

Yorkshire Ramblers' Club  
Overseas Meet  
**Wind River Range**  
Wyoming, US  
August 2017

A three-week five-member climbing and backpacking trip to 'The Winds' timed to observe the total eclipse of the Sun



**Backpackers:**  
David Hick  
Alan Kay  
**Climbers:**  
Tim Josephy  
Michael Smith  
Richard Smith

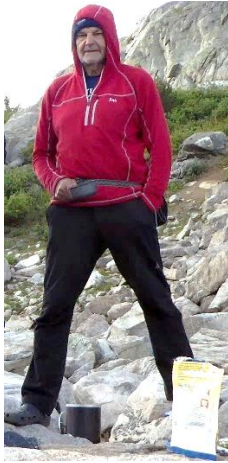
The Winds from Photographers' Point

The genesis of this meet was twofold. Years earlier Alan had received a recommendation from a fellow backpacker that the Winds were the best area in the States for the serious backpacker – a range for connoisseurs – and his subsequent research confirmed the attractiveness of its lakes, alpine terrain, bare rock and dozens of 4,000m peaks. Independently, Michael, returning from the Tetons spotted the range and heard of its potential for rock climbing. This was in 2016 and publicity relating to the 2017 total solar eclipse showed its path passing close to the Winds. An envisaged a llama supported trek did not find favour on account of lack of confidence in llama management and the

interested backpackers were happy to backpack for several days at a time.

By the early 2017 the plan was: fly into Denver; acclimatise with short hikes; watch the eclipse; backpack near the Cirque or climb there with a horse and wrangler taking in the climbing gear; then move round to Pinedale in the west of the range and backpack in to Titcomb Basin below Fremont Peak; then if time allowed stop off at Rocky Mountain National Park for a journey-breaking day on the way back home.

The outcome was a successful trip with a wide variety of contrasting experiences for both backpackers and climbers. The good weather helped and wildfires were not a hindrance.



David



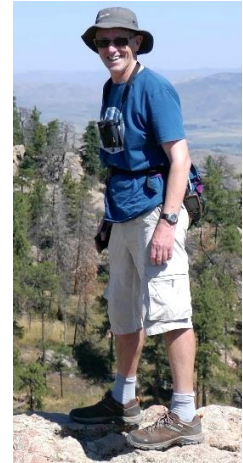
Alan



Richard



Tim

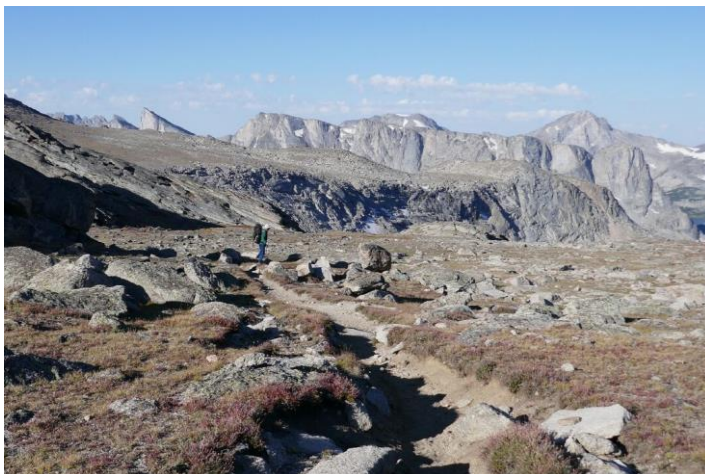


Michael

This report of the trip is presented in six main parts: Hikes; Eclipse; Backpacking from Dickinson Park; Backpacking from Elkhart Park; Climbs and Scrambles, and Reflections.

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## Day by day summary of activity

- Aug. Four fly from Manchester, UK, into Denver via Reykjavik and drive 4WD SUV to nearby 17<sup>th</sup> Westminster's Super 8 hotel.
- 18<sup>th</sup> Drive 1½ hours to near Fort Collins, for Colorado's Lory State Park and walk a couple of trails including Arthur's Rock. Then a further couple of hours drive to Rawlins and the Econo Lodge.
- 19<sup>th</sup> Drive an hour passing Muddy Gap to take a dirt track, Agate Flats Road, to park at Sage Hen a few miles WNW of Lankin Dome. Walk to and scramble up point 7617 ft. 1km west of Bills Peak, 7461 ft. and 3km west of Lankin Dome. Drive two hours to Lander to buy food and Shoshone Reservation permits. Check into the Silver Spur Motel. Tim gets medical treatment.
- 20<sup>th</sup> Hike a trail to the Agie Popo Falls in Sinks Canyon. Final shopping (pepper spray and lashing cord) then on the short distance to our eclipse accommodation near Riverton. Richard arrived there from Denver having landed there late on the 19<sup>th</sup>.
- 21<sup>st</sup> Pack sacks. Observe the eclipse. Our Riverton host gives us a Dutch Oven beef meal.
- 22<sup>nd</sup> Early departure for the Allen's Ranch in the Wind River Range. Climbers walk the North Fork Trail to Lonesome Lake followed later by the horse and wrangler with their gear. Establish camp higher up towards the Cirque of the Towers. Backpackers start from Dickinson Park trailhead and follow the North Fork Trail and Smith Lake trail to camp at Middle Lake.
- 23<sup>rd</sup> Climbers explore the Cirque and the approaches to the climbs. Backpackers follow Smith Lake Trail, High Meadow Trail and North Fork Trail to camp at Lizard Head Meadows.
- 24<sup>th</sup> Climbers climb Pingora. Backpackers walk to Lonesome Lake, Bear Lake, camp at Bear Lake.
- 25<sup>th</sup> Climbers scramble over Mitchell Peak. Backpackers follow the Lizard Head Trail to camp at Little Valentine Lake.
- 26<sup>th</sup> Climbers tackle Tiger Tower then Wolf's Head. Descend via the col by Overhanging Tower. Backpackers follow the Bears Ears Trail to camp at Dickinson Creek campground.
- 27<sup>th</sup> Climbers hike to Texas Pass. Richard continues to scramble up Camel's Hump. Move gear down to Lonesome Lake ready for packing out. Backpackers drive to Moccasin Lake, then bushwhacking on a circuit of Mary's Lake, Shoe Lake and Little Moccasin Lake.
- 28<sup>th</sup> Climbers take remaining gear to Lonesome Lake for the wrangler to pack out. Walk out along the North Fork Trail to the Dickinson Park trailhead. Backpackers complete their route to finish at the same place. Then together, all five drive to the Ranch, collect climbing gear and drive four hours through Lander, round the range and north to Pinedale.
- 29<sup>th</sup> In Pinedale, recover, replenish and repack for backpacking. Michael gets dental treatment.
- 30<sup>th</sup> Drive out to Elkhart Park trailhead and backpack in to camp above Island Lake.
- 31<sup>st</sup> Richard scrambles up Fremont Peak. Others hike up to Indian Pass and back.
- Sept. Richard hikes out to the trailhead and drives back towards Denver. The other four hike into 1<sup>st</sup> Titcomb Basin.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Richard hiked up Snowy Range's Medicine Bow peak, 12,013 ft on his way to Denver and flight to the UK. Others backpack out towards the trailhead via Lester Pass to camp by Barbara Lake.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Backpack out to the trailhead via Photographers' Point. Drive six hours to Granby and the Inn at Silvercreek.
- 4<sup>th</sup> Drive through Rocky Mountain National Park taking the Alpine Ridge Trail. Take rooms and then walk the trail to Bear Lake, Nymph Lake, Dream Lake and Emerald Lake before observing wildlife.
- 5<sup>th</sup> Morning stroll around Lilly Lake. Drive through Big Thompson Canyon to Loveland and Denver to take return flight to Manchester arriving early on the 6<sup>th</sup>.



