

Yellowstone Lake 8 September, 2023

With multiple reservations, a practice the National Park Service frowns upon, I started watching the weather for the Yellowstone Lake area at the beginning of August. I had a 9 night/10 day canoe trip planned and the weather there at 7732 feet above sea level was not being cooperative.

I left home on 5 September and made my usual overnight stops in Ontario, Oregon and Idaho Falls, Idaho. On the morning of 7 September I drove into the park very early and was standing at the backcountry office at Grant Village on Yellowstone Lake, 10 minutes before they opened at 8AM. I had decided to put my canoe in on Yellowstone Lake on the morning of 8 September. I secured the necessary permits at Grant Village and spent the rest of the day exploring old haunts from years past. Pelican Creek was at the top of my list.

I drove up to the north end of the Lake and stopped at the bridge crossing Pelican Creek, a small winding Yellowstone Lake tributary stream... full of fish. Times had changed. Fishing regulations and signs announced there was no fishing permitted within two miles of the outlet. My scheduled launch the next morning would be at 5:30 to 6:00AM. I would have to bounce out of bed at about 3:00AM to make it the the boat ramp at Grant Village in time to launch at dawn. I was not ready to make the 4 mile hike on the day before my put in at Grant Village and walked along the beach with some food for “brunch.”



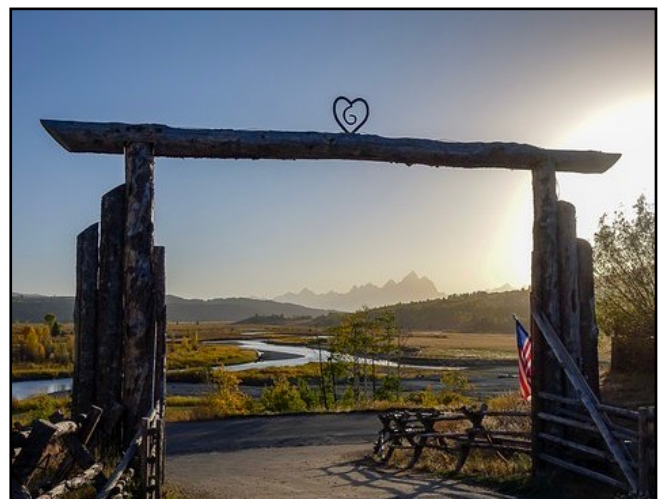
The marshy outlet at Pelican Creek with Yellowstone Lake and the mountains of the Washakie Wilderness in the background.

After my walk on the beach, I drove south toward Heart-6 Ranch at Moran, Wyoming. Even though it has a zip code, Moran, Wyoming is more of a collection of ranches than it is a bonafide town. It is named for Mount Moran, the largest peak at the northern end of the Teton Range.



Mount Moran at dawn on the Northern end of the Teton Mountain Range. Photo: 7 September, 2023

Heart 6 Ranch is named for a cattle brand of the same name. It is a simple heart shape with a number six in the middle. It proudly marks the gate to the property that sits on the banks of the Buffalo Fork of the Snake River with a great view of the Tetons. I have used this ranch in the past for my last night before I put in at Grant Village. The people are friendly and BLT's in the restaurant are tasty. From Heart 6 it is about an hour drive to Grant Village.



