

Yellowstone Lake - July 2021

There have been quite a few club trips to Shoshone lake, but I don't recall any to the big lake so I thought I'd write up my trip and provide some useful info for anyone wanting to do this. You could combine this with a trip to Shoshone lake for a longer visit.

I had backpacked to the south end of the lake in 1977 and fishing for Cutthroat Trout was so good that I got bored catching them. So canoeing down there has been on my list for a long time and with the Canada border closed this would be a good time to do it.

Planning for a week long trip, I wanted to reserve my campsites and set them up to provide fishing access to both the South and Southeast Arms of the lake. In fact, this was the only way to get backcountry permits since the backcountry ranger offices were all closed due to covid. Procedure is to download a reservation request form, complete it with your 1st choice for camps and alternatives, and mail it or fax it to the main backcountry office. I got mine out in March, and all apps rec'd before Apr 1 are put into a drawing pool, and all are processed as drawn - After Apr 1, they are first come first served. I got my reply confirmation by e-mail and got the sites I wanted. To get the actual permit, you have to call the office no more than 3 days prior to start of your trip, and they take payment info and then issue your permit via e-mail. I got my permit on the 10th, and drove to WY. Then you still need to get your Yellowstone Aquatic Invasive Species permit before launching - they don't care if you have one from WY.

This would be my only chance for a solo trip all year and I planned it as a solo. However a few days before I left I got an e-mail from Judy H who was at loose ends in MT and had heard about my trip, and asked if she could join me. I was reluctant to give up my solo trip, but told her ok as long as she was totally self-supported - (we had both been on the April Buffalo R trip, so I knew she was a competent paddler) that way, she could share my permit and we could each do our own thing - I planned on doing a lot of fishing. We rendezvoused at the Grant Village backcountry office early on the 13th and went thru the boat inspection - the ais fee is included in the non-motorized boating fee - \$20 for 7 day pass. \$3/per person/day backcountry camp fee.

Day 1 - 7/13/21 Tue After the inspection we headed for the beach and loaded up our boats and took off headed for our first camp. I'd planned a short day for the first camp, then 2 nights in S Arm and then 2 in SE Arm, and 1 on the way back in case of bad weather. You need to read the fine print on the campsite page because quite a few of the sites are off limits until the 15th for wildlife related closures. Didn't have to worry about the weather, this was a fine day for paddling with just a little breeze. I was in my Mad River Independence, a good lake boat, and Judy was in her 14'6" sea kayak. We were pretty evenly matched with a 3.5 mph cruising speed. Made a lunch stop near site 7L1, which looked like a nice one from where we stopped. There was an outfitter group of 8 or 10 sea kayaks there, just day tripping - these were the only other paddlers we would see all week till we got back to Grant and saw a few SUPers. There were quite a few motor boats out fishing, far fewer than I had expected, but not so many as to

be intrusive or noisy. After lunch we went on to our campsite # 7L3-Breeze Bay South. This was a nice enough spot, but totally burned over with some regrowth. They had cut down any dangerous dead trees, so tent sites were good and safe. This site had a big metal box for food storage ("Bear Box") and boats must be removed from the water, which we would have done anyway. Fire restrictions were in place for the entire trip, so no campfires at all. There is no requirement for carrying out your poop, so cat holes were easy if there was no toilet (some sites have toilets). Motorboats went by occasionally, but not intrusive - on the other hand, lots of obnoxiously loud motorcycles on the road 3 miles away across the lake were noisy.

Camp at 7L3 - paddled 8.5 miles today.

