

Exploring the country's inland waters

GREAT AMERICAN LAKES

Stefanie Waldek





JENNY LAKE

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BENEATH THE TETONS

Jenny Lake is a textbook example of a glacially formed mountain lake, created when a moraine deposited by a retreating glacier dammed meltwater at the base of the Teton Range. Its relatively compact surface area contrasts sharply with its depth—more than 250 feet—revealing the intensity of glacial scouring in this region. At about 6,800 feet in elevation, the lake lies directly beneath some of the most dramatic vertical relief in the United States—it's quite the photo op.

Location: Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

Surface area: 1.9 square miles **Maximum depth:**

256 feet **Where to stay:** Jenny Lake Lodge is the main hotel here, while Jenny Lake Campground offers campsites. **Top feature:** Take the boat shuttle to the Cascade Canyon trailhead, then hike to Hidden Falls and Inspiration Point.





***Nestled among the
forest-crowned hills
which bounded our
vision, lay this inland
sea, its crystal waves
dancing and sparkling
in the sunlight, as if
laughing with joy for
their wild freedom.***

David E. Folsom

The lake is large and exposed, often subject to strong winds and rapidly changing weather. Water temperatures remain cold year-round, and ice cover typically persists well into late spring. Despite its size, the lake has relatively low biological productivity, although it supports native cutthroat trout populations that are central to the park's ecosystem.

Recreational access to Yellowstone Lake is concentrated around developed areas such as Lake Village and Grant Village, where visitors can launch boats, fish, or explore the shoreline. Beyond these hubs, much of the lake's perimeter remains undeveloped, with backcountry campsites accessible by permit. The West Thumb Geyser Basin, located along the lake's western edge, is one of the few places where geothermal features meet the water directly.





ROAD TRIP

KALISPELL, MONTANA, TO BOZEMAN, MONTANA: HIGH-ELEVATION LAKES OF THE MOUNTAIN WEST

7 DAYS, APPROXIMATELY 960 MILES

Lakes visited: Lake McDonald, Flathead Lake, Stanley Lake, Jenny Lake, Yellowstone Lake

DAY 1

Kalispell, Montana, to Lake McDonald, Montana

Approximately 40 miles, 45 minutes driving

Begin your journey at Kalispell, the gateway to Glacier National Park, and head directly to Lake McDonald. Spend the afternoon at Apgar Village, where you can rent a kayak to see the mountains reflected on the lake's surface or walk the cedar-lined shoreline and peer at the colorful stones in the crystal-clear water.

DAY 2

Lake McDonald to Flathead Lake, Montana

Approximately 50 miles, 1 hour driving

Exit the park and head south into the Flathead Valley. Stop in the artsy village of Bigfork for lunch, then spend the afternoon exploring Wayfarers State Park or taking a boat out to Wild Horse Island to spot bighorn sheep.

DAY 3

Flathead Lake to Stanley Lake, Idaho

Approximately 330 miles, 6.25 hours driving

Continue south along scenic Highway 93, with the Mission Mountains rising sharply to the east. Break up the drive in Missoula, a vibrant river town, before crossing the Bitterroot Range into Idaho and winding through the dense forests of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. Arrive at Stanley Lake for sunset, watching the light hit the granite face of McGown Peak.

DAY 4

Stanley Lake to Jackson, Wyoming (via Craters of the Moon National Monument)

Approximately 300 miles, 5.5 hours driving

Drive east through the volcanic plains of Idaho en route to Jackson, stopping at the otherworldly Craters of the Moon National Monument to break up the journey. Enter Wyoming and settle in Jackson for the night.

DAY 5

Jackson to Jenny Lake, Wyoming

Approximately 20 miles, 1 hour driving

Make the short drive to Jenny Lake in Grand Teton National Park. Take an early morning boat shuttle across the water to reach the Hidden Falls trailhead, then hike up to Inspiration Point for sweeping views of the lake you just crossed.

DAY 6

Jenny Lake to Yellowstone Lake, Wyoming

Approximately 80 miles, 2 hours driving

Conclude your lake adventure by heading north into Yellowstone National Park. The drive follows the Lewis River before arriving at the massive Yellowstone Lake. Explore the West Thumb Geyser Basin, where hot springs and geysers sit right at the water's edge, and spend the night at the historic Lake Yellowstone Hotel.

