

~ Voyage of the Dammed Tour 2021 ~

Now in our 11th year of racking up the backcountry mileage on the odometer, Dan and myself have easily walked the equivalent of Calgary to the West Coast, each of us missing only one year – so for both of us, this year’s trek represents the tenth such trip we have taken. Quite a milestone, to be sure, and when Danno came up with the idea of walking from Lake Minnewanka to Abraham Lake – charting a 200 kilometre-plus course that will take us over 4 mountain passes and following two major Banff rivers – I knew that he was trying to maim me. But, the lure of being able to boast of doing ten of these trips was too tempting, the death wish was too much to overcome – I was 100% in.

It’s getting harder every year to find new remote trails to walk within a 4 hour radius of Calgary and Edmonton, and to be sure, this track consists mostly, of trails that we have travelled before. But! - we’ll be going back through Buffalo country, and I’m totally excited about getting those burly beefy boys framed up in my camera. For me, it will be all new country once the trail leaves the Park and heads over Whiterabbit Pass, near the end. We’ll drop down into motorhead country, but the one thing we can’t seem to get any good information on, is just how ripped up the landscape will be, by ATV’s and the like.

Even though our invite went out to multiple people, in the end, the same Group of Six is heading out again. The thought struck me- both of these lakes are man-made. So, following is our tale – the **Voyage of the Dammed**.

Day 1 - Minnewanka to Cascade Bridge 6 kms

The stinking hot weather that we had a few weeks back is now gone, and Dan, Mark and I approached the trailhead at Lake Minnewanka in an overcast sky that threatened to burst open. This might be one of the weirder starts to our big trip – Marcel, Geoff and Derek have already left, and we’re doing our final preps at 3:00 pm. Such is life, when trying to coordinate half of the guys who live in Edmonton, us in Calgary, and balancing work schedules and life with Covid. I’m at my usual pack weight of around 52 lbs, but surprisingly both Dan and Mark have lightened their loads over their normal 60 + lbs. It starts to sprinkle on us as we walk out to the trailhead – but then stops, and for this first day, all six kilometres of it before we get to Cascade Bridge campground, we stay dry. There is nothing adventurous or sexy to say about this first day, just to get us on the trail and walking – we’ve all hiked it, and a couple of us have skied it. But it’s great to get into camp and meet up with the boys! - they’ve got the fire going, and once we get our tents up and settled in, the evening is spent

chilling out, catching up, and getting a start on the whisky-sipping (in my case) or cracking a beer or two (in the Edmonton boy's cases – carry a couple for a few kilometres and get your fill for the next ten days.) I bought supper from Subway and ate it in the parking lot, another example of a weird start. But now we're officially away from civilization, and by tomorrow, it'll feel more real.



Day 2- Cascade Bridge to Cuthead College camp 20.5 kms

The same dull grey skies that pervaded over our evening campfire, stick around for dawn. Day 2 morning is when you finally get your pack organized- in my case, the food goes down low in the sack, and weather-dependent gear is packed up near the top – and this organization is duplicated, more or less, for the duration of the trip. I'm starting today off in a T-shirt, but expect that my anorak and pack cover will be coming out soon. The Cascade fire road was originally a road that Parks vehicles could take all the way to Scotch Camp, and it's a gravelly, hard trail to walk – your feet get sore.



It's a straight line hike, not very inspiring, and gives occasional views of the Palliser Range, and the alarming amount of dead pine trees. At one point before the cutoff of the trail going to Flints Park, a whole skeleton deer carcass was lying intact on the trail – most unusual, as bones typically get scattered all over the place.



After a dozen or so kilometres of walking today, we stopped for a break at this junction, and resumed our trek heading north on the Cuthead/Wigmore Creek trail – new country for me. After just a few kilometres more, our home for the night appears in a meadow on the right side of the trail – the former site of Cuthead College. And fine timing that it is, too, as

the skies break up and it gets sunny! This is our first of many random camps – this one being an open meadow, with a historic plaque commemorating this field as being first a camp for “conscientious objectors” during WW2, and subsequently re-purposed as a training centre for mountain park wardens. It’s pretty spartan, there’s not a log or large stone anywhere to be found to sit on, so we settle on the ground in the open meadow, and all of a sudden it’s HOT! – I move over to the shade to cook supper.



It’s a pleasant place to be – we’ve got Cuthead Creek tumbling right behind us, if we can only find a decent way down to its edge to fetch water – we finally find the spot. The rest of the eve is spent cooking, relaxing, and bullshitting until the sun disappears, and shortly thereafter the blue sky disappears as well- we’d better get the bear hangs done. Well, the trees around us are not bearhang trees, and some wimpy heights are admitted to, throughout the group. When the rains come just around dusk, Marcel was just heading out to get 20 lbs of food up in the air- we were standing in a wet sponge marshy area and had deadfall everywhere, but with my help, we managed to get it hung. The rains chase us into our tents for the night, and a few hours later, I’m putting on an extra layer in the sleeping bag.





Day 3 – Cuthead College camp to Wigmore warden’s cabin camp 14 kms

Those rains did not last the night, and by morning we are wolfing down coffee and breakfast in the bright sunshine. We probably don’t get out at our usual 9am start, as we know that today isn’t going to be a backbreaker – maybe 13 or 14 kms tops. We jump Cuthead Creek just a kilometre out of camp (but barely!) and slowly work our way steadily up, coming out from tighter vegetation and into more of an open meadow, with lots of dead trees in the forest stands (we couldn’t quite decide if a fire killed the trees or something else.)



The mountains around this area aren’t the same dull grey of the Palliser range, and with the blue sky added, I’m taking a lot of pictures! Something else kinda excites me – there’s buffalo patties on the ground now. They’re here, somewhere. After a few more kilometres of steady up, the trail enters a wider valley that holds Wigmore Lake- at 6500’, it’s a vibrant

darker blue, with grasses and reeds around it – the most scenic setting that we’ve come across so far. We take a break here and enjoy it some more, and then we blaze up the last of the trail for today, to our second random camp- Panther/Wigmore warden’s cabin.



We’re here around 2 pm- a pretty damn leisurely day, and the sun is warm as we set up in the grassy yard of the cabin. Now, let me tell you, camping at warden’s cabins as a random camp, is a rare luxury - first of all, you’ve got a biffy, but this cabin has a deck with wraparound benches! Before you know it, the deck table has stoves all over it, clothes are

out to dry and camping detritus is hanging off everything. We have a choice of two creeks here in which to have a bath. So, with all of us cleaned up and sun-dried, we get supper going – tonight is my first Annie’s pasta meal with tuna, and damn it tastes good. The one thing missing is the fire – we have to be respectful here – we can’t guarantee any warden arriving in the evening, and it would be in bad form, to have a fire going here, without a fire ring. But, the sun stays up later, setting in a dip in the peaks, and we’re putting a good dent in the whisky supply before turning in.



