



The myriad lakes of the Absaroka Beartooth Wilderness offer limitless opportunity for secluded adventure.

The Beartooth Highway (US 212), the most scenic drive in America, provides convenient access to the Beartooth segment of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. Spectacular scenery, for sure, but just a portal to the vast world that lies beyond. The wilderness found on the Beartooth Plateau holds not only the power to heal a tortured soul, but also to bridge the generation gap that in our society is more often a generation gulf. In his essay, Aaron Teasdale writes about bridging the generation gap in his own family, first from his father to him, and then on to his own sons. The original motivation he describes is invariably the lure of fabled fishing, but just as invariably, what they found was of deeper and more lasting value. —JAT

AARON TEASDALE

## What the Mountains Give *Three Generations in the Beartooths*

**I**T WAS THEIR FIRST JOURNEY INTO THE Beartooths when my sons learned to speak marmot, the chirps and whistles of the jumbo ground squirrels providing reliable accompaniment to high-country saunters here. Silas and Jonah instantly bonded with the cherubic mammals, and their youthful voice boxes allowed them to mimic the high-pitched language with surprising fidelity. At least I thought so. The marmots may have been less impressed with their attempts at interspecies fellowship, but that didn't stop the boys from whistling and calling with childhood vigor as we ambled through the mountains.

My own relationship with Beartooth marmots stretches back to my increasingly distant youth, when my father began taking me into these mountains as a child.



Yellow-bellied marmot  
© Silas Teasdale



© Aaron Teasdale

Though the country's unruly character eventually won my heart, it was the wildlife that first sparked my ardor. The elk herd, hundreds strong, viewed from a clifftop at sunset in a cool, dusky meadow far below. The young bear, the first I'd seen while on my own feet rather than inside a vehicle, that scampered away in mountain forest. And the marmots. I loved the marmots, and attempted to bring them home with me via the photographs I amassed, crawling across the tundra for hours, ever closer, for the best possible shots. To my dad's exasperation, after picking up our photos from the lab later he found roll after roll of film filled with their buck-toothed visages.

I never did learn the marmot mother tongue, though, so watching the boys commune with them felt like a kind of progress for the bloodline. This was our first tri-generational backpacking trip, my sons joining me and Dad, now carrying the honorable title of Grandpa, and we were in the Beartooths, our hallowed alpine roaming grounds, for the first time all together.

It was our second day out and we aspired to reach a distant alpine lake, where Grandpa had taken me decades ago as a boy. We were above treeline now and as we stepped over a brook I told Jonah, all of eight years old, that this water was as clean as any on this planet.

He bent down on little legs over the crystal flow and drank. After I explained how to identify springs, snow melt, signs of animal activity, and other ways to avoid suspect water sources, he proceeded to gulp from nearly every brooklet we passed that afternoon.

Like clockwork, he would smack his lips and say, "Oh man, that is some good water!"

Silas, twelve and an ardent fisherman, was less satisfied with our thirst-quenching pace. He'd heard the family tales about how good fishing can be in these lakes. "What do you say we all try to go faster now," he urged.

It's a delicate balance bringing kids into wilderness. We'd been hiking for hours and I didn't want Jonah to wilt. I'd learned if you push kids too hard, clinging to adult goals, they won't have fun – and if you want kids to love nature, it starts with fun.

"We're all doing our best," I said. "Jonah's doing a great job."

"Yeah," Jonah said defiantly, "And I'm the youngest Teasdale to ever go backpacking." I was ten when Dad first took me into wild country with everything on our back that we needed to survive for a week. Those early trips taught me the value of self-sufficiency and the inner equilibrium that, even for a child, can be found in vast, untamed places.

As afternoon turned to eve, we were still hiking, low sun gilding the peaks. Mountain goat tracks appeared in the soft earth. Ravens called

from cliff sides as we neared a low-slung pass. We were high in the alpine now and the group's palpable excitement crescendoed as the lake finally came into view below. Silas appeared to be levitating. As we started down to the glittering pool beneath the peaks, I told Jonah, who'd picked up the pace in his excitement, "You might be the first eight-year-old to ever hike all the way in here!"

"Silas, I might be the first eight-year-old to hike here!" he yelled to Silas, who didn't reply as he bounded ahead like his life was in the balance.

By bringing me here as a child, my father passed on to me his love of wild places, a love carried on from my grandfather. Now my son's excitement sent a warm shimmer through me, as if I was coming here again for the first time and everything was right in the world. As much as anything I can teach them as a father, I want my boys to know the power and peace of wild country. Since those early trips with Dad, I've spent much of my adult life exploring the planet's untamed landscapes. It's here I've come to see ravens and trout and goats and marmots as kin, fellow passengers on this fecund orb spinning through the cosmos. I've learned to embrace the wild spirit of this world, no matter how some try to pave it away, and believe this wildness is the wellspring of vitality in the biosphere and the core frequency that unifies all life. I want my children to know this primordial energy, to feel it in themselves, to understand the current of this world.

