



## Vanishing Act

Disappear into Yellowstone's secret northern fringe, where you'll find a rejuvenated landscape and total solitude (except for the bison and grizzlies). By Michael Behar



LAST NIGHT I PITCHED MY TENT AT 8,500 FEET ATOP THE BUFFALO Plateau, in a mile-wide meadow laced with spring-fed brooks. From the campsite, overlooking the remote northeast corner of Yellowstone National Park, I have the option of descending back to the base of the plateau and making a horseshoe end-run around its north side. But a ranger in the backcountry office had told me about an off-trail shortcut through a lodgepole burn that would save four miles. Of course, like most cross-country bushwhacks, it was debatable if the "shortcut" would actually save time. I knew it would require acrobatic scrambling over and under fallen timber. But who can pass up the allure of such a little-used route?



## National Parks Project: Part 5

A yearlong celebration of America's most extraordinary hiking experiences



SOLITUDE JUNCTION: YOU'LL REACH THIS VIEW OF THE BLACKTAIL PONDS ON THE FINAL DAY OF OUR AUTHOR'S 44-MILE ROUTE, JUST NORTH OF THE BLACKTAIL DEER CREEK TRAILHEAD.

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It's late June and I'm in Yellowstone on a six-day, 40-plus-mile hike with my wife, Ashley, Jake and Wendy Jacobs, who are buddies from Seattle, and Hope Schmelzter, an old friend from San Francisco. None of us has backpacked in the park before, and the Buffalo Plateau is an unlikely location for first-timers. With a week to amble through the iconic park, most Yellowstone rookies hit one of the known classics—Bechler Meadows, the Lamar Valley, or the Gallatin Range. These are each life-list treks, to be sure, but to hike them you have to wait until late summer—when passes aren't snow-bound and river crossings aren't life-threatening—and you must be willing to share the deservedly popular routes

with other hikers. None of that would do. BACKPACKER had challenged me to find a wildlife-packed, people-free, accessible trek—and one that the magazine hadn't already covered, a daunting task considering its staffers have mapped no fewer than 43 trails spanning 353 miles in the 2.2-million-acre park (see them all at [backpacker.com/yellowstone](http://backpacker.com/yellowstone)). With help from Dagan Klein in the backcountry office, I found my prize on the Buffalo Plateau with a point-to-point route that promised it all, plus a chance to explore the dramatic Black Canyon of the Yellowstone.

One reason the area has remained under the radar screen: Most photos of the Buffalo Plateau, taken in late summer, show ochre grasslands that

suggest heat and dust. But we departed Hellroaring Creek trailhead last June, after a season of above-average snowfall had saturated the park. On the morning we started hiking, the sun shined brightly on a landscape transformed by the moisture, like all of Yellowstone had been treated with Miracle-Gro. Had I been drugged and blindfolded and then told I'd been delivered to the Mayo coast in western Ireland, I'd have had no trouble believing it.

Our plan was to follow the Buffalo Plateau Trail north, then link up with Hellroaring Creek and, turning west, end with a tour down the Black Canyon. After the first mile, we reached a suspension bridge that crosses the Yellowstone River, swollen with snowmelt, running

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milky and full. From the bridge, we faced a six-mile, 2,500-foot climb to our first camp on the plateau. The ascent was steep but not arduous; valley updrafts kept the air cool, in the mid-60s. Radiant meadows glowed a dozen shades of green and the trail, hidden beneath lush spring growth, varied from barely visible to entirely vanished.

We climbed through a minefield of glistening dung patties so fresh that bison must have moseyed by only an hour earlier. They also left behind fist-size clumps of fur that clung like Velcro to low-slung shrubs. By the time we set up camp in the high meadow, without having seen another backpacker all day, I knew we'd come to right place.