Day 4 – Wigmore Warden’s cabin camp to Scotch Camp 19.5 kms

On our second bluebird morning, we we’re pleasantly surprised to find a bridge over the Panther river – there wasn’t one here when we we last ventured through, to visit the buffalo in their pens. It must have been built to make the warden’s lives easier, when removing the pens, because what was once their enclosure is now back to open slopes. Its hasty-looking construction tells us that this bridge won’t be here either, next time that the river decides to act up.



Once over the river, you’re on your own to try and find the trail – after ascending around 100’ and having a general idea of where you’re going, there it is again. It’s back on that same road again, a two-lane track that begins the long, gradual ascent up to Snow Creek summit.



The same three songs that I've had in my head since the beginning are still there! - first it was King Crimson's Starless, then John Prine's Sam Stone took over with a vengeance, and I think I introduced the Beach Boys' Sloop John B in there for variety. You don't dare share the songs in your head to the others, nobody wants to hear 'em in case they get stuck in their heads, and they'll get revenge by sharing their songs. But, it helps to while away the time, and divert attention to the fact that the buffalo that I would dearly love to see, are nowhere to be found. The hours march by, like the bends in the trail, and when I get to the top, Dan, Geoff and Marcel are waiting for the rest of us, a little jacked up because they just have seen two wolves chasing a deer a couple hundred yards away, with a couple eagles circling overhead as well! Mark had talked about a couple kilometre diversion over to Snowflake Lake, but now that we're at the junction, and still have 10 kms to go, neither of us take the detour. For me, it's this darn hardpack trail, the old truck road, my feet are already sore (but not blistered) so I need to save them for the downhill run into camp. As we tramp on, the afternoon sun is hitting us dead on, and there is very little shade, so we just march on - I am dying to have a break in the shade, but I never come up on the boys on a rest break. Which kind of explains why I took a left turn at a trail junction just a couple kilometres from our random camp for the night - all I can see ahead is cool shade! And hey, this trail was well defined as well. I gave a holler to get an idea where everyone else was, and I got an answer, sort of parallel to me but farther away - they're on the other trail. Well, my feet are in no mood to backtrack to the junction, and I have a pretty good idea that this trail will lead me to the Scotch warden's cabin. And this is indeed correct - it's a most scenic descent down to the Red Deer river flats, and the vast fenced meadow that historically has held the horse stock for Parks Canada over the years. It's almost like an advance base camp for the Ya Ha Tinda ranch, and looking out over the vast eastern slope meadow in front of Mt. White on this gorgeous day is one of the highlights of this trip.



It only takes me a few minutes to get my bearings again- I've been here before - and soon I'm coming into Scotch Camp, where the boys are already setting up their tents. I just love this camp - wide open spaces, great views, and a totally comfortable outfitter's camp- with large fire ring and bearhang tree. And the weather always seems to be good when I arrive.

In fact, good enough for another bath in the Red Deer, another Annie's for supper, (really good, once I fished out the pot lid screw) and this time, a roaring fire to settle next to when the sun goes down and the temperatures drop.



Dan went for a wander right at dusk, and came back excited – boys, I think I can see the buffalo! - so all of us traipsed over to the little promontory that he was on, but alas, his eyes were being tricked by the low light – just bushes in the distance. It's as close as we come this trip, to seeing buffalo.





Day 5 – Scotch Camp to Red Deer River Warden’s cabin camp 16 kms

Last night’s fire highlighted by Geoff’s secret desire to be the wildlife assassin at the airport (“best job ever”) , it’s another serene night and great morning to be off and running up the Red Deer river.



One great thing about hiking this morning- after crossing the steel span bridge, that could accommodate a half-ton truck, we leave the road (that heads toward the Ya Ha Tinda ranch) and get on a trail. It’s a mixture of old and new, going up the Red Deer - old wooden signs nailed to trees, giving distances in miles, and frustrating modern ones, that show (in this instance) distances to trail junctions, without marking that junction when you get there.

We're headed today for either Skeleton Lake, or the best random camp available when we get to 15 kilometres. Dan and Geoff went up this trail earlier in the summer, and the whole area was near flooded, it was a mucky mess. But today it's just a steady uphill day, with a nice little side trip to a noisy waterfall of the Red Deer over a small drop. The valley here is wide, and the trail has those deeply-worn tree blazes, made around 70 or 80 years ago by outfitters on horseback, as this is a pretty historic trail.



We pass the turnoff for Horseshoe Lake, and scramble over fallen trees to avoid fording a creek. But when we get to the turnoff for Skeleton Lake, we realize that it's a horse camp- we'd have to ford the Red Deer to get there, and none of us want to wade a serious river like that - it's on to the Red Deer River warden's cabin, just a couple more kilometres. Dan is hesitant to stay there, because of its spongy condition a couple months before - but it's dry and inviting when we arrive. Clouds have moved in this afternoon, and that rain which we are pretty sure is coming, looks to be on its way - I pick a spot that has some treed shelter, even though a dead leaning tree looks like it could take out my tent if the winds pick up. Upon further perusal- naah, it'd just miss me and scare the crap outta me.



And, sure enough, a little drizzle moves in just around suppertime, but it doesn't last. The river valley here is wide and flat, and the Red Deer meanders at a slow, smooth pace. After

supper it beckons to me, to walk out on its flats, where I sit down on a log and check out a juvenile bald eagle eying me from its perch in a nearby spruce. There's no fire tonight- again, bad form when you're camped at a warden's cabin just after a fire ban is lifted- and around 8 pm, the next round of rain gets us running for our tents. We manage to get our food off the ground, and I'm reading in my tent and listening to tunes by dusk, wondering if this is the point when we start getting wet and freezing. We saw it in the long-range forecast, but I'm still hopeful that it's changed.