Richard on the Camel's Hump

## Acclimatisation Hikes

Denver is known as the mile-high city. Its surroundings and the lands towards the foot of the Wind River range are all high. A sensible precaution was to ramp up the exercise level and heights attained over the first few days. This approach also broke up each day's driving and allowed us to get used to other aspects



Arthur's Rock, Lory State Park

of the climate such as the low humidity, strong sunlight and cool winds. The acclimatisation appeared to be helpful. However, the last member to arrive had just a couple of days with little activity and still coped with conditions – though being half the others' ages may have also have been a factor.

**Lory State Park:** Near Fort Collins and about 1½ hours from Denver airport, Lory State Park provided a convenient and relaxed four-hour, seven-mile round reaching 6,780 ft. We took Arthur's Rock Trail to give views over Horseshoe Reservoir then parts of Timber, Well Gulch and Overlook Trails to return.

**Lankin Dome:** The bare steep granite of Lankin Dome looks impressive from the highway past Split Rock. inconspicuous Agate Flats dirt road leads into the western end of the mountains, crossing the wagon wheel ruts of the Oregon Trail and Sweetwater River to turn east near Sage Hen (1 km before the Murphy Ranch). We parked by the junction having struggled with soft sand unaware of the vehicle's 4WD capability. A flat walk of a few miles past a stock pond, antelope hunters' large calibre rifle cartridge cases, a snake and a horned lizard among a lot of sage brush brought us to the foot of a 7,617 ft peak about 3km west of Lankin Dome.



Lankin Dome (middle distance) from point 7,617

Each selecting different routes on the northern side we made our ways to the summit. Some scrambling was required before a gulley was reached. Along the way Tim pulled on a handhold which broke off. It fell from his hand and struck his shin leaving a 6cm long gash. We covered it with a strip of sticking plaster and continued. The summit was crossed from the east to west to take the NNW ridge down – getting parched and scratched in the process. This was a 4½ hour outing.



Descending from the upper reaches of point 7,617

Later that day at the hospital in Lander, Tim's shin was cleaned, stapled and dressed. While he drove across town to the hospital the other three of us showered, changed and were heading for the Lander Brewing Company's Cowfish restaurant when he pulled up beside us having been treated.

Expecting crowds for the eclipse, the hospital had brought in staff from the surrounding areas and they were sat around, feet up on the table, waiting for custom. They were delighted to see Tim. His insurance checked, he was being treated in ten minutes. Twelve staples soon held him together. The bill for 20 minutes in casualty totalled \$4,175.



**Sinks Canyon, Lander:** On the eve of the eclipse there was some provisioning to be done so the hiking was curtailed. We drove 9½ miles from downtown Lander along Sinks Canyon to park at Bruce's Bridge. The 700 ft rise to the upper falls is spread over a clear almost two-mile long trail. We turned back soon after that at 8,500 ft to give a 2½ hour round trip.

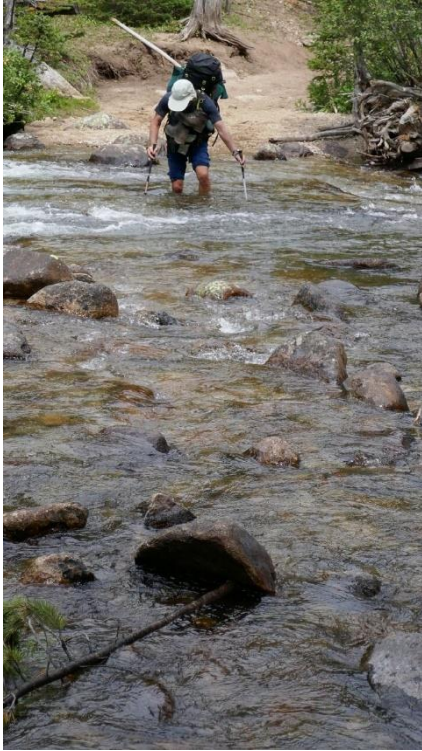
The challenge at the falls is to slide down a steep water-polished rock to plummet the last few metres into the plunge pool. Being a *local* rite of passage, we gave it a miss.



Our early start meant we saw few people on the trail's outward leg but returning we met families with dogs and grandchildren then rangers trying to sort out the parking chaos.

**Dickinson Park Trailhead to Lonesome Lake, NE side of the Winds:** The hike into Lonesome Lake and up into the Cirque of the Towers required a 4am start from Riverton and took a full day from the Dickinson Park Trailhead. The North Fork Trail was reached by crossing the marshy bottom of the valley east then following a slight ridge before a steep descent south was made to the North Popo Agie River. This was followed





upstream south then west for several miles with four knee-deep river crossings to reach Lizard Head Meadows where trekking llamas were grazing. The trail became distinct again on the far side of this marshy ground and continued west on the north side of the river to Lonesome Lake. While waiting here for the horses to bring our gear, two of us prospected up into the Cirque for a suitable campsite. Aware of the lateness of the day and the tired state of the party an adequate compromise site was identified.

In the event, having brought up much of the gear to that point, it was used to prepare a meal which allowed us to continue to a higher bench with a better water supply. That site, a little east of and below the prominent waterfall, proved to be a good camping spot throughout the climbers' visit.

**Tundra Communities Trail, Rocky Mountain Alpine Visitor Centre:**

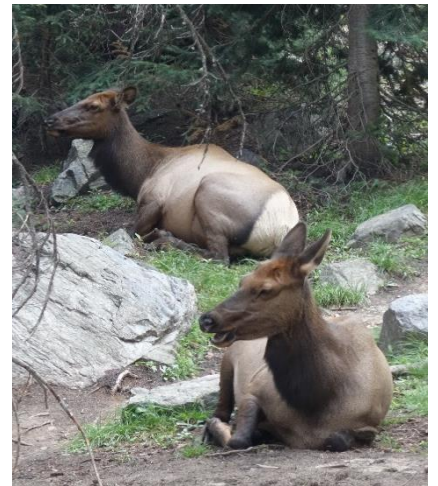
Passing through the Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado on our return from the Winds to Denver we took in a few short hikes. The first of these was from the alpine visitor centre and called the Tundra Communities Trail. A gentle incline from the car park it reached 12,310 ft in just half a mile but gave hazy views of the surrounding peaks besides the alpine zone tundra flora and fauna.

**Emerald Lake, Rocky Mountain NP:** Later the same day we braved the crowds above Bear Head Trailhead to hike the wide trampled trail past Bear, Nymph and Dream Lakes to Emerald Lake for its views of Flattop Mountain, Hallett Peak and Glacier Gorge. Returning down the same trail made a 3½ mile round with a rise and fall of 700ft. Towards sunset, on the drive back down to Estes Park, a detour took us to a flat-bottomed side valley where family groups of elk grazed near Moraine Park.



**Lily Lake, Estes Park, Rocky Mountain NP:**

The following morning a circuit of Lily Lake was used for a convenient mile of exercise before a long drive. It was an undemanding outing though we saw climbers heading for the rocky ridge above it.



**Lonesome Lake Trail into the Winds**



## The Eclipse

Eclipses, especially solar eclipses, have long fascinated humans and some individuals have gone to great lengths to observe total eclipses of the Sun. Captain Cook's third voyage searching for the North West Passage stopped off at what he named Christmas Island to observe an eclipse of the sun. He personally could not see the moments leading up to totality as he did not have a suitable dark glass to hand when the cloud density changed. The Resolution's master, William Bligh, had let the sun drift out of his telescope's field of view so missed the observation. The expedition's astronomer, second lieutenant and ship's captain all observed the onset of totality but disagreed on the timing by several seconds.

Technological progress since 1777 meant we were better prepared with anticipated timings predicted to the second and aluminium-coated polyester film filters for the US-wide passing of the moon's shadow on August 21<sup>st</sup>. America too was well prepared with arrangements made for the about 20 million people who observe it first-hand within the 70-mile wide path of totality. Traffic flows were managed. Extra park rangers and public service staff were brought in. Accommodation prices soared. We paid £1,000 to sleep two nights in someone's ranch home while they slept nearby in their RV. The previous night cost over £150 in a dilapidated twin motel room without breakfast. Thankfully the brewery restaurant did not appear to have increased its charges.