EVEN SO, I'M PREPARED FOR THE worst when we embark on that shortcut in the morning. It's the only section of our route that passes through backcountry torched during the 1988 Yellowstone fires. And though the going is tough—we must balance on fallen and charred trunks, which frequently collapse underfoot—the reward is well worth the effort: The rejuvenated

landscape amazes us. Thousands of lodgepole saplings have sprouted like a deep-wilderness Christmas tree farm. Wildflowers run amok—lupine, Indian paintbrush, bluebells, shooting stars, and forget-me-nots—in undulating rainbow bands. Sparrows nest in dead-wood hollows, and the mounds of pocket gophers furrow the chocolate-hued topsoil. The ground itself bursts with water as brooks upwell through electric-green moss, like champagne bubbling to the surface.

The shortcut deposits us just beyond the park boundary. Wild chives fringe a shallow spring-fed pond, and I sample a handful before rejoining the established trail. After crossing a muddy woodland, the path emerges on an exposed ridge that rises 1,000 feet above Hellroaring Creek, which flows so furiously that it vibrates the earth. We continue 3.2 miles to our second camp, an airy bench at the confluence of Hellroaring and Horse Creeks. We celebrate our last campfire (they're prohibited along the remainder of our route) by stoking the flames and munching on squares of artisan dark chocolate that Ashley had secretly packed. After a 10-plus-mile day, it's a moment to savor: The fire warms our faces, stars blaze overhead, and lightning flickers on the horizon.

**BIG-TICKET ITEMS: A BISON (ONE OF NEARLY 4,000 IN THE PARK) GRAZES NEAR THE MADISON RIVER; A SUSPENSION BRIDGE SPANS THE YELLOWSTONE RIVER A MILE FROM HELLROARING CREEK TRAILHEAD.**

The next morning, our route veers south along Hellroaring Creek, its banks flush with huckleberries just beginning to ripen. We've walked less than 500 yards when we glimpse a black bear at the base of a pine, pacing nervously. Suddenly, a beagle-size cub scurries up the trunk. We can hear its raspy, eerily human cries. The sow follows effortlessly into the treetop. But when we stick around snapping photos, mama scampers back down. Upsetting a bear that's protecting a newborn ranks right up there with the all-time stupidest backcountry tricks, so we divert onto a slippery embankment that rejoins the trail downriver. Later, we recognize what's left of an elk. Its remains are stripped clean except for inedible sinew; stamped in the mud nearby is the unmistakable paw print of a gray wolf.

THE TERRAIN CHANGES ABRUPTLY on our third day. The forest thins, undergrowth recedes, and fragrant sage and juniper appear amid craggy outcrops of orange rock. It's a classic high-desert landscape, and the last place I'd expect to encounter a grizzly. But at dusk that's exactly what comes galumphing toward our campsite. After a frozen second, we realize that it doesn't see us. The bellowing river and stiff breeze muddle its senses. Instant, unbridled hollering solves that



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## Yellowstone's Wild North

See bears, elk, and the undiscovered terrain of the Black Canyon of the Yellowstone on this 44-mile trip.

**Hike it** This six-day trek begins with a gentle mile-long descent from Hellroaring Creek trailhead (1) to the Yellowstone River. Cross the suspension bridge (2) and join the Buffalo Plateau Trail (3) at mile 1.5; head northeast to begin climbing up the wind-scoured plateau. Keep an eye out at mile two—the Buffalo Plateau Trail becomes faint and bears right at the fork with the Coyote Creek Trail (4). Cross into Montana on a 2,300-foot climb over 5.4 miles to a three-way intersection. Turn left and switchback another mile uphill to a natural spring and your first campsite (labeled 2B1) (5).

In the morning, hike 2.1 off-trail miles, heading northwest through open meadows. Sweep east around an unnamed 8,716-foot peak to hit the Poacher's Trail (6), just outside the park boundary. The trail dog-legs west, plummeting a quick 900 feet to Coyote Creek (7). The next 2.7 miles follow the drainage north, round Bull Mountain (8,272 feet), and descend to Hellroaring Creek. Cross the bridge and go .7 mile to the Hellroaring Patrol Cabin. Camp here (8), in

a vast creekside meadow where the author saw a black bear and cub.

On the third day, the route is flat and fast, hugging the river as it re-enters the park (do lunch at an unnamed creek (9) .4 mile south of the posted boundary line). Finish this seven-mile day at the campsite marked 2H7 next to Hellroaring Creek (10). This is grizzly territory, so be extra cautious and pack all smelly items in a bear canister.

