

Paddling Trip to Shoshone Lake, Yellowstone National Park, July, 2012

by Chip Walsh

Maybe you've seen Ken Burn's documentary on National Parks, and you've been thinking it's about time to visit or revisit some of the parks. Or, if you will be heading west for other reasons, like I did in 2012, a stop in the parks is a great way to break up a long trip. How about Yellowstone or Grand Teton? Perhaps you'd like to go, but have heard bad things about the summer crowds. I was there last July, and I can tell you, there were a lot of people in the National Parks last summer. But, what I didn't expect was how easy it was to get away from the crowds. All you need is something you already have, a boat! This article provides information that will help you launch a trip into these parks. Additionally, it provides a report of the particular trip I took in 2012.

Yellowstone has "backcountry" sites available on Shoshone and Yellowstone Lakes. Grand Teton has sites on Jackson, Leigh, and Phelps Lakes. With a boat, it is easy to get separation from the masses, which tend to cluster around paved roads. Each lake has its pros and cons, and you can read about them online or ask a ranger for advice when you get there. For my trip, I choose Shoshone Lake because it has a manageable scale, and I knew there wouldn't be any powerboats there.

To camp on the lakes, you will need to go to a backcountry permit office to get a permit for your trip. There is usually a back country permits office in park visitor centers. There's no fee for the backcountry permits, so backcountry camping is a cheaper and more desirable way to spend nights in the parks. You can reserve sites on-line for a \$25 reservation fee. The parks always hold back sites for walk-ins, so only reserve if there is a special site you want or you know you will be unable to get to a permit office early in the day.



Chip Walsh at the confluence of the Lewis River with Lewis Lake
photograph by the Canoe Guys

Consider book-ending your boat trip with lodging or camp sites the nights before and after. After arrival, this will give you time to get oriented, draw your permits and arrive at the boat launch the next day ready to go. The road-serviced campgrounds often fill up on summer nights. You can reserve ahead through a park concessionaire or look for day-of camp sites. A portion of camp sites are left unreserved and are available on a first-come, first-served basis. If you go without reservations, get your camp sites early in the day. That's hard to do when you are returning from a trip on the lakes, so you might want to have a spot reserved for the night you return.

If you are not packing your boat along for the trip (Mistake! Rethink. There're lots of places to paddle on the way), you can rent from outfitters outside the park. There are no kayak rentals available within the parks. If you bring your boat, you need to deal with Wyoming's policies designed to thwart invasive species. The boats need to be cleaned inside and out since the last time they were used in any areas where invasive species have been identified. If you are coming from the east, assume your boat will need to be cleaned. En route to the Park consider stopping at a car wash that has those high pressure wands to clean your boat. You need to register (\$10 at the permit office), self-certify the boat is clean, and put a \$15 sticker (from the marina) on your boat. Also, they give

you a placard to put in your windshield that says the boats are clean. See <http://www.nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/ans.htm> for details.

Okay, you've arrived, chosen a lake, drawn your permit, applied your registration sticker, and arrived at your launching point. Now you have to pack your gear into your boat. If you are a regular kayak camper, you will know what to do. If not, I suggest you do a practice loading before you arrive that way, you will know what fits, and where it fits, in the boat.

Special Situations

Bears. If you listen to the rangers, you will, probably rightfully, develop a healthy respect for bears. I practiced strategies for avoiding bears (make noise, keep a clean camp), but I was so unnerved by the rangers' warnings that I coughed up \$50 dollars for some bear spray. I thought I was being gouged, but it turns out those bear sprays are expensive. Thankfully, the only bears I saw were from the car on the side of the road. Most of the camp sites have some sort of bear-feeding avoidance devices. At a mountain-top camp site in Grand Teton NP, there were heavy steel lockers for securing food. On Shoshone Lake, sites had a beam mounted 25 feet high between two trees (hint: you need 50-feet of rope to string up your vittles from these high beams).

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– Chip Walsh

Yellowstone Lake is cold, even in summer, and rarely unfreezes before the end of May. I was there in late July, and Shoshone Lake's water temperature was cool but tolerable. You'll want to be prepared for the water temperature in the lake you select at the

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time you are there. Find out about the water temperatures and prepare accordingly.

