

SOUTHEAST YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

On the third day of our explorations in Yellowstone, we decided to check out the Avalanche Peak area, as it would be our longest drive from Gardiner, MT (over 80 miles); we wanted to do it on a day with good weather but not on the weekend when there would likely be more tourists out driving the roads of Yellowstone.

The Mud Volcano geothermal area had some interestingly named features (such as Black Dragon's Cauldron) which I had seen on the Trails Illustrated TOPO map; it is a nice area to check out, but it is not nearly as spectacular as some of the other geothermal areas in the park.

Avalanche Peak is located 19 miles east of the Fishing Bridge Junction. It is a 2 mile hike to the top of Avalanche Peak from the parking area along the main road towards the east entrance. The elevation gain is 2,100 feet, but since the trail is very well maintained the hike does not seem particularly difficult (though that does not mean it is easy!).

This is the first "buffalo" which we saw in Yellowstone. It is a common misconception that Buffalo Bill shot many buffalo; however, he did shoot many of these North American Bison. It is surprising to me how anyone could find sport in shooting such a slow-moving, large target for no reason other than the sake of killing it:



As we continued along the road to Canyon Village, we encountered incredible fields of yellow wildflowers near Mount Washburn. Although the yellow flowers were dominant, there were many other flowers intermixed with the yellow flowers:



Unfortunately, we did not have time to stop and photograph these flowers on this drive, as we wanted to get to the Avalanche Peak trailhead as soon as possible:



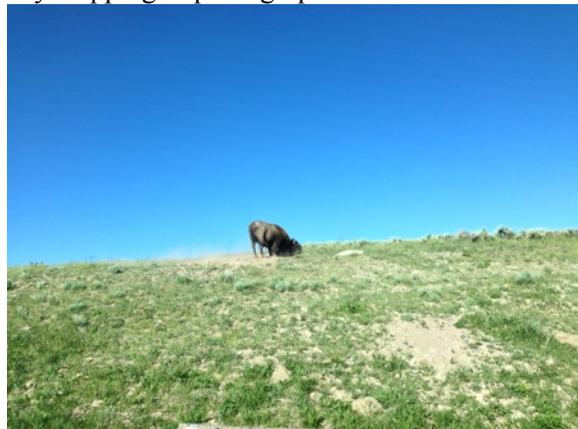
Photograph of Observation Peak after passing Chittenden Road, one of two trailheads to the top of Mount Washburn:



The wildflowers were even thicker on the south side of Dunraven Pass, on the slopes of Observation Peak:



The wildlife is definitely easy to spot when driving through the eastern side of the park; this buffalo was rubbing his face on the ground while watching the crowds causing a traffic jam by stopping to photograph him:



Mud Volcano is definitely one of the muddier geothermal areas:



This is Dragon's Mouth Spring:



Wooden information sign at Dragon's Mouth Spring; these older wooden signs appear to be more popular on the somewhat less visited eastern part of the park:



Due to the large quantities of steam rising from this spring, it was not possible to get a view into where the water was actually coming out:



Panorama from Dragon's Mouth Spring:



This is the actual Mud Volcano, for which this geothermal area was named:



Looking back at the lower part of the Mud Volcano geothermal area, before beginning to climb up towards the rest of the area, further from the parking lot:



Grizzly Fumarole:



Informative sign at Grizzly Fumarole:



The boardwalk soon leaves this lower geothermal area and enters a nice meadow-like area with some trees:



Panorama (unfortunately distorted) of Black Dragon Cauldron:



Continuing along the boardwalk, we see Churning Cauldron, which has so much steam rising off of it that it is nearly impossible to see the water below. I was not successful in photographing the churning water which could barely be seen through all the steam:



Informative sign at Churning Cauldron; the churning water is due to gases rising through the water and bubbling to the surface, not that it is boiling (the water is still at a very high temperature, though!):



Churning Cauldron from downwind, so that there is less steam obscuring the photograph (this is the less churning side of the cauldron):



The runoff from Churning Cauldron runs down towards Sizzling Basin and then through Cooking Hillside (below where this photo was taken):



Looking down at Mud Geysir, which is spewing a bit of steam, from here:



Informative sign overlooking Mud Geysir; Mud Geysir has not erupted since 1927, but the area has remained geothermally active:



Another photo of the Mud Geysir area:



Mud Cauldron:



