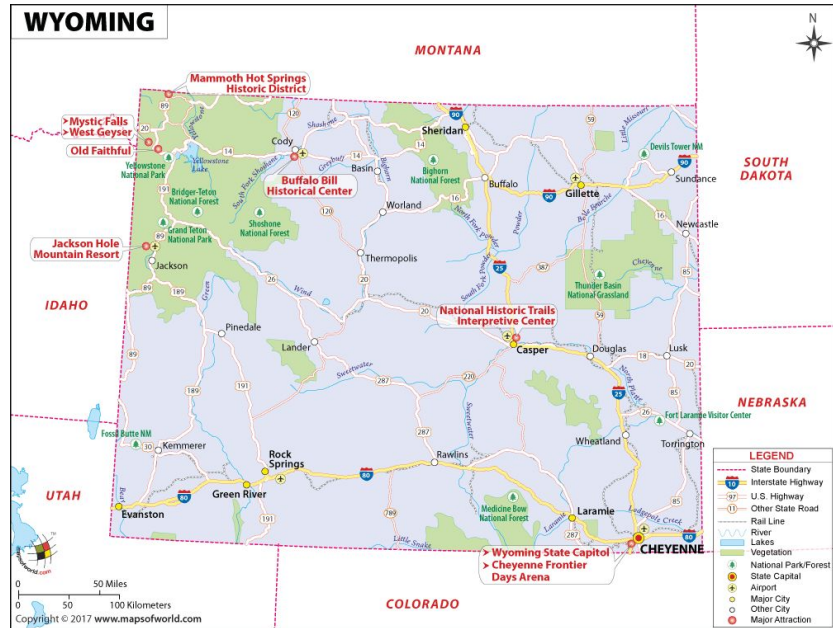


A week in the "Winds" August 2020

The “Winds”: The Wind River Range lies on the western edge of Wyoming. One of the of the largest mountain ranges in the US, the Winds is an enormous, remote wilderness reserve. It comprises an area of 2.25 million acres and straddles the Continental Divide as it runs NW to SE for ~100 miles. It contains Wyoming’s highest [Gannett] and third highest peaks [Fremont]. Formed primarily of hard granite, the Wind River Range has been a rock climbing mecca for many years.



Access to the part of the Winds we visited was through the Jackson, Wy airport, then a 78 mile drive to Pinedale, followed by a 15 mile further drive to the Elkhart Trailhead.

The trip: My friend Doug and I had been discussing the possibility of a Winds trip for the past several years. Originally planned for 2021 we moved it forward a year because COVID-19 had cancelled all adventure travel excursions. The area we decided to explore was the one near Island Lake, a 15 mile hike from the nearest trailhead [Elkhart]. Because of the distances involved and the length of the trip Doug, the official trip organizer, hired an outfitter who would do a gear drop for us, lightening our backpack load considerably.



Doug assembled a group of six persons, either folks we knew from previous AMC AT trips or personal friends.

The hiking environment: We camped at 10,500' This required considerable acclimatization. Since we were staying in a high alpine zone, there were short stubby conifer trees spread among low brush, and many rocks. The earth ground had many small undulations in it, making even short walks a moderate challenge. Water was plentiful with streams and lakes throughout the area. The area is a known bear habitat, so organization of the 'kitchen' and food storage were important.

Given the remoteness of the area, there were a surprisingly high number of hikers coming and going. Ages ranged from early twenties [i.e. the ones with the biggest packs] to those 'of a certain age.'

Weather: High sixties during the days and freezing at night. Virtually no rain - we were lucky in that regard as afternoon thundershowers are common.

The hiking: This was probably the hardest trip I have ever done, certainly during the past ten years. Typical outings were 10-15 miles in length with an elevation gain of 1,500' - 2,500' These parameters are well within the range of hikes I do. The challenge came from: 1) the terrain - the trails had a high proportion of loose irregularly shaped rock, averaging one - four feet in diameter. Concentration on foot placement and balance was always a high priority. 2) altitude - I found myself often breathing hard and sometimes out-of-breath. At the end of the week my breathing had improved considerably. Notable destinations included: Indian Basin, Lester Pass, Titcomb Basin.

Sleeping: The nights were cold, usually just above freezing. Typically everyone turned in ~8PM when the sun went down and did not arise until 630AM, 10 ½ -11 hours of tent time. Given the altitude and the day time exertions, we needed every minute.

"Fine dining" - Since our food supplies came in by mule, we had, at least by mountaineering standards, excellent food throughout. Breakfast was typically oatmeal loaded with nuts [depending on the day it could be pecan, almond, walnut, or pistachio] and maple sugar. Lunch was simple, usually bars with some supplement - I have two new favorites: [RXBars](#) and [peanut butter filled pretzel bits](#). They are both nutritious and travel well. The inclusion of chocolate covered peanut butter cups did not go well - the cups melted and made a mess inside the lunch bags. On the trail my water was often enhanced by small additions of 'lemonade' or 'ice tea' flavorings. These encouraged drinking of water, important in the dry climate. Dinner included typical 'one pot' fare such as chili, pasta augmented by canned chicken, but also stuffed grape leaves and babaganoush on crackers, sardines, smoked oysters, etc. Commercially available freeze-dried vegetable bits were often added to the main dish to enhance the meal. Because the mules were doing the heavy lifting, bourbon and red wine were also in plentiful supply. We ate well.

Fishing - The Island Lake area is popular for fishing, the lakes having been stocked during the 1930's. Most of the fish caught were California Golden trout - very rare in the Rockies. Many hikers brought fishing poles along, including several in our group.

Flowers - The snow melts by early July, so the blooming of flowers is delayed. We saw many fields of red, yellow, and blue flowers along the trails in the lower elevations.

Smoke - During the last few days, the sky turned from bright blue to a hazy brown. Smoke from the enormous wildfires in California had reached Wyoming. Breathing was harder and the views substantially curtailed.

Camaraderie - A critical element to the trip's success was the easy camaraderie between the participants. Their backgrounds are diverse: a urologist, a retired special forces helicopter pilot, an industrial health consultant, a technology entrepreneur with very similar background to my own, and a retired air force dentist who has almost completed a section hike of the Appalachian Trail. Everyone was very fit and able to successfully complete all the hikes. As important, everyone was aggressively helpful in performing common tasks and genuinely interested in one another's thoughts/opinions. Particularly during this period of self-isolation due to the epidemic, a sustained set of close, positive, natural interactions with others was much appreciated.

Photographs - coming soon.....

Submitted 8/24/2020 by Stephen Cohen