

Yellowstone adventure

Balance of nature restored once again

by Dave Gibson

Yellowstone National Park's name is derived from the Native American Minnetaree tribe's labeling of the Yellowstone River "Mi tsa a dazi" or rock yellow river. French fur trappers translated this to "Roche Jaune" (rock yellow) and the later English speaking trappers and mountain men to "Yellow Stone." The yellow rock that they spoke of was

obsidian. At the northern entrance in Gardener, an 11 thousand year old Clovis projectile point made of that stone was discovered during the construction of their post office.

Lewis and Clarks' 1805 journey to the Pacific skirted today's parkland and a member of their party, John Colter, returned with other fur trappers to the area in 1806. The next winter, traveling alone, he noted some of the geothermal features near Tower Falls. After barely surviving life-threatening wounds suffered at the hands of the Crow and Blackfoot Indians, he returned to

the civilized world describing a land full of "fire and brimstone." Known as "Colter's Hell," his accounts were attributed to his delirium and widely regarded as pure fantasy. For the next forty years, trappers and mountain men told stories about boiling mud, steaming rivers, and petrified trees but again the public couldn't imagine such a place and considered them to be myth. After exploring the area in 1856, mountain man Jim Bridger related witnessing boiling springs, spouting water, and yellow rock but was largely ignored as he was known to be a spinner of tall tales.

A few people did take Jim Bridger seriously, however, and in 1859 geologist F.V. Hayden, with Bridger as one of his guides, surveyed the lands for two years. In 1865 Acting Montana Territorial Governor Thomas Francis Meagher recommended to the federal government that the area be protected. The first detailed exploration here was by the Folsom expedition of 1869. The second serious scientific exploration was conducted by the Washburn-Langford-Doane expedition in 1870. Among those explorers was a lawyer and writer for the Helena Herald named Cornelius Hedges who in his writings favored making the Yellowstone area a national park. Eleven years after his first visit ended, F.V. Hayden returned to Yellowstone with government sponsorship and photographer William Henry Jackson and painter Thomas Moran. Hayden's report along with the imagery produced help convince the U.S. Congress to withdraw the region from public auction. On March 1st, 1872, President Ulysses Grant signed into law an act creating Yellowstone National Park.

Yellowstone National Park was the world's first national park and is still one of the best. Sometimes called North America's Serengeti, its area encompasses 3,472 square miles and supports 1,700 native species of trees, plants, and lichens along with almost 60 types of mammals and 311 bird species. Representing half of the earth's total, 10,000 geothermal features are found here. Steamboat Geyser located in Norris Geyser Basin is the largest active geyser on the planet. Old Faithful Geyser draws hundreds of thousands of spectators each year to witness its predictable releases. There have been three major volcanic eruptions in the last 2 million years in Yellowstone with the last being approximately 680,000 years ago which formed a caldera two thirds of a mile deep and 28 by 52 miles wide. It released 240 cubic miles of ash, rock, and pyroclastic materials into the atmosphere with a force 1000 times greater than Mt. Saint Helens. Considered an active volcano, another eruption could happen at any time! At the bottom of Yellowstone Lake, the largest high-altitude lake in North America, an uplifted structural cone was recently discovered by a U.S. Geological Survey in 2003 and may or may not present an immediate danger. Mallard Lake and Sour Creek Cones have risen by 1.5 - 2.4 inches per year since 2004. Although most are imperceptible to the average hiker, 1000 earthquakes a year occur in the park.

