

*Today's blog post comes from Tom James, the trip leader for Pemi West 2023, our special program for Pemi 16s. Tom, an educator and outdoorsman, came to Pemi via his friendship with Pat Clare, and he did a wonderful job of leading the boys through this three-week adventure. Many thanks to Tom, the Deer Hill trip leaders Scott and Jackson, and all of the folks at Deer Hill Expeditions for their continued partnership with Pemi to provide this incredible experience. Read on for Tom's beautiful and detailed recap!*



The theme of this year's Pemi West trip was awe. As a group, we were constantly in awe of our beautiful desert, river, and mountain surroundings in the Four Corners region. The boys were in awe of the three weeks we'd been afforded to canoe, engage in service learning, and backpack in the mountains. And I was personally in awe of how strong a sense of brotherhood there was among this group of Pemi boys, consisting of Boone Snyder, David Kriegsman, Giacomo Turco, Jack Merriam, Matias Trinca, Merrick Chapin, and Will Silloway.

The boys completed their Wilderness First Aid training at Pemi before heading to Logan for their flight out. We all met our talented Deer Hill instructors, Scott Boersma and Jackson Cowart, at the Durango airport. After loading our bags into the trailer, we drove to basecamp in Mancos, CO. Along the way, we enjoyed our first taste of the scenery, including mountains and mesas. We saw Twin Buttes and crossed the Animas River, which would become a dear friend later on in the mountains.

At basecamp in the shadows of Mesa Verde National Park, the boys gave their cell phones to our instructors to be stored until departure day. It felt like a rare gift to be disconnected and able to stay in the present during our expedition. We moved our bags into our cabin and got a tour of the facilities as the sun was setting. We saw a couple deer in the dusk before devouring some delicious pizza courtesy of Chef Heather. At Deer Hill, participants take care of all the chores, including packing up and labeling leftovers, washing dishes, and cleaning the bathrooms. We completed our first round of chores and played our first of many volleyball games. Scott and Jackson then introduced the practice of circle, a routine we followed each night where all of us could speak and listen from the heart. For our first round, we shared what we were excited about for the days ahead. Before going to sleep, we spent some time looking at the Milky Way and all the stars in the stunning Colorado night sky.

We needed all the sleep we got that first night as we spent the day preparing for the first of three sections of our expedition: canoeing down Labyrinth Canyon in Green River of Utah from Ruby Ranch to Mineral Bottom. To make sure we were ready for the heat and desert environment, we did a thorough gear check and addressed any needs in the Deer Hill store before packing personal and group dry bags. All of us packed bug nets, which turned out to be critical for a few of our campsites on the river. After a tasty



*Ready to hit the Green River*

lunch of grilled cheese and tomato soup, we learned about personal hygiene on the river, the right order to put on sunscreen and bug repellent (sunscreen first!), Leave No Trace ethics, and how to stay safe in the wilderness. Then we completed our swim test in the Deer Hill pond and had fun testing out how many boys could fit on a single boat or paddleboard. That afternoon, we co-constructed our full value contract as a group. Each of us articulated the values and principles we wanted to hold ourselves to, like curiosity, honesty, and “doing the thing.” We added them to a flag and signed our names to symbolize our commitments to each other. After another delicious dinner of buffalo wings and peach cobbler, we had our second night of circle and went to bed.

A breakfast of biscuits and gravy powered an energetic morning of clearing out of the cabins and loading up for the long drive to the boat ramp via Moab. On the way, we took in the views of the canyons, natural arches, and alien looking rock formations in the Utah desert. We carefully loaded our canoes to balance the weight of the group gear and dry bags and learned river signals. Pushing off into the water was exhilarating—all the work we’d done to prepare for that moment had led to this moment of releasing ourselves into the river’s care as we were cradled by towering canyon walls on both sides.



*Hanging out at a riverside campsite*

The water was calmer than what many of the boys had experienced on the Allagash, which allowed us to both paddle and then cool off by floating in the water. We changed canoeing partners each day, so we all had a chance to row with each other. Our first of four nights on the river was spent under a huge canyon wall with an overhanging arch. We learned knots for rigging boats to trees to make sure our canoes stayed secure. Jack took point on setting up our tarps as the rest of us set up the rest of camp. After cooking our first backcountry meals, we were treated to more incredible views of the night sky, as the moon was down to 7%.

The next day we paddled with enthusiasm and ended up moving 26 miles down the river. Even so, we had time to explore an abandoned uranium mine in Hey Joe Canyon. We found a campsite as the sun was beginning to set and worked quickly to set up camp and cook dinner. We faced heavy bug pressure at this camp, but we made it out the next morning with a story to tell. As we moved down the river, we saw great blue herons, beavers, and deer. Matias stayed on top of the river map and could always point out exactly where we were. We found a shallow sandbar and played ultimate frisbee using a frisbee we'd found on the side of the river. The frisbee turned out having a name and phone number on the back, so returning it to its owner became a side quest of ours.

