

Banff DRY Trip August 26th – September 4th, 2017

The Banff DRY trip started out as an idea by Dan and myself, to plan yet another excursion deep into the mountains and get as remote as we can. We had always wanted to explore Banff's eastern region of the park, and maybe walk right out to the foothills- I wanted to exit via the historic Ya Ha Tinda ranch. Our group missed out on a remote trip last year, for a number of reasons, the poor economy out here and job protection being the main ones. It got refined by Dan, and he was the architect of the trip route that we took this year. But things don't always go as planned, do they? - in early June, Dan wrecked his foot in a motorcycle accident, and so the reins for the trip fell to me - now the Hiker Emeritus of the group - and Derek, who was on the last two of these wonderful escapes. Our membership numbers fluctuated from four, down to three, up to 5, and with about a month to go, my old buddy Frank signed on, with his twin boys too. But because of the very limited tent spaces Parks Canada allows to be booked at each of the first four campsites, there was no room for all of us at the first 4 campsites – we solved the problem by having Frank's group start hiking a day in front of us, and ultimately meet up at Camp 4 – the last established Parks Canada campground, before we start random camping.

Now, Derek is a “wet” guy. He may not admit it to you, but his past hiking experiences tell him to bring that raincoat! – Bring that tarp! - and I even overheard him on this trip extolling the virtues of a misty view from under a plastic sheet. I, on the other hand, am mostly a “dry” guy, and could do without a drop of rain on a trip, because I'm too lazy to set up a tarp, and wet weather wrecks a perfectly good campfire.

So, Derek sends out an email at some point during the spring, and coming up with the clever moniker “Banff WET Trip” (West-East Traverse) and that was pretty cool. But what could I come up with? Well, I fired back with the “Banff DRY trip” (Direct Route to Ya Ha Tinda) and I thought that was a fine comeback! In the end, we found out that really, both monikers were only half right anyway - The West-East Traverse is certainly a more accurate description of what we did, but wet it wasn't. And, the trails we took were certainly not the Direct Route to the foothills, but damn boys, weren't she dry out there! ...and since I am the author of this little tale, the Banff DRY trip, it has become. Here is our story.

Day 1 - Mosquito Creek to Molar Creek Camp – 18 kms

Our tale begins at the Bowfort Road MacDonald's at 7 am, with Darcy picking me up in his super roomy F-150 that can pack 5 people in, and big packs, most comfortably. His daughter Brooke is along for the ride, as she will take the truck home, leaving nothing to come pick up at journey's end. A couple of coffees and 90 minutes later, we are at Derek's very nice Banff condo, with a sweet view of Cascade Mountain out the front window. Our fourth member,

Mark, who I have never hiked with before- he's the "new guy" on the trip - is there as well, so with full crew in attendance, off we go to Mosquito Creek trailhead, and start walking around 10:30 am, on a brilliantly sunny day.



Packs up, boys! - I think Mark weighs in at 68 lbs, Derek just a few pounds under that, Darcy is also over 60 lbs, and I am the lightweight of the group! - 52 lbs, or so. The trudge begins, along the open meadows that border Mosquito Creek. When we pulled up, we saw a group of around 10 or so takin' pictures of themselves, and we catch up to them after a few kilometres. It's the Edmonton Hiking Club. We play leapfrog with them for most of the way in on the trail, they are going to South Molar Pass, just like we are. I have got new boots for this trip! - all-leather, heavy-duty Mammuts - and though I had high hopes that they'd fit like a glove, around km 7 or 8, I stop to repair a hot spot on my left heel. The pack seems manageable on this first day, and the late-season wildflowers give a splash of colour to the green surroundings. Yes, even though this has been a scorcher of a summer, with forest fires ablaze all over BC, this little forested section of Great Divide country is still moist, and even a little muddy in spots. After finally overtaking the Edmontonians for the final time, we reach the pass, and enjoy the view on the downslope side, to give some privacy from the hordes. The view that you get of Mount Hector's glacier from this side, is unique for me (first time here) and spectacular. But- this is only halfway for the day, so we push on down the south side of the pass. A canyon of sorts is reached, with the beginnings of Molar Creek dropping steeply off to our right, and we hit a steep descent with little switchbacks. When it ends, we enter a very wide valley, where the creek braids through the flats ahead. And this is where my pack starts acting like a pack! Ooooooh my shoulders are feelin' it. Now, both Derek and Mark have been this way before, and Mark is telling me where the camp should be. Unfortunately, it's way farther down this