Day 2 - 7/14/21 Wed We are both early risers, up at first light and packing for an early start. Carrying gear the 100 yards or so down to the boats, I'd left the first load with my 2 gal collapsible water jug near the beach and went back for my last load. Paddling along I noticed that there was water puddling in my boat and sure enough the jug was leaking - a damned red squirrel had bitten into it and it only started leaking after I left - lucky I had a gal milk jug along as well for filtering water. We were heading for our next camp down in the S Arm for a 2 night stay - I planned on fishing and exploring all day tomorrow. Camp would be on the large peninsula separating the two south arms, on the east side of S Arm. Very nice paddling conditions again, we headed across the open end of the bay to hit the shore well north of our camp - I wanted to check out other campsites for a possible future trip. By the end of Day 3, it became when, not if I came back. There was one motor boat fishing along the shore - the only one around I think. We stopped at 5L7 for a lunch stop and to check it out. A pretty nice site in a few live trees that hadn't been burned up - it seemed that they must have dropped water or retardant on most of the camps on the peninsula as everything else was totally burned up. I'd camp here. But we went on and looked at the next site 5L6. This one was only fair, with fewer live trees and a steep bank to climb up - not one I'd like. As we continued South, I started getting a bad feeling about our site - everything was burned up and no green in sight as we approached our 5L5 site. No green trees except a couple too far away to be useful, and a steep bank to climb with our gear. Unlike our first camp, they had done no clearing of the dangerous dead trees - there was no place to pitch a tent without being in a spot that a tree could crush you, and there were no decent flat level tent sites. We picked the best two we could find and set up camp, then I set up a tarp as a sun shade - it was hot in the open. We named this "Camp Desolation". After we sat there a while, we talked about just moving camp somewhere else, legal or not. Judy saved the day when she got out her phone and found that she had service there. I looked at my permit but couldn't find any phone numbers to call, and again Judy came to the rescue - she had a Nat Geo map and it had the number for the backcountry office. So we called them and left a message that we wanted to move from this horrible place. They called back a half hour or so later and end result, we couldn't move across the lake as those sites weren't open till the 15th, and no other sites were convenient for fishing and exploring the S Arm, so we would stay at 5L5 for the night, then move next day (the 15th) across the bay. Luckily, it wasn't very windy and it did cool down in the evening.

Camp at 5L5 -- paddled 12 miles today

Day 3 - 7/15/21 Thur I hadn't known anything about 5L5 when I selected it, I just wanted a spot convenient for going further down the S arm - 7M9 would be convenient and we could see green trees over on that side - it wasn't all burned up. So we broke camp and paddled straight across the bay, then south. Stopped at 7M7 to look it over - it was a nice site (2**) and had a toilet somewhere back in the trees - I'd camp here. But our new site was farther along and we went down to 7M9 which was a very nice site (3**) and set up camp. Set our tents out in the middle of a meadow to be away from the water and the food pole, hung our food and went fishing. At least I fished, trolling my way down south while Judy paddled nearby. Mostly easy paddling till an afternoon wind came up, then it was harder work for a mile or 2 till we got close to the west shore and went along it. Stopped for lunch at 7N2 - this was a really nice spot, in a grove of trees surrounded by meadows and open hillsides where you might see some animals - lots of wildflowers here. I'd probably pick this site on my next trip if the timing is right (after the 14th of July). We were close to the end of the bay and paddled all the way to the end, heading for the place I'd caught 20 Cutthroat trout in '77. But no fish this time - the water was shallow - looked like the lake was 2 to 3 feet low this year, and it was later in the season. I fished anyway, but nothing to catch here - or anywhere else it seems. Someone had illegally introduced lake trout to Yellowstone and they ate most of the Cutt's - never saw but one rise and no fish jumping, nor any down in the deeper water where you could see down for 15'. I mostly gave up fishing, and we just headed back to camp, again working hard into strong headwinds for a while till we got close to the west shore. Another very nice evening and into our tents at dark. To be woken up in the middle of the night by the "barking" call of an elk. Guessing that Judy wouldn't know what it was, I hollered to her that it was only an elk giving a warning call to other elk that we were in their meadow - nothing to worry about.

Camp at 7M9 - paddled 12.25 miles today

Day 4 - 7/16/21 Fri --- time to move over to the SE Arm today. We went back across the bay and paddled along the shore of the peninsula, past Camp Desolation and the others we had checked out and around to the tip of the peninsula where I spent some time fishing uselessly, and we stopped at 5L8 for a snack break. This was a nice site, again in a small stand of live trees that had been saved from the fire - everything else around it was burned. This site had a toilet and a great location, but was sparse on tent sites with only a couple of good ones. We went on around the point and headed south towards our site. Stopped for lunch at 5L9 and to check it out. Not very nice, only fair with a few live trees - I'd not want to camp here. So it was on to 6A1 which we had for 2 nights. I was getting that bad feeling again - the whole peninsula looked like it had burned but there was a bit of green way down, and we finally found 6A1 back in a small bay with a nice meadow nearby. Our home for two nights was nice (2**) after all. We set up the tents close to the shore - something that you are not supposed to do - when talking to the office I asked if we couldn't be closer and they said if we needed to it was ok, but they advised against camping along the shore because bears liked to travel along it. No bear sign here though, and the other options were a very weedy and lumpy meadow, or tenting close to the food pole - we chose the two nicer spots near the bank. Sometime in the middle of the night a T-storm blew through - ferocious winds bending the wall of my tent over down on me - I had to sit up and hold it to keep the tent from collapsing on me. It broke one of Judy's tent poles

