

# Back in the Saddle

It is hard to believe that it was only one week ago we set up camp here in Gros Ventre. Everything was gray: the leafless trees, the stony ground with last year's grass, and the damp sky. Since then the grass has sprung to life and is four inches of lovely crisp green spikes. A few Unita Ground Squirrels have begun poking around the new sprouts. The cottonwood trees are budding out deep green leaves on the remains of their storm-lashed limbs.

The sky has been very dynamic this week giving us everything from bright blue through sooty ash to charcoal gray over our heads. Each day, we have been rained on, sleeted on, graupeled on, and even hailed on. Wind has gently flapped the awnings and violently shaken the trailer. We've seen rainbows and and new snow in the mountains. Winter may be grumbling on its way out the door, but Spring is inexorable.











Our time this week has been a mishmash of tasks. Some familiar tasks make us feel as if we had never left last October. Walking to the laundry house, the trip into town for



groceries, scanning for moose along the river on the morning commute, and using the need to fill the propane tanks as an excuse to have lunch out somewhere. At the same time, many hours are spent taking in all the things that are new – wildlife brigade procedures and park terminology, work schedules and new coworkers.













*A spoof on our annual Four-Boots photo. After getting fuel & propane in Colter Bay, we stopped in Jackson Lake Lodge for lunch, but missed the one restaurant being open, and had to make do with a coffee bar sandwich in front of the fire. Rough life!*

Most of the concessionaires are still in the process of preparing for the season. Some camps and restaurants are open, other facilities are a week or two out from opening. It is the same with the park. Some areas are open and manned. Other areas are available to visitors, but no ranger or volunteers are assigned to be hosts yet. String Lake is one of the spots in the park fervently preparing for the new season, with picnic sites being cleaned, a utility trailer parked in the main parking area, supplies being gathered, and the safety and informational posters being prepared.





our office on Sundays – we came to help make preparations for opening

Plastic sandwich boards need cleaning after winter storage, old signs disposed of, and new signs attached. It sounds so simple! Our first afternoon ended just as we had gotten over a dozen boards washed by a very loud thunderstorm that pelted us with pea-sized hail. We tried again the next day after Dave's shift and managed to get a few signs set up before the heavens again chased us off. In 41 degrees and rain, Velcro just does not like to stick.













