

Robbed by an Indian Game Warden

By Steven Sweeney

Part 1: In Search of Bright Stars and Rainbows

The title of this article, although every bit as true as it is provocative, is still only one small part of tale filled overwhelmingly with the unexpected kindness of strangers. At its conclusion, I hope you deem it more than just a wild story worth the read, but also a vital guide through the West's most scenic landscapes, the best in free camping and the pinnacle of good eats and scenic trails. Even more I wish you are able to capture, just as I have, the irreplaceable value of adventure and, if but only for a moment, more deeply appreciate the storms which often reveal life's brightest stars and most vibrant rainbows.

Let us start at the beginning. Six months ago I suffered my first car accident. I was lucky to make it out unscathed, but my car, a 2015 Lexus CT200h or a Prius in a tuxedo more accurately described, did not. Thus began my search for a new vehicle and I aspired to find one that would fill my life with much the same excitement that hatchback hybrid had once so well provided. I decided on a retired Forest Service truck. A 2008 F-150 to be exact, which I outfitted with a steel commercial truck topper found on Facebook Marketplace for \$600. In the broader search for back wood excursions I thought, what better a stealth camper than this?

The purpose of this trip sought to achieve one's best conception of a healthy balance between work and play. In this spirit, I ventured last winter to create my own flooring agency. In other words, I represent a number of flooring manufacturers to flooring stores dispersed throughout the Mountain West. How many flooring stores could there be, you ask? Many more than you might ever imagine and in locations you might never expect. Part of what makes this career choice so fun is that it marries perfectly with my favorite pastime, exploration. I intended to visit a number of dealers throughout Eastern Washington, Idaho and Montana from an account list I had carefully curated over the course of the preceding months. Along the way I sought to fish some of America's most prominent waters and lay eyes on as many natural wonders as possible.

Whether it's spontaneously traversing desolate forest service roads, stopping at remote antique shops or trying all the flavored pies at some small-town market, I live to discover hidden gems in both wilderness and town. With this focus in mind, two questions primarily guide my compass. The first I ask of myself, the latter to near every new acquaintance I meet. Is there a scenic route to my destination? I regard highly the road less traveled and quality views. Next: Where's your favorite place to eat? With this in mind, one theme you'll quickly find consistent in my restaurant recommendations is an emphasis on value. I define value by the estimation of price versus quality.

This criterion applied, my love for a good old fashioned East Coast cheesesteak takes us to our first stop, historic Baker City, Oregon. As we all know, the key to a proper "Philly" is in the bread, and Philadelphia's on Campbell Street crafts their steaks with authentic Amoroso's rolls. My favorite combo is a wiz wit, extra onions and pepperoni (or a "Ronnie"). Adjacent to the restaurant you'll also find an attached bar with slots to break up the drive.

Lunch now in my rearview, this grand adventure had officially begun. Shooting for a destination somewhere near Richland, a slight anxiety about where I might sleep that evening steadily crept into mind. I pulled over and scrolled through a few reviews on *freecampsites.net*, but ultimately ended up in poorly lit parking stall tucked deep in the corner of the Southridge Sports Complex. Hops n Drops just a short walk away warmly welcomed me with a late-night beer.

It was in Richland that I found what I boldly declare to be the best BBQ in all of Eastern Washington, Baby J's located on Stevens Drive. The ribs and brisket were outstanding and the accoutrements on point, which included a notable southwest style beef chili. If on the other hand, you find yourself yearning for the fresh taste of ocean fare, Mi Lindo Nayarit in Pasco is worth the detour for their expertly crafted ceviches. Even still these two popular establishments find themselves in the shadow of what to me, has always been the main attraction of the Tri-Cities, the Spudnut Shop. Home of the famous potato donut and once featured on my favorite television show, Food Paradise.

In the spirit of taking the most scenic route, when heading from Tri-Cities to the Yakima Valley I recommend Route 240/Hwy 24 over the lacking views of I-82 through this section particularly, that is of course assuming you are not interested in wine tasting or driving the plentiful small town main streets scattered along the way. Should you indulge, you'll find worthy grounds for antique hunting. Rather, the northern route will guide you through a beautiful high desert valley before emerging into acres upon acres of hop fields, an impressive sight no matter the time of year, but especially during their late summer bloom. The floral aroma of Hwy 24 helps the observer more completely immerse themselves in this unparalleled beer heaven, as the Yakima Valley produces greater than two thirds of our nation's hops.

Something I learned about in detail straight from the mouth of a local hop farmer over an IPA at Old Town Pump Tavern in Union Gap, the oldest bar in the region and the only establishment on the West Coast to serve buffalo wings with sauce from Anchor Bar, the originator of this American staple. If this proposition still needs enticing, just next door at Los Hernandez you will find rare delight in James Beard Award winning pepperjack asparagus tamales.

My short time at The Pump would change my perspective on the Yakima Valley and its rich history in significant ways. I was fortunate enough to meet some local legends, each with an interesting story to tell. Friends like Jr. St. Aubin, owner of Fruit City, who on weekends boasts the most amazing tempura fried asparagus and pork belly tacos amongst a sea of the finest assortment in fresh fruits and vegetables.

