

June 16

My wife, Barbara and I have longed dreamed of going to Grand Teton, Yellowstone, and Glacier National Parks. For us, it was one of those *someday we will go*. For me, it began as a child. One of my favorite books was *Famous Heroes of the Old West* (maybe not the exact title). The story that particularly caught my imagination concerned John Colter. A member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Colter remained in the mountains instead of returning east with the Corps of Discovery. In his wanderings, he found himself in Yellowstone. His tales of this fantastical landscape led to its being designated “Colter’s Hell.” Before I met Barbara in college, I was infatuated with a girl whose dorm room featured a poster photo of the Tetons, where she’d worked the previous summer. In retrospect, I wonder how much of my infatuation was towards her or towards knowing someone who spent a summer in a place more beautiful than anything in my experience. Ansel Adams’ classic photo of Lake McDonald in Glacier caused me to tell myself *I have to go there — someday*.

The Ken Burns National Parks series spurred Barbara and me to stop putting off *someday*. The next year would be our 40th wedding anniversary. We knew where we were going to celebrate. I began planning the trip. On our 39th anniversary at Lodgepole Campground in Sequoia, we came up with a tentative itinerary. I reserved a campsite at Bridge Bay by Yellowstone Lake, a frontier cabin at Canyon Lodge, a Roughrider cabin at Roosevelt Lodge, and a cabin at Swiftcurrent Motor Inn in Glacier. Though nearly a year in advance, cabins with bathrooms were already booked at Roosevelt and Swiftcurrent. For the rest of the trip we’d camp at first-come campgrounds in Grand Teton, Yellowstone, and Glacier.

On June 16, 2013, we embark on our long-anticipated trip, heading for the day to Twin Falls, Idaho, for a night in a motel before driving the next day to Grand Teton. This is the first time since the 1970s we’ve traveled on I-80 east of Sacramento. Except for more strip malls and fast food joints, it’s almost unchanged in over 30 years. The section beyond Auburn is especially beautiful with tall pine trees and the distinctive rock formations of the Sierra. At some points, the view glimpsed south to the peaks of Desolation Wilderness is stunning. Donner Summit and Donner Lake culminate the climb; at this time of year, they are especially beautiful.

The descent from Donner Summit through the canyon is thrilling until it widens out and Nevada crassness commences. The multi-story casinos are completely out of place, an abomination rising 20, 30 or more stories

above the backdrop of the flat desert. East of Reno, the sagebrush desert is punctuated by barren mountains on the horizon. One drives for an hour at 75-80 mph, reaches those mountains, and discovers another flat desert with distant mountains on the horizon. The Ruby Mountains in eastern Nevada are the highest and most striking, stretching for many miles north to south. In the afternoon light they are especially distinctive, helping the miles pass quickly.

The one big change from the 1970s is I-80 now bypasses the towns — Lovelock, Winnemucca, Battle Mountain, and so on. Instead of having to slow down to 30 mph and go through town, one speeds by and sees only the big casinos and the symbols for local gas stations and fast food restaurants on the exit signs.

At Wells, we head north on Highway 93. Fascinating rock formations instead of sagebrush align the road. For almost 90 miles there is virtually no sign of human habitation except for wooden signs indicating dirt roads heading east or west to locations miles away. Then just before the Idaho border we come to Boomtown, another crass casino town filled by a steady stream of cars coming from Twin Falls. We cross into Idaho at 6:15 PM, adding a new state to our tally. In Twin Falls, we get a take-out pizza and go to our motel for the night, satisfied with our day and anticipating arriving at Grand Teton tomorrow.

June 17

It is an uneventful drive (except for minor construction detours) on I-84 and I-15. When we exit I-15 at Idaho Falls, the street signs point to Highway 20 to the right with no indication of east or west. We quickly realize we're heading west. In circling back, we run into dead ends and one-way streets. Back on 20 East heading out of Idaho Falls, we follow a nearly magical stretch through Swan Valley on the west side of the Tetons. Newer, upscale homes testify to the area's desirability. We ascend and descend steep Teton Pass to Jackson Hole, which is a tourist trap oriented towards upper income visitors. Once through town, the drive is gorgeous, with the Tetons to the west and lush plains stretching for miles to mountains in the east.

At the park entrance in Moose, we learn the fee covers both Grand Teton and Yellowstone. We enjoy lunch on the shoreline of String Lake by the picnic area. There are many organized groups and families on the shoreline and paddling on the lake. Past Jackson Lake Lodge, we encounter two separate sections of major construction projects each involving sitting in a long line of cars and RVs for over fifteen minutes.

Lizard Creek Campground is near the north end of Jackson Lake on a wide peninsula. From internet research, we've learned this is the best campground in the park for tent camping. There are many vacant sites, including those with lake views. We choose a large one with no neighbors on one side and a view of Jackson Lake. This site is so nearly perfect, we wonder if any of our subsequent ones will compare.

Sunset on Jackson Lake is more beautiful than I ever hoped for. We walk a few steps down to the lakeshore, the water lapping on the small beach. We return to our picnic table to watch twilight on the lake and forest.

June 18

The sunrise over Jackson Lake is even lovelier than sunset, with the morning light shining on the mountains across the lake. I walk along the shoreline, encountering no one as I enjoy the changing views of the distant Tetons while seeking out photos.

This morning we drive down to the Rockefeller Preserve. The day hikes there seem more promising in terms of terrain and length since the trail we were considering nearby is closed. We get lucky with the construction at only one location and only about a three minute delay. From the Moose entrance we proceed down the Wilson Road, a narrow strip of blacktop — precisely two cars wide — paralleling the Snake River through a lovely forest.

The Rockefeller Preserve parking lot is crowded so we realize this is more popular than expected. We decide to hike the Aspen Ridge Trail to Phelps Lake in a loop. For the first mile there are lots of people of varying ages. We turn left on the Aspen Ridge Trail and see no one for the next three miles. The trail winds up and down, but essentially ascends the ridge and follows its contours. There is an enchanting creek a little after the first mile. The trail follows alongside the bubbling water for a quarter mile or more before climbing back to the ridge. The views west extend to the valley we'd driven through the day before. To the north, the Tetons occasionally come into view, causing us to pause and appreciate their splendor.

