



Death in Yellowstone: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park

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Intriguing stories of how people have died in Yellowstone warn about the many dangers that exist there and in wild areas in general.

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June says

Did you know that if you fall (or jump) into one of Yellowstone's boiling geothermal pools, you will not only die a slow, painful death, but your eyes will turn completely white---just like a boiled fish. Yep. It's in the book. Oh--and Grizzly bears like to slash through your tent and pull you out while you are sleeping. Thought you were safe because you hung your food up? Nope.

Sesana says

I got this book from my local library, but I understand that it's also sold at Yellowstone itself. This is probably a public service. But the sad truth is that the people who really need to see it, who think that the boardwalks around hot geysers are just suggestions, that the bears must be tame and look so terribly hungry, or that it would be fun to swim just above the falls are exactly the people who won't read and absorb the lessons of this book. For a book about horrible ways that people can die, it's remarkably free from sensationalism. The author used to work at Yellowstone, so he understands what the park is really like and a little of why people do the ill-advised things that can kill them. And the sad fact is that most of the deaths in this book, even the ones by natural causes, could have been avoided entirely. Certainly creepy, and if I ever do get out to Yellowstone it'll probably leave me slightly freaked out.

Lady ♥ Belleza says

Wilderness is impersonal. It does not care whether you live or die. It does not care how much you love it.

So while we are loving the Yellowstone wilderness, while we play in it, indeed revel in it, taking it on its own terms and helping to protect it, we foolish mortals must always remember to respect it. For not only can it bite us, but, indeed, it can devour us.

While reading this my first thought was he could have just subtitled it, "People are stupid". Indeed, most of the deaths in this book are the direct result of people being "foolhardy". There are a few genuine accidents and some deaths by others actions, negligent acts and even homicides. Lee Whittlesey covers them all. What is not included in this book are deaths from auto, motorcycle, or snowmobile wrecks or deaths from heart attacks or illness.

The book is divided into two sections: **Death by Nature** which covers hot springs, wild animals, poisonous plants and gas, lightning, falling rocks and trees (although these could also be in next section), avalanche, freezing, cave-in, falls, smoke, earthquakes, and drowning. Part II is **Death by Man** which covers Indian battles, fights, horse and wagon and stagecoach incidents, accidental and deliberate shootings, murder, suicide, missing and presumed dead, gas stove explosions, structural fires, carbon monoxide poisoning, death on road (bus accidents) and airplane crashes (military and private planes).

While this could have been a dry recitation of names and manor of death, Lee Whittlesey has provided a narrative with the deaths, how it happened and how he came by the information. He also gives a little bit of the history of his life and also why he wrote the book. This is actually the second edition, the first being published in 1995, and has more deaths. Some are older ones, the information sent to him by people who know about them. Some are deaths that occurred between 1995 and the publishing of this book.

While this is not an exciting, page turning book, I found it to be very interesting and informative. It made me glad that my parents were of the mindset that when in Yellowstone National Park, you obeyed the rules the Rangers stated because, "The rules are there for a reason!", and we left Yellowstone the same way we came in, with our limbs and lives intact. I did try to get a bear to eat my sister, but as is brought out in this book, they are wild animals and uncooperative.

The book ends with Whittlesey reinforcing the safety rules we should all follow because wilderness is after all wild and can devour us. A word of caution from me, while not gory, some of the descriptions of injuries in this book are graphic, for instance, he describes what happens to the human body when immersed in boiling hot water.

Andie says

I received this audio book from the Early Reviewers program and, once again, I had not read the description of what I requested closely enough. I thought this was going to be a murder mystery set in Yellowstone, but instead, it is a chronicle of seemingly every death that has occurred in the park since it's inception.

I will say three things about this book:

1. It is not for the squeamish. The author graphically relates stories of people being boiled alive in thermal springs, being flayed and eaten by bears and being gored by bison. It came as a relief when people just started dying by falling trees.
2. The stupidity of people apparently knows no bounds. The vast majority of the deaths related in the book could have been avoided if the victims had just followed basic safety rules prominently displayed at the park.
3. About two thirds through the book I just got bored at so much death and it just was not interesting (or shocking anymore)

This is a good cautionary book for anyone venturing into America's National Parks, but the author would have better served the reader if he had eliminated some of the deaths he relates. We did not need to hear about every last one of them.

Ericka says

The book may appear daunting, but only about 3/4 of it are stories. The last quarter is dedicated to end notes and more information about the cemeteries of Yellowstone.

Do not read this book BEFORE or DURING your stay at Yellowstone. I read the book right after I left the park's borders and it left me with the willies for a long time. It is definitely not for those who can't stomach disgusting and grotesque things. For example, they describe in detail what happens to a person's body post-geyser accident. Another chapter talked about bear attacks and people being eaten alive.