More friends still like renown local artist Larry Miller who helped create some of the famous murals that adorn the buildings of nearby Toppenish. Larry has artwork displayed in many permanent and private collections throughout the Northwest including at the Yakima Valley Museum and the Yakama Nation Cultural Museum & Heritage Center. Over some wings, he shared about his fascinating life and friendship with other famous artists like Fred Oldfield, who he met in 1972 at the Bellevue Arts and Crafts Festival or Phil Kooser, most known for his works, "The Moving of Yakima" (a representation of the city's move from Union Gap to its current location in 1885) and "Celilo Falls" (a depiction of the Indian fishing grounds inundated by the Dalles Dam in 1957).

Living in the back of my retired Forest Service truck for going on a week now the natural stresses of finding a place to park each night were gently softened when I discovered the secret of casino camping. Not much of a gambler, I found casinos still a great option when on the road. Attentive security, complimentary wifi and even a free buffet by signing up for a player's card, one perk I took full advantage of as I made my temporary home with the Yakima Tribe at Legend's.

Yet it should be said this area's rich culinary offerings provide many reasons to venture from even greatest of casino buffets. One of these is Jeans Cottage Inn where you will find the pork chops a standout. Another is The Little Dutch Inn, a great value offering tender steaks for under \$20, complimented nicely with a side of sweet baked beans featuring diced onion and ground beef.

Upon a trip to the Yakima Nation Museum & Cultural Center I learned of the upcoming weekend's Pow-Wow, the first hosted since the pandemic. Without hesitation I decided it was an event I couldn't miss. Alas, after a fun filled weekend of intense dancing, smoked salmon, and the brightest and most intricate costumes imaginable, I reflected fondly on a cultural experience worthwhile and felt prepared to set off with a full heart to a wonder of creation I have always wanted to visit, Palouse Falls.

Accomplishing this with scenery in mind, I took Route 24 to Route 26. Situated between the Frenchman Hills to the north and the Saddle Mountains to the south, this itinerary continues to the Rattlesnake Flats region through some of the most beautiful of Palouse country. I really enjoyed the charming old west town of Kahlotus, a quiet remnant of time's past. Just south of Kahlotus down Devils Canyon Road on the crest of the Snake River you'll find Lower Monumental Dam, a great place to fish and camp. Continue just a bit further to the famous Palouse Falls, carved more than 13,000 years ago by the glaciers that once dominated the continent. In fact, it is among the last active waterfalls of the Ice Age floods path. Standing at a height of 198 feet and surrounded by striking basalt cliffs, the falls furiously empties the Palouse River upstream of its confluence with the Snake. To access this site which lies within a state park, you will need a Washington Discovery Pass.

Continuing west from the falls along Hwy 12 pleasantly leads to the town of Pomeroy where one is greeted with the unmistakable prominence of a large Victorian town hall that still serves as the capital of Garfield County. Onward still are the small neighboring cities of Clarkstown and Lewiston, entrance to the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and since 1958, home of Sharps Burger Ranch which boasts the best huckleberry milkshake in town. As it relates to car camping in this area, I have stayed the night in the parking lot of the Clearwater Casino and found it satisfactory, but later discovered a more preferable location in a small riverfront turnoff right after the junction of Hwy 3 and 12 at Gibbs Eddy boat launch. Should you find yourself here on a trip of your own, I left you a hefty pile of wood for an evening fire.

The land of the Nez Perce where Gibbs Eddy resides is every bit as grand as it is rich with the history of settler's past. The arduous journey of those early explorers is almost expressed in the peacefulness of the bountiful shade from the abundant forests that cradle the Clearwater River. After salmon fishing near the town of Orofino, I spent a few days at the Dworshak Dam, the third highest dam in the United States and the tallest vertical dam in the nation standing only 9 ft shy of Hoover. Here I was fortunate enough to camp next to a couple who also happened to breed Golden Retrievers, they brought their 6 pups whose energy could fill any heart with enough joy to last a lifetime. Among the many beaches are easily accessible coves for fishing but if you have a boat, I hear the Kokanee is plentiful. I recommend stopping by the visitor's center for a short informational video on the unique construction process and expansive resources it took the Army Core of Engineers to complete this impressive project.

Feeling refreshed and keeping sight on adventure, I set sail north on the Elk River Back Country Byway, a 57-mile forest service road that winds through the remote wilderness of North Central Idaho. This jaunt passes the Dent Bridge completed in 1971 and was once voted one of the most beautiful structures in America, until finally entering the serene town of Elk River. Here I was graciously welcomed by a resident Bald Eagle perched high in the tree tops above the Elk Creek Reservoir. Begun as a hunting resort in the late 1800's, Elk River eventually became a lumber town in 1909 when the Potlach Lumber Company purchased more than 4000 acres of timber. The town quickly grew when Potlach opened one of the largest electric-powered sawmills in the country.

Elk River has many attractions and in addition to my first eagle sighting of the year, it also gave me my first bear. After conquering Elk Creek Falls, a cascade of three prominent waterfalls and a hike a little more taxing than the park signs suggest, I made my way to Perkins Cedar Grove where sits Idaho's largest tree. A western red cedar

with a trunk 18 feet in diameter and 177 feet tall, estimated to be about 3,000 years old. It is here in a quaint valley just south of the old forest grove, in a field still littered with winter snow, a black bear ran across my plane only to stop and pose on a distant hill. En-route to this champion tree, you will find many quality free camping sites maintained by the National Forest Service. Looking for a shower? You'll find one in town for \$9 at the General Store. Be sure to accompany it with a filling meal and cheap beer at Tom's Tavern, locally famous for their fried chicken and large portions.