So, as ever, I return to the Beartooths.

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As we ate hot cereal on the lakeshore the next morning, Grandpa surveyed the water and rocky slopes beyond. "Did you ever tell the guys about that night we got flattened?" he asked.

The boys had been chattering away over boy things but at these words they quieted. I chuckled and told the story of how Grandpa had led me and his frequent adventure buddy, Ron, for 17 miles into some half-frozen Beartooth lake high in who knows where and found a patch of snow-free ground to pitch our little tent, a Frostline Grandpa had sewn himself in the backpacking boom of the 1970s. The lake looked a lot like the one before us now, stark and beautiful. Then a storm came in during the night and began to batter our little hand-made nylon shelter. Grandpa went out in the wind-blasted darkness to guy the tent to rocks.

"Were the winds like 30 miles per hour?" Silas asked.

"Try 60," Grandpa said.

"I was terrified," I said. Lightning flashed through the tent walls and thunder seemed to shake the very ground beneath us. The wind grew violent, blowing the tent flat across our bodies. I was certain we were going to be blown off the mountain. This was a power, and a vulnerability, I'd not yet known.

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Golden eagle  
© Tom Murphy

“Were you young?” Silas asked.

“About your age.”

“Do you remember the white caps?”  
Grandpa asked.

“Never saw ‘em. I was too busy holding onto  
the tent and fearing for my life.”

“They were 6-feet high. I couldn’t believe they could get that  
big in such a small patch of open water.”

Yet, Grandpa noted with some pride, the tent held. And I, a kid from  
the city, learned of the real power in this world.

Fortunately, the weather was much more benign as we sat with the boys  
and talked beside the whitecapless lake. I glassed a golden eagle riding  
thermals above sun-warmed cliffs. We pulled out a map and looked at the  
necklace of lakes draped across the rolling plateau nearby. Silas’s eyes  
popped and just like that we had our plan for the day – ambling and fishing.

The best days are simple days. And so it was as we sauntered across the  
airy expanse of the Beartooth Plateau. Whistling pipits sang from the  
tundra’s carpet of flowers. Lichen-painted boulders drifted past. The  
boys once again bonded with the marmots. And then the lakes, hidden  
behind the terrain’s rocky ripples, began revealing themselves.

Sprawled on flat rocks and enjoying lunch a while later, the sun  
warm on our skin, Grandpa, in a prediction he has yet to live down,  
said the nameless tarn before us was likely lacking piscine inhabitants.  
This did not deter Silas, who for the next 30 minutes proceeded to pull  
out a trout on every single cast. Jonah, still learning the angling arts,  
had the same luck and soon the boys were hunched at the water’s edge,

Silas teaching his younger brother how to strip the guts from a fish.  
Silas declared the pool to be named Every-Cast Lake.

At another lake, much larger, we watched enrapt as an avian missile of  
an osprey dove at the water’s surface, submerged in a splash, and erupted  
upward with a white-bellied fish in its talons. Osprey apparently can  
afford to be choosy in this land of plenty, because it soon loosened its  
grip, the flopping fish plummeting through the air and splashing back  
into the water. We wondered how many rejected trout were swimming  
the lakes here working through their own PTSD and warning peers  
about the searingly bright, breathless world above.

We’ve never been particularly goal-oriented when we’re back here,  
unless simply enjoying ourselves, finding ancient rhythms, and feeling  
the earth’s beating pulse, qualifies as a goal. So we spent three nights at  
the same camp, foraging out on day trips sans heavy packs, to explore  
and see what wonders the world contained. The day after Every-Cast  
Lake we aimed high.



Silas casting  
© Aaron Teasdale

The mountain above our camp vaulted to over 12,000 feet. On the  
other side lay Grasshopper Glacier, which I’d only read about. I told  
the kids about the now-extinct species of grasshopper caught in an alpine  
storm here hundreds or thousands of years before, their bodies now  
entombed in the ice. Maybe we can see it from the summit!

First, however, there was a waterfall to see, where virginal water beginning  
its journey from summit to sea soared over a cliff edge in a roaring,  
silver horse tail. The morning was warm and we listened to the cascade’s  
music as its mist cooled our skin. We scooped cup after cupful of elixerlike  
liquid into our mouths, feeling it flow frigidly through our throats.

Clambering up the boulders next to the falls, as close as we could before  
the rocks became too slick for purchase, we moved near to each other  
to speak, lest our words drown in the din. Higher and higher we  
climbed, to where black-crowned rosy finches hopped from rock to  
rock seeking sustenance. We stopped frequently to do the same, taking  
long breaks for no reason other than to sit and look across the world,  
finding fortifications more lasting than calories.

