
Stop 43. Glacier West

Arrival datetime: Thursday, June 27, 10:30PM

Sites visited: Glacier National Park
Accommodations: Lake McDonald Lodge
States traveled: Idaho, Montana

The car was starting to overflow with souvenirs. It was also time to change the oil. So we spent much more time in Coeur D'Alene than expected. We unloaded the unbreakable souvenirs from the back seat of the car at a Mailboxes Etc. Jennifer stayed to pack them up and ship them. Michael took the car for an oil change and also had the tires rotated. We did not head out of town until 2:15PM. The drive out of Idaho took us out of the dense foliage to which we had become accustomed. There were just a few scattered trees on the brown foothills. The rivers continued, wide, flat, and greenish gray.

By later afternoon, we reached the National Bison Range. This place was run by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, not the National Park service. So our pass did not work, but the Ranger was much more helpful explaining the admission policy than had been the Forest Service. We learned that, had we paid an extra \$15 for a "hologram" sticker for our pass, we would have gotten in here, as well as many of the Forest Service-run places we had paid a few dollars for here and there. We also learned that, when Michael turned 62 a week from now, he could buy a \$10, "Golden Eagle Pass," that would work the same as the hologram. So we paid the \$4. The Ranger also told us that the

hundreds of antlers stacked on a wooden frame outside were all found in the area, and that bison had been seen on the road just an hour before. So we started on the 19-mile gravel loop through the park.



Antlers on a wooden frame.

The low broad hills were almost devoid of vegetation other than grass and wildflowers, so it was easy to sweep your eyes across the range to scan for wildlife. We saw bison almost right away, but they were so far away we had to get out the binoculars to be sure. There were at least thirty, maybe fifty dark uneven brown mounds that slowly ambled up on their feet, or sat back down. That was all the movement we could distinguish at so great a distance.

We saw a car stopped ahead of us and slowed down in anticipation. But they were taking pictures of mule deer, so we

drove on. We had seen plenty of deer so far this trip and we still had a long drive to our ultimate destination, Glacier National Park. We saw another car stopped ahead, and again, we slowed down. This time, sure enough, there were bison on the hill between the stopped car and us. With the binoculars, we could see at least 10 dark brown, tall, muscular, mangy-skinned creatures, with shaggy heads and thin tails with shaggy ends. Those with the shaggiest heads were the biggest. All except some small calves had horns several inches long.

We read in a guide that bison were commonly called buffalo, even though no buffalo ever existed in North America, just Asia and Africa. So we sang, "Home on the Range," for the second time this trip, realizing that the first time may have been a mistake. Though there were not clouds in the desert, there were no buffalo either. Here there were deer and buffalo, even though the sky was cloudy, and we had not yet seen an antelope, we supposed that there may be times when the "sky was not cloudy all day."

As we approached the stopped car at 5 mph, we saw that it was a US Fish and Wildlife Service truck. A man was standing outside it, leaning on the back. Buffalo were on the road in front of him, and swarmed on the hillsides on either side of the road. These animals had heads bigger than our torsos and torsos as big as large motorcycles. We had read that they looked docile but could become aggressive, and to stay near our car. Now that we were this close, we decided to interpret that to mean stay in the car as much as possible. We figured we would look larger and more threatening in the car. We could not imagine how the man

outside was so relaxed where he stood, not ten feet from them. But we guessed he worked there and was probably protecting the buffalo from us.



A male buffalo pauses to drink before crossing the road.

We rolled down our windows to take pictures. Michael occasionally opened his door and stood just inside it for a better shot while Jennifer kept a close eye on the animals at his back. We inched along the road, taking the opportunity to drive ahead a few yards when the buffalo meandered out of our direct path. Though we moved steadily at every opportunity, we still spent at least forty-five minutes among the herd.

Finally clear of them, we continued to look for wildlife on the hills. We stopped for wildflowers and landscape views. The low green hills alternated their slopes on the valley floor, where a river rounded first one on the left, then one on the right. We had almost finished the loop drive when Jennifer saw some small scampering creatures high on a hill above us. They were too far away to see even with binoculars, and we supposed they were deer. But then there was one beside us, and its antlers did not look like those



A female buffalo crossing the road (her calf is behind her).

of a deer. They were black and curled back. Jennifer consulted the visitor guide and found they were pronghorns, or “antelopes.” We sang, “Oh give me a home, where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play,” three times before we got tired of it, collapsing into giggles.

We then got serious about trying to get to Glacier. It was growing late and we knew we would not make it there by dinner. We wasted precious minutes trying to find a restaurant on the water in Big Forks to no avail. At just before 9:00PM, we stopped for a very good, very quick Mexican meal on the highway and continued toward the park. We arrived at almost 10:30PM and surprisingly, it was not completely dark.

We had skipped into the Mountain Time zone and it was just twilight. This was not full moon twilight, but genuine twilight. We even enjoyed views of twilight reflections on the lake.