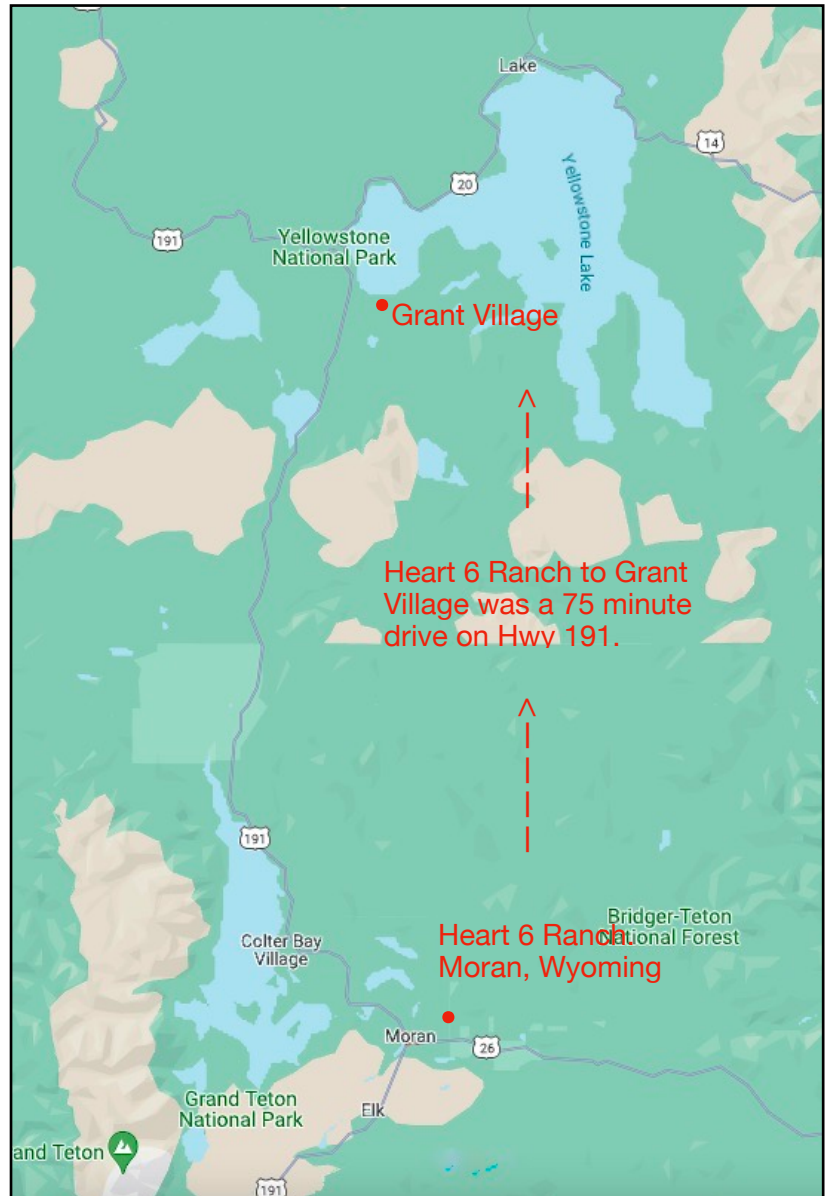
Sunset: The original cattle brand marks the gate at Heart-6 Ranch, Moran, Wyoming.

On the way to Yellowstone Lake, you cross the northern edge of Teton National Park and then enter Yellowstone National Park at the south entrance. The speed limit in the Park is 45mph. In the pre-dawn dark, wildlife can surprise you on the highway and that's the last thing I wanted to have happen on my way to my put in.

On the morning of 8 September, 2023, I woke up at 4AM Mountain Time (3AM Pacific Time) and started toward my put in spot at Grant Village. Highway 191 heading north into the Park was foggy and in some sections I had to go slower than the required 45mph. It took an hour and 15 minutes to drive the 45 miles from Heart 6 Ranch to Grant Village.

I practice loading and unloading the boat at home and it eliminates questioning where everything fits at the boat ramp.

I rowed away from Grant Village at 5:45AM after loading my canoe and parking the car. I used a headlamp to watch my compass and was happy to be on the water again. I could see the face of the compass without the headlamp after about 20 minutes.





My first crossing is 3.5 miles of open water rowing to what I have named “First Point.” I am sure it has a proper name, but I have never found it on a map. As I rowed toward First Point, I could see a thunderstorm coming my way from the west and I was hoping it would skirt to the south of me. I made it around First Point after about an hour and then the storm caught me. I beached the boat, took a tarp to use as cover and climbed the bank to hide from the wind behind a small juniper tree. It rained hard for about 20 minutes. I had to bail the rain water out of the boat before I could continue toward my first night destination of Wolf Bay.

Yellowstone Lake is on the Continental Divide at 7732 feet above sea level. The storm that came from the west was quickly met by a thunderstorm from the east. It was impossible to predict the wind direction. Meteorologists call it "variable".... I call circling storms... strange. I had never seen anything like it. I was being pummeled by wind from all directions.

I must admit I was discouraged by the storms and the residual wind made rowing difficult. I crossed Breeze Bay with white-caps slapping the side of the boat. When I got to Wolf Bay, I was exhausted after the more than 10 mile adventure. I set up camp with no relief from the wind. Rowing in wind like I had on the afternoon of 8 September was dangerous. I conceded defeat and decided to row out to Grant Village on the following morning if the wind continued. I was beaten. The prudent thing to do would be to turn around and go home.