While enjoying some of this fine country chicken one evening I heard rumors of an even greater destination accessible from Elk River, a place called the Grandad Bridge located at the far north of the Dworshak Reservoir. This can be found by following the long and arduous Aquarius Road, a winding dirt path through desolate logged forests and mountain ridges. The journey took 3-hours and terminated at a free, first-come, first-serve campground with 10 premium waterfront sites. I found the trout fishing productive on this section of the reservoir and because of the difficulty in traveling here, true peace and quiet.

Whether coming or going, the nearby town of Deary hosts a wonderful bakery called The Pie Safe where you will find some of the best sweet indulgences anywhere. It is also on the way to the White Pine Scenic Byway which offers panoramic views of farm land, extensive forests, rivers, and mountains, and the largest stand of White Pine Trees in North America. I took this route to Heyburn State Park situated on the south shore of Lake Coeur d'Alene, just outside of the charming town of St. Maries, a steamboat hub in the earlier part of this century. Heyburn revealed itself to be a superior park for bikers and hikers alike with open views of wildflowers, marshlands and the iconic lake on which it sits.

A few additional mentions in this section of Idaho include Mary M McCroskey State Park, an often-overlooked free campground with outstanding mountain top views of the surrounding valley. Superior camping can also be found at Couer d'Alene Old Mission State Park, which spotlights the oldest building in Idaho. The Mission of the Sacred Heart was constructed between 1850 and 1853 by Catholic missionaries and members of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Cataldo Mission provides an educational experience not found anywhere else, giving visitors an opportunity to examine the dynamics and complexities between Jesuit missionaries and the tribal people among whom they settled.

The lake front city of Coeur d'Alene needs no introduction, but should you work up the craving for another great cheesesteak, Best Sandwich Shack will surely win your heart. I can personally validate their claim to the "best cheesesteak in Idaho". Located on Best Avenue in a food court packed with some of town's first-rate options like Blackhills BBQ and Raw Dead Fish, this is a destination in and of itself. If instead you are seeking to find a bite downtown during an evening shoreline stroll, I hear Moon Time furnishes a fine taco and corn pasta while Hudson's has been pumping out exceptional burgers since 1907, just remember, it's cash only.

When I am car camping in this area you can most likely find me at the far end of the Spokane Tribe Casino parking lot. In an effort to compete with their rivals the Kalispell Tribe who are finding raging success with their own massive property just down the street, Northern Quest Resort, the Spokane Tribe seems determined to pull out all the stops to share in the attention. For example, one has to ask how they could not be the best sports bar in town while exhibiting over fifty \$2 craft beer selections, ice cold, on tap. Yet the food is similarly impressive with giant butter drenched pretzels and queso or a delectable assortment of Hope's Cookies, the lemon cheesecake and white chocolate absolutely to die for.

In Rathdrum, Nadine's or the Westwood Pub are worthy dinner spots on the way to one of my favorite state parks in all of Idaho, Farragut. Located on the southern tip of Lake Pend Oreille, Idaho's largest and deepest lake,

Farragut State Park offers unique scenery and an abundance of recreational opportunities like a disc golf course, a radio-controlled airplane field, fishing, hiking, biking, equestrian facilities and a tangible piece of World War II history. If you have an off-road capable vehicle, take the journey on Forest Service Road 278 to a remote eatery called Cold Creek Lodge. The road is rough and sometimes treacherous but I hear the grub is worth the venture.

Part 2: The West and its Wild Wonders

It was about this time in my journey, now the better part of 3 weeks in, that I met a character who would become an integral part of the great adventure to come. As I was fishing the Blue Creek Bay Day Use Area I spotted a gentleman, about my age walking to the pit bathroom with his own toilet paper. For this was a sign I thought, he must be camping too! Sure enough, Cory had been on an excursion of his own, on a maiden voyage in his Hood River R-Pod parked in the mountains just north of Lake Fernan. Thus began a great friendship of likeminded, aspiring mountain men that would keep us both out in the wild another month at least.

Always wanting a compact travel trailer, this was also a great opportunity to see if the grass really was greener on the other side. The pros and cons of towing and many other lessons I would come to learn fishing and camping with Cory over the remainder of this saga. I have always been a rugged individualist, the very nature of this trip is one symptom of this identity, but deciding to camp with a partner takes a certain willingness to put one's own selfish tendencies aside. It forced me to work not as a sole explorer, but as part of a team. Cory made this easy. He showed me the importance of a good chainsaw and the luxury of a warm campfire. He was a leader and a bona-fide outdoorsman, always taking the opportunity to show me a new knot, a new fishing rig or share a general tip.

Near Coeur d'Alene lies one of the best amusement parks I've ever visited and folks, I've seen em' all. Part of this was the fact that a cool overcast day supplied us with the venue nearly to ourselves. I have never been much of a roller coaster fanatic, quite the opposite actually, always harboring a deep-seated fear of heights and a general dislike for the feeling of losing control. For context, Silverwood is the largest theme and water park in the Northwest, sitting on 413-acres, boasting greater than 70 rides, shows and attractions. This repertoire includes 7 roller coasters like Stunt Pilot and Aftershock, a metal monster which dominates the skies. At 191 feet, this beast is really two thrills in one, not only taking you forwards through a cobra roll and inverted loop, but backwards as well. I cannot describe the feeling of being hoisted over the horizon, face down, forcing me to fully trust the chest bars which enclosed my large body. I near thought I'd have a heart attack. Should you share these concerns, be relieved to find some nostalgia and a calmer loop on The Corkscrew, the world's first modern inverting coaster.

