

# Wind River High Route

## Facts and Take-Aways

17-18 JULY 2021

Here are some dry<sup>1</sup> facts and practical take-aways from my solo unsupported North-to-South traverse across the Wind River Mountain Range, following the Wind River High Route (WRHR). This is written especially for someone developing an intent to complete this route in under 36 hours<sup>2</sup>, but also for a generic audience.

### Timeframes.

- Embarked at 2:15:15am on Saturday 17 July at Glacier Trail trailhead.
- Followed the Wind River High Route (according to the map-set Andrew Skurka sells).
- Traveled about 97 miles, about a half-mile of which was off-route.
- Disembarked at 2:56:15pm on Sunday 18 July at Bruce Bridge.
- Rested 5 times for more than 1 minute, amounting to about 50 minutes.
  - (1) Alpine Pass: 2:02–2:14pm;
  - (2) Douglas Pass: 4:10–4:20pm;
  - (3) Photo Pass: 11:04–11:14pm;
  - (4) Riad Pass: 2:06–2:14am;
  - (5) New York Pass: 6:05–6:15am.

Except at Douglas Pass, these rests witnessed my feet at heart-level while eating food that necessitated chewing.<sup>3</sup>

The outing lasted 37 hours 41 minutes.

### Environmental variables.

- Sunrise was 5:55am; sunset was 8:55pm.
- Skies were clear but for 3:30–4:45pm of the first day, which witnessed about 60% cumulous cloud cover, some virga and scents of rain.
- Winds grew to about  $9 \frac{\text{miles}}{\text{hour}}$  in the 1<sup>st</sup> afternoon, with about  $15 \frac{\text{miles}}{\text{hour}}$  gusts.
- Temperatures at 10,000 feet ranged within 60–78F while light, and 43–55F while dark.
- Dew point at night was 43F, collecting above 9,500 feet, especially near flowing water.
- Due to a huge wind event in September 2020, downed trees were prolific. These were concentrated between Pyramid Peak and New York Pass.
- Travel on frozen water was necessary in several stretches:
  - EastSouthEast pitch of Downs Mountain;
  - Grasshopper Glacier and some sections just North of it;
  - Most of the stretch between Grasshopper Glacier and Gannet Glacier;
  - Gannet Glacier;
  - North and South pitches of Alpine Pass;
  - North pitch of Photo Pass;
  - North pitch of Bonneville Pass.
- Travel through marsh or water was necessary in a few stretches:

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

<sup>2</sup>By improving my strategy, I'm certain an equivalent effort could offer a traverse of the WRHR in under 36 hours. I'd be enthusiastic to work anybody somebody with that intent – contact me if you're interested.

<sup>3</sup>In particular, no fidgeting with equipment, nor inspecting the route.

- Southern fan of Blaurock Pass;
  - Collecting basin of Lower Fremont Glacier, Bull Lake Glacier, and Knife Point Glacier.
  - Most of the stretch between Bewmark Lake and Bonneville Pass.
- Between Glacier Trail Trailhead and the Circ of the Towers, I encountered 4 parties.
    - A party of 2 just North of Douglass Pass. They were suffering from faulty water filters. I filtered a gallon for them, and suggested they simply use unfiltered snowmelt. The overall tenor was concern.
    - A party of about 9 just North of Upper Golden Lake. They were 17 days into a 30-day NOLS course. The overall tenor was ambivalence.
    - A party of 8 on the South shore of Upper Golden Lake. They were resting and snacking in shade. There was no communication.
    - A party of 2 along Lake Louise. All of us had lost the trail, so were happy to find it together. The overall tenor was duty.

Between the Circ of the Towers and Deep Creek (east of Wind River Peak), I encountered 5 tents, with campers enjoying the morning<sup>4</sup>; a party of 2 commencing the Northbound climb to Jack Ass Pass, and a party of 1 layering for mosquitos just before the Eastbound climb toward Black Joe Lake.

Between Deep Creek and Bruce Bridge I encountered countless backpacking parties.

- I noticed these fine creatures along the WRHR:
  - 6 deer, 13 elk, 6 bighorn; a score of marmots, a dozen pikas, 4 voles, 1 weasel, 2 porcupines; a dozen ravens, 2 osprey, 1 golden eagle, 2 falcons, 1 hawk, 2 pygmy owls, a few scores of sparrows, a score of swallows, 4 mallard ducks; a hundred spiders, tens of thousands of mosquitos, hundreds of biting flies, hundreds of butterflies (mostly lady); a fresh black bear scat.

