

RKMF Post-Trip Report

Trip Overview

The team was Emmit Gaul and Samuel Mullen. Our original plan was to begin from Dickinson Creek, follow our Wind River Range route through the high alpine lakes and creeks, and eventually finish near the Christina Lake / Worthen area. Before leaving, we called the ranger station and initially thought we would be able to access the Dickinson Creek approach. Later, we received a call back and were told that, as non-residents of the reservation, we could not access the road due to a miscommunication about the scheduled date of opening. Because of that, we had to change the start of the trip and begin at Worthen Meadow instead, which had originally been our resupply point.

Our new goal was to still hit as much of the planned route as possible, but we knew that cutting out Dickinson would probably be necessary because it was too far from our new starting point. On May 15th, we made sure our packs and gear were ready, and set up camp near the trailhead. On May 16th, we hiked up toward Leg Lake and were just below the lake when we checked the Garmin to confirm the weather for the next day. Though we had been postholing 2-4 feet of warm snow that afternoon, we caught both brook trout and arctic grayling, which we had not expected, making this day an early success! We had anticipated, and were prepared for one or two inches of snow, because that's around the predictions that we had seen on our forecasts going into the trip. When we checked the Garmin that night, it said that we should expect closer to six inches as well as the possibility of a storm starting on the afternoon of the 17th. Not wanting to get stuck in a high altitude snowstorm, we decided out of an abundance of caution to head back into the valley the next morning. Our only other choice was to cross cross a high mountain pass, which we decided against for two reasons. First, the pass was already covered in snow, and though we met some backcountry skiers that day who said it might have been doable, we did not feel comfortable taking that risk without the proper training. Second, if the storm was worse than expected, we would have been stuck at an even higher altitude. Tayo Lakes were high, exposed, and above treeline, so we decided that pushing forward would create serious risk from cold, snow loading, and possible avalanche conditions.

The next morning, we made the very difficult decision to turn around, follow our tracks back down, and find a safer place to camp. We ended up camping in a protected area near Roaring Fork Creek. This campsite kept us close enough to our resupply point and evacuation route if conditions got worse. The forecast originally called for about six inches of snow, which felt manageable even though our tent was not built for heavy snow.

Instead, it snowed roughly three feet over two days. From May 17 through May 18, we were in a true Rocky Mountain blizzard. We fished when we could, managed our shelter as carefully as possible, and stayed put because moving into high alpine terrain without snowshoes, skis, avalanche training, or a stronger winter tent would have been unsafe.

By May 19, we still could not reasonably move camp. We learned through our local contact on Garmin messaging that the lakes that had just recently opened up for ice-break fishing appeared to have become frozen again. Moreover, on our second day, we were curious about the trail, which was steep. With three feet of unanticipated snow and steep terrain, we decided that avalanche conditions could easily exist. From there, we decided that our planned high alpine route no longer made sense. We day-tripped from camp when we could, including to Roaring Fork Lake, but most of our original route objectives were no longer realistic. On May 21, we went down to Worthen Meadow for our resupply, met Emmitt's dad, and returned back up to our campsite near Roaring Fork Creek, where it continued snowing. We still hoped to reach the Silas Lakes and Creek area, so we scouted that route without all of our gear. It quickly became clear that the off-trail travel and snow-covered pass would be dangerous, especially with avalanche risk. By the time we made it back to camp, around 6 inches had fallen, with more snow in the forecast. With no possible safe continuation of our planned route, and little faith that the snow would stop, we decided we needed to leave the backcountry the next morning.

After leaving the field, we spent the night at a campground near Lander. We still wanted to continue the fishing part of the trip as safely as possible, so on May 23 and May 24 we made day trips to the Middle Fork of the Popo Agie. We visited Double Cabin, a place recommended by locals near the Yellowstone area, because it had no snow even though it was further north. This showed how unusual and localized the snowstorm in the Wind River Range had been. We fished there through May 26 and drove home on May 27.