Day 6 - Red Deer River warden's cabin to Red Deer Lakes camp 14 kms

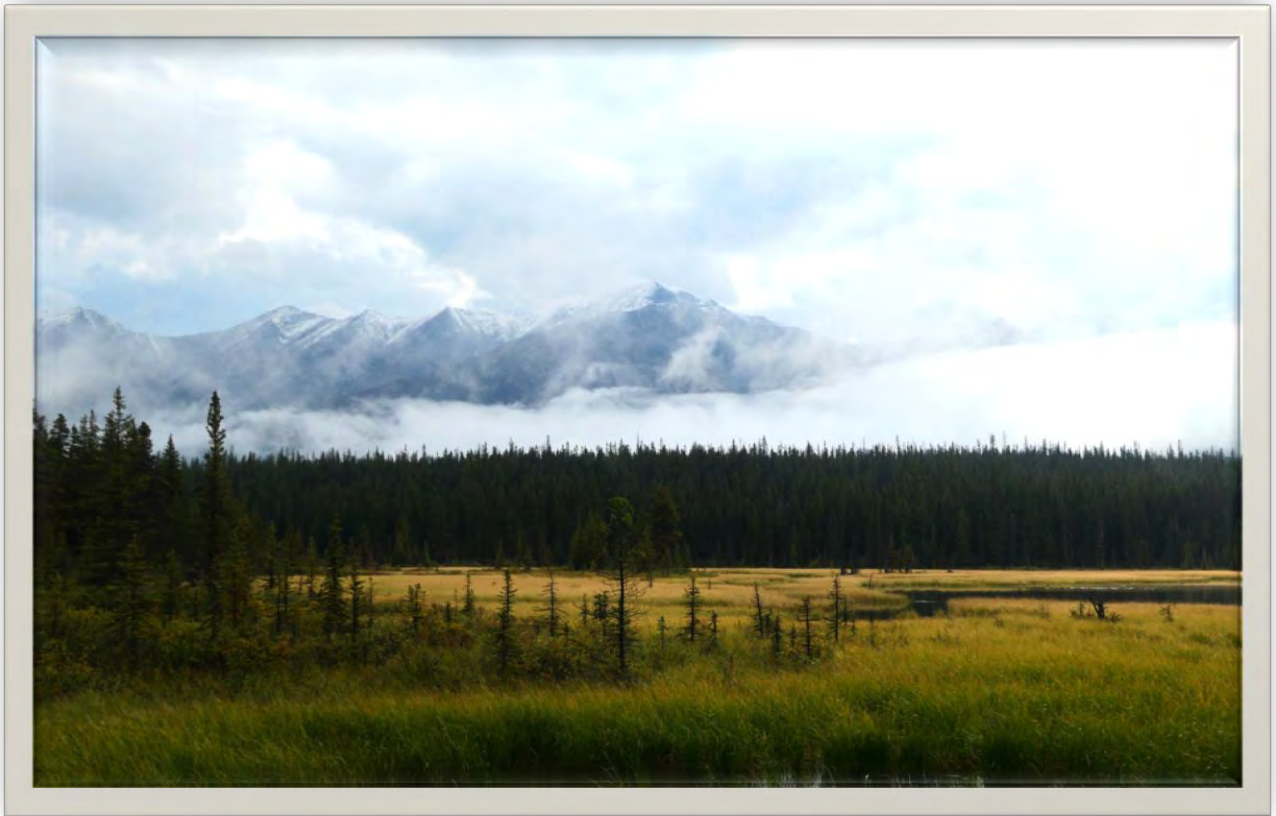
Things are changing. All that sunshine that we've gotten used to, is gone, replaced by a dull, low-hanging gloomy morning – that long-range forecast seems to have come true. Dan was bombing around camp when I stumbled out – Geoff and I commented on why it is that this guy, without any coffee in his system whatsoever, always wakes up and moves around like it's mid-afternoon. ALIENNNN We broke camp at the usual time, setting out for what might be the shortest day yet, around 13 kms, heading for the source of the Red Deer. As of this morning, I've had to resort to taping my feet, not wanting a couple of hotspots on my feet to go postal on me. I brought along an interesting product that I liberated from medical

supplies left over from taking care of my Mom a few years back- it gets a thumbs up for effective stickiness, but like a lot of footcare stuff it doesn't stay in place, and it adheres to the inside of your socks and you can't get it off. We gain around 1200' elevation over the course of today, but what we really notice is the muckiness of the trail- this section has been quite chewed up by horse travel. And horses have been chewing up the trail here for decades.



We pass lots of signs to destinations off the main trail, in miles, not kilometres. Places like Skeleton Lakes, Douglas Lake, the Natural Bridge- but all of them are meant for horse travel, to get to them would mean fording the Red Deer, and that's not in the plan. After a couple of trailside breaks, the Red Deer shrinks in size, and we start traversing through high meadow country- you can start to see the features ahead that will hold the Red Deer Lakes, the end of our walk today.





Finally, the horse gates associated with Cyclone Warden's cabin appear, at about the same time as snowflurries gusting in. We see our first person in 5 days, poking around the cabin, but he doesn't stick around to talk. Minutes later, we get to our campsite – the higher elevation has brought more blowing snow, and everything is wet. There's still a young couple here, just packing up for the trek out through Lake Louise- otherwise this second (and last) official Parks Canada campsite is ours for the night.



A break in the weather allows me to get the tent up without getting wet, but it doesn't last- a wet snow starts falling again. Man, it's a lot colder tonight! The Edmonton boys work hard to get a fire going, there's a lot of fanning the embers and splitting wood to get to the dry

middle, but eventually we bring in enough dry(ish) timber to get the fire roaring, and it stays that way for the rest of the night. The snow is a bit of a shock – but the real shock comes at supper, when Derek drops the bombshell on us that he is going to hike out to the road, via Baker Lake, tomorrow. He’s given us minor hints along the way, that his knee has been giving him some grief, but none of us thought much of it – but it’s not getting better, and he knows that we haven’t even done half of the distance yet. We’re all bummed, but we understand- he’s thinking of us, as much as himself. Serious bodily breakdown on a remote hike would not be fun for any of us. So, we drain more whisky, and talk of the good times on the trip, and make sure that Derek’s prepared for a pretty long day just to get out - around 20 kilometres to the road. Part of that preparation is him giving us the keys to his Subaru, which is parked at the end of the trip, and is our ride back. The valley socks in, and for the rest of the night, we hug that fire and wonder just how white our world will be, in the morning.



Day 7 - Red Deer Lakes camp to Upper Pipestone random camp 20.5 kms

Well, we awake to a white world, but quite honestly we all feel kind of lucky- it is white-ish, not white. Still cold, and the fingers take a beating packing up – especially getting the tent fly down. Pictures are taken, with our Baker Lake-bound brother as he exits our picture, and soon Mark and I get out in front first.



The Red Deer is history now, and for the next few hours it's the Little Pipestone that is our flowing companion. It takes just a couple of minutes to get soaked, thanks to alders and willows on the trail, so walking briskly keeps us from getting really cold. This takes us down to the Pipestone River, and the highest river ford of the trip – I really don't want to get my clothes any wetter than they have to be (my rain pants kept my shorts dry) so I do the crossing stripped down to my ginch. Good thing, too, it was just below crotch level. We took a break here, getting a good lunch in, so that we have food energy for the push up the lower Pipestone valley. We're going about the same distance today as Derek is, but this first leg is mostly downhill- the rest of today will be going up. Now, I'm happy to be heading this way today, as I've never ever hiked the lower Pipestone - and for the first couple of K, it's new and scenic, with views opening up – Mark points out the little-seen glacier that drops down from the NW side of the Drummond icefield.



But then we hit the willows and alders. From this point on, it's a HEINNNN-ous slog for kilometres upon kilometres of not seeing your legs and kicking any detritus underneath on the trail. I'd come around a feature of the valley, hoping and praying that the trail would enter a forest – but nope, it keeps on going out in the open valley, choked with undergrowth. Mark keeps an eye out for me, as the rest of the lads were out in front and out of sight. Our goal for the night is supposed to be a random camp somewhere near, or above, the Fish Lakes campsite- this was a crucial Parks Canada site that Dan couldn't get into, it was booked up. But, as the day has progressed, and the cold weather persists along with a drizzle that has started up, we've shortened our sights to an old historic camp- it's been written that Palliser himself camped there 150 years ago- that shows on the map, to be on the opposite side of the Pipestone – it'll probably need a ford to get to it.



