

## **Backpacking Trip to the Beartooths High Lakes Region (Martin Lake)**

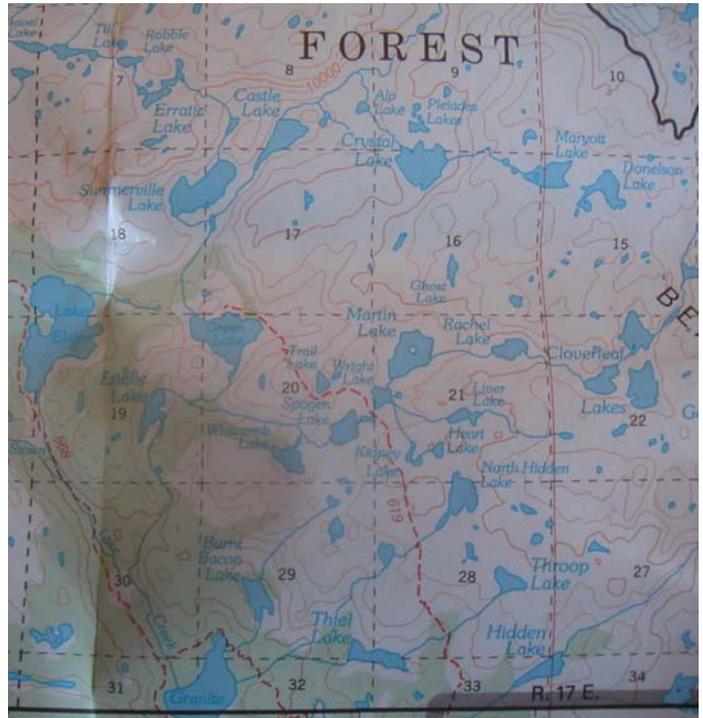


**August 23-30, 2003**

## *Beartooth Mountains–Martin Lake Basin*

Another fabulous trip to the Beartooths, every bit the equal of our last trip along the “Beaten Path.” This one takes us to the High Lakes Region of the Beartooths—specifically, Martin Lake basin. Our companions are our wonderful friends Alan and Robert and their dog Travis. The backpacking portion of the trip lasts 6 nights, 7 days.

Saturday, August 23. On this pleasant drive day, it takes us 9 hours 15 minutes to get to Red Lodge. (For future reference, it takes an extra hour to get over the Beartooth Highway to Cooke City and nearby trailheads). We stay at the Best Western Lupine Inn, just like last time, on the second floor, and arrive several hours before Alan and Robert. We use the time to get organized, pack our sleeping bags and other supplies into our backpacks, and make final decisions about what is to go and what is to be left behind. Do we really need gaiters in late August? No, we decide. What about binoculars? We end up bringing them but only use them once. Sunglasses? We always bring them but



never wear them. We are pretty well packed by 7:30 pm when Alan and Robert show up with a knock from their adjacent room. We meet Travis for the first time, a sturdily built, genial mutt from the pound who proves to be a wonder dog and a perfect companion when it comes to backpacking and wilderness travel.

We share a pleasant dinner at the Wine Kitchen in Red Lodge. The award-winning New England clam chowder really is worthy of award, and the enormous slice of carrot cake is more like a multi-tiered tower of decadence. “But not too sweet,” Robert insists. Travis, tied up outside the restaurant where



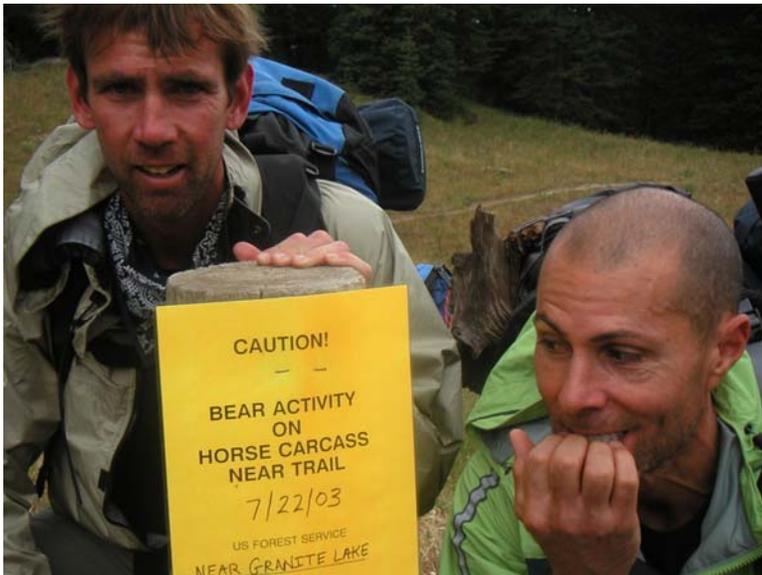
Alan can keep an eye on him, serves as the official greeter to passerby, wagging his tail and extending his paw to each person who stops—or occasionally flopping onto his side to have his belly rubbed.

