Cirque of the Towers

The Big Sandy trailhead where we did this loop hike from is a long drive south of Pinedale where we had spent the previous night. Part of the road to the trailhead is paved, but the last part is gravel. The last 4 or 5 miles is very rough but was passable in our SUV at a speed of about 10 mph. Despite the long and rough road to the trailhead, the parking area was full of vehicles and we had a tough time finding a spot to leave ours. This was very late August so mid-summer would probably be even more crowded.

Day 1: Big Sandy Trailhead to Skull Lake

We decided to do this hike in a clockwise direction, thus saving the Cirque of the Towers for the end of the hike. As it turned out, the entire hike was very scenic so there was not really a need to “save the best for last”. The trail goes north from a junction just east of Big Sandy trailhead and passes to the east side of Meeks Lake. Just north of Meeks Lake is another trail junction that has a trail that is another option for going to Big Sandy Lake. We chose to continue on the trail that headed north.

There was not much elevation gain as we walked along and through the “foothills” of the Winds with some very nice open park areas interspersed with thinly wooded areas. We passed Mirror Lake and Dads Lake on well-marked trails and briefly talked to a trail crew consisting of young people from Montana. We stopped at the north end of Marms Lake for lunch as the views of the mountains to the north became better and better. The trail north of Marms Lake has another junction that is a little confusing in how it is marked. The trail that goes along the east side of the valley is the one that we wanted but we got started out on the Fremont Trail that was on the west side of the valley. After re-checking our topos, we went cross-country across the open valley to our trail.

Shortly after passing another trail junction where the Shadow Lake trail heads east, we crossed Washakie Creek and climbed a short rise and found another trail junction. This trail also leads east, but to Washakie Pass, where we would be headed the next day. From the junction we continued north to look for a camp site at Skull Lake. We found a site on the west side of the lake behind a small rise that put us out of sight of the lake and the trail. While filling our water bottles at the lake we were visited by a sow bear and her cub. I was only able to get a brief look at the bears out of the corner of my eye because they both turned and ran away as soon as they saw, or smelled, us. We both saw them running through an open area north of the lake so I knew that I did not imagine seeing them by the lake. We did a very careful job of food storage that night.

Figure 1 Heading North on Fremont Trail
Figure 2 Marm Lake

Figure 3 Washakie Creek Looking East

Figure 4 Washakie Creek Looking West
Day 2: Skull Lake to Valentine Lake

We started the day by back-tracking south to the trail junction we had passed yesterday. This time, we turned east on the Washakie Trail to climb the pass. From the junction it is about 2 miles to the pass on a trail that is mostly a gradual climb through very open areas, even along the lower section. As you climb, the views to the west across the open plains get more and more expansive. We stopped at the pass for our second breakfast and were treated with a surprisingly calm wind for a mountain pass. The views to the east into the Winds were terrific.

The trail down the east side of the pass is also mostly gradual with a couple of steep sections as it heads along the ridge between Macon Lake and Pass Lake. After passing Macon Lake there is another drop that has some switchbacks that lead down to the shore of Washakie Lake – the biggest lake in this area. Along the way down you get views of Washakie Glacier setting in a cirque on the east face of Mount Washakie. Because the scenery was so great, we decided to take another break for lunch along the shore of Washakie Lake. There many places to drop your pack and do some exploring.

After a long break we headed east on the trail with views of Loch Leven off to the north. Another gradual downhill trail leads to Ranger Park and another trail junction. Ranger Park is a large open area surrounded by mountains that would make a great place to camp – plenty of open areas, good water access, great views. We wanted to get further on the trail, and it was relatively early to set up camp, so we headed east on the Bears Ears Trail. We climbed up out of the valley on a trail that was steep in sections but well maintained. We camped near Valentine Lake on the northwest side that was high above the lake. Getting water took some effort but the site was sheltered from the light rain and wind that had started. We found out later that a bear “warning” had been posted for this lake.
Figure 6 Climb to Washakie Pass

Figure 7 Looking West from Washakie Pass

Figure 8 Looking East from Washakie Pass
Day 3: Valentine Lake to Lizard Head Meadows

We were happy to see that the clouds from the previous evening had moved off and it was a bright, clear day for the long hike we would have today at high elevation. The trail up the valley to the intersection with the Lizard Head trail was mostly gradual with a steep section of switchbacks about 1.5 miles from our camp near Valentine Lake. We made sure to keep our water bottles full whenever we got the chance due to our uncertainty about water on the Lizard Head Plateau. That was a good decision. As we climbed the views got better and better, both ahead and behind us to the west.

The trail intersection is in a saddle area between Cathedral Peak and Mount Chauvenet and was a good place for our morning break. The Bears Ears trail continues to the north. To the east is a several hundred foot drop to a small lake sitting in a cirque. After our break we headed south on the Lizard Head trail. The trail starts by doing a slight climb of the northern slope of Cathedral Peak and then leveling off as it circles around to the western slope before heading south once again. The views are amazing as you hike along a nearly level trail at an elevation of about 11,700 feet for a distance of about 5 miles. That is why we wanted good weather. The views to the west consisted of a ridge of mountains from Payson Peak on the north to Lizard Head Peak on the south. To the east are gradual slopes up to a ridgeline that was not much higher than we were at but has dramatic drop-offs to a series of lakes in cirques. The wind was very strong as we hiked across the plateau, but the weather stayed bright and sunny.