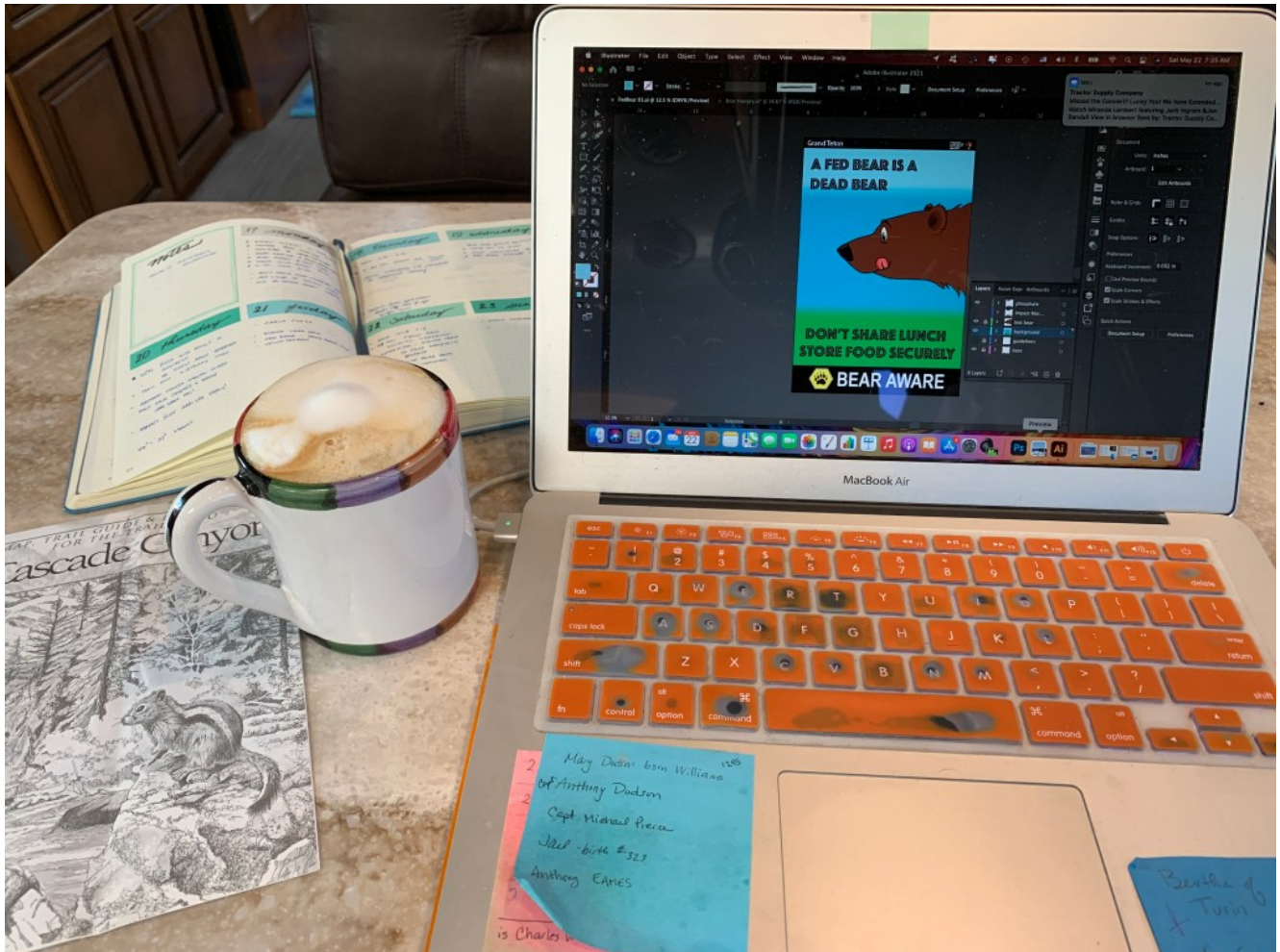


our String Lake preparations of washing and organizing message boards – there is still snow in the shade and on the trails

And somewhere along the way in this process, I volunteered to



work one day a week at String Lake! I will be learning my duties at training next Wednesday, and work the Sunday shift with Dave as that is where I am needed most. I also volunteered to help design new posters for the sandwich boards, which was fun to work on, in the comfort of the Airstream as the rain and sleet pelted down on the roof.



beginning to draft an idea for a new sign for String Lake. In the middle of the week we were able to share a meal with a friend we made last year who works for the [Grand Teton National Park Foundation](#). Thankfully, each of us was vaccinated, so we could just enjoy the time together over a great pizza. Our friend was dog sitting, offering us a real treat of having a lovely, mellow, golden retriever to share fuzzy cuddles.

Dave worked just one more wildlife brigade day this week, this time fairly far north in the park. A wild life biologist shared his observation that 399 generally uses the vicinity of

the roads less when her cubs are yearlings than she does when they are (new) cubs-of-the-year. I think that is a fascinating pattern to pick up. She certainly is making full use of her territory (although it does not appear she has forsaken the roadside just yet with this set of cubs). Back on Dave's first day she was in the Willow Flats and Jackson Lake Junction area. The next day she moved south near Catholic Bay and the Sacred Heart chapel. Then continued to head south, visiting near the old RK0 road and the Mt. Moran turnout. On this, Dave's third day, she was back north, up at Pilgrim Creek and then later at the Dump Road. Just as his shift ended, she was all the way up by Leeks Marina.



Shown in purple: this is the area that grizzly 399 and her



cubs were seen over the course of one week. Roughly 12 miles. According to the [Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee](#) (IGBC), this early in spring, grizzlies are dining on winter-killed carcasses, young grasses, ants, dandelions, and soon the [Biscuitroot](#) flower and tuber. I am told Willow Flats will soon be a yellow carpet of Biscuitroot flowers.

As Dave tells me, the shift went well. Seven hours of guiding cars, conducting people, and answering questions. But there was a dramatic twist to the day. Dave was dutifully being the new guy, watching how this other shift of people managed the jam and helping out where needed. As he looked around, with most eyes on “GB plus 4”, he spotted another grizzly across the road in the brush behind everyone. Now they had six bears to watch in two different directions! The brigade members ended up splitting as mom and the cubs went into the woods, apparently headed north and expected to remerge near the Dump Road where all the photographers were leap frogging to create a new jam, and the new bear made a big circle around the original jam, crossed the road, and came to the area where 399 had left, and that is where Dave worked to the end of his shift.