I started for home on 9 September. There is a long sand spit at Wolf Bay and when I rounded the tip on the morning of 9 September I was confronted with roller waves from the north. I made the crossing at Breeze Bay on my way out and decided to stop there to regroup. Breeze Bay is my favorite campsite and fishing spot. I thought I could evaluate my situation best with a fly rod in my hand. I put my pontoon boat together and went fishing hoping that would boost my spirits. The gusting breeze arrived quickly and I was breaking down the pontoon boat when the wind blew one of the tubes against the side of the boat. What I saw was a highly improved canoe.

EUREKA! Why not strap the pontoons to the sides of the boat as outriggers? It worked perfectly to stabilize the boat and prevent the roller waves from coming over the side. I changed my mind and started rowing back toward Wolf Bay. I crossed Breeze Bay with no trouble at all. I had solved the wind problem.

I headed back to Wolf Bay with a positive spirit. The four mile trip went uneventfully and I set up my camp before trying to fish in the Bay. There was some wind out of the south, but I went fishing anyway. I did not get a hit. Skunked again.



The canoe with the pontoons for outriggers.

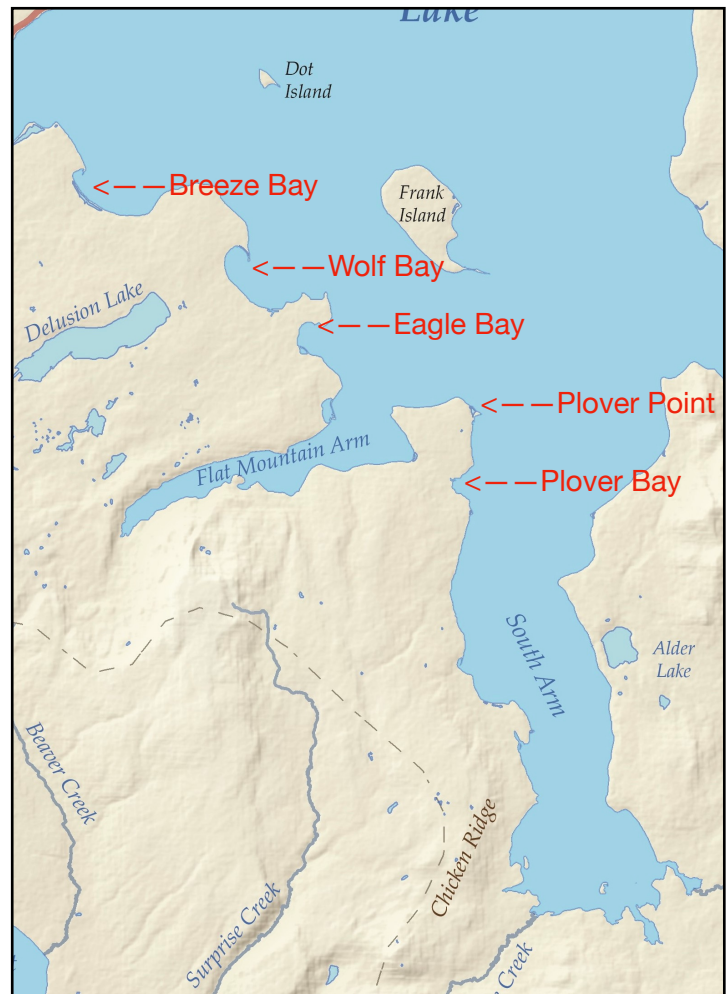
After a second night at Wolf Bay I was ready to try for my ultimate destination of Plover Bay in the South Arm of Yellowstone Lake. That would put me more than 16 miles from the boat ramp at Grant Village and it would be a good place to regroup and think about continuing on to the south end of South Arm. I crossed Wolf Bay and then started across Eagle Bay as the wind began to increase. The wind was coming out of Flat Mountain Arm with some muscle behind it. My pontoon rig was working perfectly.

After crossing the mouth of Flat Mountain Arm, I got into the shadow of Plover Point (the lee side on the north). I finally had a reprieve from the wind. I was glad for the chance to do some restful rowing. When I rounded Plover Point, at the mouth of South Arm, the wind was howling. There were campers with sea kayaks at campsite 7M4, but they did not wave and didn't look very happy. I was headed directly into the wind now, but there was not much chance of waves coming over the side of the canoe. It was a lot of work to row the last 1.5 miles to Plover Bay.

