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## Introduction

*Best Backpacking Trips in Montana, Wyoming and Colorado* is our third book in this series following guides to similar excursions in California and Nevada; and Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. The idea for a destination backpacking book for the great trips of the West was birthed one summer when my best friend, Tic, found himself the victim/beneficiary of a job loss due to the corporate raiding of Rupert Murdoch's expanding empire. A generous severance package was the positive aspect of being let go after thirty-plus years of service, with a summer free from any obligations toward gainful employment. Along with a couple of other friends, Andy and John, we embarked on a nearly month-long backpacking expedition in the northern Rockies, with the added bonus of intervening forays into civilization to shower, eat, drink, sleep, and relax. After backpacking through the stunning landscapes of the Beartooth Mountains in Montana and the Wind Rivers and Tetons of Wyoming, and upon meeting several groups of fellow backpackers from across the country along the way, the idea of a comprehensive guide to the classic backpacking trips of the western United States started to evolve.

Backpacking these three trips of a lifetime in one summer was quite an exhilarating experience and a genuine blessing, especially sharing the journey with three good friends. In our fast-paced, workday world,



*Pyramid Peak over Glens Lake (from Trip 1)*

the opportunity to unplug and decompress in the natural environs of the wilderness for just a week, let alone three, is quite a luxury. For those who appreciate the recuperative tonic of such an opportunity in the great outdoors, we trust this guide will provide all the necessary information to plan and execute the best backpacking trips of the western United States. For those who may have not taken the plunge into the wonderful world of traipsing through such magnificent country on foot with all the necessary essentials on their backs, we also hope this guide will inspire and encourage them to consider the possibility.

The western states of Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado possess some of the wildest and most scenic backcountry landscapes in the nation. Not only do backpackers from the United States find trips in this region highly desirable, but so do countless international devotees as well. From scenic canyons to alpine summits, and nearly everything in between, this region is a prime area for backpacking trips of a lifetime. The trips begin in Montana with two trips in scenic Glacier National

Park. The Ptarmigan–Glenns Lake–Highline Loop is an extended loop with plenty of spectacular side trips on one of the grandest backcountry experiences imaginable. Glacier’s Gunsight Pass Traverse is a classic across-the-park ramble that can be done in a short amount of time. Third, the little-known Crazy Mountains Traverse offers sky-scraping peaks, splendid mountain lakes, abundant wildlife, amazing views, and even a small glacier or two. The Spanish Peaks Loop features some of the best of the state’s dramatically scenic Madison Range, unknown to many but a favorite of locals due to the many gorgeous lakes, fine fishing, and first-rate mountain scenery. The last of the five Montana trips is the Beaten Path, a high alpine ramble across the lake-filled Beartooth Plateau below the range of peaks of the same name, including Granite Peak, the state’s highest summit.

Wyoming has six spectacular entries on the life list of western backpacking trips. The first is the Bechler River Trail in Yellowstone Park’s “Cascade Corner,” a fun and relatively easy ramble that visits expansive meadows, wildlife-rich habitats, a lovely river canyon, a bubbling geyser basin, and plenty of beautiful waterfalls. The Teton Crest Trail runs along the spine of one of the most beautiful mountain ranges in the country, offering unparalleled scenery along the way. The Solitude Trail Loop offers national park scenery without the permit hassles, visiting many highlights of the towering Bighorn Mountains. The Wind River Range provides three classic backpacking trips worthy of life-list status. The Highline Traverse is the classic Wind River experience with plenty of options for trip extensions. The Cirque of the Towers Loop in the southern Winds includes one of North America’s finest alpine ridge walks. The Glacier Trail transports backpackers through sublime mountain scenery to the vicinity of Gannett Peak, Wyoming’s highest summit.

Colorado offers several Rocky Mountain highs with three classic high-altitude trips. The Trappers Lake–Devils Causeway Loop explores an immense and beautiful alpine plateau, visits dramatic cliff-backed lakes, and traverses a narrow ridge crest in one compact loop. The Four Pass Loop makes a stunningly scenic circuit around the picture-

postcard Maroon Bells outside of Aspen. The final backcountry trip follows one of the highest and most scenic extended stretches of the entire Continental Divide Trail through the magnificent San Juan Range.

From wherever you live, these guides are designed to help you plan a once-in-a-lifetime backpacking trip to the premier routes in the western states. An attempt has been made to choose the majority of trips as ones that can be done roughly within a nine-day window, fitting conveniently within a traditional workweek bookended by weekends. This time frame usually includes a day each way for travel to and from the trailheads from most points within the United States.

