

## AMERICAN WILDERNESS LEADERSHIP SCHOOL EXPERIENCE (AWLS) By D.J. Gerner

On Saturday, the 28<sup>th</sup> day of June, I departed from Pittsburgh airport at 8:20 am. It was a three-hour flight from Pittsburgh to Denver, but I was seated next to some very nice people and we talked most of the way. When I got to Denver, I hung around the bookstore for a while and grabbed a bite to eat. I waited for the plane and thought about what was coming. I didn't know what to expect, but was excited and frightened at the same time. I arrived in Jackson Hole at 2:51pm. I walked around for a little while (the airport isn't that big so it didn't take too long) I found a camp staff member, Melissa. She showed me to a camp van with all the others that showed up that were in our group. I hadn't seen much of Wyoming but I liked it already. Being from Ohio, I've never really seen mountains before so I was impressed to say the least. At home, I could drive for hours and still not see a mountain. Here I couldn't find a place without mountains close by. I got to the A.W.L.S. ranch soon after. It was probably the most beautiful place I had ever seen.

Sunday morning we all rotated around doing various name games in an attempt to get each other's names down. It sort of worked but not entirely. With forty-two people in a group, not everyone is going to know everyone else's name. Later, we all did a nature hike with Peter (the wilderness survival teacher). After lunch we were in the classroom with Peter and he tested our knowledge of the local plants and wildlife with a test he made.

Monday morning we learned about some of the equipment we would be using for Wednesday's trip. Then in the afternoon we walked around doing different stations and learning about the kinds of jobs different people have in the outdoors.

Tuesday morning we had a class on building shelters using tarps that we would be using for the campout the next day. We were divided into groups and tried to put up our shelters. We all did fairly well, but as expected, everyone made a few mistakes but we corrected them. That afternoon we got all the equipment we needed including tarps, food, and sleeping bags.

Wednesday morning we started on our overnight hike. We left at eight in the morning. It was a hard hike up into the mountains and a long way to go. We were almost at our intended campsite when someone noticed something a little odd...snow! Well, I probably don't need to say there were more than a few snow balls brought into camp. As soon as we got to the campsite we ate lunch. Then everyone started setting up camp. Each camper set up his/her shelter but everyone went around and critiqued everyone else's. We got to see every shape and size of shelter -- long and thin to short and squat (mine). After that we did a compass course and panned for gold. I found some but it wasn't enough to keep. However, everyone who completed the compass course got an arrowhead carved by Melissa.

On Thursday morning we got up and ate breakfast at seven and left for camp at eight. We got back to camp around ten thirty, turned in all our camping gear and rested up for the afternoon activities. At one we left for the...

**WHITE WATER RAFTING TRIP!** We went down the Snake River, which because of the snow melts and recent rain, now had class four rapids! It was almost straight up and down all the way through "lunch counter"; the biggest set of rapids on this course. That night we had a speaker from Yellowstone come in to talk to us about the park and told us some stories from his experiences as a park ranger. It was really interesting seeing some of the things he brought in like the buffalo and grizzly skins.

Friday was both a very happy and very sad day. It was one of the most enjoyable days of my life so far with the best people you could hope for as friends. We started out in groups and walked around the ranch and did a few of the things we had learned during the week for a score; numbers 1-5 were awarded for each game. Although I didn't win anything, I still had a lot of fun and got to try throwing tomahawk double. As I only have one I hadn't attempted this before and although I failed miserably (nearly breaking both hawks) it was a learning experience. Then we went into Jackson Hole to see some of the sights. We spent most of the afternoon looking around and everyone got something for souvenirs. I got a shirt that says, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself (and bears)". Then we went to the baseball field to have our supper. Then we were off to the rodeo and watched it for a while. It was a different experience for me as I'd never been to a rodeo. Then it was back to the baseball field to watch the fireworks. We returned

to Granite Ranch after the fireworks. Everyone was sad because we knew it was probably the last time we would see most of these people, but eventually we finished our good-byes and went to bed.

Saturday I left Jackson Hole with a better understanding of wildlife, ecosystems, and the sheer beauty of the world around us; but a better understanding of how fragile it truly is. Without people to protect this wilderness we love so much, it will cease to exist. So I hope I can help continue to preserve this place that people like you have worked so hard to protect.