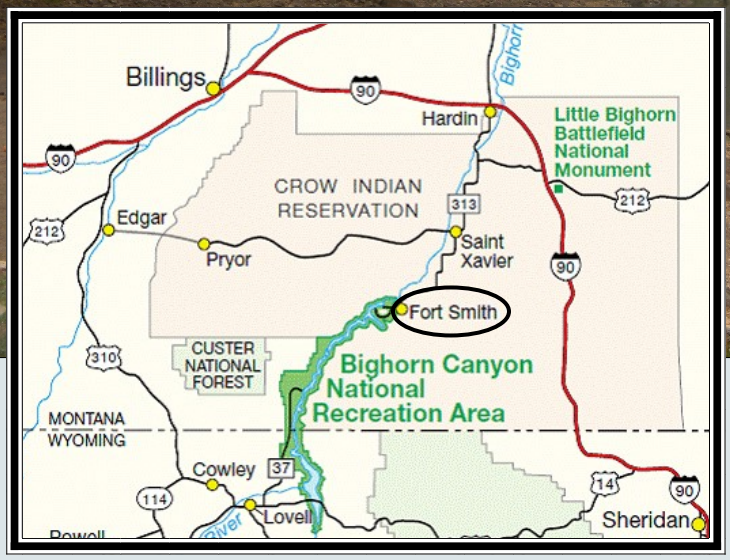
The North End of Bighorn Lake

September 7-12, 2019

By Jud Hurd



Last year a group of us visited the south end of Bighorn Lake on the Wyoming/Montana border. It was a great trip, and you can read all about it in Issue 26-1b of the *Mountain Paddler*.

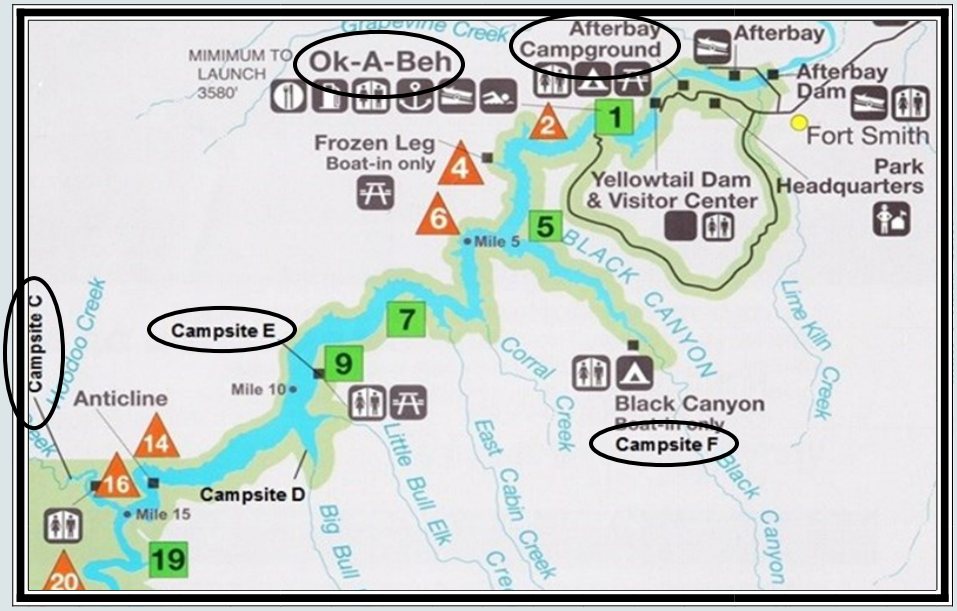
As I was looking at the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area brochure it showed pictures of green-forested and meadow-covered towering cliff walls leading down to pristine, crystal clear water. And I'm thinking, "Yeah, that's what I want to see."

While our 2018 trip included some beautiful scenery, there just wasn't anything quite like what I'd seen in the brochure. Then I had one of those slap the forehead 'Duh' moments. Those brochure pictures are at the north end of the lake just before the Yellowtail Dam. I am not used to thinking in terms of south to north flowing rivers that form lakes so it took me a while to understand how this lake works.

Once the light bulb went on, I started making plans to go back this year and visit the north end to enjoy the spectacular scenery and water. I put together some information, sent out an invitation to the club and six of us ended up going. The group consisted of me, Dick Dieckman, Sandy Carlsen and Harold Christopher, David Hustvedt, and Tim Fletcher.

I thought the first part of September would be an ideal time as we would be past the heat of summer and into the beginning of cooler, fall weather. Well, I was right on one part, it was definitely cooler. We left home on Saturday, September 7, for the seven-hour trip from Fort Collins to Fort Smith, Montana. It's a pretty good drive straight up I-25 to Buffalo. Then up I-90 to Lodge Grass, Montana, where you turn west toward Fort Smith and the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. Dick and I drove together and had a pleasant visit while listening to 700 songs on my iPod and fighting the ever-present Wyoming wind.

