

LESSONS IN WYOMING, FROM THE WATER

By Sylvia Karcz

A story of changing course, over and over again.





In a canoe on a lake in Yellowstone National Park, things were not going as planned. The sky was bleeding into darker shades of sunset, and I was gripping my paddle so tight I could hardly feel my fingers. My partner and I weren't exactly singing each other's praises, because relentless winds kept shifting our floating vessel toward the shoreline to our right—not where we needed to go—and I'm sure we each thought the other was to blame. Our friend, solo in another canoe, was overcoming his own battle with a defiant headwind, drifting further and further from us. We had yet to cross the ever-darkening, increasingly choppy expanse of Lewis Lake, and it looked like a daunting task. I kept telling myself that cliché about adventure being at its truest form when things don't go as intended, but I still craved the silence of no wind, and the feeling of my feet shuffling on land.

How I ended up in a canoe on a windy lake in Wyoming, though, is essentially a story about rolling with the punches, and it's one that begins a few states away and several months earlier, in California.

It was the peak of the pandemic, and there was no better time to finally apply for the elusive permit for the John Muir Trail: a fabled backpacking route that winds through 211 miles of some of the most impressive wilderness in California. After three months of being denied, daily, through the Yosemite lottery system, I awoke one morning to an email that I had nearly given up on receiving; I had won the permit lottery. Our team of three—myself, my partner,

and his best friend—could enter Yosemite Valley on September 11th and spend up to three weeks scrambling through three national parks, two national forests, 10 mountain passes, and roughly 45,000 of elevation gain toward the highest peak in the contiguous United States: Mount Whitney. The joy was overpowering.

Before we knew it, the first days of September were upon us, and we were in Los Angeles, sweating through training hikes in a heat wave and watching online tutorials on how to properly dehydrate vegetables for backpacking meals. This isn't a California adventure story, though, and here's why: on September 4th, the Creek Fire was sparked in the Eastern Sierras, and it exploded. On the date we were slated to start driving toward Yosemite, national forests closed, and I received an email from the park system stating the inevitable: our backpacking trip was over before it had even begun. The wildfire had burned nearly 200,000 acres by this point, and John Muir Trail reports were describing apocalyptic vistas and laborious breathing in smoky air. Hikers were being asked to exit, and some were even being evacuated by military helicopters.

The three of us spent a solid day lamenting this turn of events, glued to news reports of the devastation, hearts hurting for the land, the animals, the people affected, and, selfishly, for our adventure. We couldn't help but feel deflated that all the months of planning had been wiped out in a matter of 48 hours. We had three weeks set aside for an epic journey, and we had no plan B.

The Lewis Lake to Shoshone Lake loop in Yellowstone National Park is no joke for canoeists.



Above: Hugging the shoreline to avoid choppy water.

Below: On the lakes at Yellowstone, you can feel like the only person in the world.

Until, of course, we did. I remember us sitting at a kitchen table with a map of the United States, filled with a rushing excitement, like air quickly swelling a balloon. One of us mentioned cooler weather—a trip north. Someone said Glacier National Park, the Tetons, and then why not Yellowstone? It's on the way! Our friend suggested taking his canoes—maybe a lake in Yellowstone? Canoes! Backpacks! Adventure! Could I even paddle a canoe for several miles each day? Who cares! All hail, a plan B!

We would drive north toward Montana with two canoes strapped

to a truck, away from fires and heat waves and major cities. While we weren't exactly certain how our adventure would materialize, we were confident that we'd make the most of it. The pandemic years felt like a lesson in acceptance and adaptation, after all, and this was no different. We would create something new with what we had at our disposal: time and a yearning for connection to the outdoors.

That's how we ended up in Wyoming roughly 12 days later, at the western entrance of Yellowstone National Park. We had just spent a week in the Montana backcountry, and we craved more of that particular type of solitude—the kind you have to sweat a little for. Our initial arrival into Yellowstone didn't deliver that gift, however.

After months of lockdowns, it seemed like everyone was rushing to be outside at the same time, in the same places. The nation's oldest national park is drawing in a record number of visitors, and Yellowstone felt more like an arena with a rowdy crowd at a sporting event than an escape into nature.

So, we headed to the park's backcountry office. We'd heard whispers of a water route that crosses from one lake within the

park to another, and promises secluded, boat-in-only campsites. The attending park ranger confirmed that it does, in fact, exist. We could launch at Lewis Lake, at the southern end of Yellowstone National Park, paddle north to the mouth of the Lewis Channel, and three miles later enter Shoshone Lake, crowned the largest backcountry lake in the continental United States. From there, we would continue to a series of primitive campsites scattered on the lake's shores—there are only 20 of them in total—for three more days. It sounded simple enough, and absolutely perfect.

The ranger stressed that winds have a tendency to turn the lakes into tempests at a moment's notice, though, and it's safest to start early, keep mileage low, and be off the water by midday, before winds tend to ramp up. We were told that waves can frenzy to five feet high from out-of-nowhere gales, which is more than enough to capsize a small, paddle-powered craft; we were told that the leading cause of death in Yellowstone is hypothermic drowning. Now, I can count the number of times I've been in a canoe on one hand, and the notion of a capsized canoe



makes my hands sweat; yet, when asked if we had sound paddling skills, I was the first to say yes, that we'd done our fair share of paddling. It's hard to say whether the ranger believed us, but she gave the okay. We had to rush to get the required boat permit and check completed by day's end, and then it was settled: we would start the next day.