Up in the thin air we pondered the limitless shades of blue on mountains  
stacked as far as vision allowed. We watched mountain goats and white-  
crowned sparrows. At some point, as we hiked and the endless jumble  
of boulders seemed to reach forever higher, the young legs in our group  
tiring and the old legs unconcerned with arriving anywhere in particular,  
it became clear we would not reach the summit. Which was just fine.  
There was nothing to conquer. Whatever the mountains gave was enough.

And so we stopped at 11,500 feet – the highest the boys had ever  
reached! – and rested on the best boulders we could find. We looked  
across the Beartooth Plateau below, the azure gems of water, the pearly  
snowfields on the mountainsides, the glaciers wedged into the summit’s  
north-facing scarps. The Absarokas spiked the sky to the south, their



Silas and Jonah  
at 11,500 feet  
© Aaron Teasdale

spear-tipped summits contrasting with the blunt-topped Beartooths.  
There were Pilot and Index Peaks, containing the world’s drama and  
beauty in their majestic horns. Somehow the concept of planetary time  
and the scale of this world was conveyed to us. So many mountains, so  
much sky. Every direction wild.



Grizzly bear  
on carcass  
© Aaron Teasdale

As we climbed down and reached the tundra again we came to one of the countless glacial erratics scattered across the glacially hewn landscape and found the white splatter of a large bird dropping. This in itself would have been worthy only of a few juvenile jokes from the boys (and maybe the fathers), except closer inspection disclosed the small, furry tail of some unfortunate mammal or another next to it. The boys were captivated. Their dad, too. Few things stir the imagination of kids of all ages like the remains of a carnivore kill.

The value of preserving this wildness, that self-willed landscape unmolested by humanity's all-encompassing grip, is something I try to pass on to the boys. Sometimes those lessons are small ones. Arriving back at the lake a few hours later, I pointed across to our campsite and showed them the charcoal scrawls they'd left on the boulder behind the small campfire we'd made that morning, proclaiming their respective greatness and their brother's inferiority. I didn't say anything at the time, but now I asked them how they would feel if they were just arriving at the lake for the first time and saw those markings. They understood, even if they briefly protested when I said they could scrub off the youthful graffiti with lake water when we got back. And they did.

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Undevoured tails and sociable marmots aside, we never did encounter much megafauna on those high trips on the Plateau (and we returned to those lakes time and time again in the following years, at the boy's insistence). So on our most recent trip, with planning responsibilities having shifted from my aging father to me, I led us into the Absarokas, a few drainages to the west of our usual Beartooth haunts, where free-roaming wildlife abounds. While the crowds of Yellowstone National Park's Northern Range were a shock, we soon hiked up a lesser-traveled valley where we promptly walked among bison, elk, black bears, and coyotes.

"Imagine when all of North America was like this," I said to Jonah, by then 14 and carrying a full-size backpack. Walking through a kaliedoscope of wildflowers, we talked about the grizzly bears and unending bison herds that once roamed the plains when this continent was less bruised by man. In an age of rapidly diminishing ecological baselines, I bring my children to this country to show them what a living landscape looks like. I want them to know the normal world is not normal at all, and by being here I hope they understand how those "civilized" landscapes are but impoverished husks of their former vigor.

As we hiked deeper into the valley, a million acres of wilderness radiating from our feet, immaculate wolf tracks appeared in the wet earth. Fresh as the moment, you could see subtle lines from the paw's skin. We'd been calling out for bears, but now I encouraged everyone to quiet. This wild creature couldn't be far. Walking in silence, a large meadow opened before us, when Jonah, in front, stopped suddenly and blurted, "Is that a bear?"

Raising binoculars to my eyes, I whisper-yelled, "Grizzly!"

It had the classic caramel coloring, its shoulder-hump hairs tinged with gold, a Greater Yellowstone specialty. We watched spellbound as it

grazed in the meadow for 20 minutes, before we moved on a short way to a perfect campsite in an open pocket in the trees on the edge of the clearing, a creek between us and the grizzly meadow.

As on many of our trips, my dad's best friend, Ron, was with us. Ron is a wisecracking New Yorker with an abiding fear of grizzly bears, but to his everlasting credit he does not let his fear stop him from joining on us on wilderness explorations. As we watched the bear, his face tightened and he said, "You guys sure you don't want to camp five or six miles up the valley?"

But dusk was spreading from tree wells and a quick scamper up the trail revealed no other sites. Everyone was tired and there were good trees here for hanging food. So we sparked a fire and decided to camp there, our first time camping in sight of an active grizzly bear.