Our location of a spot north of Riverton was chosen to be close to the centre line of totality (12km off where the path width was 107km) to give 2 minutes and 20s of totality. We could not find accommodation closer to the centre line in this area under £2,000 even nine months ahead. Camping in the Winds was considered but this would have considerably reduced the chances of a clear sky from over 90% to perhaps 60%. Haze and some cloud gave some concern as the day of the eclipse dawned. But as the sun rose the skies cleared. This was the case for almost all the US except for close to the east coast where heavy cloud persisted.



From first contact (the moon starting to pass in front of the sun) around 10:20 we were observing with the dark glasses and experimenting with camera settings and using binoculars to cast an image onto a screen. Little changed down on Earth until totality was around 20 minutes away. By then things were distinctly dimmer, getting cooler as the mozzies emerged to make a nuisance of themselves. Birds flocked, went to roost and quietened down. Colours muted as the remaining light slipped from yellow to grey. All around the horizon (we were on a large plain) were sunset colours: oranges and browns.



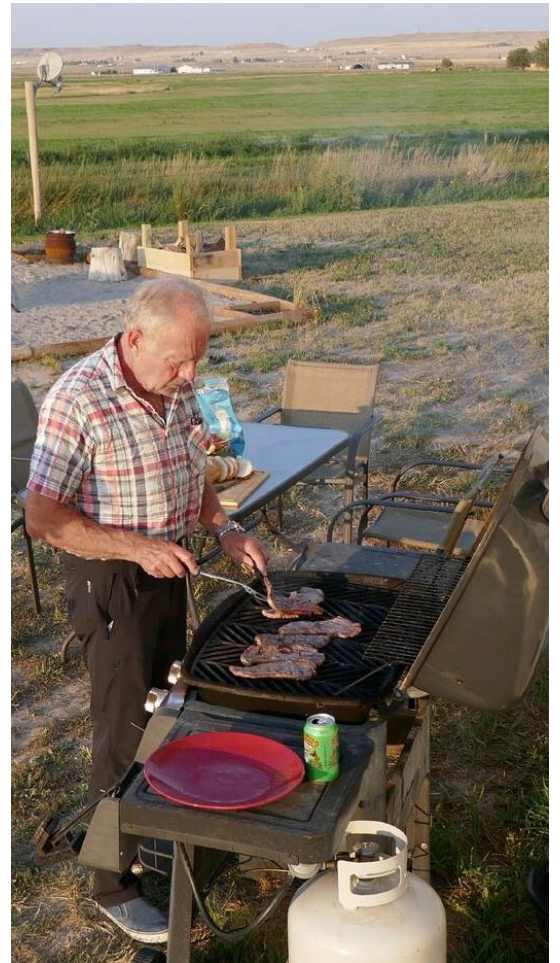
We shivered as the temperature fell dramatically. Finally, around 11:40, totality arrived and we could hear distant whooping and cheers in the darkness. Dark glasses were quickly whipped off and photos taken without filters. The sun's coronal glow around the sides of the moon was visible and our photos picked up solar flares. With only a short time to take it all in we were all too soon treated to the diamond ring of the first intense sparkle of sunlight peeking round the moon.



Then gradually the light and temperature returned to normal and it was off to the Smith's supermarket for some supplies and Arby's for a beef sandwich.

For the next few days almost everyone we met asked if we had seen it and commented on how striking it was. We got the impression that this quiet part of Wyoming, itself second only to Alaska for lowest state population density, had no real problems before the eclipse as visitors arrived gradually over five days to more than double the population. We did notice slip roads onto an interstate highway from Denver being closed for a few hours to keep traffic flowing, some queues building at petrol stations and busy eateries with local beer sales more than doubling. After the eclipse, however, many visitors started their journey home soon after noon and journey times home took two or three times longer on the highways which carried four times the usual flow. Heading into the mountains early the following day, this did not bother us.

Timing our visit to include the eclipse made the trip considerably more expensive and delayed our arrival in the Winds. But seeing the impressive 'once in a lifetime' spectacle made it worthwhile. Meeting an ordinary Wyoming family and spending some time with them was a bonus.



Panorama from Lonesome Lake of the Cirque of the Towers



## Backpacking from Dickinson Park

The backpacking group, David and Alan, watched the climbing trio, Michael, Richard and Tim, start their long walk-in to The Cirque of the Towers, then had a second brew-up and a second breakfast, before following them across the marshy trail south of Dickinson Park trailhead. This is their account.

We then followed the Smith Lake Trail westwards, initially in fairly dense forest, before rounding the prominent Dishpan Butte, and continuing westwards on a rough trail towards Smith Lake. We'd read that this area has a resident population of black bears, so when we occasionally met other backpackers, we enquired about sightings, and though most were negative, two backpackers reported seeing a female bear with young in a meadow near Smith Lake.



We continued on past Smith Lake, which was seen through trees to the south of the trail – relieved but also a little disappointed not to see bears – and found a good wild camp site on the north shore of Middle Lake. Cathedral Peak, to the west, and its two huge east ridges, provided a fine mountain setting. Later in the afternoon, without heavy backpacks, we tried to go further westwards towards Cathedral Lake, but the valley was blocked with fallen trees and rocks, so we retreated to camp, where

David tried his hand at fishing in Smith Lake, though unfortunately fish didn't take the bait.

Next day we backtracked about two miles to join the High Meadow Trail southwards, where we encountered an unexpectedly wide and turbulent crossing of a tributary of Smith Lake Creek. The rough, undulating trail continued to a series of waterfalls on High Meadow Creek, and a steep descent to join the North Fork Trail, immediately before a second knee deep river crossing. We were then on the route of the climbing trio the previous day, with a third, more turbulent river crossing an hour later. Eventually we reached the planned camping site at Lizard Head Meadows, a fine spot, despite mosquitoes, with superb views of Mitchell Peak, Dogtooth Mountain, The Monolith, and tantalising views further westwards into The Cirque.

We occasionally met small groups of other backpackers, who'd gone into the wilderness specifically to view the eclipse from a mountain setting; they were all duly impressed, though they'd been lucky to have cloud-free views. We chatted for some time with one lone walker, a man who knew these mountains in detail, and he described much of the geology and rock scenery we were to see over the next few days. He subsequently encountered our climbing trio.

Next day, after packing and hiding much of the gear, we continued westwards to Lonesome Lake. What a fine setting this is, fully justifying the descriptions we'd read in advance of the visit. Enclosed on three sides by shapely granite peaks, we got out the stoves, brewed tea, and sat for a while, trying to absorb it all. Quite suddenly, about thirty yards away, a large moose, with a fine set of antlers, ran at high speed across our path, to disappear into scrub and forest north of the lake.



We retraced our route to Lizard Head Meadows, collected the gear, and ascended the Lizard Head Trail for about a mile, to an unnamed lake east of Bear lake. As its name suggests, this is allegedly frequented by bears, and though we didn't see any, they probably saw us first. This was another fine camping spot – David fished the lake, unfortunately without success, and Alan went up to Bear Lake, in a rock-strewn cirque, totally dominated by Lizard Head Peak, 2,000 feet above.

Next day we resumed our route on the Lizard Head Trail, which here goes over a huge boulder strewn plateau, mainly at an altitude just short of 12,000 feet, devoid of any form of shelter, and thus a place to beware of in storms. Huge compensation, though, in the fine array of granite

peaks to the west, stretching northwards as far as the eye could see – Lizard Head Peak and Camel's Hump, separated by a high cirque and small glacier, the oddly named August 16th Peak, and increasingly a series of lakes up to Grave Lake, as well as umpteen other peaks stretching to the horizon, too far away to identify.



The Lizard Head Trail goes high on the eastern flanks of Cathedral Peak and two unnamed peaks, all over 12,000 feet high, and from this angle resembling huge tors, composed of pillow lava. Now on the northern slopes of Cathedral Peak, we followed the trail north-eastwards, descended a 200m long snow slope, joined the Bears Ears Trail, then turned west and descended to Little Valentine Lake for our next wild camp.