Afterwards, we distribute the food evenly among the three men, with Robin getting a lighter share in light of her lighter frame. Alan has the heaviest load, partly due to the amount of dog food he’s carrying. The final repack goes quickly, which is a relief (it is not always so), and we get to bed at a reasonable hour. We agree to a full sit-down breakfast in the morning, a last hurrah before the wilderness swallows us up.



Sunday, August 24. I turn mutinous as the morning approaches and stay behind for some extra shut-eye. I fine-tune my pack, waterproof my boots, fill up our water bottles with ice and water, and eat an English muffin and some raisin bran from the hotel’s continental breakfast. Robin regales me with tales of her hearty breakfast and pleasant mealtime conversation as we drive out of town and ascend the Beartooth Highway. This scenic stretch of road always whets my appetite for the backpacking to come. It takes you well above treeline and tantalizes you with views of alpine lakes. After an hour we arrive at the Clay Butte Trailhead and clamber out of our cars. We put on sunblock, replace our tevas with tightly-laced leather hiking boots, stare uneasily at our heavy packs, and close and lock our doors for the final time. We begin hiking at 11 am, which becomes a sort of tradition on this trip. It seems no matter when we wake, we never start hiking until 11 am.

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A small sign greets us at the trailhead: “Grizzly activity on horse carcass,” it says. Strangely worded, that, but we get the idea. “Near Granite Lake,” a ranger has scrawled underneath the typed sign, along with a date that is about a month earlier than ours. I pass by the sign barely looking at it, willing Robin not to see it, but she stares at it for a long time. Robin studies every posted bear sign thoroughly. She can recite every precaution, carries bear spray and bear bell, reminds me several times a trip not to bring food into the tent, and believes that fish should be cleaned and eaten several miles from the campsite—hands rinsed raw afterwards to remove all fishy scent. My protestations that I have never seen a single bear in over three months of backpacking in the Beartooths leave her unmoved. At least she doesn’t turn back and head for the car. She continues down the trail, relieved that we are not passing too near Granite Lake on our journey, and buoyed by the thought that surely most of the horse must have been devoured by now. We all ponder what happened to the rider.

It’s easy hiking at first, even with the heavy backpacks. The grade is downhill, through pine forest, then gradually uphill through a vast meadow with fantastic views of sharply angled Pilot Peak to the west. We head due north and eventually spy two-headed Lonesome Mountain peeking at us over the meadow’s brow. The dinosaur’s spine of Beartooth Butte looms directly to our east. A number of small streams cross our path, but the Beartooths are dryer than I’ve seen them before. Water-blackened, rounded stones mark the course of dry stream beds where not even a trickle flows. This is due partly to the time of year and partly to an extremely dry summer. Alan and Robert tell us of the pall of smoke hanging over their property near Missoula from the numerous fires. Fortunately there are no fires close by (although on one evening we see a veil of smoke from a fire east of Yellowstone), but the dry summer means the flowers are not nearly as dramatic as they should be. We see asters and fireweed mostly. Even so, the views are expansive,



the air is crisp and clear, the sun is shining in a blue sky billowing with clouds, and the meadow grasses wave green and tan. Before we know it we are three miles into the hike.

We have been using our topo maps to track our progress. We gradually become convinced that a portion of the trail is different from what the map shows. On the topo, the trail zigs to the east then back to the west before skirting the western edge of Native Lake. The pointless zig and zag seem to have been eliminated on the trail we are on: we head on a more straightforward northerly course that puts Native Lake to the west of us—still within sight, but not directly on the trail as the map would suggest.



The world makes sense again once we puzzle this out. In due time we reach another lake, unnamed, which is where it is supposed to be (just south of Surprise Lake). We celebrate by having lunch.

Sitting on a smooth granite overlook, we peer down at the lake as we munch on Jarlsberg cheese, Tyson spicy chicken chunks, and the best (and most expensive) gorp ever—Whole Foods Totally Tropical Gorp mixed with Yogurt Covered Almonds. The sun holds out long enough for us to eat, but rain clouds threaten in all directions. We convince ourselves we are in a magic bubble, protected from the rain, but the bubble bursts and we get not only rain but hail.



We throw on rain gear and huddle under thick pine trees until the squall passes. Robin is indignant—she announces she’s getting wet despite her rain gear. But it turns out she just feels wet from having the plasticky rain gear right next to her skin—underneath she’s as dry as can be.

The skies continue to spit at us so we leave our rain gear on as we hike. The trail winds up and down over ridges at the edge of the Beartooth Plateau. Our hip bones and shoulders start to feel the weight of the packs, and our breathing comes hard as we trudge up progressively steeper slopes. Alan and Robert power up the slopes with apparent

ease; Robin and I huff and puff but get there eventually. Travis, meanwhile, bounds delightedly from place to place, packless, covering two or three times the distance we are from all his back and forth activity. He wears a bear bell, which is a good thing for all the chipmunks and squirrels out there. He is frequently out of sight, far ahead on the trail, but comes quickly when called. You can hear his bear bell tinkling merrily before he bounds around the curve, giving us a long look and a wag of his tail as if to say, “What’s taking you so long?”

