

Jasper by starlight



Up the road from the bustle of Banff lies its quiet, often unnoticed cousin, Jasper National Park, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year

BY LINDA GOYETTE PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE GRANDMAISON

Not a single ripple creases the surface of a pond west of Jasper Lake, illuminated at sunrise by the reflection of Chetamon, Esplanade and Gargoyle mountains.



The first hunters to venture into this territory were following deer, elk and caribou. Archaeologists have identified almost 1,000 ancient camping sites in the mountain parks, some 11,000 years old.

The Continental Divide marks the western boundary of Jasper National Park (MAP) and separates rivers flowing west to the Pacific from those flowing north to the Arctic and east to Hudson Bay. The delicate calypso orchid (BELOW) thrives in the park's northern environment. Talbot Lake (LEFT) is bordered by the Miette Range.



ONE NIGHT LAST SUMMER, I left my tent after midnight to look up at stars I had not seen before, so clear and so close, and they sent down a question. Where have you been?

When you live in northern Alberta, Jasper National Park is a place you take for granted. On my first visit at 13, slouched in the back seat of the family car with my nose in a book, I muttered the words that defined the snootiness of adolescence to my dismayed parents: "When you've seen one mountain, you've seen them all." At 23, I returned to camp at Snaring River on summer nights and to cross-country ski at Maligne Lake under a soft snowfall. I discovered a place that had much to teach me.

One trip to Jasper tumbled into another, punctuating my life and deepening my attachment to the place. I came to the banks of the Athabasca River to celebrate on the day I learned I was pregnant with my first child. Soon, I was tucking babies and

toddlers into my sleeping bag to keep them warm on nights at Wabasso or walking with the same children on twisting trails to find the eight waterfalls along Beauty Creek or the wildflowers in the Valley of Five Lakes. In the flash of a dragonfly, they grew up to pack their snowboards or tattered tents into borrowed cars for independent adventures in the park.

At times, I have brought my middle-aged troubles to these mountains, as older people do, looking to the peaks for peace and comfort. The park will celebrate its first century in September. I have been lucky to know it, in glimpses, for 38 of those years. Returning to my tent on the night of stars last July, I realized with astonishment that it had been five years since my last visit to this Canadian treasure on my doorstep. I decided to explore Jasper with my husband Allan for a week as if I had never seen it before.

THE CALYPSO ORCHID, the most beautiful flower in the Rockies, survives in Jasper's dark forests by playing a trick on the golden northern bumblebee. Young bumblebees can't resist its shape, colours and fragrance and pick up sticky pouches of pollen while searching in vain for nectar that doesn't exist. The bees pollinate the next orchid by accident in a similar search, and so a lovely purple bloom thrives in a northern environment.

"Everything in the natural world is smarter than we think it is," explains geologist and naturalist Ben Gadd as he shows us a photograph of the bee in its tango with the flower.

This is the first Friday evening in my quest to deepen my appreciation of the park. We have joined 10 explorers for a weekend course at the Jasper Institute, a non-profit wilderness education program run by the Friends of Jasper National Park. Gadd is an easygoing man of 60 and author of the indispensable



Bighorn sheep (OPPOSITE) are nimble slope dwellers, their near-vertical habitats providing protection from wolves and other predators. Whirlpool Peak and Fryatt Mountain tower over Leach Lake (BELOW). The icy waters of Horseshoe Lake (LEFT) lie just off the Icefields Parkway, which links Jasper and Banff national parks.

The park is not only huge, high and rugged but also as fragile as the calliope hummingbird and the emerald dragonfly.

The next day, we head up to Moose Lake to find a gentle trail through dense, subalpine forest. After a morning of exploring, we emerge from the woods to lunch beside Maligne Lake and discuss our discoveries. Later, Gadd recounts the story of Mary Schäffer, the Philadelphia Quaker who found her way here in 1908 with the help of a rough map she had received from Samson Beaver, a Nakoda acquaintance. Gadd points to the mountain peaks named for Beaver and his wife Leah. He tells us about Schäffer's unlikely love affair with a much younger mountain guide named Billy Warren. They married and lived happily in Banff for the rest of their lives.

The day ends with another unforgettable story. Gadd recalls a group of Japanese students who wanted to see beavers in their natural habitat. He led them to a slough where a family of



Handbook of the Canadian Rockies and six other books. He has lived in Jasper for 26 years, hiking, climbing, skiing and exploring the hidden corners of the backcountry on foot. If I want to find the Jasper National Park outside my old comfort zone — beyond the easy, familiar trails and campgrounds, past the elk, mountain goats and squirrels and an occasional bear at the side of the highway — I know Gadd can guide the way.

