

Wind River High Route

Facts and Take-Aways

14-16 SEPTEMBER 2019

I'm sharing some facts and practical take-aways from my solo, unsupported, North-to-South traverse across the Wind River Range.¹

Here's a skeleton of what happened.

- Embarked at 3:54am on Saturday 14 September 2019 from Glacier Trail trailhead;
- Followed Andrew Skurka's Wind River High Route (the Primary Route);
- Traveled about 100 miles, about 3 of which were off route and retracing steps to regain it;
- Exited at 7:29am on Monday 16 September 2019 into Bruce Campground;
- Slept once, near Upper Golden Lake for 3 hours (2:15am–5:15am on Sunday);
Rested 10 times for more than 1 minute, usually to consume water or manage layers, for a total of about 38 minutes.

The outing lasted 51 hours 35 minutes and 24 seconds.

Sunrise was 6:50am; sunset was 7:10pm. Two 2-day weather systems within 10 days prior to my outing deposited snow in the high country: travel through the following sections was dominated by snow.

- Departure of Glacier Trail (mile 7.5) to the North face of Blaurock Pass (mile 27) = 12.5 miles.
- Creek crossing at 10,600+ (mile 30.5) to Lower Alpine Lake (mile 36) = 5.5 miles.
- Europe Peak (mile 45.5) across Europe Peak Canyon Pass = 1.5 miles.
- North side of Photo Pass = .5 miles.
- Just above Black Joe Lake (mile 75) to Deep Creek Lakes (mile 82.5) = 7.5 miles.
- **Total:** 27.5 miles of travel on snow.

The weather was stable throughout the outing: clear skies. At 10,000 feet, temperatures ranged between 24F and 38F.

Dangerous: Approaching this effort as a “run” could be dangerous. “Through-hike / mountaineering endeavor” more accurately describes my experience than does “run”: literally, I ran about 25% of the route, the easiest parts. Most of the route necessitated route-finding, scree climbs and descents, boulder hopping, glacier-travel, snowfield ascents and descents, and concentration & will. The respective hazards of such terrain include getting thoroughly lost, rock slides, ankle/leg injury, crevasses, avalanches, sliding out-of-control across snowfields, and losing some capacity to make safe decisions.

Here's a list of what I believe are important skills for safely completing this route as a single-push.

¹Contact me if you'd like a more impressionistic account of my experience.

- Very efficient boulder hopping.
(About 30% of this route is across boulder and scree fields.)
- Capacity and confidence to push boundaries of will and commitment in isolated wilderness settings (without support of any sort), while remaining cognizant and trusting risk assessment & decision-making.
- Competence quickly matching topographic features to a topo map or GPS reading, then making route-finding decisions.
- Familiarity and confidence quickly assessing risk associated to rock-slide, glacier-travel, avalanche terrain, and sleep deprivation.
- Jogging off-trail, on uneven footing; interacting with gear and a pack without stopping.

This was my 7th episode into the Wind River Range. It was my first time in the Dinwoody watershed side of Gannet, as well as the space South of there and North of Photo Pass.

Lots of elk, a porcupine, and pikas and marmots, from Golden Lake to Pyramid Lakes. First sign of recent human activity was at Photo Pass: a nice mother & son pair. 3 other parties; 2 in the Washakie trail system; 1 just South of Jack Ass Pass, they casually threatened me with a holstered handgun.

Ascending and descending Wind River Peak was, by far, the most challenging section for me – I was ill-prepared.² I became psychedelically delirious: unorganized pure perception, augmented through vivid synesthesia. It took an unnatural type of will to conjure adequate focus to safely descend the summit.³

Here is a complete account of the injuries I sustained – all of them minor: bruised shins and tweaked knee from punching through snow over boulder fields; bonked head on a tree branch, followed by 15 minutes of superficial bleeding; broken thumb nail followed by superficial bleeding; thinly abraded shoulders and torso-sides from jostling pack; superficial frost-bite/wind-burn on lower face and neck; sunburn on face and lips; mild snow blindness; loss of touch-sensation in fingers from gripping poles and interacting with snow and cold; full numbness in toes and balls of feet from bruising, probably from boulder hopping and prolonged exposure to snow and cold (after 2 weeks, still mostly numb); early signs of renal failure (swelling in face, neck, eyes, feet, ankles, calves, hands; peeing issues; trouble sleeping; confusion).

Below is an complete list of what I brought.