As we hike along, we have some amusing conversations. The first has to do with being frozen alive. Robert claims he saw a trout frozen alive in the ice near his home only moments before. This topic keeps us entertained for quite awhile. Another amusing moment comes when Robin asks “Wait a minute—which way is the wind blowing?” in the middle of a near-windstorm. We all look at her like she’s crazy. She stutters something about trying to figure out which way the clouds are blowing so she can tell if a storm is coming, but I think the hard hiking may have momentarily depleted the oxygen to her brain.

The ups and downs before and after Mule Lake (just west of the trail) take their toll, and by the time we arrive at Thiel Lake we are ready to call it a day. Knowing that the trail climbs precipitously after Thiel gives us extra incentive to stop. Alan and Robert go exploring around the lake in search of a campsite while Robin and I sit on a flat rock, a hundred yards from the lake, boots and socks off, feeling the cool air on our bare toes. How wonderful. Our mood improves immensely. We eat some gorp and begin to flirt with the idea of pushing on. Thiel just doesn’t look that promising as a campsite. A marshy meadow stretches before us. A few mosquitoes are already gathering and we guess a full-fledged



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congregation is due to arrive by evening. The rest of the lake looks too hilly and rocky for camping. But to our surprise, our two explorers return with good news. They have found what they think is a good spot, and it only remains for Robin—our real estate guru when it comes to camping—to bless the site. They have found a level stretch of grass in an improbable place, perhaps twenty yards above the lake, with a steep wall of folded rock rising clifflike just behind. It is private and comfortable and beautiful. And there are no skeets. Robin heartily approves and we call it home.

Once we set up camp, we go for a swim in the lake. Perhaps “swim” isn’t the right word. It’s more like a quick

dive in followed by desperate thrashing to get out. Trying to talk while in the water is difficult because the cold literally takes your breath away. I can’t refrain from an initial whoop of incredulity at how icy it is. Alan claims it’s not as bad as Fossil Lake on our last trip, and I’m sure he’s right, but it’s hard to believe at the moment. I dunk my head in a second time and rub my hair fast to get all the sweat out. As I surface, there is an ache behind my eyes like when you eat ice cream too fast. I clamber out, and the one good thing I can say is that no matter how cold it is outside, it always feels warm compared to the water you’ve just been in. Even in a brisk wind, you feel toasty at first. Perhaps your body’s too numb to register the cold.



On this particular afternoon, the sun shines brightly and feels fantastic. I even brave a second dive in and swim around a bit. Maybe two feet. Robin, meanwhile, is just getting ready to go in. I assure her it’s not that bad but she looks dubious given the octave increase in my voice. She dives in anyway—and dives right back out in an amazing display of agility. If this were an event I think she’d be a contender. I clamber out behind her and we both stand there dripping and hugging

ourselves on the flat rock, smiling ridiculously. It really does feel wonderful to be rid of the sweat and grime of the hike. And now that the ice bath is behind us, we can use words like “refreshing” to describe it. We towel off a bit, then lay out and let the sun do the rest.

Really it’s a perfect campsite, what with the great diving-in rocks, the deep water, the small and private grassy area, and the protecting cliff just behind. Travis seems to agree. He paws a small “nest” in the dirt and lies down, paws crossed, for a well-deserved nap.



Robert and I decide to do some fishing. It's been awhile for me, and it shows. First I thread the rod and reel wrong and have to start over. On my first cast, I forget to thumb the release and the lure swings back and hooks my fleece. My next cast goes sideways, crosses over Robert's line, plops lamely into the water about three feet from shore—and instantly hooks a fish. I reel in my line, and Robert his, and we have quite the job untangling two lines and a small struggling fish. Robert has a pair of needle-nose pliers that are immensely helpful in getting the fish off the hook. The little brookie is beautifully colored but too little to eat, so we throw him back.

I do a lot of throwing back in the next hour or so as I begin to cast more effectively. It seems with each cast I land a fish. Robert is having nowhere near the luck I am, and in the end we determine it must be the Martin #6 gold lure I'm using. It certainly isn't my casting abilities (although I do have a "think like a minnow" back-and-forth motion as I reel in that I think is effective and Robert at least thinks is amusing). The #6 is the same type of lure I used on my very first backpack trip twenty years ago in college—

the two-month backpack in the Beartooths that started my love affair with this area. Back then I got pretty handy at catching medium to big-size trout that were perfect for eating. Unfortunately all the fish I catch this evening are practically minnows. Perhaps it's because we're on a lake close to the trail and it's overfished. After hooking and releasing seven tiny brookies, I begin to feel like a baby killer and decide to stop.

As I'm finishing up, Robin calls out excitedly, "Hey guys, look, it's a mountain goat." Looking up to the top of the angled cliff-face behind our campsite, we spy him—a lone goat with small black horns, black nose, black



eyes, and a pristine and majestic white coat. He appears to be full-grown. He also appears to be curious about us because he keeps moving closer. Either that or he wants a drink and we're camped at his favorite watering hole. He's amazingly agile as he negotiates the steep rock face. Robert and I snap pictures like crazy. After ten minutes he is very close indeed, on the verge of the grassy campsite.