When we reached Phelps Lake we are among people again. There are many families with children and people our age or older. The lake is pretty, but not particularly striking. The attraction is it's a large body of water within a relatively easy hike. We follow the shoreline trail seeking a place to eat lunch. A boardwalk goes over a scenic marshy section. About

a quarter or a third of a mile down the lake along the shoreline, an off-trail lakeside location with a view across the lake is a good place to sit for lunch.

The first half mile back to the trailhead down the Lake Creek Trail is particularly beautiful walking through meadow and forest with the creek on the left. When the descent begins, the switchbacks take one away from the creek except for short encounters with the cascading water.

On the drive back to Lizard Creek, we check out crowded Jenny Lake Campground and follow the scenic road for Jenny Lake. We park at the Jenny Lake overlook and follow the paved lake view trail. A storm brews over the Tetons so the clouds and light are stunning on the water and mountains. When the rain begins, we resume our drive. The storm ends after a few minutes.

We revel in another evening and morning at Lizard Creek with the spectacular sunset and sunrise. At sunset, the sun descends beyond the ridge extending north of Grand Teton. One family plays on the small beach. No other campers join us. We congratulate ourselves for choosing such a beautiful, quiet place and having such a wonderful day. We realize that in order to further experience Grand Teton we would need to venture into the backcountry. We've now been to the non-commercial frontcountry. We know we'll be inundated with the commercial park experience in Yellowstone and so have appreciated this opportunity for a couple of days of quiet camping in such a marvelous location.

June 19

I feel a sense of exhilaration when we come to the sign indicating we are entering Yellowstone National Park. I'm in "Colter's Hell." I'm struck by the sheer immensity of the place and the incredible juxtaposition of the wide winding river, small canyons, gigantic meadows (much larger than any in the Sierra), and the thermal features that defy human description. At Grant Village, we head along the road following Yellowstone Lake. Seeing it on the map and even photos hadn't prepared us for its immensity and beauty.

We arrive at Bridge Bay Campground about 11:00. The check-in procedure is like getting a wilderness permit, complete with bear lecture. They say it's okay to store food in one's car. I tell the nice woman about the video playing when you check-in at Yosemite Valley lodging of bears breaking into cars. We get a good campsite with some privacy in the woods. The tent sites with a view of the lake are few and I'm sure reserved a year in advance.

After lunch we head off on a hike. The trail to Natural Bridge is closed due to grizzly activity so we head down to the lake and walk and sit along the shore, enjoying the shoreline with views that extend far to the north and south and across the lake to mountains. It feels larger than life — though, of course, it is only a tiny beautiful part of our planet. We find a path back that avoids the road and takes us within three sites of our campsite. We follow the path back to an overlook of the lake for sunset and sunrise the following morning. The shifting light on Yellowstone Lake is breathtaking. This is a beautiful, completely unique place. And now we've seen it at its most beautiful.

June 20

We depart before 7:00 in hopes of finding a campsite at first-come Norris Campground for the next three nights. The road passes along the edge of Hayden Valley, the “Serengeti of Yellowstone.” Numerous bison roam the vast meadows. We pull over twice to look at the Yellowstone River and for wildlife. With the binoculars, we make out what seems to be a wolf wandering a far-away hillside. Even with the binoculars it is only a moving gray shape; only its size (and perhaps wishful thinking) leads us to conclude it's a wolf.

We arrived at Norris a little after 8:00. Each site has the registration receipt clipped on a post by the road with the exit date prominently displayed. Several say “9/20” so we have a choice. The ones in A loop on the meadow by the Gibbon River are lovely in terms of location, but overcrowded with little privacy except for those sites with campers staying on — the best one has “7/2” on its post; they've found a great place to stay while exploring the rest of Yellowstone. We drive up to C loop and find an excellent one, drive down, fill out the registration, drive back up and place our receipt with 6/23 on the post. The man who is there retrieving something from his truck confirms he is leaving.

Overjoyed with securing a great campsite for the next three nights, we drive to Norris Geyser Basin. Snow flakes fall, confirming how cold we feel it to be. There are two major loop trails. We choose the shorter of the two loops, Porcelain Basin, with the intention of taking the longer loop this afternoon.

Porcelain Basin turns out to be the most spectacular in terms of setting. The landscape is impossible to describe in human terms. Most of the time one walks on boardwalks because the ground is the crusty thermal material that can cause a major burn if one breaks through. Small geysers and steam

vents are scattered haphazardly over the basin. The air smells of sulphur. The colors are sometimes vivid — deep blue, green, yellow and red with shading that constantly varies. It is no wonder no one believed the tales told by the first white men to wander through Yellowstone. It is even startling to consider what the first batches of tourists thought, though we know many treated the geysers as novelties, tossing in coins in or chopping off pieces as souvenirs.

We return to our now vacant campsite a little before 11:00, set up the tent, eat lunch, and hike the one mile trail back to the geyser basin. We see no one on the trail either going or returning. Though we appreciate the solitude, more people should be taking advantage of this beautiful, easy walk.

The other section, Back Basin, is just as interesting as Porcelain, though not as spectacular in terms of colors. The world's largest geyser, Steamboat, is currently dormant. The seating area around it testifies to the large crowds that once gathered to watch its eruptions.

At Norris Campground two bison graze in the large meadow by the river. They wander at will, seemingly undisturbed by the campers. I name them Bill and Bob. When we go down to the river at sunset, one sleeps and grazes just across on the other side, giving no indication he notices the people watching him or taking his picture. The fading light shimmers on the river and meadow as the sun sets behind the ridge beyond the geyser basin.

June 21

At dawn, when I walk down to the river, the steam rises into the sky from geysers a mile away above the meadow on the other side of the road. In the first light of day, the shadows extend far over the meadow grass. Bill bison grazes at a campsite in the lower A loop, Bob by the museum of the National Park Ranger on the campground entrance road.

Up close, bison are peculiar beasts. Their dreadlock-like shaggy fur, short horns, massive bodies over spindly hooped legs, and enigmatic faces make it difficult to perceive a particular personality. They appear large and slothful and then suddenly burst with speed and energy. Despite the numerous herds wandering over most of Yellowstone, people nearly always stop their cars and photograph them. Perhaps for many of us they epitomize the legendary Old West. During my morning and evening walks at Norris, I notice cars pulling over to photograph one or both of the Norris bison, despite their distance from the road. When there's a small herd somewhat near the road, every inch of roadside parking is usually filled with onlookers. I wonder if the bison secretly laugh among themselves at all of us seemingly ridiculous humans.

