

As the Crow Flies

July 27-31, 2012



As the crow flies – our club trip to the mountains in the Crowsnest Pass area didn't attract too many takers, but the 3 of us who did go were treated to some great hiking and scenery. The drive to the Pass as it is affectionately known locally is one of the prettiest there is in my opinion. The rolling prairie foothills of the Porcupine range keep you company on the west, while prairie grasslands flow outwards towards the east, occasionally dotted by the big gull-like wings of wind turbines. That feeling of having just stepped out of the prairie and into the mountains continues as you step off the road and onto the trailhead to immediately start your day's hiking.

This area reminds me a bit of Nordegg with a nod to the frontier coal town of Alberta's recent past. There are lots of hikes that take you to old colliers and rusted equipment with mysterious cables growing up the side of mountains like octopus tendrils. The Pass has excellent amenities; an 18 hole golf course, state of the art hospital that serves residents of British Columbia and Alberta alike; a swimming pool, easy access to groceries and lots of great places to eat as well as shop for local arts and crafts. The area is also known for excellent fly fishing. There is no doubt though that this area struggles economically.

We stayed at the Alison Creek recreational area in a dry camp. Yes, we had beer, just no water. Nice sites, spacious with very clean pit toilets and a lovely lake to wash the dust off. We managed 2 vehicles and 2 tents in one site. You do have to pay for the second tent and vehicle. It's very dusty and noisy as many of the locals come to the campgrounds to get away for the weekend. On a couple of our hikes we saw that folks pull their RV's into the woods and camp randomly. We'll keep this in mind for another trip.

Two things you need to know about hiking in this area:

- 1). the flowers are unique to this geography, beautiful and will make you change your hiking plans, so best to plan a flower hike.
- 2). This is ATV country. If you don't like being around quads, rangers, argos, bikes etc. you may not enjoy hiking in this area. Many of the hiking trails share access with ATVs and hiking does not seem to be part of the local scene or to attract the tourists. Try not to let it put you off though as there is much to experience.

Day 1 Hike to the Promised Land. The hiking description in our trail guide was wrong as it told us to park our car under a power line. No line, no pole- nothing. There were however, 3 lads gearing up to

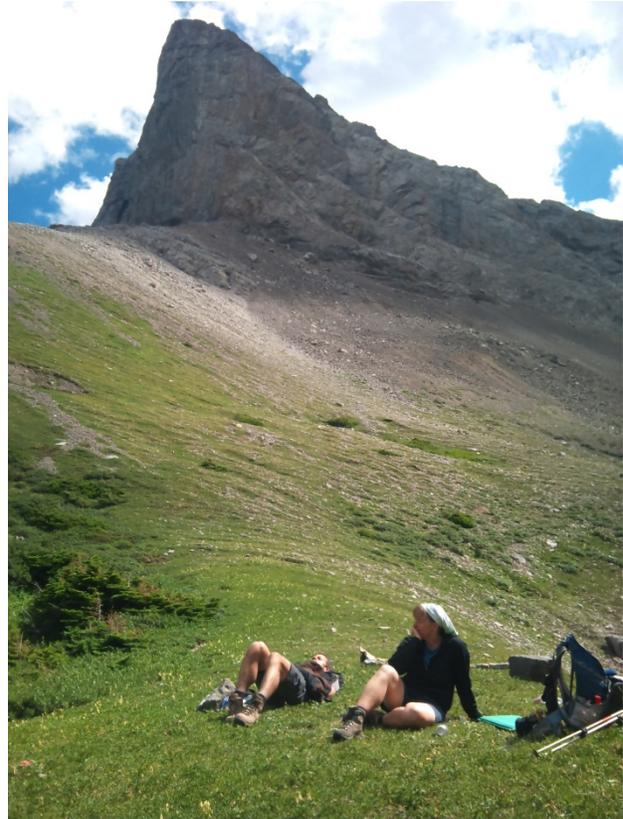
mountain bike with overnight packs that put us on the trailhead as they were headed in the same direction. It's a beautiful hike with lots of variety, challenges underfoot and scanty signage, but just enough to keep you in the right direction. We crossed logs, waded through streams that had cut new banks, walked on quad trails, climbed around the side of a mountain and then came out into a beautiful alpine meadow filled with geraniums, dryads, and forget-me-knots to the Spelunkers camp (dry) for those overnights to explore the caves. The lads had pitched their tent and lunched when we arrived. After a chat and a rest, we explored up the side of the mountain, and watched as the lads disappeared in one entrance and spent about 30 minutes winding through the underground cave system only to pop up a few meters from where they started. We had lights, but no map so didn't explore this time. Even though it was late July, there were patches of snow lying about especially in the caves themselves. A faint trail leads all the way up and over a summit pass to the site of an airplane crash. More later.

Day 2 – Flower Hike to the site of an old mining operation and Tallon Peak. We started just behind the Frank visitor station and spent a very hot, humid and leisurely day climbing up to the highest point on the east end of the Pass. You can see everything – the Old Man Dam on the prairie, the rugged peaks of Waterton, Crowsnest, the Wedge- it goes for ever. We spent time composing and taking pictures, then lying back and watching the sun glint off the wings of a glider floating over the prairie while the low sound of cows drifted in the distance. Life is good...

Day 3 – Turtle Mountain. You can go up and back out, or do a traverse across the 2 summits of Turtle Mountain. Our plan was to traverse. After positioning one vehicle at trail end, we sat at trail head and debated if hiking or retail therapy was the answer to the low grey cloud cover and rain drops on the wind shield. What the heck. The trail head is a bit tricky to start, but the trail itself takes you right to the top of Turtle Mountain. Considering a lot of this mountain slid down and rests across the road, when at the top, you can stand right where everything gave way. Hmm... We had a hard time picking up the trail to take us across the col to the other summit. We were further hampered by a deadly wind that may well have blown us to the other summit. Discretion being the better part of valor, we left the traverse for another day.

Day 4 – Seven Sisters. We had planned Crowsnest for this day, but the heat and exertion were taking their toll on our legs, so opted for Seven Sisters instead. We spent a very long day on dirt track, trying to interpret our guide book and failing. We finally gave in and turned back having logged about 24 km when we decided to explore an old side-road we had discounted earlier. It was in fact the route to our destination and led us into a beautiful hanging valley full of meadow grass surrounded by clumps of krummholtz pine at the foot of the summit to the sisters. We also had a great vantage of Crowsnest Mountain and could see some of the scree slopes that are part of the trail. Challenging. Seven Sisters looks as though there may be some good ridge scrambling and definitely some great views but alas not this time.

Day 5 – It's fun to have a destination to hike to, but it's not often that destination is the site of an old plane crash. This day took us to North York Creek. Again, we were on a popular ATV trail and we scooted



aside several times to allow riders to get to the crest of a hill before they ran out of gears. We got the distinct feeling not too many folks hike in this neck of the mountains. That impression was also borne out in the bar every night, but we had a glorious time as we hiked up the side of a waterfall above the crash site and drank fresh water and snoozed in the sun with more forget me knots tickling our noses. North York Creek is located on the other side of the Promised Land. We used our binos to try and find the summit trail and speculated where it came down to meet the North York Trail. Some fuselage remains at creek side, along with a fallen down kiosk, telling the ill-fated tale of the Canadian Air Forces DC3 Dakota that hit a peak and crashed into the valley in 1946, killing all 7 service men on board. While our access seemed relatively easy, it took 2 men on snowshoes 10 days to find the crash site and remove the bodies. On a more cheerful note, we saw a wolf on our way back to the trailhead.