Minutes after waking the following morning I noticed movement in the trees just beyond our camp. Instantly stepping over to where the others were mingling, I said, "Hey! Hey! Hey!" in my sharpest hushed tone. "Get your bear sprays!" We closed into a tight group and watched as a large, all-black bear of indeterminate species casually strolled through the trees at the edge of our camp as if we didn't exist. I called out, expecting it to run. It didn't.

Awash in bears, we followed fresh grizzly tracks along a moist trail that morning, past thickets of freshly devoured cow parsnip. Everyone was loud and kept their bear spray at the ready. Ron, who frequently drifts off the back as we hike, was not enthusiastic about the situation. I reassured him that bears have never been documented attacking a group of five people.

"Well, we better stay together then," he shot back. "Because if you guys see one and tell it another guy's coming it might not believe you."

Fortunately for everyone, it never came to that, though some large animal charged through the forest at our approach, unseen, shattering branches in its rush. I spied a bull moose in a boggy meadow. Silas eagerly pulled more trout out of the creek's cold pools. I imagined what it would be like to traverse the entire wilderness, east to west, and decided to do that someday. As much as he would love it, it's a trip my aging father won't be joining me on.

Later that day while crossing a creek on a skinny log, Grandpa's foot slipped at a slick spot where the bark had worn away. Still insisting on carrying too many of the group's supplies, he fell with his massive pack, landing awkwardly against the trunk of a tree on the creek's bank. A scary moment that somehow unfolded slowly, I stared, hoping he wasn't hurt. Never one to complain or admit injury, he brushed himself off and tested his shoulder and leg as I looked at him sideways, not wanting to appear overly concerned, but probably feeling overly concerned. I'd been watching him become more fragile over the years and didn't want him getting hurt back here, where rescue would be difficult.

"I'm okay, just tore the shoulder," he assured me. Though "just tore the shoulder" wasn't the most confidence-inspiring report. He ended up being fine, as far as I could tell, though a popped varicose vein on his calf left a purple swollen spot the size of a grizzly track.

As we hiked on and I watched my septuagenarian father shouldering his heavy load, I recalled one of our first trips together here, when it was just the two of us. I had flagged after a long day and insisted I couldn't go farther. So my dad put my pack atop his own to hike the last few miles to camp. I followed in awe. My Dad was a superhero.

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A few years later, during a summer in college as we hiked down a rocky trail high in the Beartooths, we talked about my future and possible careers. Dad asked what it was I most enjoyed doing. I didn't know then that, inspired by these journeys, I would become an outdoor writer and photographer, capturing the beauty of wild places. But Dad said something I hadn't expected when I asked him, a busy businessman often consumed by his work, what he most loved. These trips, he said, tromping through wild country with his son, were his favorite things.

It was on that first Beartooth trip with my own sons that this finally began to make sense to me. I'd given Silas a point and shoot camera to use on the trip and here was a marmot, eyeing us suspiciously while munching fists of vegetation. Silas took a picture. He crept a little closer and took another. As we watched from a sun-soaked rock, I chuckled and Grandpa said, "Reminds me of you all those years ago." Silas inched ever closer, shutter clicking, as the family collection of Beartooth marmot portraits grew again for the first time in three decades.

In that moment, time revealed itself as a kind of circle, or perhaps a deeply twisting river upon which we float past old places from new angles. In this unstoppable flow we see the world anew through our children while a love of marmots, pot-bellied beacons of the wild, passes down through generations. When my dad surprised me all those years ago, I didn't yet understand a parent's love for their children. I understood now.

"These trips are so precious," Dad said, as we strolled a lakeshore later that night seeking just the right campsite for the last night of our trip. The boys were running around playing, their cries joining a cacophony of birdsong. "You think it's always going to be like this, but it's not."

Intellectually, I knew this to be true, but like my father's earlier parental proclamations, it wasn't something I could yet grasp. In the years since that trip, as I've watched him become an old man, watched my boys become

busy young men, and seen the lines of time deepen on my own skin. I've come to understand. I now realize our trip into the Absarokas two years ago might have been our final backpacking trip together. Last year we visited Montana's drive-up fire lookout towers, a beautiful trip less demanding on old bones. These times we share together, fathers and sons in the mountains, are just windows in our fleeting lives, and no window stays open forever.

So it was that we finally found the perfect campsite tucked into a cluster of trees on that lake and the sun slipped behind low, gauzy clouds, a blood orange orb, as we prepared dinner by a campfire. I called everyone to the shore and we all stood with each other and watched in silence, until Jonah greeted a nearby marmot. As the sun melted into cloud, we realized how fast the earth was spinning. Yet there was no rush, no other place to be. We were just here, deeply alive, enjoying our last night together in the Beartooths.



© Aaron Teasdale

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Harold Teasdale  
Beartooth Mountains  
© Aaron Teasdale