At that moment we hear Travis' distinctive bear bell. Alan and Travis are just returning from a short hike. They are high up, near the top of a steep grassy slope just to the right of the angled cliff face. Robin calls out a warning. Alan and Travis are about halfway down the slope by this point. The goat gets skittish when Travis spies him. Travis bristles and begins to bark. We'll never know what the goat's initial intentions might have been, because he immediately reverses course and scrambles back up the rocky incline to safety. I catch his remarkable climb on video using the movie feature on my camera. It's something to behold. It amazes me that a hoofed creature can be so agile.

The goat retreats to safety but he doesn't go away altogether. His curiosity seems to hold him, and now and then we glimpse him peering down at us from above. Travis peers back up at him, on full alert. As long as the goat doesn't get too close, he seems content just to watch.



We make a very late dinner of black bean couscous soup and Jamaican barbecue chicken, finishing off with some chocolate pudding. It hardly feels like roughing it with all the great freeze-dried foods they make these days. By the time we finish the pudding it is 9:30 and dark. We climb into our sleeping bags and call it a night. Alan and Robert have graciously given us the better site, perfectly flat and with a view. They are left with one that slants. Their tent is small, and what with both of them plus Travis it's a tight fit. Sleep is difficult because they keep sliding down into their poor dog, who rests uncomfortably at the entrance to the tent.



Monday, August 25. We awake around 8 am as the sun touches our tent. We eat oatmeal and sip hot cocoa. The mountain goat makes another appearance. He is really quite the voyeur and seems to find us fascinating—never more so than when Alan splashes loudly into the lake after breakfast. I doubt many folks have found this particular spot to camp, so it's possible we are the first humans he's seen up close. He must find us very strange. I have no doubt the moment we vacate the site, he will be nosing around trying to figure us out.



What with our leisurely breakfast and swim, it's 11 am before we pack up and begin to hike. It's steep and hard for the next two miles. Robin and I become convinced that the distance is longer than the guidebook says. We take a lunch break on a smooth granite overlook offering great views to the south and west, over the country we've just covered. To the west, a small tarn sits below our rocky outcrop, and an arm of a lake coils farther out in the distance. Alan and I try to pin down our exact location, but the shape of this odd lake defeats us.



A bit more hiking after lunch brings us to the crest of a hill overlooking Kidney Lake. This landmark is unmistakable. From our high perch, we can see the trail nearly touching the western edge of the aptly named lake.

A final push brings us to our goal. We arrive at Wright Lake, one of a string of four lakes in the Martin Lake basin. From northeast to southwest, these lakes are Martin, Wright, Spogen, and Whitcomb. We stare down on Wright Lake from above and feel like we've earned our stay here. The trail leads

downhill to a point between Wright and Spogen. The cascading stream connecting the two lakes is broad and bubbling.

Alan takes off his pack and suggests we do some local exploring to find a good campsite. I am more of a mind to push on to Martin Lake with packs on. Unfortunately, they listen to me, and we saddle up again and trudge over to Martin.

Once there, we search for the perfect spot—and don't find it. Now, don't get me wrong. The lake is large and beautiful, with a picturesque pine-treed island in the middle and plenty of mountain scenery in all directions, but the best campsites are open and exposed and we are looking for something more secluded feeling.

After all, this is to be our four-star, multi-day base camp. Alan and Robin go on a long exploratory hike and find some great diving rocks for swimming but no perfect campsites to match. We agree to head back to Wright Lake and do some more exploring there.



We shoulder our packs, which have grown painfully heavy, and trudge back the way we came. I imagine I can feel the dirty looks of the others. The eastern side of Wright Lake, near the inlet stream, offers some prime camping country—flat, soft grasses near a stream with pleasant prospects—but again it is exposed. With the sun beating down and all of us tired, we agree to call it home for the night.

It really is hot. Robin has a good sunburn going on her shoulder blades, and I can feel a burn on the back of my arms. Our hair is matted and our bodies sweaty, so once our tents are set up, we quickly strip down for a swim in the lake. This is invigorating as always, but

the sun is so hot that it really does feel good this time. We pull our Therma-Rests and bath towels to the water's edge, lay them down in the soft grasses, and dry off in the sunshine.

The evening is pleasantly uneventful. Robert fishes in Wright Lake. I head over to Martin Lake to do the same. Eventually Robert joins me, which is a good thing, because I need his needlenose pliers again. I hook eleven fish—all brookies, all small—and throw them back. He gives me a weight for the end of my line to increase my casting distance, and I give him one of my Martin #6 lures (how appropriate, given we are fishing in Martin Lake). From that point on, Robert catches a lot more fish.





We have three-cheese risotto and Katmandu curry for dinner. As evening falls, we watch a duck circle the lake, around and around without apparent purpose. Eventually he heads over a mountain pass and out of sight. Was he trying to gain altitude to get over the pass? Going for the equivalent of an evening stroll? Getting in shape for the big migration? We don't know, but it's fun to speculate.

