

Day 1

Given we drove from Calgary that morning, we got a reasonably early start, just after 10 am. But it was the end of the long hot spell in the first half of August and it was already hot as we sweated up to Helen Lake along with vanfuls of intrepid seniors. We had lunch at the top of the ridge overlooking Helen Lake and Crowfoot Glacier beyond that.

There are two ways up the headwall above Helen Lake: straight up the gut, or a traverse and switchbacks to the right (south). The traverse is definitely the wiser choice for backpackers. As well, if you want to be sure you find the trail down to Katherine Lake, take the traverse/switchbacks, as the trail to Katherine Lake carries on from the south side of the ridge at the top of the switchbacks. I only learned this on our way back, as Marco and I went up the gut and Ellie and Greg took the traverse and we had lunch at the cairn at the top of the gut. From there, there is no visible trail as you look east, but the way is obvious.

When you get to the top of the slope overlooking Katherine Lake, you also get your first view of upper Dolomite valley, which sweeps away to the north on the backside of Cirque Peak. It was a bluebird day and the views were sublime. From the top of the slope you can clearly see the trail coming down from hiker's right and beelining to the north end of Katherine Lake. There is a small ford of the inlet stream to the lake and from the north end you get a long view south down the Helen Creek valley, into the Bow valley.



The view east of Katherine Lake and the head of the Dolomite Valley

Beyond Katherine Lake there is a small rise, on the other side of which is a tarn. This is Dolomite Pass and the headwaters of Dolomite Creek. The trail then bends north and you get your first sense for what a long valley it is: 13 km from the pass to Isabella Lake, though the lake is hidden because the valley bends to the east as it nears the Siffleur valley.

Once the trail contours north/northwest around Cirque Peak, that's when it feels like you've left the frontcountry for the backcountry. The Helen Lake crowds were far behind now. Until we got back to the Helen Lake ridge four days later, we saw five people.



Looking down the upper Dolomite Valley

The trail continues for a couple of kms through the alpine, following the shallow creek valley northwest. After a couple of minor fords (boot top) we could see the banks of the creek rise up into two rocky gates. After the last ford we passed the entrance to the gorge on the west side of the creek, the trail now following a long ridge separating the Dolomite Creek gorge to the east and a rocky ravine on our left, leading to the base of the waterfalls from the Cirque Glacier.

We stopped for a break where we had a fantastic view of the waterfalls. It was now mid-afternoon and the water was pouring down from the glacier in multiple streams. Spectacular. Even more amazing, we wandered off the trail to the other edge of the ridge and were rewarded with an amazing view of Dolomite Creek tumbling through the gorge, flanked on either side by hoodoos.



Dolomite Creek in the gorge

Carrying on, the trail picked its way across scree slopes and boulder fields at the base of the Cirque Peak/Observation Peak massif. We hopped across several streams at the base of the waterfalls and then followed the trail down one last steep drop to where Dolomite Creek emerges from the gorge and the trail came creekside again. After a short stretch we came upon two random camping spots on the west side of the creek, just before you have to ford to the east.

We camped at the second spot, which was a strip of flat ground between the cliff face to the west and the creek to the east, scattered with boulders. An old campfire ring told us we were not the first to have camped there. It was a wonderful campsite. We had our traditional first night meal of fresh steak and vegetables, which seemed especially delicious this year. Night fell early because the huge cliff face to the west blocked the setting sun. We were very happy to crawl into our tents.

Day 2

The next day dawned perfectly clear again, and warm. When we'd arrived in camp the day before I'd seen a cairn on the other (east) side of the creek and was pretty sure this was the first ford of Dolomite Creek referred to in the Trail Guide. In fact, we had already crossed Dolomite Creek at least twice, above the gorge, but there the creek is young and the crossings are minor—I guess they don't qualify as fords. There are two more "official" fords of Dolomite Creek, one more above and one below Isabella Lake, but the reality is there are no bridged creek crossings anywhere in the valley and there are numerous opportunities to get your boots wet. If you are fastidious about keeping your feet dry, this isn't the trail for you.

The day appeared to get off to an inauspicious start, because after fording the creek we couldn't find the trail on the other side. After searching in vain for a few minutes we thought maybe we had our coordinates wrong and the trail actually carried on down the west side of the creek. So we re-crossed back to the west, only to find no trail beyond our campsite on that side either. Finally, we concluded we must have been right the first time and forded Dolomite Creek for the third time in 10 minutes.

After some more diligent searching we found the trail on the west side of the creek and carried on down valley. Now the trail was in forest for the first time since the way up to Helen Lake, except for scattered openings in the trees, seemingly the result of enormous boulders having been deposited here and there eons ago. In one of these openings was another nice-looking random campsite.

The trail then climbed a ridge and dropped into a small creek valley running parallel to the main valley on the west (our right), which it followed for a ways. It then climbed another ridge and dropped sharply back to the Dolomite Creek valley and the second official ford, where we stopped for our morning break. It was a lovely

spot, with open views up and down the Dolomite valley and a tributary flowing into Dolomite Creek from the west.

After fording Dolomite Creek and the tributary, we followed the trail back into the forest fringe on the east side, where it followed the creek fairly closely. After a short uphill section the trail descended back to the open creek flats, with more wonderful views up and down valley. One more stint in the trees and we emerged into the large flats upstream of Isabella Lake.

Here is where following the trail becomes interesting. The ground is perfectly flat, and you can just see in the distance the north end of Isabella Lake. But what's the best route for getting there? Braided channels of Dolomite Creek criss-cross the flats. The Trail Guide, and various trip reports, all say that if you make your way to the forest fringe on the west side of the flats you will pick up a trail that will keep you out of the stream channels. So we did that and found the trail. But it isn't much of a trail.

As we learned on our way out, the original horse trail just makes a beeline across the flats and the trail in the trees is presumably a hiker's trail. This was the only stretch of trail in the valley where we encountered lots of deadfall, with the trail petering out here and there, requiring frequent short bushwhacks as we searched for the trail again. The distance to the lake is not long but it was a slow walk, so we decided to pop out of the trees, cross the nearest channel and break for lunch on a gravel flat. The views back up the valley were amazing.



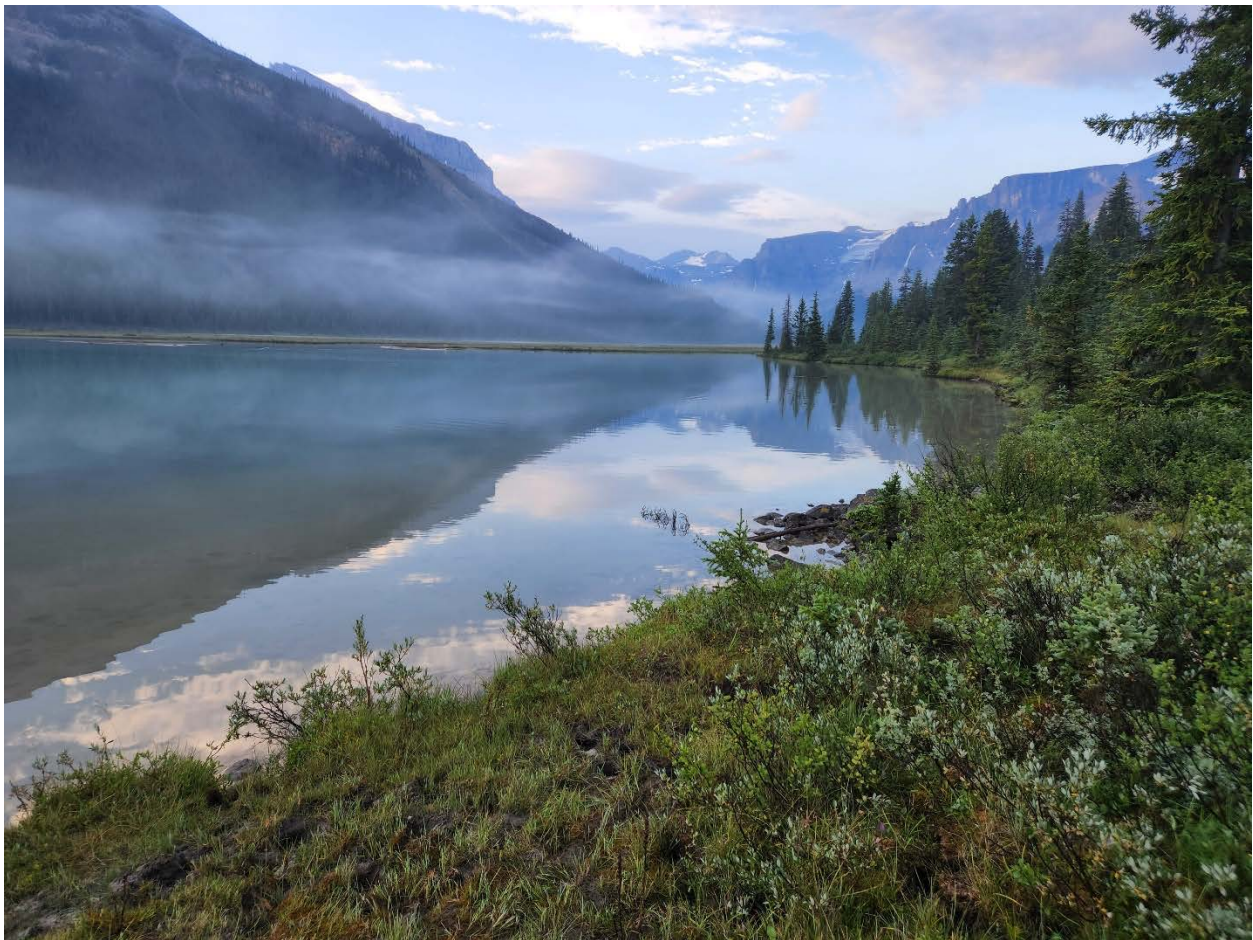
The flats south of Isabella Lake

It didn't take us long after lunch to reach the north end of the lake, where there is an excellent old campsite (complete with an outhouse) adjacent to the Isabella Lake warden cabin. As usual these days, the warden cabin was shut up tight. Thus far, we had three other hikers since entering the Dolomite valley. Now we happened up two more at the campsite, a father and daughter, C and A.

It was obvious that something was not right and we learned that the daughter, A, had hurt her knee earlier that day as they were on their way to the Siffleur valley. They had limped back to the campsite and now they were trying to decide whether she could walk the 22 km out to the highway or they should call in a rescue. Poor A felt terrible but she clearly wasn't able to schlep a full backup for over 20 km, so they called.

After we got our tents up we spent an hour or so sitting with C and A around the fire ring relating many stories of our various misadventures in the backcountry to try to make her feel a little better. I hope we were able to do that. At around 6 pm we watched as the helicopter arrived, landing on a narrow strip of lakeshore in front of the warden cabin. C and A left and we waved them away, as the helicopter lifted into the air and flew off up the valley.

It was a beautiful evening in a beautiful setting. Isabella Lake is fairly large for the mountains, over 1 km long. Fish were rising all evening and ducks paddled on the far side. Two of the hikers we'd seen the day before said they'd seen a bear swimming across the lake!



Isabella Lake looking south up the Dolomite Valley

Day 3

No backpacking today. Greg and Ellie decided to take a rest day in camp while Marco and I opted to day hike to the end of the valley and over into the Siffleur. Past the warden cabin the trail carries on northward along the lake to the junction with the Siffleur River trail and the last ford of Dolomite Creek. The trail was in good shape, with evidence of maintenance having been recently carried out—an unexpected and pleasant surprise. Pleasant walking through relatively open forest.

After about 3 km we reached the junction with the Siffleur trail, which is on the west side of the Dolomite Creek ford. This is definitely the widest ford on the trail, but the water level wasn't high and we had no problem getting across.



Dolomite Creek ford

On the other side of the creek there is a nice random campsite and we had a brief rest before carrying on—on the wrong trail! There was a clearly visible trail heading up the east bank of Dolomite Creek. Thinking it would soon swing away from the creek to climb over the low divide between the Dolomite and Siffleur valleys, we followed this trail. Soon it became increasingly indistinct and it continued to parallel Dolomite Creek. After 10 minutes or so this “trail” basically disappeared and we realized we were not on the correct trail, so we bushwhacked uphill (east) to intersect the trail. After another 15 minutes or so we found the trail. Apart from feeling stupid, we were none the worse for wear and carried on up the trail, which is in excellent shape.

The trail between the two valleys (Dolomite and Siffleur) is lovely forest walking—relatively open so there was lots of light—and we made good time. Soon the trail came within sight of the Siffleur River, which is actually a smaller watercourse than Dolomite Creek. The trail paralleled the west bank of the river for a time before crossing at a ford.

On the east side of the river, the trail travels mostly through meadows filled with willows. As is so often the case, the willows are growing over the trail so the walking was unpleasant much of the time, especially for those of us who insist on wearing shorts instead of pants when we hike. You also have to pay careful attention in places not to lose the trail in the willows. But the views up and down the Siffleur valley are lovely.

We made it as far as the old Siffleur campground—an “official” Parks Canada backcountry campsite that looks as if it receives very little traffic. Adjacent to the PC campsite is an old outfitter’s camp, which is nicer than the hiker’s camp. For those of you who venture to overnight there, the camps are located some distance away from the river and the water source is a small tributary stream flowing from the east—it is just south of the outfitters camp.



View up the Siffleur valley

After lunch at the outfitters camp, we turned around for the walk back to Isabella Lake. Being on the proper trail the whole time, we made good time back to the Dolomite Creek ford and back to the lake. The distance from the lake to the Siffleur campsite was approximately 11 km, so it was a 22 km day. We arrived back in camp in time for cocktail hour and enjoyed a leisurely dinner and evening.

Day 4

We broke camp to head back up the Dolomite valley. Our destination was our first night's camp, so it would be a short day. Heading south from camp, the trail soon emerged onto the flats above Lake Isabella. Remembering how unpleasant the hike in through the forest had been, we gauged the water depth in the first channel

we could see and it looked ankle to boot-top deep. We decided to follow what we assumed was the horse trail across the flats, rather than following the poor hiker's trail through the trees.

What a difference! We made it across the flats in no time. Yes, we crossed numerous channels and our boots were completely soaked but it was much easier and more enjoyable. I highly recommend crossing the flats if the water level permits. There are cairns here and there to guide your way and the trail is sometimes visible, but mostly it's just a straight shot across the flats to a point of forested land.

Back in the forest, it was an easy and pleasant walk to the first (west to east) ford across Dolomite Creek, where we stopped for a morning break. As we got going, we felt our first drops of rain. Apart from a brief but spectacular thunderstorm the second night, so far the trip had been dry (above our knees, that is). But we knew there was rain in the forecast so this wasn't a big surprise. As we made our way along the treed section of trail between the two fords it began to rain steadily. We reached the second ford and our campsite on the other side at around 12:30 pm and threw the tents up as fast as we could while water was boiled for tea. We then hunkered down in our tents to wait out the rain. I had a lovely nap.

The rain stopped at about 3:30 and the skies steadily cleared as the afternoon wore into evening. The only lasting impact of the rain was on Dolomite Creek, which was now running a very turbid and muddy brown, which forced us to pump water. Otherwise, it was a long, enjoyable evening in camp, watching a family of pikas energetically running back and forth along the toe of the cliff slope next to camp.



Dolomite Creek after the rain

Day 5

Our last day proved to be almost a carbon copy of our first, only now we were walking up the valley and out to the highway. It was another bluebird day and we got an early start to get as much of the climbing done as possible before it got too hot. Walking up the valley was even more glorious than walking down; as we ascended the views kept opening up and getting more dramatic.



Dolomite valley above the gorge

It was with some regret that we rounded Cirque Peak and got our first glimpses of Katherine Lake and the ridge above Helen Lake, as we knew that shortly we would be encountering the hordes of day hikers. Sure enough, after the last push up the back side of the ridge, we encountered the first hikers we'd seen since saying goodbye to C and A at Isabella Lake on Day 2.

We had lunch at the top of the ridge and then made our way down past Helen Lake and out to the highway. Below the lake we encountered none other than C, who told us that A was back in Calgary and on the mend. He decided to use the rest of his time off to head back in with his dog to try to complete what he and A had started (the Dolomite-Pipestone-Molar loop). I hope they made it.