We begin by helping you identify the top hikes in each of the three states. From there, all the aspects of planning a trip are covered, including travel; acquiring gear, lodging, and food; campgrounds near the trailheads; and any local outfitters serving the area, in case you prefer such service. Also highlighted for each trip is a section for any must-see attractions close by that could be easily incorporated into your adventure. Information is provided to help you navigate regulations and permits specific to each locale. Along with the customary technical data pertinent to each trip, any particular concerns or warnings are highlighted as well. Every attempt has been made to provide an accurate, up-to-date description of each individual hike. Unlike what is the case for some other guides on the market, we as authors have walked every mile of the trails described herein. We feel confident that you have the complete information you need to plan and carry out any of these trips of a lifetime.

Along with all the previously mentioned details, short, historical highlights for most of the areas have been included for your enjoyment in the hope that they will increase your appreciation for the areas themselves and for the people who were instrumental in their discovery or protection.

Lastly, personal vignettes accompany most trips as well. Hopefully, they will inspire and encourage you to, as John Muir so eloquently stated, “Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds blow their

own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn.”

### **Trail Etiquette, Wilderness Ethics, and Safety**

We presume that the vast majority of people holding this book and contemplating a longer backpacking trip into the magnificent wilds of the American West already have (or should have) considerable experience with lugging around a heavy pack and the associated risks and responsibilities. (If not, *please* pick up a good how-to book on the subject and get some experience with a hiking club in your area and/or take several shorter overnight adventures before setting out on any of the trips described herein.) Thus, this obligatory section on how to keep yourself safe and the wilderness unblemished by your visit will be kept short and to the point.

In their basic form, wilderness ethics are very simple and really nothing more than commonsense principles: be light on the land (ideally nobody should even be able to tell you were there), and be courteous to other users. In practice, this means being respectful of other users and following all of the “Leave No Trace” principles to ensure that the land is undamaged by your presence. So,

- Always camp in designated sites or on harder surfaces (*not* meadows) that can accommodate a tent without being damaged.
- Never cut switchbacks.
- Build only small campfires and only in areas permitted by local or seasonal regulations. Always use a backpacking stove for cooking, which is far more efficient than cooking over an open fire.
- Never feed wildlife.
- Never use any type of soap (even biodegradable soap) in any natural water source.
- Pack out *all* of your own litter (even biodegradable egg shells and the like) and pick up any litter you find left behind by others.
- Be quiet, inconspicuous, and respectful both on the trail and in camp, as to not impact the wilderness experience of others.

- Allow horse users the right of way by stepping off the trail on the downhill side.
- Report to land managers any major problems such as trail wash-outs, trashed-out hunter's camps, illegal ATV damage, or animal encounters.

In other words, be a good wilderness citizen. The land and other trail users will greatly appreciate it.

You also, of course, need to keep your safety in mind. Safety issues specific to particular hikes, such as camp-raiding bears, lack of water, and extreme heat are covered in the introductory material or trail descriptions for the individual trips. As for more general safety concerns,

- Never drink water, no matter how clear it looks, without purifying it first. (At least one of the authors has had giardia, and he wouldn't wish the experience on his worst enemy).
- Fully acclimate yourself before setting off on a long trip in the high elevations of the mountains or elsewhere.
- Be cognizant of the weather and avoid high ridges and mountain peaks during the afternoon, when thunderstorms are common in the mountains.
- Be especially careful when you are hiking in areas with unstable footing—loose boulders, small pebbles, icy patches, or similar obstacles. When you are twenty or more miles from your car, even a relatively minor injury can develop into a life-threatening situation.
- Hypothermia is the number-one danger to hikers in the American West. So dress in noncotton layers, stay dry, eat plenty of high-energy snacks, and know the warning signs to look for so you can avoid this common killer.

Most important, exercise plenty of that often rarest of commodities, common sense. In other words, steer clear of anything that a disinterested third party might uncharitably describe as “stupid.” If you do that, and have along the necessary gear and experience, you are much more likely to come back safe and sound and have a comfortable and enjoyable trip.

## Using This Guide

We intend for this guide to be used primarily by backpackers with at least some experience under their belts, as weeklong excursions are the focus of the trips selected for inclusion. As previously stated, beginning or highly inexperienced backpackers should become proficient at the activity on overnight outings before attempting any of the much-more-lengthy trips described here. For more information about backpacking, plenty of resources are available. Many cities have local hiking groups, community colleges, or outdoor retailers offering clinics and outings. An excellent book for basic backpacking is *Joy of Backpacking: Your Complete Guide to Attaining Pure Happiness in the Outdoors*, by Brian Beffort. *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills*, published by the Mountaineers, is a technical guide about mountain climbing but contains a great deal of useful information about traveling in the backcountry.