Today we are exploring the Upper Geyser Basin. The parking lot by the Old Faithful Visitor Center complex is immense. We arrive early enough to pick a place by some trees so we can find our car easily later in the day.

If there is a place that actually lives up to its hype, it's Upper Geyser Basin. The Old Faithful eruption that most tourists see is only a small part of something much grander. As Barbara put it, it's as unique and diverse as if it were laid out as a conscious theme park. Except it's not an amusement park, it's the natural world, untouched by humans except for the boardwalks, trails, and benches. Besides erupting and steaming geysers, there are deep pools, bubbling pots, steam vents, and fumaroles with constantly changing vivid colors.

When we arrive, the clock in the Visitor Center tells us that Old Faithful should be erupting in about twenty minutes. We choose our seats and watch the many tourists from around the world find their own seats in the semi-circle viewing area. The eruption elicits audible "oohs" and "aahhs" along with hundreds of camera clicks. Simultaneously, another geyser erupts in the distance, its spray extending further into the sky than Old Faithful's and its eruption lasting longer.

We wander every trail of the basin up to Morning Glory Pool. On the way up Upper Geyser Basin, we witness two major eruptions, Giantess Geyser and Grand Geyser. Being up close makes a big difference from the more distant view of the Old Faithful viewing area. One almost feels inside the plume of water shooting skyward.

Along with the spectacular eruptions, we walk by numerous pots, pools, colorful fumaroles, and quieter geysers, some spewing steam, others totally dormant. Along the boardwalk by Daisy and bubbling Comet geysers, we witness Old Faithful erupting again in the distance. The geyser shapes are fascinating with the classic cone epitomized by Old Faithful, Grotto Geyser with its hobbit house-like "windows," to what proves to be the most spectacular, Castle Geyser.

We turn right to cross the Firehole River on a bridge when Castle Geyser begins erupting. As we approach, the geyser spray cascades down on us. It is thrilling and refreshing on this sunny, hot day. Beyond where the spray falls is a good place to stand, watch, and take photos. A large crowd encircles the other side outside of the sprays range. We gaze on the plume extending towards the sky in varying volume and height for at least ten minutes before heading on. The eruption endures for at least fifteen more minutes, though not with the same height as the initial blast.

While watching Castle Geyser from the distance, we pause at Anemone Geyser to watch it go through its several minute cycle of filling and draining its two separate caverns. As we are transfixed by Anemone, Old Faithful undergoes its third eruption a hundred yards away.

All geyser basins, especially Upper Geyser Basin, lead to a reconsideration of life itself. Humans exist only on the outer surface of our planet. Geysers inform us of the rich, marvelous, mysterious diversity that emanates from below the surface. Striking yellows, reds, oranges of thermaroles grow in the warm water. The blues and greens of the pools unpredictably change shades; signs inform us some of the pools extend an unfathomable distance below. And then there's the unpredictability of the geysers themselves. Old Faithful may regularly erupt, but most geysers erupt on whimsical schedules that even baffle the experts who study them for years. As humans seek to make everyday life as predictable as possible, geysers tells us the futility of such endeavors. That these unpredictable cycles have continued for thousands of years before the existence of humans reminds us of both how fleeting and insignificant human existence may be.

We make our way back to the now crowded parking lot, find our car by the trees, and return to our campsite at Norris after enjoying a very late lunch at a picnic area overlooking a beautiful meadow. After dinner, we are treated to another magical sunset on the meadow and Gibbon River.

June 22

Today is my 62nd birthday. I commence this new year in my life with a dawn walk on the dew covered meadow by the river.

We drive to Fairy Falls trailhead with the requisite two stops for wildlife. We are learning that any drive in Yellowstone involves cars suddenly pulling off the roadway or even stopping in the roadway. A bighorn sheep on the cliffs causes a major traffic jam in a small narrow canyon that lacks the larger roadside pull-outs. A wolf walking on a meadow south of Artist Paint Pots attracts a host of cars, including ours.

At the Fairy Falls trailhead there is the standard warning sign for possible grizzlies. A man tells us a mother and cubs were just seen. We decide to proceed anyway since we are both carrying bear spray and there are other hikers visible on the trail, We meet a couple of small groups returning. The level trail is a wide bike path where one can see ahead for

over a hundred yards. About a third of a mile in, Barbara sees a brown shape on the hillside to the left. With binoculars we are unable determine what it is since we only see part of its rear. A backpacker catches up, gets out his binoculars and can't tell either. We get walking and talking together. A minute later he checks again with his binoculars and realizes it is an elk.

We continue walking with the backpacker, who is a park intern from Chicago, discussing not only bears (he's working in bear management), but other things from hiking in Yellowstone to the Sierra. When we come to a creek crossing we wish him a good trip since he is able to negotiate the crossing much more quickly with his trekking poles. Barbara and I continue up the trail, fascinated by the changing landscape with its new pines growing amid the dead trees from the 1988 forest fire. We encounter two families and a backpacking couple. Rounding a bend, we see Fairy Falls descending almost 200 feet. The backpacker intern is just leaving after conferring with a trio of descending backpackers. We have the falls to ourselves. We enjoy taking photos and simply looking at the ribbon of water plunging into the pool. The view behind us of mountains rising beyond a large meadow is also stunning.

Reluctantly, we head back. We meet no one on the trail, enjoying a pleasant hike in solitude. At the junction with the bike path, the level stroll allows us to see the Middle Geyser Basin to the left; we failed to appreciate it on the way up due to talking with the backpacker. We arrive back at the trailhead. The people in the parking lot watch us intently. At the gate, we discover a "Trail Closed" sign has been erected in our absence due to the grizzly sow and cubs, explaining why we met no one on our return. We confess to each other we would like to have seen her (from a safe enough distance) since we've never seen a grizzly in the wild

We have a wonderful lunch at Firehole River picnic area. When the sun is out, the river shines, extending in both directions as far as we can see. After our leisurely lunch, we stop at Gibbon Falls where it begins drizzling, before going on to Artist Paint Pots. The drizzle becomes a steady, heavy rain. Barbara suggests driving to the Canyon Visitor Center and picking up my real birthday present, a Senior Pass, a lifetime passport to all the parks, for which I am now eligible.