too, but it was fairly short-lived and at least we weren't at Camp Desolation where trees might be falling on our tents. Camp at 6A1 -- paddled 12 miles today.

Day 5 - 7/17/21 Sat - We duct taped the broken pole in the morning, and after breakfast paddled across the lake to the N shore to check it out, trolling across. Stopped to look at 5L2 which was a nice enough site, but had the hiking trail going right thru the middle of it - not very good tent sites either, it was one I wouldn't want to camp at. Further along we heard voices coming from higher up the hill in a patch of trees. A couple of hikers sitting in the shade for lunch. We exchanged pleasantries and paddled on to the entrance of the Yellowstone River - nothing but a slow shallow creek here, then back to the lake and headed south again, but the wind was picking up a bit, I gave up on fishing, and we just headed back to camp. Getting closer, I could see the marker sign for the camp. All the camps were marked by an orange diamond shaped sign on a post - some were quite faded, and others hidden by branches - they don't seem to have done much maintenance lately. But our sign looked odd, and after landing and pulling out our boats I went over to look at it. The sign is 3/16" or 1/8" aluminum plate, maybe 8" across - this one was only bolted at the top of the diamond - the bottom half of the sign had been bent upwards 90 degrees, and it hadn't looked that way yesterday - I think the strong wind must have bent it. I looked it over and there were no signs of scratches or bite marks, so I don't think an animal had done it - a measure of how strong that wind had been. Had the lake to ourselves today.

Camp at 6A1 - paddled 11.25 miles today

Day 6 - 7/18/21 Sun - We'll be going part way back today, heading for 7L7 which was another site that had been closed until the 15th. As we paddled back North along the peninsula we saw one fishing boat out in the main part of the lake, and two fishing boats tied up at 5L9, camping there - this was the only other campsite that we saw anyone camping at. As every morning had been, this was very nice paddling conditions, with a light breeze at our backs and we made good time. Went across to the area we wanted, and then down the shoreline looking for the campsite marker - it wasn't where we had both expected it to be, but further down the shoreline past a very long sand spit that had created a lagoon behind it. Camp was at the end of the sandspit with very large and obvious signs saying to keep off the sand spit or get a big fine - it would have been a nice 1/3 mile walk, but we didn't go out there. This was a closure most likely because of waterfowl nesting I'd guess. There was another sign post laying flat with a sign on it saying keep away from this site, but they had taken that sign down on the 15th. This was the nicest campsite we had (3**) - lots of room and the only hiking available to us - the 200 yard trail back to the toilet. Food pole here, no bear box, but a very nice sand beach and we went swimming here. I made the mistake of walking barefoot over the black sand and nearly burned my feet - water was a little cool, but not too bad if you didn't stay in for long. Quite a few geese and ducks in the lagoon, and we heard an elk squeal across the far end - sounded like a spike bull to me, and a cow mew there too. Another very nice evening and sunset.

Camp at 7L7 -- paddled 11 miles today

Day 7 - 7/19/21 Moving early today heading back to Grant. This was just another nice perfect day for paddling - ho hum! We made one stop for snacks, then back to Grant Village and we loaded the boats and gear - After this trip we were both going up to Hungry Horse MT to paddle the S Fork and N Fork of the Flathead River with T&J and their Florida gang.

This was a really really nice trip. The weather couldn't have been better (except for that wind storm), and we pretty much had the lake to ourselves but for some fishing boats, and not a lot of them either. Almost all of the 80 miles we paddled were in near perfect conditions. We saw several eagles, a few pelicans, and no wildlife but 2 deer though we heard elk twice. I caught no fish, saw no fish and heard no fish - one of the boats that we passed, I asked if they had any luck and the guy said they'd caught 20 fish - I think he was just BS'ing, but maybe he did - one other guy said he'd caught a few. Never saw anyone actually catch a fish.