²It was encased in 1-2 feet of windslab snow; headlamp's batteries ran out, and toggled into 'emergency-mode'; sleep deprived; drinking-water froze; the 28F-wind was blowing at $\sim 35 \frac{\text{miles}}{\text{hour}}$.

³**This confusion was dangerous!** I easily could have laid down in the snow to sleep, punched through snow and broken a leg in sub-snow boulders, or strolled off a cliff.

	Item	Use	Remarks
Primary layer	Shoes	entire	trail-running, lightweight, w/ laces
	Socks	entire	wool, up to lower calf
	Tights	entire	waist to ankle
	Shorts	entire	tie-top, 5 pockets (4 open, 1 zipper)
	Shirt	entire	long sleeve, small collar
	Sweat bands	entire	2, on wrists
	Watch	entire	on wrist, with alarm/cycling timer
	Visor	40%	
	Pack	entire	running vest, 6 liters in back, large side and chest pouches
	Poles	60%	collapsible, hand-straps, tiny baskets
Secondary layer	Jacket	20%	synthetic insulation, nordic skiing design, long (over butt), high collar
	Windbreaker	25%	single layer, ultra lightweight
	Mittens	20%	inner fleece glove, water-resistant, wind-proof
	Hat	25%	thin, fleece
	Glasses	∅ ⁴	glacier-glasses, (I lost'em!)
Essential equipment	Filter	5 times	small, screw-on, filter-by-squeezing flask
	Water storage	entire	2 x .6 liter soft-flask
	Bear spray	-	thin canister
	Sleeping bag & stuff-sack	1 time	ultra-lightweight, 35-degree
	Primary headlamp	fully	fancy, up to 750 lumen
	Whippet	20%	minimal; attaches to pole
	Maps	80%	12 x 1:24,000 annotated colored topo, double-sided 6" x 10" thin plastic
	GPS unit	entire	10-minute satellite-tracking pings, 25 2-way satellite-text-messages, emergency rescue button
	Auxiliary equipment	Straw	2 times
Knife		2 times	folding, partially serrated, tiny
Secondary headlamp		5 hours	very minimal, single AA battery
Extra batteries		fully	AA battery for secondary headlamp, rechargeable battery for primary headlamp
Buff		30%	thin, long
Cloth strip		2 times	1/6 long pillow case
Duct tape		0	wrapped on a pole
Compass		0	folding, with mirror and inclinometer
Lighter		0	half-sized
Safety pins		0	8
Toilet paper		0	tightly-rolled
Plastic bag		0	4 x doggie bag
Rubber band		0	
Cash		0	\$50 bill + 5 x \$20 bill
Identification		0	Driver's Lisence
Camera		∅ ⁵	small, light, expensive, (didn't take it)
Micro-spikes		∅ ⁶	lightweight, (didn't take'em)
Consumables	Gels	3,500 calories	4,000 calories, half with some caffeine
	Bars	3,000 calories	5,000 calories: 35% fat, 58% carbs
	Fruit (pressed)	0 calories	1,000 calories, 100% carbs
	Pain relief	6	24 x 200mg Tylenol
	Caffeine	2	8 x 200mg pills
	Nausea relief	1	5 x Zantac
	Salt	0	25 x salt pills

My pack weighed 5.6 pounds, which included a liter of water stored in chest pouches. To save space in the pack, and for easy access, I stuffed the 5 pockets of my shorts with as many gels and bars as they could fit; the zipper pocket contained the roll of TP in the doggie bags secured by the rubber band. The remainder of the calories I brought were stored in the side pockets of the pack, ostensibly accessible without removing my pack. These items filled the main volume of the pack: sleeping bag; jacket; hat/visor; primary headlamp & its batteries. The printed maps were folded in half and stored in an external back pouch designed for a 70oz bladder; a given section's map was folded in half and fastened against the outside of my forearm by a sweat band. The GPS unit, compass, lighter, and knife were in a side zipper pouch. The secondary headlamp & battery were in a pocket of my jacket. The windbreaker and whippet were cinched onto the outside of the pack. The remaining odds & ends were shoved in the pack's front and side pouches. The duct tape was for hot spots or abrasions; safety pins for tears in pack or clothes.

Here are some comments about this gear list.

