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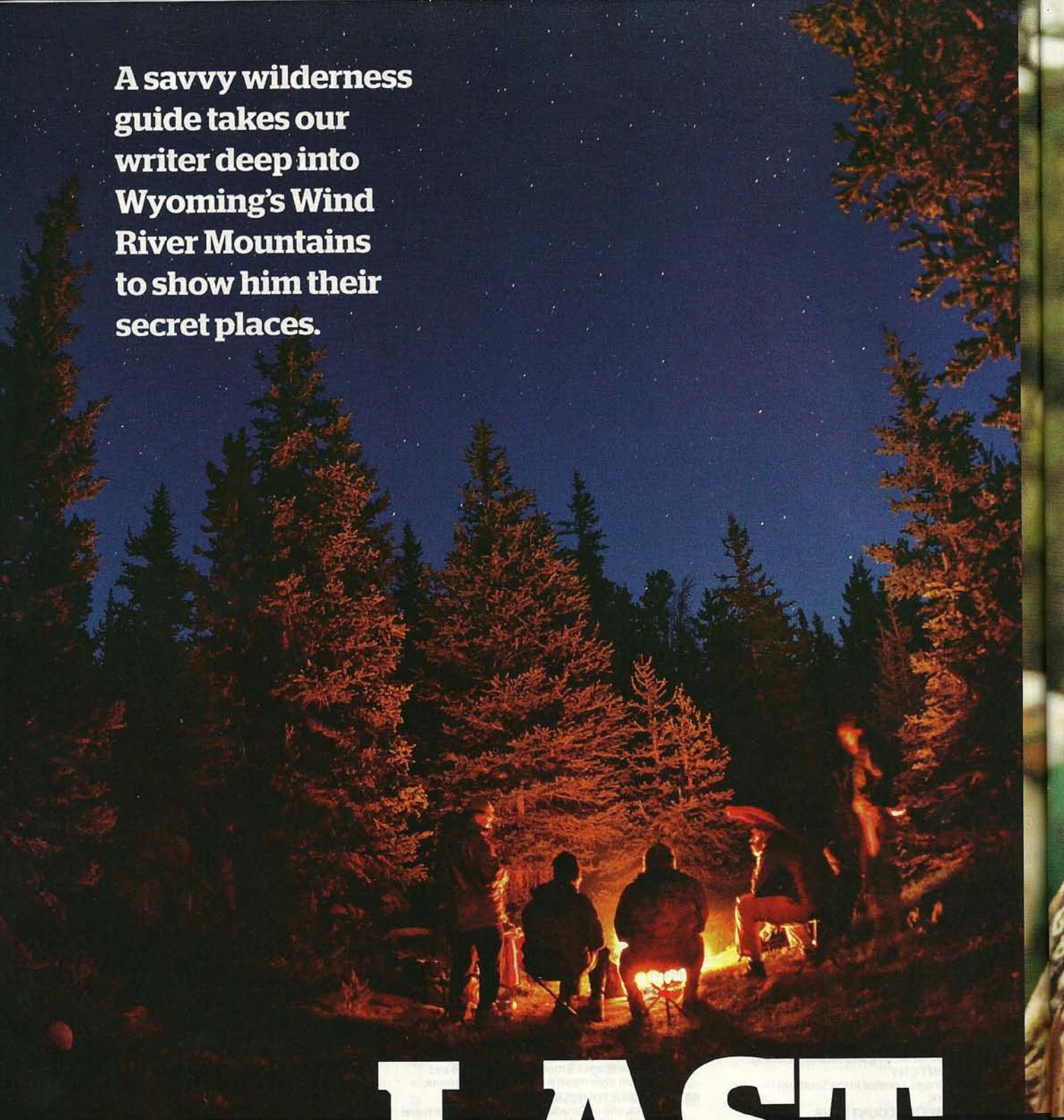
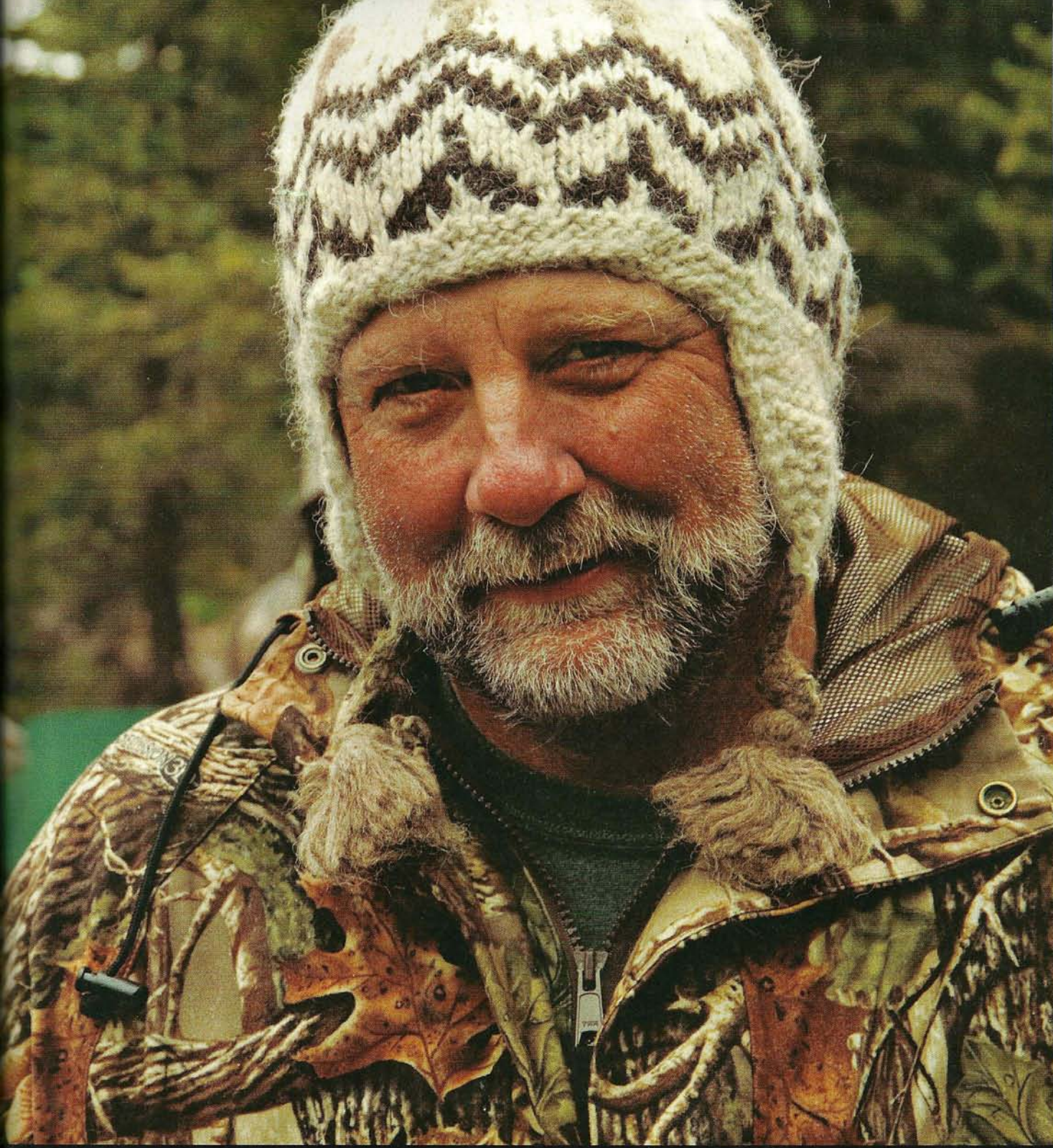


