

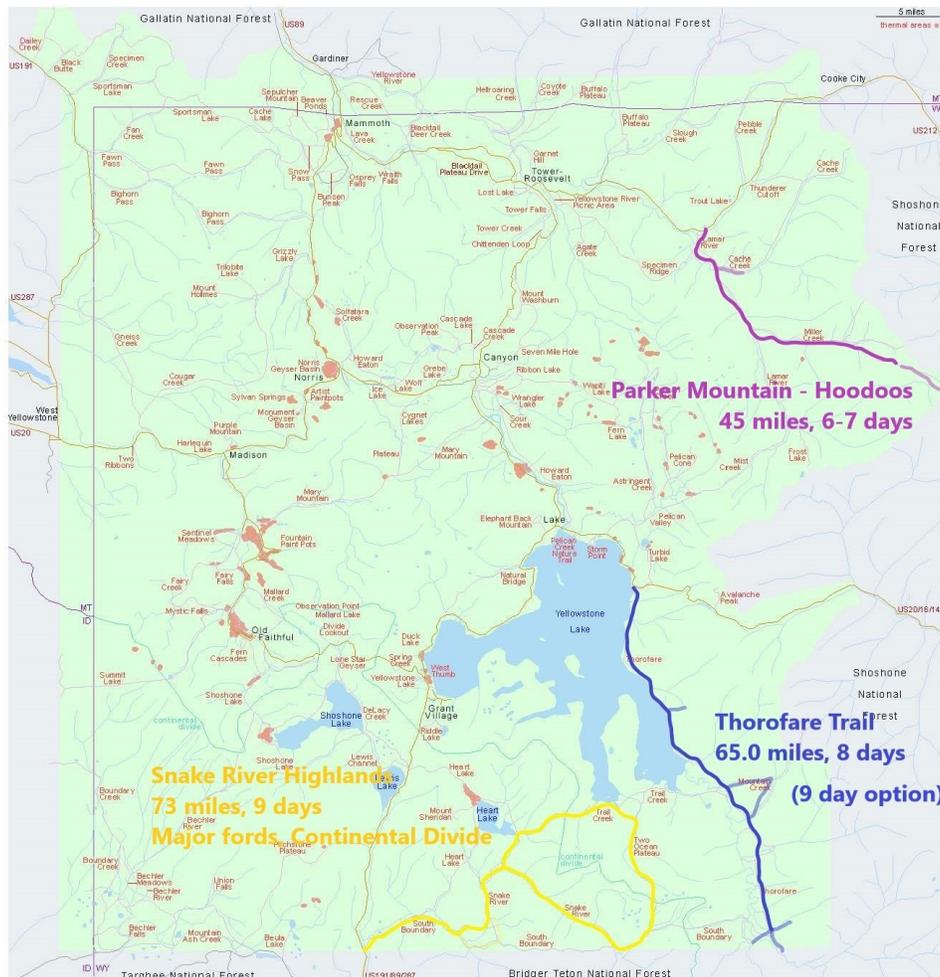
Political Science 224, “Politics of Yellowstone’s Wilderness”

Overview of Route Options

This document provides an overview of three possible backpacking itineraries. Each takes us into a remote corner of Yellowstone National Park that see few backpackers, though some trails attract horsepacking groups.

Two routes can be done in one less day than noted; the itineraries describe the longer option. For Parker Mountain–Hoodoos, deleting a day means that we make the outward (and upward) trip in three days instead of four. For the Thorofare, we avoid side trips and increase the average mileage on a flat trail. We retain the base camp either way. Snake River Highlands does not have a rest day, though we could add one. It has some short days and it might be possible to combine those — especially if we crossed the Continental Divide in a clockwise direction.

Keep in mind that these itineraries are aspirations, not promises. We enter a lottery to get a reservation slot, and our preferred campsites may not be available. Because the Snake River Highlands route has the fewest alternative sites, it is most vulnerable to drastic rerouting; however, it can be done either clockwise or counterclockwise, adding some flexibility. It connects to trails on the national forest, providing additional flexibility.



Parker Mountain - Hoodoo Basin

Overview: This itinerary takes us into a seldom-visited region in the higher elevations in the northeastern part of the park. Though this is shorter than our other itineraries, the elevation keeps people away. We will likely see more stock parties than backpackers like us.

The hike starts in the wildlife-rich Lamar Valley, ascending from 6500 to 9750 feet into the Absaroka Mountains. Students with energy left will climb Parker Mountain (10,190 feet) and optionally explore a region of hoodoos.