DAY 7

Yellowstone Lake to Bozeman, Montana

Approximately 140 miles, 3.5 hours driving

For flight options following your stay, make your way north to Bozeman, Montana, on a final scenic drive. Leaving Yellowstone Lake, head north through the Hayden Valley, which is world-renowned for wildlife viewing; it is common to see large bison herds and the occasional grizzly bear or wolf pack near the road. You will pass the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, where you can stop for a quick view of the Lower Falls before exiting the park through the historic Roosevelt Arch in Gardiner.







LAKE COEUR D'ALENE

A LAKE SHAPED BY ICE AND
RIVER FLOW

Stretching about 25 miles through the Idaho Panhandle, Coeur d'Alene Lake is a striking example of how glacial forces and catastrophic floods can create a complex, fjord-like basin within a mountain forest. After millennia of glacial carving, the lake was further shaped by the Missoula Floods—cataclysmic glacial dam bursts that scoured the Pacific Northwest roughly 15,000 years ago. Today, its shoreline is highly irregular, featuring dozens of protected bays and inlets, most notably Wolf Lodge Bay, a prime destination for viewing migrating bald eagles each winter.

Location: Kootenai and Benewah Counties, Idaho
Surface area: 50 square miles **Maximum depth:** 220 feet **Where to stay:** Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, lies on the lake's northern shoreline. **Top feature:** The lake is home to the world's only floating golf green at the Coeur d'Alene Resort and the world's longest floating boardwalk.

Lake Placid is perhaps the most internationally recognized name in the Adirondacks after hosting the Winter Olympics in 1932 and 1980.

Lake Placid is a glacial basin, and much of its shoreline—aside from the southern portion bordering the village of Lake Placid—is largely undeveloped. There are, however, a few Great Camps here: vacation homes built along Adirondack lakes by the country’s wealthiest citizens. In fact, the Adirondacks are considered the birthplace of the American vacation, as affluent families “vacated” their New York City homes in summer to retreat into the wilderness. Today, some of these Great Camps have been converted into hotels or historic sites, while others remain privately owned.

The lake’s northern end is dominated by the massive profile of Whiteface Mountain, which rises some 3,000 feet above the water’s surface. This dramatic vertical relief creates a unique wind-shadow effect, often leaving the water’s surface as smooth as glass—conditions that help explain the name “Placid.”



