

YELLOWSTONE'S HOT SPRINGS:

Images & Article by Garrett Fisher

An Aviator's Perspective

The plan was a simple one: move 2,000 miles west to Wyoming and photograph Yellowstone for a book. As though it was a prepackaged travel itinerary as opposed to a major life change, I approached the project like it was an already completed event – I would be in Wyoming, very close to the runway, and well, since Yellowstone is mostly in Wyoming, how hard could the whole thing be? “Just fly up there and get it done.”

This naivety is probably why I continue to add schemes and dreams to the end of my list of things to do at a rate faster than I can do them, the [intentionally] clueless mental wanderings of someone with too many ideas and too many hours on dark nights looking at Google Maps, feeding the monstrosity of ideological delusion with satellite shots of remote wilderness.

There was a problem I chose to forget about prior to the 2,000-mile odyssey: I flew to Yellowstone once, and it kind of scared me. That might seem like a normal proposition given the savage nature of this part of the West married to the fact that an unsuitably small aircraft was my primary transport mechanism. The reality is that fear is not my thing. Fear is reserved for the final moments of life, the bloodcurdling scream that precipitates smashing into the ground into an explosive fireball, when all of one's worst horrors come



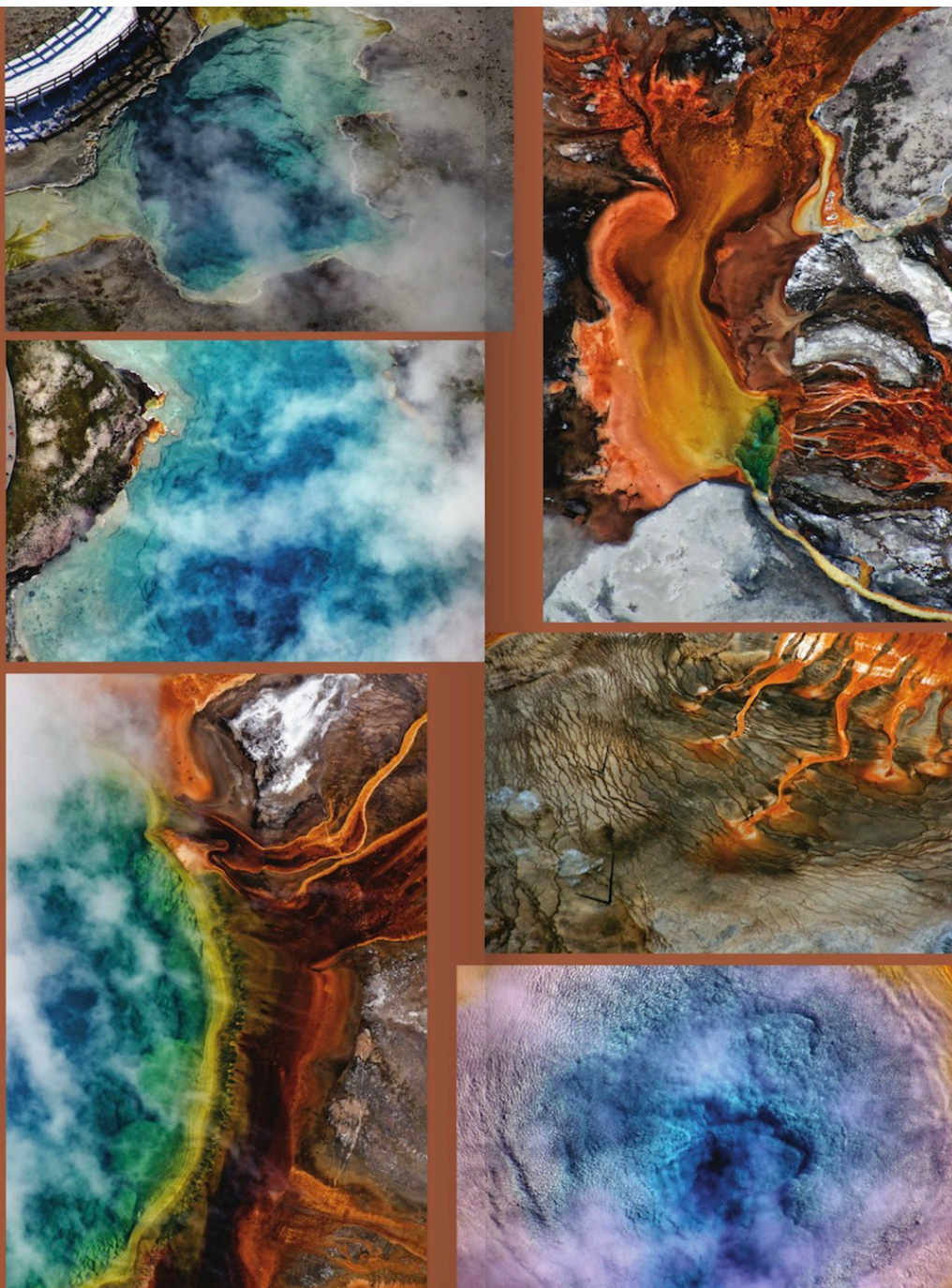
true in an airplane. The rest is simply mathematical aberrations and avoiding problems. Yet still, Yellowstone elicited *fear*.