The geology begins with the wide, glacier-carved Lamar Valley and ends with the Miocene volcanos of the Absaroka Mountains. The Lamar's well-drained, gravely soil supports a classic sagebrush steppe, above rich grasslands in the riparian soils of the Lamar River. This is the "Serengeti of North America," with bison, elk, pronghorn, and wolves attracting wildlife watchers. We'll hike up the Lamar River to Miller Creek, probably seeing the rodents that love this habitat—and perhaps some badgers, foxes, and coyotes that love the rodents.

As we climb, we'll move into montane forests, subalpine, and finally alpine habitats. We'll see high-elevation meadows and other wetlands and get to know their insect populations. Uinta ground squirrels will give way to squirrels and chipmunks, and meadowlarks to Clark's nutcrackers. The mix of predators, who are more adaptable to a range of prey, will change less.

Days and distance: as least 45 miles with camp spurs, up to 55 miles with side trips, over six or seven days. The itinerary assumes a six night, seven day trip, with a basecamp in Hoodoo Basin.

Itinerary: We begin with a five-mile hike up the Lamar River, gaining a modest 200 feet in net elevation. With the ups and downs it will feel like more. We'll see a small thermal area along the way, and we can take a side trip to the better-known Wahb Springs thermal area if desired (add four miles). We'll see some stretches burned by the 1988 fires.

We can visit the Calfree Creek Patrol Cabin the next morning, which lies along the Lamar River below our trail. This will be a second five-mile day that gains another couple of hundred feet total. From there we hike along Miller Creek for about six miles on Day 3, again gaining few hundred feet. Like the first two days, we'll have plenty of ups and downs along the way. At times the trail traverses slopes above the river, looking down on meadows and riparian areas.

The next morning we'll visit the Upper Miller Creek Patrol Cabin at over 8000' and then begin a serious climb to over 10,000 feet. Half of that climb comes on brutal switchbacks, followed by a steady uphill ascent along the top of a ridge. We will reach a saddle with scattered bits of petrified wood, obsidian chips, and possible signs that Indigenous people once hunted bighorn sheep here. From the saddle, we can walk up Parker Peak (10,190'), about 500 meters to our south. We will hope not to hit an afternoon thunderstorm while we are in the open.

Then we descend to our basecamp in Hoodoo Basin at 9400'. We will spend nights 4-5 at this camp, along a meadow in a basin surrounded by subalpine firs, Engelmann spruce, and whitebark pines. Our nights will likely be cold at this elevation, even in summer, and the basin will collect cooler air. On Day 5, we can leave our gear behind for a day trip, or just relax in camp. We might explore Hoodoo Basin from the trail, look for routes up Hoodoo Mountain, or take a ten-mile hike to the park boundary at 10,400'.

While we gained elevation over a leisurely four days on the trip out, we'll do our 21-mile return hike in just two. After regaining the saddle, we go downhill for almost ten miles. The next day is a bit over eleven miles back through the Lamar Valley, but hotel beds and a shower await.

THOROFARE TRAIL

Overview: This out-and-back itinerary takes us to the Thorofare Ranger Cabin, which lies near the most-remote place in the Lower 48 states. The cabin is 32.0 trail miles from the trailhead. While the Park Point campsites at 6.3 miles make a good weekend destination for backpackers and paddlers, we won't see many people after that.

The first half of the route follows the Southeast Arm of Yellowstone Lake, though the lake is out of sight more often than not. Our campsites all lie on the lakeshore, however. The second half of the route follows the Upper Yellowstone River. Because the river consists of a lot of wetlands, the trail usually stays on drier land between meadows and forests. We will have regular views of the South Absaroka Mountains to our east and Two Ocean Plateau to our west.

Geologically, the route follows the arm of a glacier from the most recent ice age. All of the river valley and about half of the Southeast Arm are obviously a flat, U-shaped valley instead of the steep-sided valleys carved by rivers. The South Absorakas are mostly the cores of Miocene volcanoes. We'll see some evidence of this volcanism in trailside rocks and perhaps pieces of petrified wood.

Days and distance: We will travel 65.0 miles in nine days with a few optional side trips, though it's possible to trim the expedition to eight days. We will aim for nine days of 6-12 miles, or 8-12 miles over eight days. Either option includes two nights at a "base camp" about three miles away from the ranger station. The main route will remain within a single band of 7250-7650 feet in elevation, though some optional side trips may climb above that.

Itinerary: This itinerary combines some long hiking days with little change in elevation, with varied views of the lake, river, and mountains. The Thorofare itself is rich in wildlife but the animals are much more wary of humans than in other parts of the park.