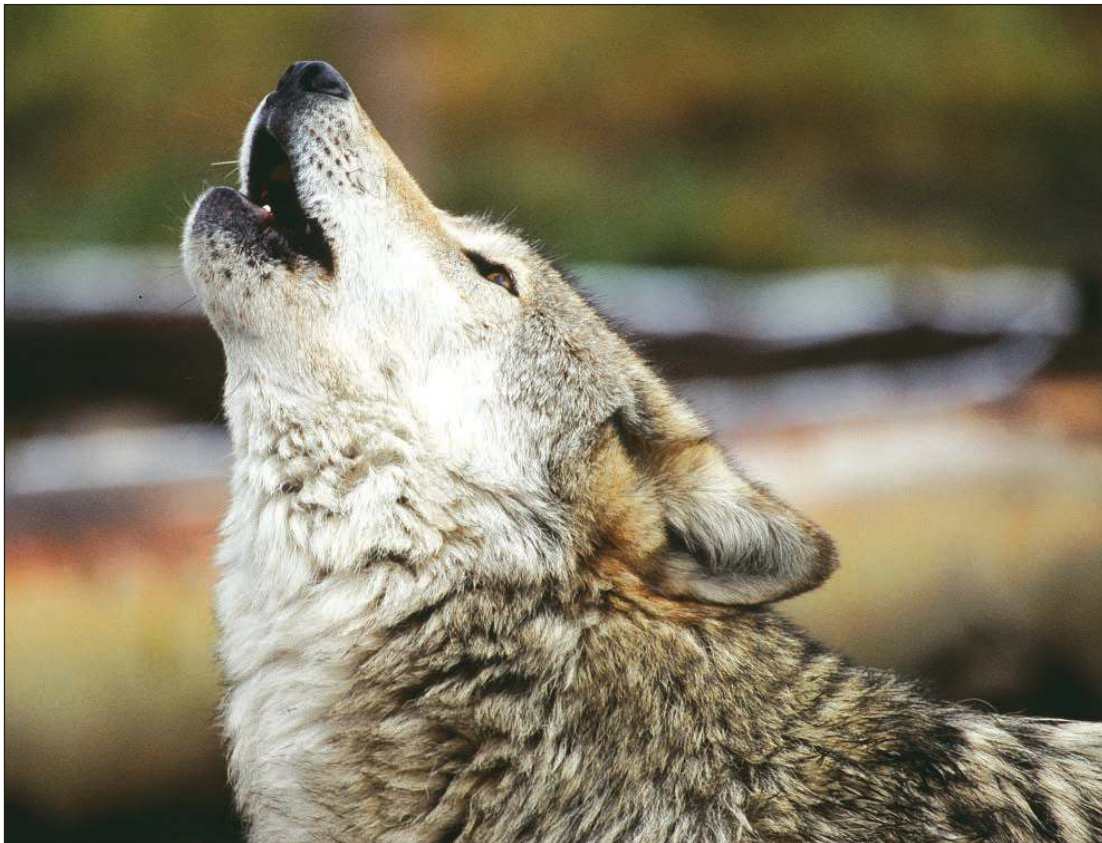
As interesting as the park's geology may be, for me Yellowstone is all about the animals. Entering the eastern entrance via Cody at the beginning of May, when most of the roads are newly opened, is the quickest way there

from Denver and a good time to visit. At this time of year the weather has finally warmed and crowds are virtually nonexistent. Although well into spring, at 8,530 ft. high, the snow of Sylvan Pass is piled deeply on either side of the road. Arriving at Yellowstone Lake, I come across a few cars by the side of the road and a tour coach filled with Japanese tourists. Sometimes to find the animals all you have to do is find the people. They have spotted a grizzly bear and are excitedly observing him meander along the shoreline, occasionally digging in the sand for clams. I get out of my truck and stand on the shoulder of the road with a British tourist who, like me, is engaged in capturing the bear's image on film. It seems that I always meet foreign tourists in our national parks, most often from England, France, Germany, and Japan. This is the largest grizzly that I've ever seen and even though he is moving at a leisurely pace (for him), we struggle to keep up. I see an opening in the trees just ahead that presents a good photo opportunity and I set up for the shot. After following the bear for a quarter of a mile, the road is now about a hundred yards from the beach where the grizzly is feeding. Click, click, click, - I get the picture that I was seeking. Soon the bear begins to head at an angle towards the road and I suddenly feel very exposed. My British companion and I are the only ones on foot with everybody else observing from the safety of their cars. I position the tour coach between the bear and myself and make small talk with the coach's guide. He doesn't think that it's a very good idea for me to be so unprotected and at this point I would have to agree. Unbeknownst to him, my impromptu plan in case of bear attack is to dive over him through his open window. The grizzly is now within 50 ft. when a carload of tourists pulls up and piles out of their vehicle. With no time to warn them, the bear uneventfully crosses the road and gives them the scare of their lives!