Tuesday, August 26. The day begins with an exploratory hike to Spogen Lake that quickly turns into a land grab to claim what we all agree is the ideal campsite. It offers a beautiful view of Spogen Lake from above. The campsite is flat and grassy and surrounded by picturesque rocks and pine trees. A waterfall cascades into the lake within easy walking distance, and the stream above the falls offers some pretty flume-like areas for bathing or just cooling your toes. It looks possible to dive off the cliffs, maybe fifteen feet above the lake, into very deep water.



We hurry back to Wright Lake and decamp as quickly as possible, worried that someone else might claim the site before us. Robin and I move our tent as a unit, with sleeping bags and sundry other supplies still inside. We fling a few heavy items into our backpacks and make the trek over to Spogen. Alan and Robert aren't far behind, and within fifteen minutes we have claimed our new site. We celebrate with a lunch that includes peanut butter and some fine French berry preserves on Carr's water crackers. This is the height of fancy on a backpacking trip.



After lunch we amble around the lake and make the short hike over to Whitcomb Lake. We follow the long northern arm of the lake, which leads to a steep draw heading up to Trail Lake. We huff and puff even without backpacks on to get over this hump. Robert spies a big trout at Trail Lake. Apparently at least one big trout survives in the Beartooths. A steep descent brings us back to Spogen.

The sun is still shining warmly, so I decide to check out the waterfall and see if it makes for a good shower. I clamber over in my tevas and shorts, plunge my hands into the cold water, and grasp the mossy green rocks to either side of the falls. I turn and sit down gingerly on a flat, mossy rock—it's almost like I'm sitting on a green moss throne—and let the water pound down on my back. The force is great enough that I can feel it tugging at my shorts. I lean my head back into the full force of the falls and come out sputtering. Wow. I think it's the best natural shower I've ever experienced. The others try it after me and all emerge smiling and refreshed. A bit later, we're surprised to see trout trying, beyond all hope, to jump up the falls. Apparently we aren't the only ones who find them irresistible.

In the late afternoon, Alan and Travis go for a "short hike" to the northwest that evolves into a long loop trip to Ghost Lake and back. Meanwhile, Robert and I fish. I try casting from the top of a fifteen-foot cliff, and the fish get quite an elevator ride on the way up—not to mention a thrilling drop when I release them.

Robin heads back to Wright Lake on her own to pick up some supplies she left behind. I follow after her once I'm done fishing, enjoying the solitude of the mountains along the way. It's a special experience to venture out solo. It feels different—not lonely, exactly, but you do feel the enormity of the mountains, and the enormity of the silence, in a way you don't when you have companionship. My path never crosses Robin's, but we meet back at camp around dinner time. Turkey tetrazzini, three-cheese mashed potatoes, cheesecake pudding, and hot cocoa leave us stuffed.



We have high hopes of seeing Mars that night, which is at its closest point to Earth in 60,000 years, but smoke from a fire to the east of Yellowstone makes its one and only appearance during the trip and veils the sky.

Wednesday, August 27. Wednesday marks a change in the weather. The rain drums on our tents as we sleep and is still coming down when morning arrives. We eat breakfast during a break in the rain. Since it's a rest day, I make scrambled eggs with cheese in addition to oatmeal. I do the cooking under a heavy stand of pine trees that provides great protection from the downpour. Watching the sheets of rain on the water and the mists curling around the hills is lovely in a cold sort of way. A brief respite late that morning gives us a chance to bathe, but it's a chilly bath and we snug back into our fleece jackets as quickly as possible.



Instead of abating, the rain gets heavier. Robin and I look at this as an opportunity to catch up on our sleep and do a bit of reading in our tents. I read *Travels with Charley* by John Steinbeck, an autobiographical account of Steinbeck's travels with his pet poodle Charley in an RV through America. Robin reads *Dragonfly in Amber* by Diana Gabaldon, the sequel to a time travel romance she started last time she was in the Beartooths. Robert reads *Seabiscuit*. Alan, who is sans novel on this trip, naps and makes occasional forays outside the tent.

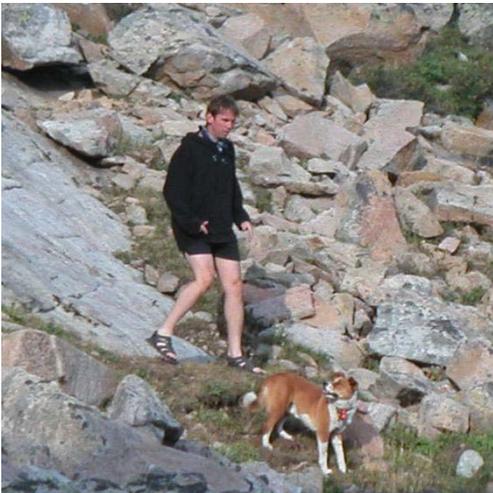


The rain is so heavy and consistent that we put off lunch until late afternoon. At last we break out of our cocoons wearing our rain gear and munch on cheese and beef jerky and gorp. The pine trees shield us from the worst of the weather. A long siesta after lunch lasts until the rains abate.