Campsite 7M5 was nice. After unloading the boat and cooking a hot meal, I went out fishing. I had seen satellite photos of Plover Bay and it looked like there were some weed beds in the shallow areas of the bay, but the bottom of the Bay was rocky with no sight of weed beds.

Even though the bottom of the Bay looked barren, I caught one nice fish at Plover Bay. It was a very fat cutthroat trout. I tried again the following morning but was not able to move single fish. The weather on my second day at Plover Bay was beautiful. It was the weather I had hoped to see when I left Grant Village four days earlier. After my disappointing fishing session, I had some food and decided to hike over to Flat Mountain Arm. It was a hike of a little over a mile across a small saddle. I set out with my compass and bear spray at about 11:45AM. I was in good spirits.

The hike to Flat Mountain Arm was a combination of open meadows, forest dead fall and trails made by wildlife. I crossed the small saddle and started down toward the water.



The beach at Plover Bay.

After his return as a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, John Colter retraced some of their path to make an attempt to establish a trade route to the natives of eastern Idaho. He is credited with being the first white man to visit the Yellowstone Plateau in 1807. He came in from the east side and circled the Lake from the north. His route is believed to have followed the western shore of Flat Mountain Arm and then crossed the same little saddle that I was using on my hike. He came out on South Arm at Plover Bay and may have camped where my tent sat today. When I planned this trip, I was looking forward to walking some of the ground that Colter first traversed in his exploration of the Yellowstone Plateau. I accomplished that and I was excited to retrace his footsteps. I am sure the landscape hasn't changed very much in 216 years and I hope it stays that way.

After some food and a nice nap in the sunshine, I started back toward my camp at Plover Bay in South Arm. I had crossed several nice meadows on the first leg of the hike and on the way back I came across a steaming pile of bear poop in my path. I was not satisfied to leave my bear spray in its belt holster. I began to carry it in my left hand with the safety off for the rest of the hike.

I was distracted by my intense attention to the perimeter of the meadow. Bears often stalk a meadow from the forest and from a nearby hiding place, they can run down an elk in a short burst of speed. I was not at all comfortable after seeing the fresh bear poop.



My only fish at Plover Bay, a fat 18 inch Yellowstone Cutthroat.



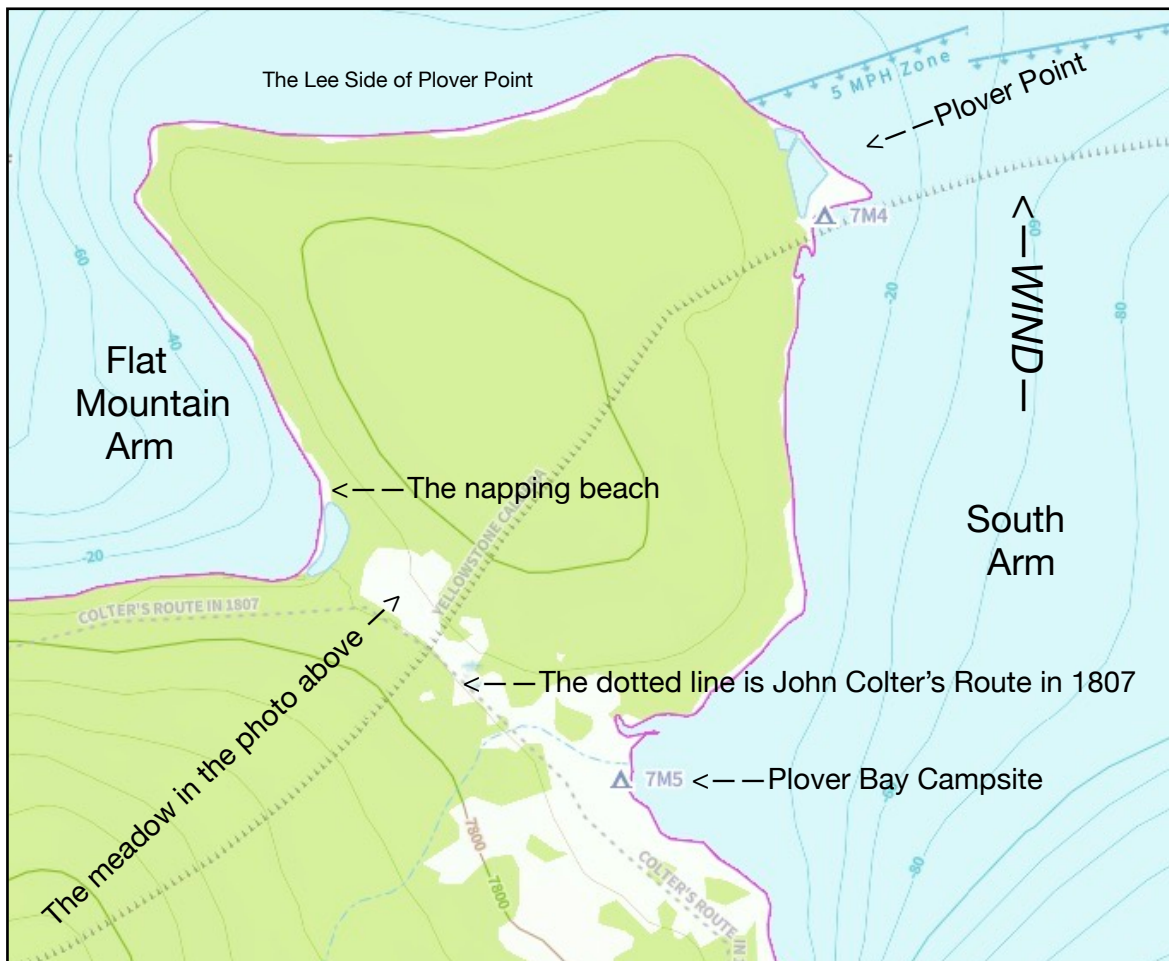
The napping beach on the east shore at Flat Mountain Arm.