A savvy wilderness guide takes our writer deep into Wyoming's Wind River Mountains to show him their secret places.

THE LAST MOUN



by DAVID ROBERTS
photographs by DAWN KISH

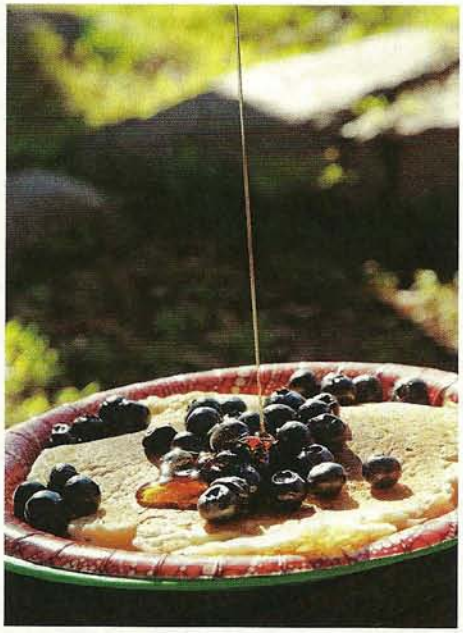
TAIN MAN

"Where does that go?" I ask Scott Woodruff, pointing out a faint path in the underbrush that crosses the river then seems to peter out among the pines. ¶ "Old horse trail up to Squirrel Lake," he replies after a perfunctory glance. "Nobody goes up there anymore." ¶ I'm not surprised Scott knows the answer—even without looking at a map. Over the past 25 years, as founder and owner of Lander Llama Company, he has hiked this six-day, 40-mile loop in Wyoming's remote Wind River Mountains 60 or 70 times, as he guides clients through some of the most pristine wilderness left in the contiguous United States. This afternoon, the eight of us

stroll along the main trail up the Middle Fork of the Popo Agie (pronounced Po-PO-zha) River, a light load in our day packs, cameras clicking in staccato homage to the scenery, while nine well-trained llamas haul all the provisions we need to camp in luxury.

I know the Winds pretty well myself—this is my ninth extended journey among its sharp peaks and tundra plateaus—but I still rely on a topographical map to keep my bearings. Peering now at my Sweetwater Gap 1:24,000 quadrangle, I find no trace of the old horse trail on the chart and no name for the lonely lake, indicated by a blue oval, nestled in a basin 350 feet above us.

As a serious mountaineer, I devoted all my earliest trips into the Winds to pursuing unclimbed routes on sweeping granite walls. This time, at age 67, I'm here not to climb but to discover some of the seldom seen corners of the range. I want to prowl the headwater cirques above picturesque lakes, to explore the valleys and glaciers first probed, with much trepidation and anxiety, by 19th-century mountain men. I want to see the Winds through the eyes of the only Native Americans who ever lived in these high peaks, the Sheepeaters. And who better to lead me than Scott Woodruff, a 21st-century mountain man who makes a living not by trapping and trading but by revealing the splendors of this 3,515-square-mile Rocky Mountain paradise to outsiders.