We plod on, and every time it seems like this alderbash will end, it doesn't! - one more meadow to cross. Finally, just when my energy level's light illuminates my dashboard, I hear voices up ahead. It's the boys, and they are milling about the first stand of big old-growth trees that we've come across - it's the historic camp, and good news- it's not on the other side of the river. What's better, the last occupants very thoughtfully left a stack of DRY wood for us. So, after a smoke break, all of us get busy setting up our homes for the night. Y'know, even when conditions are bad, little silver linings appear - the drizzle lets up while I get my tent up. And while Marcel and Dan get the wood chopped, Ge-off produces a masterpiece of a kindling structure – architecturally perfect, and the flames fall down on the centerpiece, making for an instant roaring fire.



Thank God for that dry wood. Soon, the Sock Belt appears on Dan, boots are dangerously close to the blaze with liners out, and we stack enough good wood for the evening. Now, we know that we should be farther along the trail- but weren't sure of any decent camp at the top of the switchbacks, of which we are at the base of. But we all agree, it's hard to pass up a great camp like this one, when it comes your way. We're back to hanging our food again, and our hangs again are of the wimpy variety, even a black bear on crutches could most likely haul away our meal plans for the next few days, but dammit, everything's wet, and it's a healthy forest – no leaners to get your rope over. We have a lovely damp evening around that blaze, until the short September night overtakes us, and my body demands that I rest.

Day 8 - Upper Pipestone random camp – Upper Clearwater random camp 21 kms

Day breaks, and it's cloudy and chilly- September weather for sure. I am packing a bit more day food out handy than I normally would, because I know today's gonna be a long one- we've got two passes to get over today. Pack up the tent fly wet again, and start moving, to get some warmth flowing, and today, this doesn't take long at all, in fact, it's just a few feet to the back side of our camp, and straight up.



We talked about this last night- it just doesn't make any sense to stick to the trail and end up doing not one, but TWO river fords, when we know the trail re-emerges on our side of the Pipestone, less than a kilometre away. So, we go up a steep embankment to gain a bench, and with the help of Dan's GPS, it's a pretty easy and non-eventful schwack over to where we find the trail, and the start of the steep switchbacks up to the Fish Lakes. I drop 'er down to 4 Low, and start in on the chorus to Sam Stone again, and watch the snow thicken on the side of the trail as I go up. It would have been more open and more wet had we continued yesterday, and we would have had a much harder time getting a fire going - hell, there wouldn't have been a fire. Water splashes in the ruts on the trail as I tramp through the last meadow before sighting the upper Fish Lake, and we hit a trail junction for the "Upper trail to Pipestone Pass" that none of us had seen before, but it looked decent, and

that's our destination, so we took it, bypassing the warden's cabin and hitting the switchbacks that take you up to Moose Lake. We took a break at the first meadow that you come to, before the lake, and our grey, leaden skies showed some signs of improvement, although it was still pretty damn chilly. Way in the distance, Pipestone Pass beckons, although it's still a good 8 kms before we arrive.



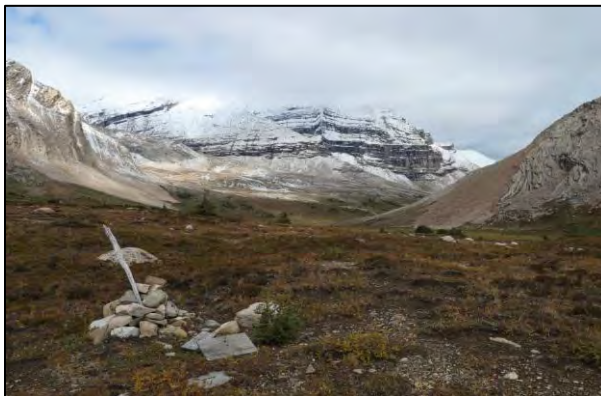
But, there's this cold beauty that assaults my eyes on this stretch - the way that the thin covering of snow blankets the autumn colours of the leaves. Unexpectedly, I find myself taking a lot of pictures on this stretch, dropping to last place and straggling, once Mark passes me.



This is also the stretch where I have seen a grizzly before, and in fact this area of the upper Pipestone is noted for its bear population, but on this day there is none to be seen. Geoff, Marcel and Dan are nowhere to be spotted in this rather vast landscape. I keep in sight of Mark, however, and as time passes and I make a concerted effort to get Sam Stone out of my head, the last steps are made in this treeless, barren landscape to stand on Pipestone Pass, and join the crew on the top. That wonderful feeling of remoteness returns - we can survey down dozens of kilometres on either side of where we are, and no other humans exist.



A good lunch ensues, but it's already early afternoon, and we have a long ways to go yet. So, we take leave of the Pipestone and enter the Siffleur valley - I admire the pattern of the young spruces emerging, dotted randomly on the far side of the valley. We mostly keep our elevation, traversing high on the northeast side of the valley, until we come to the trail junction and start gaining the little altitude needed to top out on Clearwater Pass.



It would be easier to call this a height of land, rather than a mountain pass, but that's what it's marked as on the map, so I don't argue and, after taking the obligatory pictures, keep marching on towards the Devon Lakes. I soon pass the little clump of trees that was our Mt. Willingdon base camp in 2014, and keep going. As I march along in this high treeless gorgeous alpine valley, I see that the clouds are breaking up as well, and blue sky is emerging.

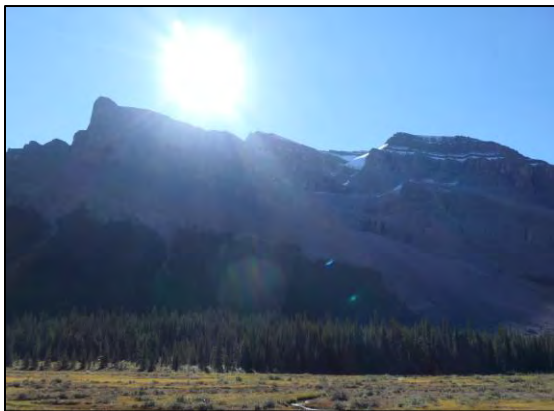


By late afternoon, we take our last break, estimating that we need to go about another 3 kilometres to our next random camp – the one that Dan and I used on our RDCW trip. This last trek is made easier by the fact that we are now going downhill, and soon as I round a corner on the trail – last again- I hear voices, and that's a good sign that camp is just ahead. It's much as I remember it to be, but drier for sure! - we were soaked, when we got here last time. Now the sun is out, and already the camp looks like laundry day, stuff is hanging up everywhere. I soon join the movement. Once again, we're the recipients of good backcountry etiquette by former hikers – there's leftover firewood stacked nicely under the old-growth trees that we have descended to, and lots of deadfall around for a good fire tonight. Which we have!! - it's been a good day. We've made up some ground that we needed to make up, the weather has improved, and we're now in the third major watershed of the day – we started in the Pipestone, we skirted the Siffleur, and now we're about to descend the Clearwater. Life is good tonight.