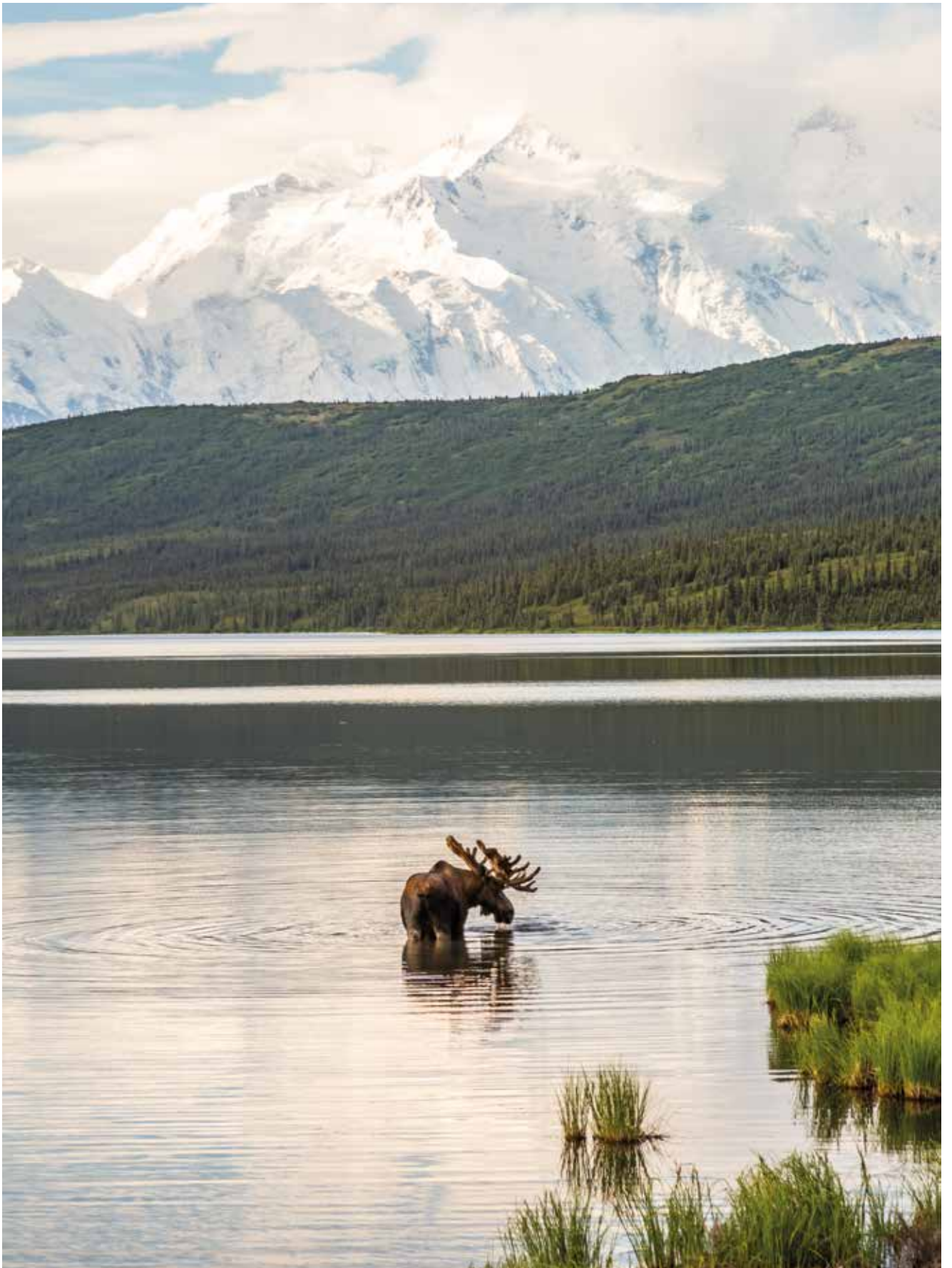




The lake's fame is closely associated with the legendary photographer Ansel Adams, who captured his well-known image of Denali here in the summer of 1948. To get the shot, Adams rose at midnight to catch the 3:42 a.m. "Alaskan sunrise," using the still air of the early morning to ensure the lake's surface was a perfect, undisturbed mirror.

Getting to Wonder Lake has always been part of the experience. It sits at mile 85 of the 92-mile Denali Park Road, and only official park buses are permitted beyond mile 15—the journey takes most of a day each way. (Always check if the road is open; the Pretty Rocks landslide, for instance, closed the road for years.) As a result, the small campground at the lake's edge is one of the most coveted spots in the American National Park system.

