

Jackson Hole and Beyond  
Exploring the Road Less Attempted ©  
Amber Borowski

I have a very doting and fun-loving family. Except for when it comes to any man I bring home. Suddenly our cozy episode of “The Waltons” becomes a painful outtake of “Meet the Parents.” The only man they have ever liked is Jason, a cross between exalted Greek God and homegrown Idaho boy. And, of course, a man I have never actually dated.

When I received the assignment to cover Jackson, Wyoming, I knew Jason was my playmate *de choix*. I met him my freshman year during a two-month course, The Natural Science Field Expedition. With packs on our backs and notebooks in hand, we trekked all over the western United States while studying geology, field and environmental biology and campus wildlife (in reference to the great outdoors, of course).

Jackson Hole has been our backyard playground over the years. We have summited the South Teton via Hurricane Pass and Alaska Basin. We have boated Jenny’s Lake in Grand Teton National Park and hiked into Cascade Canyon. In the Gros Ventre Geological Slide Area, we have scavenged for gastroliths (or “gizzard stones”) from a dinosaur’s belly. We have tamed rapids on the Snake River, snowshoed the Big Hole Mountains and conquered snow-capped Mount Glory atop Teton Pass on my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday in February.

The scope of activities is endless around Jackson Hole. Roughly 80 miles long and seven miles wide, the valley is bound by Hoback Canyon to the south, Yellowstone National Park to the north, Togwotee Pass to the northeast, the Gros Ventre Range to the east, Teton Pass and the Snake River Range to the southwest, and not to be forgotten is the Teton Range to the west. The Grand Teton towers above it all at 13,776 feet. Two wilderness areas--the Gros Ventre and the Teton--punctuate the Teton National Forest’s beauty.

I yearned to try something new this time around and my trip did not disappoint. I learned taxidermy in Victor, Idaho, and stayed in a cabin behind the shop. I boated with a rake, robbed the cradle at Granite Hot Springs, hiked an obvious peak and missed it, bulletted through the mountains on the fastest motorcycle in the world, went fishing with the goal of *not* hooking a fish, and camped outside a power plant. Wow. This was Idaho and Wyoming at its best.

### Peaking in Jackson

I started my adventure by hiking Jackson Peak a couple of days prior to meeting Jason. A local favorite, this trek is just a few miles from town past the National Elk Refuge, a range that hosts approximately 7,000 elk in the winter. The sweeping view from atop the 10,741-foot peak peers down upon Jackson Hole to the west and the Gros Ventre Range to the northeast.

I camped past the refuge in Curtis Canyon on a secluded bluff overlooking the Tetons. I was on the trail by 7 a.m. Now, most people do this hike in 9 miles (roundtrip). I did it

in 12 miles—a rare talent. The trail has a 2,380-foot elevation gain and the landscape revealed itself teasingly as I ascended through an open meadow studded with towering Douglas fir. The lush valley below glowed with green; the far-flung Tetons sparkled like jewels.

At 2.8 miles, I crossed a murmuring creek and arrived at cymbal-shaped Goodwin Lake 0.2 mile later. Beyond the lake, my guidebook stated that Jackson Peak's east ridge becomes obvious to the right and involves a steep scramble to the crest of the rocky summit. Generally one to miss the obvious, I did.

A few miles further, I reached an intersection. Granite Creek veered to the left and Cache Creek to the right. Jackson Peak was nowhere to be found. I explored both trails for more than an hour before scrambling up a peak that I thought looked like a Jackson Peak. My logic was that it was a peak and it overlooked Jackson. Close enough.

### Granite Recreation Area

I spent the rest of the day at the southern edge of the Gros Ventre Wilderness in the Granite Recreation Area. Located off U.S Hwy 189 about 25 miles from Jackson, I followed Granite Creek Road past Flying Buttriss Mountain, creek-side campgrounds and open-air apartment buildings for rickety crowds of nesting birds.

I had received an insider's tip about a trail that delves into the Gros Ventre Wilderness. The 22-mile roundtrip trek to Turquoise Lake boasts views of sharply glaciated, snow-capped mountains that descend upon a deep blue-green body of water cradled at the base of 11,190-foot Gros Ventre Peak. Hikers can either return the same way or walk 2.2 miles to the top of Cache Creek Pass and descend via Cache Creek Trail, completing an 18.5-mile hike. Granite Hot Springs awaits weary hikers at the trailhead.

I stopped at Granite Creek Falls. Swooning, multi-tiered cascades left clouds of spray hanging perpetually in air. I attempted to capture the tumbling rainbow-ridden falls on film but trees and rocks obstructed a clear shot. I debated fording the gushing waters but decided against it.

Then I noticed a middle-aged man traversing—a gawky man who was as balanced as a pregnant woman on a tightrope. I wrote him off as nuts until I noticed the rest of his family huddled in a rock cluster on the other side. A young boy waved at me.

I could no longer turn my back on this river crossing. Was I not an *adventure* travel writer? With the resolve of one determined to one-up a 7-year-old, I delved into the river's thrilling frigidty. Soon the water was thigh-deep, the swift current tugging at my feet. With arms flailing for balance like an ostrich attempting flight, I crossed the torrent and snapped my blasted picture.

I then continued to Granite Hot Springs and the trailhead for Turquoise Lake. I hiked a portion of the trail, resolved to return to hike its entirety when I had more time and descended to the hot springs.

A cute guy in his early 20s eagerly gave me a thorough rundown. While the hot springs have attracted visitors for thousands of years, it wasn't until the mid-1930s that the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) captured the thermal-heated water in a small cement pool. With the temperature varying from 92 degrees in the summer to 112 degrees in the winter, the pool is a year-round attraction.