I had fantasized about walking in and getting the pass on my 62nd birthday, but we found out Norris did not have passes. The rain briefly turns into snow on our drive to Canyon. We park in front of the Canyon Visitor Center. Inside at the information desk, I show my ID to the elderly ranger

who shows me his Senior Pass while getting mine. He agrees that this is the greatest gift for growing old in the U.S. My birthday fantasy is fulfilled.

As we drive back to Norris, the rain ends and the skies begin clearing. After a steak dinner, we receive another glorious sunset on the meadow and river, perhaps the finest of our three evenings here.

June 23

I climb out of the tent at dawn. Thirty feet away in the next campsite, Bob bison is grazing. As I am boiling water, Barbara gets up. With a smile, I point out the bison and head down to the river and meadow. It is a wonderful, magical sunrise with the mist on the river and meadow with frost shining on the grass.

When I return to our campsite, Barbara says Bob obviously grazed through our campsite. When he approached within a few feet of the picnic table, she vacated it for a few minutes until he continued into the next campsite.

At Canyon Village we head for the laundromat adjacent to the large campground. There are several people there, but lots of vacant washers and dryers. There are also many campers using the showers. It reminds us of a larger version of the laundry and shower facilities at Lodgepole Campground. While the washing machines are doing their job, I go to the Canyon Lodge registration and, to my surprise, find out our room is ready.

Canyon Village is a sprawling complex including the Visitor Center, large store, cafeteria, restaurant, bar, and lodge office surrounding three sides of an immense parking lot. The laundry, showers, and large campground encompass their own vast area a quarter mile away. Employee housing is the first structures on the road that runs behind the lodge office, bar, restaurant, and cafeteria. The road continues to the three loops of cabins. The more expensive western cabins are far from the loops of the cheaper frontier cabins. The first thing we do when we arrive at our frontier cabin with clean laundry is take showers, our first in six days.

Today we're going to the North Rim of the canyon to see the Upper and Lower Falls. I inquire at the Visitor Center about walking and am told the one trail from the lodge leaves from the far-away western cabins and we'd have to take the road to get to the trail. Since we have to drive anyway, we take the car to the brink of Upper Falls crowded parking area. We join the hordes of people at the overlook. The falls are magnificent. People are cooperative about vacating the edge of the overlook after taking their photos.

Returning to the parking lot, we drive to the brink of the Lower Falls parking lot. Again, we join the hordes descending one-third of a mile on a steep switchbacking trail. Some of the youngest and oldest people returning are having a difficult time. Again, people are courteous and cooperative at the two overlooks. The speed and power of the thundering falls is beyond clichés like “awesome.” I am struck by the primeval power of the water crashing down to the colorful canyon below.

We climb the switchbacks to the parking lot, passing people resting on the benches and rock walls. Back in the car, we join the traffic to Lookout Point. There, the parking lot is full of cars waiting for someone to leave so we drive to Grand View and find a space to park. Why is there no shuttle system in Yellowstone as in other National Parks? This seems the perfect place for one running from Canyon Village to the north and south rim drives. Think of how much better this scene would be without too many cars and the resulting frustration. We know we would have used a shuttle.

From Grandview, we follow the rim trail back to Lookout Point. Unlike at the Upper and Lower Falls, the crowd is distracting with all the families lining up for a portrait with the falls in the background. It’s expected, however, and we take it in stride. We return to Grand View and continue on the trail to Inspiration Point. On the trail, the hordes are absent. We pause at several places to admire the awe-inspiring views of the canyon’s yellow, brown, red, and white walls, and blue river far below. We now understand how the park got its name. Despite all we’ve read in advance, we are overwhelmed by the canyon’s beauty.

For dinner, we go to the picnic area by Chittenden Bridge at the beginning of the South Rim trail. We find a table above the bridge and river. The rushing water of the river below provides a soothing background.

After dinner we drive to Grand View and walk along the canyon rim for a quarter mile or so. We are the only people on the trail. Across the canyon at Artist Point, a large crowd gathers. We wave to them. The sunset light on the canyon and distant peaks is breathtaking. We linger in solitude until darkness. This is the most sublime moment of our stay in Yellowstone.

June 24

At dawn, I walk past the cabins across the road to what appears to be a trail. With its paved surface, it seems to be the remnants of a bike path. I follow it along the edge of the cabin road. At the far end of the cabin complex, the path heads off into the woods in the direction of the North Rim.

Many dead trees lie scattered on the path, but they don't present an obstacle. The path emerges out of the wood and climbs a short hill in a meadow where a small herd of bison sleep and graze. At the top of the hill the path intersects the road, follows it for a 100 yards or so, then diagonals over the meadow to some trees. Beyond is a fire gate on the North Rim Road. The Lookout Point parking lot is 100 yards to the left. Soon I am at Lookout Point gazing on the Lower Falls in the sunrise light.

There is a friendly family of four and a photographer with his wife. Otherwise, no one else is here. I have my pick of a view. When the sun emerges through the high clouds, the falls glow in the morning light. Colors in the canyon below emerge in the day's first light. When the light reaches Lookout Point proper, I walk back to our cabin.

Today is our 40th anniversary. To celebrate we're hiking the entire South Rim trail. We drive to the trailhead parking area by Chittenden Bridge picnic area where we ate yesterday. The first section along the river is lovely. There are only a few fellow hikers. When we reach Uncle Tom's Trail, the hordes begin. The trail descends 500 feet with 300 steps on wide metal stairs. Originally, the tourists used ropes. There are photos of women in long skirts climbing the ropes, illustrating how our ancestors were a hardy and feisty lot. Now, through the stairs' metal mesh one sees a long, harrowing, deadly drop to the canyon floor. Since one descends with a steady line of people on the right side while another steady line of people ascends the left side, it is not a pleasant hike. One is forced to walk at the pace of those in front. At one point, the line comes to a halt. I apologize to the woman behind me; she remarks a pause is fine by her. To some extent the view of the falls at the bottom almost isn't worth the hassle; I wonder what this would feel like at the beginning or end of the day with fewer people to distract from the awe-inspiring hike and falls.

The climb back up is arduous. Many people stop several times on the way so one has to pay close attention and make a way around them without colliding with the line of people descending. We are relieved to get back to the South Rim Trail.

On the trail between Uncle Tom's Trail and Artist Point, there are once again only a few people. At Artist Point with its large parking lot, the hordes return. As at Lookout Point yesterday, families line up for the perfect portrait with the falls in the background. The last mile out to Point Sublime offers spectacular views of the canyon below and the forest plain above, as well as a sense of solitude. We eat lunch a little beyond the end of the trail before

beginning the hike back. The return hike is perhaps even better since we are now aware of the best places to stop off the trail and take in the spectacular views of the canyon.