long stretch, than I want it to be! Around 5 pm, we finally reach it. The trail going along the flats is rather faint, and it's easy to lose it- there is no trail signs at all, showing that the campground is off to the right a few hundred yards, but Mark spots something shiny over there, and makes a beeline for it. Turns out there are 4 women camped here. Hmmm - four women, four men Darcy looks at me, winks, and says "now Jim, old dogs are better left sleeping on the porch." I inquire "yeah, but how 'bout I just curl up at their feet" and off we go, laughing, ford the creek and go pick our spots at the camp. The spots are all in the trees, but it's got a nice open meadow out front near the creek, for lounging in. The girls are a reasonably friendly lot, having hiked a sizeable chunk of real estate themselves. It's going to take a little getting used to, but we do not have to drop our packs and hustle off into the woods for firewood - all of the Park is under a fire ban. Set up your tent, grab your food stuff, and get the stove going, and get to know the four of us. We spend a pleasant evening catching up. When I hit the sack at dusk, it's gotten a lot chillier, and this first night in the tent- you're usually the most nervous, listening for sounds of bear activity out there- was the coldest of the whole trip. Had to put on an extra shirt halfway through the night.



Day 2 - Molar Creek Camp to Wildflower Camp - 26 kms

Oh geez I remember this day !!!

Woke up in the early morning light, when you can just barely read the numbers on the clock- 6:30 or so. We know that today is going to be a big day, we've got 24 kms to go, to get to our next camp, but I am consoling myself because our map-reading says that it is going to be

mainly flat trail, going through a popular area- the Skoki region. We got out at the usual time – 9 am - and this would prove to be not early enough. Right off the bat, the trail started crossing the stream braids, which got most of our party meandering upstream or downstream, looking for a good place to jump across. I am more of the “fording” type - strip off your boots as fast as you can and put on your stream boots, and wade across. No matter – we are about the same speed once across, and for the next couple hours or so we trudge it all the way to the Pipestone River, and the warden’s cabin there - this time, it’s a ford for all of us, it’s a pretty big river. The warmth of the day is now upon us. The next leg of this day is to get to the Red Deer Lakes, and what the hell is this?? – Uphill?? -you bet it was, man I wish I read the map better. It’s much easier at this point to blame Dan, the architect of the trip, but all of us endured about a 1500’ elevation gain, quite a few kilometres and a lot of sweat, to get up into the Red Deer Lakes valley. This was also a dry stretch of the trip, and we needed to veer off into the campground there, to fill up our water bottles. We rest up in some meagre shade – it’s around 4 pm now, and we still have about 10 kms to go.



And now, my next beef about Parks Canada - somehow, all of us seemed to miss the cutoff junction to our destination, and needlessly walked – uphill- all the way to Baker Lake campground, before we saw the trail that took us back down into the valley and to the trail junction that we should have been on. No trail signs at the junctions! By 6pm, we had descended down the trail to within 3 kms of our camp, and rested by a small stream- we’re running on fumes now. We headed out into a marshy field, where the trail braided - 3 of us took the right-hand trail staying low, near the creek gully, and Darcy took the left-hand side. Soon, all of us were separated, and no amount of yelling on my part was getting any response. My trail soon deteriorated into a game trail, but I did manage to catch up to Derek and Mark, mucking about, trying to find the trail, like I was. After a lot of hollering to locate him, we got Darcy to descend down from his high trail, to us, so we could stick together, so late into the evening. As it turned out, Darcy was on the proper trail! - we were not, but by 7:45 we stumbled into Wildflower Campground. It is a protected camp, in the trees, with water very

close, but not much else going for it. We did not care. After minutes just sitting on my pack in a stupor, setting up the tent, and finally getting food in your body, it was dark when we hung our food for the night. I am exhausted from today's heat and long trail, and crawl into my tent, feeling the rest of the dead coming up. Tomorrow should be an easier day.

Day 3 - Wildflower Camp to Badger Pass Camp – 11 kms

I'm always amazed at how you can be so beat the night before, but still wake up, replenished, and ready to go again. As much as my writings emphasize the pain and suffering, which is what you feel at the time, what still needs to be mentioned are the sweeping vistas, the inviting coolness of the forest sections, and the beauty one sees around every corner on these trips. It's understated, and it's why we're here.