- + I'd bring chap-stick (high spf).
- + I'd bring sun block, probably a rub-on stick.
- + I'd bring another battery for my primary headlamp.
- + I'd wrap duct tape on *both* poles, for easily and symmetrically keeping grip near their center-of-mass.
- + I'd bring another .6 liter soft-flask, if expecting prolonged frozen terrain.
 - I'd bring far fewer salt pills – in principle, I should be far away from cramping and pushing through it.
 - I wouldn't bring pressed fruit sticks.
 - I'd bring a much smaller compass.

(Taking bearings isn't a high priority; emergency rescue via a mirror is an unlikely scenario. So a compass without a mirror or inclinometer would have been fine.)
 - I'd bring a puffer and lighter-weight jacket, though with full collar and long torso.
 - I'd eliminate the buff & cloth-strip redundancy. Probably, I'd forgo the buff.
- I'd make sure my watch is fully functional.

(The sounding alarm wasn't functioning.)
- I'd figure out how to attach my poles to my pack easily. I'd even select a pack with this criterion in mind.
- The poles, in their collapsed state, served as picks for lightly frozen snow faces. This was very helpful on 3 occasions.
- I was happy with my decision to not bring micro-spikes.
- While I would have liked some photos of the trip, not bringing a camera was a fine decision: I was hardly in a state to indulge such a device the vast majority of the time.

Here are some practices I'd consider implementing, should I do it again.

- !!!! I'd plan the trip around the last full moon before snow falls: mid-August to late-August. The snow was very inefficient and effortful to post-hole through; it obstructed quick travel across several prolonged boulder fields; it partially

obscured some of the few crevasses along the route, as well as angle-of-repose scree, which made travel deliberate, slow, and somewhat dangerous.

- !!!! I'd commit to sleeping as soon as I notice I'm delusional in the darkness. As I mentioned above, my experience up Wind River Peak was disturbingly dangerous. Normally I have confidence in my judgement in the face of a low Class 5 pitch, in avalanche terrain, or around other familiar risk-types. I now understand that I cannot trust my judgement while in a delusional state, for I could easily make blatantly dangerous decisions.
- !!! I'd bring sufficient battery-life so that I could be liberal with my headlamp's brightness. Also, I'd remind myself how to use the light before I embark – I couldn't turn it off super-bright mode, and the batteries ran out.
- !! I'd be carefully exact about memorizing the route beforehand; I'd consult maps in-route often. I believe this is helpful for managing will: the surprise features and wrong turns were (exquisitely) demoralizing.
- !! I'd sleep amply the 10 days prior to the effort, and shift sleep schedule to accommodate a 2am start. I'd sleep sooner in the first night; something like 10:30pm-1:30am – I believe travel would be more efficient in the dark right after sleep instead of postponing sleep to travel.
- I'd use a different pack: one that is designed to bear the weight I was carrying, pack tightly and small, allow quick access to the GPS unit and bear spray, and quickly hold poles.
- I'd wear tighter tights: the ones I wore became flabby around the ankles, causing me to trip a few times and thereafter to alter my stride to avoid such.
- I'd spend less time trying to stay on faint trails, and simply continue moving forward instead. The marked trails frequently faded in and out.
- I'm not sure if North-to-South or South-to-North would be best. The former front-loads the off-trail and high-elevation parts, while in the daylight, which seems advantageous for a 2-day effort. The latter allows for moonlight to be more useful for nighttime travel. I'd consider this point thoughtfully.

With such adjustments to the approach I took, I believe a non-professional runner / mountaineer could peak her training to safely complete this route in well under 2 days.

⁷ That said, I don't recommend embarking with that intention. This route is so aesthetic/fantastic⁸, intricately nuanced, fully wild, and varied, I believe a fuller, longer-resonating, experience could be achieved through a "fast-pack" approach – on the order of 5 days – rather than as a "race" preoccupied by a Fastest Known Time (FKT). My emotional recovery from this effort is unprecedentedly prolonged for me; I remain tantalized and unfulfilled by so much of the Range and its inhabitants that I knowingly ignored in-route. My approach felt embarrassingly contrived. The context in which an FKT attempt would now make sense to me is for an additional degree of adventure after acquiring acquaintance with essentially the entire vicinity. ⁹

⁷For a North-to-South effort, a 2am start could place one above 13,000' by light, around Eruope Peak or even South Fork Bull Lake Creek for sleep, at the summit of Wind River Peak before sundown.

⁸in the literal sense of the word

⁹I'm paraphrasing Andrew Skurka here.