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"This park is very special. The people who know it well feel proprietary toward its mountains, scattered lakes, and glaciers. Perhaps it is the arrangement of the land, an unsurpassed concentration of American wilderness. Time and again I have thought, as I regarded some aspect of this country, yes, this is exactly right—almost, it would seem as if some magic existed that could translate thought and emotion into rock and bark."

Greg Beaumont

A View Inside Glacier National Park

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OUR NATION'S 10TH NATIONAL PARK

100 YEARS • 100 STORIES

The Echoes of our Voices

By Brian Schott, Whitefish, MT

The park ranger laughs at us when we walk into the backcountry permit office in Apgar at 11 a.m. and request popular camping sites with few spaces in the heart of summer. We should know better, he says, since we live in Whitefish, and we joke with him about our laziness as we peruse the listings of the few available sites. Fortunately, Snyder Lakes is open and was one of our top three choices—we think that the short distance, the late hour, good fishing prospects, and more hang-out time should make for a perfect overnight trip and we're glad with our luck.

We watch the backcountry safety movie and run through the checklists with the ranger, talking with him about the bears (“they walk the shores of the lake”) and other hazardous may-cause-death warnings that somehow seem to give life to people that live in the mountains. Despite our jovial mood, we are truly serious about the care that we will take. Hang the food. Bring the bear spray. Make noise. We pay the four-dollar-per-person fee, buy a bottle of wine and an extra tarp at the shop next door, and head off into the woods.

Bugs buzz and bite us as we hike our way up the steep trail toward the backcountry campground. Trying to be “helpful” (macho) I have stuffed my pack full of forty pounds of gear and let my wife Lyndsay have the lighter load. She springs up the trail while I lumber, sweat pouring down my face as I trudge up the seemingly steep first approach along the flanks of Mount Brown. Lyndsay laughs and offers me a sip of her water. Mine's almost gone. Soon I feel a hot spot on my right heel and decide to drop the pack and take a break to cover the start of a blister with mole skin.

But soon I find my rhythm. We follow the trail through the quiet woods with the bears that often feel haunted to me. I'm not sure if it's the million acres of wilderness in Glacier National Park or the variety of plants and views and surprises, or whether there are really spirits that have decided it's just the best place in the world to spend some time. Or maybe it's the sharp sound of our voices as we call “Haye-ohhhh!” telling the bears that we're here and would

rather not meet them. Secretly we want to. The jagged peaks of the mountains come into view and crouch around us like giant sentinels of life, reminding me, like the stars always do, how small we all are. The vastness is unspeakable. We arrive at the lake and determine the best site to camp based on the parameters of space, slope, views, and access to the outhouse and food prep area. We set up our tents, hang our food, and unpack our rods. My brother Mark teases me about the genius of my black fly selection since there are only about a million of them swarming around us. But the bug repellent saves our skin as we catch one small little cutthroat after another while Lyndsay and Elna make origami balloons on the rocks by the water.

The native fish are so active, we can watch them swarm and strike our flies. Soon we get picky and pull the fly away if a too-small fish swims up to feed. We want something bigger. In the shallow water by the shore we can even “shadow cast” by teasing our fly above the surface of the water so the fish leap into the air for their hooked meal. They’re so innocent and don’t know any better than to lunge at the perfect treat flying above them. We laugh at our luck and decide to eat before dark.

Mark fires up the camping stove and we sip wine while Lyndsay adds spices to the rice. It’s wonderful being the only campers and we soon notice an echo after we laugh—so we take turns yelling “Ehhh-ko!” and listen to the sound wrap its way around the cirque from Mount Brown, to the Little Matterhorn, to the steep cliffs of Mount Edwards. We snack on beef jerky and trail mix and listen to the quiet noise of wind and the trickling giggle of water. The mountains wrap us in their arms. The hot rice tastes like a gourmet meal. We sip water straight-filtered from the pristine lake, pure and cool.

This is why we live here.

We wash up, hang our food, and marvel at the fading alpenglow shadows on the walls of the mountains. Bear spray in our hands, we walk back to camp and climb into our tents while we wait for the stars to shoot from behind the fading curtain of blackness. Lynd-

say and I snooze and awake an hour later, unzip the screen window and open our eyes to the deep, rich murk of the sky, the stars like a million smoldering campfires in the milky space. We watch a few satellites navigate their way through the course of stars, then we zip ourselves back into the womb of our tent to slumber.

Morning arrives and we emerge feeling newborn and rested, even though during the night our nylon bags have slowly slid down the slippery slope of our Therm-a-Rests like glaciers, the pull of gravity on the slim slant of the camp waking us from time to time to readjust. Mark and Elna already have coffee brewing and bagels warming and we laugh about sleeping squished at the ends of our tents. We talk about going for a swim, but change our plans as clouds begin to roll in, as if blown from a giant's breath while thunder booms in the distance. We break camp as rain starts to lightly fall.

The sounds of our boots on the trail are muffled as we brush along the wet wildflowers and huckleberry bushes. The lush forest is quiet. The forest is draped with dripping clouds. I pause on the trail as the sun reemerges and we begin to catch glimpses of Lake McDonald shimmering in the distance as we hike back down the trail toward our starting point, another small cycle complete, some balance restored.

There are trivial worries to return to at home, concerns that sometimes seem like big shadows on a wall. But at this spot in time, the big trees dripping with lichen pointing toward an ocean of sky have only left room in my mind for the incredible gift of this day with the most important people in my life. I need to remember to always stop and look. Watch. Listen for the echo.

Brian Schott is a freelance writer and founding editor of the Whitefish Review.