The trail ascending up towards Pulsatilla pass from Wildflower camp was rocky and marshy for the first few kilometres, and avalanche debris had piled down from slopes to our left, with just minor detouring. Even after such a hot summer as this, snow was still on the ground. After crossing a couple of these avy slopes, the trail got down to some serious up. We wheezed and puffed our way until we got out into the open, and laid our eyes on perhaps the most beautiful vista of the whole trip- the north side of Pulsatilla Pass, and its beautiful little lake nestled in there. I think we all forgot about our burdens, and just enjoyed ascending up to the pass, the views getting better with each step gained.



We were at the pass by mid-day, and lounged at the summit, until the heat drove me down the south side of the valley, looking for shade. As we had a short day, we enjoyed a spell amongst the wildflowers and bees, a pleasant little brook, and the coolness in the trees for awhile, then headed down the valley to our destination tonight, Badger Pass campground. I took the lead on this stretch, and was on my way, head down and blazin', when thankfully I

was called back by the boys- I walked by the camp! No trail junction sign, but if you have eagle eyes, you can see an old sign nailed up in the trees. Thankfully, they did. It's a long walk to get water in the valley in this camp, but the spots were sheltered among some nice old-growth forest – a very majestic one guarding my spot. We had time here, to rest and relax, before supper, and we met one lone young English bloke, who gave us some nice beta about the trail up to the pass, and also confirmed that our party of four that we are going to rendezvous with tomorrow night - my buddy Frank, his twin boys Brinton and Riley, and their friend Ethan, left that morning from this camp. Our plans are on track, and by tomorrow evening we will be a group of eight!



Day 4 – Badger Pass Camp to Flints Park- 19 kms

Our diligence and foresight of getting up early, and getting out of camp by 8:30 to get a head start on this long day, just got dashed – after about 20 minutes or so, Mark and Derek sensed that we were headed back to Pulsatilla Pass. Turns out, we were. When we left camp, we immediately hit a T-junction – and since the trail to the left went up, and the direction was correct, we took it. By the time we corrected this, we were back to a 9:15 am start. Have I mentioned “lack of trail signs” before?

I remember looking at the long range forecast, and today looked to be the hottest of the days- but we did hit a nice cool breeze on our long grind towards the pass. Our English bloke Rob told us that there was water in the approach- there was- and we kept ourselves hydrated as we went. Soon we were above treeline, and pushing for the pass, still a kilometre or two in the distance. I daresay that I started feeling my pack get more manageable on this day – all of us seemed to be going strong. Soon, we crossed the last rubble gully and headed up some fine scree to a lonely cairn that was the summit.



What a place!! Off to our left, and with a faint, steep trail ascending, is the Bonnet Glacier, one of easternmost icefields left in the park. Steep rockfaces were on other sides of us, and to our right, the pass down to the beginning of the Cascade River invited our descent. After lots of pictures and beef jerky, we dropped down into the immediate gully in front of us, following the scree trail. And what was there? – a Parks Canada sign! – says “Badger Pass – 400m” – well DUHHH you can see it from there, and there is no junction here anyway. Thanks for that, Parks Canada, couldn’t have done it without you. We started down into the upper Cascade valley- a pleasant descent to a high valley that looked like this would be the place where bears would want to hang out, but there was none to be seen. A big glacial erratic rock graced the east side. Once the valley ended, it entered a gully that got steeper the farther down you went, and it was here that I slipped on loose rock on the trail, gained speed while trying to not fall, did a half twist, quarter gainer, and launched it into the ditch! My pride wounded, I bounced back up, unhurt, somewhat thankful no one witnessed it! We stopped at the bottom of the hill shortly after, for shade and water replenishment. While rummaging through the multiple pockets in my hiking shorts, I made a disappointing discovery – that fall had literally ripped half of my pocket off, and took my Swiss army knife and various other minor sundry items with it. After tortuous discussions with myself, I didn’t want to retrace my steps back up the hill, so I told the boys, screw it, let’s keep moving. However, the real piece of good luck came about a half kilometre down the trail, when I wanted to take a pic of a scenic view - my camera was gone too!!! Now this is a dealbreaker. I dropped the pack and headed back up the hill to reclaim the booty the mountain took from me. Thankfully, I found everything, all together right where the train wreck happened. Darcy waited for me at a spot on the trail where the detour (from flooding) wasn’t clear, and soon caught up to the group. We followed, and watched the Cascade River grow in size from the numerous tributaries feeding it, passed the first campground, and a good trail saw us make good time in the afternoon heat. This is where we also noticed forest fire smoke invade our new valley – it made for some good pix that I got of Block Mountain, but otherwise was not welcome by any of us. We got to Flints Park camp around 5 pm, and we had a greeting party of Frank – in sandals- and his son Riley, and we were warmly welcomed into camp. There has been an effort by Parks Canada recently, to reconfigure campgrounds so that the eating area is isolated, and to be used by all parties exclusively, and usually located near the bear hang – but it sure makes for a spread-out camp. You’d better not forget anything at your tent before heading over to make supper, as it will be a fair slog to go back and get it! So, now in our group, we have my buddy Frank, his twins Brinton and Riley, and their friend Ethan. Do not for a minute think that having “children” along might hamper our progress! -from this point on, the “kids” usually led the way on every trail. Brinton and Riley are over six feet tall and built like spiders, and Ethan is a strapping lad in his own right. We spent the night catching up on our respective adventures, but still kept it to