Day four's route crosses high meadows—with a good chance to see elk—then joins the Yellowstone River. The next 4.6 miles flank the river, where there are plenty of shady waterfront rest stops to cool down.

Spend nights four and five downriver at Crevice Lake (1Y1) (11) and use the lay-over to dayhike the Black Canyon of the Yellowstone. Lunch and swim at a 100-yard-long, black-sand beach (12) located 3.2 miles from Crevice Lake. On the final day, double back upriver to the Blacktail Deer Creek Trail (13) and hike the final 4.6-mile leg, climbing 1,000 feet from the Yellowstone River to the trailhead on Grand Loop Road (14).

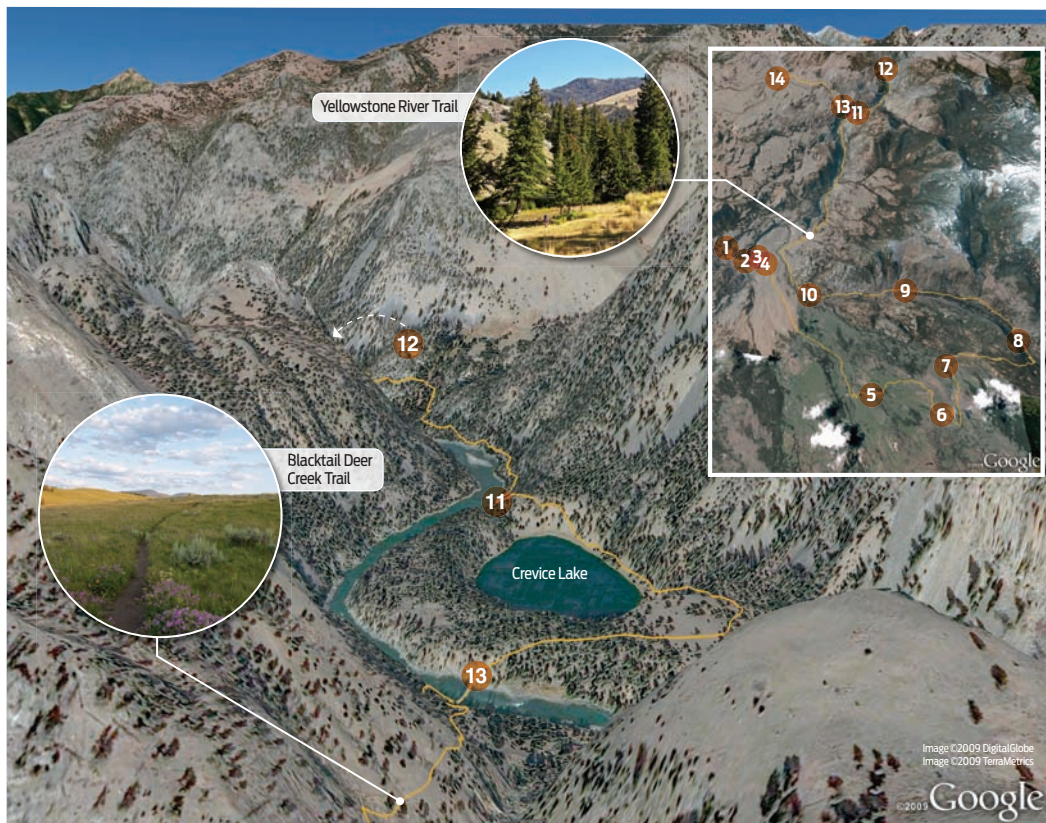
**THE WAY** Start at Hellroaring Creek trailhead, five miles southeast of Tower Junction. End at Blacktail Deer Creek trailhead, on Grand Loop Road eight miles east of Mammoth Hot Springs Visitor Center.

**WHEN TO GO** Relatively low elevations make this hike best from late April through late June (great for wildflowers) and early fall (watch for hunters). Avoid summer's heat.