Although we did not complete the full planned route, the trip still became a major wilderness learning experience. We completed the fishing grand slam and caught golden trout, arctic grayling, brook trout, rainbow trout, brown trout, and Yellowstone cutthroat trout across the full trip! The biggest highlight was putting our outdoor skills and decision-making into practice. The conditions became scary at points, but we stayed calm, made very conservative choices, and prioritized safety. Looking back, turning around before crossing the pass toward Tayo Lakes was the right decision and likely prevented a much more dangerous situation. While leaving the backcountry early was certainly not the outcome we had hoped for, it was the safe and responsible decision. We hope to conquer our full plan in better conditions soon!

Itemized Budget

Total amount received: \$2,086.00

RKMF expenses:

Food: \$830

Maps \$30

Sam's Fishing stuff: \$292.00

Amazon supplies: \$76

Gas 1: \$62

Emmitt's fishing stuff: \$275.00

Fishing licenses: \$247.00

Last of the electrolyte Gummies: \$12.00

Gas 2 : \$46.00

Gas 3: \$57.00

OE Rentals: \$110

Total RKMF Funded spending \$2037 = **Under budget**

EXTRA PERSONAL COSTS INCURRED:

- Refundable Garmin deposit: \$550.00 (refunded)
- Bear spray: \$39.95
- Pot: \$30.00
- Additional personal / non-grant total: **\$70**

Total Trip Cost = \$2107

Food and Rationing

We had too much food.

While we ate almost all of the dried food meals (I think we brought some extras from a previous trip) we ended up not snacking as much as anticipated. This can be attributed to our unfortunately low mileage per day. Even still, I think we overpacked on snacks, which made our packs heavier than they ought to have been. In the future, I would bring no m&ms, and less dried fruit. The gummies were all eaten. Also, we did not use all of the electrolytes.

Equipment

Because of the ridiculous amount of snow, we wish we would have brought snow gators (which emmit's dad brought on our resupply) and even possibly snow shoes. We did not, however, need the microspikes because we were not dealing with ice. A better tent, and better sleeping pad (for sam) could have proved useful too. Funny enough, though, we found ourselves wanting more fly fishing gear at times. The bear kit was sam's favorite!

What Worked, What Didn't, and Why

What worked best was our conservative decision-making. We checked the Garmin forecast, looked at the route ahead, and realized that continuing over a high mountain pass toward Tayo Lakes during a snowstorm would be too dangerous. We were able to change plans, descend to safer terrain, and camp near Roaring Fork Creek where we had access to water, fishing, and a

realistic evacuation route. Staying near Worthen also made the resupply and eventual evacuation much safer.

Our communication and teamwork also worked well. When conditions became worse than expected, we stayed level-headed and made decisions together. We did not treat the original itinerary as something we had to complete no matter what. Instead, we adjusted to the actual conditions in front of us.

What did not work was the assumption that mid-May would give us manageable early-season conditions. We changed the dates because we were hoping for excellent ice-break fishing, and to avoid a really bad wildfire season. The fishing could have made the risk worthwhile in normal spring conditions, but the storm changed everything. Our tent and travel equipment were not designed for three feet of snow, and we did not have skis, snowshoes, or avalanche training. The original route depended on high alpine travel, and after the storm, those areas became unsafe and entirely inaccessible.

Travel Logistics

We drove from Divide, Colorado to the Wind River Range on May 15. The original plan had been to start from Dickinson Creek, but after learning that we could not access the reservation road as non-residents of the reservation, we changed the start to Worthen Meadow. Worthen had originally been planned as our resupply point, but it became the most practical starting point because it was accessible.

After evacuating from the field on May 22, we drove to a campground near Lander and used that area as a base for day trips to the Middle Fork of the Popo Agie on May 23 and May 24. After that, we drove to Double Cabin, which locals recommended as a good place to catch our remaining species for the grand slam. We fished there through May 26 and drove home on May 27.

Future groups should know that access assumptions need to be confirmed directly before the trip, especially if a route involves reservation roads or trailheads. They should also know that early-season conditions in the Wind River Range can make trailhead access, high passes, lakes, and off-trail travel change very quickly.

Permitting / Government Relations

The biggest permitting and access issue was the Dickinson Creek approach. We originally planned to access the route from Dickinson Creek and called the ranger station before the trip. At first, it sounded as though we would be able to go. Later, we received a call back and were told that because we were not residents of the reservation, we could not access the road during that time of year. This forced us to change the trip and start from Worthen Meadow instead.