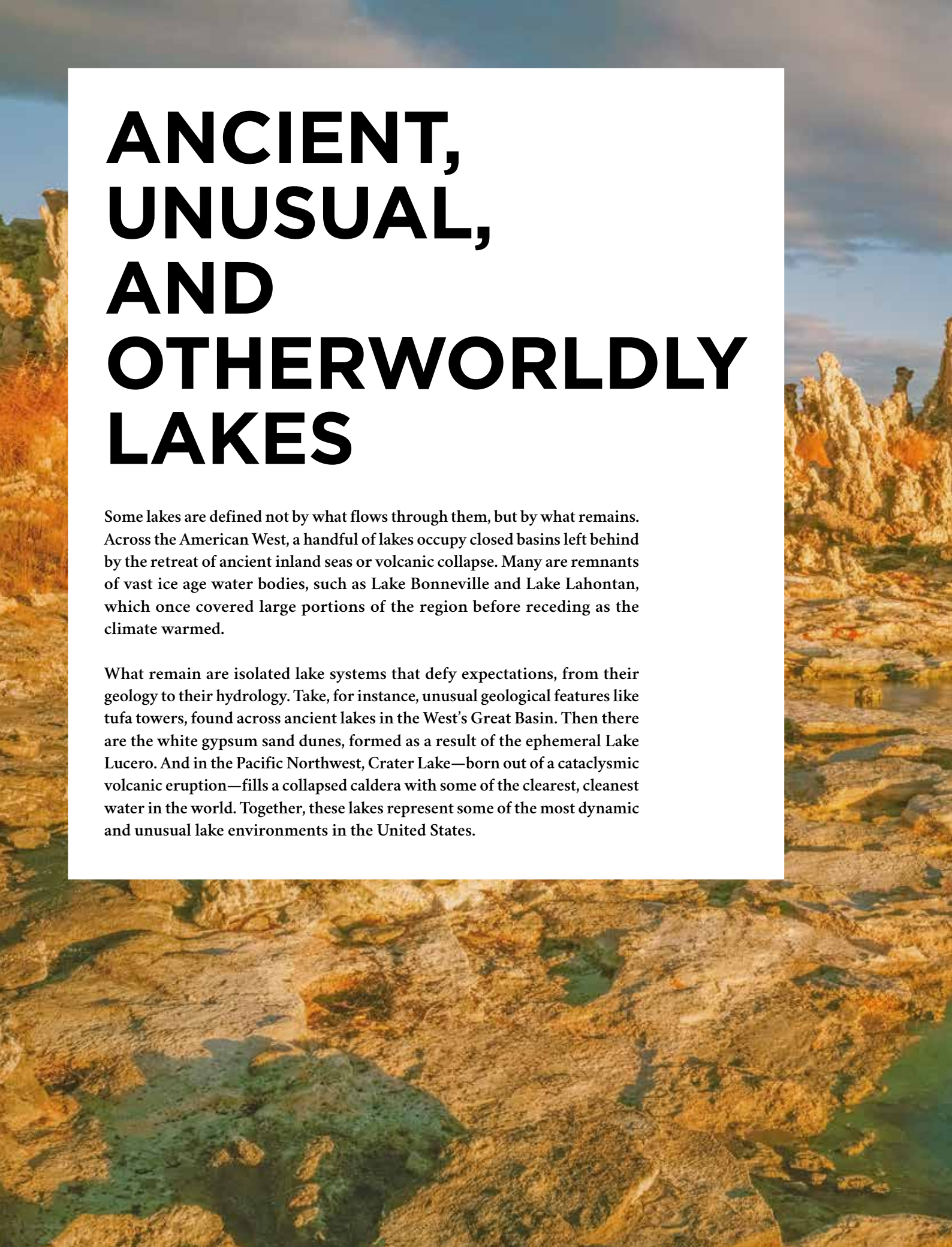
Wonder Lake in Denali National Park was carved by the Muldrow Glacier some 22,000 years ago—it's the same glacier that descends from Denali's northern slopes and is visible from the lakeshore on clear days.



ANCIENT, UNUSUAL, AND OTHERWORLDLY LAKES

Some lakes are defined not by what flows through them, but by what remains. Across the American West, a handful of lakes occupy closed basins left behind by the retreat of ancient inland seas or volcanic collapse. Many are remnants of vast ice age water bodies, such as Lake Bonneville and Lake Lahontan, which once covered large portions of the region before receding as the climate warmed.

What remain are isolated lake systems that defy expectations, from their geology to their hydrology. Take, for instance, unusual geological features like tufa towers, found across ancient lakes in the West's Great Basin. Then there are the white gypsum sand dunes, formed as a result of the ephemeral Lake Lucero. And in the Pacific Northwest, Crater Lake—born out of a cataclysmic volcanic eruption—fills a collapsed caldera with some of the clearest, cleanest water in the world. Together, these lakes represent some of the most dynamic and unusual lake environments in the United States.





***This solemn, silent,
sailless sea—this lonely
tenant of the loneliest
spot on earth—is
little graced with the
picturesque.***

Mark Twain

Is it remote? Yes. Otherworldly? You bet. Beautiful? Well, that's in the eye of the beholder. While Mark Twain might not have liked Mono Lake—he wrote that it “is little graced with the picturesque”—there is, undoubtedly, a draw to this far-flung body of water. And that's the unusual tufa towers, formed by millennia of geological processes.

Tufa towers are calcium carbonate formations created when freshwater springs rich in calcium once bubbled up beneath the lake's surface and reacted with its alkaline waters. As water levels dropped in the 20th century, these towers were exposed, forming surreal clusters along the shoreline. The Mono Lake Tufa State Natural Reserve provides the most accessible and dramatic introduction to these formations. Wooden boardwalks and trails wind among the towers, allowing visitors to observe their intricate shapes up close.

Despite its desolate appearance, Mono Lake supports a remarkably productive ecosystem. Trillions of brine shrimp and alkali flies sustain millions of migratory birds, making the lake a critical stop along the Pacific Flyway. It's also a good stop for (human) national park visitors. Mono Lake's gateway community, Lee Vining, is also the gateway to the eastern entrance of Yosemite National Park.