Throughout our six-day ramble, Scott steers us to his secret places, especially the tucked-away campsites he has spent decades scouting out. The evening before, we switched from hiking boots to sandals, waded the Middle Fork, pushed through a thicket of thigh-high reeds, and pitched our tents in a part of Bills Park, a marshy meadow, that nobody else seems to know about. As the sun sank, the stream meandered through, and willows swayed in the warm August breeze.

I spent an hour catching and releasing seven or eight mid-size brook trout. Then Steve Foelker and Kara Faciszewski, Scott's assistant guides, served us a robust dinner of spaghetti with meat sauce, garlic bread, and "gooey bars," rich brownies concocted by Scott's wife, Therese, who prepares all the expedition meals beforehand. Afterward we sat around the fire as Scott regaled us with stories of eccentric past clients, such as the Englishman who, first night in camp, asked Scott (innocently, it turned out) to go skinny-dipping with him. "I've never been skinny-dipping," the man shyly explained. "Would you show me how?" Scott obliged.

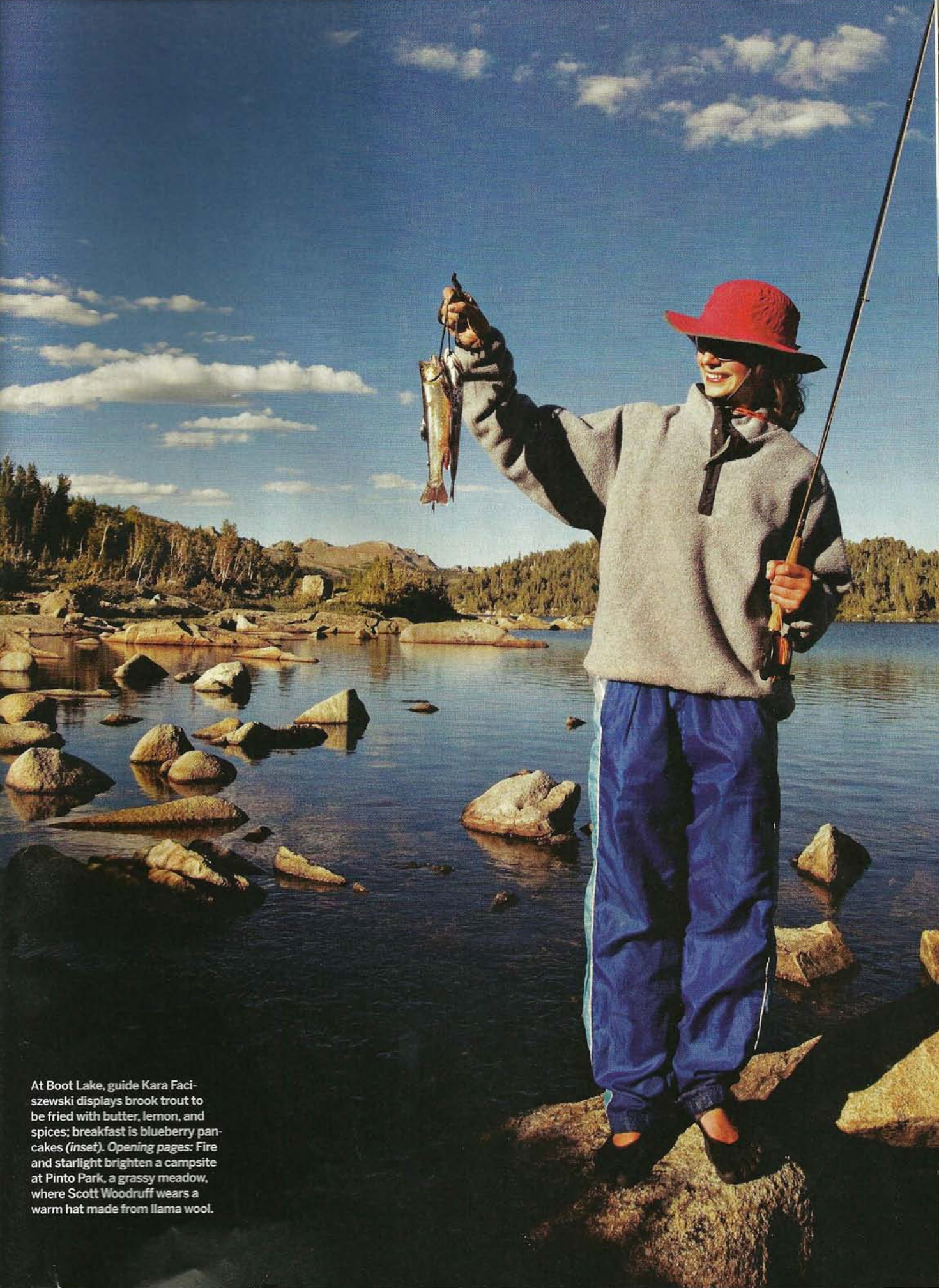
The next day, we leave the Middle Fork and climb a steep trail to a pass overlooking Ice Lakes basin. Around 2 p.m., Scott abruptly veers off the trail and plunges down a grassy slope. We follow—llamas, assistants, clients, and all. Twenty minutes later, we arrive at a subalpine oasis—a copse of trees at 10,500 feet adjoining a meadow perfect for llama-grazing, supplied by a hidden spring whose water is so pure we don't bother to treat it before drinking. It's another of Scott's secret places, a refuge just out of sight of Boot Lake, an angler's haven. We'll spend three nights here. After we've set up our tents, I ask Scott: "Why'd you take that shortcut?"