Since backpacking is considered a rigorous physical activity, participants should be in excellent physical shape. Anyone with a lifestyle of lying on a couch all day watching television and eating Twinkies should not expect to be able to suddenly rise up and accomplish even the easiest trip in this guide. The level of enjoyment one experiences on the trail will be directly proportional to one's level of physical fitness. Additionally, some of the trips require advanced skills, such as the ability to navigate cross-country, or the possibility of using an ice axe on steep, snow-covered slopes. Pay close attention to the difficulty ratings and the reason for them when evaluating the suitability of a particular trip.

Following each trip's introduction, important information will be listed and a brief explanation follows.

**Days:** A suggested number of days required to comfortably hike each trip is listed. This number is for the average hiker; some people will want to take more time and others less. Since all of these trips are located in spectacularly scenic areas, certainly more time could be spent enjoying the scenery. On the other

end of the hiking spectrum, ultralight backpackers in excellent shape could surely accomplish these trips in much less than the recommended time.

**Distance:** Every attempt has been made to record the cumulative distances for each trip accurately, though you may find minor variances from time to time.

**Type:** This entry lists the nature of each hike. Loop trips start and end at the same trailhead. Shuttle trips start at one trailhead and end at a different trailhead, requiring either two vehicles or being dropped off at the beginning trailhead and subsequently picked up at the ending trailhead.

**Scenery:** As to be expected with trips of a lifetime, all of the ones in this guide are highly scenic. On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), we have made a very subjective rating of the trips relative to each other. More than likely, some readers may have a difference of opinion.

**Solitude:** Similar to the scenery category, we have listed the potential for solitude on each trip. Similarly, this is a subjective evaluation and may vary from one's own experience. Some people may inadvertently end up on a trip with a high solitude rating at the same time as a group of 50 Boy Scouts.

**Technical Difficulty:** Another subjective evaluation on a scale of 1 to 10, this entry attempts to evaluate factors such as condition of the trail, degree of navigation required, stream crossings, lack of water sources, sections of cross-country travel, whether or not the use of an ice axe may be required, etc., to determine the overall technical difficulty of each route.

**Physical Difficulty:** Similar to the previous category, we determined how physically demanding each trip might be, taking into account factors such as elevation change, trail grade, altitude, and daily mileage.

**Elevation Gain/Loss:** The cumulative elevation gain and elevation loss for the entire trip is listed here.

**Season:** This listing indicates the average time of year when the trail is open for travel.

**Best:** The optimum time within the open season when conditions are usually at their peak.

**Maps:** For most trips, the USGS 7.5-minute quadrangles are typically the best maps for backcountry travel, and they are listed here. Additionally, other maps, from public or private sources, may be equally as helpful, or more so, and are also noted where applicable.

**Resources:** If additional resources are available that are helpful for background information or trip planning, they are listed under this heading.

**Contacts:** The appropriate government agencies overseeing the public lands for each trip and their contact information are noted.

**Permits:** Necessary permits and how to obtain them appear under this category. National and State Parks usually require an entrance fee. Some areas do not require backcountry permits, others can be self-issued at trailheads or ranger stations, and still others require quite a bit of effort to obtain. We have provided all the pertinent information and necessary resources to aid in this quest.

**Regulations:** Along with permits, many agencies have specific requirements for backcountry travel. As noted in the section on Backcountry Ethics and Trail Courtesy, great care and respect should be given to the lands being used. Sometimes this will match the specific regulations listed here, and sometimes they will be exceeded by the standards of minimum-impact guidelines.

**Nearest Campground:** For those parties wishing to camp at a developed campground, either before or after a backpacking trip, campgrounds closest to the trailhead appear under this heading.

**Nearest Airport:** The closest international airport to the trailhead is noted here, with mileages to the trailheads. Closer municipal airports with commercial service are also listed.

**Nearest Outdoor Retailer:** In case backpacking equipment needs to be purchased or rented, the closest outdoor retailers appear here with mileages from trailheads.

**Outfitter:** For groups desiring to be guided on their backcountry adventure, appropriately licensed outfitters appear under this heading with contact information included. A wide range of services is oftentimes available, from simply dropping supplies at a prearranged destination to hauling gear and patrons and providing all meals.

**Transportation Logistics:** This category is for any specific concerns regarding transportation to and from the trailheads, including lengthy car shuttles, car rentals, public transportation options, and road conditions.

**Backcountry Logistics:** Symbols will highlight any potentially significant concerns you may need to prepare for on each trip. A = altitude, BB = black bears, GB = grizzly bears, FF = flash floods, H<sub>2</sub>O = waterless sections of trail, L = lightning, N = navigation may be required, PI = poison ivy, R = rattlesnakes, Sn = possible snow-covered slopes, St = stream crossings, Su = sun, Tc = ticks, W = inclement weather, XC = cross-country sections. Any additional concerns for safe backcountry travel will be noted in this section. If applicable, special conditions will be noted.