With my attention concentrated on the bear, I did not pay close enough attention to my compass. I was heading south. I should have been heading south east to make a quick return to my camp on the shores of Plover Bay. After two hours of going in the wrong direction, I turned directly east and found the shore of the Lake quickly. I had emerged on the beach about 1/2 mile south of my camp.

I walked north along the shore and returned to my camp right about dinner time, 4:00PM. After I had a hot meal and washed my dishes, I started packing my gear for an early morning departure. I had decided to return to Wolf Bay on the morning of 12 September, Day 5. My weather radio was predicting stormy weather for a couple of days. I was hoping to travel to the end of South Arm, but I did not want to be caught 24 miles from Grant Village with several days of unpredictable weather ahead. Plover Bay was nice, but it was time to go.



As I started across another open meadow, I was a sitting duck. I carried my bear spray in my hand not on my belt. I put the safety (the white clip) in my pocket. I was ready.



The weather on my final evening at Plover Bay was beautiful. The wind died at about 7:15PM and the mountains of the Washakie Wilderness were splattered with purple and pink and orange. I had not caught very many fish, but the walk in Colter's footsteps more than made up for it. My goal was to row back to Wolf Bay on the morning of the fifth day. I had no way to predict how soon the wind would appear, so I planned to be on the water at first light. I packed all but my tent and sleeping bag the night before.. I was hoping to launch at 6:00AM on the morning of 12 September, Day 5.



Plover Bay sunset.

The wind woke me up at 4:30AM. This trip broke all the weather rules. The morning is usually the calmest part of the day and the best time to be rowing. Based on the weather I saw on the previous evening, I was hoping to row out of South Arm without any trouble. No such luck. The sky was covered by ominous clouds and roller waves were slapping the beach. I thought things were only going to get worse and loaded the canoe quickly. The water was bad, the wind was bad and the sky was bad. I put my head down and kept rowing. I got around Plover Point and into the lee of the headland with some effort. I was glad to be in the calm water and was dreading the crossing at Flat Mountain Arm.

When I got to Flat Mountain Arm, the wind was a fraction of what I had seen in South Arm. It made for an enjoyable early morning crossing. I was headed toward Eagle Bay when I saw a bald eagle, then another and another. Bald eagles eat fish primarily and Eagle Bay was accurately named. The congregation of bald eagles indicated to me that there must be fish in the Bay making for easy pickings for hungry birds. I made the short crossing at Eagle Bay, but vowed to camp there next year for a chance at some good fishing.



Day Five, Plover Bay sunrise, 12 September.