The guide's rugged face breaks into a half-sheepish smile. "It's kind of an old Western, cowboy thing. You know: Head 'em off at the pass," he says, referring to another group we spotted ahead of us that might have been heading toward the same spot.

"Or a mountain man kind of thing?"

The smile disappears. "Those guys—Colter, Bridger, Bonneville, and the rest—I think they were motivated by the same impulse I felt when I first hiked in the Winds—the urge to explore. 'What's over the next ridge?' 'Am I the first one ever to be here?' But the risks they took were so much greater than ours. They had half the equipment and no maps. What they did have was balls."

STRETCHING 90 MILES from northwest to southeast in western Wyoming, the Wind Rivers form the longest mountain chain in the lower 48 with no road crossing it. No range in North America so abounds in lakes—more than 2,000 of them. And no range is so lavish with meadows and timberline plateaus, across which pikas and marmots scuttle on their inscrutable errands. And few ranges anywhere contain so much smooth and swooping rock—great cliffs of granite, as well as bands of gneiss and granodiorite. One other geological quirk: The seven largest active glaciers in the country outside of Alaska all flow from Wind River headwalls.



At Boot Lake, guide Kara Faciszewski displays brook trout to be fried with butter, lemon, and spices; breakfast is blueberry pancakes *(inset)*. *Opening pages:* Fire and starlight brighten a campsite at Pinto Park, a grassy meadow, where Scott Woodruff wears a warm hat made from llama wool.

Much of the range is contained today in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. We don't know how much time that great mountain man, Jim Bridger, might have spent trapping beaver in the Winds, but he was instrumental in organizing the three rendezvous—those drunken orgies of gambling, horse racing, and swapping tall tales during which the mountain men came together every summer to sell their pelts—that were held in plain sight of the range. The 1838 rendezvous took place at the junction of the Popo Agie and the Wind River, some 25 miles northeast of our camp on Boot Lake. The canny scout and trapper Kit Carson attended that rendezvous, his last; four years later, he would guide the most ambitious mountain-climbing expedition undertaken to that date anywhere in North America into the heart of the Winds.

On our third day, the rest of the gang decides to hang out and fish Boot Lake and its neighbor to the north, Jug Lake. I set off alone, cross a saddle above timberline, and descend into the north-facing cirque at the head of Deep Creek Lakes. I'm confronted with jumbled boulders, some as big as houses. To get to the head of the highest lake, I have to move with stodgy caution, using hands and feet to swing from one sharp boulder-crest to the next, dark gaps yawning below me: A single slip and I could easily break a leg...or my skull. It takes me an hour to cover a quarter-mile.

I'm confronted with jumbled boulders. I move with stodgy caution, using hands and feet to swing from one sharp crest to another. A single slip and I could easily BREAK A LEG...OR MY SKULL.

I lie on my back to rest on a patch of green grass beside a glacier-fed torrent leaping from slab to slab. I'm far from the nearest trail, well above the highest fishable lakes. There's a sense that very few people have ever been here. I'm thinking about Benjamin Bonneville. In 1833 the French-born trapper made the first recorded attempt by any non-Native American to cross the Wind Rivers. The diaries he kept have long been lost, but he lent them to Washington Irving, who "digested" them into a book called *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.*, a best seller when it appeared. Looking for a shortcut to the Green River from the east side of the Winds, Bonneville and his three companions headed up the Popo Agie. The country was far more rugged than the men bargained for: As Irving writes, they "soon found themselves in the midst of stupendous crags and precipices that barred all progress."

Bonneville gave up hope of a traverse of the range, but he was determined to get to its crest for a good view. After two more days of "arduous climbing and scrambling," the men penetrated "into the heart of this mountainous and awful solitude." Finally, with a single partner, the captain got close to his summit. Claims Irving: "The ascent was so steep and rugged that he and his companion were frequently obliged to clamber on hands and knees, with their guns slung upon their backs." At last the two men stood on top, where "a scene burst upon the view of Captain Bonneville, that for a time astonished and overwhelmed him with its immensity."

Historians argue about which summit Bonneville reached, but the leading candidate is Wind River Peak. Heading into the Deep Creek cirque, I topped the shoulder of that mountain at 11,400 feet elevation. For all I knew, I'd crossed paths with Bonneville 177 years after his intrepid probe into uncharted wilderness.

I rise from my blissful cushion of grass and hike on, heading for the base of a thousand-foot wall of sheer granite that I know no one has ever climbed or even attempted. Now my thoughts shift to another U.S. army officer, John C. Frémont. In 1842, on the first of his five expeditions across the West, Frémont made a long detour off the Oregon Trail to try to climb the peak he had decided was the highest in North America. His guide was Kit Carson, who thought he could lead Frémont's 15-man party to the foot of the peak. (Unfortunately, Fremont Peak, as it's now named, is not even the highest in the Winds, let alone in North America; Gannett Peak, four miles to the north, outstrips it by 59 feet.)

