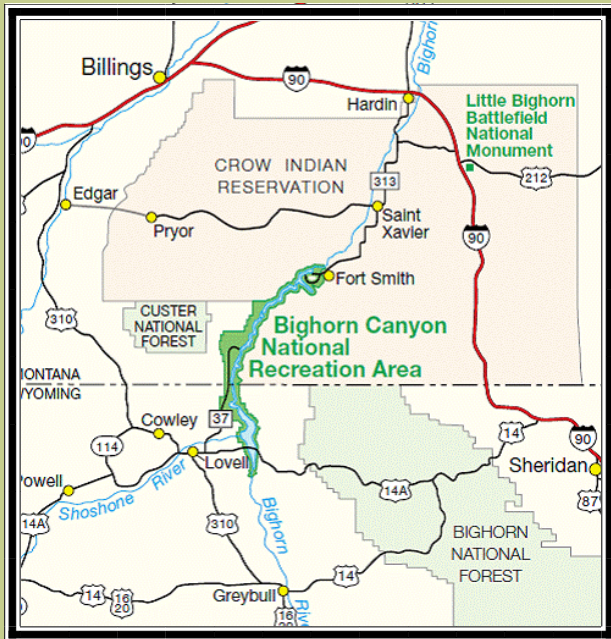


BIGHORN LAKE, WYOMING AND MONTANA

JUNE 2 – 6, 2018

By Jud Hurd



A friend at church, who has been fishing for trout on the Bighorn River below the dam for years, asked me if I'd ever been there. I hadn't even heard of the area so I looked into it.

Bighorn Lake is formed by the Yellowtail Dam, north of the lake because the river runs south to north, just west of Fort Smith, Montana. The fifty miles of the lake below the dam are in Bighorn Canyon, encased by 1,000 to 2,500 foot cliffs that end at The Narrows, just beyond the Horseshoe Bend campground. The area is officially called Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area (<https://www.nps.gov/bica/index.htm>).

After doing some research and looking at pictures I decided to lead a trip up there. I put out an invitation to the club membership and got a lot of positive response. In the end our group consisted of me, Ann Marie Odasz, Marsha Dougherty, Leah Bornstein and Joe Findley, and Julie Rekart and Marlene Pakish. Going this far north I wanted to make sure we had warm weather so we picked the June dates. The plan was to meet at the Horseshoe Bend campground just north of Lovell, Wyoming, on Saturday, June 2. We would then paddle three different sections of the lower canyon on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.

Let me tell you, the drive through the Bighorn Mountains and the Bighorn National Forest west of Sheridan was worth the trip all by itself. This area is covered by flourishing pine forests that don't show any signs of beetle kill. Dotted throughout the forests are lush high meadows, and then you get up above the tree line and drive across the top of the range. To me it looks just like driving over Trail Ridge Road.



When you reach the west side you are looking down on the Bighorn Basin which is bounded on the west by the Beartooth and Absaroka Mountains, on the south by the Wind River and Owl Creek ranges, on the north by the Pryor Mountains and on the east by the Bighorn Mountains. The Basin is elliptical in shape, about 140 miles long and 100 miles wide.

The five of us arrived at Horseshoe Bend [A] by late afternoon. We talked to the campground host and he told us that Ann Marie had been by earlier but there was no sign of her. We knew Marsha was way behind us. Julie, Marlene, Joe and Leah were in a big site which had access to electricity. I took the tent site next to them and Marsha would join me when she showed up. Still no word from Ann Marie. We found out later that she was at her family's cabin just west of Cody. Ann Marie was born and raised in Wyoming so she has family here. But she had no idea about the Bighorn so she was excited to see it.

After dinner I wanted to call Gail and let her know everybody was okay. No cell reception at the campground. Okay, that made sense. No cell reception in Lovell. That made no sense since it's a town. Found out later there is WIFI available at the visitor center but it was too weak to make calls but I could text home. So, if you go up here plan your communications accordingly. Actually, it was kind of nice to be totally out of touch for a few days. Just like the old days, remember?



View across the lake from Horseshoe Bend Campground

Horseshoe Bend is at the north end of the lower lake where the canyon begins. Looking across the lake were some beautiful foothills that threw out gorgeous shadows in the evening as the sun went down.

We set up our camps, had dinner and got comfortable. Joe and Leah had brought some lumber scraps from home and they built us a nice fire where we sat, relaxed and visited. After a long day it was time to turn in, but still no Marsha.

We got up the next morning and Marsha had shown up about 11PM. We had a good breakfast and then drove north to Barry's Landing [B]. The drive there was through some more beautiful countryside and I wanted to stop and take a picture at every turn, but the put-in was at the end of about the longest and steepest ramp and drive to the parking lot that I have ever seen [photo on the next page]. Bring your hiking boots and a backpack to hike back up to the car.



