

Pagosa Escape

By Bil Parker



Navajo Reservoir

July on the front range can be a little warm. Not oppressive but, in the summer of 2001 we had just spent a week in Summit county paddling Dillon Reservoir. At 9000 feet, the daytime temperatures are down right pleasant to say nothing of the cool evenings. So, when we realized another opportunity to escape the heat, we headed southwest to our former home in Pagosa Springs. Elevation 7,000 ft. Pagosa lies just west of the fabled Wolf Creek Pass (most snow in Colorado fame) and 60 miles east of Durango. Pagosa is classic Colorado. High rugged peaks, lush pine, fir, aspen and spruce forests. The lower ranges are comprised of gambriel oak, piñon and juniper. We decided that both areas were equally important to play in so, off we went first to Navajo Reservoir.

The Navajo Res. is a big one. 35 miles long taking two states to hold it all as it laps over into New Mexico. The Colorado State Park portion alone is listed at 17,900 water acres. It is fed from the high mountains of the Weminuche Wilderness via the San Juan and Piedras Rivers. The drive is most pleasant from Pagosa. 17 miles west from town on Colorado 160 then left and south on Colorado 151 for another 17 miles to the town of Arboles. We turned left

into the State Park at the sign in the center of town (don't blink) and drove down towards the lake which is plainly visible. Just before the right turn to the marina we saw a sign that read sailboard beach with an arrow pointing left. Only a pay station now separated us from the water. We dutifully paid our \$4.00 day use fee and suddenly became the only people on the lake as far as we could see. We drove down to the beach which had been thoroughly trampled by deer. A beautiful blue sky day greeted us as we put in our kayaks. We paddled east into a light breeze for approximately 8 miles up the San Juan arm. Lots of heron, Canada geese, a golden eagle and to our absolute surprise, dozens of wild turkeys played hide and go seek with us among the reeds and grasses as we paddled up the narrowing arm of the San Juan drainage. By mid afternoon we had returned to the north bay where we encountered 2 jet skis and one ski boat. Tuff to take after all that peace and quiet. We could have easily paddled and explored for days.

Our next journey took us north of Pagosa Springs 21 miles on county road 600 or as we ex-locals still call it "Piedra Road", to Williams Creek Reservoir. It is a good dirt/

gravel road that will easily accept a camper rig. Here is absolute screaming beauty at the base of the Weminuche Wilderness. This is the San Juan National Forest, no fee to get on the water. The campgrounds are slightly above the lake. Boat ramps and beaches are all on the north and west end. No other services are available. But, who really needs all that crap anyway? There are always plenty of places like Dillon. This is special. The lake is about a mile long and a little over half as wide. It boasts 508 water acres (Boulder Res. is 540) at an elevation of 8,241 ft. Rimmed by forests and mountain so if you get tired you can go for a hike or do some fishing or watch for deer, elk, and moose. Very few folks frequent this jewel. As is typical for the high country in the summer, our mornings weather was perfect. Clouds, wind and rain can form in the afternoon. Highs in the 70's to 80's,. Lows in the 50's and 60's.

Vallecito Reservoir was to be our next day paddle but, unfortunately our plans were changed by fate. So, this just gives us an excellent excuse to plan another trip back to our southwest mountains. Happy Paddling!