I'd recommend this trip to anybody - well worth it.



Day 2 - my tent at Camp Desolation



Day 2 - such a lovely spot - not!



Day 3 - Morning looking west



Day 3 - taking a break at site 7M7



Day 3 - pretty meadow at site 7N2



Day 3 - our camp at 7M9



Day 4 - a stop at site 5L8 - good camp, great location in those trees





Day 4



Day 4 - our camp for two nights at site 6A1



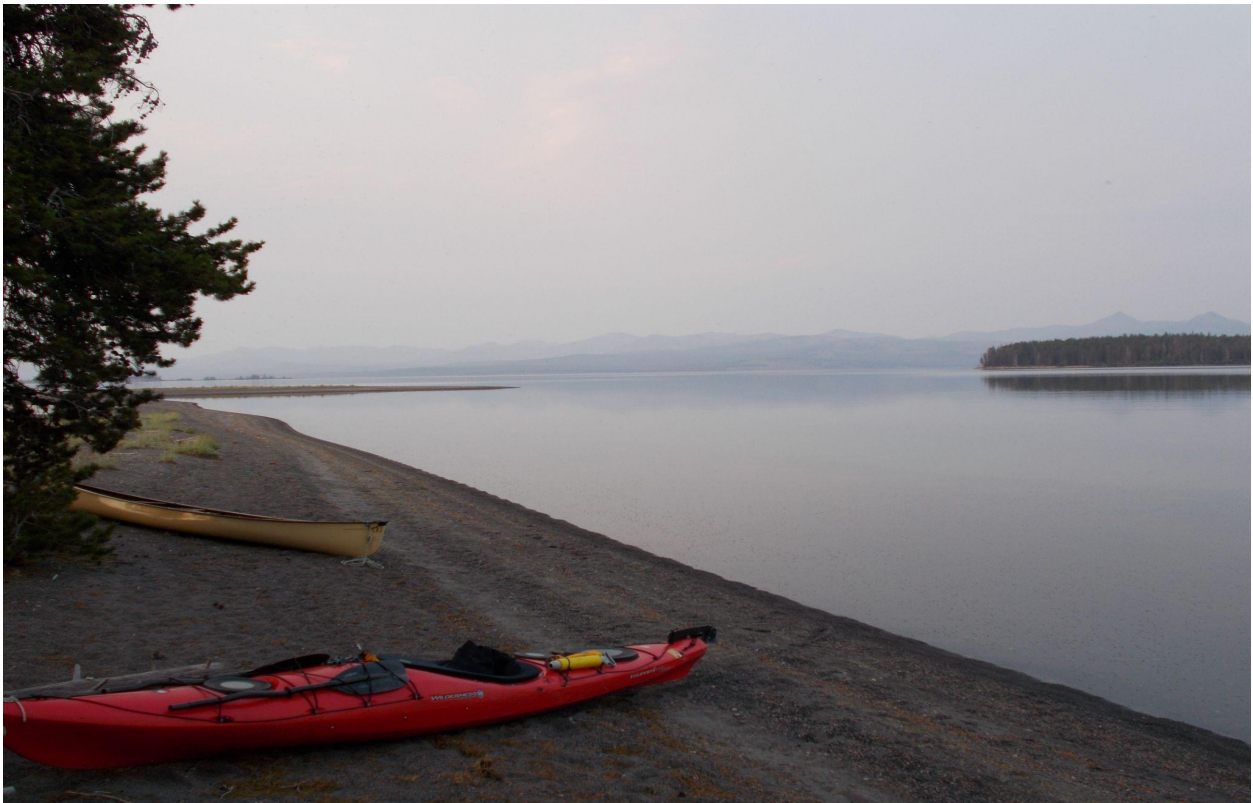
Day 5 - headed to the north end of SE arm - bit of a breeze



Day 5 -



Day 6 at camp 7L7 - the lagoon - sand spit at right



Day 6 - the black sand beach - quite a bit of smoke haze in the air



Day 6 At 7L7 - must have been an old fire here long ago - lots of young pines



Sunset, Day 6



Day 7 - on the way back to Grant Village boat ramp



Some of Judy's pic's





I the hunter missed seeing this little buck



Nice paddling conditions if a bit hazy

