

Yellowstone Lake • September, 2022

On the evening of 18 August, a dry lightning storm ignited several forest fires across the county where we live in southern Oregon. The fire closest to us was the Rum Creek Fire. On 23 August I flew to Atlanta to say “Goodbye” to my younger brother who was dying of cancer, convinced that the crews assigned to fight the fire would get (and keep) it under control. The eastern edge of the fire was about 15 miles from our home.

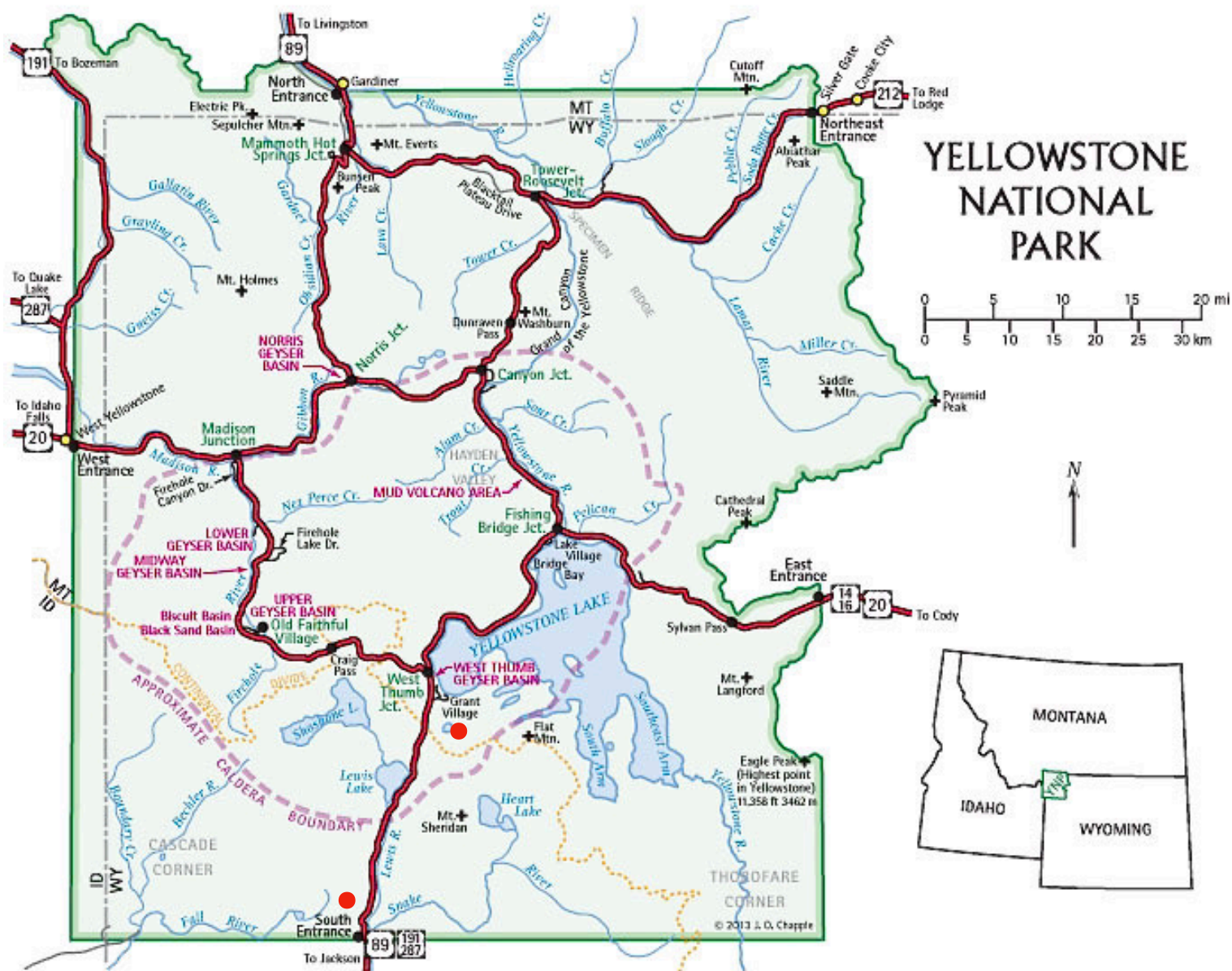
When I returned from Atlanta, our property was under a Level Two Evacuation Order. Evacuation Orders are broken into three categories or “levels.” Level One requires the property owner to get ready to evacuate your home. Level Two demands that the property owner be ready to go.... meaning, you have gathered your most important documents and possessions in preparation to leave your property at a moments notice. Level Three means “Go.” If you choose to stay, and you or your family members sustain injury (including loss of life), your insurance company may decide to refuse to pay any claim you submit.

