

A Week in the Wilderness

In Wyoming backcountry I saw mountain peaks, marshy meadows, grazing elk, and real-life cowboys. But nothing was more remarkable than what I saw inside.

By ANNA DUBROVSKY

It was getting dark by the time we crossed into Yellowstone National Park, and a sign at the entrance had me worried. It wasn't the warnings about bear maulings or bison gorings. "Camp only in designated campgrounds," the sign said, and it listed twelve. Eleven were marked "full." It hadn't occurred to us to reserve a patch of dirt.

At the still-open campground, Lewis Lake, we drove in circles searching for a spot. The only unoccupied site was the one reserved for hikers and bicyclists. My friend Jason and I pulled into a parking lot and crawled into the bed of his pickup, eschewing flashlights so as not to attract park rangers. This is how I spent my first

night in Wyoming: squatting in America's oldest national park. It wasn't Yellowstone that drew me to Wyoming in August. A few months earlier, Jason had proposed a week of backcountry exploration in the Wind River mountain range. The "Winds," as they're known, include Wyoming's highest summit, Gannett Peak, but get less press than the showier Tetons. They stretch more than 100 miles. Vast swaths of the Winds are U.S. Forest Service "wilderness areas," which means no roads and no vehicles, no toilets or tap water. It means no trash cans—you carry out what you carry in. It means most Americans will never visit.

ing, too. But little of the camping I'd done since childhood could be classified as "backcountry." Always there was a vehicle in sight, a bathroom around the bend, or, at the very least, a kayak moored nearby. I'd never slept in a tent for six nights. I'd never shouldered a pack the size of a tuba.

In the weeks leading up to the trip, I

We'd eat trail mix, freeze-dried foods, and fresh trout. Jason's a mountain man. We dated some years ago, and much of what I know about living outdoors I learned from him. Instead of flowers and chocolates, he wooed me with fleeces, halogen headlamps, and a sleeping bag suitable for sub-zero conditions. Our relationship unraveled after he surprised me with an RV instead of a ring, but we remain good friends. He agreed to show me Yellowstone before we disappeared into the mountains—to ease me into the wild.

I flew from Pittsburgh to Jackson Hole Airport by way of Dallas. (The environ-

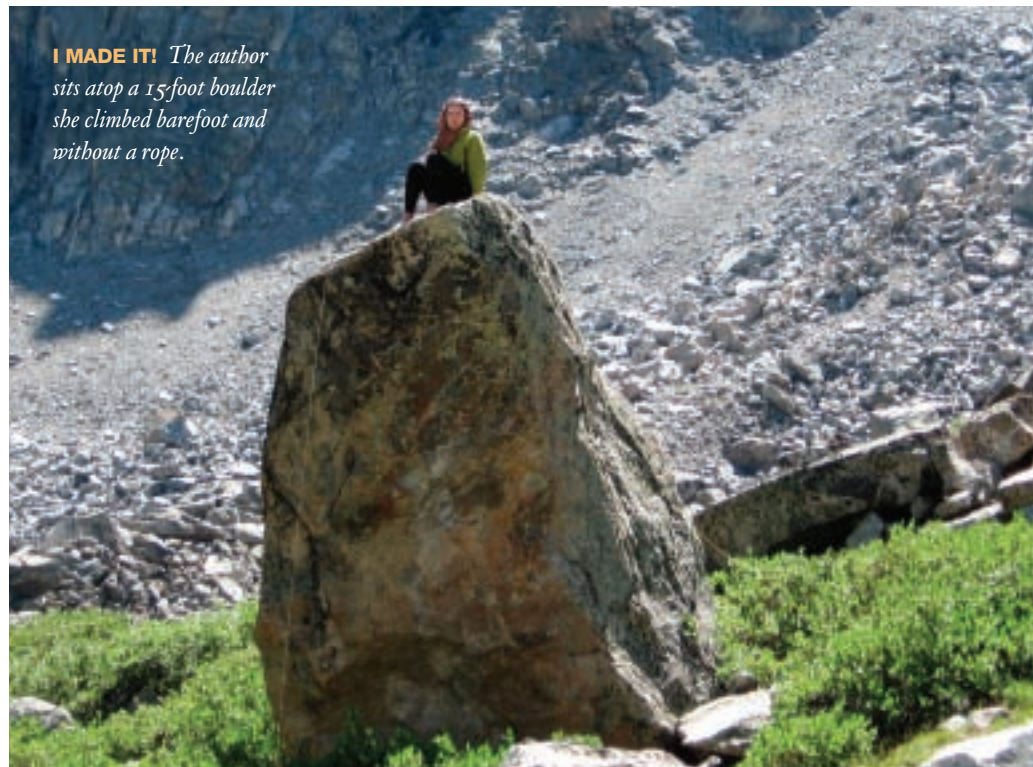
Time spent in nature is a sabbath in the truest sense. I loosen my grip on life's steering wheel and take deeper breaths.

