

An angler heads into the Wind River Range. When it comes to backpacking into the backcountry, the views can be breathtaking and seemingly endless. That journey can be more enjoyable if you know a few tips, such as having your pet help carry gear. (Photo by Lisa Ballard)

BACKCOUNTRY BASICS

A primer on backcountry travel and camping

By Lisa Ballard



A backpacker ascends above the timberline when heading to a mountain lake. (Photo by Lisa Ballard)



Elephant head lousewort is among the many stunning wildflowers in the alpine backcountry. (Photo by Lisa Ballard)

Backpacking deep into the backcountry immerses you in nature. You unplug in pristine places where wildlife and intriguing flora abound. The journey to your campsite is part of the appeal. Pauses to enjoy the view or savor a snack atop a rocky outcropping break up the physical exertion. You might soak your feet in a gurgling creek or photograph elephant heads while traversing a meadow of wildflowers — not the pachyderm of course — but the pink blossoms that look uncannily like miniature stacks of them.

Perhaps you like to fish. Nothing rewards quite like hooking a trout in an alpine lake, 10 miles from the closest town, then watching the sunset over snow-mantled peaks with a couple of friends or loved ones. It's these kinds of bonding experiences that also teach self-sufficiency, instill confidence and create meaningful memories.

There are dangers, too. A thunderstorm might suddenly boom around you. A bear might cross the trail, or you might get sick or injured. Backpacking, like other outdoor activities, has its array of challenges. Whether you're a first-timer or an experienced backcountry traveler, here's what you need to know to ensure you have a good time and make it back to the trailhead.

Do I need a permit?

Wyoming is blessed with some of the best places to backpack in the world. At many trailheads you can park and head down the path whenever you wish, but not always. Before you go, understand the camping regulations where you're heading by checking with the management agency. You may need to reserve a campsite and/or get a permit, particularly if you're heading into Yellowstone or Grand Teton national parks. Plan ahead and check before you go.



The author reaches a rocky perch en route to Trapper Lake in the Wind River Range. (Photo by Jack Ballard)

How far should I go?

When selecting a route consider the mileage and the vertical gain in elevation. It's easier to hike 5 miles on a flat trail than 1 mile that rises 1,000 vertical feet. Remember you'll be carrying about 40 pounds, maybe more, and the terrain could be rough. A big day with a heavy pack in Wyoming's backcountry is typically around 6 to 8 miles for a person in reasonable, physical shape. In general, if you plan an average of 1 mile per hour with a relatively early start, you'll be at your campsite with time to set up your tent, cast a line and explore what's around you without feeling so exhausted that you can barely crawl into your sleeping bag.

It also is important to plan the route with the weakest person in your group in mind. If that person rarely walks more than a mile on a sidewalk, asking them to trek 5 miles carrying weight, even if they have all day to get there, will physically drain them.

How long should I stay out?

It depends on how much weight you're willing to carry. Additional weight comes from food and fuel you need for each day you're out. The rule of thumb is to limit pack weight to 25 to 30 percent of your body weight. If you weigh 150 pounds, your pack should weigh 45 pounds or less. Base the duration of your backcountry trip not only on what you want to see and do, but what's reasonable to haul on your back.

What tent should I get?

Unless you intend to camp in the snow, opt for a 3-season tent rather than a 4-season one. The main difference is a 3-season tent isn't made to bear the weight of snowfall or gale-force winds, but it will protect you from other types of nasty weather and pesky bugs.

For a little more room without adding noticeable weight, opt for a tent that

accommodates one more person than the number sleeping in it. For two people opt for a 3-person tent. You'll appreciate the extra space, especially if a storm hits and you're stuck inside or if you have a dog that needs to pile in, too.

Do I need a sleeping pad?

Yes! A sleeping pad is your mattress and it insulates you from the ground, which would otherwise suck heat from your body and can lead to hypothermia. Modern sleeping pads are inflatable, lightweight and don't take up much space in your pack. A full-length pad is more comfortable and warmer because your legs from the knees down are on the pad rather than the tent floor.