As it had for Bonneville, the Winds proved rougher than expected for Frémont and Carson. Frémont concluded in his official expedition report, also a best seller when it came out, that the range was a "gigantic disorder of enormous masses," amid which he was stunned by "a stillness most profound and a terrible solitude." Yet after innumerable hardships and setbacks, Frémont and five teammates reached the summit block, which was so precarious that "it seemed a breath would hurl [it] into the abyss below."

On my way back to camp from the Deep Creek cirque, I think, Yeah, those mountain men were tough. But the Wind Rivers were tougher.

BACK AT BOOT LAKE THAT AFTERNOON, I learn that Steve, Scott's assistant, is planning to supplement our dinner with a specialty: trout filets dredged in flour, flavored with lemon, and sautéed in a big iron skillet. He has already caught eight or nine brookies. I unlimber my pole and land two big ones from a granite slab shelving into the lake. Then Ken Karbon, a client who has come to the Winds three times to fish with Lander Llama, trudges into camp, looking weary but contented.

"How many fish did you catch?" I ask him.

"Oh, about 20."

"Great. What a fish fry we're going to have."

Ken looks abashed. "I didn't know we were going to cook them," he confesses. "I threw them all back."

Later I sit in the llama meadow with Kara and ask her impressions of her summertime boss. In front of us, the ruminants that have carried all our gear and food are peacefully munching grass. "The llamas are what make Scott Scott," she says.

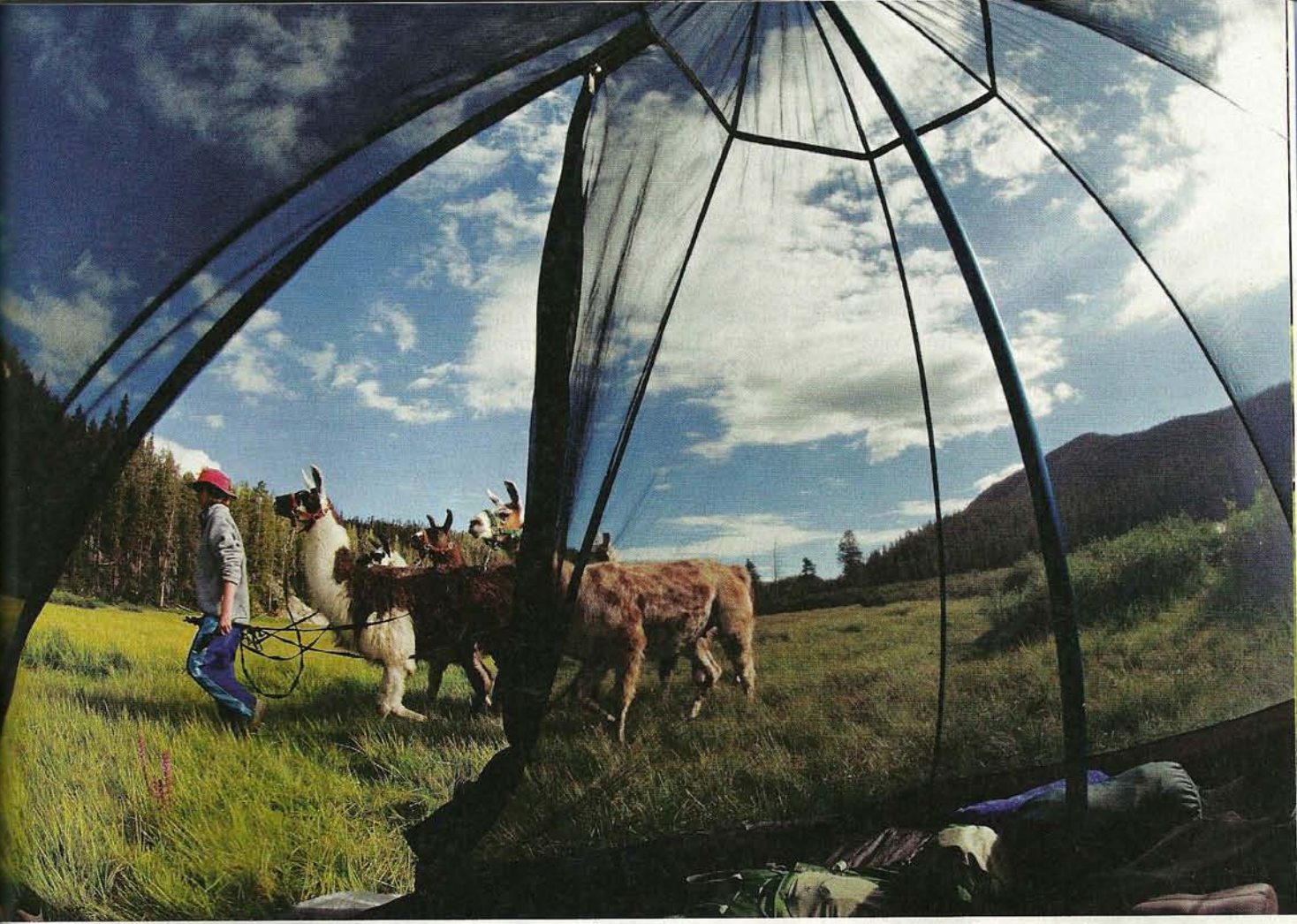
It's a shrewd insight. Before dinner that evening, sitting on a log beside Scott, I ask him, "How'd you get into llama trekking?"