**Important skills** for safely completing this route as a ~36 hour effort.

- Quick-recall and/or actionable memory of the entire route.<sup>5</sup>
- A meticulous plan for night-time travel assuming zero visibility, such as using memory, compass, stars, maps, GPS track, handrails, etcetera.
- Quickly toggling into a Flow-State for long ascents, prolonged boulder-hopping sections, and the couple substantial trail sections.
- Experience managing nausea, such as by keeping spirits up and by modifying breathing, effort, hydration, and strategically consuming elements of nutrition.
- Efficient mistake-less boulder-hopping. Efficient brisk jogging along trails.
- Capacity and confidence to make clear-minded decisions while sleep-deprived, and to meet boundaries of will and commitment in remote wilderness (without support of any sort), while remaining cognizant and trusting risk-assessment & decision-making.

**Injuries** (all very minor).

- 6 blistered toes, 2 lost toe-nails, 1 blistered heel.

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<sup>4</sup>One with four dogs one which chased after me while a camper screamed at it.

<sup>5</sup>This is in place of making any route-finding decisions, or interpreting a map or GPS device in real-time.

- Bruised and tattered pads-o-feet from boulder-hopping. The beginnings of foot-rot which absorbed bits of dirt, making each step acutely uncomfortable and distracting.
- Lightly chapped lips.
- Mild kidney injury: identity-confusion, post-effort swelling in face, neck, eyes, feet, ankles, calves, thighs, hands; trouble peeing.

## Gear.<sup>6</sup>

	Item	Use	Remarks, such as quantity carried
<b>Primary layer</b>	Shoes	entire	trail-running, w/ laces, w/o rock plate
	Socks	entire	ankle-high
	Shorts	entire	5" seam, tie-top, 5 pockets (4 open, 1 zipper)
	Shirt	entire	long sleeve, w/ hood
	Sweat bands	entire	2, on wrists
	Watch	entire	w/o band
	Visor	70%	
<b>Secondary layer</b>	Vest	entire	racing style, thin back & chest pouches, 2 zipper pockets
	Jacket	0	thin, baffled
	Wind breaker	20%	
	Mittens	∅	inner glove, water-resistant, wind-resistant
<b>Essential equipment</b>	Glasses	50%	glacier-glasses
	Water storage	entire	.5 liter soft-flask w/ tall nozzle
	Filter	15%	screw onto flask
	Space blanket	0	6'x8'
	Headlamp	40%	up to 750 lumen
	GPS device	entire	10-minute satellite-tracking pings sent once per hour, 2-way text-messaging, emergency rescue button
<b>Auxiliary equipment</b>	Pole	10%	collapsible, hand-straps, tiny baskets, whippet attached
	Crampon	∅	ultra-light, rope connecting toe and heel pieces
	Chap stick	9 times	spf 15
	Straw	once	silicon, 6 inches
	Buff	0	
	Duct tape	0	wrapped on pole
	Compass	entire	dime-sized
	Lighter	0	half-sized
	Toilet paper	once	tightly-rolled
	Plastic bags	once	3 x doggie bags
	Rubber band	-	
<b>Consumables</b>	ID, Cash, Debit card	-	Driver's License, \$170 (\$50+6x\$20), -
	Gels	6,000 calories	24 gels @ 250 cal/gel, mostly coconut oil & rice syrup
	Bar	280 calories	1 bar w/ 20g protein
	Nuts	300 calories	500 calories, salted almonds
	Acetaminophen	2 pills	8 x 500mg pills
	Caffeine	1 pill	5 x 200mg pills
	Electrolytes	70 pills	110 x 200mg Sodium pills (NaCl + trace K + Mg)

### How gear was worn.

- Body:**
- Visor & glacier glasses (for most of the light time), long-sleeve shirt often w/ hood up, shorts, socks, shoes;
  - Sweat band on each wrist: one with compass integrated.
  - Wind breaker tied around waist, often pinning crampon.
- Shorts:**
- Open pockets carried 2,500 calories of gels.
  - Zipper pocket carried straw, space-blanket, toilet paper in doggie bags cinched by rubber band.
- Vest:** At time of embark, I'd guess my vest weighed 1Kg, which includes a .5L water.
- Chest pouches.

<sup>6</sup>That I'm able to assess, all gear, including glue, is vegan.

- \* GPS device, water flask.
- \* Watch, trash, chapstick, filter, all pills, ID, Cash, Debit Card.
- Side zipper pouches.
  - \* Remainder of food.
- Back compartment.
  - \* Jacket (tied as a ball) w/ mittens, extra headlamp-battery, lighter in jacket pocket.
  - \* Headlamp wrapped in buff.
  - \* Pole w/ whippet.