After we left the Mud Geyser area, we passed a large group of buffalo. It was interesting to notice on our return drive through this area that tourists would stop further north up the road to photograph a lone buffalo which was a large enough distance from the road that a substantial telephoto lens would be needed to get a good image. Often, a single buffalo would be a short distance down the road standing right next to the road, and around a couple of corners there would be a large group of buffalo, neither of which had as many tourists causing as large of a traffic jam as the single buffalo which could barely be seen. Hence some advice to wildlife photographers: there are enough buffalo near the road that the best photos will be obtained by searching out these buffalo, rather than waiting for one to appear in the distance. Also, if there is a large enough traffic jam being caused by rubbernecking tourists, park rangers will luckily appear to disperse the vehicles:



Yet another buffalo, this one just past the Fishing Bridge junction:



There was quite a variety of very nice wildflowers along the shores of Yellowstone Lake:



There were much less vehicles at the parking lot for the Avalanche Peak trail than I had expected, but there were enough hikers on the trail that we were not too concerned about bears (there was a recommended 3 person group size, which was our group size, but we did encounter two solo hikers). The top of Avalanche Peak can just barely be seen through the trees in this photo:



Looking east towards Eleanor Lake from the trailhead for Avalanche Peak:



The trail starts out steep, and although the starting elevation is only at around 8,500 ft a hiker could get out of breath quickly:



The peak seems quite a distance away at the beginning of the hike, though it is nice to have an idea of how far away it is rather than have multiple deceptive false summits:



Not quite one quarter of the way to the top, the trail levels out for a short but welcome distance:



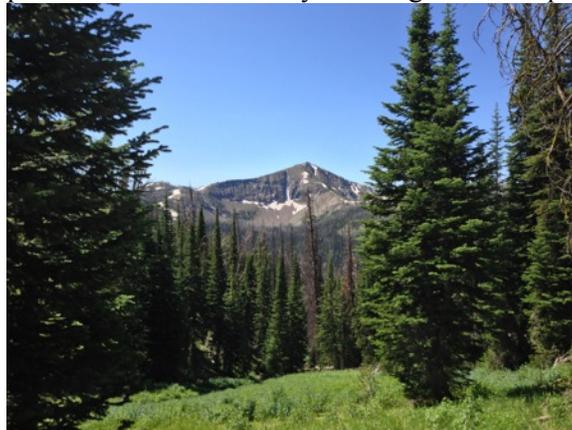
We soon enter a nice meadow:



This meadow had lots of small blue flowers:



Looking across the valley at another peak which would be very nice to get to the top of:



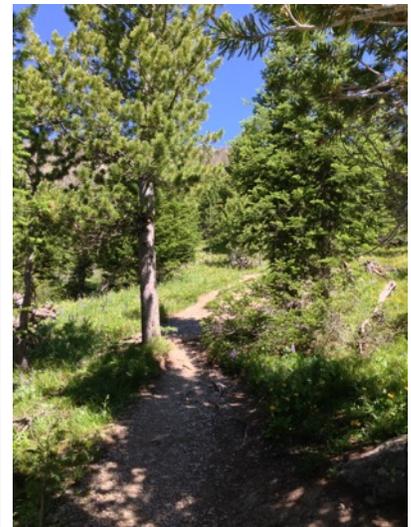
After the trail left the meadow, we began to encounter more wildflowers, which only got more spectacular:

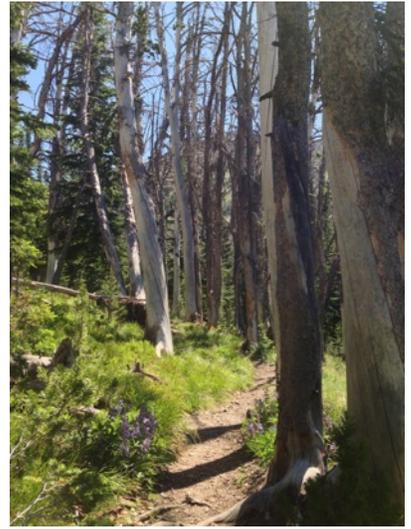


This is one of the rare glimpses we got of the peak to the southeast of Avalanche Peak, Hoyt Peak:



The next eight photos show our progress up the trail through an amazing group of wildflowers (which unfortunately did not show up well in my photos, as usual); there were smaller trees and more grassy areas in this part of the hike, beyond the meadow:





Two close-up photos of some nice flowers:



The trail finally began to get less steep as we approached the halfway point:



Looking back across the valley as more peaks are beginning to appear through the trees:



Three photos of the last steep stretch and the groups of flowers before we reach the midpoint:

