Lake. When I pull stuff out of my pack, I realize that I’ve left a pair of socks behind at the sunny flat rocks where we dried our equipment this morning.

Wildflower first seen today: Arnica.

Day 6: 16 August 2022

The missing socks actually resolve a dilemma for us: For our trip we had blocked off one more day than we really needed. What should we do with the extra day? The answer is now clear: We will walk back to our campsite on Lost Lake Trail and retrieve the two socks. It will be fun to do this now-familiar walk with minimal pack load.

In the early morning we pass chattering Red Squirrels. Near Hobbs Lake we hear rumors of a Black Bear, but we never see it. I find my socks exactly where I had left them hanging on a tree above the sunny flat rocks.

On the shore of the spectacular Seneca Lake we eat lunch, bathe, and watch an Osprey. There's an infant riding in a carrier on its mother's back. We encounter a young Native American woman from New York City just as she and her boyfriend catch their first glimpse of Seneca Lake. The wonder shining in their faces is beyond valuation.

To balance the grizzled old horse packer, leading a single mule, that we saw on day 2, we encounter a young cowgirl horse packer, leading a single mule, with flowing locks emerging from her cowboy hat. When her mule balks, Bill gives it a poke with his hiking pole.

There are more Pika, a Shrew, a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, brief rain and hail. We get back to camp, eat dinner, then stroll up to Two Top Lakes as an evening jaunt.

Wildflower first seen today: Water Crowfoot.

Last Day, Day 7: 17 August 2022

We walk back on the same path we used to walk in. Two moose (no antlers). Lupine. From a meadow, view two distant crows who fly so close they appear to be one, then separate, then fly close again.

Many people, including a group of three Forest Service folk (two wilderness rangers and a trail crew worker), whom we thank personally. Eat lunch, then, just as we arrive at the trailhead, meet and thank one more trail crew worker.

It has been a memorable trip. We have met an impressive range of people – various ethnicities, ages, modes of transport, experience levels. Some were plainly tired, but no one was complaining. This is a much-visited and much-loved wilderness. But also impressive are the range of scenery – sweeping vistas, intimate wildflower nooks, rushing waterfalls, still lakes, snowbanks, cloudbanks – and the range of life – trees, fungi, birds, wildflowers, insects, mammals from Shrew to Moose. My single sentence summary: “Walking through a symphony of rock, water, cloud, snow, and life.”

On the way home, I take the 8:00 am flight from Jackson Hole to Atlanta, with a window seat on the right. Soon after takeoff, I have a clear view of our entire backpack route. The floor of Titcomb Basin is shaded by its eastern enclosing mountain wall, except that the dome between third and fourth Titcomb Lake peeks up into the sunshine. I wonder if the marmot is peering out from his dome.