


The 4th annual remote mountain hike is a departure from the first three- in that, we knew we didn't want to hike in Jasper again. So, out came the maps!

Where to go?

We had never gone deep into Banff Park before, so we soon started concentrating on long trips stretching from Lake Minnewanka, all the way up to Bow Summit. At first, we zeroed in on a 175 km trek from Mount Norquay up to Mosquito Creek, but with the aid of Dan's newly acquired GPS, we realized that, with the amount of mountain passes to cross, the elevation gain would kill us. Banff Park is a different animal than what we were used to in Jasper- narrower valleys, multiple mountain passes, and so many more river fords! So, after doing due diligence with the GPS, we finally all agreed on a loop (with only a 20 minute drive between beginning and end) that is 130 kms long, with 5 mountain passes to cross, and we are calculating 9 days to do the trip. It goes like this:

Day 1 Fish Creek parking lot to Baker Lake campground

It was a dreary drive out from Calgary today- we're all pumped to go, but our beautiful summer weather has stalled out for a couple of days now, drove through rain and low clouds through the foothills and all the way past Banff. Dropped a car at Mosquito Creek for the end of the trek, and crowded back in to Dan's Mazda to Fish Creek parking lot at Lake Louise, preparing for the steep, uninspiring trudge up the maintenance road to Temple Lodge- about 4.5 kms. Well, good fortune smiled on us early- the Skoki van, taking Skoki folks up to the top of the road, was just preparing to leave. We stuck out our thumbs, and he cheerfully stopped and let us on! Bonus. I have been very lucky over the years to catch rides up to Temple Lodge, and the tradition continues. About a dozen Skoki-goers and us, piled out at the top, and in minutes we were off- about an 11 am start. It's a wide, well-travelled trail over Boulder Pass on the way to Skoki, and I thought we did well with our 50 lbs + packs (Dan and Ryan claim theirs to be 60+, and I believe them) , we were passing the others. It's overcast and drizzling today, not so good for stopping. We

A photograph showing a hiker from behind, wearing a dark backpack and red gaiters, walking on a dirt trail. The trail is surrounded by vibrant pink wildflowers in the foreground. In the background, there is a large lake (likely Ptarmigan Lake) nestled in a valley, with steep, forested mountains rising on either side under a cloudy sky.

Boulder Pass for a few minutes some snack food in us, and then again. There's lots of people on skirted Ptarmigan Lake, passed Deception Pass/ Skoki, and descent down to Baker Lake. is at the far end of the lake, and 2 pm- even the drizzle let up for set up tents. It's in a wide, open settled, Ryan and I wandered scenic outlet stream out of the with waterfalls. No bear

some very fresh evidence of digging on the east side of the lake- still green on the underside of the sod clumps, only a day or two old. There are loons calling on the lake, and an osprey is wheeling about, above us. No fires allowed at this camp, so it will be an early night tonight. Had a chat with two very young women who pulled into camp late, found out they came from my home town! They were wonderfully naïve ("do you carry your firewood?") and I am sure this is their very first backcountry trip - I give them credit for setting off, and encouraged them to keep going.

nice for walking, stopped at to rest up and get we were off the trail. We the junction for started the The campground we got in around awhile, until we valley, and once about- very lake, complete sighting, but

Day 2 Baker Lake Camp to Red Deer Patrol Cabin

Woke up to a foggy morning in camp, but by the time breakfast was done, you could tell it was going to clear up.



We had to pack up a wet tent, but by 9 am we were off, it was 6 kms still to go before we got to the Red Deer lakes- source of the Red Deer River. Twenty years earlier, I proposed to my wife here. The trail got muddier the closer you got to the alder-infested lakes, and we passed the last two tourists here- just leaving the campground- that we were going to see in a long time. Shortly after, we got to the Cyclone warden cabin, the sun came out, and we took a break here. We had met around 6 Parks Canada ladies going in to this cabin yesterday, with promises of wine and chocolate if we stopped in, but alas, no one was home, they must have been out on a day trip somewhere. After this, the trail stopped being muddy, and we made good time.