By the last week of August, we were not under evacuation orders, but because of the unpredictability of a wildfire, I was thoroughly convinced that I would not be able to make my planned trip to Yellowstone Lake this year. We were monitoring the fire two to three times a day and it continued to inch toward us on its eastern perimeter. By the first of September, the fire fighters seemed to have the eastern edge of the fire corralled. On 4 September, the day before my scheduled departure, I made a run to a nearby grocery in the little town of Merlin, Oregon. The parking lot was filled with fire crew trucks and other officials vehicles from all over Oregon and northern California. I asked one of the fire fighters what was going on and he told me they were being reassigned or were going home. I said... What about this side of the fire?... he said it was “out.” I bought what I needed and quickly headed home with this news.

My wife, Cynthia, and I decided that I should go to Yellowstone. The eastern edge of the fire had not moved for days and at least some of the crews were being sent home. It was a huge relief for us and Yellowstone was back on my radar.

I was scheduled to leave for Yellowstone Park on the morning of 5 September and drove away from our home at 8AM. We were convinced our property was safe from the wild fire now 12 miles away. I made the 8 hour drive to Ontario, Oregon on the Idaho border and spent my first night on the road there. The next night was spent in Idaho Falls, Idaho, giving me just a 3 hour drive on the following day to the southern entrance to Yellowstone Park.

I was on the road out of Idaho Falls at 5AM. The 3 hour drive to the South Entrance puts me into Yellowstone before the crowds hit. The ranger stations in Yellowstone don't open their doors until 8AM. To beat the daily wind on the lake, I always intend to be rowing away from my put-in spot at Grant Village by 7AM. Arriving at the Park a day early gives me time to get my permit at the south entrance and a boat inspection at Grant Village with the rest of the day to enjoy myself. Then the following morning I can launch my boat at 7AM.



Yellowstone National Park

Note: South Entrance and Grant Village (red dots)



As I drove north toward the South Entrance of Yellowstone on the morning of 7 September, I stuck my phone out the window and took this photo of the sunrise on the Tetons.

My plan was to camp at 7L5 on Wolf Bay on the first night and then continue to 7M5 at Plover Bay for the following three night. Then I would come back to 7L1 for nights 6 and 7. I would row out on the 7th day. I arrived at Yellowstone's South Entrance on 7 September, a day before my scheduled launch, to get my backcountry permit and my canoe inspected. The park ranger told me the predicted weather for the 8th was not good and recommended that I launch on the 7th. She suggested that if I got caught in a storm on the afternoon of the 7th, I could pull into campsite 7L1 at Breeze Bay for the night instead of trying to make it to my designated site of 7L5 at Wolf Bay. I still needed to get a boat inspection and time was wasting. I called my wife and talked with her about the weather and using the advice of the park rangers, I decided to go. I dashed to Grant Village for the boat inspection.

When I got to the boat ramp at Grant Village on the morning of the 7th, the water on the lake was a bit choppy and the wind was from the south west, but I thought I could make it around the first point and into good water easily. I launched my boat at about 10AM on Wednesday, 7 September. The weather report predicted thunder showers for the afternoon of the 7th. My goal was to reach Wolf Bay on my first day and continue to Plover Bay on the second day. Plover Bay is very secluded and there are weed beds in the bay that I had never fished. I was looking forward to giving them a shot.