I found the chapter on geysers and animal attacks to be the best part of the book. It will be interesting to see if I can bring myself to check out Old Faithful ever again. By the time you're done with this you might be lucky if chipmunks don't send you into a panic. This book proves that anything that can go wrong will and that you should never doubt in the depths of people's stupidity.

C-shaw says

Perverse as it may be, I love to read disaster books of all sorts: mountain-climbing terrors, shipwrecks, etc., and I am especially enamoured of bear attack stories. This book is so interesting to me, even as I cringe while reading it. I hope my interest is in part a desire to avoid such horrors, rather than just for the prurient thrills!

* * * * *

Well, my interest faded after reading pages and pages of minor details about people who died over a hundred years ago. The part about the hot springs deaths (boiled people and dogs!) and the bear attacks (chewed humans!) were horrific but interesting.

C says

This book is thoroughly researched and jam packed with information. For that I give it 4 stars.

It is so thorough, though, that at points it gets pretty dry. It starts out so dramatically with the death-by-thermal-pool chapter, that everything after that doesn't really measure up.

Granted, not that I want people to die in more dramatic ways so that it'll be more interesting to read...

It is more that the thermal pools are such a bizarre and horrific way to die, everything else seems... tame. I had to take a moment to reflect the physical process of a human being parboiled or stewed. Nevermind a human you know and love. In front of you.

So, it is good to note that the book can get quite graphic, and horrific. But, the flip side to that is that it's not a work of fiction, and these are real risks to consider when being in the park. Particularly falling (make sure your hiking shoes have good tread!) and drowning ("don't cross the streams!" is more universal than initially thought!)

Overall, it was an interesting read. Particularly the legal issues surrounding those deaths (also a bit dry, but still interesting) and the dilemma of preserving nature wild & natural vs. trying to protect humans from their own foolishness.

Granny says

I am not, by nature, ghoulish (oh, maybe just a tad), but this book is really good bathtub reading. The "foolhardiness" aspect of the title was what intrigued me. I had no idea how many visitors to Yellowstone should be eligible for The Darwin Awards. This is "truth stranger than fiction" reading at its best.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

The main idea of this book is: respect the wilderness! Whittlesey has done a very thorough job of chronicling every death that has occurred in or near Yellowstone National Park. Chapters are arranged by means of death. What strikes me repeatedly is that people simply ignore or fail to understand warning signs, restrictions, and rules-- they're there for a reason. The animals in the park are NOT part of a zoo or petting zoo-- they're wild and potentially dangerous. I can't believe people have been seen putting their kids up on the backs of bears and bison to take their pictures! This was an interesting book and should be read by anyone considering a trip to the western wilderness.

Christine says

No mystery what the book is about; the title says it all. However, word of caution: If you're hoping for a Faces of Death account of death in Yellowstone, this isn't your book. But, if you'd like a tastefully written, historical recounting of the various ways in which people have died in Yellowstone in the last 100 years, then Whittlesey's book IS for you. Lots of interesting information, lots of common sense reminders about life in the the wilderness. Whittlesey says it best:

"While appreciating its (nature) wholeness, we must never abandon a healthy respect for wilderness. Wilderness is impersonal. It does not care whether you live or die. It does not care how much you love it. So while we are loving the Yellowstone wilderness, while we play in it, indeed revel in it, taking it on its own terms and helping to protect it, we foolish mortals must always remember to respect it. For not only can it bite us, but, indeed, it can devour us."

CatBookMom says

The first part is really fascinating: deaths by falling into thermal features (hot springs), bears, bison.

FWIW, I worked for the Nat'l Park Service (NPS) for 3 summers while I was in college - 1968-1970. Not only was I there for the initial story about a child mentioned in this book, which story made national news, about a boy who drowned in a thermal feature, I transcribed the initial Old Faithful local-office NPS inquiry from the cassette tape of their discussions to paper. Everything this book says about it is congruent with what I recall of the happenings. It was horrifying.

If you go to Yellowstone, keep your young kids on a leash (literally), or attached to your hands every single moment.

Book Concierge says

The subtitle states: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park.

I've had this on my tbr for some time. In general, I like nonfiction about natural history and the great outdoors. I read Jack Olsen's *Night of the Grizzlies* a few years ago and found it fascinating and compelling. I was expecting something akin to Olsen's work with this book, and was sorely disappointed.