We awoke to a cloudy day. We had booked a horseback ride for 9:00AM, so took our time getting ready and having breakfast. At the Lodge’s breakfast buffet, Jennifer got a bowlful of biscuit gravy instead of oatmeal by accident and almost gagged when she tasted it. We strolled along Lake McDonald. It was surrounded by smooth colorful rocks, purples, greens, reds, pinks, and well as various shades of gray. The water was clear but silt made it murky where the creek flowed into it. Rather than the blue reflection of the sky to which we were



And the antelope play.

accustomed, this lake was a uniform dull green.

Our horseback ride took us along McDonald Creek, which was much more of a river than most rivers we had seen. It was silty green and crashing white, swamping trees and low lying land, creating small islands, and washing away trees. The forest we road through was cedar and hemlock, trees fallen everywhere, familiar old growth interdependent ecosystems of moss, fungus, wildflowers, insects, and other wildlife. We were a bit disappointed because we had specifically asked whether the trail rides brought us to a place in the park we could not get to easily on foot, and the salesperson had said yes. However, we could see a road

from the trail on and off for most of the way. Also, it was a cold three-hour ride. However, in the end, we were glad we had chosen to ride because they took us along the same trail we had been thinking of hiking, and it was muddy and full of horse evidence. So it was much better to be on a horse than on foot.

We had lunch in the lodge and embarked on a boat tour of Lake McDonald. This was interesting for its mountain views and geologic history. This park has some of the oldest rock on the earth's surface. Almost a full third of the land in the park is alpine, that is, it is so high it does not support trees. It used to have hundreds of Glaciers, but now has only seven or so, and they are melting so fast that by the year 2030, it will have none. They will



McDonald Creek.



Navigating the muddy trail along McDonald Creek on horseback.

probably not change the park's name, as it will still be historically significant. We learned about the guy who lived here with the Indians in the 1800s and sent articles to the editor of field and stream.

That editor, Grinnell, popularized the park and got a mountain, glacier, and lake named after him. It did not seem to take much to get a mountain after you in those days. Several were named for people who had simply climbed them after the area was already popular.

The mountains lining the lake had distinctive shapes and made a nice frame for the cloudy green water. A lot of the rock around the lake was deep red reminiscent of Zion. It was certainly a pretty place, but we were not yet sold on it being a close cousin to Yosemite or Zion, as many people had exclaimed. At the visitor center at Apgar, we got a taste of what was to come. The slide presentation showed a lot of very scenic landscapes without describing where



Distant view of the Continental Divide from Lake McDonald.

exactly in the park the scenes were from or what specifically different parts of the park had to offer.

We had not yet gone hiking and we were looking for some advice as to where to go. The horse guide had extolled the virtues of Avalanche Lake but we were worried about bears. A clerk in Port Angeles, hearing our plans for Glacier, had warned us about the bears, saying that they were known to be a “big problem” there. We had seen in the park literature that they were “unpredictable.” Instead of the “dos and don’ts” of Yosemite, Glacier literature offered “suggestions” as if there was nothing known that could save you if you were attacked. This was also the first place the literature made reference to

bears “stalking” humans as prey. Apparently, if you were stalked, there was less hope of avoiding attack than if you surprised a bear by accident, though neither scenario looked good.

One of the suggestions was to hike in groups. We had seen there were many Ranger-led hikes and asked a Ranger if they all really went according to the schedule. When he said that they did, we figured we had better arrange our hiking schedule around them. He noticed that we were wearing our Zion T-Shirts and he became another Glacier fan telling us that it was very much like Zion. He told us where the best views were in the Apgar area, applauded our plans to hike Avalanche Lake, and insisted we should



Lake McDonald from Rocky Point.

go to the Many Glacier area. Some others asked him to recommend pepper spray to deter bears and we listened to the answer. He said he could not recommend any brand, but told them what brand the park service used. We wrote it down.

Following the Ranger's advice, we took a short hike to Rocky Point, a nice place to view Lake McDonald. It was less than 2 miles round trip but already we were sick of making noises to distract bears. We clapped and spoke loudly. We felt ridiculous. On the way back, we passed a campground and found 3 teenage girls lying quietly in the middle of the path. They quietly told us that they were playing a game. After that, we figured if the bears were after anyone, they would

go for these morsels first. We enjoyed the rest of the hike in silence.

At the lodge, we opted for the pizza and beer restaurant rather than the formal dining room. Walking across the resort complex, we saw a red headed squirrel that looked like a cartoon character, though we were not sure which one. We went early to bed to prepare for our 8:30AM Ranger-led Avalanche hike. We ran late anyway. Jennifer went into the Park Café to get breakfast for the road.

While Michael waited outside, he saw a magpie.



Miles traveled: 314
Departure datetime: Saturday, June 29, 8:10AM
Departure weather: 54° Raining