I made the first 3.5 mile crossing easily and pulled into the shore for a rest. I was feeling pretty good. I had no wind and calm water. I took my time and then continued toward Wolf Bay. I was heading south toward Breeze Bay when the wind picked up. I was still two hours from Wolf Bay and was not worried about my chances of getting there as scheduled. By the time I got to the sand spit at Breeze Bay, the wind was getting stronger and I still had a crossing of about 1.25 miles to make before I could hug the shoreline and continue on to Wolf Bay. I wisely decided to take the advice of the ranger at the south entrance and pulled into Breeze Bay for the night.



Rest stop after the first 3.5 mile crossing.

I started to unload the boat at Breeze Bay and a clap.... no, an explosion.... of thunder startled me. I don't startle easily, but the thunder was so close over head and gave no rumbling warning. It was a clue of what was to come and I hurried to unload the boat. I had no time to put up a tent or a lean-to shelter, so I did the next best thing and hid under the yellow tarp I use to protect my gear from the sun while rowing. The showers continued until dark and I was glad I did chose not to attempt the crossing of Breeze Bay on the afternoon of the 7th. Between the showers I set up my camp on the beach at campsite 7L1. There is a beautiful camping area on the bluff behind the beach, but I just didn't have the energy to make the trek with my gear. I was staking out my wind screen when another boat rounded the sand spit. They were headed back to Grant Village after a week on the Lake and decided to stop and ask if they could camp with me instead of rowing in the bad weather. We all had a good laugh when I told them I was not supposed to be camping there either and there was plenty of room for all of us.



Passing thunder showers at Breeze Bay on 7 September.... heavy clouds and north wind. You can see the sand spit that makes the north east border of Breeze Bay. You can also see the point of land in the distance, at the far side of Breeze Bay, that I chose not to reach as the showers approached. The photo looks straight east.



Hail stones on the beach at 7L1.

The following day opened with mild north wind and chop on the Bay that prevented any fishing. By noon, heavy thunder storms were rolling in from the northwest. The worst of them packed high winds and torrential rain. The wind blew my wind tarp down and I hid under my yellow tarp again. Lightning and thunder appeared all around me. I was told as a kid that you can count the seconds between the flash and the thunder to judge how close the lightning is to you. A count of three seconds is a mile, six seconds is two miles, etc. With each lightning flash, I could not count to "one." It was very close. The thunder was so loud and so close overhead that I could feel the concussion of each blast in my gut. I have been in only one other storm of this magnitude. It was at Palo Duro Canyon in 1978 where 4 people died in a flash flood that swept away an entire campground. Even then, I could not "feel" the thunder. Sitting close to a lightning rod like a canoe, started to worry me. The heavy rain was replaced with marble sized hail. The surface of the Lake was boiling with the onslaught of the hail stones. The storm continued for an hour and when it was over, my camp-mates came down to the shoreline to check on me. We all had a tenuous grin on our faces.



The rain and hail passed, but the wind continued for the rest of the day. On Friday morning, 9 September, I decided to make a run for it and try to reach the other side of Breeze Bay and then go on to Wolf Bay. I was still hoping to get to Plover bay, 9 miles away. My camp-mates decided to stay put for another day and hopefully row out on the 10th.

At 7AM on the morning of the 9th, I set out across Breeze Bay in moderate chop and light drizzle. In no less than 15 minutes, in the middle of Breeze Bay, I was in serious trouble. High wind had appeared from the north. Referring to the map above, you can see that I would have to row 90° to the north wind to make the crossing of Breeze Bay. At that ferry angle, the boat was quickly in jeopardy of being swamped by the waves coming out of the north. The sun came up at 7AM but I could not see it through the thick black clouds and drizzle. It was a miserable morning and my boat was in danger.