After passing Eagle Bay, the only reason to continue on to Wolf Bay was to be within striking distance of Grant Village if the weather got unbearable. The wind at Wolf Bay was again just a fraction of what I had seen in South Arm. I set up my camp in the same site I had on days 1 and 2. I got out on the Bay for some fishing, but the wind came up and quickly blew me off the water.

Campsite 7L5 is a “multi-group” site. That means you may have as many as three groups in the busy parts of the summer, but after Labor Day, demand for campsites on Yellowstone Lake slows to a crawl. On this day however, another group of boaters arrived early in the afternoon. They did not come over to introduce themselves and it appeared they were going to be quiet, courteous neighbors. They set up their tents and went out fishing for the rest of the afternoon.

One thunderstorm after another came in from the north west and I was glad that I had decided to move from Plover Bay to Wolf Bay. The radio said it could last for a couple of days. Wolf Bay would be an adequate spot to wait out the storms. “Clear” weather was promised for several days after this batch of storms passed. I set up my kitchen with a tarp for cover and decided just to sit this weather out.

On Day 6 I decided to do some beach combing. Last year I found a native spear head on the beach and couldn’t hope to ever find anything like it again, but you never know. I hiked about a mile along the beach and brought nothing back of interest.

After a hot meal, I was in my sleeping bag at dark, about 8:00PM.



Campsite 7L5 and flat water at Wolf Bay



Another storm approaches at Wolf Bay

On the sixth day of the trip, I went to bed in stormy weather. I was awakened at midnight by a very strange repetitious groaning noise right outside my tent. I had never heard anything like it. I was trying to decide if it was maybe a bear... or maybe one of the neighboring campers that had been injured... or one of the neighbors that was having some sort of schizoid episode. Then whatever was making the sounds ran away toward the other group of campers. The moaning did not stop. The animal then charged back toward my tent and stopped just inches away. The moaning continued. It circled the camp several times running and stopping and running and stopping, still moaning. I was now sitting upright with the safety off my bear spray. The incident lasted about 4 to 5 minutes. The animal charged my tent several times and then left the scene as quickly as it had arrived. I had packed my gear for a departure at dawn on the morning of Day 7 and left Wolf Bay at 6:00AM without discussing the incident with any of the other campers at 7L5. When I got home to Oregon, I researched the moaning sound I had heard. What I found was... adult male black bears make a moaning sound when they are afraid or confused. Seeing several tents for the first time must have been unnerving for the frightened bear.

This link is pretty close to what I heard at Wolf Bay.

<https://www.facebook.com/YosemiteNPS/videos/black-bear-vocalizations/2585948285029873/>

Toward the end of this video the bear starts moaning, but in a higher octave.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lwbrown/4052587500>

Other sites say the moaning sound is an aggressive vocalization. Whatever caused the bear to start moaning is immaterial at this point. It was certainly unnerving... to me.

I learned an important lesson at Wolf Bay on the night of 13 September. I sat in my tent and listened while the unknown animal charged my tent repeatedly. I will never do that again. I have met these night time marauders before. On a canoe trip in September of 1986 I was camped on an island on the Smith River in Montana. I heard something rustling through my gear in the middle of the night. In a sleepy daze I thought it was another boater stealing my stuff. I jumped out of the tent and found a bear looking for something to eat. I keep a very clean camp and when he saw me in my bright red union suit, he took off. I made the mistake at Wolf Bay of just sitting in my tent. I had a pretty good idea what was making the moaning sounds. I should have acted... gotten out of the tent with my pepper spray and confronted the bear. If it had been a grizzly bear it probably would have killed me, but I was pretty close to certain it was a black bear, even though I could not identify the moaning. Live and learn.

The following morning I was on the water at my usual time of 6:00AM and did not have a chance to talk to the other campers about the crazed intruded of the night before. I had sat out two days of thunderstorms at Wolf Bay and I was now heading to my favorite campsite on the Lake at Breeze Bay... with the promise of good weather.

There is a sand spit at Wolf Bay that is the longest of any of the stops I have made on Yellowstone Lake. If you are heading north, you must first get around the end of the sand spit that points south. The sand spit at Wolf Bay is more than a quarter mile long. So you have rowed a half mile just to get back to the latitude of your campsite starting point. In the protection of the Bay at dawn the water was calm, but as soon as I rounded the sand spit and headed north toward Breeze Bay the water was choppy. Again I had bad water after an evening of nice weather. Last year I had a severe storm come up at dawn and it put me in trouble to start the day. The first photo to the right was taken inside Wolf Bay behind the protection of the sand spit. The second photo was taken in the open Lake on my way to Breeze Bay. Quite a difference.