What sleeping bag should I pack?

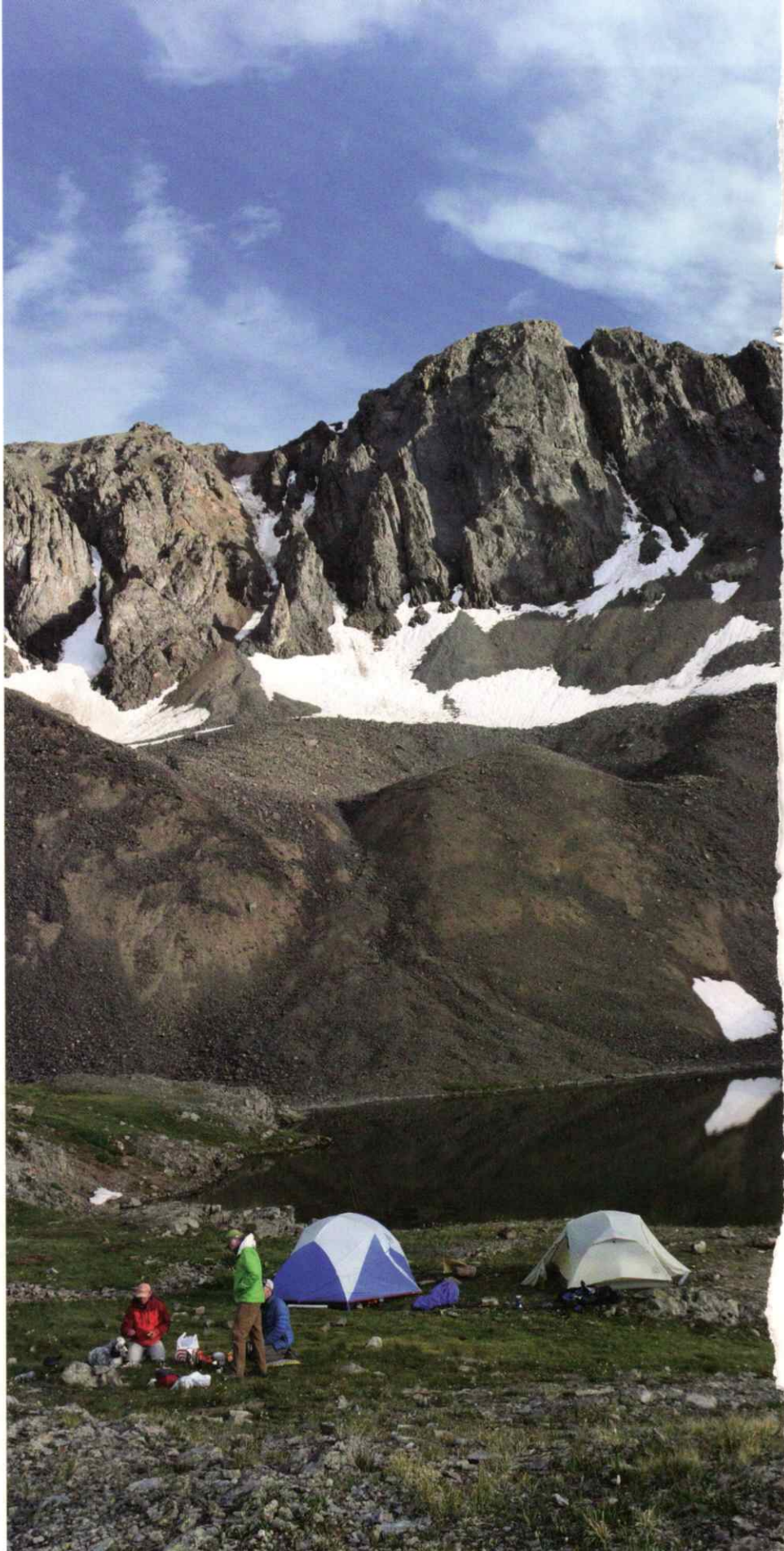
When choosing a sleeping bag you need to make three decisions: size, temperature rating and fill material. Get a sleeping bag that fits you. Unlike a tent, bigger is not better because your body has to warm up the whole thing.

