

Canadian Rockies 2008 ~ Bryant Creek Camp

~ A Week With The Skyline Hikers ~

*In mid July 2008, **Bruce Brenot** spent six days with the Skyline Hikers in the Assiniboine Pass area of the Canadian Rockies. Since 1933 the **Skyline Hikers** have offered a summer hiking experience in the Rockies from a different base camp each year. Here is an account of his experience and impressions.*

Saturday July 12: From the Calgary International Airport I took the Banff Airporter (\$100.00 round trip), which took me right to the door of my B&B, *The Wits End*. It is well located, a five minute walk to the 'Y'. Their rate is \$120.00, which is \$5.00 more than the Y, but includes breakfast.

Sunday July 13: My adventure starts with dropping off my duffel bag at the Banff 'Y' in the morning. I find the atmosphere is exciting and friendly. I'm one of eleven new faces in a camp of 41. After they check me in, I asked about a few things; especially if booze in the camp was really welcome. I was assured happy hour was alive and well. So I added a bottle of scotch to my last minute shopping list.

On my way to dinner I met a familiar face from the morning and so we dined together. Walter is a long-time Skyline Hiker, and so we traded hiking stories. Later in the evening we attended an orientation session at the 'Y' where we learn about the camp, the hikes, procedures, and we meet the other hikers. Before the meeting starts, Jim Kelly, the Chief Leader, invites me to be a hike leader. Walter suggested me because he knew the camp was short of leaders.

Heading to Base Camp

Monday , Day 1, 18 km: It's an 20 minute walk to the train station carrying my day pack only to where our bus is waiting to take us to the trail head. Once there, we are divided into groups of ten. Banff National Park has minimum and maximum limits for hiking groups. The groups are not allowed to be smaller than six, because grizzlies have never previously attacked a group of six or more. Good info to have! We hiked 18 km up a long valley surrounded by mountains. On the way, the purple 'calypso orchid or fairy's slipper' were worth stopping for as it is the most beautiful of the Rocky Mountain orchids.

The Camp

It's like walking back in time! Our outfitters are the Brewster's; a well know name in the Rockies for early outfitting and guiding. A picturesque train of 14 pack horses, with their wild looking riders, bring in our duffel bags. Each horse can carry 200 lbs or five duffel bags. The duffel bags sit on pack saddle constructed of wood with an "X" frame at each end; sling ropes secure the duffel bags to the saddle. A large piece of heavy canvass then covers the entire load. When everything is in its proper place, an intricate series of loops and twists, referred to as a 'diamond hitch', secures the entire load to the saddle and the horse.

Daily Camp Routine	
Wake-up bell	0700 hrs
Hot coffee	0715
Morning hot water	0700-0730
Breakfast	0730
Lunch pickup	0800
Hike departures	0830 - 0900
Afternoon hot water	1615-1700
Hot tea	1615-1745
Dinner	1800
Donut	2000
Cocoa and cookies	2100
Lights out/ Quiet time	2200

These horses are referred to as rejects; horses with attitude who are too spirited to be used as riding horses on dude ranches. The horse corral and tack tent, surrounded by an electric fence, is adjacent to our camp.

The camp is also enclosed by a high voltage electric fence and contains enough canvass tents to sleep 50 hikers. The tents are large, offering enough room for three singles or two couples and all their gear. The tent floor is mostly grass, but may include a rodent hole or tree. The tents are support by a ridge pole and cross supports taken from the forest just as it was done a 100 years ago. Each tent also has a small wood heater for those really cool nights. The nights were cool and damp; it did freeze two of the nights.



Base camp

The kitchen and dining tent is huge. The kitchen area is staffed by two cooks plus another who is the "gofer". The dining area is simply two long rows of picnic tables. The "Donut" is a large circular tent with a large round hole in the roof to allow smoke from the fire pit to escape. It's the entertainment tent. Here we report on our hikes; what hikes are being offered the next day; and then finish off the evening with a lengthy round of campfire songs. 'Riders in the Sky' seems to be the camp favourite. On the last evening everyone gets together to perform skits.

There are tents for washing, privy tents, a medical tent and others which I'm not sure of their purpose. It's a tent city with all the comforts with a real western feel. My camp task was to clean the water filter.

Hiking & Camp Life

Tuesday, Day 2, Nub Ridge - 18 km : My hike is to Nub Ridge, and six hikers have chosen to give the new guy a try. We cross over Assiniboine Pass into a valley of subalpine meadows. Mount Assiniboine is in full view en route to Nub Ridge. As we climb the ridge we are blessed with a large variety of alpine flowers. Most of us lunched on the ridge, while three participants climbed the Nublet. Time was becoming an issue as a crack of thunder was heard and the skies all round us were turning black. It wasn't long before they accomplished their goal and we were on our way back. Half way back the light hail and rain started.