### Comments about gear and approach.

- Openly and deeply inspecting my local environment is an anchor for my attention.
- Keeping awareness on breathing – taking very deep slow breathes – is surprisingly helpful for both managing nausea and for affording high-effort ascents (without being overcome by fatigue).
- I brought no maps: I memorized the entire route, including as much minutiae as I figured relevant (though, see §**Flail**). I find this very helpful for quick navigation, and also for avoiding interfacing with maps, GPS devices, or other bits of codified information that requires interpretation. Indeed, I’ve found that such information can become incomprehensible when very tired; also, holding an entire route in mind brings it closer to living experience, which is helpful for making intuitive decisions about pacing & fueling and for averting surprises which can be demoralizing and seed irrationally emotional stress.
- I used the watch’s timer for marking consumption of calories and salt. I find this practice essential for staying in front of fueling, and also for outsourcing decisions so as to relieve my mind of mounting tasks and to dispense needless seeds and blooms of irrational stress.
- As a rule, I filled the water flask any time an opportunity presented and it was less than half-full.
- As a rule, I ran all trail sections. I was thoughtful about holding an efficient form: short stride, strong level hips, slightly cocked forward.
- + Due to the §**Flail**, I did not carry adequate fuel, which necessitated a nighttime of rationing that was initiated by the gradual consumption of the protein bar.
- Carrying the crampon, whippet, and mittens was an unintended mistake (see §**Flail**). Also, the pole was not necessary.
- With the presently available materials and technologies, I believe this gear was as trim as safely viable (except the items of point (-)). In particular, while the jacket was by far the most bulky item and was never used, should I have been rendered immovable through the night, it would have been essential.
- The sweat bands served as ‘mittens’, with hands as fists. The doggie bags were for collecting my used toilet paper, and covering feet or hands if wet or cold. The rubber band cinched the doggie bags over the unused toilet paper. The duct tape was for blisters or tears. The straw was for drinking snowmelt. Shoe laces can be handy for jury-rigging. (I think the function of the rest of the gear is self-evident.)

**Faster.** I believe the following factors explain why my previous traverse of the WRHR was 37% slower than this one.

!!!! There was profoundly less snow this time.

!!! I had lived memory of the entire route this time, so took far fewer wrong turns and paused much less to navigate.

!! There was nearly 3 hours more day-light this time.

! I didn't sleep, nor plan to sleep, this time.

! My pack was tiny and light this time.

**Flail.** The week before this excursion, I scouted a higher route and more aesthetic (in my opinion) variation of the WRHR – among these variations, some involved Class 3+ travel, some involved Class 4 sneaks, some involved more ice-travel and low Class 5 moves.<sup>78</sup> I brought very little on this scouting excursion – no pack or vest – stuffing my pockets and tying stuff onto my waist. With a monocular, between Douglas Lake and Angel Pass I found two dear friends of mine 25 days into a month-long trip. They made a pizza for me, donated clothes for me to sleep in, and prepared hash-browns for me the next morning. This scouting excursion occupied about 44 hours.

Immediately after this, a 3-day excursion I had planned for a couple weeks later was cancelled due to my partner injuring their ankle. So I crammed some work into the intervening days, and memorized a collection of said variations to the WRHR, then embarked. My intension was to assemble said variations through a brisk while pleasant effort. For lack of time, I didn't bother with arranging car logistics, and was open to exiting at any number of exit-points, depending on how I was feeling, especially through/after a night without sleeping gear.

Ice rotted in the intervening warm days since my scout. As I crossed Gannet Glacier, the ice was collapsing in familiar, though frightening, ways. Before leaving Gannet Glacier, I tested a steeper pitch of ice, aided by my crampon. I hadn't seen ice behave that way – slush runnels that could peel apart – leaving me freaked. So I opted against those variations that crossed ice, and reluctantly ascended Blaurock Pass. Once there, I figured I was already many hours quicker than my previous traverse of the WRHR, meanwhile I had been following the standard WRHR verbatim to that point. As it is so proficient at for justifying behavior, my mind conjured a narrative: "Go for the FKT. Do these variations another time, as two excursions: a Northern one; a Southern one".

So I committed to following the standard WRHR, without variations. As I did so, I dragged some self-defiance with me – disgusted by how ego-stroking overtook an otherwise gracious and open excursion. As I hadn't maps, and only memorized the said variation of the WRHR, several sections were navigated via memory from the last time I traversed the WRHR two years prior, which was then largely covered in snow. So, in the darkness, I found myself groping at topography how a mosquito exits a car's cracked passenger window.

All around, this effort, while quick, was a flail of intentions, movement, focus, and behavior.

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<sup>7</sup>While some of these variations are decidedly extraneous – aesthetic detours – to a through-route, others are more (in my opinion) natural high-routes – true to the spirit of the concept – through the Wind Rivers.

<sup>8</sup>Contact me if you'd like some tips about this higher route.