It might have something to do with the progressively darkening skies as I flew on that first flight from sunny central Wyoming to menacing Montana, the smoky haze from Western fire season. The wind coming from the Snake River Plain didn't help, nor did the gray skies in July over the Absarokas, which conveniently turned to sun over the Bighorns. There was also the matter that the whole park was one of four things: a giant cheese grater of pine trees, deadly cold water, acidic and boiling water, or rugged terrain. I suppose in the interests of fairness I should disclose that a small percentage was suitable in the event of an emergency, though I didn't like any of it.

It took two months to finally smack myself around and make the hour flight north into Yellowstone, having waited until some of the roads opened, just in case the worst happened. I did fly all around the Tetons, Gros Ventre Wilderness, and the Wind River Range in the preceding two-month period, ostensibly places far worse to have problems, yet the aversion didn't change despite my logical fallacy. Once I did make the first flight, I woke up and realized that there are a lot of hot springs.... too many hot springs.

I decided to purchase a zoom lens, something I had previously not considered as close imagery is generally not my aerial photography style. With this new tool in hand, I battled what ultimately turned out to be aggravations that made pursuit of my goal harder: generally worse weather over Yellowstone than surrounding regions, higher winds than the general area, and the realities of trying to operate a 300 mm zoom lens at 75 miles per hour, taking photographs of extremely specific points while flying a plane. The concept of "simply" getting the job done was now out the door, though that is normal with every one of my fantasies hatched while chained to a desk.

Over time, and with many flights, I was presented with a conundrum: there are too many things in Yellowstone to photograph. For the sake of book marketing, do I just do one with some superficial highlights? Or for the sake of the hundreds, if not thousands (depending on the definition) of hot springs that exist, should I do my best to show them all? How else would people see them? It



didn't take long to decide that I had two projects on my hands: the hot springs....and the rest of Yellowstone.

The matter achieved another dimension of complexity as I made flights in the changeover to winter: the hot springs change. Part of it has to do with seasonal and daily lighting, and other factors relate to weather and temperature. In addition to these cyclical realities, the springs undergo various geologic processes which alter their appearance – new features appearing, and existing features shutting off hydrothermal flow. A few of the springs began to show different colors entirely from when I flew months earlier. The project, having previously expanded in scope, was now a subtly moving target.

I decided that my goal was to overcome some of the challenges of visiting the park on the ground, realities of walking over a brittle active geothermal hot spot: it is simply impossible to see everything. Some springs have boardwalks and access points which afford incredible views; others do not. No one can walk on bacterial films or mineral accumulations due to danger and the fact that the park would be ruined in short order. Drones are also not allowed, which means that many springs are viewable at some element of angle or distance, which was somewhat agitating to me when visiting on the ground. My goal with the project is to present things that cannot be seen easily, or at all: straight down into some springs, off limits areas, or backcountry destinations which require a lot of time and work to explore.

Some of the highlights of the project to me were images of springs that filled my screen entirely at home, yet I was only looking at a fraction of the colorful hot springs. In other instances, there are rivers of red flowing reasonably long distances from their origin source, creating an apocalyptic scene. The absolute highlight, which I will never forget, is seeing Old Faithful while not erupting, and finding an abundance of jewel-like pools adorning the geyser, something I could only see from above with a slow airplane. [WLM](#)

"Yellowstone's Hot Springs: An Aviator's Perspective" is available at Amazon.com, garrettfisher.me, Valley Bookstore in Jackson, Eagle Flight Services in Afton, and Cody Coffee Roasters at the Cody airport.