At the Uncle Tom's Trail junction, a large group of Amish families are just returning from the descent and ascent. How they managed it in their sandal-like shoes is beyond me and several others I notice staring at their footwear in bewilderment. For the last mile, we are once again in near solitude along the rushing waters of the Yellowstone River above the Lower Falls. We feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction as we walk back to our car.

On the drive back near the hill where the bison were grazing this morning, the traffic is stopped. The small herd is crossing the road. Two bulls break away from the herd and charge down the left lane of the road, one at the car twenty feet in front of us. He passes the car and veers right toward us on a collision course. Between a Prius and a charging bison, we assume the bison will win. Ten feet from our car, the bison turns and runs to the right side of the road, slows to a walk, and meanders onto the meadow. With a laugh and "what the . . ." we proceed back to our cabin.

We walk to the restaurant for our anniversary dinner. The skies are threatening so we wear raincoats. The trail is blocked for construction at Canyon Village and we are forced to follow the road behind the village. It begins raining lightly. At the restaurant we request a window table, resorting to the "it's our 40th wedding anniversary" ploy. As we are seated, a downpour commences. Safe and dry inside, we watch the rain and lightning flashes and listen to the thunder. The worst of the storm passes as we enjoy our dinner so it's only a drizzle for our walk back to the cabin. With the rain, we forego another sunset trip to Grandview.

June 25

It is a drizzly morning. I am glad to have discovered the trail yesterday. I take the trail, not expecting much. Two elk are in the meadow on either side of the diagonal trail to the North Rim road. Neither pays much attention to the human passing as I walk between them. I have Lookout Point to myself. While the view is nowhere near as photogenic as yesterday, I linger, taking in the scene and the solitude. When the drizzle becomes heavier, I walk back to our cabin. I realize it will take me a long time to absorb the last two days. The canyon is so remarkably beautiful and unique.

We drive to Dunraven Pass and the trail for Mt. Washburn. One guidebook proclaims if you have only one hike to do in Yellowstone, make it Mt. Washburn. It's a long switchbacking climb up an old road with ever-expanding views that extend from Yellowstone Canyon to Yellowstone Lake to many of the distant peaks in the park. It is windy and cold. Many people hike up the trail, some not in shape for the climb. At various points, we see some decide to turn back. For much of the hike, one can see the top with its observatory, leading to a sense of anticipation as we round each switchback. The views in all directions become more expansive with every step.

With the last switchback we are outside the observatory as the wind blasts. Taking refuge inside the observatory, we join a few other hikers who are sitting on the benches or moving around to see the various angles of view in each direction. The view is breathtaking. The entire Yellowstone caldera lies out to the west. I try to imagine its eruption; it is beyond human rational thought, supernatural in its power. Mountains rise beyond the rim of the caldera and in every other direction, miles and miles away, even beyond the park boundary.

The return hike down lacks the anticipatory excitement of the climb. The cloudy, windy weather doesn't help. When we reach the parking lot, the weather improves slightly. We decide to have our cooked meal at lunchtime and go to Cascade Lake picnic area for a barbecue. The many Yellowstone picnic areas are one of the best features of the park. One gets to be in a beautiful place with people who also seem intent on appreciating this particular time and place

After lunch/dinner, we drive to Roosevelt Lodge. We encounter a major construction zone with a half-hour delay. Roosevelt Lodge is a place for families with children who do not want to camp. Three generations of one family occupy the neighboring cabins. The cabins are quite close together — a neighboring cabin is occupied by a couple on motorcycles who have a difficult time parking their bikes in the designated space between cabins. It is often noisy. The cabins are cute, but tiny with no space to move around in. The cowboy theme is a bit overdone.

After arriving we take a hike to Lost Lake, a lovely solitary walk in the woods over a short ridge. The forest is quiet and beautiful. Wildflowers line the path. Lost Lake is a sublime lake nestled in a small valley with water lilies on part of its shoreline. We follow the trail through the valley to the parking lot for Petrified Tree, which is fenced in to prevent vandalism. We return by the same beautiful trail as shadows begin to fall.

June 26

We decide to go to Mammoth Hot Springs for the terrace thermals. Unfortunately, unlike Norris and Upper Geyser Basin, the boardwalks at Mammoth are not laid out well so one has to backtrack up or down to see the various terraces. People are expected to drive around for major sections. We hike the roads, which surprises the other tourists in their cars. Most of the thermal features are currently not particularly active so look nothing like the photos we've seen; those photos were probably taken years ago.

At Canary Spring, a ranger is leading a large group, lecturing about the area. They block the boardwalk path to the overlook. The ranger and the people on her tour seem oblivious too all of us wishing to get to the overlook. One person in front asserts himself and we are permitted to pass through to view one of the only terraces still relatively active. We go to the store and find the parking is a mess. We patiently let the more impatient drivers choose their way through the parking lot. After a week in Yellowstone, we chalk up Mammoth as the one place that failed to live up to our expectations.

For our final afternoon in Yellowstone, we drive up Lamar Valley to look at wildlife. We see lots of bison, a nesting osprey, and a coyote family in its den, which is spied by a wildlife photographer in one of the picnic areas along the Lamar River. We see no wolves or grizzlies, except possibly a brown shape through binoculars moving on a far distant hillside. Lamar Valley is gorgeous with the river meandering through to the right side of the road. Even without seeing much wildlife we enjoy our drive with several stops up to the northeast entrance.

We realize the two campgrounds off the northeast entrance road would have been a better alternative to Roosevelt Lodge. We rescue a partially disappointing day with dinner at Warm Spring picnic area, which is lovely, quiet, and empty so we dine in solitude.

I am ready to leave Yellowstone. There are too many people unless one gets away from the roads. Yellowstone is so amazing and diverse, one could spend a lifetime exploring it and still discover something new every day. Yellowstone is incredible, totally unique to anywhere else on our planet, but one has to get up early and linger in the evening to fully appreciate its subtle beauties. The evening drive back through Lamar Valley provides it.