The clouds dissipate and we see our first sunshine. It's after 4 pm. Robin and Robert decide to stay around camp, reading, fishing, and making a true rest day of it. Alan and I decide to go exploring.



The weather holds and it turns out to be a fantastic late-day hike. Accompanied by Travis, we visit a slew of lakes. We call this our "Organ Lakes Hike" because three of the lakes are named Kidney, Liver, and Heart. We also see Marmot Lake—large, shimmering, and beautiful—and look down on Rachel Lake from above. Nearly all of our travels are off-trail, and half the fun is navigating from lake to lake, picking out a route, and celebrating when the lake is actually where it is supposed to be. This is a great region for honing your topo skills. Distinctive landmarks like Castle Mountain to the north, Lonesome Mountain to the east, and Pilot Peak to the west make it hard to get lost. Alan is a natural at orienteering, and while I am most definitely not a natural,



through sheer perseverance I've improved to the point where I've become competent. On this jaunt we navigate perfectly from one spot to the next. The sun shines between puffy clouds and the mountain meadows are green and fresh with rain. At one point we traipse through a stunning high country fellfield (half rocks, half meadow) bathed in slanting, late-afternoon sunlight and become euphoric at the beauty. Every once in awhile you experience these perfect moments of happiness in life—and the Beartooths have given me more than my fair share of these.

We return from our travels around 7 pm. The evening is definitely more brisk than it's been. We put on extra layers of clothing and eat minestrone soup and hearty lasagna. As Robin cleans her dinner plate, a trout startles her and nearly jumps onto it. Good thing for the trout she's already eaten.

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What with the cloud cover, it's full dark by 9 pm. Mars is once again hidden behind clouds—but Alan awakes in the middle of the night and catches a bleary-eyed glimpse of it.

Thursday, August 28. We wake up to a gray dawn. I shower in the falls under intermittent sunshine. By the time Robin takes the plunge, it has turned cloudy and chilly. We warm up in our sleeping bags and nap until Alan asks if we're ready to go on our day hike.

Ten minutes later we have our hiking boots on and hit the trail. Of course, it's 11 am again. The weather is overcast but pleasant enough. We hike north, skirting the east

side of Wright and the west side of Martin, before heading up a draw on the north side of Martin Lake. After that climb the land levels out as much as it ever does in the Beartooths and the hiking turns easy. We cross several boulder fields, hopping from one large boulder to the next, and are surprised at how well Travis navigates these. He keeps up with me, following right in my tracks—and I'm pretty fast when it comes to boulder fields. His enthusiasm stems in part from the chipmunks and pika that live among the rocks. He takes long detours just for the chance of catching one of these snacks. With his bear bell on, they're unattainable, but it doesn't stop him from trying.

Before long we reach Crystal Lake, our destination. We look down on it from above. This is a true high-alpine lake—no trees or shrubs, just fellfields and water. It looks forbidding compared to the lakes we've been visiting. What with the flowers being dormant this year, it's even more austere than usual. But one flower that isn't missing is mountain sorrel. I find it tucked into the crevice of two boulders. We



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find it all over the rocky hillside as we hike down toward the lake. The sorrel leaves are edible and have a sharp, tangy taste.

We circle the lake to the west, climbing a small hill that gives us a pleasant view looking down on the water. By this time the sun is shining in a blue sky, so we decide to take advantage of our good fortune and have lunch. It feels like we have the whole wilderness to ourselves. Indeed, we haven't crossed paths with a single soul all day. It's a strange and wonderful thing to trek through country so beautiful and find it so empty.

During lunch, Alan proposes an extension to our hike. We're all having a great time, so we readily agree. We decide to make a big loop past the Pleiades Lakes, Alp Lake, Castle Lake, Summerville Lake, Green Lake, Trail Lake, and back to Spogen Lake. During this "Lakes Tour," which is all off-trail until Green Lake, we pass through some fantastic countryside.



After Alp Lake, for instance, we happen upon a waterfall that is dramatic even this late in August. We wonder what it must be like in spring when the water really flows. Alan and Robert hike to the top of the falls while Robin and I laze in the meadow. I catch sight of a water ouzel, a nondescript bird that, remarkably enough, makes its nest behind waterfalls. It flits up and down the river for awhile, then we see it fly right through the waterfall, presumably to its invisible nest behind.

We hike through a long river valley that is protected enough from the elements that asters and fireweed grow in profusion. I even see pink monkeyflower growing in clumps near the river. It feels far less austere than Crystal Lake did, just a short distance away. The river broadens as we follow it.

We arrive at Castle Lake. Robin dips her hand into the inlet stream and smiles happily. With the sun shining, it's hard not to feel happy in country such



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as this. We puzzle over the naming of the lake, since neither it nor the visible mountains or nunataks (small rocky hillsides) look very castle-like to us. We follow a vague trail along the southeastern side of the lake. It seems that even in the trackless wilderness, a vague trail circles every lake.

