

Yellowstone Lake – October, 2020

I began my canoe trip at Grant Village in Yellowstone National Park on 7 October, 2020. The weather was perfect on that morning. I had a window of about four days before a large frontal system was predicted to hit the Park with heavy snow, wind and low temperatures. It was a gamble.

I was hoping this trip into the the Yellowstone backcountry would be a diversion from the insanity that raged in the United States in the weeks prior to the presidential election. My destination was Park Service campsite 7L1 in Breeze Bay on Yellowstone Lake.

The start was not smooth. After a two day drive from my home in Oregon, I spent the night in Idaho Falls. I woke up at 5AM and drove directly to the south gate of Yellowstone Park. I was at the Grant Village ranger station for the mandatory gear inspection by 8AM. The inspection was mundane, but I was missing an important document. I had not been able to buy a Park Service fishing permit beforehand and I was hoping the rangers at Grant Village would solve that for me. The polite rangers had no idea how, or where, I could get a National Park fishing license so late in the season. I predicted this would be a problem and had made three stops on my way across southern Idaho at outlets that were listed as "vendors" for the Park Service. No-one had the required National Park license that would allow me to fish in the Park. The officials at Grant Village suggested I make the 30 mile drive to the Fishing Bridge ranger station on the northern shore of the lake to buy a license. I asked the Grant Village ranger to call ahead to see if a license was available there, but the call went unanswered. My only option was to make the drive to Fishing Bridge and bet on finding a license there. Nearly 2 hours later I was back at Grant Village... without a fishing license. I drove past the ranger station on the way to the boat ramp and launched at about 10:30AM.

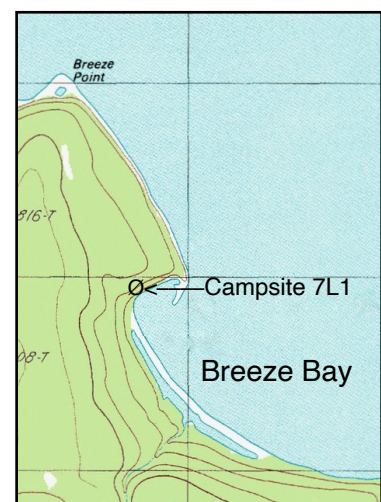
I was hoping to beat the approaching storm and get 3 nights and four days in the backcountry at site No. 7L1. The weather looked good with very little wind, a few diffuse clouds and a slight haze of smoke from somewhere far to the north.

I use a rowing frame instead of paddling like Hiawatha. The use of two oars can push a loaded canoe through the water at more than twice the speed of a single paddle and it's easier on the shoulders. It was still four hours to my first camp.

The sand on the beaches of Yellowstone Lake is comprised of finely ground volcanic scree. That is also the sound it make when you walk on it.... “scree, scree, scree”. On the banks of the small bays on the lake’s western shore, tall berms have developed from scree carried by thousands of years of high winds and waves. My camp was on the northwest corner of Breeze Bay, on a narrow beach with just enough room for a small camp. Nighttime temperatures were promised to be in the 20’s, so I brought my small four season tent and a goose down sleeping bag along to combat the cold.

I set up my camp and took a hike to the nearest high ground for a look around. I could see the berm of scree making the western shore of Breeze Bay. I could also see the berm was backed on the west by a long slender, shallow lagoon not visible from my camp. It’s origin was a puzzle.

Yellowstone Lake sits at 7,733 feet above sea level. At this altitude, I would expect a lagoon of limited depth to evaporate quickly. The ground on the back of the berm had to be at or below the water level of the lake, allowing seepage to keep the lagoon filled during the summer season. The lagoon looked like a mosquito farm to me, but I did not have to deal with a single one of the infamous insects.



I ate my evening meal and headed for my sleeping bag at last light. I was tired and in the tent by 8PM. I fell asleep easily in the dead quiet of the Yellowstone backcountry.

Several hours later I was shocked awake by the “bugle” of a bull elk. October is rutting season for rocky mountain elk.

The Oxford Dictionary defines a “rut” as “an annual period of sexual activity in deer, elk and some other mammals during which males fight each other for access to females.” I can now honestly testify that the Oxford definition is quite accurate.