Further along the road and once again in my vehicle with the smell of sulfur from the hot springs in the air, I come across a herd of American bison. Bison kill or injure far more people in the park each year than bears do and are not to be taken lightly. The park's population of buffalo currently stands at around 4000 animals. The roadways make convenient thoroughfares for them and park visitors routinely experience "buffalo jams." The bison's safety is guaranteed inside Yellowstone's boundaries but since 2005 when leaving the park into Montana, in search of easier forage in their historically milder wintering grounds, they are subject to hunting. In that year 1,016 bison were slaughtered. Being carriers of brucellosis (a disease introduced by



DAVE GIBSON



DAVE GIBSON

European cattle which can cause livestock to miscarry) the ranchers feel that they are a threat to their livelihood. No cases of transmission have ever been recorded and the hunt remains controversial. Having learned my lesson, I try to stay within a safe distance from my truck and what I judge to be the time that it would take me to reach my vehicle and the time it would take a disgruntled buffalo to gore me. Most of the bison stand grazing in the field with a few docilely resting on the ground. A newborn calf, not a half an hour old, is being tenderly cleaned off by its mother.

One of my favorite parts of the park is the stretch along the Madison River between Madison and West Yellowstone. The Best Western in town offers good accommodations with an indoor swimming pool and hot tub but during more recent visits in the warmer months, when showers

are available, I prefer to camp at one of the many campgrounds (saving sixty dollars per night). This region of the park suffers scars from the fires of 1988 when 793,000 acres or 36% of the park's land was consumed by flames. That year started out with above normal precipitation but by June extreme drought had enveloped the region in what would become the driest summer on record. It would take until November to extinguish the last of the embers. In what seemed like a disaster at the time, Yellowstone may have actually benefited in the long run. Aspens, willows, sagebrushes, grasses, and forb root systems survived intact and were fertilized by the fire's ash. More wildflowers bloomed in the following years. Some of the lodgepole pines which make up 80% of the park's forest land require fire to release the seeds of their serotinous resin cones. Today the new growth trees are all

about 15 to 18 feet high affording better wildlife viewing.

Along the Madison I see ospreys soaring back and forth above the river perusing its surface for trout. Occasionally one dive-bombs into the water grasping a fish in its talons. Bald eagles tend their multi-layered nest built of weathered gray sticks. A bison and her calf ford the icy river to join their herd. Coyotes cruise the fields in search of voles. A male white pelican stands in the water proudly displaying the unlikely protrusion on his upper bill. Trumpeter swans peddle steadily through the current.

Besides the Yellowstone ecosystem's 600 grizzly bears, the animal that is most beloved and feared here is the *Canis lupus*, or wolf. The last wolf was shot in Yellowstone in 1926 and by the 1930s had been extirpated from the contiguous United States. In 1973 they gained protection under the Endangered Species Act

and were one of the first animals listed. In mid-January of 1995 fourteen gray wolves (sometimes called timber wolves) were captured in western Alberta, kept in holding pens, and released in Yellowstone. Fourteen wolves were also captured and released in central Idaho's Mammoth Wilderness. The following year seventeen wolves were captured near Fort Saint John, British Columbia, and released in the park that spring. Twenty wolves went to Idaho. By 2006 there were thirteen packs calling Yellowstone their home and a total of 850 in the U.S. not including Alaska. The best place to find gray wolves in the park is in its northeastern quadrant in the Lamar and Hayden Valleys.