The pontoons on my canoe did their job and I made the short trip to Breeze Bay without any trouble.

The sand spit at Breeze Bay was giving good protection to the water on its lee side, even though the windward side was pretty ugly. I put the pontoon boat together before I had any breakfast and caught fish almost immediately. Breeze Bay is a wonderful place to camp. One of my all-time favorites. I had three days ahead of me at Breeze Bay and I was looking forward to them.



Calm water in Wolf Bay at sunrise, 14 September,



Morning chop between Wolf Bay and Breeze Bay.

My typical Yellowstone Lake camp consists of a chair, a table, a stove, a tarp, two gear boxes, lockable food boxes, a four season tent, lots of yummy food, but no alcohol. If something goes wrong, I don't want alcohol to be the cause. In the photo, the front of the tarp is laid back but can be flipped forward and tied down to keep me completely out of the rain. I usually do not have a night time fire, even if the National Park Service allows it. I am usually in bed when it gets dark.... about 8:00PM.



Typical Yellowstone Lake camp. This one happens to be at Plover Bay.

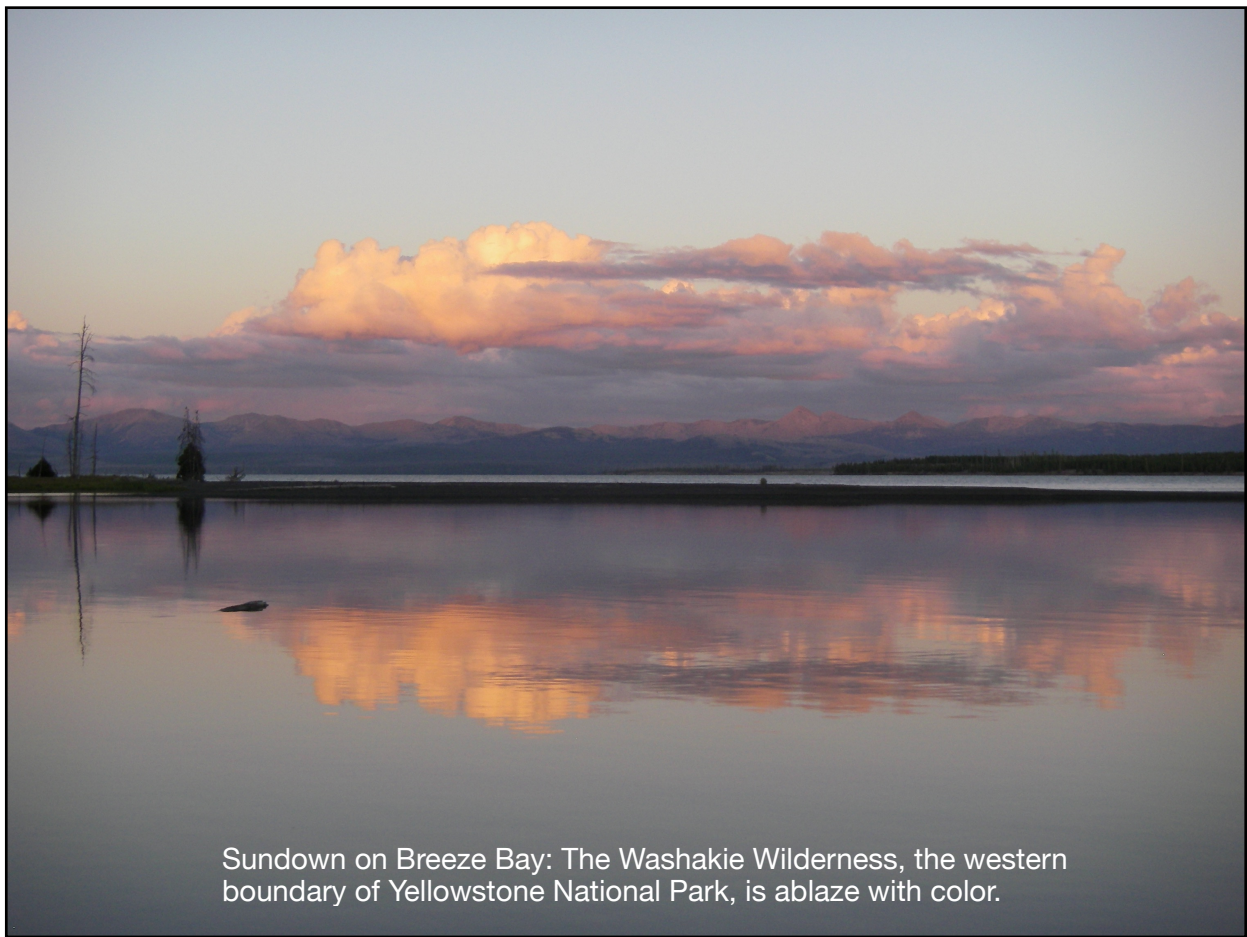
The weather on Day 8 was perfect. Calm water lasted most of the day. After a great fishing session and some breakfast, I decided to hike along the beach to campsite 7L2 on the southern shore of Breeze Bay. I had camped at 7L2 before and found a beautiful spear head, about 2 inches long, there in 2022. I did not expect to find another native artifact to match it, but you never know. Half way around the Bay, tall bluffs are broken by a ravine that opens into the Lake. The beach at its mouth always has some interesting footprints.