Day 9 – Upper Clearwater random camp - Indianhead creek random camp 23kms

Blue skies greeted us this morning, and just a little bit of moisture on the tent fly – my biggest concern this morning was finding my food! I stashed it last night back in the woods and it actually took me 5 or 10 minutes to find the spot where I hung it. Today we've got another big day distance-wise, but with any luck it will be good walking with little effort.



The views started to open up for us pretty much right out of camp, and a good trail led us to the Clearwater River warden's cabin, where we stopped for our first break. Last time we

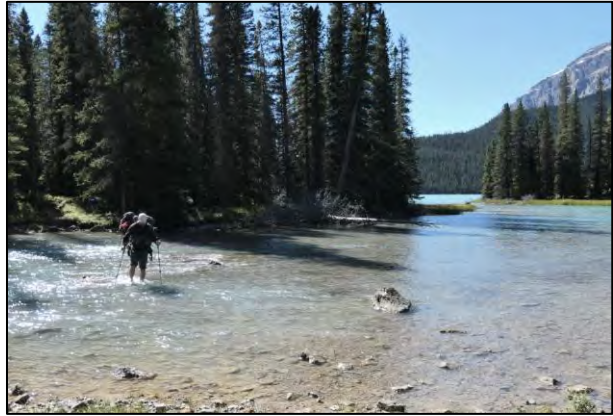
were here, a helicopter landed right out front and workers started in on repairing the horse corral, decimated by the flood, the year before. They were kind enough to let us have a tour of the inside of this old and historic cabin as well. They did a fine job on the corral- now located north of the cabin- and we have a nice long break, admiring the open meadow out front that leads down to Clearwater Lake.



Mount Harris looms large above us, as we continue our march northeast, skirting a couple of the highest peaks in the Eastern Rockies. After another couple of hours, we reach Martin Lake – this was originally scoped out as one possibility for a random camp, and if we had made it here, we wouldn't have been disappointed- there's two great spots to set up camp, and it's scenic as hell.



Man, that sun sure feels good, after a couple of days without it. There's a long ford here of the outlet stream of Martin Lake, which seems higher than the last time we were here, but it feels great on the feet, and we hit the dusty trail again.

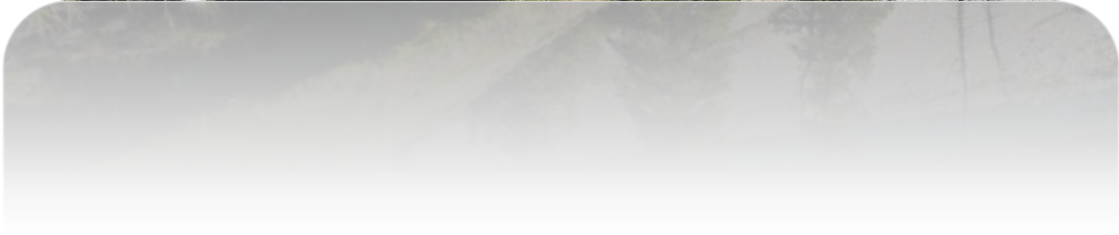


We're stopped in our tracks by the sheer beauty of the scene around Trident Lake.



The day continues, as the trail gains the altitude of a small bench, and we are afforded views of the ever-widening Clearwater valley, with its prairie grasses and wide expanses that the eastern Rockies give us, along with an older forest fire burn off to the east of us. We get to a spot where all the peaks in front of us are more rounded, and it feels like we could walk out of the mountains in a day or two if we kept this up. But it's now getting late in the afternoon, and although we're not going to walk out of the mountains, if we kept going this way, we could walk out of the park today – we're approaching the easternmost boundary of Banff Park. Now, this is the part of the trip that we don't have a lot of info on- and that's the

trail junction that will take us north up Indianhead Creek, to Whiterabbit Pass. But we have one big trouble- there's no trail junction where the GPS says the trail junction should be. On we march.



Finally, we take a much-needed break, because it's starting to feel like we are lost. With most of us bagged, Dan volunteers to keep going down the trail to scope it out, and after a half hour or so, returns – he's found the trail! – not marked properly on the map. We can see there's a spot up this trail where it looks like a good spot for a random camp- looks flat, and has water nearby. It's getting close to 5 pm, too, and as much as getting farther along the trail would make the next day shorter, Mark is pretty adamant that we should call it a day here- we're still down in the valley, but with a flat meadow guaranteed, and a creek too. We finally agree to this - and hindsight being 20/20, Mark calls it right- our home for the night is a wide open meadow, on the edge of forest protection, and with Indianhead Creek in the sunshine right in front of us, inviting us to come in and get undressed and clean up. Challenge taken! Although we're in one of the remotest parts of the park, and haven't seen anyone in days, there's been helicopters landing and taking off just a hundred yards or so away, at the Indianhead warden's cabin, so we leave it alone, not really wanting to attract park staff attention. There's no fire tonight, because of this, so we just watch the sun set behind us on this warm eve, and brew some tea, (my whisky's gettin' low) while this tired body of mine rests up for the next long day tomorrow.

Day 10 - Indianhead Creek random camp - Whiterabbit Valley random camp 24.5 kms

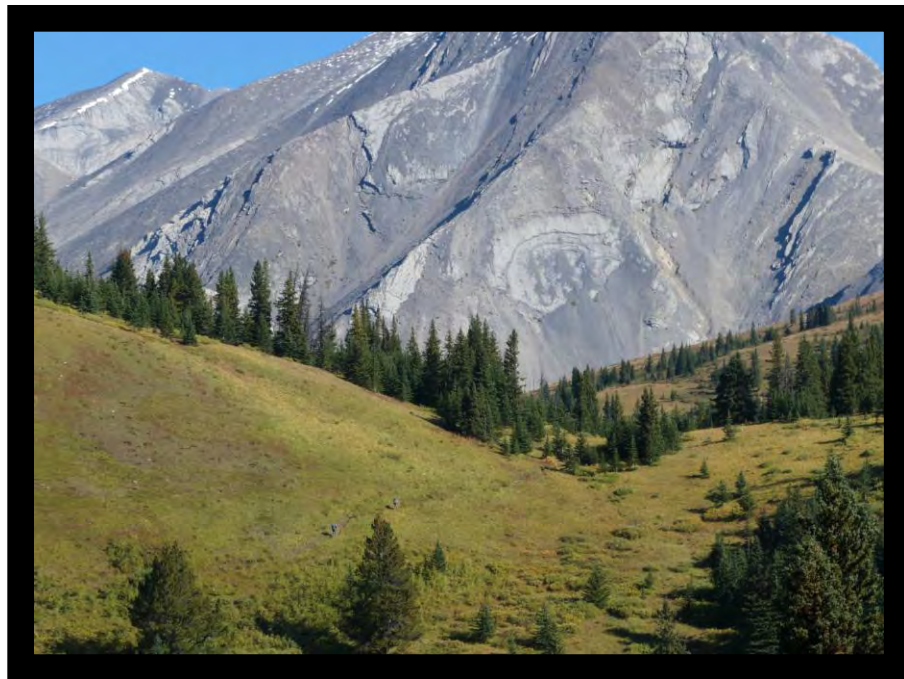
I got a good night's sleep, on a warmer-than-normal night, and awake this morn to a spectacular sunrise with a sliver of a new moon- we get a clear, low view of the east and I'm up early, knowing that it's gonna be a long day.