Select a temperature range that's at least 15 degrees colder than the coldest temperature you'll likely encounter. If you're backpacking in the Wind River Range in August, where the overnight low can easily dip to 35 degrees, bring a bag that's rated to 20 degrees. If you get surprised by a cold night, you'll still be cozy inside your bag.

Another important decision is down versus synthetic fill. Down compresses into a smaller stuff sack inside your pack and is lighter weight than synthetic fill. The downside of down is that it loses its insulating qualities if it gets wet. If you expect rain while you're out, or if you sweat a lot when you sleep, synthetic fill is a better option.

How do I navigate?

A cell signal is not dependable in the backcountry so your phone's map app might not work, but a GPS that retrieves its bearings directly from satellite signals usually works. Be sure to set a waypoint at key spots, including the trailhead and your tent site, and bring extra batteries. In addition, you should carry a topo map and a compass to get a more complete picture of where you're going and in case your GPS fails.



Backpackers enjoy a wilderness campsite near a lake laden with cutthroat trout. (Photo by Lisa Ballard)

The author casts for trout in a creek far from civilization. Packing a four-piece fly rod and a selective number of flies or lures are a couple of sound tips for fishing in Wyoming's high country. (Photo by Jack Ballard)

What if I get lost?

The best way to get found happens before you leave home. Tell someone who is not going with you what route you will take and when you will return. Then stick to the plan. That way, if you don't show up, that person will notify search-and-rescue.

Bring a whistle. Many packs have one built into the sternum strap. If you lose your way, stop moving, find a sheltered spot out of the wind, then use your whistle to signal for help. The sound is louder, travels farther and is more sustainable than shouting.

What if a storm hits?

Afternoon thunderstorms are common in the high country, even on a sunny day with a clear forecast. Plan to be at your campsite with your tent up by midafternoon in case a storm hits. Keep a rain jacket and rain pants within easy reach. If you get caught in a thunderstorm and you're not at your tent, drop your pack — the metal frame can attract lightning — then find a depression to sit or lie in until the storm passes. And spread out. If lightning strikes, it helps defer the possibility that multiple people in your group get zapped.

Should I drink the water?

