

GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK PADDLE

SEPTEMBER 11 - 17, 2010

by Michael Anson



Early Saturday morning Jan Faulkner and I loaded all of our gear into the back of the truck, hooked up the kayak trailer, and headed north on I-25.

We drove all day enjoying the antelope herds scattered across the Wyoming plains and arrived at Colter Bay Village, on the northeast shore of Jackson Lake, around 6:00 in the evening.

We had rented one of the many small cabins there and planned to meet up with Richard and Kristy Webber the following evening. Vail Associates operates the campgrounds, cabins, restaurants and lodges in this part of Grand Teton National Park and we experienced great food and services. There is a laundry facility, post office, general store and several restaurants, but no service station to fix a leaky tire, as Richard and Kristy discovered later in the week.

On Sunday morning Jan and I explored the local area, checking out all the different types of campgrounds and RV parks and getting familiar with the local scenery and services. We also took a four-wheel road on a bluff above the Snake River for spectacular views. We met Kristy and Richard for dinner Sunday evening and went over what we would all like to see and do the following week.

Monday morning we had decided to paddle out of the Colter Bay Marina counter-clockwise around Elk Island. The water was flat calm and the weather was cool and clear. The Grand Tetons were *spectacular* with a light dusting of early season snow and the trees and bushes were just beginning to take on the fall yellows and reds. Although we didn't see any actual elk on Elk Island, we did get to watch one young male deer vigorously polishing his antlers on the sage brush and later a doe and fawn grazing along a narrow bay.

We stopped for a leisurely lunch on the island and then returned in the afternoon to the marina by way of Half Moon Bay. The water levels had dropped and some passages shown on the map were no longer accessible.

But the water was crystal clear, it was a beautiful day, and the scenery and company couldn't be beat.



On Tuesday morning we launched our kayaks from the southeastern end of String Lake, just southwest of Jackson Lake. We paddled clockwise up the western shoreline to the portage trail to Leigh Lake. Again the weather was spectacular and the scenery was postcard perfect! We carried our boats the 100 yards or so from String Lake to Leigh Lake and again headed north along the western shoreline.



Mike paddling below one of the campsites on Leigh Lake

As we paddled north along the shoreline of Leigh Lake we stopped and checked out a couple of the campsites that can be reserved ahead of time and thought it would be a fabulous place to camp on a future trip. The metal bear boxes and poles to hang food, located a short distance from the campgrounds, were a reminder that we weren't alone.

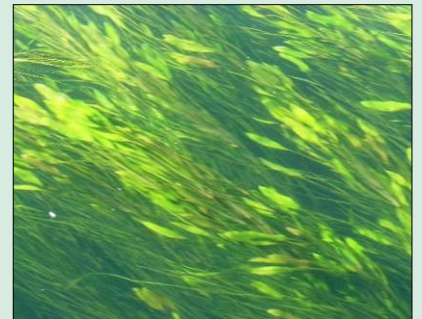
From the north end of Leigh Lake we beached our kayaks and hiked a short distance to Bear Paw Lake for a brief lunch break. We startled a deer along the trail, or rather it startled us. After lunch we hiked back to our kayaks

and began to paddle south along the eastern shore of the lake. The wind had picked up and slowed our progress a bit, but by the time we reached the portage back to String Lake, the wind had subsided and the blue sky had returned.

After portaging our kayaks back to String Lake, we paddled south along the eastern shoreline to our put-in point where we loaded everything on the trailer and headed back to our cabins...tired but happy! The water in all of the lakes and rivers in the Grand Teton National Park were absolutely crystal clear and gave us fabulous views of the rocks, fish and vegetation below the surface.

On Wednesday, we put in just below the Jackson Lake Dam (and outflow to the Snake River). We took both vehicles and shuttled the truck and trailer to the take-out point near Moran Junction, then returned to the put-in.

The Snake River was my favorite part of our week of paddling although all of our paddles were fantastic. The weather was perfect and we could see schools of large trout six to eight feet down in the water as well as beautiful aquatic vegetation anchored to the bottom.



We spent an hour or so exploring the meandering oxbow bend along the river where we came across a large family of river otters, at least eight, that had taken over an abandoned beaver lodge.

As we drifted further down the Snake River a bald eagle flew down to the river surface and caught a careless trout. He then landed on the end of a large tree trunk protruding from the bank and ate his catch in front of us.

Although the river was flowing strongly, it was surprisingly easy to maintain a position without much effort. I know we all wished we could spend the entire day drifting down this spectacular river, but we were running out of time and weren't familiar with the conditions at the lower take-out points.



Jan and I spent that afternoon driving up through Yellowstone National Park which we had been to several years earlier but always enjoy. Kristy and Richard drove into Jackson, Wyoming, to have a slow leak in one of their tires repaired before they started the long drive home.

On Thursday Jan and I gave Richard and Kristy a break (from us) and some time to explore the area on their own. We took the opportunity to hike around Two Ocean Lake, which is just



All photos by Jan Faulkner

east of Jackson Lake. As we hiked the trail around the lake we saw bear scat every quarter mile or so, but since it didn't contain any GoreTex or Bear Bells, we figured we were relatively safe.

We had a wonderful dinner again with Richard and Kristy on Thursday evening, before all of us heading home the following morning. They told us that they had spent the day once again paddling on Jackson Lake. We couldn't have asked for better weather or paddling companions and hope to get back to Teton National Park area again soon.

ADDED BY RICHARD AND KRISTY:

During our "break" from Mike and Jan we once again paddled on the big lake, putting in at Signal Mountain. Signal Mountain gives a good alternate put-in to Colter Bay and provides a ready access to the south end of the lake. Our paddle took us around Donoho Point (actually an island) and back over to Elk Island. This would be the best access point if you wanted to try to make it over to Moran Bay on the west side of the lake.

We thought we would avoid the crowds by a visiting in September but were surprised by the number of visitors roaming around. However, there were very few people on the lakes. We basically had Jackson Lake to ourselves. We only saw one campsite occupied during our visit. The campsites appear to be really well prepared with both metal bear boxes and hanging poles.

String Lake and Leigh Lake are beautiful but by the afternoon the parking lots were full; get there early. We did see a few other paddlers on these lakes. Pam Noe had suggested that we take wheels for the portage over to Leigh Lake, a suggestion that we totally ignored. However, we will definitely take wheels the next time!

It gets cold in the mornings. We typically got started by 8:00-8:30. On our last day the bilge water was frozen in our boats. Frosty hatch covers get really stiff and hard to open.

Grand Teton National Park is a great alternative to Yellowstone for those who might not want to do the whole paddle-camp thing; do day paddles instead. The scenery simply can't be beat, and the Snake River paddle is not to be missed.



Kristy and Rich Webber