To think I almost didn't want to go, having to be persuaded and incentivized by Corey, a true park enthusiast and adrenaline junkie, to take the leap. Yet the rare opportunity to hop right back to the front of the line helped me adapt my apprehensions and by my 8th trip around, I began to truly embrace and appreciate that nervous feeling one might only get from an experience like this. I still think about my time at Silverwood to this day and it always brings an inadvertent smile.

Heading north you'll find the charming city of Sandpoint, unique in its stature at the junction of Lake and River Pend Oreille. I recommend the detour west on Hwy 2 to Priest Lake and one of my favorite attractions there, Granite Falls. To access the viewpoint, follow Hwy 57 on the west side of the lake until it turns into a gravel forest road and continue approx. 45 minutes to the Granite Creek Campground. I found the egress to the trail entrance still ridden with deep snow, but the result in all its fury well satisfied the extra effort to make it there.

On the banks of Priest Lake, you'll find plentiful fishing at Beaver Creek Campground near the base of Tule Bay in addition to unhindered views of the mountains. Some of the most pristine and peaceful beachfront sites can be reserved at Lion Head Campground, part of Priest Lake State Park, accessed out of Coolin. It is here at the north end of the lake where you'll find striking verandas evoking the majestic spirit of this place, best described by a friend who once told me Priest Lake gets its name from its black appearance, created by the reflection of the tall and thick firs which grace its shoreline. I can say with confidence, if the Holy Spirit does exist, I might hope one could find it here.

East of Priest Lake, Hwy 95 guides you to Bonners Ferry, a quaint little town rich in gold rush history and the path east through the Kootenai National Forest. Along the way is Kootenai Falls, a beautiful attraction which reminded me of what Celilo Falls must have been like (from Phil Kooser's depictions observed at the Yakima Museum of History just weeks earlier). A short roadside trail over railroad tracks and a bridge eventually opens to a grand panorama of this natural marvel and its creator, the mighty Kootenai River, running directly through the town of Libby just upstream.

Having now become an expert in seeking out Army Core of Engineer campgrounds, Cory and I directed our caravan just 13 miles north of town to the Libby Dam, at the mouth of Lake Koocanusa. Hundreds of free campsites line the entirety of the western side of the reservoir where a plethora of eagles also reside, making it a bird watching heaven excitable to even the most avid of spotters. To this point I even saw a rare Golden Eagle here, one of my favorite birds known for their aggressive nature and dominant profile. Lost in time we enjoyed greater than 2 weeks of fishing the mighty Kootenai and Yaak Rivers under the faithful watch of two brother Bald Eagles, ever patiently waiting for us to carelessly leave a carcass on the rocks. Each morning from the comfort of our tents we watched local guides drop their drift boats with clients eager for a fruitful take. Although I also saw many fly fisherman find success on this part of the river, we were rewarded handily with a float setup as the battle cry "bobber down" rang frequent into the night.

Forced to retreat from our riverside paradise a few days of the week for beer and supplies we pulled into the Libby Exxon one evening only to have our fate increase. Cory, driving a new Toyota Tacoma himself, began to admire another Tacoma waiting in the gas line. He yelled a compliment to the man filling the tank, who promptly introduced himself as Johnny. It turns out he was on an adventure of his own, heading towards Glacier and not knowing where he might camp that night. Without hesitation Corey and I bragged in jest about our premium riverside site and invited him to hang. Thankfully John agreed and we all quickly grasped the notion that he too would be a central part of the coming fun.

Johnny shared our sense of humor and passion for exploration. Never have I laughed so hard around a midnight fire. He too enjoyed disc golf and although not a self-proclaimed fisherman, very quickly became a frequent contributor to the dinner table. Trading lively stories and sharing congruent life aspirations, he like Corey, became a brother to me. A trip that I imagined at the start I would endure alone, now became one I could not imagine taking without these newfound friends.

The success of any venture for me was in whole measured against the sheer volume of rainbows, wildlife and bright constellations I could find. Like game hunters, storm chasers and star gazers we all sought to fulfill this common endeavor, and satisfy it we did, blessed with some truly spectacular shows casting a plethora of vivid palettes and a diverse array of creation. I've always found the fleeting nature of a rainbow's reveal its most special feature, forcing the audience to work and pause simultaneously for its gratification. Faithfully and gallantly emerging to ensure the perseverance of beauty in its purest form amidst even the roughest of storms. Many times over the walkie talkies we frequently used to communicate in the deep woods, I would hear my hiking partner's

calls to hurry up trail for this divine show of colors. Always being last in the group on long hikes and generally a slow trotter, I waited eagerly to hear of their sightings of a clear double arch or giant beast just ahead.

We found all of this and more in North Western Montana. But before I leave you with an impression of Libby even the most enthusiastic of outdoorsman could not overstate, see a few recommendations for the record. At Libby Sports Center you will find an excellent selection of sporting goods at reasonable prices and at Fix Coffee Shop fresh bagels in the morning. Steins Grocery Store in Troy will reward with the best in fresh baked breads and an impressive collection of big game mounts which once earned it a feature in Field and Stream Magazine. Finally, should you have a rainy day which calls for a cold beer, the Lake Koocanusa Resort half way up the reservoir's eastern shore is charming enough.