Whittlesey give us a recitation of incidents in the park, and surrounding communities, divided into categories/chapters. The first two are fairly interesting despite the dry, factual delivery. Whittlesey begins with people who have been burned / scalded by falling – or diving (!) – into various hot springs. The second chapter is devoted to encounters with bears, primarily grizzlies. In each chapter, he relates the incidents in chronological order, beginning with vague reports of events in the late 1800s, for which we have minimal historical data or first-hand accounts. He includes chapters on poisonous plants, falls, runaway horses, Indian battles, suicide, car accidents, drowning, and avalanches among others.

I appreciate the amount of work involved in gathering all this information, and Whittlesey obviously spent time trying to corroborate various accounts (frequently without success, though he noted his efforts). However, the delivery of this information is so dry and “just the facts, Ma'm” that I quickly grew bored.

Archer says

A man from Brussels falls into a thermal pool and dies after his legs are boiled, later the small spring is renamed Belgian pool. A young man from Alabama camps illegally and is eaten by a bear. This a chronicling of "accidents and foolhardiness", with the emphasis put by the author on foolhardiness. It's definitely morbid and the attitude towards the "fools" can be a bit disturbing, but there are some riveting stories here, and they are described in a refreshingly matter-of-fact way. You don't have to embellish too much when your subject matter is people being gored by bison or falling 800 feet to their death.

A side note: I bought this book as a calloused youth on a trip to Yellowstone in my early teens. A larger, louder, and rowdier boy had run past me on the boardwalk while I was walking along with my parents. I was jealous and a bit spiteful towards the reckless freedom of this other kid. Later on we saw him once again, but this time he was sitting on the side of the boardwalk, crying and clutching his bare feet, which were bright red. "Fool" I thought, and I bought this book.

Joyce says

Honestly, what could I have been thinking? Perhaps this would be true crime? But no, it is, literally, a chronicle of deaths of every kind throughout the long history of our first national park. There are deaths by nature--those hot pools, lightning, bears, drowning-- and by death by man--Indians, dumb accidents, suicide, murder. There is a bit of "these-victims-were-too-dumb-to-live" about this, but there's also a picture of the park geographically and historically. Lots of "who knew?"--for example, boating on Lake Yellowstone can be deadly, and Old Faithful and the big geysers are the least of one's worries--tons of little hot tubs

everywhere! At the end Whittlesey discusses the real problem: how do you preserve the wildness for which the park is cherished while keeping visitors safe? Probably not the book for a long car trip but perhaps to dip into. Grisly and harrowing but cautionary. Good thing I've already been to Yellowstone.

karen says

this book has a fantastic title. i love the word-choice of "foolhardiness", and i thought i would really enjoy reading a book about people doing stupid things and paying for them with their liiiives. which i think makes me a bad person, but since a lot of these deaths take place in the 1800's, there is enough distance that it makes it less of a character flaw in me, and more of an abiding interest in historical circumstances. is what i am telling myself. but lee h. whittlesey is not gong to be stealing the crown of "king of narrative nonfiction" from erik larson anytime soon. this doesn't read like a book anyone would want to curl up with - it is more just a sort of social archive - a list of things that have happened within the park with no authorial voice or unifying thread.

there are basically two points. one: nature is wild, and yellowstone is not disney. it is not and should not be retrofitted to play nice with the tourists. and two: don't be an idiot.

this is a breakdown of the chapters, and ways people have died in yellowstone, in my own words:

- hot springs
- animals
- poisonous plants
- poisonous gas
- lightning
- avalanches and freezing
- cave-ins
- falling rocks
- falling trees
- falls
- forest fires
- earthquakes
- drowning
- indian battles
- fight
- diving
- horse,wagon,stagecoach
- shootings
- murders
- suicide
- missing/presumed dead
- gas stove explosions and structural fires
- carbon monoxide poisoning
- air/road accidents

so basically, it is another book that assures me that i should never ever leave my house. ever.

i am not someone who is overmuch impressed with the majesty of nature. nor of the majesty of architecture, for that matter. when i find myself in distant lands, my first thought is, "where is the closest bookstore?" and

"food!! gimmie exotic food!" so the thought of going to a place to just be inspired by nature's vast canvas - i can see how people would dig it, but i am not one of them.

and while dying from many of the ways listed in the above chapters can be avoided by a sane person (yes, a photo of your toddler sitting astride a bear *would* be adorable, but usually you are just going to end up with a picture of the day your kid got torn to ribbons by your "foolhardiness") and (do not jump into a hot spring with a temperature of 202 degrees F to rescue your dog because your eyeballs will boil, your skin will slough off of you, your last words will be "that was a stupid thing i did," and your dog will still be dead), still there are many potential deaths over which you have no control. and why?? because people are idiots. you would think, wouldn't you, that being in all that open space would somehow be safer than living in a city where people push people off of subway platforms and mug people at knifepoint and get into scuffles on the sidewalk because people weren't meant to live that close together, but you would be wrong. people will find a way to be idiots no matter where they are, and these two situations are illustrative of that:

In two such other cases, deaths can be attributed to persons on the rim of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone purposefully throwing or accidentally dislodging rocks that fell onto persons below.

and

In the near-darkness at Eagle Creek campground, just north of Gardiner, the two saw a yellow tent belonging to Shannon Weatherly, 28, and a male friend. Schultz and Keys said later they thought the tent was a bear, and Schultz fired into it. His bullet struck Shannon in the head, killing her instantly and terrifying her friend.

so you could be doing all the right things - camping where you are supposed to be, enjoying a nature hike with your water bottles and granola treats and BLAMMO! some stupid kid throws a rock from way up above you and your head is caved in and bleeding into your thermal shirt. or you could be sleeping off your long day of respectful nature-observing and BLAMMO!! someone thinks your TENT is a BEAR. which i guess means it should be shot?

people are stupid. how we managed to evolve enough to build airplanes and bridges is beyond me.

your risk of dying in an indian battle or stagecoach accident are, admittedly, slim, but lightning, falling trees, earthquakes... you can't prevent this shit from happening.

but some of them. some of them, you can prevent as long as you are not a fool. like eating plants in yellowstone. seriously, why?? why??

like water hemlock.

do not eat this.

Six children found the plant growing along a stream and ate "greedily" of it, thinking it a parsnip.

but i guess it's hard, because what kid doesn't go just crazy for parsnips, right?

My own rules for eating plants in Yellowstone are threefold: never eat wild mushrooms, never eat plants that resemble wild carrots or parsnips, and more generally, never eat any plant unless you are positive of what it is by virtue of specific training.

my own rules are way more simple: pack twinkies.

oh, and don't be terrible at being a boy scout:

The scouts of troop 63 stopped at the outlet of the lake in order that leaders Layne Reynolds and John Bishoff could locate their assigned campsite. Imprudently, the party had not brought a map along, but they nevertheless decided that their camp lay directly across Shoshone Lake, probably an hour's paddling.

what boy scout troop doesn't bring a map?? seriously - that's just "be prepared 101."

and while this book was mostly very dry and plodding, there were occasional refreshing bursts of awesome, which is my word for "ewwww!"

Mr. D.E. MacKay, a sixtyish gentleman from New York, jumped from the careening vehicle at the first hint of danger. Unfortunately for him, he landed hard with his feet far apart, and the force drove the bones of his legs up into his body and lacerated his bladder. Then the caroming coach fell foursquare upon him.

he is later described as having been *telescoped against the rocks*.

awesome. (ew)

and i will just leave you with this - further proof that ladies with little dogs are usually the worst at taking responsibility for anything and although this makes me sad in my doggy-love parts, i still think the doggy ended up in a better place than being owned by this nightmare of a human:

"May I release my dog from his leash?" she asked. "No, ma'am," said the ranger deferentially. "It's strictly against the rules."

"There seem to be rules against everything one wants to do in this park," she said with a petulant frown. "Now what possible reason can there be for not allowing my dog a little freedom? Poor Von has been tied up all day!"

The ranger's strict training kept him from saying what he wanted to, but his face reddened at her tone. He began, "Lady, there are bears around here that might..."

She did not give him a chance to finish the sentence. "Oh, if that's all that worries you, Von won't hurt the bears!"

She reached for the snap on the dog's collar and unleashed him before the startled ranger could utter another word of protest.

The dog headed straight for an old black bear mother sitting at the edge of the forest some fifty years away, her two cubs above her in a tree, lying on two large limbs. The old bear sat there calmly, her front legs braced in front of her, not seeming to notice the dog that dashed madly toward her. She even inclined her head slightly the other way as if to show just how little this canine creature interested her.

The pup charged right up to the bear, fully expecting her to run. She sat motionless and he slowed for a quick turn to keep from running into her. At exactly that instant the old bear went into action. Quicker than a cat she struck out at him and with one blow of her paw sent him spinning with a broken back. Then she called her cubs down and hurried into the woods.

It happened so quickly that not one of the spectators moved for a few seconds. Then everyone rushed to the side of the dying dog, his owner protesting tearfully, "Why didn't you tell me? I can't understand why such

terrible beasts are allowed to run at large. Why aren't they put in cages where they can do no harm?"

ugh. hate her.

special thanks to brian for sending me this book/knowing what a sicko i am, and reinforcing my resolve to never go anywhere. ever.

ever.

come to my blog!