Granite Hot Springs is a favorite among weary hikers who conquer the Gros Ventre Wilderness' network of seldom-used trails. Winter guide services often include Granite Hot Springs as a destination for their dog sled and snowmobile adventures.

The young lad was exceedingly helpful and peppered me with questions of my travels. When I finally turned to leave, he coyly reeled me back in. "You know, the best time to go for a dip is actually *after* we close." I stopped. Was Junior flirting with me? It was less than an hour until closing and the prospect of taking a dip after hours by moonlight was tempting...all in the name of journalism, of course.

And then I heard it-- a baby crying. The lamentation must have come from the pool but I took it as a very translucent Cradle Robbing Sign. I let the subject drop. I was disconcerted to later ascertain that he was closer to my age than I thought—27. And so I traded a dip under the stars for camping in my Jeep outside of the Bonneville Teton Substation. Who was the one whining that night?

### Teton Valley

I arose early the next morning to hike the 4-mile Pass Ridge Trail from atop Teton Pass prior to meeting Jason in Victor. I proceeded south along the ridge, which gleamed with pink, orange, blue and purple wildflowers. I paused when I encountered a moose and her calf foraging in a meadow. For half an hour, I watched them chew, stroll, scrutinize me and chew some more. I made myself appear more moose-like (at least to a shortsighted ruminant) and slowly moved forward to capture the treasured moment on film.

I then drove from Teton Pass into a valley known as Teton Valley or Pierre's Hole, Idaho. The gentle course of the Teton River (a fisherman's oasis for cutthroat, rainbow and brook trout) is nestled between the jagged Teton Range to the east and the rolling Big Hole Mountains to the west.

Great western towns Driggs and Victor have become popular settlements for those escaping Jackson's tourist megalopolis and high taxes. It is a closely guarded secret that mountain biking is better on this side of the pass, with Pole Canyon, Mahogany Trail, the Big Hole Challenge and the Aspen Trail among the favorites.

In Victor, I traded my Jeep for the backseat of Jason's new motorcycle—a Kawasaki Ninja ZX-12R. The model meant nothing to me. Jason was determined to make it meaningful. "This is the most powerful motorcycle in the world," he huffed. Seeing that my response towards this apparatus was directly tied to his ego, I raved on cue.

We cruised all over the western flank of the Tetons. The terrain had a polychromatic, if often raw, diversity of hues: green farmlands, milky-blue ponds, golden expanses of

wheat, and the tawny browns and rust reds of the Big Hole Mountains' rhyolite hills that spilled into Swan Valley. We zoomed along precarious turns and stopped to explore lofty summits.

### Taxidermy, a Rake and a Fish

Our final stop was the pinnacle experience of the trip. Jason's boss has a friend who owns a taxidermy shop four miles west of Victor. This friend also rents out a cabin behind the shop. I was extended an open invitation.

Now, I did not want to be rude but I was a bit wary of the whole thing. Stay at a taxidermist's cabin? I envisioned dirty animal trophies cramming the walls and hunting rifles as centerpieces.

I was mistaken on all accounts. Keith and Claudia Davis run Fin and Feather Taxidermy out of their spacious log home. Claudia gave us a tour of the tasteful gallery that features mostly fish and birds. Most of their taxidermy customers are local hunters but people come from all over the world to purchase their wares. Her husband Keith decided 20 years ago that she would skin the animals (grisly) and he would stuff (more pleasant). I deemed this an advantageous assignment to get him out of the dirty work. He deviously agreed.

Jason, a hunting fanatic, was in his element. He did not hesitate to respond affirmatively when Claudia asked if we wanted to see the taxidermy process. Before I had a chance to object, we were being led into the shop. I exhaled and decided to suck it up. Witnessing road kill reduces me to tears. How much worse would a taxidermist's chopping board be?

Fortunately, we did not see the actual procedure and Claudia merely explained the equipment and materials she uses. At the end of the tour, she hopped on her ATV and we followed her down to the cabin.

I was more than pleasantly surprised--I was mesmerized. Fin Springs Cottage is a charming log cabin snuggled at the base of a riotously green valley. A natural spring trickles through the yard, feeding into two ponds that are stocked with rainbow trout for catch-and-release fishing. A gas grill, fire pit, teepee, horseshoe pit, picnic area and swing dot the secluded grounds.

Keith entertained us with stories of Victor's environs as he gave us a tour. When he left, Jason gave me a fly-fishing lesson. Not even 10 seconds after he dropped the line in the pond, he caught a fish. He offhandedly flattered me: "Gee, Amber, I think even you can handle this." He was wrong.

Later that night, I eased the steely rowing boat onto the pond with rod in hand. As I started to board the craft, I noticed I was bereft of something kinda critical—oars. After combing the area, I noticed a rake on the grass. Improvisation was in order. I pushed out with new "oar" in hand, raking the water of the small pond. Streams of fish gawked at the curious claw that avariciously grasped for them.

I set the rake as anchor, grabbed my rod and viewed my prey. I wasn't out for the kill or even the catch, just a few nibbles. Capture would involve touching the fish to release the hook. And after an afternoon of Taxidermy 101, I was not quite prepared to do that.

A nibble here. A bite here. A rake there. I had a grand time--until I caught one. The fish flipped, flopped and writhed. I did the same. When it became evident this guy wasn't going anywhere, more ingenuity was in order. I won't get into the sordid details but let's just say I released him without touching one slimy scale.

I spent the rest of the evening on the grounds, watching the spring abruptly belly into the crystalline pool as fish glided back and forth like World War II torpedoes. Fin Springs' charms were a diversion from the missed opportunities on Jackson Peak, at the hot springs and on the pond. And I could definitely forget about any professional aspirations as a taxidermist. But my only consolation was benign: who needed all that when I had discovered my own private Idaho.

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