Boulders on the beach at 7L2

There are huge boulders in the middle of meadows around the Yellowstone Park and I have been told they were dropped there by receding glaciers. These large rocks left on the beach at 7L2 could only have been delivered there in the same way, thousands of years ago.

Sundown at Breeze Bay can paint the Washakie Wilderness peaks in a backcountry art exhibit that I have never gotten tired of. The forested point of land at center/right in the photo is the southern boundary of Breeze Bay... about 1.75 miles to reach in open water. The Bay in the foreground, inside the sand spit, is filled with weed beds making this site my favorite fishing spot. The rest of the Bay was rippled, but behind the sand spit I saw no big rollers or white-caps for my two days at Breeze Bay. It was wonderful.



Sundown on Breeze Bay: The Washakie Wilderness, the western boundary of Yellowstone National Park, is ablaze with color.

I have learned that on backcountry trips, something always goes wrong and something always goes amazingly right.

Gone Wrong?... On Day 2 my phone went dead... even though I had it fully charged on the night before my put in. If you don't shut it down between photos, it will continue to search for service and deplete the battery. Maybe I forgot to shut it down. I carry a fully charged solar charger also and it is usually good for at least one full charge of my phone, but when I tried to use it, it was dead also. I have no idea why. I used my old standby camera for the next 6 days, which does not take the best digital photos you have ever seen.

Then.... on the evening of Day 8, I thought I had lost my back up camera. After taking a picture of a nice fish I returned to camp. When I thought to look at the photo I could not find the camera anywhere. I got in the boat and rowed along the shoreline where I had photographed the fish, but could not find it. I convinced myself I had dropped it over the side in the lake. I was mad, disgusted. Eight days of photos.... gone. I sat there at my favorite campsite with the promise of another beautiful day on its way tomorrow. I was scheduled to stay at Breeze Bay on the night of 15 September and row out on Day 10, After the camera incident, I decided to pack up and leave on Day 9. I packed my camp and left for Grant Village at dawn on the morning of Day 9. I made it there in record time... 2 ½ hours. I did not find my camera until I got home to Oregon. Maybe I'm losing it.

Gone Right?.... I was beaten by the wind on Day 1. I had decided to row out and go home on Day 2. My discovery of using the kick boat pontoons as outriggers saved the day. I was proud of myself for being confident enough to turn around on Day 2 and continue. It was the shot of positivity that made the rest of the trip possible.

Thunderstorms came and thunderstorms went. I had a better tarp system this year and just hunkered down in its shade. Let it rain.

I learned something from the bear that raced around my campsite on the night of Day 6. It was another animal encounter that I will never forget.

I saw more eagles on this trip than ever before. It added to my positivity.

I learned to keep my eye on the compass, no matter how distracted you might become with the possibility of a bear in the brush.

I learned I can do without my two big water cans (20 lbs each) and just live on filtered water from the Lake.

I brought back too much food and will correct that in the future.

The pontoons not only stabilized the canoe, but made it faster. They kept it from bobbing around in the water and made the hull more efficient. In good water and no wind on 16 September, I rowed in record time.



Gary at campsite 7L2, 15 September, 2023. My camp at 7L1 is on the opposite shore.

I can't believe I have to wait an entire year before I get to go back. Sheesh, life is hard.