mental cost of my return to nature makes me cringe. I like to think I offset it by not touching a car or light switch for more than a week.) Jackson Hole is a resort town that defines rugged chic. The main square is crowded with stores selling carabiners, >>

fretted over logistics. "What about toilet paper—used toilet paper?" I asked Jason, who lives in Salt Lake City. How would we bathe? What would we eat? Jason offered reassurances. The toilet paper we'd bury. Streams and lakes would serve as baths.

I said yes with some reservations. I love hiking. The sounds of it seduced me years ago. I'm not talking about the chirping of birds or howling of winds; those are city tunes, too. I'm talking about the rhythms of sole meeting terrain: the crunch of gravel or pine needles, the rattle of loose rocks, the slurp of mud. I'm soothed by them, transported from tense to tranquil on even the shortest of trails. I love camp-

I MADE IT! *The author sits atop a 15-foot boulder she climbed barefoot and without a rope.*





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sweat-wicking coordinates, cowboy hats, and chandeliers made of antlers. A three-bedroom ranch house at the edge of town—last remodeled in 1975—commands \$1.3 million. Jason and I stayed just long enough to picnic and purchase a \$25 piece of nylon to cover my backpack in case of rain. Then we drove north to Yellowstone.

I wanted to hate the park. I wanted to shake my head and cluck at the commercialization of nature. Wyoming is the nation's least-populated state. Yellowstone has six times as many visitors per year as Wyoming has residents. In my pack was a tattered copy of the Edward Abbey eco-classic *Desert Solitaire*. Abbey would have regarded Yellowstone, with its paved roads, traffic jams, gas stations, and general stores, as the work of madmen. In the 1968 memoir, he argued that cars should be banned from national parks:

Let the people walk. Or ride horses, bicycles, mules, wild pigs—anything—but keep the automobiles and the motorcycles and all their motorized relatives out. We have agreed not to drive our automobiles into cathedrals, concert halls, art museums, legislative assemblies, private bedrooms, and the other sanctums of our culture; we should treat our national parks with the same deference, for they, too, are holy places.

But I couldn't hate Yellowstone. It's magnificent. It's a wonderland of waterfalls, bubbling mud pots, hissing fumaroles, and rainbow-colored hot springs. We endured traffic jams. We didn't get a lick of solitude. But I made eye contact with a bull elk. A herd of bison lumbered past us. Experiencing Yellowstone is like drinking Dom Pérignon from Styrofoam cups: splendor in unsavory packaging.

By the time we rumbled over the long, unpaved road that leads to the Green River Lakes Campground, our doorway to the Winds, it was 1 a.m. I drifted in and out of sleep but shot up when I spotted an owl perched on a road marker post. Jason

Anna Dubrovsky is a contributing editor of Yoga+.

{ HOW TO BE A GOOD CITIZEN IN THE WILD }

Backcountry travel isn't about boldly going where no man has gone before. It's about treading lightly on established trails whenever possible. Blazing new ones scars the land. Take your cues from the Wilderness Act of 1964: Wilderness is "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Here are a few guidelines:

- When traveling off-trail, avoid sensitive soils and vegetation. Group members should spread out so you don't create paths.
- Camp in high-use areas whenever possible, to avoid creating new campsites.
- Avoid camping closer than 200 feet (about 70 steps) to water and trails.
- Pack out all trash. Inspect campsites for litter before moving on.
- Bury human feces thoroughly in small "cat holes" dug 6 to 8 inches deep at least 200 feet from water, trails, or camp. Use white, unscented toilet paper sparingly. Bury it well in the cat hole or place in a sealable bag and pack out.
- Leave rocks, plants, and artifacts as you find them for others to enjoy.
- Camp stoves are preferable to campfires in many areas because they eliminate the need for firewood and help to leave no trace.

To learn more about outdoor ethics, go to www.lnt.org.

shifted into reverse for a better look, but the nocturnal raptor was gone.