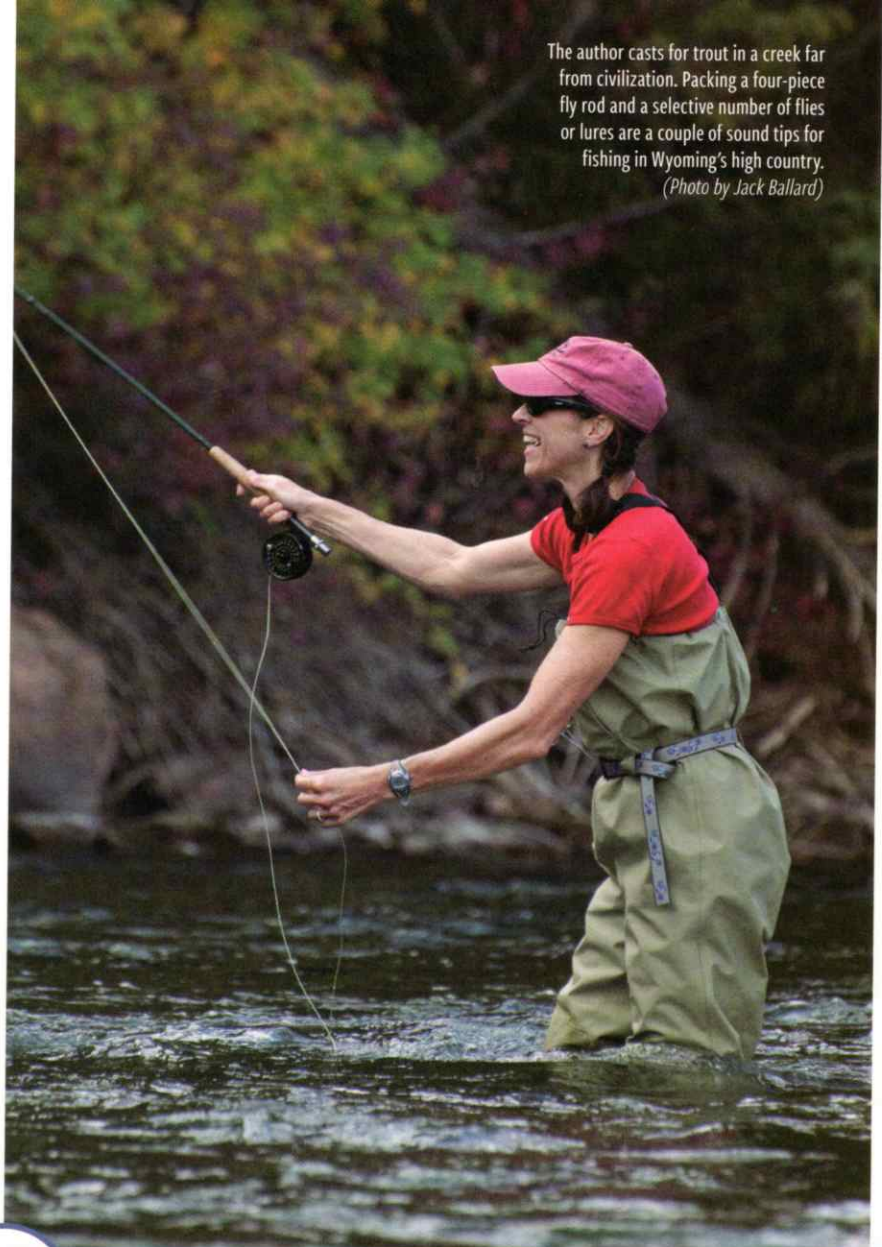
Even the clearest mountain stream may contain microscopic impurities, like the parasite giardia lamblia which causes digestive tract distress. Always boil, filter or chemically treat water before drinking or brushing your teeth. Use hand sanitizer, especially if you are cooking or eating. More backpackers get sick from dirty hands than from waterborne nasties.

How do I stay warm?

The key to staying warm in the backcountry is staying dry. Dress in layers and be sure the ones closest to your body are either wool, which is warm when wet, or synthetic fabrics that wick moisture. A weatherproof outer shell and a down, synthetic down or similar insulating top are musts, too. It can snow in Wyoming's mountains any month of the year.

There's a saying among savvy backcountry travelers that cotton kills because it retains moisture. Leave your cotton clothing at home.