June 27

We pass under the Roosevelt Arch and exit Yellowstone. Along with being beautiful, Montana has an excellent highway system with frequent passing lanes on the two lane highways and clear, accurate signs. At Livingston we return to interstates, following I-90 west to Missoula, then north on 93 to Polson. The local Safeway, learned about on the internet before our trip, occupies part of a shopping center at the junction with Highway 35. We resupply for our six night stay in Glacier National Park — three nights camping and three nights at Swiftcurrent Motor Inn in Many Glacier.

Highway 35 north follows the shoreline of gigantic Flathead Lake for miles and miles. Since there is almost no traffic, it is a marvelous drive. At the Glacier entrance, I show my Senior Pass and we head north on the legendary Going to the Sun Road, Lake McDonald to our left. We recognize the peninsula for Sprague Creek Campground before seeing the sign. Though it's only 2:45, all the campsites are taken. The website said it rarely fills on weekdays in June. The campground hostess says it has been filling this summer, unlike in the past, and to come back tomorrow at 9:00 to get a site. I guess I'm not the only one reading on the internet that this is the best campground in the park.

We head down the road to Avalanche Creek Campground and find an excellent site. While not on Lake McDonald, this is a quiet, beautiful place to camp. The lovely forest is all around, providing a sense of seclusion and comfort.

After dinner, I walk down to McDonald Creek (which is more like a roaring river than a creek). I meet no one. My mindset is a mess; the last few days have been an emotional roller coaster. Even being by the creek in solitude at this time of day fails to lift my spirits. I lie on my back, eyes closed, listening to the creek rushing by. At a noise, I open my eyes; a young male deer stands a few feet away. I take a photo of the deer, the last photo on the roll. I get confused rewinding the film and the winding lever comes loose. In a panic, I stupidly undo the camera back, exposing the film. I instantly realize my mistake, close the camera, figure out my mistake with the lever, reattach it, rewind the film, and put in a new roll.

I lie back down, eyes closed, wallowing in my folly. I hear something nearby. Opening my eyes, the deer stands three feet away, staring at me with an expression of pity. I take that as a sign to snap out of my remorse. I begin to take in the subtle, singular beauty of this place.

June 28

I arrive at Sprague Creek at 8:40 AM. One person is already here and has secured his site. I parked in an empty one (9) and walk around reading exit dates on the posts. The ones with the lake views are closer together and so not private except for two, which are reserved through June 30. I notice a site that looks good with a lake view where the people are leaving. I start to fill out the envelope, then realize it is the handicapped site — their truck/camper had obscured the sign. I fill out another form and choose 22, though closer to the road, one of the most spacious and private sites. I put the envelope on the clip of the post. A nice couple, probably also in their 60s, are packing up and reaffirm the site's privacy. Elated, I drive back to Avalanche.

After the move to Sprague, it's 11:15 and we're ready for our hike to Avalanche Lake. First, there's the issue of finding a parking space at the trailhead, which proves difficult — there are none. I drive up the road looking for parking, but any parking further up is blocked by construction. Turning around, we see a couple near the trailhead parking getting into their car. Barbara hops out. Since traffic arrives behind me, I drive down to where I can turn around and head back to where the couple's car is pulling out from the space secured by Barbara.

We walk the Trail of the Cedars, a lovely stroll on a boardwalk with interpretative signs that try to be evocative; at some signs, hikers have added their own ironic commentary. We cross Avalanche Creek on a footbridge and begin the climb to Avalanche Lake. Alongside the tumbling water of the creek, all other sounds are drowned out. Lots of people are taking photos of the creek. Making noise to warn grizzlies is unnecessary. We pass or meet a constant flow of one small party after another.

The hike is gorgeous despite all the people. The trail steadily climbs through a beautiful forest. We soon sight Avalanche Lake, which sits in a cirque with peaks rising high above. Most stunning are the several waterfalls pouring down the sheer sides of the mountains. Many cascade and drop hundreds of feet. I don't think it is possible for a photo to convey the staggering beauty of the scene.

Following a lakeside trail, we find a spot on the shoreline in the shade on comfortable rocks and enjoy lunch. Afterwards we walk to the end of the lake where the trail ends. An inlet creek beach invites us to take our shoes off and wade in the cold water. A perfect log extends out along the inlet creek into the lake. We sit on the log and twaddle in the cold water

for a long time. Butterflies flit all around us, even landing on us. It is a sublime place.

Our return hike is almost as wonderful with humor as well. Three six year olds (or so) with their tinkling bells sold at the park stores to warn grizzlies cavort down the trail singing “Jingle Bells.” We play trail leapfrog with them for half a mile or more, a great diversion from the less happy hikers struggling up the climb. Two different small groups ask how far it is to the lake. When I reply at least another mile, they groan.

We return to our campsite and after dinner head down to Lake McDonald. I walk through the empty picnic ground for the best lake access. After all the anticipation, Lake McDonald does not disappoint. It is as beautiful as I ever imagined. The sunset is gorgeous if not spectacular in terms of cloud color. The dead trees (site of an old avalanche?) on the other side make for a striking contrast to the green; the ones on the top of the ridge create a sinister horizon against the sky.

June 29

At dawn the lake is still enough to reflect the light and its stages on the ridges and peaks. This is the Glacier National Park experience I was hoping for with the large lake and awe-inspiring peaks reflected in the water as in Ansel Adams’ photo (even if taken from a different location).

This morning we hike to Fish Lake. The forest is enchanting in many places. The 1,000 foot climb to the ridge is relatively easy — I notice the steepest two sections more on the way down than hiking up. The mosquitos on the last mile to Fish Lake become numerous; for the first time on the trip we use our deet repellent. Fish Lake is a pleasant small lake with water lilies like Lost Lake in Yellowstone, though Lost Lake was more beautiful. On the hike up we see only one other couple so we talk a lot to make noise to announce our presence to grizzlies. On the hike back, the number of people render our making noise unnecessary.

On our return, we decide to do part of the John Lake Trail. The trailhead is parked up, but the other end of the loop by the falls is not. There are lots of people by McDonald Creek and around the bridge to the trail on the other side. After crossing the bridge, we follow the trail to a pretty overlook of the cascades and have lunch. Afterwards we have a wonderful walk along the creek/river and through a pine forest to the trail at the north end of Lake McDonald before returning to McDonald Creek and the bridge. For much of the hike, especially in the forest, we are in solitude.

This trip has been going by too fast. I have not been able to absorb it yet. The dramatic peaks and entrancing beauty are overwhelming. The rise of the peaks, the waterfalls of hundreds of feet, the water on the lakes, each is astounding. The shoreline of Lake McDonald in the evening and sunset engender quiet understanding.