On night three we found a sandbar campsite and set up tarps to protect us from the sun. We relaxed and played games by the beach, taking frequent dips to cool off. That night, we cooked backcountry cinnamon buns and shared our favorite Pemi memories in circle. Our final full day on the river gave us the chance to hike up to the thin saddle at Bowknot Bend where two arms of the river come close together, giving us views of where we'd been seven miles upriver. The weather at our last campsite taught us the value of storm-proofing, as strong gusts blew through the canyon. Our creative tarp setups held up wonderfully and we had one last circle on the river where we reflected on how we'd supported one another in this first leg of our journey together.



Merrick cooked up a hearty breakfast of pancakes on the river, giving us the sustenance we needed to make it to Mineral Bottom, the last take-out spot before Canyonlands National Park. A group of Deer Hill interns met us at the boat ramp with the gear we'd need for our service learning trip. We cleaned out our canoes, swapped out gear, and loaded up for the long drive to the Hopi Reservation. We stopped by Sand Island on the San Juan to fill up on water, a precious resource on the reservation. We drove through the Navajo Nation as the sun began to set and arrived at our service host Marshall's property on the Hopi Reservation at the end of the day. He greeted us, told us where to set up our tents, and let us know when we'd get to work the next morning.



*Master chefs showing off their work*

Merrick and Will cooked us up a breakfast of huevos rancheros as we listened to Marshall explain his hopes for our time together. He's been in the process of building a house on his property for his mother for the past few years, which the boys were enthusiastic about helping out with. We learned how to strip bark off freshly cut pine trees so they dry out faster, remove knots, sand down wood, and apply linseed oil. Marshall also taught us about traditional house construction techniques using natural materials like clay, river silt, and straw. We had a chance to mix the material in with the proper ratios under

Marshall's guidance and to plaster the walls, which the boys took to with gusto. To give us a sense of what the house might look like at the end, he gave us a tour of the house he lives in, which runs on solar power and contains a water collection and filtration system.

As we worked on this project over the next few days, Marshall explained how the Hopi are a matrilineal society and how his family is structured. In the evenings, we would drive down from the mesa into the valley to remove weeds from his field. Marshall taught us about the significance of corn in Hopi culture and shared stories from his childhood tending this field and looking after flocks of sheep. He also offered a metaphor we'd come back to several times during the expedition: a man's field is a reflection of his life. We made space in circle to consider the state of our own fields.

We managed nutrition and water intake carefully during the hot days we spent on the reservation and continued to refine our outdoor cooking systems in preparation for the mountains. One stand-out meal was a Dutch oven pizza put together by Giacomo Turco and Matias Trinca. Scott also took advantage of the clear skies and remote location to lead us in an astronomy lesson.



*Field work on the Hopi Reservation*

Marshall generously shared more of his family's history by taking us to the house overlooking the field his great-grandmother grew up in. On our last full day, his mother and sister cooked us some delicious soup and fry bread to thank us for our service. We then hiked up to the end of a mesa to enjoy one last sunset on the reservation. We settled into a reverent silence and took in an absolutely stunning sunset as the boys sat with arms around each other in brotherhood. Circle felt particularly tender for us that evening as we reflected on how special our service learning experience had been for us as a

group. It felt even more special the following morning when Marshall invited us to a Hopi community ceremony, which we observed respectfully before bidding farewell to Marshall and starting the drive back to basecamp.

Our drive wrapped right around the Four Corners monument, sending us out of Arizona, through New Mexico, and into Colorado in the space of 30 seconds. Back in Mancos, we de-issued our gear from service and (most of us) took much anticipated showers. We decided we wanted an extra night in the mountains, so we made it our goal to spend less than 24 hours at basecamp. That night, we set intentions and expectations for our backpacking section, as this would be the most difficult part of our expedition yet.



*Heading off into the mountains!*

With everything ready to go, we loaded up in the afternoon and drove north to Coal Bank Pass. Spending so much time in the desert made the cool mountain air a real shock to the system! We took a short hike up toward Engineer Mountain and set up our first campsite, which was also where we encountered our first snow of the trip. We learned about campsite selection, water purification, bear hangs, sleeping warm, and mountain hygiene. That night, we were glad to have packed warm clothes as the temperatures

dropped. Each night in the mountains, we deepened our practice of circle by reflecting on topics like adversity, favorite Pemi memories, growth, and belonging.

The wildflowers were in bloom as our route took us towards and around Engineer, and as we headed north, we enjoyed sweeping views of the San Juan mountains. A campsite near Jura Knob was our destination for the evening, though the snowmelt from a heavy winter snowpack led us to seek dryer accommodations as we approached the junction with the Colorado Trail. With thunder rumbling in the distance, we crossed a large snow patch and efficiently identified an alternative campsite near an alpine lake around 12,000 feet above sea level. The boys worked quickly to set up a stormproof campsite, but once our work was done, we marveled in the beauty of our site and the majesty of the Twin Sisters right in front of us. The storms in the distance faded away and the moon cast crisp shadows as we settled into warm sleeping bags beneath our three tarps.