At Summerville Lake, we cross the river with some difficulty—it's getting wider and wider as we go—and climb a short, steep face on the lake's south side to get a view. Summerville is quite large as mountain lakes go. We sit awhile in a small pine grove and listen to the distant falls thundering into the lake on the rocky northern end.

Taking a southwesterly course, we reach a point on the river where it is too broad and deep to cross. Robert, Robin, and I head upstream while Alan tries downstream. I finally find a crossing point. The stones are smooth and moss-slick. Sometimes they are beneath the rushing water, but if you step carefully, you can make it to the other side without getting water in your boots. I succeed, then go back to help Robin, and promptly lose my footing. One boot goes under and I feel water ooze down my sock.

Robin and Robert make it across successfully and we hike downstream until we find Alan, still at the far side. His search for a good crossing point has been fruitless, and at last he throws his hands in the air and simply trudges through the water, regardless of depth. Of course his boots are full of water when he reaches the other side. He takes them off, pours them out, and stoically puts them back on.

Robert decides to have a bite of gorp as Alan reties his boots, but as he takes the baggie out, it spills all over the ground. A chipmunk must have chewed through the baggie. This is decadent chocolate gorp—very expensive—so we spend several minutes foraging for peanuts and chocolate pieces through the short meadow grasses, eating as we go. “Just make sure it's chocolate,” we joke.

The weather is starting to cloud over again and we realize we'd better pick up the pace. Some of the clouds look distinctly unfriendly. We hike up, over, and down to Green Lake, a pine-forested lake. A steep uphill climb to Trail Lake leaves us weary. We've had enough now, and it's raining. We hike down to Wright and



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reach our Spogen campsite just as the rain kicks into high gear. We dive into our tents, shed our raingear, and heave a sigh of relief. What a great hike—what tremendous sights—and how pleasant to be back in our tents. We nap from 4:30 to 6 pm. The rain continues all evening, falling hard at times. Most of us read, but Alan, who gets claustrophobic if he's stuck in a tent for too long, stays outside, huddled under the pine trees with Travis, keeping a cold vigil in the rain.

It's getting late and still it's raining. Finally our hunger gets the best of us. I call out "Screw the rain!" and emerge from my tent.

It's near 8:30 pm and getting darker and colder by the minute. I whip up a quick dinner of vegetable beef barley and pad thai. Yes, pad thai in the wilderness. Cold and hungry as we are, it tastes fantastic. Who knows what it would taste like back home. We eat our repast under the same protective pine trees that have served us so well.

It continues to rain throughout the night. I love the sound of rain on my tent, but this is a bit much. The ends of our sleeping bags are damp, and anything that touches the edge of the tent is damp as well. We all pray for a nice, sunny day tomorrow.

Friday, August 29. But it is not to be. It's a very gray morning. We talk it over and decide to break camp and backpack south in the direction of the trailhead. That way, if the next day is rainy, we can leave a day early. If it's sunny, we can take advantage of our new location.

We all feel buoyed by the decision to move. We decamp quickly. While it's a bad day for sitting around doing nothing, it's a great day



for backpacking—gray, misty, cool. We get a lot of hard hiking out of the way by lunchtime. Unlike some return hikes, this one is not all downhill. It's a mixture of ups and downs, and some of the ups are challenging. We're tired by the time we reach Thiel Lake. We push on, but I can tell Robin is maxed out by the time we hike the tough uphill after Mule Lake.

We have a late lunch at Surprise Lake. We break out the peanut butter and jam to celebrate the fact that our goal for the day is near. There are two unnamed, connected lakes just south of Surprise Lake. We ate lunch at the first of these on the way in, and now we hope to camp at the second one, further in.

The hike after lunch is short and easy, and before we know it we arrive at the second lake, which I dub "Keyhole Lake" because of its shape. We drop our packs with a sigh and search out a campsite. There is plenty of grassy, open camping right at the base of the lake, but we opt for a more secluded campsite offering terrace views. The site is on the south side, with pretty granite outcroppings, flat "kitchen rocks," and plenty of grassy areas for tents. The views of the lake, the mountain behind it, and the more distant mountains to the west are terrific. The only downside is the short but steep descent to get to the lake.

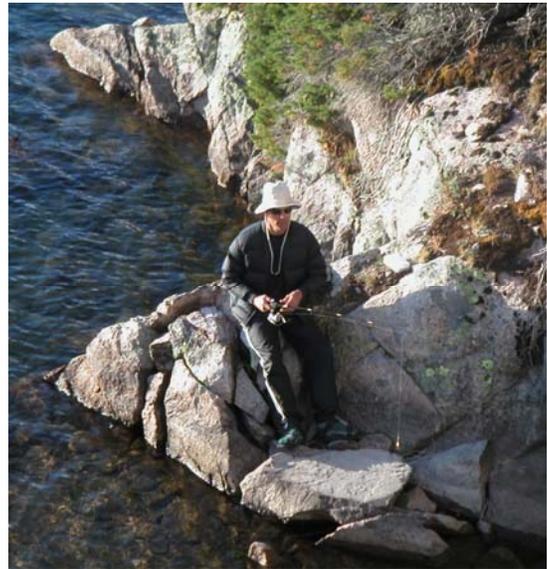
The first order of business is airing out the tents and sleeping bags. The sun is not exactly shining, but it's making an effort



anyway. Enough so that Robin and I go for a swim—almost a necessity for us nowadays after a hard backpack. Alan has already finished his swim and is busy pumping water. Unfortunately, my water filter gave out earlier in the trip, and now the carbon filter in his is close to useless, too. It takes forever to pump a quart of water. We take his place after our swim and pump for awhile. After a few minutes, the chilly swim catches up with me and I start to shiver with cold. It takes fifteen minutes to pump one quart. We decide that will have to be enough. By now my teeth are chattering, and so are Robin's. We warm up in our sleeping bags, feeling chilled through and through.