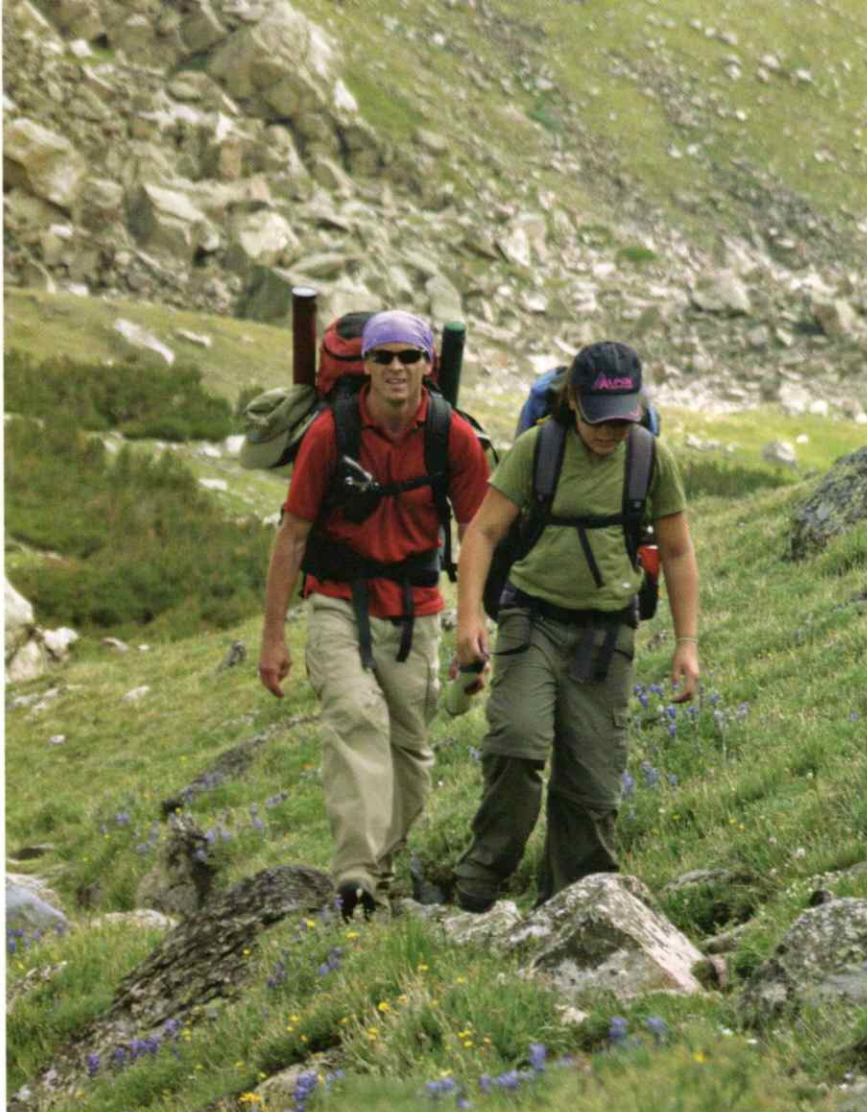
If you're cold at night, put on a wool hat. People lose about 10 percent of their body



5 TIPS TO HELP YOU CATCH MORE BACKCOUNTRY FISH

1. **Use a travel rod:** For fly-fishing, a four-piece rod fits easily on the side of a pack and is shorter, whereas a two-piece rod sticks up and catches on tree limbs.
2. **Do your research:** Instead of bringing your entire tackle box, figure out what you'll need for lures or flies and streamline what you carry. Grasshopper and cricket patterns usually work well in August, along with common dry flies like parachute Adams and elk-hair caddis. If nothing bites, try a basic wooly bugger.
3. **Find the inlet:** When fishing an alpine lake look for the inlet, which is where fish like to hang out. Water coming into the lake is like a food conveyor belt to fish.
4. **Understand spawning:** Cutthroat, rainbow and golden trout are spring spawners, which could mean July in the high country. If the fish ignore your presentation to them they might be spawning and less interested in feeding, but don't give up, they still eat a little — especially if it's an easy grab.
5. **Be stealthy:** Though a remote lake doesn't get a lot of pressure, the fish are still wary of avian and land-based predators. The water is likely clear, which helps you see the fish, but they can see you, too, and they'll spook if they catch you moving on the shoreline.

— By Lisa Ballard



A father and daughter hike toward a remote lake to fish and camp. (Photo by Dominic Ballard)

heat from an uncovered head. Retaining that 10 percent might make the difference between feeling chilly and warm. If you're still cold, wear your down jacket inside your sleeping bag.

Can I prevent blisters?

Blisters are caused by friction inside your boots. Start by getting proper-fitting, good-quality hiking boots made to support the amount of weight you plan to carry. Wear them a few times around the neighborhood or on several short hikes before your big backcountry trip. Lace them snugly so your feet aren't moving, but not so tight that your feet can't articulate as you hike. You may need to adjust the laces as your feet settle in or change in size. Wear wool or wicking socks. Cotton retains moisture that can create a hotspot. It helps to take off your boots and air your feet now and again during the day, and have a pair of camp shoes, like sturdy sandals

or slip-on shoes, to wear in the evening. It's important to keep dirt and debris out of your boots by wearing gaiters or pants that are long enough to keep the tops of your boots covered. If you feel a pebble or grit inside a boot, stop immediately and get rid of it.