The next morning, Jack and Will were our leaders of the day, and they ensured we made steady progress through the day as we followed the Colorado Trail towards Little Molas Lake. Along the way, we met a handful of southbound thru-hikers who were in the final stretch of the Colorado Trail, which runs 567 miles from Denver to Durango. At camp, Giacomo cooked his second masterpiece backcountry pizza of the trip. After dinner, our resident tactician Matias took charge of charting a course towards Vestal Lake.



*Hiking along the Colorado Trail*

Our next day was our biggest so far in the mountains, both in terms of distance and elevation change. We followed the Colorado Trail down into the valley the Animas River cuts through. As we descended, we spotted the first of several trains we'd end up seeing on the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. The boys dipped their heads in the cold river, and we stopped for a quick bite. After a bit, Mother Nature decided it was time for us to hit the trail again and gave us the first of several short episodes of hail. We put on our rain gear and began following the Elk Creek Trail, taking us into the rugged Weminuche Wilderness. Electric Peak came into view as we ascended through a steep gnarly trail into the meadow below Vestal Lake. This was an especially beautiful campsite, with the Grenadier Range laid out in front of us.



*The scramble up Arrow*

After such a long day, we slept in and had a relaxed morning where we nicknamed some marmots we'd seen eyeing our camp. We broke down camp and hiked the steep mile up to Vestal Lake, a high alpine lake at an elevation of over 12,200 feet. There was only a small patch of grass among the rocks to set up shelter, but the boys worked efficiently to engineer a three-tarp solution as afternoon storms threatened to roll in. We finished in the nick of time and dashed under the tarps as hail and rain began to fall.

Excitement made it difficult for some of us to sleep, but we all managed to

get some rest before a cascade of digital watch alarms went off just before 4:00am. Forming a trail of headlamp lights, we set out in the dark and made for the base of Arrow Peak, a 13,809-foot mountain looming over the lake. The time we'd previously spent learning how to communicate and operate as a group was essential, as this was our most challenging endeavor we'd faced so far. We climbed carefully, navigating scree, talus, and rock slabs as the sun finally rose over the mountains in the distance. Loose rocks were a hazard we had to manage as well. We ascended to roughly 13,200 before deciding that the safest decision was to turn around given the steepness of our hike up and the prevalence of loose rocks. This was an excellent lesson in thoughtful decision-making, and we all felt proud of what we accomplished that morning. We took a moment to appreciate the incredible views we were afforded so high up before slowly descending, moving in pairs through some of the steeper sections. We hiked even down past our previous campsite, after stopping for a Polar Bear in Vestal Lake, and stopped again in a swimming hole before making for the Animas River to set up a camp we'd use for our last two nights in the mountains.

Given our alpine start the previous day, we slept in but woke right up as Jackson led us in a special version of Polar Bear in the Animas: cold immersion. Jackson then guided us through a yoga session before we started our day in earnest. That afternoon Scott took us through a workshop on outdoor leadership styles, and we saw that we had an excellent balance of drivers, spontaneous motivators, intellectual architects, and relationship masters in the group. As we conducted our final circle in the wilderness, I felt deeply proud of the bravery and authenticity of this crew of boys.



*Enjoying the Weminuche Wilderness*

On our final morning in the mountains, we hiked quickly uphill to Molas Summit, where a fresh box of Oreos (we'd cleaned out several in the mountains) was waiting for us. Talks of burritos had become more frequent over the last few days, and we brought these discussions to fruition with a trip to Zia Taqueria in Durango. After a week in the mountains, I can safely say that was the tastiest burrote (giant burrito) I've ever had. Back at basecamp, we de-issued gear for the last time, hopped in the showers,

and played some of our favorite games. The boys also wrote letters to themselves, which they'll receive back in the middle of the upcoming school year.

On our last day in Colorado, we held our final circle in the sauna Deer Hill has at basecamp. We went through four rounds of circle reflecting on what we were taking with us and what we were

leaving behind. As we challenged ourselves with the heat provided by the wood-burning stove, there was space for singing (including the Pemi *Campfire Song*) and gratitude for one another. After sauna, we jumped in the pond and got ready for our barbeque. Matias was a champ and jumped on the grill, and later that night, he looked through the Deer Hill photo albums and found photos of the Pemi West participants from 2019 and 2022.

Scott and Jackson drove us back to the Durango airport the next morning, where our cell phones



were returned. We bid farewell to our wonderful instructors, and then to our West Coast Pemi boys in Denver. The rest of us traveled back to Logan where Pat Clare drove us back to Pemi—but not before the Turcos brought us delicious cannoli and Italian cookies!

Huge shout-outs go to Matias for taking the lead on photography, Scott and Jackson for being such thoughtful and caring field instructors, and Pat for facilitating the ongoing partnership between

Camp Pemi and Deer Hill. Finally, I want to extend my admiration and gratitude to all seven Pemi boys who participated in this expedition. Each of you taught me something and I hope you feel as proud as I do of what you accomplished on this expedition.

– Tom James