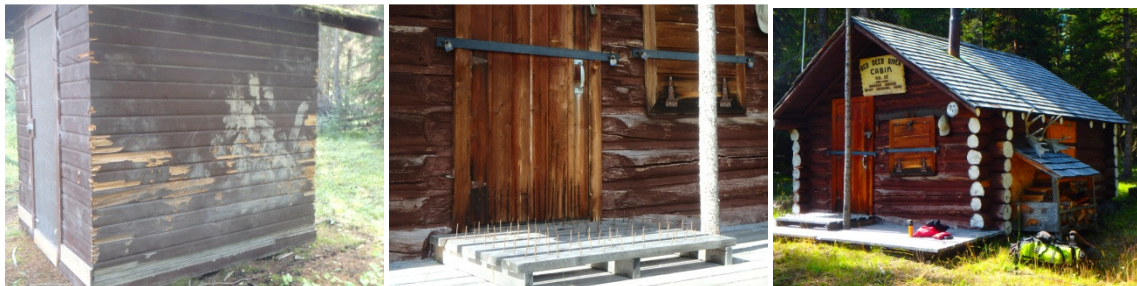


The trail started getting sketchy about 4 kms further down, by the gravel flats where the river valley widens, we lost it for awhile but where the river hugs the left side of the valley, we picked it up again, and tramped on. Drummond Creek is supposed to be a ford, but we managed to get across it by a couple of boot-splashes in shallower spots- another reason why full-leather boots are a must! The river valley opened wider, and we skirted marshy areas- a couple of ponds with reeds and marshes, and good views- and eventually came to Douglas Lake campsite. It had old Parks Canada signs signifying it as a

campground, but it is old and not used anymore. We decided to go farther down river to Red Deer Patrol Cabin, another 6 kms down the trail. One thing we have noticed, was the lack of bear signs on the trail, but tons of wolf tracks - this must be a wolf highway!



We followed more good trail until we got in to the cabin at 3:15 pm - a 20 km day. The cabin was booby-trapped! – obviously they've had bear problems here, and they have pallets with 3" nails sticking up from them, in front of the windows and doors! We have never seen this in Jasper, must be a Banff remedy. A most picturesque spot, we dried out all of our stuff in the sun, and spent a great evening eating supper on the porch and building a great fire. One unsettling sight, was the feed building - you could see the muddy paw-prints of the bear trying to break in, and great chunks of the wood siding either ripped or gnawed away- but did not breach the barrier. Let's hope he gave up for good! We also had fun rigging up the bear hang, it took a couple of tries but the food is now up in the air, and we are in for the night.



Day 3 Red Deer Patrol Cabin- Divide Creek Junction

Today is the day we're heading as far as Divide Creek Junction, and it's only 11 kms away. Even though we said we'd sleep in a bit today, we're still up at 7 (Dan got up around 6) and I am up last – the fire is already going. Taking into account the war-zone around the cabin, I was a little nervous about bears last night, but all was quiet. We watch the sun pop over the crest of the mountains half an hour later, and then the low mists of the valley coast our way- the sun obliterates them in no time. We were walking by 9:30, and spent the day on mostly good trail- staying on a bench above the Red Deer, using a fallen tree to cross an un-named creek, losing the trail for a small section to wash-out, crossing McConnell Creek, again on a fallen tree but much more difficult! I lost my balance near the end and leaped off, barely making the other side. Then, for the last 3 or 4 kms we hiked thru a recent forest fire (Ryan, being a firefighter, noticed signs that pointed to it being a year or two old) until we finally got to the Divide Pass turnoff. No Parks Canada sign, just a small wood sign tacked to a tree - easy to miss.



We headed a little closer to the river, where meadows looked like an obvious place to set up camp. This is our first “random camp”, we’ve resurrected an old fire ring, set up our tents in sheltered spots because the sky is super threatening to the east, and we are close to the ford where the trail goes east to Scotch Camp, and the Cascade fire road, just a couple kilometres away. We had a little rain before we got here, and it’s hard to judge which way the weather is gonna swing. I headed into my tent for a nap, a little shower breezed thru, and then got out to make my favourite appetizer, which always revives me- a bowl of Cup-a-Soup with Frank’s hot sauce added. It was then we had our first human- and equine- encounter in a while. A horse party of Parks employees had just come over Divide Pass, and they gave us some good info on the trail ahead- especially the washed-out section of Peters Creek - very valuable, and gave us some peace of mind. Got some great pix of the whole horse party fording the Red Deer. Later, we settled in to another peaceful fire along this friend of ours- the Red Deer River. Tomorrow we leave it.



Day 4 Divide Creek Junction – Divide Warden Cabin

We had a lot of cloud and threatening weather come over last night, and it got pretty chilly, although it did not rain. It cleared up in the night – got out to pee, and was met with a faceful of stars. But it sure was chilly this morn. Got the usual 9 am start, and the trail immediately went up. It first travelled through the last of that forest burnout, found the trail straddling the burnout and the untouched forest on the right. The Red Deer river was seen in glimpses, fading into the distance, then was gone from our sight – we entered the cool shaded forest, perfect temp for grunting uphill. Man, there’s a lot of wolf tracks, and we figure he’s a big one – but no bear tracks. After a break, and some muddy sections, we

started to get into a clearing, approaching Divide Shoulder – this is the high point on the trail before the actual pass, and from here we have to descend about four hundred feet. We just ascended 1300', so we got some work in today. While on the descent, you could see Divide cabin waaaaay in the distance, but it lifted our spirits to see it - end of day was in sight! It looked idyllic, and when we got there and set up our camp, we all agree – it is.



We own this valley ! - it is beautiful, I've taken panoramic photos, we've all had a bath in the stream, we're drying out stuff in the sun - we've made ourselves at home on the cabin porch. This is our lazy day, and we deserve it, and need it - we read, collect some firewood, I scribble in my journal, we all take a nap. When the sun goes down, after our freeze-dried gastronomic frenzy, and Dan's instant Margarita mix, we get the fire going and have a grand evening watching the light fade. Best camp yet. We need it, to build up our strength for tomorrow's long day, over the pass and down Peters Creek.



Day 5 Divide Warden Cabin – Clearwater Outfitter's Camp

I think that Divide WC camp will go down as the best. I slept well last night, but it sure got cold- the skies cleared, and I wore an extra layer to bed, my down vest. Even at that, I was just warm enough. There was frost on the ground when I got up. But we had a fire, the sun came up, and we were off by 9:30. It was 3 kms to the pass, and the uphill trek views just got better and better - tackling elevation first thing in the morning is the best time, you've got all your energy, and when the views and the weather are good, you don't even notice the up. We got to a viewpoint before the final leg to the pass, and it was just spectacular up there. I did not expect Divide Pass to be such a magical place, but it was.



The pass itself is wide open, barren, with a small tarn at the top – meadows everywhere, not a soul to be seen. We hung out for a snack, and headed down Peters Creek. Immediately, the trail changed to rocky – still meadows, but not muddy anymore, roots on the trail have changed to rocks on the trail. Even high up, we hit a few washouts, but these could be jumped. The trail stayed on our right of the creek for another 3 or 4 kms, until Peters Mountain and the un-named peak on hiker's right closed in to make the valley tight. Then all hell broke loose. The cliffsides on left and right broke loose during last year's floods, and the trail was obliterated for the next 2 or 3 kms. We came to our first ford, and Ryan and I got our fording footwear on – Dan put his boots back on, and preferred side-hill bashing on the rock slides on hiker's left - Ryan and I kept our beach shoes on, and followed some flagging that showed a way through the destruction. We must have forded the creek 5 or 6 more times in the next couple of kilometres. We lost Dan – that is to say, we couldn't see him, and he couldn't hear us, but the creek was noisy, pounding its way down, losing elevation fast through this gorge. But it was short-lived, he was in front of us, and we hooked up further downstream.



Better still, we managed to find the crucial part of the trail (the horse party told us about this junction) where the trail switchbacks uphill for a couple hundred feet, becomes a nice forest trail and escapes the washout . Problem over! We took this nice forested trail all the way down to the Clearwater River valley. This took quite awhile, and represented a good portion of the day – by the time we rounded the shoulder of Mount Peters, descended down through the trees and crossed the large open meadow at the lowest part of the valley, we had travelled 20 kms. We took a rest in the meadow, and found out that we were only a kilometre or so from the outfitter's camp that was marked on the map. It was a big day, and we were knackered – partly from the exertion, and partly because we had been in the sun a lot today. The outfitter's camp was in a flat valley with old-growth trees, but not on the Clearwater River, that was a few hundred meters away. We debated moving on another 3 or 4 kms to get to Indian Head warden cabin, but our exhaustion said let's stay put - this turned out to be a wise decision. We all found our spots in the forest to set up tent, easily found lots of firewood , and got our bellies full of supper. That revived us to do a little side trip. We realized after looking at the maps and GPS, that we were only 1 kilometre away from the NE corner of Banff park! - so we bushwhacked our way over to where Peters Creek flows into the Clearwater River. That is the corner of Banff Park ! - we took a group shot of us standing on the corner rocks of the junction. Cool. We bashed our way back thru the bush to our camp- it's warm tonight, a nice change from bundling up just before bed - and faded away peacefully before another evening fire.



Day 6 Clearwater Outfitter's camp – Clearwater Warden Cabin

So warm, indeed, that I stripped down to underwear in the middle of the night! Another gorgeous start to the day, which starts with us fording the Clearwater River, and leaving the park for a few kilometres. Dan and Ryan are ready to go by 8 am! – I was just packing up. I started hiking in my neoprene booties and underwear, and headed for the Clearwater. The boys were waiting for me on the other side. We all agreed, the crossing was “nut-deep” – this is the deepest ford of the trip. That done, we started looking for the trail on the north side- it's all braided here, with alders, and Dan and I bashed around for about 20 minutes or so (Ryan went ahead, but didn't have any better luck finding anything) until we found a reasonable one (evidence of maintenance) and followed it until it merged with the main trail. We knew it was hunting season as of the day before, and as the horse party advised us, “don't go into stealth mode” - don't want to get shot at! A couple of kilometres later, however, we were back at the park boundary, and a surprisingly good entrance- with maps and a notice board, and lots of warnings, most likely for the hunters and outfitters entering via the forestry roads on the Eastern slopes. We hadn't gone more than a kilometre, when we turned a corner and ran straight into the Park Warden and his deputy, at the horse gate of the Indian Head Warden Cabin. He was confrontational right off the bat. “Where did you come from?” in an unfriendly voice. Now, I can understand that he might be nervous about accosting illegal hunters illegally poaching- with guns. But Warden S. Anderson had a good 5 or ten seconds, before we even saw him, to make a judgement of what we were all about - so we gave him the Dickhead Award. With arms folded in front of him, he asked for our permits - understandable- and only then, when it was clear we were legal, did he lighten up somewhat. But Warden Anderson was too much the toy cop for our liking- a little friendliness goes a long way. Warden, we just hiked 100 kms to see you, and our fees and taxes pay you, and your Deputy's, wages. At this point, we still hadn't seen any hikers since the Red Deer Lakes, just Parks employees. Anyway, we finally parted ways, and we headed in to the cabin to check it out – it's actually a bungalow with a basement, and it's the only cabin any of us had ever seen, with an electric fence around the entire perimeter of the camp, to keep the nasties out. We peeked thru the windows (they didn't have bars over them), ooh'd and aaah'd a bit at the luxury inside, had a bit of a snack, then down the trail we went. A lovely, dry trail indeed- first we hopped Indian Head, then Malloch creeks, and walked through open vistas that were truly spectacular in the beautiful blue-sky day that was granted us. We didn't have a set goal of where to camp tonight, but were leaning towards Martin Lake, or perhaps the Clearwater Lakes beyond. We clicked off the kms, getting baked in the sun, until we heard a muffled roar in the distance. It was Martin Falls, and it was impressive! – I actually thought it was the Clearwater. Shortly thereafter, it led us to Martin Lake, and we forded it where it exits the lake. We checked, but there was no good spots to camp here, so on we went towards the Clearwater Lakes.



A couple of kms later, and we reached them - it's actually one lake, with tight bottlenecks between bodies of water, so that it looks like a couple of them. Someone had told us there was good camping here- we sure never saw any. By this time, we are now getting bagged – this is going to be a 20 km day – we keep going, and finally make the Clearwater Warden Cabin, and a spot to camp. It's not the greatest set-up, but it will do - the wind has really picked up, and there are spots below the cabin, in a hollow – just watch out for the horse poop. It turns out we put in a 24 km day, according to Dan's GPS, and all of us are slow to do anything. But, eventually we feed ourselves, get the bear hang up, get some water from the Clearwater, out in the valley, and get the fire going. The wind has died down, and a few sprinkles of rain hit us, but soon the sky clears and we have another great little fire to entertain us until dark.



Day 7 Clearwater Wardens' Cabin - Lower Devon Lake

I wasn't in the tent for more than half an hour, and it started to rain. In fact, it pretty much rained all night. So, getting up wasn't much fun, even though it wasn't raining – but everything was soaking wet, and the skies were grey. But, our morning routine was interrupted by the sound of a metal bird approaching us - the distinctive sound, against the mountain silence, of helicopter blades ripping up the air. A couple of minutes later, it landed out in the meadow in front of us, and four guys from the Parks service jumped out, unloaded a bunch of gear, and marched up to join us. Good guys, all of them, no S. Anderson here, and their job for the day was to move the horse corral gate (we noticed last night that, right beside the cabin, a creek had evidently washed out in last year's floods, and brought down a rockslide with it, which overran the horse corral.) Apparently this work is part of this year's budget. The foreman was nice enough to open up the cabin so we could check out the inside- which was really cool of him, as the Clearwater cabin dates back to the 30's. As much as you get bad weather every now and then in the mountains, we are extremely fortunate that it doesn't happen while we are setting up or tearing down – today is no exception, it lets up while we pack, but no sooner do we leave the Parks crew behind, it starts to rain. Then it starts to rain hard. There is nothing much good to say about hiking in rain, soon we are all wet, and visibility is nil. Dan and Ryan abandon their idea of scrambling Willingdon the next day (we are now walking around it) , and since the weather is so crappy, we need to find some shelter for tonite's camp- we're chilled to the bone, and we are at a point on the trail, nearing treeline, that if we keep going, we will be above treeline for the next 20 kms. But again fortune smiles on us- just before the Lower Devon Lake, and after only 8 kms or so, we run across an outfitter's camp, and we know that this is home for the day. It's got big, old-growth trees that have dry spots under them, and we all scramble to find a decent tent spot. So, I guess you could say we set up camp in the rain- but those big trees sure help. It's only around 12:30 or so, the rain tones down to a drizzle now, and we get the fire going. The fire ring is big, and someone left a lot of wood behind- albeit wet now. No matter- we get a good blaze going with some dry wood from the dead low branches of trees ("ladder fuel" as Ryan calls it) , get some coals going, and soon we've got a big blaze going- what a pick-me-upper! Life is now better – AND the rain is letting up!

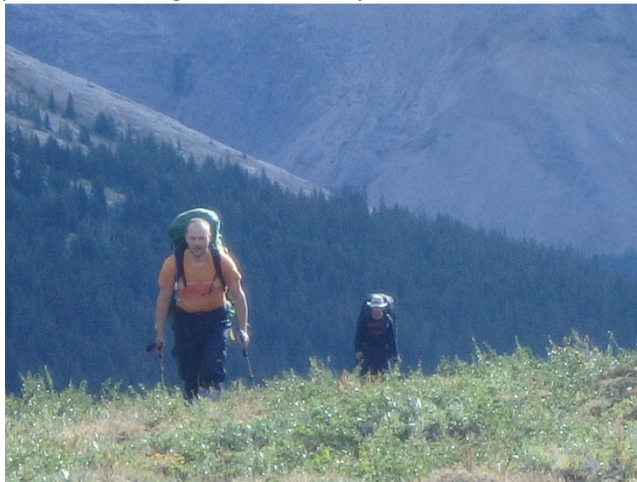


We shoot the shit around the blaze for the next few hours, everything is drying. There's a deer that has wandered into camp, that is so unafraid of us, we can almost pet it – it grazes within a few feet of the tent, like the last one we had in camp, and although it sometimes wanders off, it reappears multiple times over the day. This is now around the time that "food-bartering" occurs – Dan is still loaded with food, too much food, so treats us to landjaeger sausage and jalapeno jack cheese - yummm. Anything to get the pack lighter! I'm not much fun because I'm on course to finish up the trip with just

enough food- but we've been munching all afternoon, we know we've got a big day tomorrow, walking over two mountain passes on the highline trail, to get to the Fish Lakes.

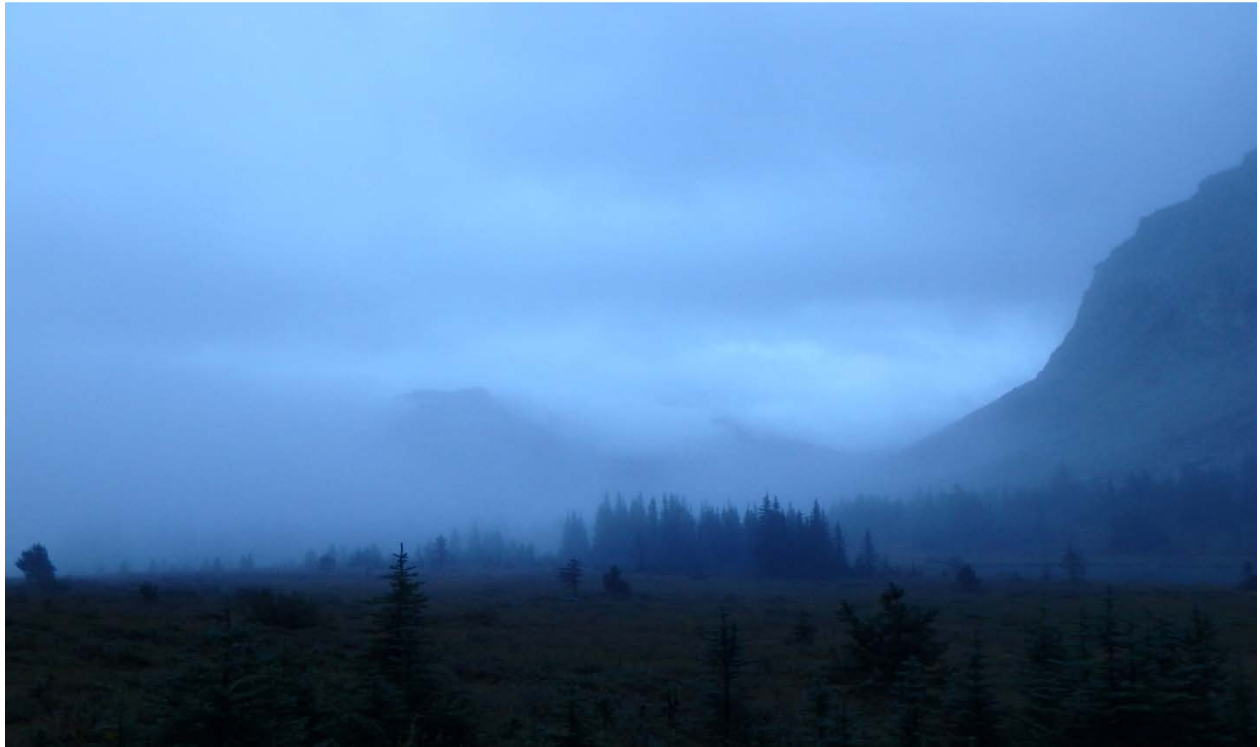
Day 8 Lower Devon Lake – Fish Lakes campground

That big blaze lasted until 10 pm last night, those coals were so hot they consumed any and all things chucked on the fire, including a big honkin' log that I was pretty sure wouldn't burn, but there was nothing left of it by morning. The deer was joined at some point in the middle of the night by her boyfriend, you can hear their hooves but for me it's a good noise, it means no bears around. It was cold last night, and it is cold this morning too - started off sunny but now looks threatening. We got our 9 am start, ascending the last of the trees, past Lower Devon Lake, and broke out into the open. I am now in familiar territory, back in the same valley where, just one month ago, I climbed Mount Willingdon. This unpredictable weather has lifted a bit, and although it is not exactly warm, it is pleasant enough, and blustery.



The approach ridge for Willingdon comes into view, but just like the weather on my ascent, the summit is draped in cloud. We stopped at the site of our first camp- nothing more than a clump of wind-blasted spruce trying to survive above treeline – and have a break, scoping out the ascent ridge for when Dan and Ryan inevitably come back to claim it. Our bear from the last trek, nicknamed Devon, was nowhere to be seen. We soon were walking again, approaching Clearwater Pass, and the whole Siffleur River valley opens up before our eyes. This is big country we are now in. There is only around 3 kms between Clearwater Pass and Pipestone Pass, and just a few hundred feet of elevation to drop down, into some small trees and alderbrush (also prime grizz habitat, we stay awake through here) and soon we are grunting up the final few steps to the top of Pipestone. This is a remote, exposed pass, and it would be a scary place to be in bad weather. But it's now familiar territory for me- one last break, and we start downhill now, for the last 10 kms or so to the Fish Lakes. Dan and Ryan get a ways in front of me now, but still in view, since we are still above treeline, and the expansive views for the next 6 kms lull me into a false sense of security about bears - I see no tracks, and since I figure Dan and Ryan will be yo-bearng, I walk along in silence with my thoughts. About 2 kms before Moose Lake, I round up a small bump and there is Mr. Grizz, about 100' away, and standing up. I had about one second to appreciate the sight of that magnificent beast – silver, brown and black, a beautiful coat on him, a squared head, smooth coat on his underbelly - OK, that's enough! - turn around back down the trail, out of sight, fumble for the bearspray, take the safety off, hurry, hurry, back to that stream!! - I turn around, thankfully no bear. I decide to take the detour around him close to the cliffs descending down to the little tarn on hiker's right, and by now I am yipping and yo-bearng my head off, nervous of course, being alone - but I never see the bear again, and soon I am on my way, past Moose

Lake, I've got a little mini-adrenalin rush going on, dodged a bullet. When I finally caught up with Ryan, looking slightly wild-eyed, he calmed me down somewhat, and we hiked on down the final switchbacks to the Fish Lakes without incident. After telling the boys of my encounter when we got into camp, I think they had a mixture of relief, and envy. So, we got set up in camp again.... met our first hikers since the Red Deer Lakes, and watched the weather sock in again, happy to have our shelters up. Then it rained. Oh man, did it rain. Pretty much for the rest of the night. There's no campfires anyway at Fish Lakes, so we did our best to get supper in us, huddling under Ryan's small tarp – but this was the most miserable night of the trip. It cleared up around dusk, but rained off and on, all night.



Day 9 Fish Lakes Campsite – Mosquito Creek Trailhead

We woke up in the morning to a squishy, soggy, muddy campground. My down booties were soaked, and for the first time all trip, I got out of my tent and put my boots on- somehow they stayed relatively dry. The rain had stopped, and it was shaping up to be a reasonable day, but the thought has settled in with all of us – today is the day that we are hiking out. Thoughts start creeping to the outside world.



Once again, like clockwork, we are off at 9 am, and right off the bat, we are climbing the 1300 vertical feet up to North Molar Pass - there's a pretty little spot just a kilometre out of camp, where a mountain stream cascades down to meet the Fish Lakes, where I fill up my bottle. Then it is all business after that for the next hour and a half, to the highest point that we get to on this trip - 8500' at the top of the pass. It actually snows on us, light flurries, when we are there, the weather still not really tipping its hand as to what we will get for the rest of the day. A small break up there with Ryan, taking in the last of the big scenery, then we start down the trail into Molar Meadows, and a very beaten path towards the road.

There is one last break taken at MO5, the weather going back to sunny, and the shade offered at this campsite is welcome. Then there is the time, when I know that the trip is about to end, that I listen and listen for the sound of cars on the highway that I am fast approaching. I don't really want to hear them, for that means the trip is over, but sure enough it happens, and your mindset automatically returns back to civilization. It's gotta happen.

Another trip in the books.

Where do you think we should go next year?