We got to Fort Smith about mid-afternoon and stopped at the administration building to fill our water bottles. A park ranger told us we were in an administration parking lot not open to the public. I hate starting a trip being chastised by the local constabulary, but we had a nice conversation with her and got some local information (always good to get when visiting a new area for the first time) that was very helpful. She said we would pretty much have the lake to ourselves and she was right. We probably didn't see more than about a dozen boats the four days we were on the water. Black bears are prevalent on this lake and the ranger told us bears had been spotted at both our campsites so we would need to use good food storage practices.



Dick and I found the Afterbay campground and set up our tents. We then did a little exploring. From the campground we backtracked through Fort Smith and turned off for a 10-mile drive over a mountain to the Ok-A-Beh marina, our planned launch spot.

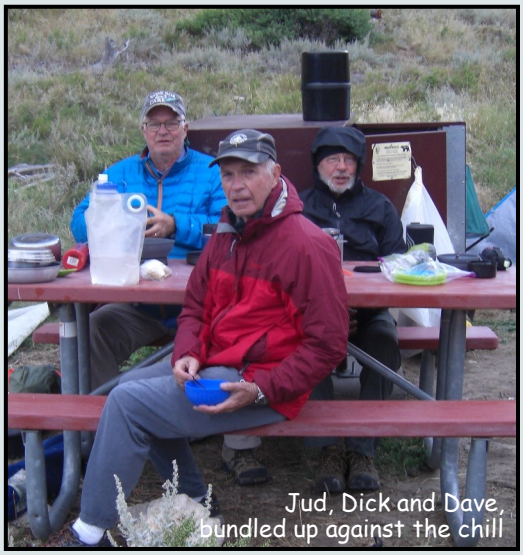
We really had to be watchful while driving as it is open range and there are lots of Black Angus cattle all along the road. Lots of calves too, so we had to slow down in case one of them decided to dart in front of the car.

We got to Ok-A-Beh and it is a beautiful marina. Feeling proud that we knew where to go the next day, we headed back to Afterbay. I kept thinking to myself that the car seemed very comfortable with a seven-foot Greenland paddle sticking all the way through the center.

Then I realized the reason we had so much room is there was no paddle. That's right, folks, Yours Truly left his paddle at home. I was up the creek without a paddle, but Tim came to my rescue and lent me his spare Greenland paddle. And we don't need to talk about why I just didn't use my own spare!

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8: We headed over to Ok-A-Beh for the put-in. Remember me saying I picked this time of year expecting some beautiful, mild fall weather? Well, I was a little off.

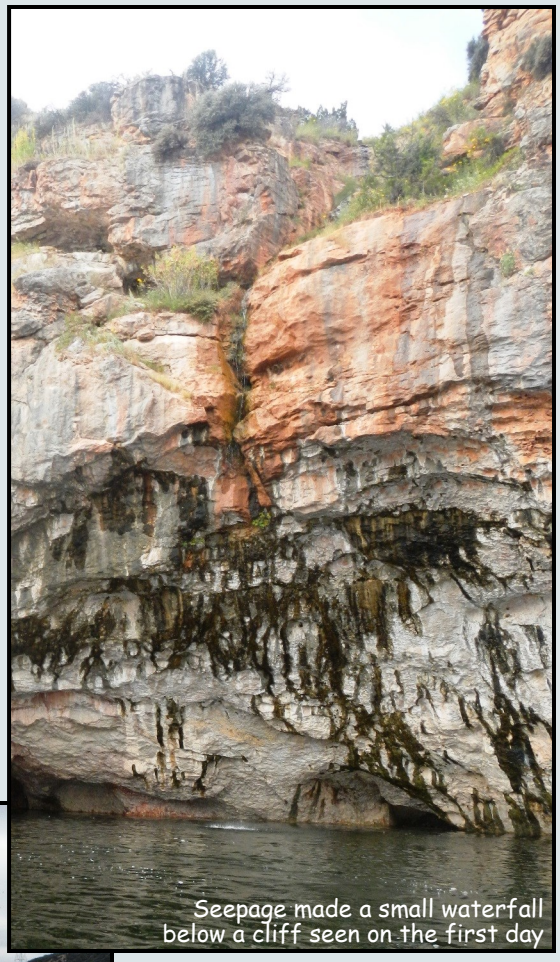
Morning temperatures were in the 50s and we had overcast skies with on-and-off rain throughout the whole trip. The highs never got above the low 70s and that was for a very short time of the day. I think we saw only a few hours of sunlight the whole trip.


