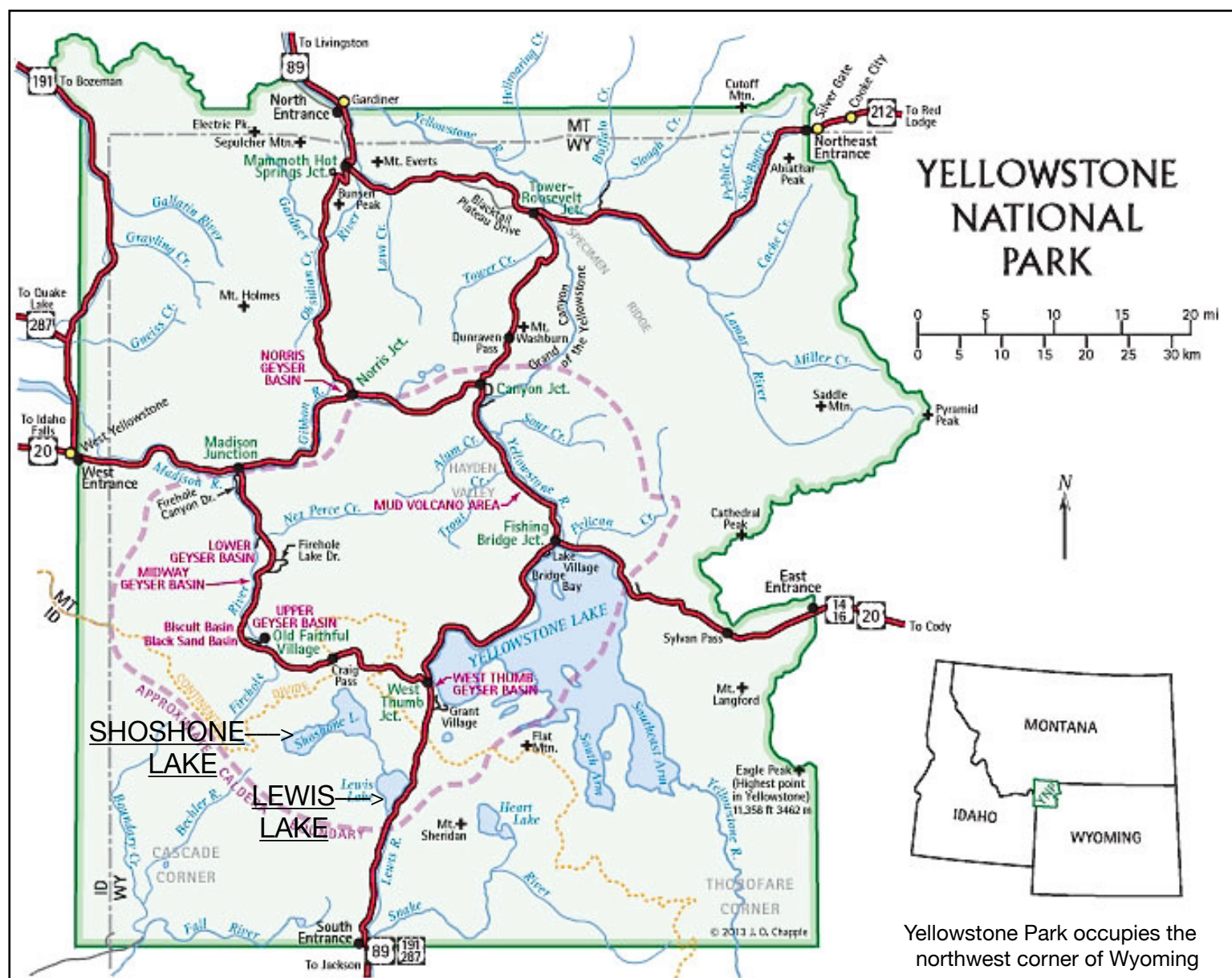


Shoshone Lake and Yellowstone Lake 2021• Part One

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My 2021 trip to Shoshone Lake and Yellowstone Lake began on 9 September, 2021. When I left my home in southern Oregon's Rogue River Valley the weather did not look perfect for my two stage backcountry canoe trip, but I didn't see anything in the forecast that would keep me away. I had spent a year researching the trip into Shoshone Lake and was anxious to get going. Shoshone Lake is the second largest lake in Yellowstone Park and it cannot be accessed by car. You can hike in or you can paddle across Lewis Lake and then drag a canoe up the Lewis River Channel. There is no other way to get there. On the 9th of September I stayed overnight in Ontario, Oregon and then in Idaho Falls, Idaho on the night of 10 September. On Saturday 11 September, I arrived at the Lewis Lake ranger station for my boat inspection and backcountry permit at about 10:00AM. I had reserved campsite 8Q9 on Shoshone Lake for 12, 13 and 14 September, 2021.



Yellowstone Park occupies the northwest corner of Wyoming

Shoshone Lake is the largest lake in the lower 48 states without a road. The nearest boat ramp is at the southern end of neighboring Lewis Lake. The two lakes are located in the southern part of Yellowstone Park, on the Pacific side of the Continental Divide. They are connected by a 3 mile section of the Lewis River which has its source in the geyser basins and springs that surround Shoshone Lake. This 3 mile section of water is called Lewis River Channel. To get my canoe into Shoshone Lake, I would have to paddle 3.5 miles across Lewis Lake, paddle 2 miles up the Lewis River Channel and finally drag my boat across rocky volcanic gravel in shallow water for the last mile. To make the trip I had to buy a composite canoe. My old reliable aluminum boat would be impossible to drag across the gravel in the last mile of the Channel. A composite boat is "slippery" and won't stick to the rocks like aluminum. For this leg of the trip, I had to have a composite boat. I found a used 16 foot Mad River Express for a reasonable price and would probably resell it after going in to Shoshone Lake. I immediately removed the seats and set up the new boat for my rowing frame. I gave up paddling a canoe in open water like Hiawatha and prefer to use a frame with two oars. I can push a heavy boat across a lake at more than 3 miles per hour with less shoulder stress and energy than using a single paddle.

In the 1970's I backpacked into the Shoshone Lake Geyser Basin at the west end of the Lake from the Old Faithful area. This time I wanted to camp close enough to the outlet at the southeast end of the lake to be able to fish for brown trout that I hoped would be spawning in the Lewis River Channel.

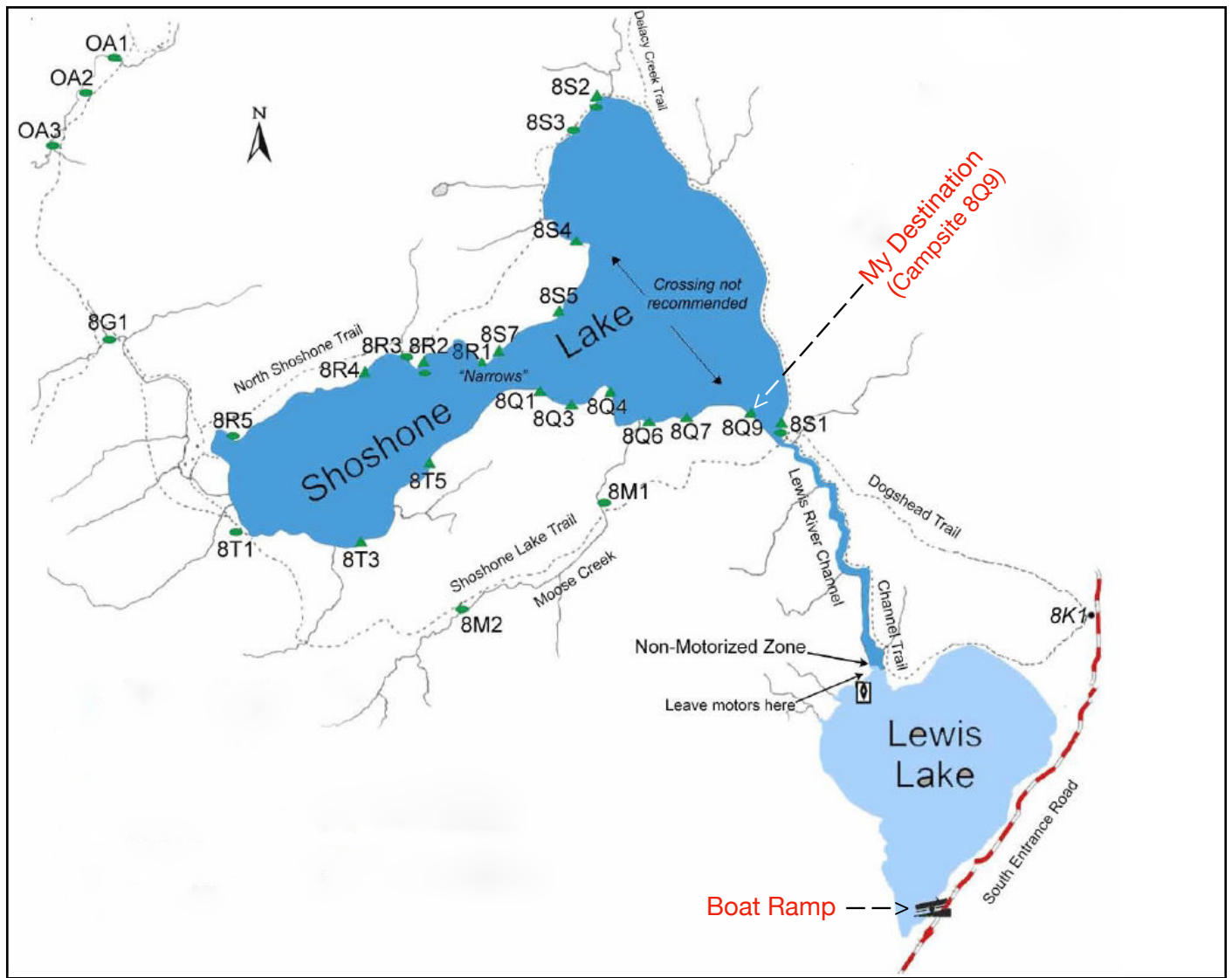
Once my boat inspection was completed at the Lewis Lake ranger station on 11 September, I was ready for my scheduled launch the next day. I drove south to Moran Junction between Teton National Park and Yellowstone National Park. Then I went about 10 miles east on Highway 287 to the Hatched Resort where I spent the night. I was on the road at about 5:30AM on the morning of 12 September, heading for the boat ramp at Lewis Lake.

Yellowstone Park is a plateau. Water runs off this plateau in all directions. The Continental Divide crosses the Park near Lewis Lake which sends its waters toward the Pacific Ocean. At nearby Yellowstone Lake, the water is on the eastern side of the Divide and runs toward the Missouri River and then on to the Gulf of Mexico. The south east portion of the Park is appropriately named, Two Ocean Plateau.



Hatched Resort near Moran Junction

The wind on the Yellowstone Plateau can be enormous. Rolling waves and white caps in open water can reach three feet. Rowing across any of the Park's large lakes in the afternoon is not recommended and highly discouraged by Park officials. I was loaded and away from the boat ramp at the Lewis Lake by 7:30AM on the morning of 12 September.



I was hoping to arrive at my campsite on Shoshone Lake by noon. I was the only boat on Lewis Lake and the water was still. I made good time, arriving at the mouth of the Lewis River Channel in about 90 minutes. About half way across Lewis Lake, a slight wind came up and I could see the clear day would produce the expected gale. Thankfully, the wind diminished as soon as I got off the open water and entered the Channel, but I still had 2 miles to go before reaching the shallows. After another 40 minutes, I skidded my boat onto the gravel in water that was too thin for rowing. I took a rest and had a snack and some water.

The next mile was arduous. The flow in the Lewis River Channel was smaller than normal due to the long term drought that the entire western United States was suffering. In many places, the water never came up to the shoelaces on my wading boots.



Break Time... Lewis River Channel

The sand and gravel gave way to shallow rock gardens that impeded my progress and at one point I thought I would have to portage or go back. The Mad River Express composite boat did its job and slid over the skinny spots, but not without some effort. I passed three different groups on their way out of Shoshone Lake, but I was the only boat I saw going in. I asked each group how far I had left and the final party said, "It's just around the corner!" I had done the six mile trip to the outlet of Shoshone Lake in about 3.5 hours. I still had a mile of paddling to go along the south shore of the lake to reach my designated campsite at 8Q9, but I was pleased with my job so far. I had made the difficult last mile of the Channel slowly and methodically. It worked out just as I had planned. I rowed my boat out onto the Lake and turned it west toward my campsite. I was grinning now because I knew I would make camp before the wind hit.



The outlet at Shoshone Lake
12 September, 2021

Much of the Shoshone Lake shoreline is steep and rocky. The campsite at 8Q9 was perfectly situated at the mouth of a ravine. It was the only flat spot I had seen since I entered the Lake. It had a small beach and a well established camping area. The log in the photo has been stepped on thousands of times by deer, elk, moose and bear that come down the ravine to get a drink of the lake's water. The sand testified to the arrival of these recent visitors and was covered with their footprints. The campsite promised to be comfortable. The bear pole used to hang my food was right there in camp and a sign pointed toward a pit toilet 200 feet away.



The first thing I did was put my fly rod together. I waded out as far as I could from the beach to make a few casts before the wind put an end to my hopes of catching a fish. I did not get a hit for my 2 hours of casting, but didn't care at all. I was pretty tickled with myself for being there and my campsite was beautiful.

The beach at Site 8Q9.
The photo looks east toward the outlet.

I spent the rest of the afternoon setting up my tent and my kitchen. With a canoe, you can go into the backcountry in style. I take a small roll up table, a light chair, a four season tent, a down sleeping bag, an inflatable camp pad, potable water, fishing gear, waders, binoculars, a first aid kit and plenty of food. You could hardly call this “roughing it.” I set up my tent under a cedar tree and spent a couple of hours reading a book on the beach. While trying to read, I could not help but notice the number of noisy pine squirrels that called this campsite home.



Campsite 8Q9 on Shoshone Lake
Yellowstone National Park

The pine squirrel, also known as the Douglas squirrel, the red squirrel and the Chickaree, is found all across North America... from Alaska to Newfoundland. They can also be found as far south as the Rocky Mountains of Arizona in the west and the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee in the east. The pine squirrel is larger than a chipmunk, but smaller than a gray squirrel. I was a bit worried when I saw this healthy population. They're cute, but if they smell food, I am living proof they will chew through a tent, or a gear bag, or a piece of clothing just to get to something as innocuous as a paper towel you used to wipe your mouth. In 2021 at a campsite on Yellowstone Lake's Breeze Bay, I saw a Pacific Fisher with a pine squirrel in its mouth. Consequently, I never saw or heard a single one of the little varmints while camped there. The fishers obviously kept the pine squirrels under control at Breeze Bay. Conversely, what I saw now led me to believe there were no fishers along the south shore of the Shoshone Lake. The pine squirrel population was thriving in their absence. I would have to keep an extra clean camp



Chickaree or Red Squirrel

On the morning of 13 September, I rose to a beautiful day and no wind. There were two mule deer in the tall grasses next to my camp and they were not alarmed by my presence at all. Campsite 8Q9 is very popular and the deer probably thought I was the same person that was there the day before. They were not frightened at all. They browsed on the grass and wandered off at their own speed.

After breakfast I decided to paddle west along the south shore to the mouth of Moose Creek. I wanted to check out the stream and the meadow it drained as possible fishing spots. The trees on the beach, past the mouth of the Moose Creek, harbor campsite 8Q7. It was only about three fourths of a mile from my camp at 8Q9 and there was no-one camped there when I arrived. Some light wind was rocking my boat on the way over. I had a rod with me, but I thought if I explored the creek and the meadow, the wind might inhibit my return to my own camp. I took a quick look, a few pictures and went back to 8Q9. Then I came up with the bright idea to hike overland



Campsite 8Q7 at the mouth of Moose Creek

to Moose Creek Meadow. If I could get there on foot, I would not have to worry about using the choppy water route to get back to my camp. I ate some lunch and struck out through the forest. There was a steep ravine between my camp and Moose Creek which made the overland routes impassable. On the way back, I decided to take a “short cut.” I started down a slope of about 30 degrees, covered with dead fall. I hopped from log to log and then I landed on one that rolled under my foot. As I fell, I instinctively reached above my head with my right arm to grab something to stop my slide. A landscape of deadfall looks like a game of Pick-Up-Sticks, but the pieces are lodge pole pine logs. The logs cover the ground in no preconceived design. These fallen trees often have stubs (or stobs) of their broken limbs jutting at a 90 degree angle from the trunk. The broken stubs often have jagged, sharp ends that can be very dangerous, if not deadly, if you fall on one of them. As I fell and reached back up the hill, my hand was abruptly stopped by the stump of one of these broken branches. If I had not been wearing leather gloves, the stumpy limb would have torn the palm of my hand wide open. Instead, the sharp broken point of the old tree limb punctured my glove and left an inch long V-shaped laceration at the base of my thumb.

Initially I was most concerned with the pain in my right shoulder. The sudden jerk, as my body was stopped in the free fall slide, suggested to me that my shoulder was seriously injured. I felt the pain in my hand, but it was my shoulder that concerned me most. I quickly found a safer path down the slope. When I reached my camp, I became acutely aware of the pain in my right hand. I carefully removed the torn glove to find a significant laceration, bleeding profusely. To compound the situation, I was taking a powerful anticoagulant to slow my clotting process in response to a recent diagnosis of atrial flutter.

I immediately put pressure on the wound, but it took the rest of the afternoon to stop the bleeding. Once I no longer had to put constant pressure on the gash, I used liberal amounts of Neosporin to disinfect the area topically and a compression type bandage to keep it from bleeding further. My doctor sets me up with a mini-pharmacy when I go on these trips and I began taking the antibiotic Kelfex he had given me for just this type of situation. I made my supper with one hand. I worked with the wounded hand on top of my head, above my heart. I decided to cut my trip short

and leave Shoshone Lake the following morning, 14 September. After a cold supper, I sat in the rowing frame of the canoe to see if I could hold the oar with my right hand. I tried several options and finally found that if I strapped my wrist to the oar handle, I could row without having to grip the oar. I also decided that I had made my last cross-country excursion hopping from log to log through the forest. I could see now that the term “dead fall” was an obvious pun. The jumble of fallen logs on a forest floor is called “deadfall” but the term now held a second meaning for me. If you fall on one of these logs with its protruding spikes, you might experience a “dead fall” yourself.

Before getting in my tent for the night, I packed up as much of my gear as possible. I was expecting to need extra time to get to the boat ramp at Lewis Lake, so at 5AM on 14 September I loaded my boat in the dark and started for the outlet of Shoshone Lake. Somewhere along the line I had gotten the idea that on the way out I would be able to float along with the current through the shallow section. Wrong! Of course I had to drag the boat downstream, through the same shallow mile of the Lewis River Channel that I had waded coming upstream, but this time with my throbbing hand over my head. I crossed Lewis Lake and arrived at the boat ramp around 10:30AM, before the wind became prohibitive.



Dead fall on the forest floor can be very dangerous.

When I landed on the beach beside the boat ramp, there was a canoe with a party of two men ready to set off across Lewis Lake for the mouth of the Channel. One of the men sat in the back of the canoe holding onto the dock and the other was just returning from parking their vehicle. He came over to my boat and was impressed with my rowing frame. He said they had seen me coming toward them from far off across the lake and were very interested to know how I was making such good time. We spent several minutes discussing the advantages of using two oars instead of one. I finally told the man, with a long paddle ahead of him, that he should “get going, the wind was already coming up.” He told me they were not worried and went on to say his friend had “done this trip many times.” I casually looked over at their boat and identified three things I thought were foolish.

On a wilderness trip, you never plan for the best. You always plan for the worst and expect it to happen. You don’t “hope” that everything will go just fine and dandy. I have been on a lot of backcountry trips and something always goes wrong. Sometimes it’s a small interruption and sometimes it’s a major problem like the laceration of my hand. The two men putting in at Lewis Lake boat ramp on the morning of 14 September were making, what I thought, were three obvious mistakes.

No.1 They had two men in their canoe. If they flip their boat in the 45 degree water, both of them would surely die. They should have had two boats. If one of the boats gets into trouble, the other one can help. When my older brother asked to go on this trip with me, I told him he would have to bring his own composite boat. I was not going to put the two of us in the same canoe. That would endanger him.... and me. The case of the two Boy Scouts from Ashton, Idaho came to mind. On a Scout Troop backcountry trip to Shoshone Lake, two of the boys flipped their boat in open water. Both perished before the Scout leaders could get them to shore. Getting to shore is no guarantee of survival. Time is precious and starting a fire to warm the freezing victims takes time. It is easy to find accounts of Lewis/Shoshone Lake boaters that capsized and were unable to get to shore before surrendering to hypothermia. With two boats, there is at least the “possibility” of making a successful rescue of the person in the water. With both people in the water, there is no chance at all that either one would survive.



Overloaded canoe
(stock photo)

No.2 They had gear stacked above the gunwales of the canoe, making the boat top-heavy. With a higher center of gravity, the boat will capsize easier. Also, the heavier load makes the gunwales closer to the water. A low riding boat makes it easier to become swamped in a lake full of white caps. Paddling a top heavy canoe in choppy water is foolish.

No.3 The men were putting in on Lewis Lake too late in the morning. They were just starting as I was taking out. They should have been on the water at least two, or even three hours earlier, to avoid the notorious Yellowstone Plateau wind. At 10:30AM, I thought I was getting off Lewis Lake just in time.

I was not concerned that these men would have trouble getting to Shoshone Lake. I didn't give them a second thought, but the three bad decisions I identified at the boat ramp were a display of a poor decision making process that could potentially lead to trouble.

Once I had the car and the trailer loaded, I took a last look as they were about a half-mile off shore in water that was becoming choppy. I turned and drove away with my mind concentrated on finding a clinic that could put a couple of stitches in my hand. I still had confidence that I could make the Yellowstone Lake portion of this adventure.

I stopped at the South Entrance to the Park and asked the ranger for directions to the nearest clinic. I was hoping I would not have to drive all the way to Jackson to get some-one to look at my hand. The ranger told me my only option was at Jackson Lake Lodge.



Jackson Lake Lodge

Grand Teton National Park is directly south of Yellowstone. The Snake River leaves the southern boundary of Yellowstone Park and flows through Teton Park's Jackson Lake on its way to Jackson, Wyoming. From there it winds its way to Boise, Idaho and then joins the Columbia River which delivers its waters to the Pacific Ocean. The "clinic" at Jackson Lake Lodge was a small building of no more than 12x12 feet. The sign on the door read, "CLOSED FOR THE SEASON." I sat in the parking lot and silently listed my options. I then called my wife Cynthia to let her know I was planning to put-in on Yellowstone Lake at Grant Village tomorrow, 15 September. I did not give her any details about my hand. The bleeding was under control, I had closed the wound with butterfly strips, the Keflex was on board, I kept a clean bandage on it, the pain had diminished and I had plenty of first aid supplies. I was confident. Let's go.

I drove north to the spot where the Snake River crosses Highway 89 near a landmark called Flagg Ranch. The Snake River is a beautiful trout stream here. Below Jackson the Snake River turns into a churning torrent that is popular with rafters and kayakers. At Flagg Ranch it's just a lazy piece of water begging to be explored. I had plenty of daylight left and decided to spend the afternoon fishing. I waded the quiet water, contemplating my launch on Yellowstone Lake the following day.



Snake River near Flagg Ranch