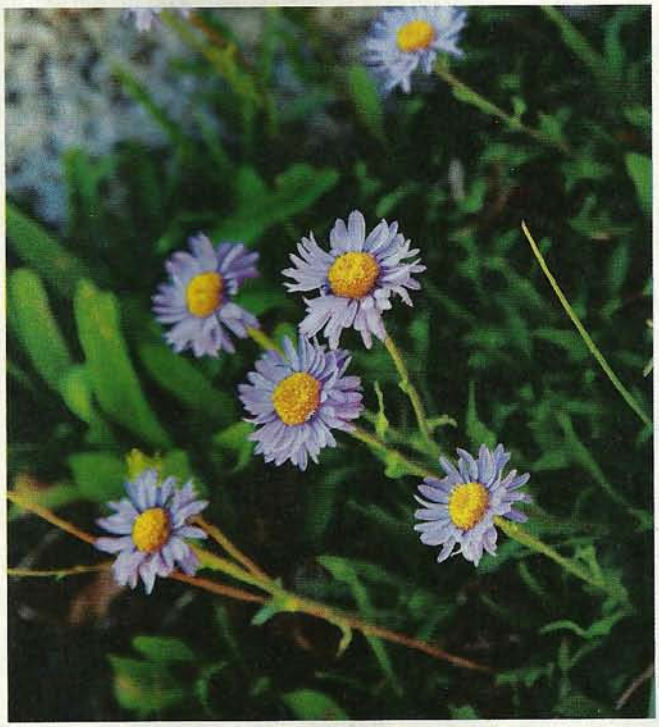
His eyes seem to light up. "I grew up in Wisconsin," he says, "where I met Therese. We both loved the outdoors. One day—I was about 27—I came across a picture in an outdoors magazine of a guy in a hat, with a cheesy grin, leading a llama. I said to myself, 'This is too good to be true!'"

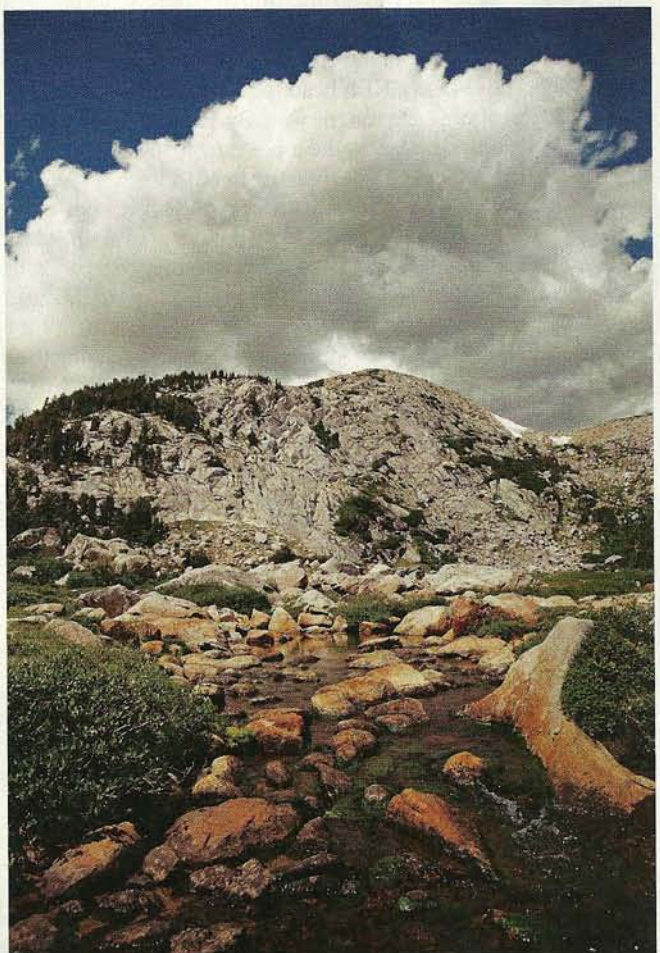
As he talks, I study our guide. At 53, he's strong, stocky, and fit with the grizzled look you see in old engravings of mountain men who've spent a few too many months without seeing a bathtub. "I'd already hiked in the Wind Rivers," Scott continues, "so I knew it would be the perfect place to run a commercial llama-packing outfit."

Scott moved to Lander in 1985 and worked three jobs while waiting to get a permit from the national forest. He started Lander Llama that same year with six animals.

"Every waking minute I'd take those llamas into the backcountry, learning the valleys and learning my wilderness business philosophy as I went. It's pretty basic. Give the clients spectacular beauty and comfort—good gear and good food, fresh steaks and fruit, not freeze-dried noodles. And focus on low impact. Camp