Jud, Dick and Dave, bundled up against the chill

But that didn't discourage our intrepid group. We paddled along a wall where water seeped through, forming a small waterfall, and then to a buoy line marking the no boating area at the dam. Finally, it was time to head up lake [southwest, away from the dam] to our first campsite.

The brochure pictures are true to life. We were surrounded by beautiful cliff walls everywhere we looked. There are a variety of sandstone colors but what makes this different, from say Lake Powell, is that there are trees and green meadows covering the steep slopes of the canyon walls. Everybody commented on how beautiful it was, and unlike anywhere else we have paddled.

The steep canyon walls are both a blessing in their beauty but also a problem in that there are no places to pull out along the way. Everything is either vertical or very steep into the water. The only good places to pull out are the designated campsites unless you are adept at getting out on one side of your kayak, which I am not, but Tim is. So, once you are on the water you are paddling until you reach your destination. This can be tiring so you have to pace yourself and take a few rest breaks along the way.



Seepage made a small waterfall below a cliff seen on the first day

Buoy line in front of Yellowtail Dam.
The dam is 525 feet tall, which creates a deep lake with clear water.

The day was overcast but no rain and the temperature was comfortable; combine that with extremely clear water and just a little wind and we had almost ideal paddling conditions. A little sun and warmth would have made it perfect.

Sandy, Tim, Harold, Dave and Dick on the way to Campsite E, at Dayboard 9

Our goal was to paddle to Campsite E at Dayboard 9, which is 8.1 miles southwest of Ok-A-Beh according to the brochure mileage chart, another nice piece of information they provide. With our side trip to see the waterfall and dam we paddled 9.5 miles.

We arrived about mid-afternoon and found a nice sandy beach to land. There were six or seven established tent sites that could hold two tents each. We began the usual club UN-like deliberations on who was going to take which tent site: "I like this one but if you like it you can have it and I will pick another one. Oh no, if you like it you take it and I will pick another one. Well, we could put both tents on this one site, if that works for you. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera." Finally, negotiations were completed and everybody set up their camp. Then it was time for what I like best about these trips: kicking back with good friends and visiting.

A Noah's Tarp, by Kelty, is good to have

Campsite E

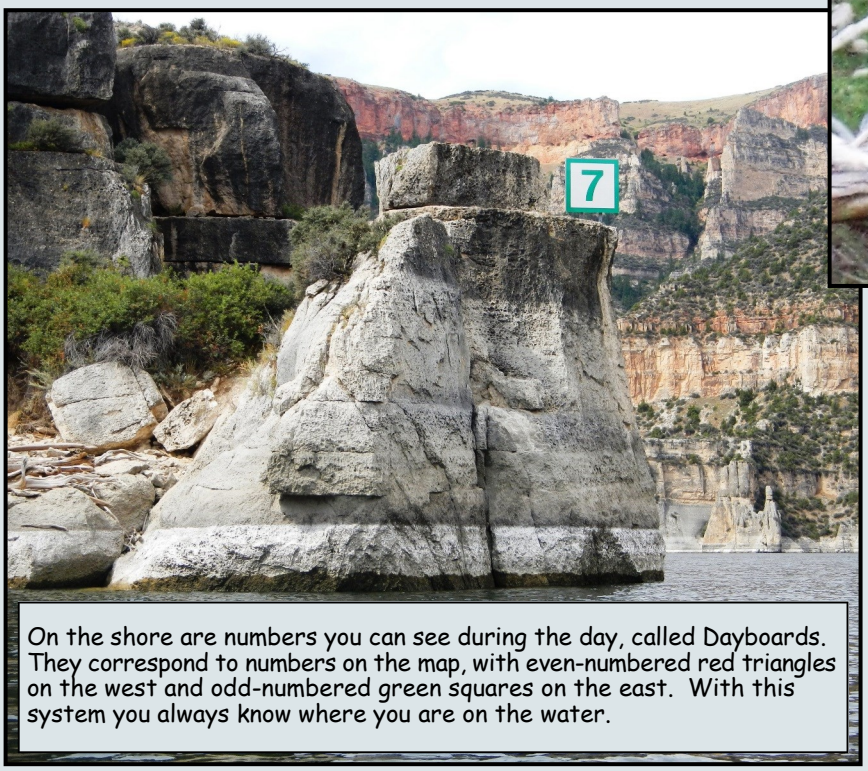
Eventually the day wore on and the clouds were gathering so we set up a tarp just in time for the sprinkle that moved in. Everybody cooked and ate under it. As we were sitting there in the rain, I saw a mule deer doe and her fawn bounding over the hill just beyond our camp. It is really neat to see wildlife in their natural habitat!