Bugling Rocky Mountain Elk Bull

A bull elk of the species *Cervus canadensis* is a very large animal. Full grown males can top 1,000 pounds with an antler spread of 74 inches. The large rack of antlers is used to “spar” or “joust” with other males during the rut. A dominant male may have intentions for a beautiful lady, but can find his designs challenged by some hot headed upstart.

In the winter of 1979, I witnessed this sparring in the Park's Firehole River drainage near Old Faithful and it is quite a gentlemanly struggle. Elk do not crash together in raging charges like bighorn sheep. After failed attempts to banish the interloper, the male with the prize in his eyes may accept the challenge or concede and step aside.

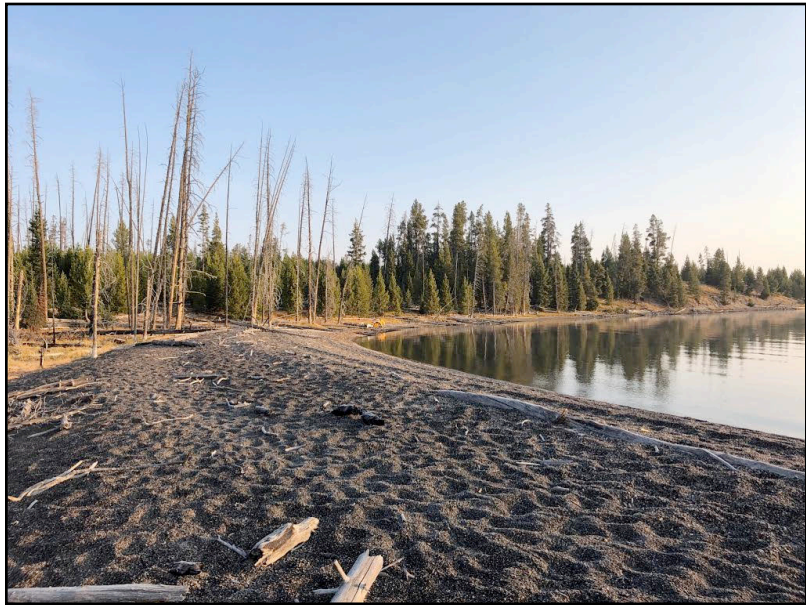


Jousting Elk, at Old Faithful, winter 1979. A younger male observes and gets educated.

If the duel proceeds, the two bulls approach each other politely. The antlers are then locked together and upon some undetectable signal, the muscles of each bull tense as they try to best the other with sheer strength. The duel is more like an arm wrestling match in a bar than a slug fest in a prize fighting ring. The muscles of the neck are used to torque the head of the other animal. The stronger animal may even

push his opponent backwards. The sounds of the locked horns is enormous. The winner must demonstrate superior strength. When the loser senses the winner has the “right stuff”, he will abandon the

argument. The loser is then vigorously, strenuously and explosively chased from the scene.



Scree berm covered with elk prints. My yellow tent is at the center of the photo.

After a few minutes, as I nervously sat in my tent, the first bugling bull was answered. Then another and another. I began to hear foot steps near my tent and the entire scene became populated with elk. The females (cows) were walking through my camp and males (bulls) were bugling as close as 30 yards away. It was now a raucous party. I could hear the females being chased through the lagoon. I could hear antlers clacking together during sparring. I could hear pursued animals plunging into the lake to escape. Within an hour, it was mayhem. I went from being amazed at my good fortune to be in the middle of it all, to fearing the prospect of 1,000 pound elk using my camp as a battle field.

As the scene became centered farther down the berm, I entertained the idea of getting out of my tent for a look. I thought I might be able to sneak up on these sex crazed elk to get a glimpse of a once-in-a-lifetime wildlife sighting.

That idea was abandoned after I remembered watching a frustrated moose years before. During a fall rut, the young bull was pushing sapling aspen trees over and destroying them with side to side slashes of it's huge rack. My fear of being mistook for a sapling and gored in the backcountry prevailed.

I sat up for hours listening to the chasing, the sparring, the bugling and the frantic escapes. I got very little sleep that night and the next morning I walked along the crest of the berm to examine the scene. The photo above shows the berm of scree and my yellow tent in the center of the picture. It also does a good job of showing the extent of the activity along the entire length of the berm that I witnessed only with my ears.