After an hour of observing big-horn sheep negotiate precipitous basalt cliffs, from Mammoth Hot Springs I travel east towards Tower-Roosevelt. I see mule deer and black bears along the way. Some of the black bears are not black at all but brown or cinnamon-colored. They are much smaller than the grizzly bears and lack the grizzly's distinctive shoulder hump. A young black bear naps in a tree and at two years old and fending for himself, I am told by a ranger that, his chances for survival are perhaps ten percent. A badger is surrounded atop its dusty borough by its young. Past Roosevelt, I encounter a coyote trotting alongside the road. One of the byproducts of the wolves' reintroduction has been a reduction of the coyote numbers by half. No longer the top dog, they tend to stay closer to the roads that the wolves normally avoid lest they become a meal. Across a glen I see a half dozen coyote pups frolicking in the morning sun very close to their den.

In Lamar Valley, far up a sagebrush dotted hillside, a grizzly bear has taken an elk calf. When the elk are young, they will sometimes lie motionless in the

brush hoping to avoid detection from predators. Wolves and bears scour the landscape searching for such easy pickings. The grizzly firmly holds the dead calf in his powerful jaws as the mother elk valiantly feigns charges. Her pitiful mournful cries are indelibly stamped in my mind.

Now in Hayden Valley, a pronghorn antelope bounds across my path. At Pebble Creek a grizzly is feeding in the water on an elk carcass. One onlooker tells me that he saw a pack of wolves kill this particular elk just the day before. After gorging on up to 30 lbs. of meat each, they were either satiated or chased off the kill during the night by the bear. There is no question of ownership now but the eagles, ravens, magpies, and coyotes still hang around the perimeter patiently awaiting an opening. Beyond this scene in the open valley I finally see what I was hoping for - WOLVES!

Wolf packs are usually comprised of six to eight individuals but I count ten roaming in the tall grass. This is probably the Druid Pack and the very wolves responsible for yesterday's kill. Most of them wear thick slate-gray coats but I notice two white members and one black individual in the group. They romp playfully through the field seemingly without a care in the world. Life as a wolf can be very demanding and somewhat dangerous (especially around other wolves). Wolves can't help being wolves and sometimes run into trouble when they attack sheep or cattle and are shot by ranchers. For now they seem at peace as am I. There is a certain satisfaction in seeing the wild animals interact in a way that was intended. The natural balance of Yellowstone has been restored and for the first time in seventy years one can enter this special place and be serenaded by the hauntingly beautiful howl of the wolf.

Help your business grow!

Advertise!
For ads that get results, call

Gilpin County News
303-582-0133
www.gilpincountynews.com

"EXCEEDING YOUR EXPECTATIONS!"

INCLUDES STREAM!

341 W 3rd Street - Nederland
Gardener's Delight with STREAM running through the property!! 3 BR, 2 BA, real stucco ranch style hacienda. Mature landscaping! PRIVATE!!!! VIEWS from the verandah. Walk to town and bus. MLS #522304

ONLY \$339,900!

Eleanor Yeager
303-543-3096
nederland2000@msn.com

Offered by Eleanor Yeager - "Working for you"

GREAT VIEWS!

1406 Apex Valley Rd - Black Hawk
IDYLIC! Streamside horse prop among towering spruce 0.98 acres! Meticulous 2002 remodel w/new everything! Park-like setting has some of the oldest Spruce trees in Gilpin county. Excellent design w/mission accents, custom wood cabinetry and tile work. Arched doorways. 2 Remote propane stoves. Trout fish from the yard! Barn and water for two horses. Borders BLM lands. Deck and flagstone patio w/large hot tub wired for sound! Engineered septic & bridge, new roof, new siding, energy efficient. Low taxes!
MLS#528265 **\$324,999**

Heather Games
303-543-3095
heathergames@earthlink.net

Offered by Heather Games - "Mountain property specialist"

Each office independently owned and operated.

We are located at the traffic circle in Nederland, and also have 16 regional offices along the Front Range and Boulder to better serve you!