He teaches us to look down, as well as up. The trick in Jasper is to remember that the park is not only huge, high and rugged — like the commanding Mount Columbia, its tallest peak; or the grizzly bear, elk and moose, its largest mammals — but also as fragile and delicate as the calliope hummingbird, the pixie cup lichen, the sweet wild strawberry and the emerald dragonfly. The Rockies are home to 277 species of birds, 1,300 species of plants, 20,000 species of insects and spiders, 15 species of amphibians and reptiles and 69 species of mammals. On the rocks near Medicine Lake, I learn to be as curious about the pika — a squeaking mammal the size of a guinea pig — as I am about the huge black bear scooping buffalo berries with a furry fist near Maligne Canyon.

The next morning, Gadd meets us just north of the town of Jasper on Pyramid Island, a small islet “loved to death” by townspeople and tourists early in the century, then carefully restored in 1998 by hundreds of volunteers who planted native trees, shrubs and wildflowers. Here, we wander with a purpose, searching for the unfamiliar and taking our dumbest questions to a patient naturalist. What is a witches' broom? How do you tell a raven from a big crow? Is this a cranberry? We listen to a family of loons, watch circling ravens and share binoculars to find the yellow-rumped warblers that Ed and Tom, two Americans, insist on calling “butter butts.” I fill my notebook with question marks about unknown plants and tiny creatures on Jasper's soft floor. “Now think about what each plant and animal might be doing in a different season of the year,” prompts Gadd. Twelve new friends sit together around a picnic table, eating summer cherries and contemplating nature's mysteries.



I watch an eagle soaring above the riverbank and imagine the voyageurs who canoed on this river, over the same rocks, so long ago.



A rainbow trout glides through the crystal waters of Maligne River (LEFT). The feathery purple bloom of the shooting star (BELOW) unfolds in late May.



beavers obligingly showed off its talents with tail-slapping enthusiasm. Cameras clicked amid Japanese exclamations of delight. At dusk, the visitors suddenly stopped taking pictures and asked to be led back to their van. Clearly nervous about the approaching nightfall, the city dwellers hurried along the path until they were bumping into one another. The moon was full. Owls shrieked. Bats swooped. Gadd gently suggested a way they could banish their fear in a few minutes. He led them to a clearing in the dark woods and encouraged them to lie down on their backs in a circle on the soft earth, with their feet together at the center. “Just look up,” he said. Together, in silence, they gazed at stars in the black night.

“This is the finest night of my life,” the Japanese interpreter whispered to Gadd as he gripped both hands and said goodbye an hour later. The strangers conquered their fear of night in a Canadian forest. I will too.

JASPER IS A GOOD PLACE to wrestle with fears and overcome them. I had always been too frightened of rapids to try white-water rafting on the tumbling Athabasca River. If you’re so eager for new experiences, I tell myself a little wryly, this seems like the perfect week to drown.

The preparations are comical. Allan and I join a French-speaking Swiss family, two British families and a Pakistani family from the United Arab Emirates in a dungeon below a street in downtown Jasper. Our guides provide wetsuits, river slippers and life jackets and point to two changing rooms.

PARKLAND

A raven rests on an icy perch. Tangle Falls spills down limestone steps (BELOW RIGHT). The Athabasca River (BELOW) flows out of the Columbia Icefield.



Six women struggle to pull wet and slender wetsuits over dry and voluminous hips. We help one another yank them up — tug, tug, tug — and can't breathe for laughing. Then we waddle to the van like damp mother ducks. Smirking husbands of any nationality risk a whack with a paddle.

We slide the raft into the river just below Athabasca Falls. "In the unlikely event that you fall out of the raft, keep your feet up so they're not caught in the rocks," our guide tells us. Two blue Canadian eyes meet two brown Pakistani eyes in shared alarm.

OK, here goes! Over the rocks and into the splashing water we sail as I try unsuccessfully to swallow screeches. "I like new experiences!" exclaims Queenie, one of the women from England, before my paddle slips out of my hand and clunks her on the head. With a grin, she keeps paddling. The speed, the icy splashing, the Athabasca itself are exhilarating. The largest river system and one of the most powerful rivers in the park, it was an essential highway across the West in Canada's fur-trade era. I watch an eagle soaring above the riverbank, and imagine the voyageurs who canoed on this river, over the same rocks, centuries ago. Did they watch an ancestor of this eagle with the same pleasure?

Like the Athabasca, the park's other rivers, countless tributaries and babbling creeks flow from mountain glaciers. We had already hiked up to the Angel Glacier at Mount Edith Cavell to look for a snow cave earlier in the week. We decide to drive south to the Columbia Icefield on the park's southern boundary the next day.

I hadn't climbed the steep path to the Athabasca Glacier since the early 1980s. Thousands of visitors hike up its toe every year to touch the melting coolness, and marvel at a chunk of ice that can deliver fresh water across forest, plains and tundra to three oceans. Western Canadians take a personal interest in

these glaciers, as we depend on them for our drinking water and our agricultural abundance. But the most-visited glacier on the continent has been shrinking for 125 years. As I walk up the path, I pass the familiar markers of its icy reach in different decades. Here is the year my parents were married. Here is the year I graduated from university. Children run back and forth, higher up, to find new signs marking their birth years. "Here is me — 1996!" "Here is me — 1998!" The accelerating pace of the glacier's retreat startles me.