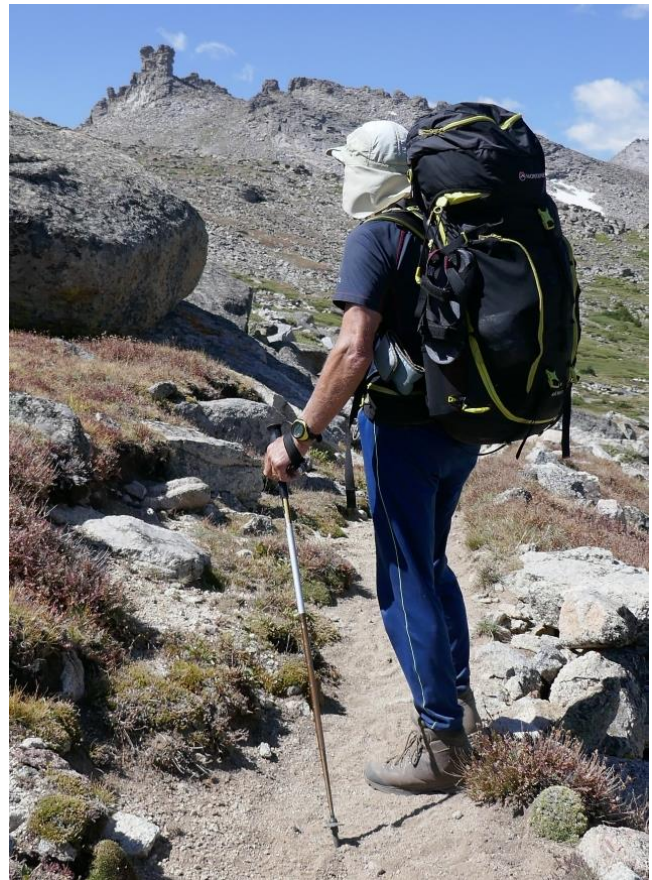
This was yet another good mountain wild camp site, a short distance above the lake, well sheltered from wind, with a pair of marmots resident among rocks across the stream. The final day of this mini-backpacking outing involved ascending the part of the Bears Ears

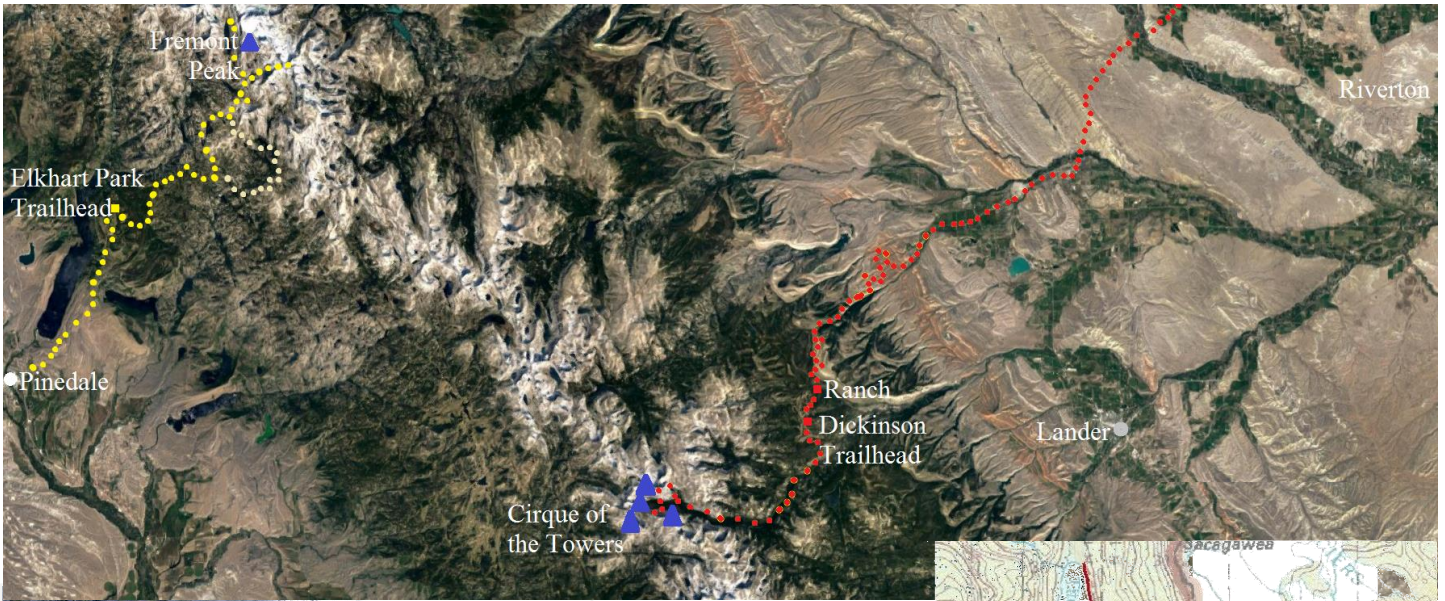
Trail we'd descended the previous day, then zig-zagging round and to the north of Mount Chauvenet, walking amongst outcrops of pillow lava at an altitude of 11900 feet. There was still a grandstand view of mountains in the northern part of the Wind Rivers Range, so grand it was difficult to look elsewhere.

The trail turned eastwards, beneath and north of the Bears Ears Mountain, where we had close-up views of a number of the "bear's ears" – rock formations which justify their name. We crossed a large snow slope, then Sand Creek, had a brew of tea, and were passed by a group of five men on horseback, who'd come from Valentine Lake – the larger lake below our previous night's camp. We crossed Adam's Pass and followed the trail north-eastwards through woodland above Ranger Creek to Dickinson Park Work Center, then south along the access road to the campsite at Dickinson Park.

We'd completed our five-day backpacking on schedule, and had a spare day before the three climbers were due to return from The Cirque. We therefore drove north to Moccasin Lake and walked to Mary's Lake on an unmaintained, deteriorating trail; the trail then totally disappeared, so we bushwhacked north to Shoe Lake, eastwards to Little Moccasin Lake and eventually made our way to the northern end of Moccasin Lake, where to our relief we found a fisherman's trail along the east shore, enabling us to get back to the vehicle. On this day we saw recent bear scratches on tree trunks and bear droppings, and though we didn't see a bear, in the wildest part of this maze of fallen trees and vegetation we disturbed an elk, which made off at speed.

After a second night at the Dickinson Park campsite we walked for two hours along the North Fork Trail, in the hope that we might meet our climbing colleagues, but it was not to be, so we returned to the campsite to await them.





**Backpacking from Elkhart Park**

After operating as two separate groups in the east, the five of us reunited for a backpacking trip from Pinedale in the west into the high, narrow valley of Titcomb Basin. Another early start and we had

driven the 40 minutes up Skyline Drive to the Elkhart Park trailhead and were surprised to see so many vehicles there. By 8am we were laden and walking along the Pole Creek Trail. The trail wound through pines and small lakes gently rising to Photographers' Point. This cliff edge's extensive views over the Bridger Wilderness gave us an excuse to pause. From here the clear and well signposted trail starts to cross the grain of the land with repeated rises over small ridges and drops to lakes.



We met perhaps thirty backpackers in twos or threes making their way out from Titcomb Basin back to the trailhead. They reported heavy rain showers the previous day.

Often people camp near Seneca Lake but we pushed on past Little Seneca Lake and two minor passes and descended across snow patches to the head of Island Lake. Mosquitos were a problem by the lake so we went steeply up the slope to the southeast and camped by a fast-flowing stream on a tree-lined cliff top. This gave good views, had a breeze, dry pitches and proved to be a good site.