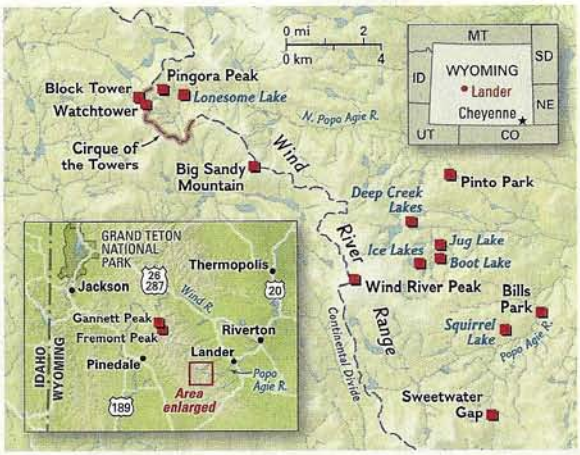


Clockwise from top: Kara gathers the llamas for loading as the group prepares to break camp at Bills Park. Many remote parts of the range, such as this granite ridge, are above timberline. Alpine asters color the meadows, as do Indian paintbrush, columbines, scarlet gilia, and other wildflowers.

at least 200 feet from a lake or stream. Use only downed timber for firewood. Green tents, earth-toned packs, blend in with the scenery. And I'd find my own secret campsites." He looks at me. "Pretty nice one here, don't you think?"

OUR FOURTH DAY in the Winds turns out to be our most ambitious. We're off shortly after 8 a.m. Scott and Steve take Ken and another client, Dick, on a long fishing circuit north into lower Deep Creek basin. They don't get back for ten hours. When they do, an exhausted Ken is happy. "Got all four," he brags, "brooks, rainbows, cutthroats, and goldens. A grand slam of trout." They've fished every shore of a pair of sparkling lakes, catching and releasing more fish than they can count.

"You can thank Finis Mitchell for a day like today," Scott says. Finis (pronounced Fine-us) was a latter-day mountain man who grew up on the edge of the range in the early 20th century. During his long life, he climbed 244 peaks in the Winds, and by his late 70s had taken (by his own reckoning) 105,345 pictures of his beloved wilderness. To make ends meet during the Depression, in 1930 Finis and his wife, Emma, set up Mitchell's Fish Camp near Big Sandy Opening on the southwest corner of the Winds. Trouble was, only about five lakes in the sprawling range held fish. To remedy this defect, Finis horse-packed trout into the backcountry, in seven years stocking 314 lakes with some two and a half million fish, according to his book, *Wind River Trails*. Once the Fishing Camp was up and running, the couple charged their dudes $1.50 a day to guide them into the backcountry.



That same fourth day of our trek, Mark (another client), Kara, and photographer Dawn Kish head for Wind River Peak, which rises 2,700 feet above camp on the west. By 11 a.m., they're on the summit plateau. But just below the top, a snowfield almost as hard as ice nearly turns them back. Dawn works out a bypass tiptoeing close to the mountain's sheer north face and coaxes her companions to the highest point. Back in camp that afternoon, Mark declares: "That's the best day I've ever had in the wilderness."

I set off that morning on another solo cirque prowl to the head of the southernmost branch of Ice Lakes basin. This time it's the Sheepeater Indians who fill my thoughts, as I try to imagine their way of life here 200 years ago, before the mountain men arrived.

The Sheepeaters, a branch of the Shoshone tribe, were driven by their enemies—Crow, Blackfeet, and other Shoshone—to take refuge in the Wind Rivers. They were named by Anglos for their unmatched skill at hunting bighorn sheep, which they shot with arrows launched from beautifully crafted bows made, appropriately enough, of bighorn sheep horns. Yet theirs was a marginal existence. Unlike their neighbors, the Sheepeaters never domesticated the horse, traveling from valley to valley only with travois dragged behind their dogs. Simply to survive, they mastered the art of concealment. Only a handful of white explorers ever made contact with these refugees.

One was Benjamin Bonneville. On his retreat from the range in 1833, one of the captain's comrades spotted three "savages" running across the valley below him. He fired his gun in hopes of luring the men to a parley, only to see them run all the faster. Irving's paraphrase of Bonneville's journals summarizes the prevailing view among the mountain men of the Sheepeaters:

They are miserably poor; own no horses, and are destitute of every convenience to be derived from an intercourse with the whites... These forlorn beings have been looked down upon with contempt by the creole trappers, who have given them the appellation of "les dignes de pitie," or "the objects of pity."

Now, at the head of Ice Lakes basin, I try to imagine those long-ago hunters somehow managing to bring down enough game to feed their families through the brutal winters. The feat seems unfathomable: It's hard enough for me simply to clamber from one rocky ledge to another, let alone play at stalking bighorn sheep.

I top a ridge and see a buck deer a hundred yards away. He takes a good look at me before loping effortlessly out of sight. Even with a high-powered rifle, I wouldn't have time to get off a shot. With a bow and arrow, forget it.

Later, I find five tiny pieces of chert lying on the ground, flakes chipped off a core stone by hunters as they crafted knives and scrapers and arrowheads. They're the only vestiges of the Sheepeaters I've ever found in the Winds.

Poor? Destitute? The objects of pity? I don't think so. For centuries, I reflect, those alpine indigenes mastered a landscape so severe that no one else has ever lived here year-round. It's a strange conceit, I realize, but maybe the ultimate mountain men were the Sheepeaters.

ON OUR FIFTH AND LAST NIGHT, we camp in another of Scott's secret places, on the edge of a green meadow not far from the broad saddle of Pinto Park. We can see the jagged ridges of the Cirque of the Towers, nine miles to the west. That's where I first went into the Winds, way back in 1968, when my best friend and I camped for a week at Lonesome Lake and climbed the walls of Pingora and Block Tower and Watchtower.