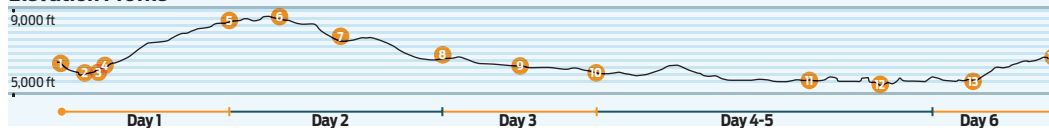
**MAP AND GUIDEBOOK** Trails Illustrated #303 and #304 (\$10; natgeomaps.com/trails-illustrated); *Hiking Yellowstone National Park*, by Bill Schneider (\$17; globepequot.com)

**PERMITS** Reserve in advance (\$20 per trip) by mail beginning April 1. Some permits are also assigned on a first come, first served basis, 48 hours prior to departure. Get the reservation application at [nps.gov/yell](http://nps.gov/yell). Questions? Call Yellowstone's Central Backcountry Office at (307) 344-2160.

**VACATION PLANNER** For supplies, stop at Flying Pig Adventure Company (406-848-7510, [flyingpigrafting.com](http://flyingpigrafting.com)) in Gardiner, Montana. For travel and lodging info, go to [yellowstonepark.com](http://yellowstonepark.com).



### Elevation Profile



### MORE HIKES

Map contributor Jeff Chow recently explored Yellowstone for five weeks. He returned with trail beta, map details, and beautiful photos for 24 hikes. See his trip reports and others at [backpacker.com/yellowstone](http://backpacker.com/yellowstone).



### THE MAP

This 44-mile route (left) in northeast Yellowstone travels faded paths and veers off-trail on the second day. Go online to see more-detailed digital maps, images, and turn-by-turn waypoints. Then print the map, download GPS files, or share the trip with your hiking friends. Go to [backpacker.com/hikes/470907](http://backpacker.com/hikes/470907).

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**BEACHED: A SHORELINE CAMPSITE ALONG THE BLACK CANYON OF THE YELLOWSTONE**

problem. It perks its ears and then does an about-face, disappearing behind a furrow in the hillside. After the adrenaline clears my system, I'm reminded of the exceptional solitude we've found. It's no exaggeration to say we've seen more bears (three) than other backpackers (zero).

On our fourth day of hiking, we'll link up with the Yellowstone River Trail and follow it to the mouth of the Black Canyon. It's also the day that the weather—consistently sunny and pleasantly warm until now—shows its teeth. When we intersect the Yellowstone River, the sky resembles wet concrete; thunder reverberates in menacing claps. Thankfully, eight miles of easy walking brings us to our fourth campsite, situated beside the Yellowstone River near Crevice Lake.

We pitch our tents on a sandy shelf just a few feet above the river, where there's a secluded beach. Wendy wades into the strong current for a dip, and plunges up to her neck in the frigid water. She doesn't stay long. I opt to douse myself with water hauled ashore in a cooking pot. I'm still drying off with a Lilliputian camp towel when the storm strikes. I dive into my tent, where the spattering rain sounds like buckshot. We'll stay two nights here and use the layover to explore the Black Canyon of the Yellowstone, and

then on day six complete the final 4.2 miles to Blacktail Deer Creek trailhead, where we left a shuttle car.

It's eight miles from Crevice Lake through the Black Canyon to the terminus of the Yellowstone River Trail in Gardiner, Montana. We decide to dayhike halfway. Without a full pack, I feel weightless as we enter the chasm and descend through an increasingly desertlike landscape marked by prickly pear cactus and sagebrush lizards. The temperature pushes 80°F, which triggers tremendous snowmelt. A mile from camp, 15-foot-high Knowles Falls, on the Yellowstone River, firehoses over the drop. Farther west, the canyon narrows to the width of a freeway, funneling water into frothy rapids that catapult RV-size hunks of forest detritus and the occasional deer carcass downstream.

Walking silently, I scan the river valley for movement, hoping to spot more animals—bears or elk or bison. But if there's one thing about Yellowstone—especially when it comes to wildlife—it's that you should be careful what you wish for. At that moment, I unwittingly straddle a five-foot-long prairie rattlesnake coiled on the trail. It clacks its tail, then bluff-strikes right between my legs (yes, there)—at which point I shatter the Olympic long jump record.

When I breathe again, we've reached our lunch spot, a black-sand beach that wouldn't look out of place ringing the shore of a Tahitian isle. The setting reminds me just how much we've seen in less than a week. We've fast-tracked nearly every Rocky Mountain ecosystem—subalpine meadows, montane forest, riparian valleys, and a desert biome. And for the final act, we're treated to a slice of the park's volcanic soul. With one night to go, I only have one concern about my first trek in Yellowstone: Where will I go on the second? 🍌

*Michael Bebar lives in Boulder, Colorado. He's currently shopping for kevlar-reinforced boxers.*

## INSIDER'S GUIDE YELLOWSTONE

### TOP TRAILS

#### DAYHIKE Pebble Creek

This route packs more alpine oohs and aahs into a one-day ramble than any other trail in Yellowstone. Park at the northern access point to Pebble Creek trailhead (one mile from the Northeast Entrance gate) and drop a shuttle car seven miles south on the Northeast Entrance Road. You'll climb an easy 500 feet in the first .75 mile, then follow Pebble Creek as it meanders another nine miles through a glacial-cut valley smothered in crimson geraniums and calf-high purple lupine. Picnic in the shadow of 10,442-foot Baronette Peak—scan its slopes for bighorn sheep—and a dozen other lofty summits. At 6.6 miles, intersect Bliss Pass Trail and continue straight through meadows where elk and moose often graze in midsummer. Mind the four fords across Pebble Creek; the water can be thigh-deep and dangerously swift before early July.



#### WEEKEND Geyser Basin

Of all the world's known geysers, two-thirds of them—some 300—lie within the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. See 40 of them—plus numerous mudpots, hot springs, and fumaroles—in a single weekend on this 27.7-mile overnight to Shoshone Geyser Basin. From Old Faithful at the Howard Eaton Trail, cruise three miles to Lone Star Geyser. It erupts every three hours, spewing superheated water 45 feet high. Pitch camp at your reserved site on Basin Beach (site 8T1; mile 9.6) beside Shoshone Lake.



Here, within a span of two miles, more than 100 active thermal features spout and gurgle. (Pack *The Geysers of Yellowstone*, by T. Scott Bryan, a detailed field guide with maps and photos.) On day two, hike



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on the Shoshone Lake Trail to Moose Creek, where you're likely to meet its gangly namesake in the open meadows. Finish the last 4.6 miles via the Doghead Trail, where you'll see remnants of the 1988 fire that charred nearly 40 percent of the park.

### WEEKLONG Bechler River

Got a week and want to dabble in everything that makes Yellowstone Yellowstone? Find world-class fly-fishing, muscle-soothing hot springs, roaring waterfalls, and big wildlife on

the Bechler River Trail. Begin at the Howard Eaton trailhead, 1.75 miles south of Old Faithful on the Grand Loop Road, and climb 500 feet across the Continental Divide to your first camp at Shoshone River Meadows (8G1). Next morning, you'll join the Bechler River Trail, descending 1,500 feet over 20.6 miles through Bechler Canyon; the route passes a dozen waterfalls and cascades, plus hot springs and geysers. Fourteen designated campsites—some with sprawling canyon vistas, others cozy and creek-side—line the trek from mile 6.7 to 24.2. Plan

at least one overnight at Ferris Fork (9D1), where a short walk on a spur trail leads you east to Ferris Pool, big enough to accommodate 10 hikers. At mile 20, you'll reach Bechler Meadows (bison alert!), with the Tetons as a distant backdrop. Spend two nights at Bechler Ford campsite (9B2) and use the layover for a dayhike on the Boundary Creek Trail to Dunanda Falls. Continue south on Bechler Meadows Trail to the Mountain Ash Creek Trail; pitch camp

at the base of Union Falls. Double back on Union Falls Trail for 1.7 miles and rejoin the Mountain Ash Creek Trail, then continue toward Pitchstone Plateau (4.5 miles), a sparsely vegetated, 70,000-year-old lava flow, to complete the 58-mile trek.