Overlooking the campsite used above Island Lake

The big attraction of this area is Titcomb Basin and its views of towering peaks and we set off for that the next morning but increasing cloud by the time we reached the turnoff to Indian Pass caused us to switch plan and head for that pass. Richard had passed the same junction earlier having left camp at 6:30 and carried on into Titcomb Basin then scrambled up Fremont Peak to the north in demanding conditions (described elsewhere) to make the most of his one available day before he had to head back home. The remaining

four of us wound through the steadily rising trail past the lakes of Indian Basin. Turning east first through marshy ground below snow slopes then over those slopes and scree we eventually reached the pass, 12,140 ft on the Continental



Towards Indian Pass which is the distant low point slightly right of centre

Divide. Looking back over the terrain we considered the route ingenious and appreciated why the more direct route had been avoided – snow slopes and steep rock slabs made that way impassable. At the pass we caught up with a heavily laden couple who were about to head down Knife Point Glacier; it would be a day or two before they would hit another decent trail. The female half was so intent on keeping her footing on the snow slope that she was unaware of David's approach and was so startled on realising he was there that she shrieked and dropped her trekking pole. Perhaps she thought he was a bear – well, he had been backpacking for a couple of weeks. We returned by the same route to make it a nine-hour day

of about 11 miles. Brief morning rain caused us to put on waterproofs for the only time in the three weeks. The afternoon gradually brightened.

The next day Richard was off before 8am to walk out and drive to be sure of catching his flight the next day. Those remaining had a slower start as the plan was for a more relaxing pace and less ascent on a walk into Titcomb Basin to the north. The northern tip of the uppermost lake was reached in a ten mile, six-hour stroll with many stops to admire the peaks and watch the flotilla of goldeneye on the upper lake. This time we met two Germans on a variation on the Continental Divide Trail. They were 4½ months into the south-to-north route and unsure if they would finish it this year before the winter set in.

The next day we planned to walk most of the way directly back to the trailhead to greatly reduce the following day's hike out and allow plenty of time for the drive south. Up at dawn and packed for departure from the Island Lake camp before 8am we were soon over the two minor passes and down to Little Seneca Lake. A dilemma faced us: carry on straight back and we would finish early in the afternoon

or we could take a different route new to us, twice as long and not researched, over the Lester Pass and rejoin the outward trail near Eklund Lake. The slope up to the 11,115 ft pass looked well graded and slowly we talked ourselves into this option to make best use of our remaining time in the Winds – after all we were unlikely to be returning. There were moments when we regretted that decision. The tramp up



to Lester Pass was no problem. A snow bank on the other side was descended to wind down the Highline Trail through alpine meadows to the tree line and a lake for a break. We were making good time.

Then we reached Pole Creek and discovered that an unexpected river crossing was needed. All descent so far... a lot of it. Another mile or so and a second, deeper faster-flowing crossing. Then in the heat of the afternoon a long unrelentingly uphill Pole Creek Trail took us past a string of lakes including Long, Mary's and Eklund Lakes to regain all that lost height with nutcrackers giving raucous accompaniment.

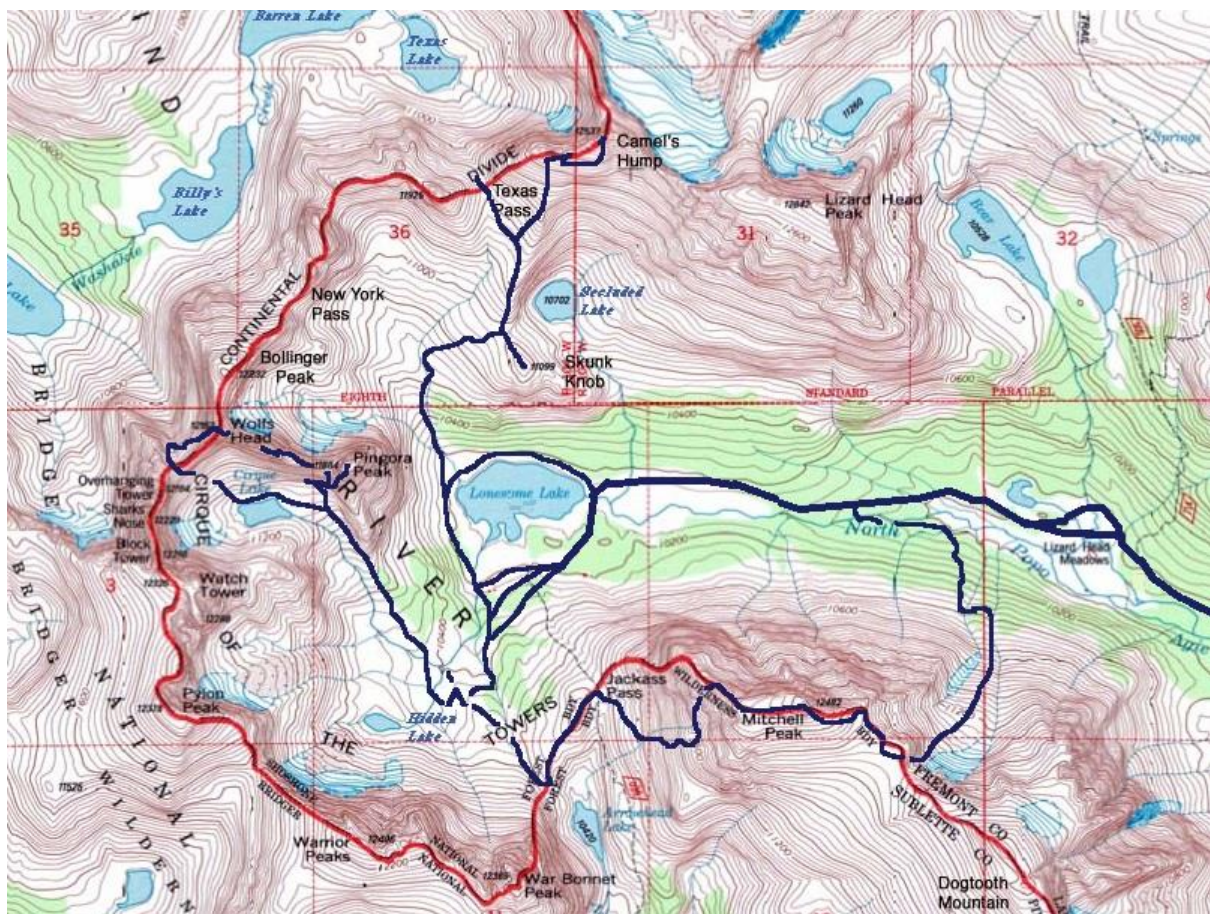


The second Pole Creek crossing



It was hard work with our packs and we were tiring but we had seen two new valleys. Enough flattish ground was found by Eklund Lake where we camped despite the inlet being dry. This site was enlivened by squeaking and whistling rodents including chipmunk, ground squirrel, pikas and water shrews. A camper on the far side of the lake fished at night using a light as a lure.

The hike out the next day via Photographers' Point was uneventful. Off by 7:15 we were at the Elkhart Park trailhead before 10am. Another grand five-day trip.



## Climbs and Scrambles

**Lonesome Lake:** After our exertions of the previous day's walk in to camp by the Cirque of the Towers we decided to explore the lower levels of the Cirque and check out the approaches to our selected climbs. Although the area is a long way from the nearest trailhead, all the towers are within an hour and a half or so of the campsites above Lonesome Lake.

That lake was sadly one of the first to become polluted due to human activity but efforts at education by the Ranger authorities and a ban on camping within ¼ mile of the lake have greatly improved the situation. People seem to be taking the problem seriously here and elsewhere in the range, making low impact camping a priority. The basin below the Cirque of the Towers, with its chaos of boulders hiding little meadows and copses of pines holds a multitude of secluded campsites, far enough from streams for hygiene but close enough for a convenient water supply. Although there were many other backpackers and climbers camping, the sites were so well hidden we never felt crowded.