Near the south end of the Lizard Head trail just as you pass the Peak, the Cirque of the Towers comes into view and the trail drops steeply down a series of switchbacks and soon you come to a spur trail to the Bear Lakes that are just slightly north. We wanted to continue down into the forest to find a camp site so we did not take the trail to Bear Lakes. We had seen the lakes from above while hiking on the plateau. After a short section of level trail and then another drop down on a trail through forest, we reached an intersection with the North Fork trail in Lizard Head Meadows. We started looking for a camp site as we headed west. The Meadows was somewhat crowded with other parties so it took some time to find an isolated site that had not been overused by others. It was evident that a lot of horse parties use this area for camps. However, when we were there in very early September, we only saw a couple of horse packers in the area. The site we found was near the outlet stream from Bear Lake and had good views across the meadows. We were a little disappointed that we were not able to see any wildlife in the meadows in the evening – maybe too many people about.

Figure 12 Morning View from Camp at Valentine Lake
Figure 13 Looking West from Above Valentine Lake

Figure 14 View East Towards Bears Ears Mountain

Figure 15 Hiking on Lizard Head Plateau
Figure 16 Lizard Head Peak from Plateau

Figure 17 Lizard Head Meadows from Plateau

Figure 18 Lizard Head Peak and Bear Lakes
Day 4: Lizard Head Meadows to Big Sandy Lake

From our tent site we had a great view of the Cirque of the Towers, one of the main reasons we chose this hike. A thin layer of clouds to the east prevented the rising sun from shining brightly on the mountains, but the scenery was still great. The trail heads directly up the valley to the Cirque as it passes through light forest and meadows. The small willows were tinged with yellow. Just before Lonesome Lake, the trail turns south for the climb of Jackass Pass. We decided to take a break at the lake for a snack and plenty of photos. As we were exploring around the south shore of the lake, we came across a cow moose munching away on her breakfast.

We had wandered away from the main trail as we explored and then headed up to the pass on what we thought was the main trail. It turned out to be a “social” trail probably used by climbers and we ended up about ¼ mile away from where we should have gone over the pass. We saw somewhat of a trail going down the rocks toward the lake below the pass so we continued on. As we got lower down the slope, the rocks to climb over and around got bigger and the slope got steeper. What should have been a hike down the trail on the east side of Arrowhead Lake of about 30 minutes turned into about two hours of scrambling down a slope with boulders as big as a garage. In places, we had to take off our backpacks and hand them down to each other so that we could slide through narrow places. Do not go on any trail that is on the west side of Arrowhead Lake.
Eventually we got to an area where we could cross the outlet from Arrowhead Lake and we found the correct trail going towards Big Sandy Lake. After walking around a shoulder coming down from Mitchell Peak, we came across a small lake that looked like a good spot to have lunch. It felt good to get our packs off without needing to hand them down over a large boulder. After a long lunch break, we headed back down the trail. The trail went down gradually with a few steep sections using switchbacks. After crossing North Creek, the trail went into some heavy forest area and then several switchbacks take you down to the level of Big Sandy Lake.

We were overly tired due to our descent from Jackass Pass through the boulder field so we did not spend much time looking for a camp site at Big Sandy Lake. We took the first reasonable site we found on a bench above the northwest side of the lake. We found out the next day that there were better sites to the west of where we camped but there were also a lot of other campers in the area.
Figure 26 Pingora Peak

Figure 27 Cirque of the Towers

Figure 28 "Wrong" Side of Arrowhead Lake
Day 5: Big Sandy Lake to Big Sandy Trailhead

The trail from Big Sandy Lake to the trailhead is a relatively level walk through heavy woods and open meadows. We chose to take the trail that went by Diamond Lake and V Lake rather than the more direct route that follows Big Sandy River. It appeared that this trail got a lot less use and we did not see any other hikers along this stretch. We were able to make it to the trailhead well before noon. The parking lot was still jammed with vehicles but overall the five days of hiking did not seem “crowded”. There are a lot of trails and places to camp once you leave this trailhead. Time to get a shower and some pizza.

Figure 29 Near Diamond Lake

Figure 30 Meadow Near V Lake
This was another trip that we had read a lot about and it had been on our list for quite a while. Doing the trip clockwise worked out the best, other than getting on the wrong side of Arrowhead Lake while doing Jackass Pass. I would not have wanted to climb out of Lizard Head Meadows with the Cirque of the Towers at our back. One thing we may have changed if we had more time would be to continue north past Skull Lake and go over Hailey Pass to Grave Lake. But that would have meant missing the great scenery of Washakie Pass. Next time! When this trip was combined with the Titcomb Basin and Death Canyon hikes, we had our packs on for 13 days in a row. See other write-ups for those hikes.

Additional Photos: