

Shoshone Lake and Yellowstone Lake 2021 • Part Two

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While sitting in the parking lot at Jackson Lake Lodge, I called the Yellowstone Park's Backcountry Office and finalized my permit for Yellowstone Lake. I was planning a 5night/6day paddle into the area of the Lake east of Grant Village. I had already undergone a boat inspection and safety lecture prior to my Lewis Lake trip so I was ready to launch. I stayed overnight at Buffalo Valley Ranch, near Moran Junction at the northern entrance to Teton National Park. The cafe was open when I got there, but the menu was "limited".... pub grub only. I ate a BLT on their deck with a beautiful view and went to bed at about 7PM. I was up and rolling toward Yellowstone Lake at 5:15AM on 15 September. I had almost everything I needed for the trip. I was trusting a weather report that was now 6 days old. There is no internet service in Yellowstone which makes getting accurate weather reports difficult. I didn't see anything more serious than showers predicted for the next five days, but the weather can change quickly on the plateau. I put in on a bright, sunny morning and was grinning from ear to ear when I rowed away from the sandy beach at Grant village. There was a slight southwest wind, the sky was clear and my hand was doing just fine. I was headed for campsite 7L2 in Breeze Bay, about 8 miles away.



The view from Buffalo Valley Ranch near Moran Junction
(Teton Mountains in the background)

When I passed Breeze Point and turned south (see map on next page), I began having trouble with one of my oar locks. I had the tools to fix the problem and it gave me a break on a nice beach between Breeze Point and site 7L1. I reached my campsite at 7L2 around 10:30AM. There were trees along the shoreline, but the campsite was not very protected from the southwest wind. I knew by afternoon, this site would be blown out. I tried to have a hot meal at about 2PM, but the wind would not let me keep the stove going. I had a cold lunch and went for a hike to the south of my camp.



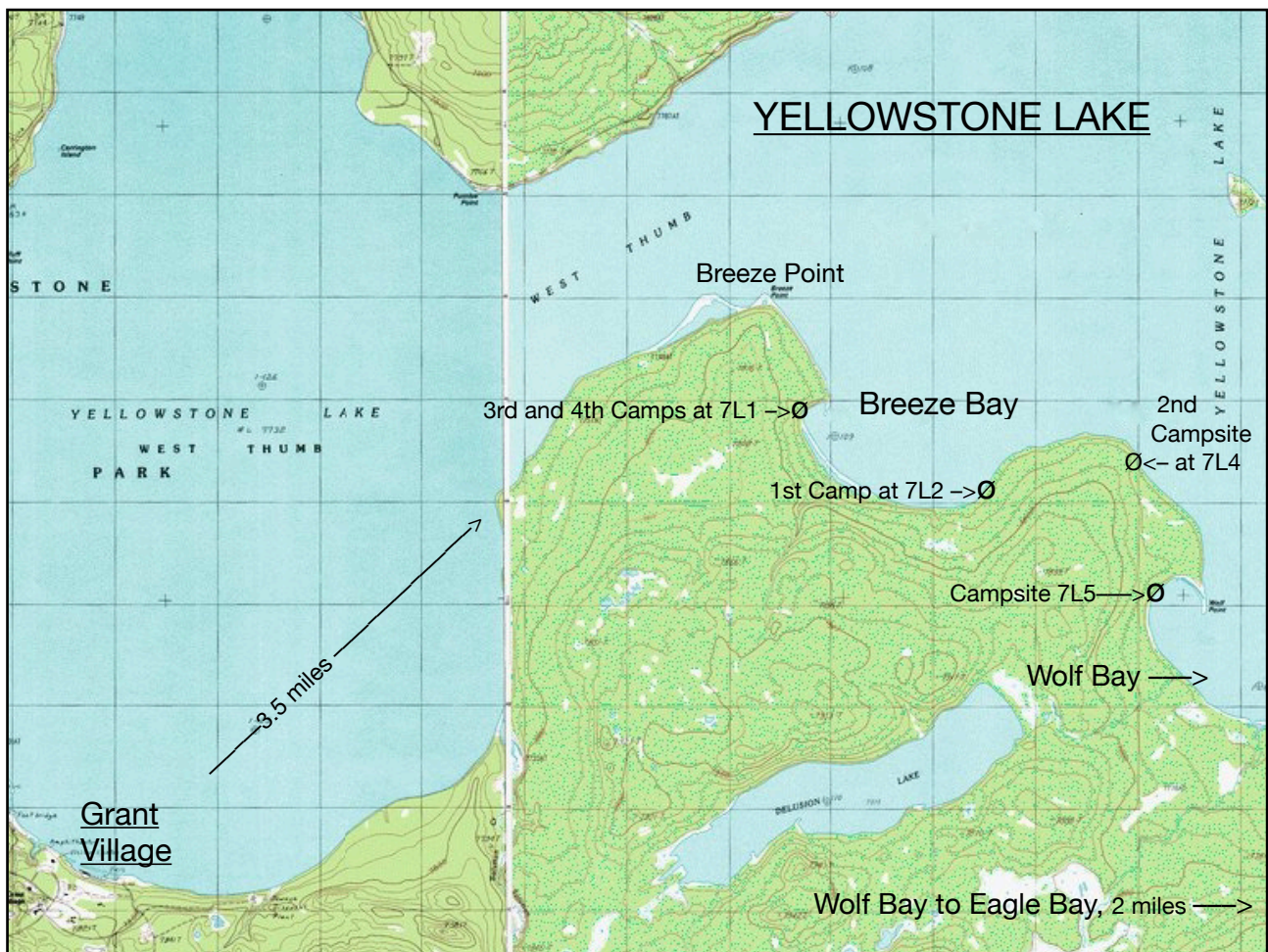
Sunset on the beach at campsite 7L2 in Breeze Bay
(the assembled pontoon boat ready for fishing)

I found a beautiful wide open meadow that must have been lush and green in the wet months of the spring and early summer. The tall dried grasses gave up an interesting story. There was a bear wallow in the middle of the meadow, now sunbaked and useless. I imagined a waiting line to use it when it contained cool wet mud and water. Deeper into the meadow I discovered a spot where elk had been bedding down during the day. The smell reminded me of the elephant enclosure at the zoo. When I got back to camp, I settled for a cold dinner and then packed up as much gear as possible to be ready for an early departure. I was planning to move to campsite 7L6 in Eagle Bay the next morning. On 16 September I loaded my canoe at sunrise. The night had been a cold one. It was only about 32 degrees when I crawled out of my tent, but the day looked promising.



The Bear Wallow

The point to the east was an easy reach and my next open water crossing was at Wolf Bay. There was virtually no wind when I got there, so I kept going about a mile straight across the open water. I did not like what I saw at Eagle Bay. The campsite was barren... no trees... no wind protection. I decided to head back to site 7L1 at Breeze Bay instead of staying the night at Eagle Bay. On the way, I rowed in to campsite 7L5 at Wolf Bay, but it was no better.

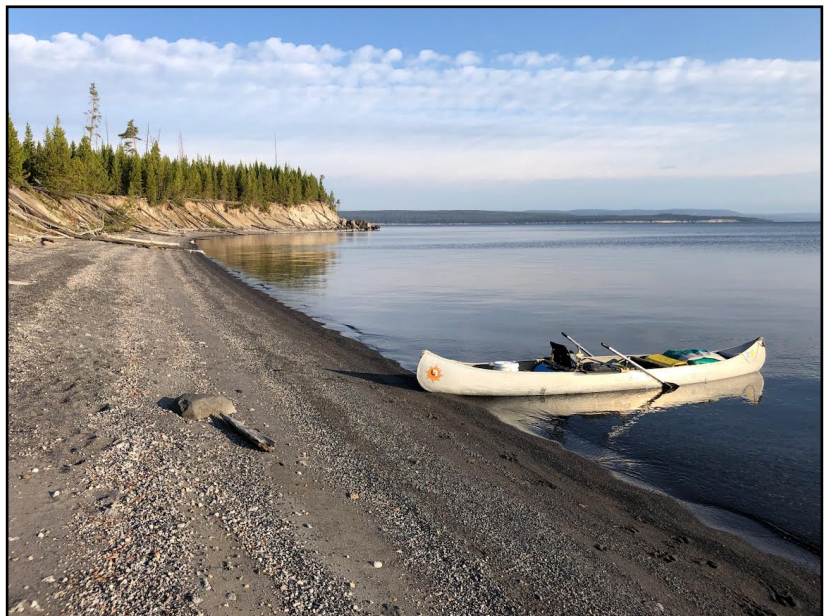


The campsite was unprotected and I thought by afternoon I would be very unhappy there. I started back north, but if I was going to beat the wind, I was running out of time.

Then I remembered a small protected inlet I passed along the shoreline north of Wolf Bay. The National Park Service folks get very upset if you camp in an “undesigned” site. Camping in the wrong site is a minor infraction. Creating a new campsite is strictly forbidden. When I arrived at the small inlet, there were white caps on the Lake, but the little bay was quiet. I thought I had probably missed my opportunity to cross Breeze Bay farther to the north and decided to stay at campsite 7L4 in the small inlet known as “Ravine.” It took some time to haul my gear up onto the bluff overlooking the beach, but I got it done. I set up camp and decided to give the little bay a try with my fly rod. I walked north to the rock out-cropping (see photo), and waded out as far as I could. After I made two casts, I took 2 steps to the right and started casting again. It took about 2 hours to get back to where I had beached my boat and I had not had a single hit. I gave up and went up on the bluff for some dinner.



Looking east from campsite 7L2

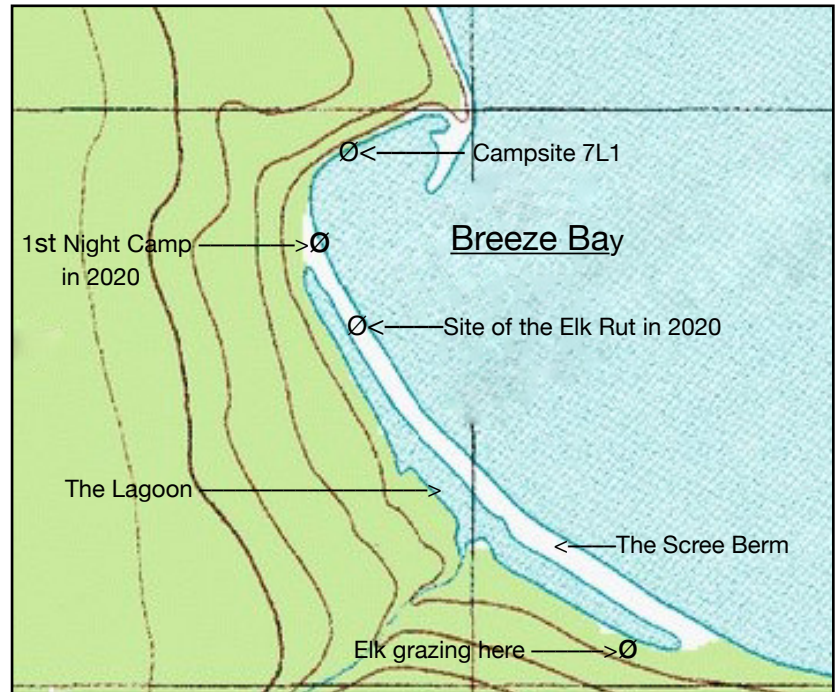


The beach at campsite 7L4, “Ravine”

The wind never stopped on the night of 16 September. It slowed to a breeze, but it never quit. When I got up the next morning, there was a nice sunrise, but there were ripples on the water. I packed my gear off the bluff, loaded the boat and took off for site 7L1 at Breeze Bay. I had camped there before and knew the site had some wind protection provided by a good stand of trees. I began the 2.6 mile paddle after a cold breakfast and a pint of water. As usual, I was happy to be on the water and made good time even though the lake was a bit choppy. My permit did not have me staying at Breeze Bay on 17 September, but I thought if no-one was camped there I would take it.

When I came around the point and got my first view of Breeze Bay, I could not tell if anyone was camped at 7L1. There is a long skinny spit of sand on the northeast corner of the Bay that obstructed my view. Half way across Breeze Bay I was convinced I saw no sign of campers. I cruised in to the beach at 7L1 and slid the boat onto the sand with a smile.

Setting up camp could wait. This year I brought the pontoons that go along with the rowing frame. A pontoon boat is basically a seat with a float on either side. Your feet dangle over the front and reach into the water. You wear waders with flippers on your feet to stealthily approach wary fish. I got my first pontoon boat in 1998. That boat gave me the idea to use a rowing frame on a canoe. The pontoon frame was the same width as the gunwales.



As soon as I hit the beach at 7L1, I inflated the tubes with a small pump I had brought along. I rigged my fly rod and paddled out without the oars. I had never been able to fish this small bay effectively. I could not wade out deep enough to reach the weed beds that harbor larger fish and most of my casts hung up in the brush or steep berm behind me. I was sure I did not need to paddle out very far, maybe no more than 100 feet. All year I had been looking forward to fishing the small protected bay to the east of my campsite. If there were big fish here, that's where they would be.



The Pontoon Boat

The fly of choice was a Hackled Hare's Ear Nymph, a classic. It is a "wet fly" and is therefore fished below the surface of the water. After a long cast, the fly is retrieved in small twitches. The hackle on the fly produces action that imitates the legs of a swimming aquatic insect. I tied the fly to the leader with a Homer Rhodes loop knot... which in turn lets the fly become even more active than it would if tied on with a hard clinch knot. I paddled out slowly until I found the weed beds that I had tried to reach from shore on my trip in 2020. I made long casts.... let the line sit on the water as the fly sank... then began my retrieve. To my complete delight, I caught two nice fish before the wind came up. Then I prudently decided to stop having fun and organize my camp.



Hackled Hare's Ear Nymph

In the afternoon I hiked around the shoreline to the spot where the elk rut had taken place the year before. There were very few tracks in the sand on the beach and just a few in the mud around the lagoon. It was obvious the rut had not begun. I returned to my camp and was looking forward to paddling into the small bay behind the sand spit in the morning to finally get a chance at the weed beds there.

Unlike my first night at site 7L1 in 2020, my sleep was uninterrupted. In the past, migrating geese often arrive on these small protected bays after dark. It is believed they commonly migrate during the night to escape daytime predators, avoid thermal weather complications and take advantage of cooler evening temperatures. When they come in after dark, close to your camp, there is no sleeping until they settle down. They are loud and may take an hour or so to relax. At home, our house sits on a north/south ridge line that the geese use as a guide to find their overnight resting spot in the Rogue River Valley near Grants Pass, Oregon. When they fly over our house heading south, the noise can sometimes disturb a good night's sleep. I don't mind. I love their honking. On 17 September, I slept like a baby.

On the morning of 18 September I was up at first light... about 7AM. I had a good hot breakfast and was in the pontoon boat in an hour. I paddled out to the weed beds and slowly started east toward the inside corner of the bay. I caught three fish that morning. Two of them were over twenty inches.

The species does not live long enough to reach what you could call "lunker" size. In my years of fishing on the Yellowstone Plateau I had become accustomed to landing fish in the 16 inch range. On this morning I hooked and beached a 24 inch cutthroat male, the largest I have ever seen. I never took the fish out of the water and snapped the photo in the shallows along the beach.



Geese often migrate at night



My camp at 7L1 as seen from the pontoon boat



Twenty four inch Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout

As far as I was concerned, my trip was a complete success at that point. I still had two nights left on my permit and I was camping at the wrong site, but I was not going to move again. I was satisfied and happy with myself. I had cracked the cutthroat code.

When I got back to shore, I had some food and heard a bugling bull elk in the direction of the south end of the lagoon. I got my binoculars out of the gear box and found the bull with his “harem” grazing peacefully in the spot I suspected. Worthy bull elk gather a bevy of beauties into a “harem” in the fall of the year. I hiked along the east side of the berm toward the south end of the lagoon. By the time I got into position, the harem had moved on. I squatted under the branches of one of the few cedar trees on the berm and before long another harem with a much larger bull wandered into my field of view. I watched this group for about an hour. I tried to use my camera’s zoom feature to get a picture, but I was too far away. A thunderstorm was floating in from the south west and rain began to fall. After the group of elk left the scene, I started back to my camp with some energy in my step. The wind had increased and the rain was heavier now.



Bull Elk and his Harem

After a cold supper, I staked out my tent in preparation for what looked to be a pretty good storm. I witnessed two more of the big thunderstorms before dark, each one larger than the first. I crawled into my tent and read a book with the noise of the drops hitting the rain fly. I was unsure about the weather and rested uneasily that night. At about 2AM I checked and found rain... but no snow. When I woke up at my regular time of 7AM, it was still raining. I am usually not deterred by bad weather, but I had a seven mile paddle back to Grant Village and did not want to have to make the trip in a storm.

On the morning of 19 September, I paced the shoreline in front of my camp. There was too much wind to use my stove so I ate a cold breakfast. By 9AM the rain turned into light snow. I continued my nervous pacing and could not decide if I should stay at 7L1 for my final night or leave while the leaving was “good.” When I saw a bald eagle take a coot on the gravel spit at the east end of the bay (behind me in the photo) I saw it as a valuable piece of information. Bald eagles usually eat fish, but they have to be able to see their prey from the air. I once saw a bald eagle in winter take a duck coming downstream in full flight on the Firehole River. As the mallard passed, the eagle simply dropped off his perch and grabbed the duck right out of the air. In a storm, the wind ripples the surface of the water and obstructs their view. When this eagle had to resort to falling out of the sky, like he was dropping down an elevator shaft to pin the poor coot to the sand, I thought the raptor knew something I did not. Maybe he was thinking he’d better take what he could get instead of waiting for weather that would allow him to hunt his favorite food. I decided to go for it.

While the eagle sat on the coot, plucking feathers, it took me just 30 minutes to break camp and load the boat. When I launched, the snow fall was becoming heavier. I sprinted for the tip of the gravel spit and I turned north. Around Breeze Point, I turned west into the wind and heavy snow was beginning to fall. In another 30 minutes I was rowing in a white-out. I had attached a compass to the top of the gear box in front of me, but I was continually wiping snow from its face. When I got to the final point of land before deciding to make the 3.5 mile crossing to Grant Village, I seriously thought about sticking to the shoreline instead of braving the open water. Hugging the shore would add another mile to the crossing, but it would be safer. On the other hand, another half hour in the heavy snow and cold wind might make the possibility of hypothermia more dangerous. If I could use my compass effectively, the straight line open water route would be the way to go. On the way in on 15 September, I had made a note of the compass bearing. I could use it now, in reverse, to navigate. I didn't think about it long and pointed the boat directly at Grant Village boat ramp. After 100 yards of rowing, I could no longer see the shore. I knew it was to the south, but I couldn't see it. Without the compass, I would have been forced to follow the shoreline or run the risk of rowing around in circles.



The morning of 19 September at 7L1
Should I stay or should I go?

Once I landed at Grant Village and quit rowing, I began to get very cold. I was wet from my own perspiration which made me colder. As I backed the trailer down the boat ramp, I noticed my dashboard thermometer read 32 degrees. With the wind chill, I am sure it was in the 20's and probably in the lower 20's when I left my campsite 3 hours earlier. My boat was heavy now, filled with 2 inches of water and melting snow.

Once the gear was removed, the canoe was still difficult to manage. I kept thinking the warm car interior would be nice, but I still had to get the gear in the car and the boat secured. When I crossed the Continental Divide heading south, there was about 4 inches of snow on the road. I just wanted to get off the Plateau before things got really bad. By the time I got to Moran Junction and turned south toward Jackson Hole, the snow had turned to rain and I knew I was in the clear. I planned to drive the eight hours to Ontario, Oregon when I made my exit from Yellowstone on the 19th, but decided to cut that short and spent the night in Idaho Falls. When I arrived at the motel three hours later, I was exhausted.

The Phone Call From Leo

On the 20th of September I stopped for lunch as I drove west across southern Idaho. I got a phone call from an “unknown” number while I was having lunch in a cafe near Twin Falls, Idaho. I never answer calls from “unknown” numbers. It’s usually a robo-call and if someone really wants to talk to me, they’ll leave a message. For some strange reason I decided to answer the phone. It was a man named Leo that identified himself as a law enforcement officer (a L.E.O.) in Yellowstone Park.

My mind began to race. I had a fishing permit that covered both legs of my trip. I had left clean camps wherever I went. Had they discovered I had been camping at an unassigned site? What could Leo the L.E.O. want to talk to me about?



Leo asked if I had, “camped at site 8Q9 on 13 September?” I said that I had. He then asked if I had been there on the 14th as my permit listed. I was scheduled to stay another night, but I explained that I had decided to pull out early and left campsite 8Q9 on the morning of the 14th. Then he asked if I had seen anyone “coming in on the morning of the 13th?” Since I occupied the closest campsite to the outlet, my observations would be valuable. I said that I had not. I did not see a single west bound boat coming past my camp on the 13th of September. I then listed the people I had seen. I met three groups coming downstream on the 12th as I was dragging my boat up the Lewis River Channel. No-one else came in and passed my camp on the 12th. On the morning of the 13th, I saw four groups pass my camp on their way toward the exit at the outlet, but no-one was coming in.

Then I asked..... “What’s this all about?” Leo told me two boaters were scheduled to put in at the Lewis Lake boat ramp on the morning of the 13th for a four night trip to Shoshone Lake. The families of the missing men had reported them missing on 19 September. Leo did not tell me, but I later found out that the body of one of the men had been found on the morning of the 20th of September... the same day he called me. The two missing men were Mark Crumbo O’Neill and his brother Kim Crumbo. If two men put in on the 13th.... why had I not seen them pass my camp on that day? I had been on the water all morning and had not seen a single boat on their way in. Leo did not answer that. Maybe I was too busy in the afternoon trying to stop the bleeding of my right hand to notice who came and went on the Lake. It’s possible I just didn’t notice them go by my camp.

I then told Leo that I did meet two men putting in at Lewis Lake boat ramp on the morning of the 14th, as I was taking out. Once your boat has been inspected and you finalize your permit, there is no rule that says you have to put in on the day you say you will put in. You can wait a day if you want, but if you choose to wait, you are still expected to exit on the day the permit expires. Because I did not see anyone pass my camp on their way in on the 13th, I asked if the men I saw on the morning of the 14th could have been the missing pair. Leo had no comment.

I gave Leo a description of the men I saw on the 14th, but he had no comment about that either. The conversation was one sided. Leo asked the questions and when I tried to find out what campsite the missing men were heading to, Leo told me that he could not answer that because the investigation is “ongoing.”

I am reprinting paragraph No.1 from Page 8 of Part One here:

“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.”



Could a canoe pass campsite 8Q9 without being seen?

I mentioned earlier that I rowed west from my camp at 8Q9 to have a look at Moose Creek Meadow at campsite 8Q7 and did not find anyone camped there on the morning of the 13th. Leo would not tell me which campsite the two missing men were headed for and would not give me any details about their “investigation.”

In the 20 September phone call with Leo, he had been pretty tight lipped about the two missing men. I had not seen a newspaper or a news report, but I later learned that on 19 September the remains of missing New York woman Gabby Petito had been found near Moran Junction. She had been murdered and her body had been dumped in the northern Teton Park area. The Park Service was obviously on high alert.

I have had several conversations with Yellowstone Park Officials since September about this incident. I found a photo of the missing men and they fit the description I gave to Leo in our first conversation on 20 September. Mark Crumbo O'Neill's body was found washed up on the eastern shore of Shoshone Lake, along with their canoe and some of their gear. A life jacket had washed up with the canoe suggesting it had not been worn at the time of the incident. The NPS investigators also found their abandoned campsite on the south shore, but they have not released the site number the Crumbo brothers used.

Both of the Crumbo brothers were retired National Park Service Rangers. Kim was a former Navy SEAL that had served two tours in Vietnam. His body has not been found and he is presumed dead. Both men were very familiar with the dangers of wilderness camping. I hope someday I will learn if the two men I met at the Lewis Lake boat ramp on 14 September, 2021 were the Crumbo brothers. It's a tragic episode.

I had taken two boats to Yellowstone. I had the composite boat for sliding over the rocks and gravel in the Lewis River Channel and the aluminum boat for Yellowstone Lake. In open water I prefer the aluminum boat. The keel is very helpful in windy conditions. If I hadn't been so tired and had my wits about me, I would have offered the composite boat to the men I met at the Lewis Lake boat ramp. When I told the man that came over to see my rowing frame that he had "better get going, the wind was already coming up."... he said.... "We're not worried, my friend has done this trip many times."

THE TIME LINE

09 September: Left Grants Pass, Oregon headed for Yellowstone. Stayed overnight in Ontario, Oregon.

10 September: Drove to Idaho Falls, Idaho and stayed overnight there.

11 September: Drove to the Lewis Lake ranger station in Yellowstone Park for permit and boat inspection. Stayed overnight at Hatchet Resort near Moran Junction.

12 September: Put in on Lewis Lake at 7:30AM for a 3 night trip to Shoshone Lake. Arrive at campsite 8Q9 at about 11:00AM. Saw no-one following me in for the rest of the day.

13 September: Spent the night at 8Q9 on Shoshone Lake. Saw no-one coming in for the rest of the day.

14 September: Left Shoshone Lake. Arrived at Lewis Lake boat ramp at 10:30AM. Met two men there putting in for a trip to Shoshone Lake. Spent the night at Buffalo Valley Ranch near Moran Junction.

15 September: Put in at Grant Village on Yellowstone Lake for a 5 night trip. Camped overnight at campsite 7L2 at south end of Breeze Bay.

16 September: Camped at campsite 7L4 at "Ravine".

17 September: Moved to campsite 7L1 at north end of Breeze Bay.

18 September: Camped a second night at 7L1 in Breeze Bay. Thunderstorms appeared in the afternoon. Rain continued all night.

19 September: Rowed out in a snow storm. Arrived at Grant Village at about 12 Noon. Drove to Idaho Falls and stayed overnight there.

20 September: Stopped in Twin Falls for lunch. First learned of missing men in a phone call from Leo, NPS Law Enforcement Officer. Stayed overnight in Ontario, Oregon.

21 September: Returned home. Researched the two missing men Leo asked about.

It would have taken only a few minutes to even up the gear load and get them off in a better configuration. At the end of their trip, they could have left my composite boat at the Lewis Lake ranger station for me to pick up on my way south after the Yellowstone Lake leg of this expedition. Hind sight, as they say, is 20/20. Shoshone Lake is a dangerous destination. The wind is notoriously unpredictable, the water is at best only about 45 °F and the trek to get there is daunting. I spent a year planning my trip and then had to cut it short because of the injury to my hand. I am very glad I made it to beautiful Shoshone Lake, but I don't think I will ever go back.



A choppy afternoon on Shoshone Lake