



Pat—and we later found out that she had won the vote and is now Dubois’s proud mayor.

“Bear Country. Dangerous. Avoid confrontation.” The same poster was at every trailhead. It had a large bear claw on it and was pinned to the noticeboard where the trail led us back into the mountains. Well, we had been warned. Not once, not twice, but three times. Felicity was out there with her cubs, and we needed to stick together.

The strange thing about all the warning signs was that they no longer intimidated us. Not to a state of fear anyway. Strangely, I was kind of hoping to glimpse Felicity. After all, we had seen plenty of black bears, but I was kind of getting curious about grizzlies. A few days earlier, another hiker had come across her about five miles into the trail and had to use his bear spray to scare her off. But I felt good heading out into the mountains with Rip and Dom. Nosh had taken an alternate route and would reconnect with us next week in Pinedale.

We soon came across some bear scat, and things really changed when we saw fresh prints in the mud. The paw prints, with deep sharp claws, were in front of us, and we were on full alert, scouring the horizon for any movement. Fortunately, the trail soon forked into two directions, and the paw prints veered off right as we continued straight on up the mountain track.

As the day continued, we saw no further sign of Felicity, and my attention switched to my other pet fear: thunder. A dark thunderstorm began to rumble in the distance. The clouds rolled in, and inevitably, it started to rain. The heavy load of food on my back made my left shoulder ache, so I popped some ibuprofen to ease the strain. Having had far too little food with me during the previous five days, I had subsequently bought much

too much food in Dubois. The first day back on the trail was horrific, with big jars of peanut butter, mayonnaise, and Nutella weighing me down.

On the second morning, we got up early and were treated to a surprise moose encounter. I had never seen a moose in real life. The year before, I had hoped to see one when I hiked up above the Arctic Circle on the Kungsleden Trail in Swedish Lapland. However, nature can’t be scripted, and unfortunately, I didn’t see a single moose during my three-week hike. But now, in the early morning, there was one right in front of me, taking its time having its breakfast drink from a pond. The majestic creature waded gracefully through the boggy water, with tall green grass reaching up to its belly. The three of us stopped, took pictures, and let everything sink in. What a sight, what a sight! A creature like no other, larger than a horse, with its long brown nose and a strange goatee dangling under its chin. What struck me most was how silently and gracefully it moved, trotting off a little and then stopping to give us a second glance.

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Judging our close proximity, the animal decided to move on to more private pastures and trotted off into the thicket. And just like that, he was gone. We stared at one another with wide eyes and broad, contented smiles. We had finally seen a fully grown male moose. No words were said, and we hiked on.

As we walked on, we realized that we had finally seen the so-called *big five*: Rip had seen a pack of 12 wolves up in Glacier and also caught a glimpse of a mountain lion up there. We had seen plenty of black bears and one of us had seen a grizzly in the distance. Elk sightings were becoming more and more frequent, and now

finally we had bumped into a moose. Wildlife really was in abundance along the CDT, as we also encountered longhorn antelope, and the countless deer were beginning to lose their novelty. Rodents frequently poked their noses up at us, and we often saw beavers swimming in lakes, making their dams of logs. The chipmunks and squirrels frequently jumped from branch to branch, and the reptiles became ever more frequent the farther south we trekked. There were numerous kinds of ants, big and small, busying across the trail as we stopped for lunch, hoping to catch a crumb or two. A plethora of birdsong filled the morning air, and we were soon also graced by the sight of a bald eagle as it dove down into a lake to catch a fish.

It’s strange to think that less than half a year ago, the thought of walking among all this wildlife really intimidated me. To be totally honest, it scared the shit out of me. But reality is often much less frightening than imagination. The thought of living with bears worried me so much that I nearly cancelled this trip altogether. And to think how totally different my mindset was out here in the wilderness itself. Time and time again, I am baffled by how adaptable and flexible our human mind is in adjusting to new circumstances.

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Walking with this young, energetic crew, I found that my pace had increased considerably. Perhaps a little too much, but I was still managing to keep up. We were hiking three miles (5 km) an hour for days and days. As I looked down at my feet in continuous motion, it struck me how abnormal this pace was when compared to the normal tempo of walking with my family in the woods. There are all kinds of words for this sort of pace: speed walking, race walking, and even power walking or flying. Olympic athletes average a pace up to eight miles (13 km) an hour, over twice as fast as I was walking, and I already felt as though I was flying. But I guess the continuous elevation gains and descents, as well as the 10-hour stints we did each day, compensated for that difference.

The wide, flat plains of Wyoming offered the perfect circumstances to get some faster miles done.