Nub Ridge

It is the last hike for Darren and Garth. They hike out the next day as Darren's wife, who is also Garth's sister, is in hospital. They were my tent mates.

Wednesday, Day 3 – Assiniboine/Wonder Loop - 23 km : The ladies are signing up; I'm feeling good, excited, and so the flirting begins. Again we cross over Assiniboine Pass into the valley of many subalpine meadows heading towards Wonder Pass. We lunch at Assiniboine Lodge, which offers views of Mont Assiniboine's enormous east face hulking over Lake Magog. It a clear, sunny day and Mont Assiniboine is full view; we get lots of great photos. We continue to climb up the valley towards Wonder Pass.

The meadows are lush, green and full of wild flowers. The 'western anemone' flower were common but mostly finished as they had their distinctive shaggy seedheads. Higher- up the large, creamy white cup with a yellow centre flower could still be seen. Orange and pink 'Indian paintbrush' were common and a few in yellow were present. Also common are the 'snow cinquefoil', which look similar to a buttercup. Below the treeline was a belt of larch trees (or tamaracks). They looked so soft, and the needles were soft to the touch. They must look stunning in the fall when the needles turn golden. On the summit we took a break and were entertained by a colony of marmots. They seemed curious, or perhaps they were just interested in our packs?

It was here Colleen presented me with a Fine Dark Chocolate bar called 'SEXY'. Well, that just did it, my head swelled and I started to strut! I shared the chocolate with

everyone, but kept the packaging signed by all the ladies. It now has a special spot in my home. Ladies in eastern Canada have a much higher standard!

On the way back, 'blue clematics' flowers were seen along the path's edge; fresh grizzly bear scat was found in the middle of the trail and a boreal toad was spotted close to camp. Parks Canada tasked Skyline Hikers to keep a look-out for amphibians and reptiles in Banff National Park and to document sightings.

Thursday, Day 4 – Og / Assiniboine loop - 20 km : Today there is a big influx of males. Its sunny and Og Pass is our designation. The trail runs high along the side of a valley until the valley itself climbs towards the Pass. As the trees disappear the valley becomes a large alpine meadow. The views are striking! These alpine meadows are very high on my list of favourite places! We have lunch on the pass before we descend through a belt of larch trees to a valley with a huge subalpine meadow that offers more views of Mont Assiniboine. We hiked the the length the meadow before turning to cross Assiniboine Pass and back to our camp.

Friday, Day 5 – Allenby Pass- 14 km : I saved this hike until last because it's shorter. We should be back early to prepare for skit night. It's a steady climb as the trees give way to alpine meadows. Alpine 'moss campion' pink wildflowers survive in middle of our rocky path. Again the views are awesome and amazing. We lunched on the Pass summit with a group of trail riders and their horses. It's a bit cool, so we all don our rain gear and it's a good thing we did. The sky turns black and thunder could be heard. We quickly gather ourselves and make a hasty retreat toward the tree line. The winds pick up and the hail, the size of marbles, pours down in buckets. It soon over took us! I worry if the winds get any stronger we could be endanger of being blown away! The hail rapidly accumulated on the trail and there was thunder and lighting all around us. After what seems forever, we finally reach the safety of the tree line. The adrenalin was flowing! Everyone was feeling the heighten exhilaration. The hail now turned to rain and our pace slowed. By the time we reach camp the skies have cleared.

Skit Night : Being alone in my tent I was hoping to escape skit night. This was not to be! Thanks to Jenny, one of the camp hosts, she invited me to join her troupe. Roughly our skit was based on the TV show "So you think you can dance". Three couples were competing as to who could do the best trail dance. The first couple did a privy dance; the second dance evolved a parasol and some stripping, and then Jenny and I did an erotic pole dance using hiking poles. Jenny has the moves; while... at least I got lots of laughs! All the skits were excellent and everyone had a good



"Securing the Load" - outfitters readying pack horses for journey out from base camp.

time.

Time to Bid Adieu

Saturday, Day 6, 18 km : The horses were loaded with duffel bags. The camp divided into hiking groups and we were on our way back to the bus and to Banff for the wrap-up dinner. One last round of 'Rider in the Sky' and it was time to say good-bye. Later a few of us went for a soak at the Banff's Sulfur Springs.

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