just dusk - that's right, another mountain pass awaited us tomorrow, and another 20 kilometre day.



Day 5 - Flints Park to Panther Horse Camp- 22 kms

The smoke hung low, and interspersed with the clouds, made Day 5 morn rather gloomy. Packing up 8 people was still a pretty efficient affair, obviously the larger the group, the more chance for delays, but the slow guy was me! There were three young, fit guys who were camped here, who unexpectedly packed up camp around 8 pm last night and moved out (most likely when they saw 8 people in camp) and that perplexed us. This morning, the mystery was solved - I detoured over to get a photo of the Flints Park warden cabin – just a few hundred yards from the camp - the boys obviously have a Parks Canada connection, and camped out here! The trail junction heading up to North Fork Pass started off at a nice steady grade, through alder and willow, and came to a creek crossing not far up it. Multiple people in our group tried to jump it – half of them failed- I forded it and kept the tootsies dry. The day started heating up again, when we started up a steep headwall on open slopes. Man, I felt this one! - my steps up were getting mighty puny, as we ground our way up switchback after switchback. Finally, a high valley – even had water in it- and a final respite before the last steep push up to the top. Of course, the boys got there first, and Brinton was scrambling up a minor summit! – oh to be young again. The view looking down to, and north of, the Panther River valley was superb – all of us are experiencing, and appreciating, the look and ruggedness of these northeast park peaks for the first time.



We had a good long break up here, and it was probably 1:30 or so before we started down the horse trail leading down through the scree to the start of the Panther River valley. The trail veered over an intervening ridge once down the first steep bit, and then dropped down into the first level of flat valley, and alders. I was somewhat proud of the fact that, up till now, I had not worn gaiters the whole trip – didn't need to, as it had not rained. But if you have ever walked on an alder / willow infested trail, then you know that without gaiters, you'll be bleeding from scratches by the end of the day! The trail got sketchy as it got near the Panther (a mere creek at this point) but we always picked it up again. Then, a drop down to the next level of flat valley – and more alders. This was a large valley, and between losing the trail / picking it up again, a few kilometres of alder-bashing occurred. Finally, at a definitive turn to the right where the ridges pinched out the valley, we were certain we could see the trail on the left hand side, descending through this gully, into the trees - and for the first few hundred yards, there was! - until it faded out to an animal trail. What followed, was the ugliest stretch of fruitless bushwhacking on the whole trip, that took 2 hours of pain and sweat from us. Mark, with his GPS, was a very handy guy to have at this time, and the trail showed to have crossed over to the other side of the creek from us. More thrash and splash to the other side - where's that damn trail? - we climbed up, back down, back up again- thick, mossy undergrowth with lots of dead branches to stab you- till we reached a spot up from the creek, and sent the twin boys off to scamper up the hill to see if they could locate the trail. Frank has spirits intact, but is

bleeding profusely. Derek and Darcy are bagged, although they would not admit it. Ethan – who doesn't say much of anything at the best of times, is saying even less of it now. The boys are now so far up the hill, we can't hear them and they can't hear our yells. This was probably the low point - crikey, now we've lost the kids! But they came back on their own, empty-handed - and we now realize that we just have to thrash our way in the right direction. Darcy, Mark and I just started walking down the creek- quite honestly, a soothing treat for my hot feet, and blisters – the rest pushed on through a marshy area, as the forest pulled back and more open valley lay ahead. Finally - around 4:30 or so, we saw some flagging in the alders up ahead, and picked up the trail where it came out of a flooded area, and gained the bench on the left-hand side.

