Wind Rivers

MALCOLM SALES

Wind Rivers? Where and what is Wind Rivers, I asked, when the place was first mentioned.

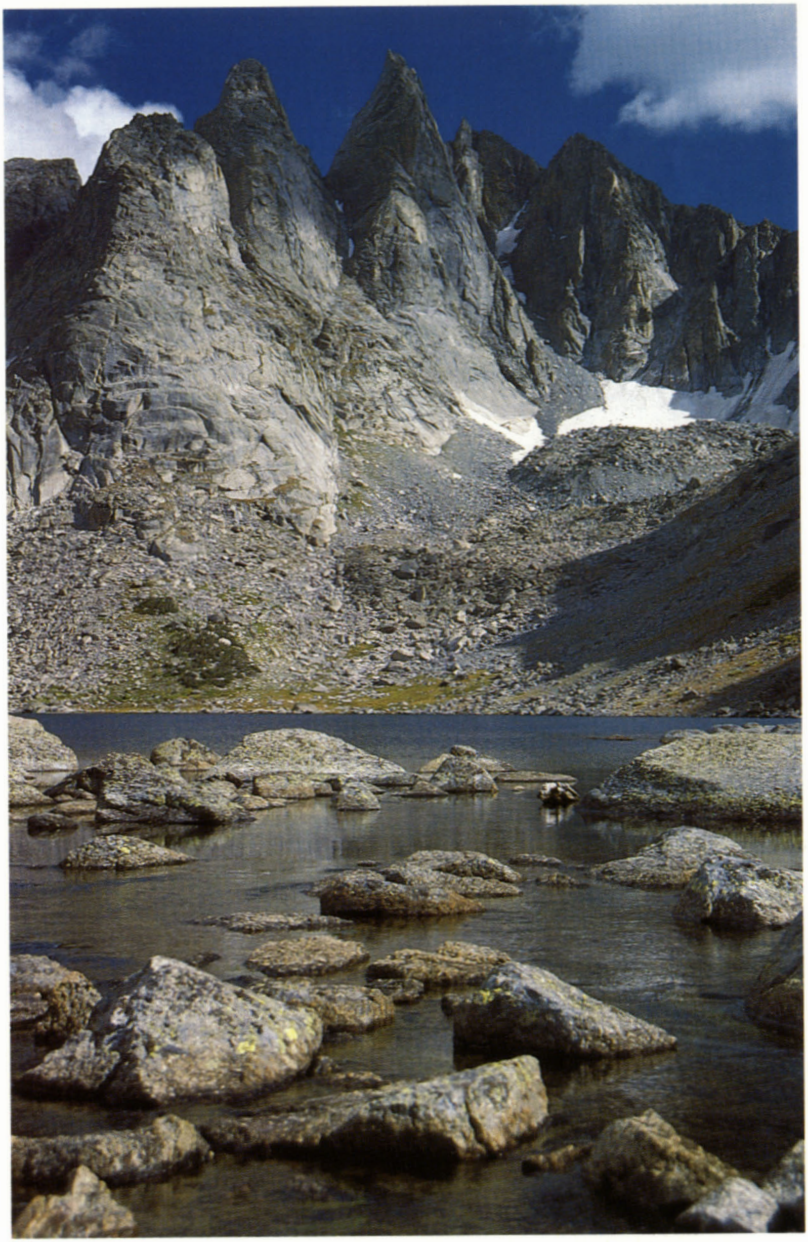
It is in fact in the USA. A wilderness area on the Great Divide in Wyoming. Roughly speaking north-east of the Grand Canyon and south of Yellowstone and the Tetons. Gannett Peak in Wind Rivers at 4207m is 10m higher than the Grand Teton and is the highest summit in Wyoming.

Wind Rivers can be quickly described as a cross between the Black Forest and the Alps. To my eyes, the area was refreshingly devoid of people. As a wilderness area it benefits by not receiving the publicity that is given to the better-known National Parks. There are none of the huts and skiing accessories that proliferate in the Playgrounds of Europe. One has to walk (or ride a horse, if that is one's fancy) and camp in order to get about.

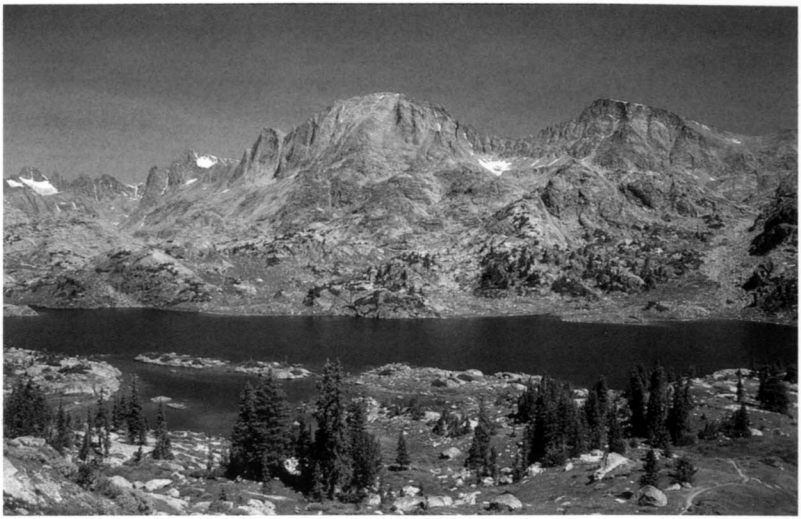
Six of us went there in the summer of 1987: Anne and Henry Wheatcroft, who had been there before in 1984, Mike Garrett, Bob Stewardson, Chris Whitford and myself. With the American dollar so low, it was almost cheaper to go to the States than to the Alps. We flew from Gatwick to Dallas, and then on to Denver. Flying to America has the advantage that you may take as much as you wish, as long as it is kept to two items of luggage. You would be surprised at what can be crammed into a Karrimor Jaguar rucksack and an ex-services grip. The disadvantage of flying to America is the immigration control. One needs a holiday after being given the 'third degree' by that lot.