When heading to Glacier National Park, one could easily overlook the added value of taking the alternative route, the Lake Koocanusa Scenic Byway (Hwy. 37). This runs adjacent to the reservoir north to the mountain town of Eureka, which sits perched in a scenic valley just shy of the Canadian border. Near city center awaits two noteworthy lunch spots, Café Jax a local staple and The Front Porch, home of the Montana Huckleberry Burger, adorned with none other than a giant scoop of homemade ice cream. Sounds gross I know, but I promise it is a culinary treat equally delicious as it is odd. After hitting the tackle shop, spend an hour at the Historic Village Museum located just outside of town.

From Eureka, Hwy. 93 follows the towering profile of the great Northern Rockies. For \$50 you can purchase an annual Non-Resident Montana State Parks Pass and enjoy camping at either of the Stillwater Lakes (upper and lower) or Whitefish Lake State Park, a beautiful option with abundant opportunity for recreation. Adventure awaits still if you continue on to Columbia Falls where lies access to North Fork Road (Forest Road 486) which continues up the North Fork of the Flathead River to the old west town of Polebridge. The Mercantile here is revered for their Huckleberry Bear Claws, which compete for Montana's finest pastry against exceptional offerings from other world class bakeries like Fleur of Whitefish and Cerés of Kalispell.

We decided to camp down an offshoot of Forest Road 486 called McGuinness Creek, in the shadow of what we comically labeled the "Fairbanks Trailer", an abandoned camper on a prominent mountainside ridge. Here we thought about the final destination of another hero of ours, Christopher McCandless (Into the Wild). We made the most of our time before moving to Big Creek Campground just north, where we encountered Pam, the most wonderful camp host I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. So kind and accommodating was she that we ended up staying for the better part of 2 weeks, roasting marshmallows under the careful gaze of that big sky which makes Montana so famous. The river which runs through the park still raging from this year's late snow made it too fast to fish successfully, but this would certainly be a spot hard to beat late summer.

At Big Creek we would also meet Adam, a Montana native and avid outdoorsman. Full of knowledge on the surrounding areas and generous enough to point us in the right direction of huckleberries, moose, bear, elk, sheep and goats which seemed to make frequent appearances if sometimes I thought, just for us. He and his lovely wife were also excellent chefs, one night sharing their own version of vegan sushi which left our stomachs prepared for the coming days filled with long hikes and wildlife hunts.

Finally, as if Big Creek could not be any more attractive, it serves as the gateway to three other notable destinations. First to the Camas Road Entrance to Glacier National Park, sometimes referred to as "the local's entrance" as we found the ranger station rarely occupied. Second, to the North Fork section of the park where rest Kintla and Bowman Lakes, side trips highlighted by phenomenal views and fishing. Third, a pot hole laden forest service road leading to Moose Lake, where we found miniature Whitefish abundant. En-route one early

morning we did indeed see a formidable bull moose dart across our path, making this near 20 mile in and out excursion worth all the while.

Paddle-boarding and enjoying the sanctity of this high elevation campground, we met Boyd and Vicki Bjorn, a golden age couple who shared our love for wild flowers and mushrooms. Their stories recounting mule rides across Red Meadow Lake and sketchy mountain passes bagging sometimes hundreds of pounds of Morels, brought to mind our own fruitful digs near Kellogg and the importance of preserving this special paradise for generations to come.

The western portion of Glacier National Park offers many attractions and a diverse array of trails. Here you will find broad panoramas of the mountains which reveal to the observer the sheer expanse of the range. At nearby Apgar Village there is ample accommodation, quaint shops and a reasonable selection of dining. A 12 pack of PBR's will run you approximately \$20, not much more than the local Exxon, snacks and gear are a similarly good value. In addition, the visitor center hosts the most ranger sponsored activities in the park.

One thing I enjoyed about my travel partners was our shared passion for attending ranger presentations, treating each day like a new chance to seize it with purpose. We attended near every interpretive walk in all areas of Glacier, but one of the most memorable for me was on tree identification. Curated by Park Ranger Lee, a former practitioner of environmental law, the walk was presented in such a way that made it easy to absorb the vast wealth of knowledge our guide had to offer. For instance, when discerning between Lodgepole and Western White Pines, Ranger Lee taught us to observe the needle clusters which reveal their maker. Accordingly, Lodgepoles have groupings of two needles shaping an L, and Western White Pines have 5 needle clusters, forming 2 W's. Cleverly, Tamaracks can be remembered by the trick "too many" (as in too many to count). The ranger's passion and obvious enthusiasm for the wonders of phenology was contagious and she inspired us to challenge ourselves further.

I found great interest in the differing character of the forests west of the Continental Divide as opposed to those in the east. Some of these observations stood apparent on Trail of the Cedars, a cool 1-mile loop through an old growth cedar grove which also serves as the entrance to Avalanche Lake. Adding to the serenity you'll find deer more ample in this section than any other. One night at dusk we packed a cooler for a casual stroll. Having the place near to ourselves, we were visited with group after group of young felt bucks, 9 in total over a 2-hour period. So enamored were we by their inquisitive attitudes that when we arrived at the campground gate later in the evening we realized we were not only the last car there, but locked in. Shortly thereafter met with the headlights of the campground host who hastily freed us only to bear the news that due to construction on Going to The Sun Road, we were trapped in the park until early morning. Laughing all the while we made the best of the situation by exploring historic Lake McDonald Lodge. I even helped Johnny haul his kayak to the hotel dock and off he paddled into the night, able to enjoy the water all to himself.