We set off to reconnoitre Pingora Peak and Wolf's Head, both sharing the same initial approach through an area of massive boulders. Luckily, a climbers' path has formed and the going was surprisingly easy to a small cairn marking the zigzag route up ramps and ledges onto the south shoulder of Pingora. Here we could trace our planned route for the morrow before descending the ledges and working up to the foot of the wall leading up to Wolf's Head. We had already been warned about the horrors of the direct approach up 300ft of steep ledges and a pair of descending climbers agreed declaring it 'very scary'. We climbed a short way up a blocky gully which looked fine and decided on that way for later.

Wolf's Head   Tiger Tower   Pingora   Camel's Hump





The South Buttress of Pingora was our first route the next day, a four-pitch climb rated at 5.6 (UK Severe \*\*\*). We had a youth on our side and it seemed a waste not to use it so we pointed him up the climb and off he went.

Enjoyable exposed climbing up corner cracks on impeccable granite led all too soon to a 200ft scramble to the blocky summit. One pitch was rather harder (5.7, UK HS/VS), so we may have been off route. Pingora dominates the view from below but on the top one feels dwarfed by the higher peaks around the Cirque. Three airy abseils reunited us with our approach shoes and a leisurely stroll back to camp after a short but satisfying day.



The second route, two days later was the famed East Ridge of Wolf's Head, 5.6. Although the climbing is not hard, this is a much more serious

proposition being virtually inescapable and with a long approach and descent. Given the reputation of the Cirque for afternoon thunderstorms, an early start is essential. We did but even so there were several parties ahead who must have set off in the dark. Having decided on the indirect approach we scrambled up a mini bergschrund beside a snowfield to the base of our gully. This went easily apart from a short excursion onto the flanking slabs where we

used a rope although it turned out not to be really necessary. Topping out on the ridge we then had to cross Tiger Tower by one pitch of Diff climbing and an abseil down the other side to the Wolf's Head col. From here the aspect is somewhat alarming. The ridge is spectacularly narrow and foreshortening makes it look impossibly steep. Once you get started though the true angle becomes clear and delightful V Diff climbing on granite with the friction properties of velcro took us in about 350ft to the more level section of the ridge.





The exposure along most of the routes is “awesome” (you can’t climb in the USA without using that adjective), a couple of sections of admittedly easy climbing were exceptionally narrow.

We soon reached the four pitches of technical climbing; tenuous toe traverses, hand traverses and squeezes through holes from one side of the ridge to the other. All delightful climbing on beautiful rock with stunning situations. Route finding was easy. If you can climb it, you’re going the right way. If you can’t you’re not. Eventually some easy scrambling reached the airy summit with room for two. The first abseil station was just below the summit and four abseils of 80-100ft reached a ledge and terrace system which took us the ¼ mile to the col before Overhanging Tower and a final abseil. All abseils can be done on one 60m rope. We thought it was all over but the descent from the col on very steep gravel was horrible. However, all things come to an end and we soon reached easier going and a delightful walk out surrounded by peaks turning golden in the setting sun.

Pingora was a good climb. Wolf’s Head was an outstanding climb. If one is climbing in the Hard VS to low Extreme grades there is a lifetime of magnificent climbing to go at here.

Besides the rock climbing in the Cirque some of the surrounding peaks were scrambled when we wanted a quieter day or the weather looked less settled.

**Mitchell Peak:** Mitchell Peak, 3,804m or 12,482 ft, stands opposite Pingora and flanks the Jackass Pass. It has steep faces to the north and west with rocky ridges breaking the southern slopes above the pass. The normal route starts by crossing the Popo Agie River to the north by Lizard Head Meadows and circling round to the eastern side. We had though read of a rough winding route starting from the pass. From our camp we traversed a minor hump to reach the Jackass Pass (also called Big Sandy Pass) picking

out potential ascent routes on the way.



Scrambling up Mitchell Peak with the Cirque as a backdrop

A vague track through the lower grassy slopes vanished once we started on the talus (boulder field). Turning a ridge by a traverse right and entering a gulley we made good progress to a scramble up a small ridge with a stunning finish (I, 3<sup>rd</sup> class). A move onto a block left one peering nervously down over the apparently overhanging north face. A right turn and gentle

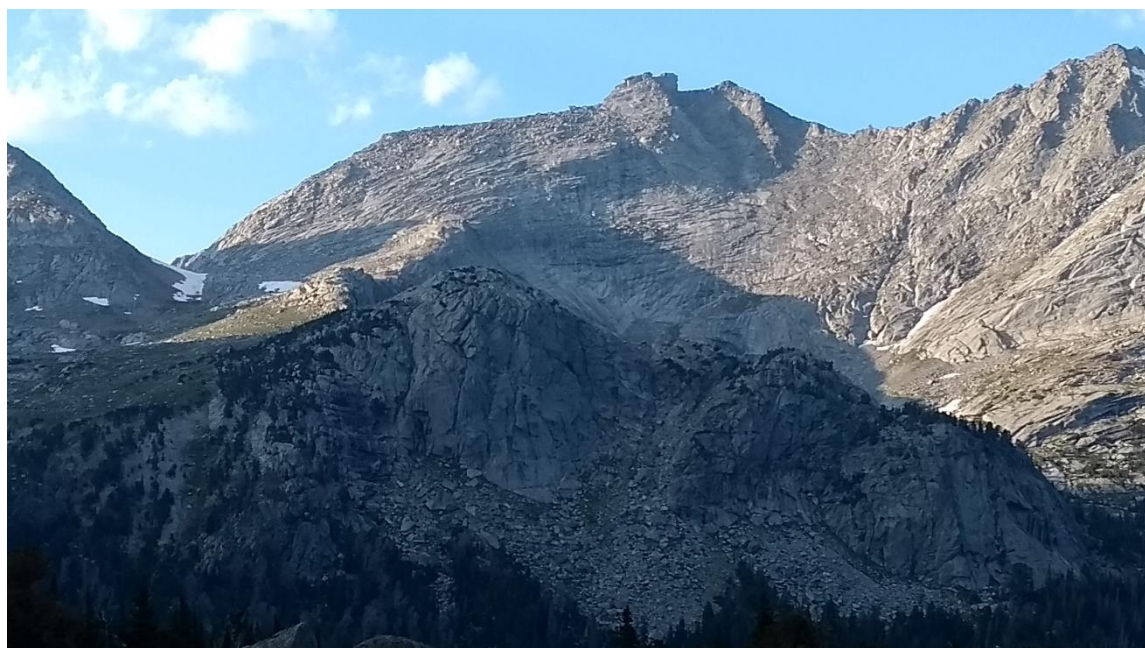
scrambling over blocks took the three of us to a broader ridge and shallow Cairngorm-like boulder slope and a rocky granite summit. A worthwhile ascent. A bite to eat and we needed to move on as the weather looked as if it would deteriorate as forecast. Rather than descend the ascent route we looked west and the normal route appeared reasonable. After a 100m or so south we scuttered down a rock slab (I, 3<sup>rd</sup> class) to find a stony slope to the col towards Dog Tooth Peak. The descent into the corrie above Lizard Head Meadows was initially steep and loose but improved to a rough grassy slope. A long descent left us on a rocky outcrop, peering over mature pine forest trying to find a way on. A way was found through the trees by following recent moose track and trusting we would not run into the rear of the beast. On reaching the fast-flowing turbulent river we turned upstream and after a mile or so found a place where we could step across between boulders and gain the North Fork Trail back to Lonesome Lake and camp. We suffered only a few spits of rain but there had been significant rainfall elsewhere in the range.

The Winds' prolific photographer and climber, Finis Mitchell, climbed the peak eleven times between 1923 (aged 21) and 1973 and placed a plaque by the summit to mark this achievement. The peak is named for him.



**Camel's Hump:** Though technically a day to recover between our exertions on Wolf's Peak and the long walk out, it seemed a shame not to try and take in another one of the magnificent mountains of the range. Described by the guidebook as a 3<sup>rd</sup> class scramble, the Southwest Slope route up to the twin summits of Camel's Hump (3,821m, 12,537ft and 3,807m, 12,492ft) provided a series of interesting problems.