On the beach in front of my tent, I found evidence of another visitor I had during the night. The bugling elk had attracted the attention of several wolves. The wolves were trailing the elk, looking for an easy meal. I searched for about a mile along the shoreline but found no evidence of a kill. I am glad I never met the animal that left the footprint in the photo.



Foot print made by a large wolf.

Later in the day, I moved my camp farther away from the rut site in case the herd returned on my second night. During the rest of the trip, I only saw a few females and never heard another bugle.

The remaining days were spent watching otters play in the bay, waiting for the next flock of migrating geese to arrive and lounging on the shore with a book to read.

On one of my early morning hikes, I saw a very rare pacific fisher. Its day break hunt had been

successful. It stopped 30 feet from me with a chickaree (pine squirrel) in its mouth and just stared. I may have been the first human it had ever seen and it risked everything to take a look. The fisher is a member of the weasel family (Mustelidae). It measures 24 to 40 inches in length and weighs 12 to 15 pounds. They will den in the ground or in hollow trees. They are active during the day and at night.

The fisher is a formidable hunter and one of the few predators that feeds on porcupines. They attack the porcupine from the front, avoiding its dangerous quills. In some areas of the lower 48 states, the fisher has been accused of wiping out the lynx population.



The second camp at Breeze bay; 7L1



Pacific Fisher

The lynx is a 30 pound cat that would be a formidable opponent for a 15 pound fisher, but officials in Massachusetts claim the fisher has no problem taking them down. When I returned to civilization, I called the Park and reported the fisher sighting. The Park biologists were glad to have the information and planned to close my campsite on Breeze Bay where I found the fisher for at least the immediate future to protect the animal(s) from human interference.

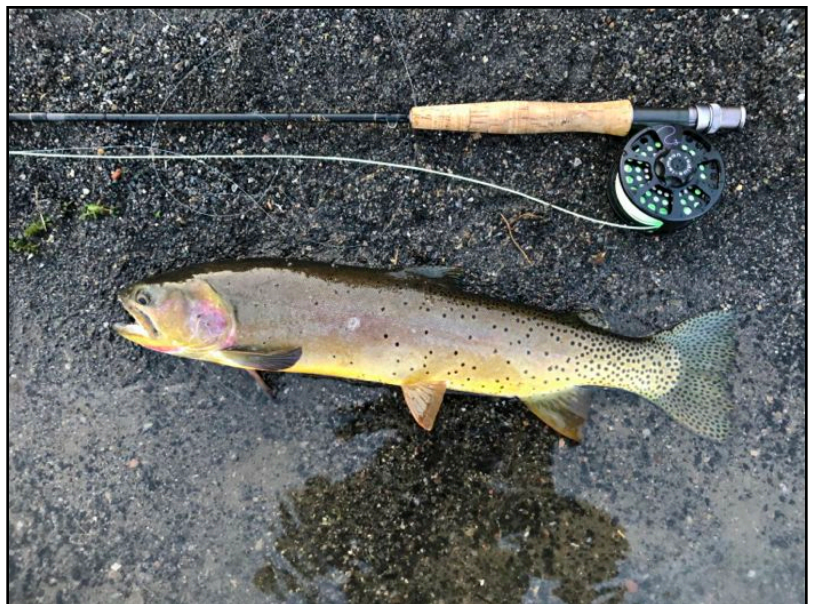


Fisher's Range

The fishing during my four day trip was good. My hand tied flies worked perfectly, just like the first time I used similar patterns there in 1973. I will admit, as far as game fish go, the Yellowstone Cutthroat is not a very sophisticated target. They will readily hit just about any fly to present to them. When our daughter was a pre-schooler, we took her to Yellowstone Park. I cast a hare's ear nymph, attached to a clear bobber with a 6 foot leader, into Yellowstone Lake and let her slowly retrieve the rig.