The following day we sought to hike a flat 10 miles in-and-out up the west side of Lake McDonald. Leaving from Fish Creek this trail eventually leads to a small peninsula with a few primitive campgrounds and a rocky beach hosting unbeatable views. If you find the distance off-putting, the short walk to Rocky Point along the same trail head is your quintessential bang for buck vantage. In my own journey, now averaging near 30 miles per week, my company was motivating me to push my own physical limits. Many times, we would wander far beyond our intended destination, Johnny trekking in Rainbow Sandals and Cory soldiering on with a sore foot helped me deal with my own fatigue. I knew I had no room to complain but most importantly, discovered the immense benefit of hiking with positive people who sought to encourage me at every turn. Their motivational cheer cannot be understated in accomplishing this personal endeavor to truly go the distance.

This training would come in handy on my summit of Columbia Mountain, proving bar none to be the most challenging hike of my life. A brutal 12+ mile tour with a total elevation gain/loss of close to 9,000 feet. I began the trail promptly at 8AM. It was a cruel roller coaster for the first 2 miles before gradually increasing inclines became the standard, made additionally arduous by a large rut which ran dead center through the path for almost half the entirety of its distance. By the time I'd traversed the topside ice fields, my hiking group had already been at the summit for over an hour. When I finally arrived, they greeted me with an excitement that made it seem like we were all experiencing this majestic scenery for the first time together. And what a remarkable view it was brandishing vantages extending all the way from the Flathead Valley to Glacier National Park, from the Bob Marshall Wilderness to the Whitefish Range. When I finally did reach the parking lot, the last man to exit the mountain, it was nearly dark. I felt a deep relief and pride unlike any I had experienced thus far and like a song on repeat, this verse from Timothy kept coming to mind... "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

After a day of rest and a night at the Blue Moon Rodeo in Columbia Falls, we decided it was time to move on to the east side of the park, a wholly different but even more impressive section which takes the hiker directly into the heart of the mountains. Base camp was setup in the Lewis and Clark National Forest near the Marias Pass Obelisk as it would put us close to Two Medicine, St. Mary's and Many Glacier. On the way sits Goat Lick Overlook, an easy place to spot one of nature's most elusive creatures. I recommend you follow the paved path to its end and hop the fence, climbing uphill to the overpass where you should find a family of mountain goats relaxing in the shade. One behavior you might observe and the origins of this attraction's namesake is the licking of cliffside rocks or even gravel by both sheep and goats seeking to replenish minerals like salt which can be lacking in their alpine habitat.

Years ago, the National Park Service stocked lakes like Two Medicine and Swiftcurrent with sport fish to encourage tourism. Yet contrary to their intentions, ecologists have since learned this practice has had an adverse effect. Newly introduced species like Mackinaw quickly out-reproduced and out-competed the native fish for limited resources. In a concerted effort to curtail this trend and restore balance to their respective ecosystems, limits have since been lifted on certain fisheries. Proceeding with conservation in mind, we aimed and succeeded in catching large numbers. Well-armed with gold spoons and a Bill Dance ultralight I soon began to think I was a half way decent fisherman, landing nearly every breed my trusted regulations guide indicated should be present.

Just as Two Medicine provided abundant quantities of fish, St. Mary's was rich in wildlife. In the first two viewing exhibits for example, we frequently observed grizzlies, herds of elk and black bear, one of whom would faithfully descend to Rising Sun Campground to dig for bugs and berries each dusk. The hikes to Virginia Falls and Otokumi Lake are my top two recommendations in this section. While trekking back from the former we encountered the rapid onset of dark clouds and fierce thunder. Sure enough, within mere moments of finding Cory's passenger seat a hail storm of record proportions began to rain from the sky. A vitriolic bombardment lasting almost 20 minutes ensued, intense enough to make the national news the following day.

Above St Mary's is Many Glacier, well considered to be the heart of the park. Here sits the Many Glacier Hotel, built by the Great Northern Railway in 1914 and situated on the shores of Swiftcurrent Lake. Red Bus Tours, boat cruises, horseback rides and numerous other activities are available at this spectacular setting. You will also find a substantial presence of Moose. We viewed a large bull wading in the cool marsh in the north of Lake Josephine and another two near their namesake, Bullhead Lake. Finally, I encourage you to take every chance to soak up the frequent ranger talks offered at Many Glacier. Of them, my favorite was a Wildflower Walk where we all were

able to confirm the diverse array of flora we had dedicated countless trail hours to memorizing in the weeks prior. With a new found confidence in my ability to survive off the land, I endeavored to hike it all.

In order to secure ready access to all 3 of these park entrances we decided to setup a new camp on a ridge overlooking St. Mary's Lake just outside the park entrance. Over the course of this adventure, just as in this moment, we used an app called GIAI, a cheaper version of Onyx to differentiate between private and public land. With our map showing us in neutral territory, we enjoyed the pristine views of our scenic mountainside and reveled in the luck of having found the perfect site.

It was at this time that John left us to return home to teach special education in Arizona. His patience, positivity and hilarious jokes were sorely missed.

Part 3: Robbed by an Indian Game Warden

One early Sunday morning Cory and I awoke to chop some fire wood high on the forest crest. While doing so we were greeted with the sweet song of birds and 3 black bears from not 30 yards away, a mother and two cubs. Like the Berenstains they hopped along on two feet, almost as if to wave hello before quickly scurrying down the hill. Tired and satisfied we drove back to camp only to find a Blackfoot Indian game warden waiting for our return. Pulling up we could not imagine what had instigated the contact.