A one-hour drive in the morning took us to the Lewis Lake boat launch—at 7,782 feet elevation—where we set off on the second day of autumn with two canoes, three days of food, camping gear, a hammock and a guitar for good measure. We started paddling with ambitious strokes, sun on smiling faces and elated that we were the only ones on the gleaming, early-morning waters. Our bows pointed to the northern end of the lake, and after a couple hours, we reached our first stop: the mouth of the Lewis River. It felt like we'd stumbled across some well-kept secret (watercraft are banned on all other rivers and streams within Yellowstone), and as we meandered through the channel's clear waters, surrounded by stately pine trees and wilderness as far as the eyes could see, we really felt the solitude of it all: no roads, no cars, no crowds. This is what we came for.

Nearing two miles into the river, the water became shallower and shallower, the strength of the opposing current was finally felt, and we began to hear a crackling that could only mean one thing: the canoes were beginning to scrape the bottom of the river. We assumed it was just a small section



and attempted to push through, but after propping up on some larger rocks and having our canoes boomerang a few times, we began to think that maybe a portage was just part of the program. When a group of men towing a custom aluminum rowboat floated up behind us, they confirmed our suspicions. This is, indeed, normal.

We didn't, of course, have a proper tow rope—or any rope, in fact. But we did have a couple of small bungee cords holding our backpacks together, so we made do, taking turns pulling our vessels in cold, shin-deep water. Our map showed that we were only about a mile shy of the channel's end, so we trudged on like this until the first glimpse of Shoshone Lake beckoned us.

It's a sizeable body of water, Shoshone—almost 13 miles at its widest—and seeing this expanse in person made me awestruck. I didn't have time to appreciate the

wonder for too long, though, since our clocks' hands revealed that it was already past midday. Our campsite was about halfway down the lake's southwestern shore, so we had a good amount of paddling left, and, true to lore, winds had picked up, creating whitecaps near the lake's center. They were not a welcome sight.

We paddled for what felt like hours. In the choppy water, our friend got close to tipping his canoe over a few times too many (paddling a two-person canoe by oneself is no easy feat), and it gave us all a rude awakening. Having a good story to tell is one thing, but the cautionary words of the backcountry office ranger were ringing loudly in our ears, and we were not looking for some survivalist tale. So, we hugged the shoreline, with each passing cove feeling like a false summit.

In the late afternoon, we finally arrived at our backcountry

The Lewis Lake adventure renders an automobile unnecessary—no roads, no cars, no crowds.



Above: Short-lived perfection, as weather caused an early departure from this backcountry campsite.

Opposite: Plotting a route over water.

site, in a protected cove clear of unfavorable conditions. We were smoked; my arms were jelly, and I had no doubt that the same we-may-be-in-over-our-heads emotions were creeping up on each of us. While we relished in the comfort of land and a campsite that felt like our own secluded island, we could still hear the wind persisting in the distance, a constant reminder of just how much we were relying on good conditions to get us back to our car safely.

Everything looks a bit different from a boat-in campsite in the backcountry—more in focus. Waking up to a watercolor sunrise

and a camp-stove coffee, knowing that the three of us wouldn't see another soul unless we paddled out—or someone else paddled in—was a recharge unlike any other. But despite the momentary perfection, we were proposing a bail-out plan over breakfast. The wind hadn't ceased like it was supposed to, we had no way of knowing when it would, and we came to the conclusion that we were simply not prepared enough to risk it for two more days. And so it went that just as quickly as we began our Wyoming canoe adventure in Yellowstone National Park, we were now making a call to end it. It felt

like both a small failure and the smartest decision we could make. It felt like a familiar tune.

We were okay with that balance, though. If the COVID-19 outbreak made us more cognizant of anything, it's how things can change at a moment's notice, and that accepting that change can be a saving grace. Perhaps our canoe trip didn't go exactly as we had envisioned, but did we eventually end up back at our original launch-off point safely? Sure we did. Did the gales persist all day, and did our journey take hours longer than planned? Sure it did. The wind became our enemy, and paddling



turned into a tug-of-war with water. As we pulled our canoes onto the shore on the brink of sunset, I was cold, hungry, and barely speaking to my partner.

Crossing open water was an emotional, exhausting experience, and one that looked significantly different to the adventure we had dreamed of. But perhaps it's the very adventure I needed, and it's no doubt one that will be remembered long after the soreness in my arms has worn off.

For minutes to hours after you get off water, you can feel the sensation of rolling amid waves on dry land. It's no surprise, then,

that later that night, tucked into a sleeping bag in the cab of the truck, I dreamed that I was floating. I'm not sure where, and I'm not sure why, but I liked to imagine that I was still in Wyoming, still in the vast expanse of Yellowstone National Park, and still smiling in both places: in my dream, and safely in my bed on land. **R**

Sylvia Karcz is a freelance writer forever dreaming of the next adventure. She is an obstinate believer in the power of storytelling, and her heart is fullest when exploring connections in the outdoors.