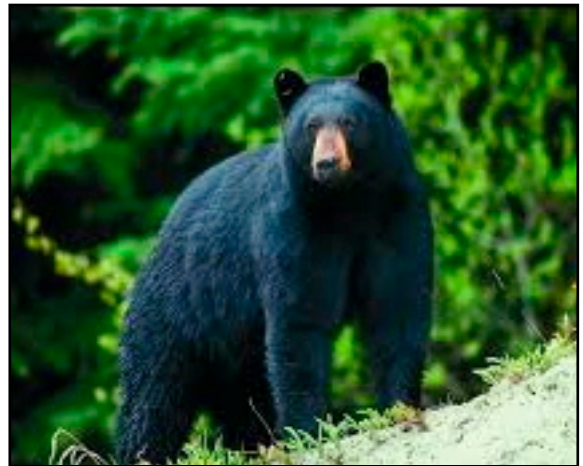
Hare's Ear Nymph



Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout

When a fish approached, it passed the trailing fly and started gumming the plastic bobber with overt curiosity. We were both amazed. The Yellowstone Cutthroat is a unique and beautiful species, found only in the Park and it's surrounding watershed. Every fish I landed on my barbless hooks was released unharmed. Best of all, these handsome trout never knew I was unable to locate a National Park fishing permit before I launched 4 days earlier.

The mountains of the Washakie Wilderness form the eastern border of the Park and on the final morning, the sunrise over those peaks was spectacular. On the last morning of the trip, I found the evidence of another visitor during the night. A single black bear had made a pass through to check me out. Black bears can weigh as much as 450 pounds, about half the size of grizzly bears.



Black Bear

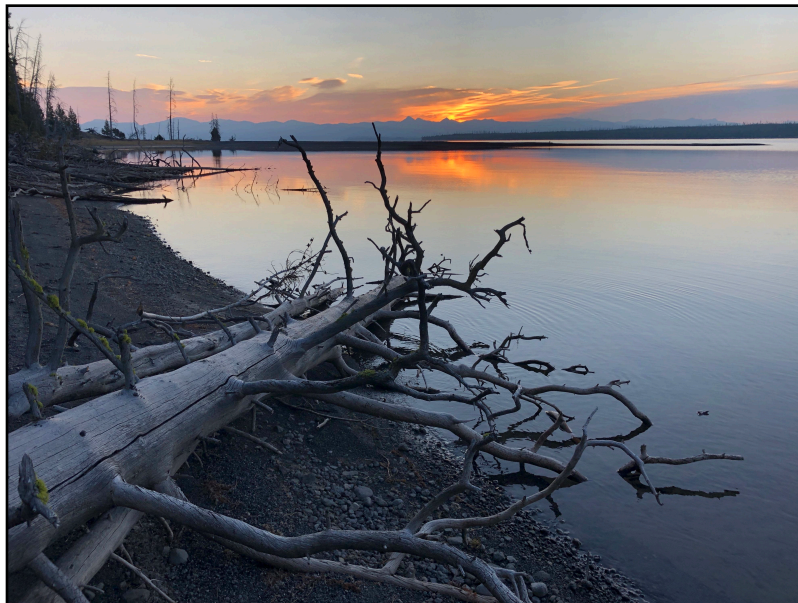
Grizzlies have a distinct hump on their shoulders that is absent in the black bear. Many years ago I confronted a black bear at our home in Oregon and found it to be quick and agile... not the lumbering oaf portrayed in Disney movies. The toes of a grizzly bear fall in a straight line but the print of a black bear shows a pattern that is laid down in an arc. I keep a very clean camp and never heard the intruder. The bear found nothing to eat and moved on quietly.



Black Bear foot print at my camp.

The paddle out was uneventful. I had the car loaded and was headed home by 11AM. I ran into the expected storm on the drive toward Oregon. I was hit with high wind and heavy rain about half way across southern Idaho, near Twin Falls. If I had stayed another night on the Lake, I would have been rowing out in a snow storm.

There aren't many places I have visited that I would say are "magical" but the backcountry surrounding Yellowstone Lake certainly qualifies. Both environmental and political pressures on Yellowstone persist and from time to time it seems the Park's days are numbered. In my nearly 50 years of visiting the Yellowstone backcountry, I have never been disappointed. The place never fails to leave me amazed. I am hoping the generations behind me will understand the need for places like Yellowstone and continue to fight to keep wild places wild. Stay tuned.



Wahakie Wilderness veiled in smoke at dawn.