The next morning we met the rest of our party: friends of Jason's who'd driven from Salt Lake City. There were eight of us—three women and five men—plus two dogs. Youngest was Sean, a college student who turned 20 that day. The oldest was Norm, a 50-year-old mailman who began making annual pilgrimage to the Winds with his wife, Alison, more than a decade ago. We cooked a hearty breakfast, stuffed our packs with some 400 pounds of supplies, and took turns in the wooden outhouses, the last bathrooms we'd see for a week. Then, single file, we headed south on the Highline Trail. We skirted the larger of the Green River Lakes and the smaller, and then we were engulfed in a forest of gangling pines.

I am not a naturalist; I don't know the names of things. I can't tell an ash from an elm or a primrose from a peony. Pheasant or wild turkey? Beats me. The words, if I had them, would anyway fail to convey what I saw. Wilderness possesses an exquisiteness that language cannot capture. As Abbey wrote, it "has the curious ability to remind us that *out there* is a different world, older and greater and deeper

by far than ours, a world which surrounds and sustains the little world of men...For a little while we are again able to see, as the child sees, a world of marvels."

Our second day of trekking was a mostly uphill affair. I lost count of the switchbacks and lost sight of my companions. Admiring the scenery would have been unwise; I watched my footing instead, head down, wincing as newly acquired blisters ground against hiking boots. Worse were the afflictions of my mind. I was sixth in our train. Too weak to catch the leaders and too proud to wait for the laggards, I berated myself for my cardiovascular shortcomings and fought off resentment at the mighty-lunged front-runners. (My hiking mates included three bike racers and a marathoner, Bob, who's competing in the U.S. Olympic trials in November.) I willed humility to triumph over frustration and ego.

That afternoon found us sprawled in a meadow near Summit Lake. The struggles—physical and mental—of walking in the wild are more than compensated for by the ecstasy of stopping. I yanked off my boots and turned my sweat-drenched back toward the sun. Wrapped in the rays of a star 93 million miles away, I slept. >>

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IN WYOMING'S "WINDS" *Enjoying the sunset beside Peak Lake.*

Less than half an hour later, I was slapped awake by gusts of wind. A gray curtain had fallen, accompanied by a crescendo of thunder. I scrambled to my feet, wriggled into my socks and boots, and dug out my rain jacket.

It didn't rain. Instead, we got sheets of hail. I resumed my march to the beat of ice pellets. They pricked my jacketed shoulders and stung my bare hands. Summit Lake, mirror-like just moments earlier, roiled. The hail-littered trail looked like a Beanie Baby slaughter field. I forgot my pains and the weight of my pack as I pressed ahead. I felt giddy.

This unpredictability is something I love about the wild. Wilderness coaxes spontaneity from even the most myopic of men. It prohibits routine. Outdoors, we're forced to improvise. We escape from our mostly scripted, temperature-controlled daily lives. *We let go.* Time spent in nature is a sabbath in the truest sense. I loosen my grip on life's steering wheel, shake the tension from my hands, and take deeper breaths. I sleep longer.

Our first four days were marked by schizophrenic weather and frequent costume changes. One moment I'd be lounging in a tank top, and the next I'd be sprinting around camp, yanking laundry from radiator-hot rocks before diving into a tent to wait out a thunderstorm.

The topography changed constantly, too. The Wind River mountain range is a patchwork of incongruous terrains. We started our Day 6 hike by descending a steep, treeless talus field crawling with spiders. The hard, sharp rocks gave way to soft, gently sloping meadows studded with flowers. Halfway through the six-hour trek, we entered a pine forest. Roots snaked across the trail; raspberry bushes and mushrooms the size of baseball caps grew alongside it. Sunset brought the biggest change. The forest, in the space of 15 minutes, went from idyllic to ominous. We fished out headlamps and trudged to our final camp. I dreamt of grizzly bears and ax-wielding drifters.

I felt fearful but also daring. Nature invites us to experience extremes, both internal and external. That week in August, I hiked more than 40 miles—and arrived at an inner stillness. I shivered in my tent and baked in the sun. I unfurled my yoga mat in a grassy field; I threw a snowball. I climbed a 15-foot boulder barefoot and marveled at what I found inside: pairs of opposite emotions. I felt humble and proud; alone and connected; tiny and titanic. Then I climbed down and clung to them all. +

Courtesy of Anna Dubrovsky

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