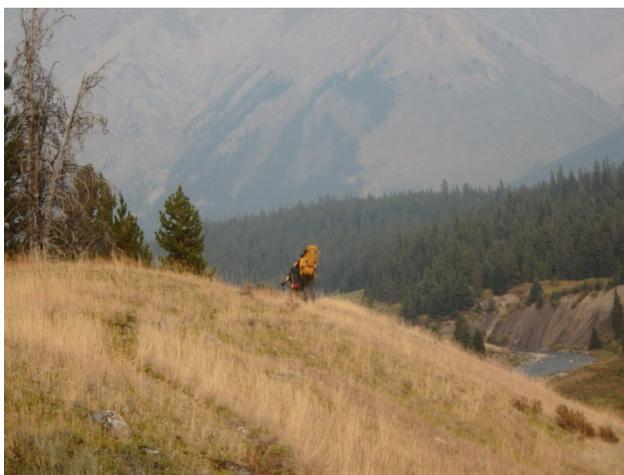


We have won !! From this point on, the trail behaved itself and stayed out in the open – and visible- for the rest of the way down the valley, toward the confluence of the Panther River and Wigmore creek, where the Buffalo roam. We still had six more kilometres to go, and although it was an easy trail, we were a bunch of bagged puppies trudging on, when the boys' sharp eyes spotted a little trail that branched uphill, toward a little oasis of green forest in an otherwise forest-fire burnout zone – and a little-used horse camp. It looked just like home! This is our first “random” camp, and it had a nice little campfire area, with a nailed-up bench that was surprisingly comfortable, and a countertop of sorts fashioned from wood nailed to trees. The little meadow had enough room for all our tents (and not too many more) and we all collapsed on our chosen spot for tentsite, and staggered around to make camp, getting our strength back. We have a day off tomorrow! We're just a kilometre or so from the buffalo paddock that Parks Canada has introduced just this year, and we're all keen to visit this tomorrow. Damn, we're a great group- after a trying day like this, everyone is still in a good mood, and we laugh and shoot the breeze in our new digs for the next day and a half.

Day 6 - Rest Day at Upper Panther River

“Dem goin's out on the Buffalo Range depends upon yer pay “

Finally, a rest day!! - getting to watch the sunlight actually hit your tent, and letting the heat drive you out. Having two cups of coffee and pondering the other side of the valley, before anything gets done. Work on bandaging your feet. Read another chapter of Kurt Vonnegut! Another day of sunshine coming our way, the smoke has cleared a bit, and it's great to do nothing but laugh and chat until noon. That's when the whole group of us set off to find the buffalo.



The trail crosses the Panther again, you can jump it here, and then cuts over a small shoulder – the top of which we are warned by a new sign, of what areas are closed, what areas are in a

“temporary restriction” area, and how much money you can lose, if you break the rules. Derek spotted the buffalo from the top of the ridge! - we descend down to the Wigmore Warden Cabin, which is one of the few cabins built in the 50’s, bungalow-style with a basement, and the shutters are all wide open. We cross over a bridge to the front lawn, and loiter about, expecting to see someone, but the place is eerily empty. But make no mistake about it, this is Buffalo Central - just mere yards away, are a couple of large canvas shelters housing ATV’s, skidoos, fencing equipment, etc, and just 100 yards or so past that, over the creek, is the fenced compound housing the buffalo. And, this morning, they are grazing close by! Not completely understanding all the rules, we are cautious of getting close to the fence- don’t wanna lose \$25,000.00, ya know- but soon we get bolder, and we’re snapping pix of these dozen or so majestic beasts, with 4 or 5 calves, by the dozen. It’s not what I expected- I had a romantic vision of ranch-style fencing- but this is ugly, prison-style fencing, designed so hungry critters like wolves and grizzlies can’t get in and eat them. After getting up to the highest ground possible to shoot down on them and eliminate the fencing from the photo, and getting our fill of watching them, we shuffle back to the warden’s cabin, where a young warden dude is engaging our group already on what it’s like to “buffalo-sit.”