**Amenities and Attractions:** Since the focus of this guide is on vacation backpacking trips, we have included this section, which highlights things of note in some of the communities and natural areas closest to the trailheads. Lodging, dining, special attractions, great day hikes, and other activities are highlighted for those interested in the addition of a more civilized touch to their backcountry adventure.

**Directions to Trailhead:** Accurate directions are given to all trailheads.

**Trip Description:** Constituting the main part of each backpacking trip is the trail description, which should be both accurate and up to date.

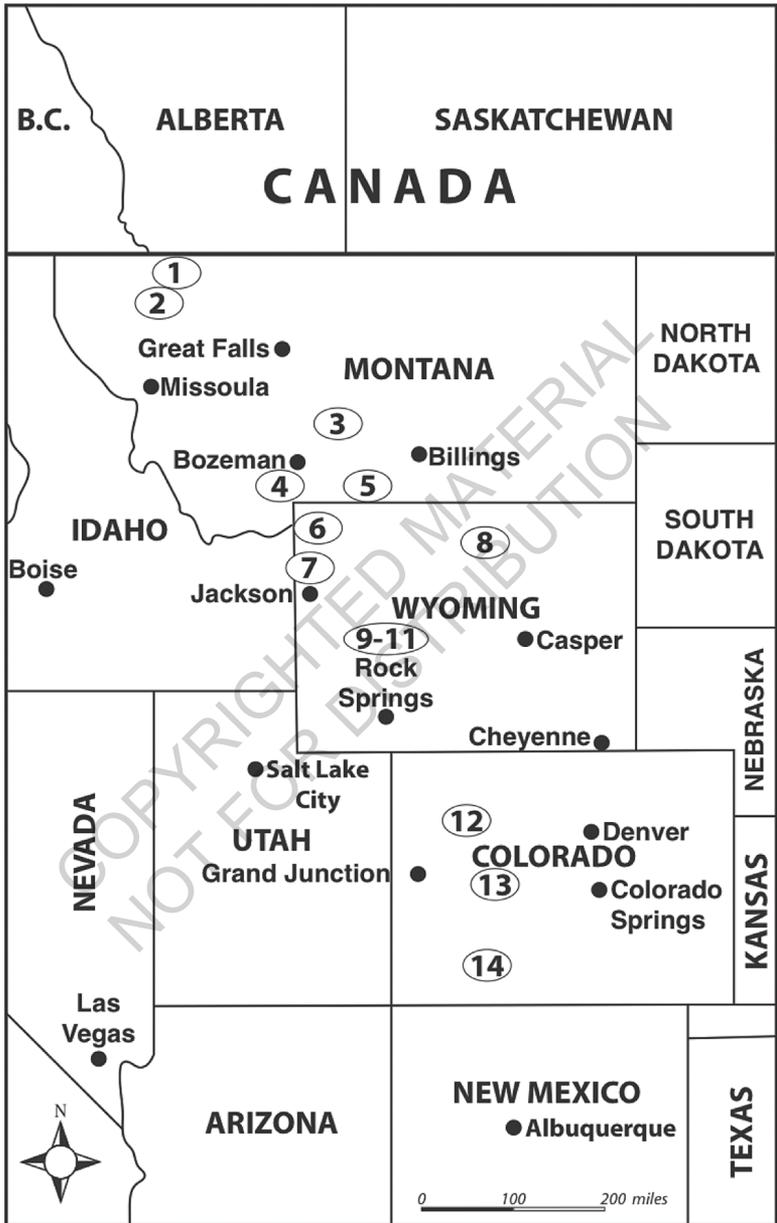
**Possible Itinerary:** Following each description is a possible itinerary with corresponding mileages and elevation figures. These itineraries are meant to be suggestions only. Undoubtedly, other plans may be equal to or better than these suggestions. However, feel free to follow our suggested itineraries if they fit your needs.

**Alternates:** If appropriate, an alternative route may be suggested, in case, for whatever reason, plans do not work out for a specific trip.

**Giving Back:** The backcountry of the West is a very special resource, more than worthy of our care and consideration. For those who want to give something back, we have listed an organization involved in efforts to preserve and protect an area.

Map Legend	
	Featured Trail
	Secondary Trail
	Cross-country Route
	Boundary
	Backcountry Campsite
	Developed Campsite
	Trailhead
	Parking
	Mountain
	Fee Entrance Station
	Ranger Station
	Visitor or Information Center
	Picnic Area
1140'	Elevation
	Distance Between Points
	Point of Interest
	Interstate Highway
	Federal Highway
	State Highways

Map Legend



Area Map Showing the Trips