Should I make a campfire?

It depends on the conditions and your surroundings. Check before you leave if campfires are allowed in the area and if there are any fire bans. If campfires are legal, make a ring of stones to contain it, on rock or dirt, then collect dead, downed wood. Keep water near the fire. If it's windy, wait for another time. Always be sure your campfire is totally out before you crawl in your tent for the night or leave the site.

What if I get hurt?

Some of the protocols for injury are the same as getting lost, like telling someone your plan before you depart and staying put. If you've got a cell signal, call 9-1-1, then layer on clothing or wrap up in your sleeping bag to stay warm and prevent going into shock if the injury is serious. If you know first aid, use it, otherwise just stay calm. Help might take some time to arrive, but it will come.

Should I bring my kids?

Backcountry time is family time, though it's better to limit your outings to day hikes until your kids reach school age. The key to teaching your kids to love the outdoors is keeping it fun, which means properly outfitting them with clothing and footwear, and keeping the distance reasonable. A rule of thumb is to go half your youngest child's age. For a 6-year-old, limit the day to three miles or less, and remember the rule to limit pack weight to 25 percent of body weight. If your kid weighs 60 pounds, their pack should be about 15 pounds, so probably just water, lunch and some clothing. You'll need to shoulder the rest.

Should I bring my dog?

If pets are allowed, bring Rover along but with a few caveats. Dogs should be on-leash as a courtesy to other backpackers and to prevent them from harassing wildlife or worse,

Stay bear aware when
recreating in bear country.
(Photo by Mark Gocke/WGFD)



BE BEAR AWARE!

- Carry bear spray in an accessible spot, such as on your belt, at all times in bear country.
- If you encounter a bear on the trail, don't run. Gather your group together and pick up young children. Have bear spray ready and slowly back away facing the bear. Talk calmly but loudly to identify yourselves as humans. If the bear comes toward you, act as large and as loud as possible.
- If you see a cub, do not approach it. Mama bear is close by even if you can't see her.
- Never block a bear of any age from coming or going. A cornered bear is a dangerous bear.
- Store food, trash, toiletries and other bear attractors in a bear-proof canister or hang it in a sturdy bag or backpack from a high tree limb that's at least 100 feet from your tent. It will keep other critters from raiding it, too.
- Watch for bears where they might feed, such as around berry patches, decaying wood and shorelines.
- Be alert. Avoid wearing ear buds and listening to music in the backcountry, and approach blind spots on the trail with caution.
- Make noise by singing or talking.
- Keep your pet on a leash.
- For more information about recreating in bear country, see the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Bear Wise webpage: <https://bit.ly/3GN9g4t>

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bringing an angry bear back to you.

Get a dog pack so that Rover can carry his own food, pad, packable bowl and water. The weight rule goes for your dog, too. If your dog weighs 45 pounds, limit its load to 11 pounds.

Clean up after your pet! Burying its poop is best, at least 100 feet from water or the trail. Some backcountry organizations suggest a 200-foot buffer.

What about my poop?

Bury it, too, the same distance away. Carry out other trash. Better yet, let Rover do it.

Backpacking fulfills you in many ways. By

overcoming challenges like a steep ascent, a bout of bad weather, a stove that won't light or fish that won't bite, you return stronger and more confident in your everyday life. Though you may be tired from the physical demands of the outing, it will ultimately energize you. Good friends become great friends, and the fond memories last a lifetime.

— An award-winning writer and photographer and a long-time contributor to Wyoming Wildlife, Lisa Ballard spends most of summer and fall trekking into the backcountry to fish, hunt or simply enjoy the view. She's the author of 10 books on backpacking and hiking. See her work at www.LisaBallardOutdoors.com.