

Wind River High Route

Part 2: As you go

Once in the field, the single most useful resource included with the Wind River High Route Guide is the Mapset. These highly detailed maps **are** extensively annotated, so that information about the topography and the route are visible with a single glance. For many sections of the route, you will rely on them exclusively.

Part 2 of the Guidebook is meant to be complementary to the Mapset, and minimally redundant with it. It contains general information and context, and in-depth explanations for sections that really need it. Intentionally, the text does not provide turn-by-turn directions or minor route notes -- the Mapset serves these functions better.

Section 1: Plains to Alpine

The Winds are among the wildest and most remote mountain ranges in the lower 48. Access is very limited; from most trailheads, it takes about a day to reach anything good, and about a day to make it back out.

The first fourteen miles of the Wind River High Route are its most casual. They are entirely on-trail, mostly forested, and gently graded. It's an opportunity to acclimate, eat through some food, find your hiking legs, and reacquaint with your equipment.

At the base of Wind River Peak, the tone of the trip changes, and then gets very real during the descent of the West Gully. This section ends at Big Sandy Lake after several relatively easy miles along and down from Black Joe Lake.

Overview

- Start: Bruce Bride (PR-00)
- Finish: Big Sandy Lake (PR-11)
- 23.7 miles
- 7.7 miles off-trail (32 percent of total)
- 12,574 vertical feet of change (2,532 feet net vertical gain)
- 530 vertical feet per mile

Route description

Up the Popo Agie

Ten miles west and uphill of Lander, and near the head of Sinks Canyon, Bruce Bridge Trailhead sits near the upper range of the Wyoming's high plains. As you climb deeper and higher into the range parallel to the Middle Popo Agie River (pronounced "po-po-zsha"), the prairie grasses, sage, and juniper

give way to aspens and scrub oak, lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir, and finally the alpine.

In the first two miles, there are two unsigned and unmapped trail junctions. In each case, stay right. There are several other mapped trail junctions in this section; the signage is worth double-checking.

Cattle graze in the lower elevations. Expect moderate dust and cow patties until around the trail junction east of Three Forks Park. Pass through at least two drift fences.

Loop 1 || At the trail junction northwest of Pinto Park Lake, Loop 1 departs the Primary Route.

Just before the outlet of the lowest Deep Creek Lake, the forest opens up and the scenery is no longer ho-hum. You will never again be bored on the Wind River High Route.

Loop 2 || After climbing out of the North Fork of Popo Agie, Loop 2 connects with the Primary Route at the trail junction near the lake outlet.

The trail across the lake outlet is undefined. Instead, hike towards a wooden post kept upright in a pile of rocks and rejoin the trail, which climbs south through sub-alpine forest for 150 vertical feet to a saddle overlooking the Ice Lakes.

Wind River Peak

Before charging up Wind River Peak, it may be worth noting the time of day and the weather, and considering your camping options. It's a slow 6 miles to the next decent camping area, i.e. that has some grass and natural wind protection, and that is not on the top of something. Moreover, the weather is notably worse at the summit of Wind River Peak, which is 2,600 vertical feet away.

From the saddle, follow a use trail that cuts diagonally up the slope. Reach a small tarn after punching through some krumholtz spruce.

The northeast ridge of Wind River Peak is not technically challenging, but the altitude is. To avoid wasting energy wandering excessively across the broad ridge, take a compass bearing on your map to Chimney Rock (hint: it's about 225 degrees), and then generally stick to it. Settle in for a long climb, and mind your altimeter to rule out false summits. Switchbacking may make you feel better, but you won't reach the top any faster -- in this instance, your sustainable vertical speed is the limitation.

Chimney Rock and Wind River Peak are separated by a shallow saddle consisting of fine gravel and large boulders. By this point, there is very little vegetation, and there is even less so beyond. In the event of an afternoon rain event, you may find marginal shelter among the rocks.

The summit of Wind River Peak is the most fitting start or finish to the Wind River High Route. In each direction, there are spectacular views, especially to the north. Gannett Peak, Wyoming's high point and 42 miles distant, is even visible -- it's distinctive for the horizontal snowfield below its summit. For a northbounder, it's an inspiring sight, with mountains and valleys that will soon have more personal meaning. A southbounder should be immensely proud -- you just hiked all of that!

If weather and daylight allow, soak it in. The Wind River High Route is full of vistas, but this one is among its best.