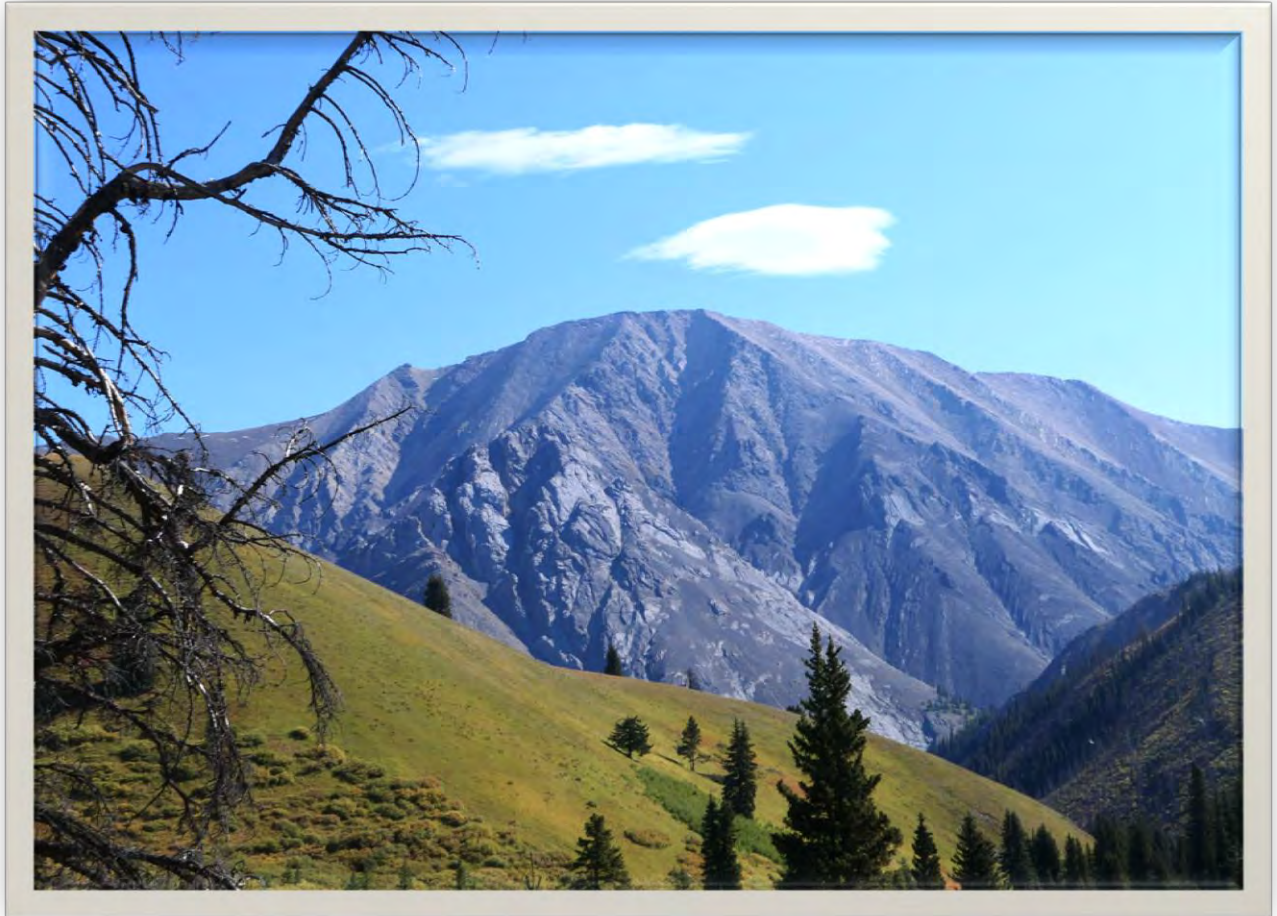
The good news is, I'm feeling strong- bring on another 25 km day. We start out by backtracking a couple of kms to the trail junction for Whiterabbit Pass, and start heading up it. It stays in the Clearwater valley for just a couple of kilometres, then strikes out due north out of the prairie grasses and into an older forest burn. New growth trees are slightly taller than myself, as we clamber over deadfall and out of the thicker forest and into- you guessed it- alders and willows.



A bit of the bane of our existence for sure, but the dead trees thin out and we start to gain a ridge, giving us blue-sky views of Indian Lookout and Wampum Peak- it's one thing to struggle through more undergrowth but at least the scenery lets you forget how much work the walking is.



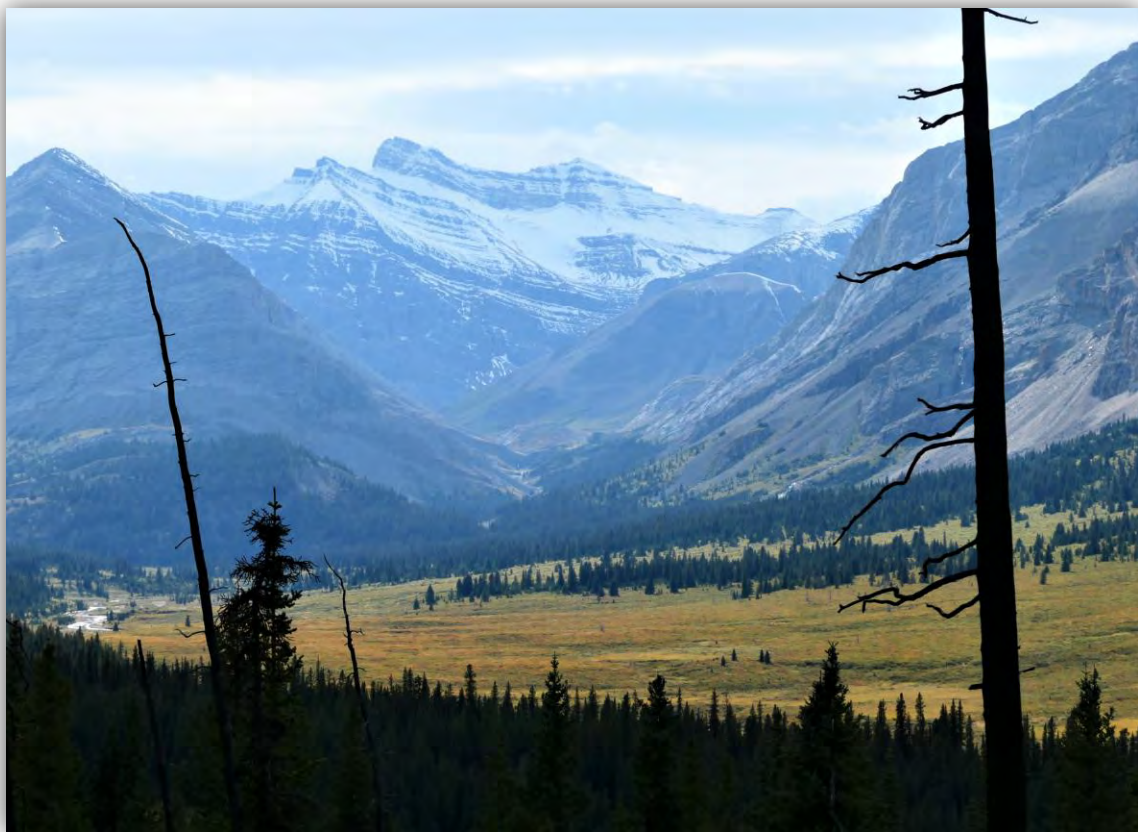
At one point, Geoff and Marcel lost the trail and wanted to know if I was on it! This is new country for all of us, and that spirit of adventure is grabbing us all. We skirt an unnamed peak to the west of us, through a narrow draw in the valley, and then hit yet another long valley of alders and willows, so we push through these to the height of land that we can see off in the distance.