Alan heads off for a solo hike northeast with Travis and eventually reaches Lonesome Lake. I remember this lake from my first backpack trip to the Beartooths. Lonesome Mountain rises behind it. It's austere, almost like a moonscape, but eerily beautiful. Meanwhile, Robert fishes Keyhole Lake and catches the biggest trout of the trip—but he's lost his killer instinct and decides to release it.



After I'm warm again, I go on my own solo hike. I cross over a saddle on the east side of Keyhole Lake, drop down to two tarns on the far side, then head south along the margin of T Lake. I hike back up to the west, cross a different saddle, and successfully complete a loop back to our own lake. I am without topo map, rain gear, or warm clothing on this short foray, so I make very sure to keep my landmarks straight. It's incredibly quiet. A Gray's jay caws once, a pika bleats in the distance. I haven't heard a single marmot the whole trip, even though we're in the heart of their country. Do they hibernate so early? "Where Have All the Marmots Gone?" I hum as I hike.

Robin, meanwhile, solo hikes to the tarn just northwest of, and visible from, Keyhole Lake. She sits quietly at this spot, communing with nature, then presses on a bit further into the wilderness until she frightens herself and momentarily feels lost. "I didn't like that feeling," she says. I can't blame her—I've felt it myself and it's scary. I should note that she does this hike without bear bell or bear spray and doesn't think twice about it. For all her worry about bears before our outings to the Beartooths, she becomes remarkably at ease once she's out here.



Alan has decreed this a "no cook day" for me, so he and Robert tackle dinner on their own. I watch from a distance, finding it hard not to participate—especially when I hear the chefs cry out as water boils over the lip of the pot and the stove sputters out. But Alan, the sous chef, relights the stove in a jiffy, and in no time Robert whips up a fine dinner of tomato chipotle pasta with a double helping of three-cheese mashed potatoes. It all tastes delicious. I realize I am not irreplaceable—what a blow. But a dessert of chocolate pudding and some hot cocoa soothe the pain. So does a fantastic sunset over the lake.



Robin and I put on our headlamps, clamber down the hillside, and clean up the cups and plates in total darkness at the lake's edge. This feels eerie. The erratic light from the headlamps only accentuates the darkness. We turn off the lamps for a moment and wait for something to coil out of the water and drag us in.

The fire we started in our fire ring before dark becomes very helpful now in warding off the chill of the night. We sit close and warm our hands. The fire reduces to embers. Like gods we watch from above as a glowing city of twinkling red lights emits enormous heat and energy.



## *Beartooth Mountains–Martin Lake Basin*

Saturday, August 30. To our dismay, it is still cold and gray and dismal when we awake the next morning. We decide to backpack out one day early. Alan has a fast-approaching business trip to Japan, so the extra day means a lot to him. And I must say, the idea of a hot shower and a real bed doesn't sound half bad to any of us. We eat a full breakfast of oatmeal, scrambled eggs, and hot cocoa as we begin planning our next trip to the Beartooths. I propose going in early July when the waters are really flowing. Alan suggests the Jasper and Golden Lake region as a base. Thinking about our next foray takes some of the sting out of leaving. Alan and Robert take a final plunge in the lake. Robin and I decide to wait for the hot shower soon to come.

Now that we're on our way out, Alan decides it's okay to show Robin some bear scat at the edge of the lake. "But it's old, probably from last season," he assures her, though Robin has her doubts.

It's nice, cool weather for hiking, and we make good time as we backpack out. There are still ups and downs, but our bodies are in better shape and our packs lighter. After three or four miles we are back at the trailhead, feeling fit and happy. We take the "after" pictures at the bear sign, throw our packs into the cars, and hug each other farewell. Travis jumps into the back seat. Alan steals a few Doritos for the road. We toot horns. We part company. But for a long time we feel the afterglow of a week spent in close company with good friends.

Robin and I drive through thick mist over the Beartooth Highway. It's like pea soup, and we realize the weather could have been even worse where we were camping. It takes us six hours to reach Casper, Wyoming. We arrive around 7:30 pm, check into the Showboat Motel, take long, hot, delicious showers, and go to dinner at the Silver Fox, which serves the best blackened prime rib I've ever tasted. The real mashed potatoes, fresh vegetables, hot rolls with butter, and red wine are delightful. Civilization is a treat once you've been away from it for awhile.