Richard soloed the unmarked route which followed a series of inclined ledges up the face with a short bouldering-style wall encountered at each step between levels. The ledges, noted in the guidebook as 'conveniently slanted', have just enough friction against your boots for the angle to stop you sliding –



Texas Pass, Skunk Knob (foreground) and Camel's Hump behind

although it takes a while to convince one's body that this is the case. The top provided both superb vistas of the previous week's routes and an excellent ridge scramble between the humps. Lizard Head Peak (3,914m, 12,842ft), the highest in the area, was tantalisingly close separated only by a fantastic airy ridge climb (West Ridge, 4th class). However, low energy reserves and no company meant it awaits another visit.

Michael walked to the Texas Pass and then up Skunk Knob.



Scrambling route on Fremont Peak. Helen's Peak to the left

**Fremont Peak:** During the walk in to Island Lake, Fremont Peak (4,189m, 13,745ft) stood out on the horizon. With time against Richard before the end of my trip he wanted to see as much of this new part of the Wind River Range as possible. His route would take him first up into Titcomb Basin – its lakes reminiscent of an Alpine valley - before heading northeast from the 10,575ft Lake's east shore through a notch to Mistake Lake. It was at this point while descending slightly that Mistake Lake justified its name as a loud rip emanated from his trousers... ventilation was not be an issue for the rest of the trip. From the southern end of Mistake his route went southeast up the main rock gully to

gain Fremont's southeast ridge via a saddle at 11,900ft.

Joining there the main path and, with the damp weather more reminiscent of a Munroe ascent, Richard started up the Southwest Buttress scramble (class 3). Once into the scramble, the path is not clearly defined and the grade/exposure of the scramble varies significantly depending on the route picked up the ridge (up to class 4 on the slabs towards the right). Thankfully the grippy rock and intermittent clearing of the clouds allowed him to work his way up and enjoy the challenge of the slabs. With the mountain to himself, the top was identified by a long canister securely wedged between the two topmost prominent blocks.



View from Fremont Peak looking back along the trail into Titcomb Basin

During my brief time on the top waiting for gaps in the clouds to reveal the view, every weather was experienced. It is easy to see why this mountain was believed for so long to be the tallest in the Rockies. The descent on the loose rocks improved with each step as one feels more invigorated as the elevation decreases. Glissading into Indian Basin and encountering yet another stunning valley with a colourful abundance of wild flowers, his knees were thankful for flatter ground.

**Medicine Bow Peak, Snowy Range:** Following the recommendation of our Riverton host, Richard took Route 130 back to Denver and with his flight not until the evening he was looking for something to

keep him occupied. Although the driving distances are great, rolling along these quiet American roads is undemanding and the scenery making you feel you're watching a Western. Route 130 traverses the Medicine Bow National Forest and many trailheads were signposted from the roadside. Travelling light (most things were packed for the flight) and with no map, he did not set a good example to the hordes of families setting off for their Labour Day weekend walks.

The Snowy Range is the northernmost sub-range of the Medicine Bow Mountains, their distinctive quartzite rock creating a striking white scar poking through the forests. The walk up from Lake Marie follows well marked trails and a bare rocky ridge up the boulder strewn top of Medicine Bow Peak (3,662m, 12,013ft). With two weeks of conditioning behind him Richard was not to be overtaken.



The unobstructed views from the top over the National Forest were only limited by the haze and showed that this area could keep you easily busy for a week or more. The Snowy Range is certainly worth a detour should you be passing and made a great finale to Richard's trip.



## Reflections

The **Wind River Range** is an impressive area for backpacking or for climbing. The five members spent hours gazing at the scenery despite all being highly experienced travellers in the world's mountain ranges. The area covered by the Winds is large: 100 miles long running NW-SE along the Continental Divide with over 40 peaks exceeding 13,000 ft (~4,000m). The range's breadth averages around 20 miles with relatively few access points (trailheads).

The more popular western flank has just fifteen access points and there are fewer in the east. The roads to the trailheads are long and can be rough going so an **SUV is an advantage** though we also managed with a saloon. Despite their length these roads do not penetrate far into the Winds. Once on the trails we found them to be well signed at junctions and there are some other paths neither marked on the maps nor signposted. The trails are constrained by the topography to generally avoid the steep river-cut valley sides so wind around with the rivers, shelves or ridges.



SUV crossing the Oregon Trail – Elkund Lake Camp

The range's breadth and the circuitous trails mean the **walks in to the central chain of peaks are long**. Several backpackers we met were surprised that we managed reach the Cirque of the Towers and Island Lake each in a single day - admittedly long days in both cases. The distances to the spine of the chain with its more dramatic scenery and tempting objectives make the range less suitable for single day outings.



We visited two of the most popular areas. Even so we never felt oppressed by the

presence of others. **Encounters on trails were infrequent** enough to generally result in a chat sometimes for ten minutes or longer. One lone backpacker guessed who three of us were on hearing us speak having spoken to the other two the previous day.

Denver was chosen for the frequency of **flights** it offered. Salt Lake City would have reduced driving time by a couple of hours for the Pinedale (western) side of the range but flights were more expensive. Flights to Riverton were too infrequent to be worthwhile. Using Iceland Air avoided the need to have a connecting flight within the US and the associated need to collect and re-check-in luggage. Services on the Iceland Air flights were basic.

Total **expenditure** for the meet was around £9,300 for the five participants including flights, car hire, accommodation, permits, food and drink. Permits were only needed for the Shoshone Indian Reservation (eastern) side of the range.

Despite good roads and highways leading to the centres of Lander and Pinedale the time taken to travel there from Denver and between them is long because of the **driving distances involved**: 400, 475 and 160 miles. There are few services and eateries along large parts of these routes.

There are many **further opportunities** in the Winds though we have probably experienced much of the most concentrated treats. The Big Sandy approach to the Cirque, Gannett Peak and the Highline Trail near there would all have been visited had we had more time. Backpacking the length of the range would take three weeks even with resupply drops close to the route.



Island Lake camp

Camping, especially backpacking, concentrates the mind on what is essential. We used one-person single-hoop tents except Tim who had more space in a two-person three-hoop tent when it was transported by horse and a hooped bivvy when he was bearing the load. There was usually little difficulty in finding **suitable pitches**. Clear night skies at 10,000 ft resulted in **frosts some nights** and those with -5°C sleeping bags appreciated them.

The Winds are not littered and some care is needed to keep them that way. It is sensible to **canister or suspend food** away from 'critters' not only to prevent loss or damage but to reduce impact on wildlife.

Feeding adequately is another important aspect of any backcountry trip. We ate well when in towns and had no problem finding suitable restaurants. The criteria for backpacking food were lightness, small size, calories, ease of preparation and acceptable taste with some variety. Complicating factors were that taking food into the US is problematic, time for purchasing food was limited and the increased numbers of campers anticipated for the eclipse might deplete local stocks. The Mountain House range of meals were considered acceptable and our eclipse accommodation hosts were willing to take delivery of an order

from the company's US factory. However, they would **not accept payment from a UK card**, nor PayPal. Alan, who was arranging all this, had to make a payment to our hosts who then ordered a simplified version of what we wanted for us. Simplified because we could not burden them with entering online the dozens of items we wanted so substituted standard multi-day emergency food supply packs as supplied to survivalists. These dehydrated foods simply required the addition of boiling water, resealing and being allowed to stand for several minutes though we found leaving them longer and being kept hot while standing improved the texture and temperature. Oddly the packs are not vacuum-packed but puncturing the packs meant the volume could be greatly reduced. Another odd feature is that the packs often contained a stated 2½ portions blazoned with 'enjoy right from the pouch'. Firstly, we could not get three of use round a single pouch to dip our sporks in and, secondly, we needed 1½ or 2 of the stated 'portions' to feel as if we'd had a serving rather than a snack.