The pass isn't so much spectacular as it is wild and remote, and we are about to leave the National Park here, dropping down into the unknown territory of the Ram river. By 2:00 we are standing by the boundary marker, having pushed about halfway (but the uphill part) to our goal today.



Interestingly, the alder and willow growth is much lower, and the trail easier, on the north side of this pass, and we make good time on the descent down what becomes the upper Ram river valley.



After a quick few kilometres, we ford it, and soon after, come across two cabins – one we expected to find, and one we didn't. The first one is one that is maintained, and has Trapline 543 emblazoned on it - the second one is a historical trapper's cabin that I marvel has not been burned down yet, and it's solid but in rough shape- open to the elements. It's around these cabins that we can see some ATV tracks, but they're not well defined, and it's eerily quiet around here- we were certain that we'd run into multiple parties of motorheads by now, especially as it's now the Labour Day weekend.



We waste a few minutes getting turned around here, but soon get on the correct trail again, and keep moving- it's getting late in the day again, but the farther we go today, then the better the possibility that we can get out tomorrow, on another very long day. We leave the Ram river valley and head northwest down an unnamed valley that will eventually connect to the Whiterabbit river.



It shows that it has a stream running through it, but in September it doesn't, so we keep stumbling along- thank God it's downhill, as my get-up-and-go has got-up-and-gone. I am out in front, wanting more to keep moving, for fear of losing my mojo, and keeping those feet going. Finally, Dan overtakes me and shortly after he does, we come across – really nothing more than a sloped clearing devoid of willows, and a small creek - and make it our camp. It's by far the most spartan, and uncomfortable, of all of our random camps, but hey, they can't all be keepers. We make it work, and while a breeze kicks up – but good stable weather still in place- supper is made, whisky runs out, the Drum cigs are rolled thinner, and good-natured banter arises again, and a certain undercurrent of excitement is palpable, knowing that we intend on doing the last 30 kms or so and get out tomorrow.

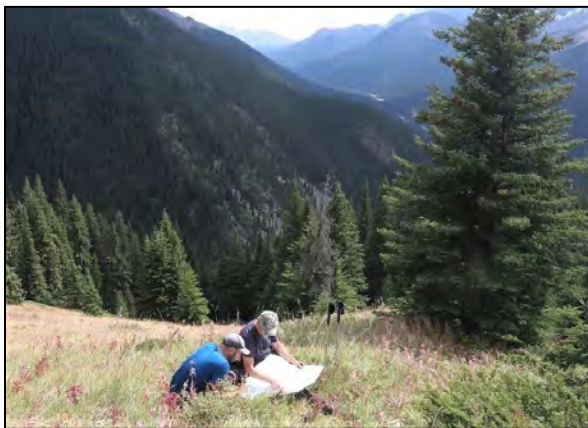


Day 11 - Whiterabbit valley random camp - North Saskatchewan/Abraham Lake trailhead 33.5 kms

Even at the most uncomfortable spots of random camping, I manage to emerge well-rested- I give a lot of credit to my Thermarest here, and very glad for this, as this is gonna be a long day. I didn't buy the topo map for this last portion of the trip, so I'm also not 100% sure where I'm going! We get away from camp around 8:30 today, and continue this descent along an unnamed creek originating from the peaks to the west of us.



Initially, the going is good, on well-defined horse trail, but that ends when it meets Whiterabbit creek, and we are greeted with the same trail destruction that we have encountered many, many times from the 2013 flood- the trail followed the creek, but the creekbed becomes this mess of gravel washout and destroyed trees. For a while, our eagle eyes spot flagging tape dangling off bushes in the distance- the only signs of where the trail goes. For hardcore hikers like us, it's heartbreaking how much damage this flood did to the trail system. But, we cobble it together, and for the next couple of hours, progress is made. Then, we get to a recent flag (it's bright orange still, not faded by UV light) that shows the trail ascending- it's looking like we have to ascend this ridge blocking our way to the east of the creek. This trail doesn't mess around- it's going seriously up, and Mark and I are together, taking it in stride. But, after a half hour of this, something doesn't seem right- this is like climbing a peak! - what self-respecting trail on its way to Abraham Lake would do that? I'm vaguely annoyed at not having Dan, Marcel and Geoff within shouting range as well- are they even up here? This unsettled feeling lasts a bit longer, when we are at least comforted by the fact that the Edmonton boys are indeed up ahead, allaying our fears that Mark and I are alone up here - we've gotten to treeline, and this trail just DIES. Ends. Goes to the top of this high ridge, but despite our searching around up here for any signs of it descending down the other side, it evaporates. What is particularly frustrating for us, is that someone before us valued this trail enough to bring along a chainsaw and clear fallen timber off it. Perplexed, we study the GPS, and maps, but conclude that we must have missed the trail along the creek.



So, down we go- on a scheduled big day, this was the last thing that we needed to do, waste around 1800 vertical feet going up and down to nowhere. Once back at the creek, we're called on Strike Two - there is no trail here that we missed. Well, we really only have one recourse to us, and that is to follow the creek - but it looks like it has to go through a small tight gully with steep banks. So, we do what we have done only once before, in all of our multi-day treks - we put on our crocs and start meandering down the river bank, staying on the stony banks when we can, and wading in the creek when we can't.



After probably a half hour of this, sensible heads in our collective say that this is ridiculous, we need to start ascending the right-hand bank to look for the trail, as that is where the GPS puts the trail. So, the boots come back on. It's hard to properly describe our frustrations at

this point, because we all know that the prospect of another night out looms large – we are most probably 15 kms from the road still, without a trail. And, there’s a nightmarish amount of deadfall to negotiate on a very steep right-hand hillside.