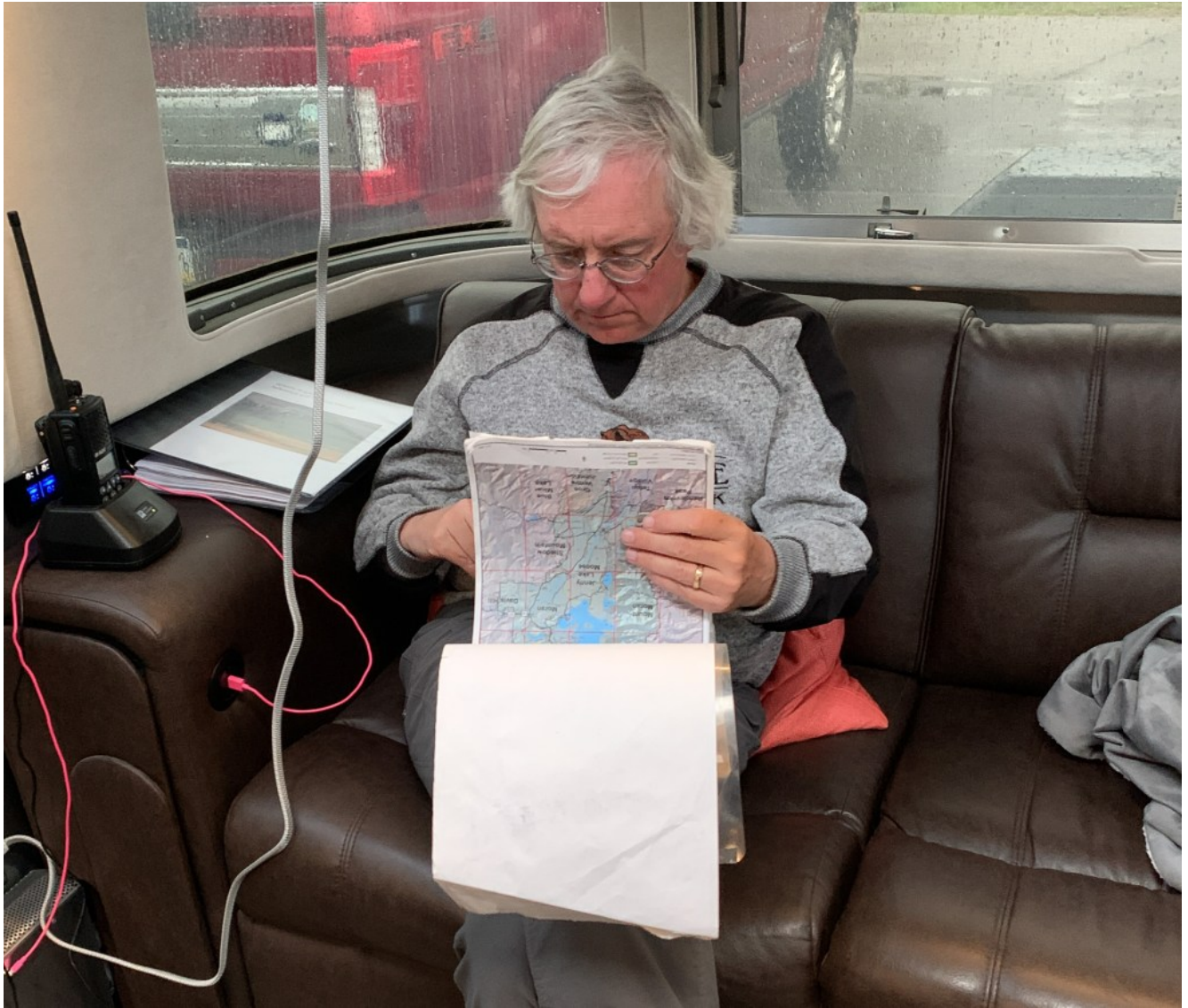
Dave's Saturday wildlife jam – with an Airstream passing through

In three days of working, Dave has about 20 hours of working with grizzlies. That is about nineteen more hours than over the last twenty-five plus years!