The waves were now about 2 feet high and white-capping. It was not yet 7:30AM. I had never heard of anything like it. The wind usually picks up around noon and the afternoons on the Lake are predictably windy. All I could do now was point the aft end of the boat into the waves and row as hard as I could to keep the canoe from turning sideways across the waves. As I went over each wave, the aluminum boat made a loud “bang” as it landed in the trough of the next wave. I was getting scared, but I did not give up. I could only hope I could continue to keep the boat pointed into the wind and that the wind would push me to the southern shore of Breeze Bay. It was 45 minutes before I made land fall and when I looked up, I saw the campsite sign for site 7L2 (see map). I had been delivered. I quickly got out of the boat on the lee side and tried to keep it 90° to the shore so I could pull it onto the beach. The boat was heavy. It was loaded with gear and had taken on some water. A wave hit the north side (the windward side) of the boat and pushed it into my legs, knocked me on my butt in about 18 inches of water. Now I was exhausted and soaking wet.



My camp at 7L2, looking north from the eastern shore of Breeze Bay.

I unloaded the boat and pulled it onto the beach. I found my wind tarp and set it up behind a nice, full, fir tree near my new campsite. I stripped down naked and put on the spare set of clothes I always take with me. I strung my clothes line between two trees and hung the wet clothes in the wind. I never take cotton clothes.... they take all day to dry. I always use wool or synthetic clothing for just an incident like this. Next, I set up my table and stove to make a hot breakfast. Now that I was out of the wind and drizzle, things were looking up.

By mid-afternoon the clouds had parted, the drizzle was gone and the wind had slowed to a tolerable speed. I continued to consume all the calories and fluids I could. I had camped at this site before. There is no fishing on this side of the bay. The water gets deep very close to shore, so I usually set up my camp and then take an afternoon hike.

The Clovis Point is a fluted projectile used by early inhabitants of North America. These highly effective weapons were first discovered near Clovis, New Mexico in 1929 and their use dates back more than 13,000 years. The horse had not arrived in North America when these weapons were used by men on foot to take down large animals like bison, elk and mastodons. The mastodon (wooly mammoth) are not found in the fossil record about 1,000 years after the advent of these spear points. The disappearance of the mastodon is a clear testimony to the effectiveness of these deadly weapons.

As I was moving my gear off the beach and into my campsite, I found the obsidian spear point shown in the photo. It was laying in the sand very close to where I had struggled to control the canoe as I landed on the beach at site 7L2 at 8AM. I could have easily stepped on it or destroyed it when I dragged the boat out of the Lake. I was ecstatic. I always spend time on these trips looking for native artifacts. I have never found as much as a tiny arrow head. I believe it had to be uncovered by the waves of the storm that pounded the beach in the last 24 hours. Its fluted edges have been dulled by time, but miraculously, the point was still in tact. I instantly forgot that I had nearly died in the middle of the bay at dawn and my mind raced with the possible origins of the stone. It is truly the highlight of my 49 year history in the Park. What a find.



Native obsidian spear head (2.25 inches)

The rest of the day passed quietly. As I was putting up my tent, a mule deer doe came right in to have a sniff. I backed off the chore to give her some room. She put her wet nose on the strange fabric and then just went about her business. She was not afraid of me at all. Maybe I was the first human she had ever seen. I made a hot dinner and went to sleep when the sun went down. I slept like a log after what I had been through at dawn.