This climb feels like a new kind of pilgrimage. I stop to read signs from Parks Canada describing scientific evidence that links glacier melting to climate change and greenhouse-gas emissions. The signs urge a change in our response to our environment; one suggests the Athabasca Glacier could disappear altogether within three generations. Adults murmur around me. Some fears are more difficult to overcome than an afternoon on a swirling, whirling river.

SEARCHING IS A HABIT in these mountains. The first hunters to venture into this territory were following deer, elk and caribou. Archaeologists have identified more than 950 ancient camping sites in the mountain parks, some 11,000 years old. In recent centuries, the Kootenay, Nakoda (formerly known as the Assiniboine or Stoney), Pikani and Cree travelled in these mountains. They led Metis, eastern Iroquois, French-Canadian, English and Scottish voyageurs deep into the valleys in the early 1800s, always looking for something.

On our last afternoon in Jasper, I want to walk on an old, important path. We follow the jade-coloured Whirlpool River to



Historic and luxurious Jasper Park Lodge curves along the shore of Beauvert Lake (at bottom) and is separated from the town of Jasper (at right) by the channels of the Athabasca River's silt-laden waters.

RUSS HEINL/ALL CANADA PHOTOS

Moab Lake, where backcountry hikers can continue to walk for 51 kilometres on a trail that shaped Canadian history.

David Thompson, the brilliant explorer who mapped Western Canada, was searching for a new trade route across the Rockies to the Pacific in 1810. An Iroquois guide, a man the map-maker called Thomas, led the party of 23 men and 3 women toward the mountains. When they reached the Athabasca River, they stopped for four weeks to build dogsleds, make snowshoes and prepare supplies for the arduous climb. On Dec. 29, with the temperature at -32°C , 12 men with eight dogsleds and four pack horses began their ascent through deep snow and dense forest. Eventually, forced to abandon their horses and most of their supplies, the travellers were soon weary, hungry, frozen and frightened. They followed Whirlpool River and struggled over Mount Athabasca — and the great divide of a continent — on Jan. 11, 1811.

“When night came, they admired the brilliancy of the stars,” Thompson wrote in his journal. “As one of them said, he thought he could almost touch them with his hands.”

Stars in the night sky over the northern Rockies should inspire loyalty for a lifetime, but people can be forgetful. Why had I stayed away so long? My return to the park reminded me of our obligation to defend this beautiful territory. A protected wilderness can teach us everything we have forgotten. The stars, the trails, the search, the discovery — these are Jasper’s revelations.

Linda Goyette is a writer based in Edmonton. Mike Grandmaison is a photographer based in Winnipeg. His new book, The Canadian Rockies, was released by Key Porter in April.



To comment, please e-mail editor@canadiangeographic.ca. Visit www.canadiangeographic.ca/travel/summer07.

PARK PROFILE

- Jasper National Park sprawls across almost 11,000 square kilometres, making it the biggest of Canada’s Rocky Mountain parks. It was created by the federal government in 1907 as a forest reserve for the “preservation of forest trees on the crests and slopes of the Rocky Mountains and for the proper maintenance throughout the year of the volume of water in the rivers and streams that have their source in the mountains and traverse the province of Alberta.”
- Three years later, Ottawa removed about 100 descendants of Iroquois-Metis voyageur families from the new forest reserve. Descendants of those families still live in nearby communities.
- The town of Jasper has a population of 4,600 and operates under a special agreement with the federal Department of

- Canadian Heritage that gives it authority over all municipal matters with the exception of land-use planning and environmental issues.
- The place name, Jasper, comes from fur trader Jasper Hawes, who ran a small post for the North West Company at Brulé Lake after 1813. The last Hudson’s Bay Company post at Jasper closed in 1884.
- Logging and mining were permitted in the park in the early 1900s. The town of Jasper also became an important railway hub and was home to as many as 600 CN workers and their families by the 1920s.
- Unemployed men in relief camps started construction of the first permanent road between Banff and Jasper in 1931. In 1940, the Banff to Jasper Highway finally opened; 450 men had worked on the project for nine years.

- Roughly four hours by car from either Edmonton or Calgary, Jasper attracts about 1.9 million visitors a year while Banff welcomes roughly 3 million tourists a year.
- The 1,200 kilometres of trails outside the town of Jasper and across the park’s backcountry beckon those seeking a wilderness experience. Jasper is the most northern national park in the UNESCO Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site.

For more information on the park and its 100th anniversary celebrations:

- Parks Canada/Jasper National Park: www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/jasper
- Friends of Jasper National Park: www.friendsofjasper.com
- Jasper Tourism & Commerce: www.jaspercanadianrockies.com