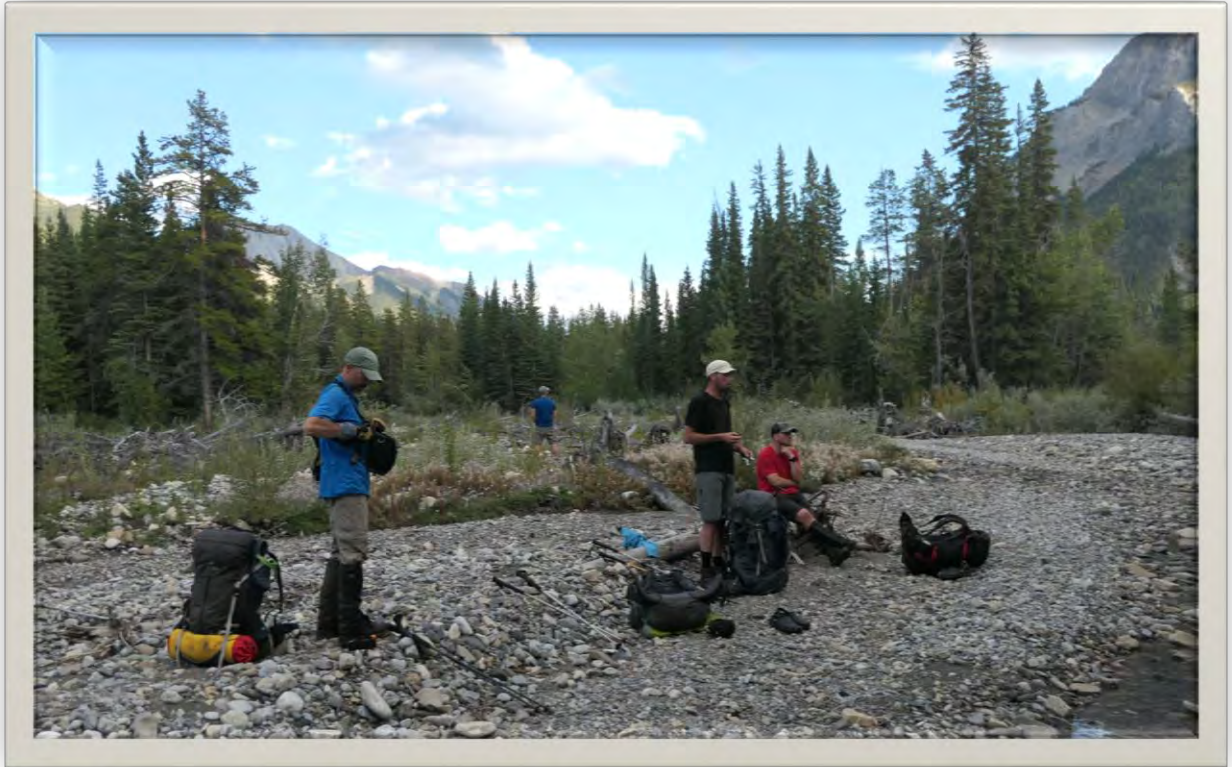


But, amazingly, there is still humour in our banter! – black humour to be sure, but tempers stay in check as the sound of dead dry wood snapping underfoot echoes in our ears. Blood flows. The odd swear word is uttered. Many pauses ensue, to check the GPS – it says that the trail should be about 60 vertical feet above us. Dissenting voices- certainly my own- want to go back down to the creek, where at least I’m not getting stabbed by vicious dead spruce trees every second minute. But we persevere, and angle steadily up- until finally, I hear Dan musing about finding a chainsawed log up there! could it be? a minute or two later, and the definitive words “found the trail!!” reach me, and spirits lift to the heavens! It’s a pretty decommissioned trail to be sure, and lots of fallen timber abound on it, but it’s visible and it’s going in the right direction. After about another hour or so, we emerge onto a more travelled trail, and it signifies that we have gotten to the trail system that is accessible from the Abraham Lake/North Saskatchewan trail head.

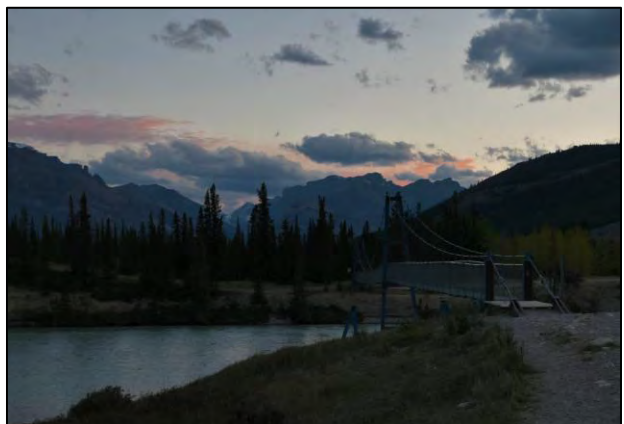
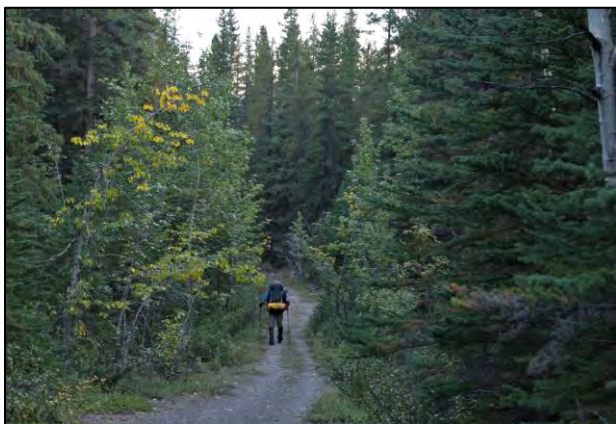


After an ordeal like that, it’s official- we’re a freakin’ happy group of guys. Well, if “happy” is not quite the word, then patient, determined and optimistic are. I think you can also add the word “fatigued” in there too- it’s now around suppertime, and we still have probably

twelve kms still to go. So, the march continues, but the trail gets better – at about the halfway mark, we've got one last ford to make of the Whiterabbit, and in some ways it's a blessing in disguise- cold water on my feet revives them.



As the sun sets, this last slog to the finish line gets exhausting for me. Aspen trees replace the spruce and pine, and we've gotten to the flat river plain of the North Saskatchewan- we've reached the 200 kilometre mark of this march.



Because we start to intersect multiple trails, we stay a little closer together now, making sure that no one gets lost, so close to the finish line. I'm dead last, stumbling along, making

sure that Mark is at least in sight. Finally, at dusk, we cross the Siffleur River, close to its confluence with the North Sask. We overtake a party of eight walkers, of Asian origin, and they question me as I overtake them- “did you really start at Lake Minnewanka?!” and I verbally say “yes”, and then, as I finally cross the large suspension bridge over the North Saskatchewan, and into the parking lot, where the boys are waiting for me – I think to myself, somewhat in amazement, “yes, I started at Lake Minnewanka.”



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