### GET LUCKY IN THE LAMAR

The Lamar River Valley has “a bit of everything,” says Orville Bach, the author of two Yellowstone guidebooks and a seasonal ranger for 36 years. His favorite spots:

**Explore a mystery** On August 23, 1877, 800 Nez Perce Indians with 2,000 horses entered Yellowstone on the run from 400 U.S. cavalry soldiers. But shortly after reaching the Lamar Valley, the Nez Perce vanished. “The Army lost them,” says Bach. “How do you lose 2,000 horses and that many people?” See for yourself on a hike to their last-seen location near the confluence of Mist Creek and the Lamar River, 38 miles from the start of a thru-hike that begins at Artist Point (below). To hike to the site of a battle between the Nez Perce and the Army, see page 26.

**Visit the wildest of wilds** The remote Mirror Plateau, the unforgiving Absaroka Mountains, the petrified forests of Specimen Ridge: All lie within the Lamar and Pelican Valleys, where grizzlies assemble in such numbers that overnight camping is forbid-





den and hikers are encouraged to pass through loudly and quickly. For the ultimate highlights tour, begin at Artist Point on the Wapiti Lake Trail. Near mile seven, you'll cross Moss Creek, leave the trail, and bush-whack three miles northeast to (soakable) Joseph's Coat Hot Springs. Spend the night here—at a designated campsite (4B1)—before connecting with Upper Pelican Creek Trail, Mist Creek Trail, and finally the Lamar River Trail, where there's a good chance you'll spot bears, moose, elk, bighorn sheep, bison, osprey, bald eagles, and antelope. If you're lucky, you might see or hear the Druid wolf pack. The route spans nearly 60 miles—tack on 15 more with a traverse of Specimen Ridge. "Go in September," says Bach. "The streams are down, insects are pretty much gone, and the elk are bugling."

## Key Skills

### CAMPING WITH WOLVES

In 1995, wildlife biologists reintroduced 14 Canadian wolves into Yellowstone. Today, the population has increased to 124 animals, presenting new thrills—and a few chills—to backcountry hikers. Here are safe-hiking tips from Doug Smith, head of the Yellowstone Wolf Project.

**Use bear precautions** The same rules apply: Hang your food 100 yards from where you sleep, and avoid on-trail surprises by making noise while you hike.

**Make space** "Backcountry wolves will almost always avoid you," says Smith. But in some instances, a curious wolf might approach. If so, modify your route and let the wolf move away. "If it doesn't run, stand your ground, yell, clap your hands, and flap your jacket." Still too close? Use bear spray.

**Fight back** There's one big exception to the just-like-bears rule, notes Smith: "If a wolf grabs hold of you, fight like hell." But sleep easy: Wolf attacks are rare, with only 20 recorded nationwide in the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### FLY-FISHING SMARTS

Yellowstone boasts hundreds of streams filled with fat arctic grayling, cutthroat trout, and mountain whitefish—all native species.

Chad Olsen, founder of Greater Yellowstone Flyfishers ([gyflyfishers.com](http://gyflyfishers.com)), has spent two decades leading guided trips into the park. Use his tips to land a big one.

**Pack light** A featherweight graphite rod that breaks down into four parts works best; pair it with a small reel and floating line. The whole setup weighs less than a pound. And pack sandals or river shoes—you don't need waders in the summer. Tackle should include two leaders, a spool of tippet, bead head nymphs, woolly buggers, and an assortment of dry flies.

**Cast your line** Slough Creek, in the northeast corner of the park, is one of the best places to hook a trout. Other hotspots include the Yellowstone River, Black and Grand Canyons, Lamar River, Pelican Creek, and the Snake River. Avoid fishing after heavy rains, advises Olsen. Downpours muddy rivers and make it hard for fish to see your fly. (For tips on reading a trout stream, see page 48.)

**Fish fry** Native Yellowstone species are catch-and-release only. But there are enough stocked rainbow, brown, and brook trout to ensure a hearty campfire feast. Just be careful how you cook: Roasting fish over hot coals is sure to attract bears. Poach your catch in boiling water instead—it's simpler and creates less odor. Remember to clean your catch far from camp, preferably where you landed it.