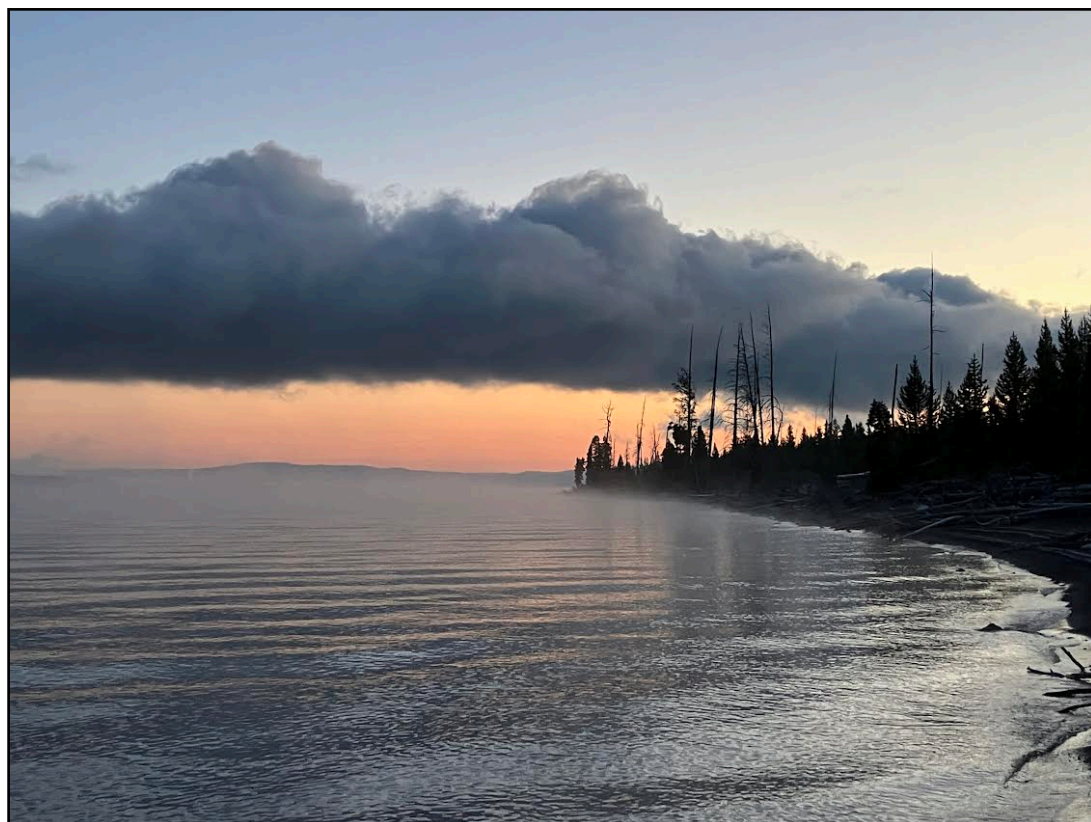


I was up early on Saturday, 10 September with a new plan. I had decided not to try for Plover Bay. It would take at least another day of rowing to get there, leaving me no time to explore before having to start back. Also, my back was pretty sore after fighting the waves in the middle of the Bay on the previous morning. I decided to row back across Breeze Bay and spend the rest of the trip at my first campsite, 7L1. The fishing there was predictably good and the next few days promised to produce some better weather than what I had gone through so far. I broke down my camp and was rowing toward campsite 7L1 by 9AM.

As far as I knew, my camp-mates were still camped at 7L1, on the bluff at the north side of Breeze Bay. They had carried all their gear to the beautiful campsite on the bluff and I would not know if they were there without rowing over for a look. I had not seen them on the Lake on the morning of the 10th and saw no smoke from a morning fire.



The setting of the full moon on the west side of Breeze Bay on the morning of 10th September from the beach in front of campsite 7L2.



The sunrise on the east side of Breeze Bay from the beach in front of campsite 7L2 on the morning of 10 September.

The Lake was calm and the morning was promising. I landed on the beach at 7L1 after 30 minutes of leisurely rowing and found no sign of my camp-mates. They must have rowed out in the morning moon light to avoid any possible adverse weather events.

I quickly inflated the pontoons I use with the rowing frame on the canoe and rigged my fly rod. I put my waders on and used small flippers to paddle out into position. I started casting and really did not care if I caught a fish or not. The trip had already produced enough excitement to keep my mind busy for the year that would pass until I could return. I landed 5 fish that morning. The largest was a beautiful, hefty, 22 inch Yellowstone Cutthroat trout. I never get tired of taking their picture. What a beautiful fish.



A fat 22 inch Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout.

My mind was miles away during my fishing session. My casting was routine with an occasional surprise at the end of the line. How long can I do this? Will I have good weather next year? Will I ever find out what happened to the Crumbo brothers who died last year on Shoshone Lake? Did a bear trash my car at the Grant Village boat ramp while I was gone? How long will this wilderness remain protected from greedy politicians?