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9: Sometime during the night I awoke to a pretty good wind blowing and eventually I heard one of the tarp poles crash down. Not to worry. We will just set it up again in the morning. Morning arrived and, yup, the tarp was down; one of the stakes gave way in the wind. But here is the real mystery: we looked and looked and couldn't find the stake or the tarp line. It had to be there but there was no sign of it. It was like something came down from the sky and took it up while we were sleeping. We never did find that darn stake. Spooky, huh?

After breakfast we paddled south to explore more of the canyon. We had looked at the map and seen there was a bathroom facility at Dry Head Canyon, 5.7 miles up the lake. There was also Campsite C there, so we thought we would be able to take a lunch break, have a potty break and return to Dayboard 9, doing maybe a 12-mile day. But as I continued to study the map, I pointed out that the floating potty was about halfway down the canyon while Campsite C was shown at the back of the canyon. Maybe it was a free-floating potty like they have at Lake Powell, needing a high deck exit and entrance to use? Well, we decided to go for it anyway.

We had rain on and off, and sure enough, when we got to Dry Head Canyon the potty was free-floating and not at the campsite. Since there was nowhere to land we decided to continue to the back of the canyon and look for the campsite. We came to a Y and I made the mistake of directing us to the right which is Hoodoo Creek and, again, there was nowhere to land. We went back to a place where we could get out for lunch and then headed back to camp at Dayboard 9. It turned out to be about a 15-mile day and we were all very glad to see our campsite. (Campsite C was on the left fork of the Y and just a little bit farther. Oh well, you can't win them all.)

As we were sitting around resting and getting ready for dinner our two mule deer came waltzing down the hillside, big as you please, as if they owned the place. They payed us no never mind and proceeded to graze on the grass and shrubs at our landing. We got up, moved around and talked, but they pretty much didn't worry about us. They looked up once in a while but then just went back to grazing. Dave even got up and walked down to his boat and even that didn't bother them. They looked at Dave and probably thought, "This guy doesn't look dangerous so let's just keep eating." As I said before, there is something unique about sharing an experience like this with wild animals in their natural habitat.



On the shore are numbers you can see during the day, called Dayboards. They correspond to numbers on the map, with even-numbered red triangles on the west and odd-numbered green squares on the east. With this system you always know where you are on the water.

Pulling into Campsite F

Tuesday, September 10: We headed for our next camp, Black Canyon, Campsite F. We had been told this is the most popular spot on the lake and we saw why when we arrived. We paddled 7.3 miles and were welcomed by a beautiful, large sand beach, a dock that could accommodate ten boats, a floating potty, and a dozen well developed and maintained tent sites.

We were also greeted by three rangers who were waiting to present a program for another group arriving in boats. Oddly enough the rangers were all looking across the water where Black Canyon Creek flows into the lake. They had binoculars out and were pointing to something. We saw that there was a black bear on the other side of the creek browsing for food.

There was no threat and it was great to watch it, just like watching the mule deer. Later the rangers told us another bear had been spotted on our side of the creek but farther back up the canyon. We were grateful that bear boxes are provided at each campsite, and we made sure all our food and attractive-smelling items were stored properly.

We proceeded with our usual routine and we set up the tarp again. Even though we saw some sunlight today, we could still have rain, and the forecast for tomorrow was rain all day. That evening we saw hundreds of fish swimming around the dock. Dave thought he saw whiskers on them so they might have been catfish. I think this lake would be great to fish and I'll consider that if I go back.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11: We woke up to overcast skies, a light fog and mist this morning. Everybody had breakfast, broke camp and packed their kayaks. We had 6.2 miles to paddle back to the Ok-A-Beh marina and we got away around 9:00.

It wasn't too bad until we got out of Black Canyon and turned toward the marina. Then we got a fairly steady rain; we paddled about the last couple of miles in the rain. Everybody was anxious to get off the water as we got to Ok-A-Beh a little before 11:00.

We put our gear in the cars, put the kayaks on top and headed up to the restrooms to change into dry clothes. Harold and Sandy decided to drive straight through back to Lafayette, but David, Tim, Dick and I had reservations in Buffalo which is only about a two-hour drive. Dinner was steaks at Winchester's Steak House. I highly recommend it if you are ever in Buffalo. I also recommend the SureStay Plus Hotel by Best Western. It is really clean and comfortable, with great service, and very reasonably priced.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 12: We drove home battling a horrendous west wind all through Wyoming. The one bright spot was stopping at the Chugwater Soda Fountain for one of their wonderful malts or shakes. Yummm!

That's about it, folks. Everybody said they had a great time and really appreciated seeing a new lake. I think there might be interest in returning, perhaps earlier in the year when the weather will be a little more cooperative.

Photos provided by
Jud Hurd, Sandy Carlsen and Harold Christopher