We exited the truck as did Deputy Spotted Eagle who informed us we were camping on Indian land and vehemently demanded to see our camping permit. Taken back by the aggressiveness of his tone but exercising extreme politeness in return, we acknowledged the root of our misunderstanding and displayed our map which clearly indicated we were camping on USA land. The officer quickly dismissed our claims, paying us no consideration whatsoever, and then pursued a shocking course of action. He informed us he would be issuing us each citations totaling \$600 (\$500 for lack of a Blackfoot Camping Permit and \$100 for lack of a Conservation Permit), but it didn't end there. Warden Spotted Eagle then demanded we follow him to an ATM to satisfy the whole of the levied charges on the spot, in cash, or he was to take the equivalent value in collateral. This sent chills down my spine, we were being extorted.

I pleaded with the warden explaining I did not have \$600 to pay him but would happily address these allegations in Tribal Court. I agreed to follow the proper recourse as my right to due process allowed, but this only aggravated him further. Spotted Eagle then proceeded to rob us both at gunpoint. As if in an episode of Westworld, he confiscated Cory's new solar panels and STIHL chainsaw before turning his attention to me. Ravaging my vehicle, he forcefully removed over \$1000 in goods including those I had relied upon to feed myself over the duration of our trip like my fishing poles, tackle bag containing all my licenses, and power bank. Amidst my respectful protest to both the illegal confiscation and exceeding value of the collateral taken, he persisted undeterred with his scheme.

During this time and recognizing in the moment the inappropriateness of the officer's actions I stepped to the side and dialed 911. My call was directed to the emergency center in Browning, capital of the Blackfoot Nation, and answered by an Indian dispatcher who told me she was aware of the contact and directed me to comply. I then called the Glacier County Sheriff to no avail, this calamity conveniently initiated on a Sunday. I felt angry and hopeless, but taking cues from one of my favorite YouTube Channels "*Audit the Audit*", I remained silent and courteous.

When the robbery was complete, Cory explained to Spotted Eagle that being in need of both his panels and saw, he would reluctantly go with the officer to the nearest money machine. So in close pursuit, on we went to St.

Mary's Grocery where Cory made two transactions to satisfy his demands. We were told not to return and that should I fail to address these allegations in court, a warrant would be promptly issued for my arrest. Warden Spotted Eagle then returned to Cory his belongings, and departed with an arrogant grin.

Sitting in shock at the events which had just transpired, defeated and depressed we hastily moved camp up the road to Chewing Blackbone, a paid resort located on the shore of Lower St. Mary's Lake. The following day I called the Glacier National Park Police who informed me that my experience, however unfortunate, left me with little recourse. The attending officer almost comically responding, "consider this your donation to the Blackfeet Tribe". I then again called the Glacier County Sherriff. This time I spoke to Donna who informed me like the Park Police had earlier, that the Blackfoot Fish and Game were notorious for these transgressions but she too was short on advice. Donna did however provide me with the contact information for a local lawyer with dual jurisdiction (Thane Johnson), out of Kalispell. Thane revealed in our conversation he too was personally familiar with this deputy in particular and currently litigating a case involving a local hunter, who when en-route to his paid lease, allegedly crossed Indian land and saw his guns confiscated. This hunter made the brave decision to challenge this injustice but like he, to fight required a lengthy process and retainer beyond my capability. It is fair to say we appeared quite simply put, out of luck.

Determined still we continued to tell our story to anyone who might hear us, and as it would turn out, destiny was listening. On our second night at Chewing Blackbone we met a young Indian lady camping at a site nearby with her family. After a brief conversation and a cold beer, she invited us to spend the rest of the evening with them. Sitting on that lakeshore and after a few jokes we explained the sore taste left with us by the weekend's events. Suddenly the matriarch of their family, a kind and wise grandmother emerged from her tent. Sympathetic to our cause, she humbly informed us she would make a call. A call she did make to a close family member who also happened to be on the Blackfoot Tribal Counsel. She informed me my best course of action was to file a formal complaint, something I attempted with no success as all involved refused to hear me. Undeterred but still understandably frustrated, we resolved to visit the court the following day.

The next morning we made another fateful acquaintance while emptying the trash. A worker at the campground happened to be making his rounds when we engaged in friendly conversation about the best in nearby fishing spots. Again and on cue, we told of our tribulations with Warden Spotted Eagle. This gentleman then made a suggestion which came with impeccable timing, just up the road and at this very moment he explained, there happened to be a group of Fish and Game wardens repairing a battered fence. Among them was a man named John Horn who might be able to help us further.

Without hesitation we went to confront John. He struck me on first impression as a kind and reasonable man. Luckily, he was also receptive to our story and just as the wonderful grandmother only a night prior, offered to make a phone call on our behalf. Disappearing for a brief moment, he returned to encourage us to visit the Tribal Court in Browning and seek resolution, the Judge will be reasonable he confidently predicted.

Onward then we embarked with honest reluctance, doubt and a hint of fear on the 30-mile trek into town to find the justice we so badly needed. Arriving at the Tribal Court House, I approached the clerk and asked to address my citations. After a few minutes an elder emerged from the back and speedily led us down a winding corridor to the court room in the building's rear. She instructed us to sit behind the defendant's table. The Judge would soon come to adjudicate our case and there I sat, all the possibilities which might arise from my decision to appear in court in the first place now flooding into mind like a relentless river of anxiety. I wondered if I might be imprisoned too.