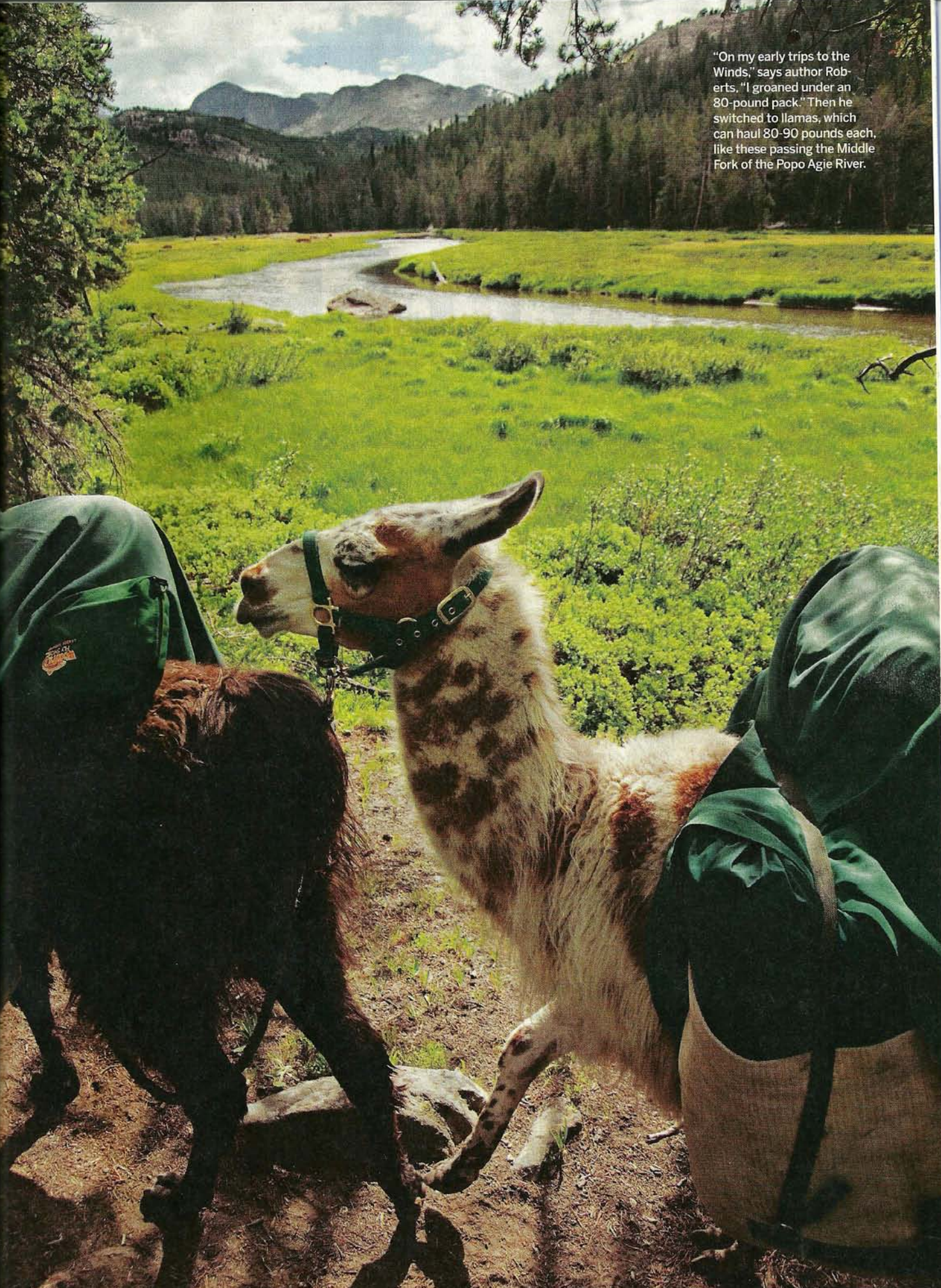
A sudden storm, mixing rain, snow, and hail, sweeps over us and is gone in half an hour, leaving the bluest sky we've seen. Just after 8 p.m., the sun slides behind the distant knife-edge of Wolf's Head in the Cirque. The air's so clear that we catch an instantaneous glimpse of the rare green flash. Half an hour later, a crescent moon, with Venus poised directly above it, spangles the sky in the southwest. And an hour after that, in full darkness, we watch meteors blazing into nothingness, as Perseus rises in the northeast.

It's our coldest night yet, the temperature dipping to about 25 degrees Fahrenheit; next morning, there's ice in our water bottles. But I stay up around the campfire almost till midnight. I'm not ready to go home. How many more trips will I ever take into my favorite range in the West?

That evening, I ask Scott about his future. A quarter century, I muse, is a long time to guide the Wind Rivers. "It's been a good ride," he answers. "I can see doing it for a few more years." He pauses to stare into the campfire. "But one thing I know—I'm not going anywhere else. I'm gonna die here in Wyoming."

Writer DAVID ROBERTS and photographer DAWN KISH covered the Ute Mountain Tribal Park in our April feature, "Beyond Mesa Verde."

INTERNATIONAL MAPPING



"On my early trips to the Winds," says author Roberts, "I groaned under an 80-pound pack." Then he switched to llamas, which can haul 80-90 pounds each, like these passing the Middle Fork of the Popo Agie River.