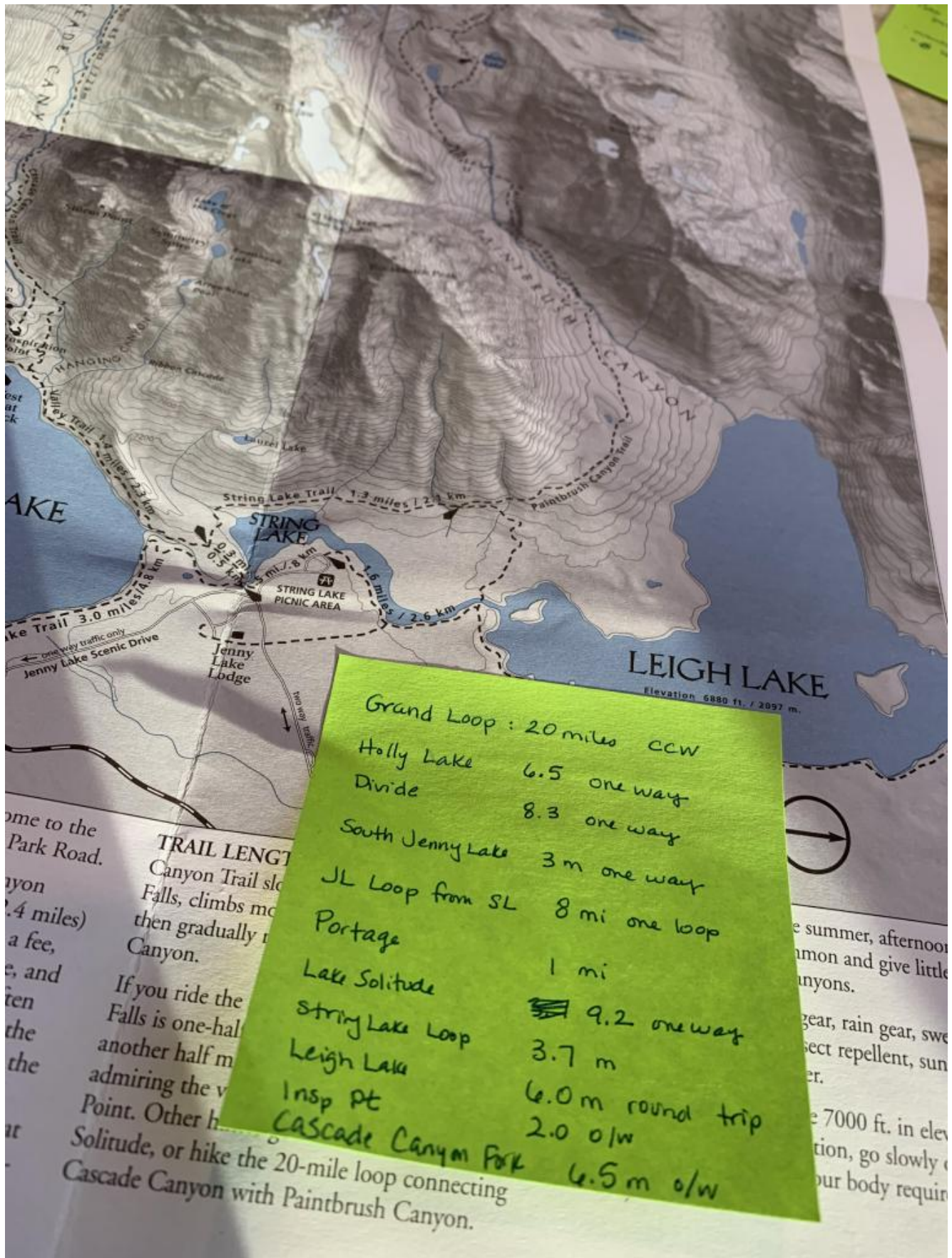
We also did a little experiment this week – we did not connect to shore power! Despite all the rain and cloud covered days, we were able to charge the batteries enough using solar, that we could live normally in the the Airstream. That means lights, convection oven, electric coffee makers, charging computers, etc. We did not try to skimp on power. The down side to the experiment is that it has been so cold at night, 34-41, and someone in the trailer during the day keeping the heat on, that we used a lot of propane. But it was a good test of the recently upgraded system and proof to ourselves on what kind of limits the features of the Airstream place on our ability to boondock (camp without hookups).

As we close out our first week, we are feeling happy to be back in the saddle – in our old familiar place – and looking forward to the busy season ahead.





Dave studying his wildlife brigade materials



Kathy taking advantage of Dave's cheat-sheet that helped him answer so many 'What hike should I do' type questions last year