Suddenly Judge Pepion entered the courtroom. He first outlined the charges levied against me and then explained that was I to plead not guilty, I would be subject to additional court hearings and eventually a trial. I acknowledged that I understood my rights and chose my next words carefully. With a slight hesitation in my voice, I entered a plea of guilty and requested the opportunity to explain myself. The noble judge allowed me to do so and I argued my case well. Lacking any fluff or theatrics, I was able to demonstrate that the app. which had thus far faithfully guided us to the distinction between private and public land indicated we were in the clear. I made obvious my remorse and articulated my intention to make right in the eyes of the court whatever injustices I may have unknowingly committed. I also notified the court of my inability to pay the levied fines and humbly asked for an act of mercy I by no means expected.

After hearing my arguments, the judge turned to the prosecutor, "how should we proceed?" he asked. To my surprise the prosecutor responded in no uncertain terms, "I move to relieve these boys of their charges". Seemingly recognizing herself the precarious nature of Warden Spotted Eagle's actions, the prosecutor informed the court that although the bond amount could not be reduced as per recent changes to the Fish and Game Code, she urged the court to find a different solution. In his wisdom and acting with gracious clemency, the judge ruled that the bond be suspended for one year pending our compliance with the law and ability to avoid another appearance in his courtroom. A heavy sigh of relief overcame me as the reality of what had just occurred became apparent, I had come to Tribal Court, and won.

Upon hearing that my case had just essentially been determined without penalty, Cory spoke up. "Judge, might I too, who not being able to live without the collateral taken and having paid the deputy as he requested, seek resolution?" The judge turned to the prosecutor for her recommendation, which was to issue Cory the same fate as I, so as to remain consistent with the court's findings. With that the judge ordered the prosecutor to write him the order, not exiting before issuing this stark warning to us both, "I best not see either of you gentleman here again". We reverently agreed and shared a silent smile

Cory and I then exited the court room and accompanied the prosecutor back down the hallway to her office. Upon entering her confined domain, I noticed for the first time her name on an envelope in a tableside basket, "S. Horn". It was then it hit me, she was related to John, that must have been the phone call he stepped aside just earlier that morning to make. At this point, now seeking to wrap up this process and ride far away from Browning I did not inquire much more than but to confirm my suspicions and thank her sincerely. We sat then just as today, eternally grateful to all those who made an effort to help us even when there existed no personal benefit in doing so.

The prosecutor then offered to escort us to Fish and Game to retrieve our stolen goods. It took a little over an hour upon receiving word for Warden Spotted Eagle to return, fishing poles in tow. Still he attempted to justify his actions but nothing he nor anyone could say at that moment might replace the satisfaction redeemed by the shocked expression on his face upon being presented with the judge's written order. This moment alone made our determination to find justice worth all the while. He begrudgingly released us with our belongings and off we sped towards the reservation's horizon.

Arriving at my campsite that night I was able to decompress and properly reflect on what had happened. Had we not been at that resort at exactly that moment in time I thought, our conundrum might well have ended differently. It now occurred to me that this was more than just a story about an injustice righted by simple fate or persistence or even both, it was a story about the resolve of the Blackfeet heroines who chose to walk against the tide to aid us in a time of need. It was a story about redemption that taught through its own result that we are always ill-served to cast judgements upon the whole bunch on account of a few bad actors. Over a cold beer I sat

content in acknowledging the positive effect of my own self determination to challenge circumstances which seemed at every turn inevitable. How important it is to never give up. Yet present more than any other emotion was an overwhelming feeling of appreciation and a keen recognition that it is never too late to stand up for yourself and effect the change in your life you wish to see.

The following day in a conversation with a dear friend and client, Bob, even more realizations came to light. He told me that as a former fire chief, among their department directives was to avoid Indian land in state cruisers as they often served as a worthy target for eager Blackfoot officials. It now made sense that the retired Forest Service truck which had yet served me so well to discourage unwanted contact with others in the back woods, may very well have been an attractive ticket of revenge for Warden Spotted Eagle. Regardless, I was happy to be back in a place where officers were accountable to the law and where respect for the civil rights our forefather's fought so intently for like that of due process, again reigned supreme.

Hoping to continue the journey even further, the restraints of my now overly extended budget made my decision to return home for me. I spent another week fishing the pristine waters of the Clearwater along the Northwest Passage Scenic Byway, but the overbearing heat of Idaho's late summer sun made persisting to stay in nature more difficult. On my drive home I thought about all the wonderful friends I was so fortunate to meet, all the wildlife I was so privileged to view and the amazing miracles of creation which revealed themselves to me time and time again. In spite of the saddening thought that the end of my trip was near, I found comfort in the notion that my own mission of personal discovery would never end. I was resolute more than ever to explore the remote parts of America still left untouched, no matter the consequence.

Thus, it must be told that the search for bright stars and vibrant rainbows does, should you choose to embrace it, bear the most valuable of treasures. There along the journey rests the rich fruit of lifelong friendships and unforgettable experiences only fulfilled by the effort to seek them out. Many times, over the melody of a late-night campfire, Cory, John and I would deliberate on the risks and rewards of venturing the road less traveled. For what was it that separated us from those who merely yearn for a sense of adventure? Only the personal desire to take a chance and make it happen. If there is one thing I have come to know for sure, it is that life is short and uncertain and so I leave you with this well-spoken advice. Do not wait for life to expose itself to you, rather, with great conviction and new found purpose I implore you to expose yourself to it. There seems in whole, no greater virtue than this.

With the link enclosed please also find a collection of my poems and articles published in [The Boise Beat](#)