My only fishing session. My camp at 7L1 can be seen in the background.

After my fishing session I hiked to where I thought the bugling elk that kept me awake the night before were located. I stomped around in the forest for 2 hours without finding any elk signs and returned to my camp disappointed.

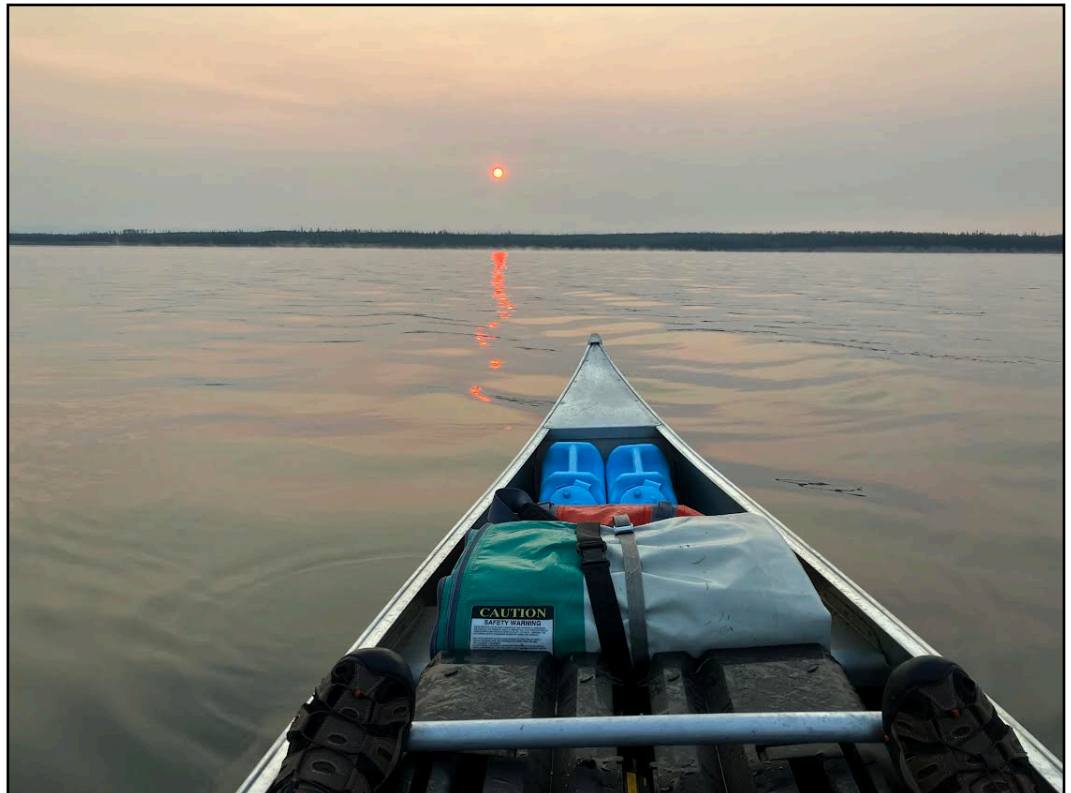
I was planning to row out on the morning of 13 September, Tuesday, but decided to go early and leave on the 12th. I had done more than I had expected to do and was satisfied with the trip. I was convinced my campmates had rowed out in the moon light and if the sky remained clear, I decided to give it a try. I packed up everything I could on the evening of the 11th. I got up at 4AM on the morning of the 12th and took my tent down. I loaded the boat and rowed away from 7L1 at 5AM. I wore a head lamp to break down my tent and load the boat, but my eyes adjusted quickly in the dark.

There was no wind, the lake was glassy smooth, the rowing was effortless and I made it to the boat ramp in a record 2 hours and 45 minutes. During the final 3.5 mile crossing to Grant Village, the sun rose into eerie wildfire smoke on the eastern border of the Park. You can see my feet in the photo.

I have already started getting ready for next year's trip. Can't wait.



Rowing was easy in the moonlight.



Looking east during the final crossing to Grant Village.