Yellowstone is perhaps most famous for its thermal springs and geysers. On a summer day, literally thousands of people will be visiting the well know attractions. But there are also active geothermal features at some areas on the lakes. At the geyser basin I visited on Shoshone Lake, I was the only person there. Thermal basins can be dangerous. Occasionally people break through the crust of earth and fall into scalding hot water. This can be avoided by following established trails, so if you are going to visit one of these areas make sure to find out where to access the established trail.

On the way to Shoshone Lake, I had to hike up the shallows of the Lewis River while dragging my kayak behind me. The current was quick, and the river bottom was 6-inches to 2-foot boulders. If your trip includes a river hike, consider appropriate foot wear. While walking over an uneven bottom through moving water, walking sticks helped me maintain my balance and keep from falling. There were few decent walking sticks to be found along the Lewis River, so I suggest acquiring sticks before you get there. Most trips don't require a river walk, but if yours does, be prepared.



Shoshone Lake shoreline at camp site
photo by Chip Walsh

Notes on my trip to Shoshone Lake

I paddled solo from the boat launch at Lewis Lake. The route crossed Lewis Lake and ascended the Lewis River. I had a permit for a primitive campsite on the north shore of the "Narrows" section of the lake. It broke down to about an hour crossing Lewis Lake, about an hour paddling up the river, about an hour towing my boat up the last portion of the river, and about an hour to my permitted camp site. I spent another hour or two finding my site, which points out it is always good to have a safety margin of daylight.

Conditions on these mountain lakes can get as rough as out on the Chesapeake Bay, and it can happen in an instant. On my paddle out of Shoshone Lake, a wind came up in an instant, just like somebody flipped the switch on a huge fan. I'd been paddling placid water, then foot-plus height waves jumped up in about three minutes. I recalled reading that afternoon winds came up quickly on Yellowstone's lakes, but this was beyond my expectation for coming up quick, and it was morning.

I hadn't found specific information on the geyser basin at the west end of Shoshone Lake, and I paddled there. I don't know how extensive it is because I became afraid to get out and walk around much, recalling the warning about constantly changing conditions, break-through crust, scalding water, etc. I did find a bubbling fumarole right at the water's edge. A ranger later told me the features are more extensive, and there is a well worn trail through the features. I never saw it. The ranger said if you stayed on the trail, there was little danger of being boiled alive.



Shoshone Lake camp site indicated by an orange reflector
photo by Chip Walsh

It was about a six-mile paddle back to the Lewis River. There were a few other paddlers on the water. In all, I think I saw four boats. At the east end of the lake, I landed at the beach near where the river exits Shoshone Lake, ate a bit, strapped Tevas over my booties, and broke out my wading sticks. As is often the case, the trip downriver was much easier than the upriver trip. I sat on the stern of the kayak, facing the stern, and floated over the shallow swift water at the top end of the Lewis. Sitting on the stern made the bow lighter, so the current wouldn't sweep it around. I dangled my legs in the water to fend of rocks and used the pole in either hand to snub my way downriver. I only scraped one rock on the way down. It was amazing how quick this part of the trip went, at least in comparison to how long it had taken me to travel upriver.

When I came out onto Lewis Lake, the wind was howling. Naturally, it was not a helpful wind, basically southwest and coming at me from about my one o'clock to two o'clock. Waves were a foot and higher, but that just added interest to the paddle. I reached the launch with a mixture of sadness to be rejoining the summer crowds and relief to be out of the wind and finished the trip.

The Lewis Lake campground was full when I came off the lake, so I was glad to have paid up my campsite ahead of time. I'd talked to the campground host before I left, and he told me he had to chase people off my site prior to my return!

Chip Walsh is a member of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association, Inc. and paddles frequently with the Pier 7 Pirates. Chip was featured in the "CPA Paddler Profile" in the January-February 2013 edition of the Chesapeake Paddler. A longer trip report with more photographs is available online at <http://chipwalsh.org/GoWest12/Yel-Ss-Lake.html>. Information on Yellowstone, Shoshone and Lewis Lakes is available online from the National Park Service, <http://home.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/upload/3maps.pdf>.