He answers all our questions, and tells us that the project is going very well - 100% birth success rate, only a grizzly predator has attempted to break in, with no success. He tells us that, based on similar introductory practices in the USA, wolves take a couple of years just to figure out what the heck these beasts are, before they come to the realization that maybe they can kill and eat them. A wolf can’t take down a full-grown buffalo, but they could separate the calves from the herd. In any case, we are told that the buffalo won’t roam free in this area (but no doubt, monitored as to their travel) for a couple more years yet. He also tells us that we are only the fifth or sixth party this year, to have ventured this far, to visit. Once we have picked his brains clean, we are off up the valley again, back to our camp. Most of us find a little spot on the river, doff the clothes and clean up – it’s a beautiful sunny day to sit there naked and let

the breeze dry you off. Read a book napmend my shorts..... get supper going..... the whiskey is getting low. Evening passes, and soon we are discussing the day's journey tomorrow, over our last mountain pass. We are going to look for a camp spot just this side of the pass, to make it a short day.

Day 7 - Upper Panther River to Scotch Horse Camp- 20 kms

Seventh day in Church dawned brilliantly again, albeit with a bit more smoke that crept into the valley overnight. Campsite checked and double-checked (things tend to get more spread out when you camp two nights in a row, especially clothes set to dry on bushes, hanging on tree trunks, etc), we made our way back to the buffalo compound, forded the river there, and started climbing – up the temporary, re-routed trail that intersects the Snow Creek trail just a few hundred metres up.



Now we have a commanding view of the whole paddock, and now we can see it's pretty big- it stretches back to an open plain. I can tell, from pictures that I viewed online, that this is the plain where they first let them loose, in the deep snow from last spring. They are all back there now, just little dots in my viewfinder, making yesterday's close encounter that much more special. We turn and start hiking up a gradual, wide path, entering a wide valley full of – what else? – more alders and willows, and the peaks around us are farther back, and have more of a “front-range” look - today is the first day we feel we are walking out of the mountains, and into the foothills! What we didn't know from looking at the map, but can see now, is that this is part of the old fire road leading to the Red Deer. This old roadbed has grown over, but the trail is straight, and we make excellent time. However, one thing is pretty clear- we won't be making our camp up here anywhere, as there is no alder-less area to camp, and no water either. We are heading for the Red Deer!



After a couple of pleasant rest stops along the way- a couple of old wooden signs announce faint trails to side-trips to lakes in adjacent valleys- the descent is just as gentle as the ascent was. After about 15 kms, the roadbed vegetation changes to berry bushes – buffalo berries – and red splashes of bear crap now dot the trail. They look to be about a day or two old, but hey, there’s eight of us, and most sane backcountry bears know enough to get off the trail and let this motley crew pass. Before you know it, the rounded peaks we just passed, give way to a wide forested valley in front of us – we’ve reached the Red Deer valley, our last river to follow on our trip. By around 3 pm, we drop down on the last little plain before the river, and a big horse camp welcomes us to our right. Home! This one is a classic – it’s got multiple firepits, and an inviting meadow in which to pitch tents in. Heck, once you drop down to the stream, and head up the other side, there’s ANOTHER camp over there, too. No need - all of us have some time to set up, and have a snooze or hang out, before suppertime. And here’s the good news- we made such good time today, and are farther down the trail to be “ahead of the game” so to speak, that we declare tomorrow to be another rest day. That suits us all! - we’ve worked hard for many days, so we are getting a couple of lazy days to recharge our batteries. That afternoon was downright HOT there in the meadows, but then a stiff breeze comes up for the evening, and will stay with us for the next day. Frank and the boys have amazed me for the past few days with the quality of their food, and the quantity of their food they’ve brought! -

and they do dishes every night, heat up water for it too. (I'm a lazy SOB who just boils water for every meal.) And, Mark and Derek also team up, and they make delectable dishes every night, too. (Coincidentally, their packs are the heaviest as well.) Only Darcy and I are "boil-in-bag" guys. But now, on the tail end of the trip, the boys are starting to bemoan the fact that most of the food is gone, and rationing might be necessary! Of course, twenty-year-olds are eating machines, so I feel for them a bit, but think they will survive!

Day 8 - Rest Day at Scotch Horse Camp

Those first days of pushing my stamina are starting to disappear now from my memory, and my bones, with each day that passes, and now, another sleep-in. It was super-warm last night, I think Mark told me it only got as low as 14 deg. C – that is balmy. And this morning, the wind is up- it's blowing hard, but it's doing a good job of keeping the forest fire smoke away. Our only interest today, is just to do a little exploration of the immediate vicinity- mostly this means hanging out down by the Red Deer. Which, after a leisurely brekkie and a game of catch later (the boys brought a ball) , we did!