Future groups should triple check reservation rules and trailhead access well before leaving, and then confirm again right before the trip. Apparently double checking is insufficient.

Leadership and Group Dynamics

We managed very well, especially for so much time hunkered down during a snowstorm. The only real dispute we had was over what to name our Garmin. Sam often handled the bear hang while Emmet was busy with other tasks like cooking or cleaning camp.

Safety and Risk Management Concerns

The main safety concern was the unexpected snowstorm and the risk it created in high alpine terrain. On May 16, we were just below Leg Lake when the Garmin forecast showed an incoming snowstorm. Continuing to Tayo Lakes would have required crossing a high pass during the storm and then camping above treeline. We were worried about avalanche risk, very cold conditions, exposure, and whether our tent could handle the storm. Because of this, we decided not to continue toward Tayo Lakes and moved to lower, safer terrain near Roaring Fork Creek the next morning.

The storm became much larger than forecast. Instead of roughly eight inches across two days, we received about three feet of snow. We managed risk by staying put, keeping our camp in a safer location, fishing only when conditions allowed, and avoiding the high alpine sections of the planned route. We were not avalanche trained and did not have skis or snowshoes, so we treated snow-covered passes and avalanche-prone slopes as no-go terrain. This was especially important when we scouted the possible route toward Silas Lakes and realized that it would require off-trail travel across slopes that looked unsafe.

The final major safety decision came on May 22, when another storm began and had already dropped about half a foot of snow by midday. At that point, staying longer would have meant more snow, colder conditions, fewer safe travel options, and increased avalanche concern. We evacuated while we still had a safe route out.

After that, there were no storms. We did find grizzly prints at Double Cabin every day, but never saw one.

Specific Route Descriptions & Concerns

The route changed before we even entered the field. Because Dickinson Creek access was not allowed for us, we started at Worthen Meadow. From there, we tried to connect with as much of our original route as possible. On May 16, we traveled up toward Leg Lake and camped near the lake, then decided not to commit to the high pass toward Tayo Lakes because of the incoming storm. On May 17, we backtracked down to safer terrain near Roaring Fork Creek.

Our main backcountry camp ended up being near Roaring Fork Creek, a few miles outside Worthen Meadow. This was not the full route we planned, but it became the safest and most realistic base camp because it had water, nearby fishing, and a reasonable evacuation route. From there, we fished the creek, attempted day trips, went to Roaring Fork Lake, completed our resupply at Worthen, and scouted the route toward Silas Lakes.

The route toward Silas Lakes became unrealistic after the snow. It would have required off-trail travel and descending a snow-covered pass with avalanche concern. Because there were no other people around, no established tracks besides ours, and no safe reason to continue higher, we decided not to push farther into the route.

Photographs



Grayling!



Double Cabin campfire!



Biggest rainbow!



Somewhat scenic fishing spot close to camp. The creek melted sometime in the later afternoon because there was flow from a creek, but was often frozen in the mornings.



Following our tracks back down pre storm! There was already much postholing before the storm, but it was manageable, and there was fishing!

More pics to come in presentation of course!

Detailed Daily Course Log

Day 1: May 15

Starting Location: Divide, Colorado

Ending Location: Wind River Range / Worthen Meadow area

Movement / Distance: Driving day.

What We Did: Drove from Divide to the Wind River Range and camped near the trailhead in the later afternoon.

Significant Notes: This was the first major route change. Worthen had originally been our resupply point, but it became our starting point after we learned that we could not access the Dickinson Creek road.

Day 2: May 16

Starting Location: Worthen Meadow area

Ending Location: Camp near Leg Lake / just below Leg Lake

Movement / Distance: Hiked from Worthen Meadow toward the Leg Lake area.

What We Did: Hiked up toward Leg Lake and camped near the lake. We checked the Garmin forecast and saw that a snowstorm was coming in. The next planned section would have required crossing a high pass toward Tayo Lakes, so we decided not to continue over the pass the next day.

Significant Notes: This was the most important safety decision of the trip. Continuing over the pass would have put us high, exposed, and close to or above treeline during the storm.

Day 3: May 17

Starting Location: Camp near Leg Lake / just below Leg Lake

Ending Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Movement / Distance: Backtracked downhill to safer terrain near Roaring Fork Creek.