Day 1 takes us through a burnt forest and then a mix of meadows and forest with only occasional views of Yellowstone Lake's Southeast Arm. Our first campsite will be 6.3, 9.2, or 12.3 miles from the trailhead; we'll aim for one of the first two. Day 2 continues along the Southeast Arm, to a campsite at either 12.3 or 17.5 miles from the trailhead, depending on where we started that morning. The shorter distance would allow an off-trail side trip to Brimstone Basin, a waterless geothermal area that few visit. Allow two hours for the side trip, which adds about two miles and some elevation gain.

Depending on the choices for Days 1-2, Day 3 will bring us to Beaverdam Creek (17.5 miles from the trailhead) or Mountain Creek (25.6 miles). Either way, this will be our first night away from the lake, bringing us into the Thorofare proper. If you prefer the eight-day itinerary, subtract one day from each of the numbers from here on.

Days 4-5 take us into the heart of the Thorofare Region, the valley of the Upper Yellowstone. We will spend two nights at a base camp that will probably be 28.5 or 29.5 miles from the trailhead. No matter our itinerary, we'll have to hike 11-12 miles on either Day 3 or Day 4. On Day 5, students who want to visit the ranger station can do so (7-8 miles round trip), spending some pleasant hours relaxing there. If there is interest, we can also explore the open country beyond the cabin. Some hikers will want to make base camp a rest day.

Our return journey will take up days 6-9 (5-8 on the shorter itinerary). We can break it up various ways. The natural option would space the four days (three nights) out as evenly as we can, ideally getting to Park Point on our last night.

SNAKE RIVER HIGHLANDS – TWO OCEAN PLATEAU

Overview: This itinerary travels through seldom-visited country south of Yellowstone Lake, between the Snake River and the Yellowstone River. We will have one campsite on or near Yellowstone Lake's South Arm. We will ford the Snake River many times, the Heart River twice, and cross the Continental Divide twice.

Geologically, the Snake River Highlands and Two Ocean Plateau consist of a mix of uplifted sedimentary rocks from the Laramide orogeny (80–70mya), volcanic rocks from Cretaceous volcanoes (80–60mya), and rhyolite from the three eruptions of the Yellowstone caldera (2 mya–650,000 years ago). Eroded rock from the Red Mountains adds to the mix, which the Snake and Heart Rivers have carved into valleys. In short, it's geologically chaotic.

You'll experience the geology as a varied landscape, mostly along the Snake River. We have a lollipop itinerary, traveling an 18-mile "stick" in both directions and a counterclockwise circular hike—the "sucker"—of 36 miles.

This route would be easier to reach from Grand Teton National Park to the south, reducing our total driving distance a bit too. We would find cabins or campsites there instead of Cody. Flyers would use the airport in Jackson, Wyoming — not Michigan or Mississippi!

Days and distance: nine days, eight nights, 72.8-mile lollipop. We'll hike about 4.0-9.0 miles each day without a rest day; if we are unlucky with permits, we might face a twelve-mile day.

Itinerary details: We start with a ford of the Snake River at about 6700 feet. You may find this challenging. Fortunately, we are going up the Snake River, and it comes to look more like a creek where we are going. After the ford, we see some backcountry hot springs, disappear into the woods for a couple of miles, and return to the river and more hot springs. That's a good snack spot before we continue to our first camp at about 9.0 miles from the trailhead. A long first day!

The "stick" of the lollipop is about 17.9 miles each way, roughly following the Snake River northwards. We will try to hike it in two days. It is possible to break up the second day in two, of 3.8 and 5.1 miles (outbound); obviously, the mileage will show up as additions to day 3 or day 8. An optional route on day 2 adds 2.0 miles while saving two fords and some elevation gain; that's a game-time decision.

We'll pass some small hydrothermal areas on the first two days, the "stick" of the lollipop, then turn southeast. The sucker begins with 8.5 miles along Snake River on Day 3, seeing a few more small hydrothermal areas.

Day 4 takes past the Fox Creek Patrol Cabin on the park's southern boundary at 3.3 miles. We finally leave the Snake to turn north. I hope for a campsite along Plateau Creek at 6.5 miles, which lets us cross the Continental Divide on a short day 5 (4.4 miles).

If we're unlucky with permits, we would camp near Fox Creek on day 4, making the day 5 crossing 7.2 miles. Either way, we cross the Continental Divide at about 9250 feet on Day 5. That marks our high point. After that, Day 6 takes us to a night near Yellowstone Lake (7732 feet). A lower crossing of the Continental Divide at 8250 feet on Day 7 gives us views of Heart Lake and the Red Mountains.

After that descent, we return to the lollipop stick at about 8.9 miles. Then we have the same 17.9 miles spread out over two days. The same optional route from Day 2 is an option on day 8. It adds 2.0 miles while saving two fords and some elevation gain. Again, it's a game-time decision. We end the trip with a repeat of the challenging ford of the Snake River.