The bridge over the Red Deer will never get washed out- it's suspended high over a narrow gorge , and you could drive a truck over it. Which, back in the old days of the Park, they did. Wandering a bit farther on the north side of the river, we found the trail junction that would lead us west back to Divide Pass, as well as our trail for tomorrow, heading east. While wandering back to camp, Frank and I saw a trail that just looked like it might have angled back over to the river for another viewpoint, but after topping out over a small rise, it didn't- it actually led over to a huge open meadow, and pasture. A great view, to be sure- then we noticed that it was fenced! What we stumbled upon, was a huge grazing pasture, most likely a summer holding pen, for warden service horses brought in from the Ya Ha Tinda ranch. In other years, this grass would be green and lush, a cornucopia of nutrition for a horse, but this year it was golden, like a wheat field, and the strong breeze made the tall stalks ripple and

sway. It was a powerful image that still stays with me as I type this. The fenceposts shrunk away from us till they seemed like matchsticks, and rounded a corner to a tiny speck of red and white beckoning in the distance –the flagpole of the Scotch Creek warden’s cabin. Frank opened the gate, and followed the trail that led through the pasture, and we waded thigh-deep in grass in the warm wind over to see this old cabin. It was well worth the walk- all of us hikers have come across warden cabins over the years, that are situated in a little slice of heaven, the kind where you could drink in the view for days, weeks even, with the help of a good book or three. This was one of them. I sat on that porch for awhile, and time-travelled. A perfect spot for a perfect day.

Back at the camp, our discovery made others in our group wander over there, and between napping and reading, Frank and I also got in a game of crib or two. Evenings like this one would have been enhanced by a fire for sure, but we have learned to make do without them. And, our meadow here is positively crackling dry. We have now gone eight days without a single drop of rain- a personal record for any of my travels. Tomorrow, we leave the park. We have walked over 120 kilometres so far, and we are pretty darn close to climbing over 2 vertical miles of elevation as well.



Day 9 - Scotch Horse Camp to Ya Ha Tinda random camp – 12 kms

The day has dawned cloudy, and for the first time I see clouds cloaking the shoulders of the mountains. Hmmm- did I jinx something here?? It’s almost welcome. The cooler weather makes for comfortable hiking, and rain seems like a pleasant diversion now, a novelty. The most concerning issue this morning, however, is Darcy – he has picked up a stomach bug of some sort, and he is out of sorts – not his normal jovial self. We get going, and we’re careful to not let Darcy be the last of the group. We get on the north side of the river, and now we’re heading straight east on well-travelled trails with lots of road apples on it. An old forest burn is on our left, as we skirt the last big peak north of us, the wide Red Deer channel faithfully on

our right. After a couple of hours and about 8 kms or so, we reach the Banff Park boundary! – we have done it.



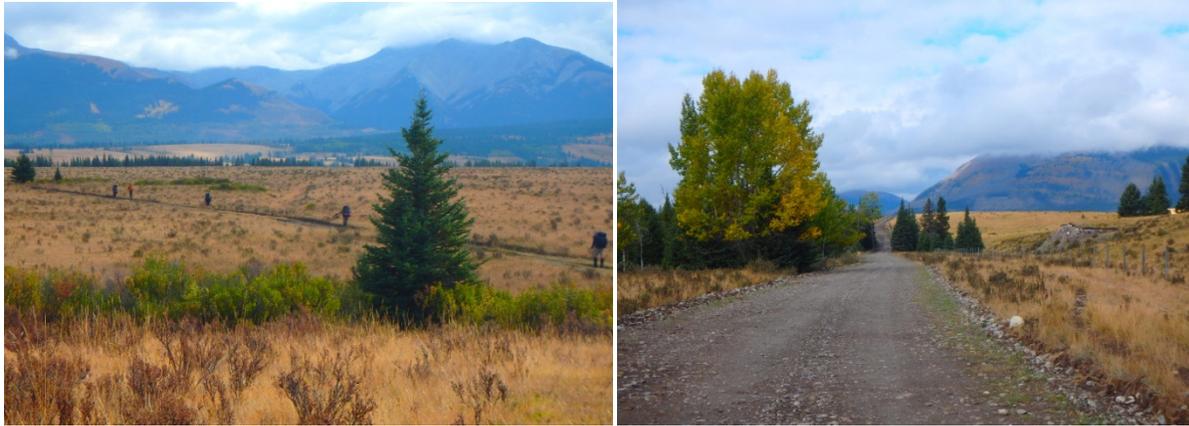
A good rest is in order here, and we rest and ponder, and appreciate the marksmanship of the “NO HUNTING IN THE PARK” sign shot full of holes. Shortly past this, the trail turns into a road, and just a few hundred yards down this road, is the gate to The Outpost at Warden Rock. It’s some sort of dude ranch / riding stable. It’s got all kinds of corny signs, from the top of the driveway down to its front gates – stuff like “ when you are riding through hell, keep riding” and “Complaint department- 50 miles” and although about 6 or 7 horses greeted us there, and one of the two dogs came out and dished out dollops of dog love to us, nary a human was visible. A wonderful little spot situated under the imposing east face of Warden Rock. Back on the road, Darcy has taken a turn for the worse, darting off into the woods multiple times. All of us are kind of hoping that a vehicle will come rumbling by, and deposit our stricken hiker at the end of the trail, Bighorn campground, where he would at least have the comfort of a biffy. But not a motor invades our space. It has gotten increasingly cloudier, and almost chilly, and