Barry's Landing: a steep drive + debris in the water

We paddled south 9.2 miles (Jud), 8.3 miles (Joe) or 8.6 miles (Marsha) depending on whose GPS you looked at. I liked the 9.2 miles. The water was very murky in this area and there was a lot of floating logs, sticks and wood debris on the water. That's because we were at the beginning of the canyon, and at the south end of the open part of the lake is the inlet from the Shoshone River that carries a lot of debris into the lake. There is nothing to stop it and the southerly wind blows it up into the canyon.

One thing I really like about the canyon is there are red mile markers on river right and green mile markers on the left. Well, they aren't exactly a mile but they relate to the markers on the canyon map so you always know your location relative to your destination.

One thing I really didn't like about this stretch is there was absolutely nowhere to land and get out of the kayak. All the shores were straight up-and-down cliffs or very steep rock slides. You could get a foot on the ground on one side of the kayak but the other side was a 5-foot drop or more. We stayed in our boats all day and rafted up to have lunch.



Ann Marie, Jud, Leah and Joe at lunch

Despite this inconvenience, the scenery was spectacular and we saw lots of turkey vultures, a red tail hawk (we think, maybe), common mergansers, and Canadian snow geese. The geese were really cool: as they flew overhead and honked, we heard their honks echo off the canyon walls.

There was one small side trip up Layout Creek that we explored. When we got to the back of

the creek we heard the water rushing in but we couldn't get very close due to the pile up of debris blown into the end of the cove.

An interesting aspect of this part of the lake is that we only saw one boat all day long. We essentially had the lake and this stretch of the canyon all to ourselves. We did see a number of power boats at the launch but they all seemed to head north.

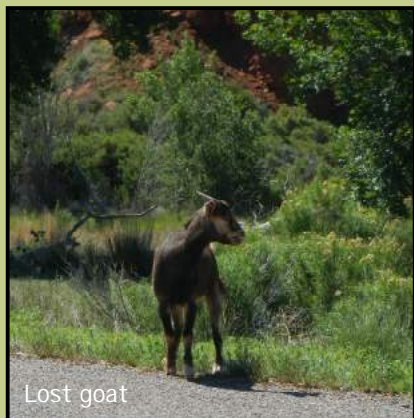


End of a near perfect day of paddling. Ann Marie took off for her two-hour drive back to her cabin. The rest of us made our way back to camp.

On the drive between Barry's Landing and Horseshoe Bend the road goes through the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, the first national wild horse range established by an act of Congress, which provides sanctuary for about 200 wild mustangs.



If you are lucky you get to see some alongside the road. And if you are really lucky you also get to see a lone goat trying to find his or her herd.



Lost goat

Joe and Leah took a swim at the marina while the rest of us rested or putzed around with our gear. We had a nice dinner together, visited and then off to bed.

Monday was much of the same. Breakfast then back north to Barry's Landing where we explored north in the canyon.



Joe, Leah, Marlene, Julie, and Marsha



Joe with his umbrella-sail, Marsha and Ann Marie

Ann Marie brought a bubble wand with her and she made bubbles while Joe unfurled his umbrella to sail up the river with the prevailing southerly winds.

The rest of us just paddled and enjoyed the scenery. There was less debris on the river since we were farther north. Also, there were two little side canyons to explore across the river from each other.

The first was Twenty Mile Creek [C]. It meandered back to the southeast for about three-quarters of a mile, and we came across a fishing boat back there. So, now we knew where the power boats were.

We headed across the river to Medicine Creek [D] where we saw more fishing boats. A very nice thing about Medicine is that it has boat-in only camp sites at the back with a pit toilet and bear boxes. We were able to get out of the kayaks, walk around and have lunch. Medicine Creek was also about .75 mile long.



Marlene, Twenty Mile Creek



Julie, Twenty Mile Creek

We paddled about 8.6 miles but some of that was exploring the side canyons. So, when we finished lunch and headed back we had just a little over three miles to paddle. Another great day on the water and then back to camp. We had another nice dinner and the Joe and Leah built another fire so we could enjoy some S'mores.

That night a strong wind came up that even blew my kayak out of its saddle on the car a little. We had the tents flapping in the wind all night and pushing the sides of the tents

down on us. The wind was still up Tuesday morning and after a discussion we decided to call it a trip and head home a day early. That was too bad but I can't complain as I got to see a whole new body of water, had a wonderful time with good friends, everybody traveled safe and sound, and we are looking forward to going back next year.

On Monday Marlene got a picture of a snake swimming across the lake so we stopped at the Bighorn Canyon Visitor Center near Lovell to identify it. They have a really nice relief map there so we could see where we camped and paddled.

While the southern end of the canyon was pretty spectacular, it doesn't come close to the north end of the lake behind the dam. The lake is much wider, the canyon walls much taller and the water much clearer. That is where we will go next year. So, be looking for the announcement.



It's just a bull snake

Photos by Jud Hurd and Marlene Pakish