June 30

I revel in another dawn on Lake McDonald. It is an ideal morning as we pack up for our trip on the Going to the Sun Road to Many Glacier.

The drive over Logan Pass exceeds our expectations, both for how difficult it is dealing with the road and traffic and its stunning beauty. We stop at three different pull-outs on the way up to the pass to take in the views and appreciate the setting from outside an automobile. Waterfalls are all along the road, coming down in short cascades to the road itself to breathtaking plunges hundreds of feet down mountainsides. The views are spectacular: both of the surrounding and distant peaks and down hundreds of feet to rivers and lakes below.

The parking lot at Logan Pass is chaos. There are too many people and too many cars. It's Sunday, a fact we'd forgotten in our vacation status. The personnel at the Visitor Center are polite, but not as knowledgeable as at other locations; they are unable to answer many of our questions, though we do learn the Highline Trail is closed. We decide to hike to the Hidden Lake overlook and assess whether to continue to Hidden Lake.

We find ourselves on a walk through snow with an endless stream of people. The trail consists of the deepest and widest trampled trench through the snow. Most of the people are polite and accommodating. But with that many people, one is bound to get a few clueless jerks. They stop to take photos in the middle of the trail instead of stepping aside, oblivious to those behind them. Or they hurriedly push by people; in one instance a woman is knocked over on her face into the snow; the young man does not pause, let alone apologize.

When the trail levels off, a lovely tarn sits beside the trail. At the Hidden Lake overlook, a mother bighorn sheep and her child feed on the bushes. The Japanese tourists and 20-somethings compete as to who could get closest in violation of the rather obvious "Area Closed" signs. Fortunately, the mother goat doesn't seem too frazzled by all the people. Perhaps they should station a ranger here, especially since one can easily get close enough for photos without violating the restoration area, even without the zoom lenses on their DSLRs.

The hike from the overlook down to Hidden Lake is steep with no clear trail down over the snow; it would take probably at least an hour and possibly longer to get there and back. We decide to skip it. The hike down to the Visitor Center is actually more fun than up. We are familiar with the route of the trail and can avoid the dense hordes of people by going far to the side over the snow.

The drive down the Going to the Sun Road is also exhilarating. The Jackson Glacier view sign serves as a reminder that we are slowly destroying this wondrous place along with the planet's other glaciers due to climate change. The drive along St. Mary Lake is beautiful, though the gates to both picnic areas are shut with "area closed" signs hanging on them. When we arrive at Swiftcurrent, we're rather hungry. Since our room isn't ready, we go to the nearby picnic area, a lovely site with Altyn Peak rising above, though being Sunday, rather crowded.

The setting for Swiftcurrent Motor Inn (its formal title) is beautiful with Mount Grinnell and Swiftcurrent Glacier dominating the view from the parking lot. The cabin itself is cute with two small separate rooms. The bedroom has no separate flat surfaces of any kind, such as a nightstand or shelf for putting eyeglasses, watches, or anything else. The outer room includes a sink and a table and benches. The big problem is the bathroom facilities, which are possibly a health violation in certain states. The shower stalls contain no hooks, benches, or any place for clean clothes, unlike every other public shower I've been to. You have to put your clean clothes directly on the dirty concrete floor.

We find an unclaimed table in the same picnic area for dinner. Many families occupy the other tables, concluding their Sunday visit with a meal while the surrounding peaks catch the day's last light.

July 1

At dawn, I walk to the picnic area and follow the trail. Slightly before a bridge over Swiftcurrent Creek is a picturesque view of Mt. Wilbur and the slow moving water. I walk back to the inn area and follow the Swiftcurrent Pass trail to a bridge over a small creek where I enjoy another picturesque view and exploring along the creek.

Our hike today is to Grinnell Lake. The hike is delightful and relatively easy — as Barbara terms it, an "old ladies hike." On the hike up, we have much of the trail to ourselves even at Josephine Lake where a ferry runs back and forth from one end to the other. We prefer to walk.

The wildflower display is spectacular, especially on the trail above Josephine Lake. We encounter a ranger-led hike with about fifteen people. The female ranger is very courteous (unlike at Mammoth in Yellowstone) saying “let the hikers pass” and exchanging a friendly hello, “what a beautiful morning” as we walk by. At the Grinnell Creek crossing, a suspension bridge spans the creek. It is nowhere near the structure of the Golden Gate of the High Sierra over Woods Creek in Kings Canyon, but fun to cross.

We arrive at the lake and no one else is there. There is no trail along the lakeshore so we find a place apart from the large area at the lake outlet. The ranger and her group arrive and occupy the outlet space. We gaze at the lake and the view of the waterfalls dropping down the sheer walls below Grinnell Glacier while eavesdropping on the ranger.

We realize a quiet lunch here is not possible and decide to do the short side trail to Hidden Falls, as recommended by the ranger. We recross Grinnell Creek to the spur trail to Hidden Falls. It is more than worth the trip. Hidden Falls have a quality different than the spectacularly long drops from the peaks and glaciers. There is a mesmerizing power to the water and an aesthetic charm to the setting within the lush undergrowth. We backtrack to the bridge and find a lovely spot for lunch well off the trail on a log by Grinnell Creek.

We return to our cabin a little after 2:00, take showers, and walk through the campground. The campground is quite nice. Due to its size we expected it to be overcrowded and noisy, but it is neither, with the sites well arranged. We decide that when we return to Many Glacier (someday), we’ll stay in the campground. We check out take-out at the restaurant. The two men are quite nice and we could have ordered then, but we say we’ll be back later.

When I return at 5:30, it’s a different shift that exudes an attitude towards our simple request for a take-out order (though the menu prominently encourages them). No salad is possible now. I order a pizza and tell the head waiter I’ll walk around outside for the 15 minutes he says it will take. The guy finds it incomprehensible as to why I’d want to walk around outside looking at the view and for wildlife. Outside, a female ranger and a man are looking with binoculars at a bighorn sheep far up the mountain, discussing park wildlife. I eavesdrop and wish I’d bought our binoculars with me. After twenty minutes, the pizza isn’t ready so I sit on the porch outside and look at the view. The guy apologetically delivers it to me out there. Back at the cabin, Barbara and I enjoy our pizza and take an evening walk to Fishercap Lake.

At first, we are the only people here. The view is wondrous with one peak rising across Fishercap Lake, sunset light angling up its brown, red, green, and snow-white face. The sunlit peaks to the east reflect in the still water. A mammal — we suspect an otter — swims across the middle of the lake, diving down and resurfacing. It is all quite serene. Then others arrive — first a fisherman and a young couple who quietly seek their own solitude. Then four people with drinks and a blanket arrive and constantly chatter. One woman fires away with her Canon, taking more than dozen photos while I take one. She then leaves in a huff for some reason, but the other three remain, gabbing way. While we contemplate leaving, the family departs, permitting us serenity once again so we linger until it's nearly dark.

July 2

At dawn, I return to Fishercap Lake. No one else is on the trail or at the lake. The distinctive peaks to the west receive the sunrise light. The lake is calm so the reflections are nearly perfect. Mornings like this feel like mornings in the backcountry wilderness with the stillness and solitude.

We take a glorious hike up the Swiftcurrent Pass trail. It's even more beautiful than the Grinnell Lake trail. It has more abundant wildflowers, providing a carpet on the sides of the trail. In places, the forest spreads out with a sense of symmetry. We begin with a detour to Fishercap Lake to avoid a large group hiking up the trail. We follow the winding trails through dense forest along the shore to the end of the lake. Once past the end of the lake, we diagonal up to intersect the main trail. Red Rock Lake sits to the left of the trail. At the end of the lake we come to Red Rock Falls, which are picturesque, but not spectacular. The large group has stopped and spread out around the falls, making a day of it here. For the next mile we hike in solitude, though there are people on the trail either far ahead of us or behind. In one open section, the wildflowers bring us to a standstill.

Bullhead Lake sits below Swiftcurrent Glacier with waterfalls descending the sheer cliffs of the ridge wall below the glacier, similar to Grinnell Lake, though not as large or numerous. Grinnell Mountain and Swiftcurrent Mountain rise above the lake. The best spot on the shoreline is taken so we choose another further down the lake. When the people soon leave, we move to the spot, take off our shoes, and twaddle in the cold water while gazing at the magnificent scene before us. While we are having lunch, other people began arriving. A family finds a place to spread out where we were sitting before. Another family proceeds further down

the trail. Then a party of three women arrive, probably in their 50s and obviously minimal hiking and wilderness experience from their manner and the conversation. They stand chattering ten feet way for several minutes until one of them ventures down and remarks “how nice to soak your feet.” She notices the bugs and asks about them. I reply they’re just here and not really a problem; this is their home, not ours. She proceeds to spray bug repellent while sitting beside us. Looking around, she realizes there is a place ten feet down the lakeshore where she can sit by herself. She offers no apologies and shows no embarrassment.

The one negative of this trip is my increasing disappointment with the behavior of my fellow humans. They are often insensitive ignoramuses, ignoring and interfering with other people’s enjoyment and, worse, harming the fragile beauty of these glorious wild places.

Since we’ve finished lunch, we head back to the trail and walk to the end of the lake. Hoping to hike further, we come to the crossing of the inlet creek. A family sits by the crossing watching the creek. They are friendly and remark they stopped here because they couldn’t negotiate the crossing. While not difficult, it does require trekking poles, which we lack. We turn around and enjoy the hike back to the trailhead, frequently pausing to appreciate the wildflowers and views.

For our final dinner in Glacier, we go to the picnic area for a cookout. On the main road by the picnic area entrance, cars are stopped and lots of people are gathered. We find a picnic site and go to see what the excitement is about. A bear is in the woods by the main road. A ranger turns on his car’s siren in a vain attempt to spook the bear. The bear is cinnamon colored so we’re hoping it’s a grizzly due to the excitement. I get a good look and realize it’s only a young black bear. When the bear ambles off into the woods, the people get back in their cars and amble to their destinations. We have the entire picnic area to ourselves, an unexpected surprise.

We enjoy our final dinner in solitude, watching the evening light slowly begin its long fade. Alpenglow begins to appear on Altyn Peak. The birds flit around the campground, singing cheerfully. After dinner, we walked down the Swiftcurrent Nature Trail, stopping at a bench and the bridge to savor the golden light on the forest and water. The only other people we see are another couple who cross the bridge and continue down the trail to Many Glacier Hotel. The solitude, silence, and serenity are a perfect conclusion for our final evening.

July 3-4

It is a beautiful morning, gold light on one peak, trees shining in the first light of day. At dawn, I revel in the morning light. I take a walk along part of the Swiftcurrent Nature Trail. I can't believe it's the last morning. It will take a long time for this to set in and be better understood. It is good to end here amid the peaks and glaciers where one can feel away from the bustle of commercialism. Even here in the cabin circle of D loop, there is quiet at 7:15, the sounds of the breeze rustling the aspens and birds singing.

On the long, two-day drive home, the portion through the Bitterroots on the "Lewis and Clark Trail" is the most breathtaking. The road twists through a river valley, at times more a canyon than a valley. Occasionally there is a sign for a campground or trailhead. Many of the trailheads have no cars in the small, dusty parking areas. Barbara says we should return here for a backpack or car camping trip.

After a night at the Sleep Inn in Ontario with the Wingers and excellent beer and burgers next door to the motel, we celebrate the 4th of July on America's highways. The morning drive on Highway 20 in Oregon to Burns is lovely with its green hills and fertile valleys. In Burns, we are the last car down main street before it is closed for the 4th of July parade for which families line the sidewalks in anticipation as we drive by.

South of Burns, 395, a highway we've driven numerous times between Bridgeport south to Independence, proves captivating if not as spectacular as the escarpment of the Eastern Sierra. After lunch in Alturas at a place that claims (probably rightfully) to have the best burgers in northeast California, we head southwest on highway 299. It is another gorgeous drive through beautiful forests and over passes with Mt. Shasta and Mt. Lassen on the horizon.

Finally, we reach the more urban/suburban landscape of Redding and join the masses moving down Interstate 5 to myriads of destinations from Red Bluff to Los Angeles. We re-enter the contemporary world. The outside temperature is 110 on the climate control panel and 78 inside. A major accident closes part of I-505 so we detour through the office parks of Vacaville before rejoining the mass of cars heading west on I-80 to the Bay Area.

We return home and back to the responsibilities of surviving in contemporary America renewed by our experiences of a more timeless America. Part of me wants to get back in the car and do it all over again.