At Denver we hired a 4WD Ford Bronco, a Range-Rover-type vehicle. We also had to wait for three hours for one of our rucksacks to catch up with us. To judge by the way the airport staff took the news of our lost rucksack, it would seem that missing luggage is an every-flight occurrence which is usually corrected on the next flight. Once re-united with all our kit, we squeezed into the Ford and drove 700km through the night to a village called Pinedale, population 1000, altitude 2100m. Here we had breakfast and then purchased food in the supermarket, fuel and maps from the Outdoor Shop. The maps are not nearly as good as the British OS. The Americans, like the Europeans, rely upon well-marked trails and guidebooks to help their navigation.

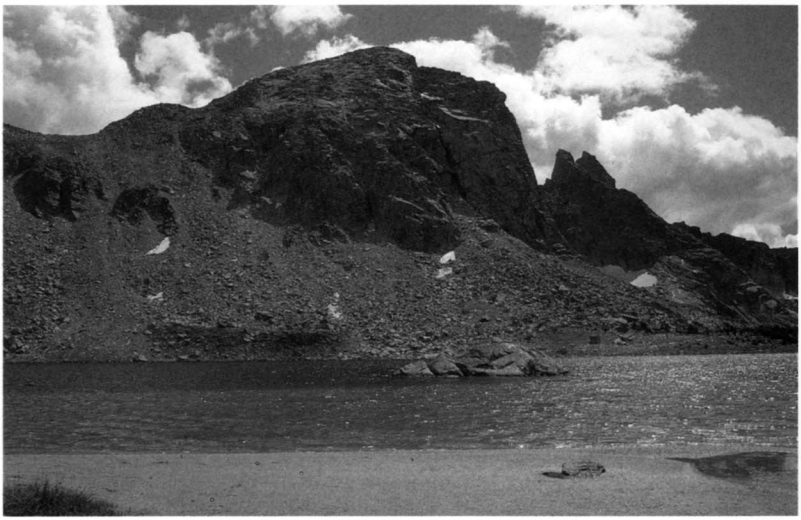
Our objective, Wind Rivers, was still just a distant impression on the horizon. Before us lay a 60km drive along dirt-tracks to a trail-head and camp-site called Big Sandy Opening. From here a six-hour walk put us in the middle of some of the most magnificent mountain scenery I have ever seen. We spent five days walking and scrambling in the vicinity of a rock-climber's dream, the Cirque of Towers: a semicircular wall 300m high, with the unique Pingora at its centre. The guidebook we used, *Climbing and Hiking in the Wind River Mountains* by Joe Kelsey, gives a wealth of routes here of all grades, with plenty of scope for new discoveries.



52. Shark's Nose (3670m), Shadow Lake.



69. Fremont Peak (4190m), Island Lake.



70. Bollinger Peak, Billy's Lake.



71. Cirque of towers, Wind Rivers.



72. Looking towards Nevado Kashan (5701m) from Laguna Awash (John Hudson and Rob Sneyd attempted a route up the rock-face to reach the right-hand ridge near the snow arête).

After restocking from our car at Big Sandy Opening we went for a two-day trip to Big Sandy Lake, above which stands Big Sandy Mountain, with some spectacular sandstone towers on its SE ridge.

Once away from the Big Sandy Opening camp-site, we met very few people. Those we did meet were all American, and all expressed surprise that the British had heard of Wind Rivers. Even in the States it is not very well known.

We stopped again at Pinedale to top up, as we drove from Big Sandy in the south to Elkhart Park in the north. A one-and-a-half-day walk brought us to Indian Basin and Fremont Peak (second-highest in Wind Rivers). Another half-day's walk, and we were in Titcomb Basin, ready for Gannett Peak. We may have been ready for Gannett Peak, but the weather, which up to now had given us one day's rain and plenty of sunburn, was not. Waking up to heavy rain, Mike and I decided to wait for better weather. The others went off backpacking. Our day of waiting did indeed produce a weather change. A three-inch carpet of snow greeted us when we looked out of the tent next morning!

Time was running out. We had a plane to catch, and a long way to go to catch it. So we gave up waiting for Gannett to come into condition, brushed the snow off our tent and walked back to one of our previous camp-sites. By coincidence the others arrived at the same site, having made the same decisions.

A clear, cold night provided a magnificent morning. Bright weather with fresh snow still on the distant mountains made for a beautiful walk back to Elkhart Park.

All-in-all, it is an ideal area for those who wish to get away to the mountains, and also to get away from the crowds. Be you rock-climber, backpacker or mountaineer, this area has something to offer.