As for 'cooking', this was simply a matter of boiling water. Two MSR **multifuel stoves** were used both burning generic camping stove gasoline purchased in a large supermarket for \$13 a gallon. About half was used. The other stoves used gas canisters available from outdoor suppliers and large supermarkets in mountain areas. A small complication at the end of the trip is the **safe disposal** of those items which are neither allowed to be dumped nor taken on a plane. We dropped all remaining fuel off at a family-run outdoor shop where the owner was happy to use the remainder himself. He also took some pepper spray canisters. A surprised but delighted hiker waitress took the remaining pepper spray canister.

Weather conditions were generally kind to us. There can be **significant snowfall** in September at the high camps. Another frequent problem is smoke haze from forest fires. We noticed this one evening looking towards Gannett Peak from our camp above Island Peak and later for two days throughout the Rocky Mountain National Park. The filtering of the setting sun's light by the haze gave the sun a blood red colour against a dark grey sky even an hour or so before sunset.



The last breakfast together as a five above Island Lake





### Nature Notes

While none on the meet were experts in the flora or fauna, they did notice species they considered notable. Some of those identified are listed here.

Moose	Desert Cottontail	American Robin
Elk	Greater Shorthorned Lizard	American Pipit
Mule Deer	Northern Sagebrush Lizard	Grackle
White-tailed Deer	Wandering Gartersnake	Brown-headed Cowbird
Pronghorn	Downy Woodpecker	Goldeneye
Feral Horse	Rufous Hummingbird	Great Crested Flycatcher
Yellow-bellied Marmot	Belted Kingfisher	Olive-sided Flycatcher
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel	Great Blue Heron	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Red Squirrel	Double-crested Cormorant	Rock Wren
American Pika	Chough	American Crow
Unita Chipmunk	Red-tailed Hawk	Common Raven
Montane Vole	Gray Nutcracker	Wild Turkey
Western/American Water Shrew	House Sparrow	Ring-necked Pheasant
Coyote	White-crowned Sparrow	

**Pikas:** The pikas were numerous and active gathering bundles of vegetation ready for the winter. Those in the Cirque were unafraid and came right up to our feet and ropes.



The species is at risk from global warming as pika are specialised for high altitude environments and can not compete with other rodents at low altitudes and die if exposed to temperatures of 25.5°C for more for several hours. With warming their environmental niches are likely to recede higher up the mountains with consequent reduction in area and increase in communities' isolation from one another.

Pika do not hibernate so need to gather large quantities of herbage. An adult will typically make over a hundred foraging trips a day, 13 an hour, through the summer, carefully selecting the plants with the greater food value. A Colorado study measured the stored food piles to be sufficient for more than 175 days of winter feeding.



**Being Bear Aware:** While no bears were encountered on this trip there were clear signs of their presence. Droppings were found on trails in Lory State Park and on the Lester Pass. Away from the trails the backpackers near Dickinson Park noticed claw marks and evidence of bears' back scratching on trees.



We took various precautions against attracting the attention of bears. Except for the camp in the Cirque of the Towers where local advice was that there were enough people around to discourage bears: food and empty food packets were stored in bear canisters; bear canisters were stored well

away from tents; no food was stored in tents; meals were prepared more than a hundred metres away from tents; pepper spray was carried readily accessible; bear bells were attached to some trekking poles. Bear precautions are advisory rather than mandatory in the range.

Bear canisters were readily available for loan from Forest Service's Ranger District offices in Lander and Pinedale either at no charge or for a small donation. Copies were taken of the borrower's ID and credit card against the possibility of failure to return the canisters. There was a drop box for the return of canisters outside office hours.



## The Continental Divide

The Pacific-Atlantic watershed of North America (Continental Divide or Great Divide) is long and tortuous. On our drive south we crossed it five times in an hour or so while on a reasonably straight highway. There is a Continental Divide Trail (CDT) running from the Canadian to the Mexican border along trails or back roads on or near the Continental Divide.

We met two individuals heading south and an Austrian couple heading north who were tackling the CDT. We could appreciate why they wanted to hike through these mountains and other parts of the Rockies. However, there are many scores of miles of the CDT south of Winds before the next wilderness area is reached, the Medicine Bow National Forest. Much of those intervening miles are through flat or undulating sage brush with dirt roads to be covered at an average of 17 miles per day which we thought would be tedious. A further problem in this area is lack of reliable water sources in the Wyoming Great Divide (desert) Basin.

One of the CDTers we met thought around two-hundred now set off each year with the intention of completing the trail but I note that under fifty had registered completion in 2016. At around 3,000 miles it is a serious undertaking and typically requires six months. Reputedly, heading north starting in March or April is more reliable as a late June start on the Canadian border can be delayed by a few weeks waiting for the spring run-off to finish and allow access.

Above Pinedale, our destinations Fremont Peak and Indian Pass are on the Divide but not the CDT. We did though follow the CDT in that area from Seneca Lake over Lester Pass and down to Cook lake and a little beyond. Near the Cirque of the Towers, Wolf's Head and Mitchell Peak are both on the Divide and a variation on the main CDT passes between them using Texas and Jackass Passes while the main route stays well to the east of the crest in this area.



Meeting CDTers on Indian Pass

## Sources of information

- Camping food [www.mountainhouse.com](http://www.mountainhouse.com)
- Guidebooks:
  - Joe Kelsey, 2013, Climbing and Hiking in the Wind River Mountains 3rd edition. Falcon Guides
  - Ron Adkinson, 2012, Hiking Wyoming's Wind River Range 2nd edition. Falcon Guides
  - Wind River High Route [www.andrewskurka.com/product/wind-river-high-route-guide](http://www.andrewskurka.com/product/wind-river-high-route-guide)
  - Lankin Dome area [www.topozone.com/wyoming/fremont-wy/summit/lankin-dome](http://www.topozone.com/wyoming/fremont-wy/summit/lankin-dome)
- Maps:
  - Beartooth 1:100k <http://www.beartoothpublishing.com/product/wind-river-range>
  - Wind River High Route [www.andrewskurka.com/product/wind-river-high-route-guide](http://www.andrewskurka.com/product/wind-river-high-route-guide)
  - Wyoming Topo 2011 <https://www.gpsfiledepot.com/maps/view/512>
  - Earthwalk Press, North Wind River Range, Hiking map and guide1:48k Earthwalk Press, South Wind River Range, Hiking map and guide1:48k
- Climbing:
  - Wind River Range [www.mountainproject.com/v/wind-river-range/105823538](http://www.mountainproject.com/v/wind-river-range/105823538)
  - Lankin Dome area [www.mountainproject.com/v/lankin-dome/106379366](http://www.mountainproject.com/v/lankin-dome/106379366)
- Permits and Rangers:
  - Wind River Outdoor Company, 8114 WY-789, Lander, WY 82520  
<http://www.Windriveroutdoorcompany.com>
  - Ranger offices: Washakie Ranger District, 333 Highway 789, South, Lander, WY 82520.
  - Pinedale Ranger District 29 East Fremont Lake Rd. PO Box 220. Pinedale, WY 82941
- Trails and local information:
  - Wind River Range: [www.summitpost.org/wind-river-range/171223](http://www.summitpost.org/wind-river-range/171223)
  - Continental Divide Trail <https://continentaldividetrail.org/>
  - Popo Agie Falls Trail, Sinks Canyon <https://www.sinkscanyonstatepark.org/>
  - Lory State Park <https://cpw.state.co.us/placestogo/parks/Lory>
  - Pinedale <http://www.visitpinedale.org>
  - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/shoshone>
  - Llama supported hiking <http://www.landerllama.com/>
  - Wrangling by Allen's Diamond Four Ranch <https://diamond4ranch.com/>

**Regrets?** A couple of months after the trip we were discussing what went well and what might have gone better then someone asked if we had any regrets...

Tim's only regret was that he had not discovered the area twenty years earlier.

Michael's only regret was that when passing through the hamlet of Rand, about 30 miles from the nearest decent stretch of water and spotting the ironically named Rand Yacht Club, we did not stop and call in for a drink.