What We Did: Followed our tracks back down before the storm got worse and found a safer campsite near Roaring Fork Creek. We set up and reinforced camp as best as we could, managed the tent, and fished nearby when conditions allowed.

Significant Notes: The forecast had called for manageable snow, but conditions worsened into a serious storm. Camping near Roaring Fork Creek kept us closer to Worthen Meadow, our resupply point and evacuation route.

Day 4: May 18

Starting Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Ending Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Movement / Distance: Stayed near camp.

What We Did: Continued to wait out the blizzard. We took shifts through the night to knock snow off the tent and woke up roughly every 15-30 minutes. We stayed in place because moving into the high alpine without winter travel gear would have been unsafe.

Significant Notes: Across May 17 and May 18, roughly three feet of snow fell. Our tent was not designed for that much snow and was often damp inside.

Day 5: May 19

Starting Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Ending Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Movement / Distance: Stayed near camp with short fishing movements.

What We Did: Remained at camp and fished the same creek area. We still could not realistically move camp because of the snow. We believe it was also snowing this day, though we slept better that night.

Significant Notes: We learned through our contact that the high alpine lakes were no longer usable for the original ice-break fishing plan because they had frozen back over.

Day 6: May 20

Starting Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Ending Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Movement / Distance: Day trip to Roaring Fork Lake.

What We Did: Took a day trip down to Roaring Fork Lake to find accessible fishing, then returned to the same camp afterward.

Significant Notes: The fishing was not especially good, and our options were becoming very limited.

Day 7: May 21

Starting Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Ending Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Movement / Distance: Hiked down to Worthen Meadow for resupply, then hiked back up to the same campsite near Roaring Fork Creek.

What We Did: Went down to Worthen Meadow and met Emmitt's dad for the planned resupply. After resupplying, we returned back up to our campsite near Roaring Fork Creek and camped there again that night. We were also able to briefly scout the possible route toward Silas Lakes and Creek without taking all of our gear. The route was clearly unsafe because of snow-covered off-trail terrain and avalanche concern.

Significant Notes: Staying near Worthen made the resupply possible and kept us close to an evacuation route. It had started snowing again. By the time we got back to camp near Roaring Fork Creek, there was around six more inches of snow, with more forecasted.

Day 8: May 22

Starting Location: Camp near Roaring Fork Creek

Ending Location: Campground near Lander

Movement / Distance: Scouted the possible Silas route, then evacuated out.

What We Did: There was already a new half foot of snow, with more forecasted. We evacuated and spent the night at a campground near Lander.

Significant Notes: This ended the backcountry section of the trip. We decided there was no longer a safe or worthwhile reason to remain in the Wind River backcountry.

Day 9: May 23

Starting Location: Campground near Lander

Ending Location: Campground near Lander

Movement / Distance: Day trip.

What We Did: Made a day trip to the Middle Fork of the Popo Agie to continue the fishing objective in a safer area.

Significant Notes: This allowed us to keep working toward the fishing goal without trying to force the original high alpine route.

Day 10: May 24

Starting Location: Campground near Lander

Ending Location: Lander area / en route toward next fishing location

Movement / Distance: Day trip and travel planning.

What We Did: Made another fishing day trip to the Middle Fork of the Popo Agie and began shifting toward the next fishing location.

Significant Notes: We caught brown trout and rainbow trout in the Popo Agie area.

Day 11: May 25

Starting Location: Lander area

Ending Location: Double Cabin area

Movement / Distance: Driving and fishing day.

What We Did: Drove to Double Cabin, a place recommended by locals near the Yellowstone area, to target the remaining species needed for the grand slam.

Significant Notes: The area had no snow, which showed how unusual and localized the Wind River snowstorm had been.

Day 12: May 26

Starting Location: Double Cabin area

Ending Location: Double Cabin area

Movement / Distance: Fishing day.

What We Did: Fished the Double Cabin area.

Significant Notes: We completed the grand slam objective by catching Yellowstone cutthroat trout in the Double Cabin area.

Day 13: May 27

Starting Location: Double Cabin area

Ending Location: Divide, Colorado

Movement / Distance: Driving day.

What We Did: Drove home.