we plod on, through interspersed pockets of forest and meadow. Our planned destination is not far up ahead, where the map shows a creek intersecting the Red Deer. Finally we reach it, and indeed, there is a pleasant little meadow just off the road, and water available from the Red Deer- we are about six or seven kilometres from the finish line. We get Darcy in, and set up, and not a moment too soon - you can see the rain coming toward us, and for the first time all trip, the rains come down. We got our tents up, but we got a little splashed setting the tarps up. And a fine spot it was, on a little flat spot overlooking the river. Derek looked positively beaming!! - like I said, he's a Wet guy, especially with a cup of scotch in his hand! Between Derek, Mark and Frank, they got two tarps up, in tandem, that gave us ample space to stretch out and make supper. Darcy went directly to his tent, and rested - we tried to make his ordeal a bit easier by brewing up some soup for him (all that he wanted), and hanging his food that night. The rain petered out well before dark - we'll pack up wet tomorrow to end it off, contrary to our 10-day experience.



Day 10 - Ya Ha Tinda random camp to Ya Ha Tinda Ranch road – 7 kms

Our final day of the trip dawned cloudy and cold, but there were holes in the sky that gave hope of a clearing later in the day. Our patient felt somewhat better, but still, Frank, Brinton and Riley took a lot of Darcy's weight out of his pack, to help him along. We are still following a road, and will be, till the end - but not one vehicle has gone by – just two folks on horseback. We are now of the opinion that this is a restricted access road only – perhaps just to stock the Outpost at Warden Rock, or for emergencies. We emerge out of the last of the forest, and in front of us, a huge swath of Front Range grasslands open up – it's absolutely gorgeous country. Poplar trees dot the intervening ridges that we cross, and the sky has broken open with just scudding white cloud under blue sky. I made poor time, because I kept stopping to take more pictures!



Finally, way off to our left, at the upper head of a huge windswept range, we could see the Ya Ha Tinda in the distance. I wanted to walk up the road to see it, but knowing that our “ride” is arriving at noon - it’s a 14-seat Banff Airporter shuttle bus!! – because that’s where Derek works- I decide that I’ll leave the exploration of the ranch for my next adventure up this way. At about 11 am, the last of us arrive at the appointed spot, at the Bighorn campground - and that amazing feeling of completion sweeps over us all. We passed the course – pun intended. It’s always bittersweet. On one hand, you get into a rhythm, and you don’t want it to end – after all, we’re explorers, right?? - J. Monroe Thorington got it right when he said “ We were not pioneers ourselves, but we journeyed over old trails that were new to us, and with hearts open. Who shall distinguish?”



The campground is filled, on this Labour Day Monday holiday, with true horse people - there must be 30 horses tied up at various spots over this sprawling campsite, and a few million dollars worth of horse and camping gear as well. This area is made for horse people, and it’s just for horse people - ATV’s, get the hell outta here. We sit on a grassy knoll and soak in this last hurrah, and gaze back out on our mountain view – the one we came in on.

The bus arrives. The driver is a great guy, and he brought a cooler of beer, and bags of chips. This band of “pioneers” soon disappear out onto the civilized plains, beers in hand and mouths full of chips. So it ends. For now.

