



# O'Hara '96

Published by the Lake O'Hara Trails Club, Box 98, Lake Louise, Alberta T0L 1E0

## Wolves at Lake O'Hara?

By Cam McTavish

After surviving two attempts in the past century to exterminate them, the gray (or timber) wolves (*Canis lupus*) are struggling to make a comeback. Wolf activity in the Rocky Mountain parks of Western Canada began to increase in the 1980's. Research over the last decade has identified six wolf packs in Banff National Park two in Kananaskis Country, one in Kootenay National Park and, for the first time in recorded history, a wolf pack in Yoho National Park.

Perhaps it is misleading to say that these packs live in the parks, since wolves typically need more than 1000 square kilometers of habitat to survive. Only one of the packs confines its movements to within park boundaries, where they are protected from legal hunting which still exists in both Alberta and British Columbia.

In the Lake O'Hara area, our research has revealed that in the summer of 1994, a single adult wolf entered the Duchesnay Basin and spent several days there. Earlier that same season, we found that the small Yoho pack had traveled up the Ottetail Valley and then moved into the McArthur Creek drainage to catch and consume an elk calf. I suspect that a grizzly bear had also snacked on the scant remains that the wolves had left, as a bear scat with a tiny elk hoof and hair was collected near the same location as the wolf kill.

This spring (1995) in Yoho National Park, we captured two adult wolves,

fitted them with radio collars and named them "Sirius" (after the bright dog star) and Merlin (after the mythical magician). Shortly after his capture, Merlin disappeared (like a true magician!) from the study area only to reappear later in the Kinbasket Lake region of B.C.

We were also able to ground track a single wolf up Cataract Brook to within half a kilometer of the Lake O'Hara



campground. It then moved south to Odaray Prospect where its picture was taken by one of the remote cameras (see above photo), intended to document the movement of Grizzly bears, before it left the valley via Cataract Brook. Was this a lone wolf searching for another, or was this just a brief reconnaissance of the O'Hara area by one member of the Yoho pack? Could this mean that the entire pack may visit the valley as well? Should this be the case, there is no reason to

worry. There has never been a documented attack on a human by a wolf in North America. Wolves are afraid of humans and with good reason. We have shot, trapped, and poisoned wolves, and dynamited their dens for over a hundred years. When the fresh scent of our species reaches them, they run!

When the fall hunting season began outside of Yoho National Park, we were very concerned as the wolves had left the comparative safety of the park, and entered the heavily hunted Beaverfoot drainage just south of the park. For several days the Yoho pack was located with radio-telemetry within 300 metres of an occupied hunting camp Luck for once was on their side and no wolf mortalities were added to our steadily growing database.

So what can we expect now that the wolves are back? We're not overly optimistic regarding the success of these wild hunters. In November of 1994, ten wolves were in the Yoho pack; by January 1995 the pack had been reduced to eight, and in March there were five but only three remained for the spring denning season. We know that several were shot and killed, one died when run over on the railway within the park, others no doubt dispersed and some natural deaths may also have occurred. This 70% reduction of pack size in one year coupled with the relatively low numbers of ungulates that exist as prey within their home range does not bode well for this group.

The past two years have shown that the Yoho pack is having a tough time. Maybe the wolves will choose to leave, or perhaps highway, railway and

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hunting mortality will prohibit their existence here. However, wolves are surprisingly adaptable, and maybe they will be able to create a niche for themselves - keep your fingers crossed for Sirius, Merlin and the other Yoho wolves.

*Cam McTavish is a wildlife biologist currently working on both the grizzly bear and wolf research projects in Yoho National Park. This article was submitted in October. Cam has since reported that not only is the Yoho pack of four having a tough winter with the low prey base and the deep snow (which makes for tough travel), but also that Sirius was shot and killed in the Beaverfoot in late fall.*

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## Grizzly Bear Research Goes "Socio-Ecological" Visitor's Surveyed Too!

*By Jean-Paul Molgat*

The scope of the Lake O'Hara Grizzly Bear research has been expanded to include information on visitors, as well as grizzly bears. The new "Socio-ecological Research Project" aims to provide information which will allow the area to be managed for the benefit of both grizzlies and humans.

The "socio-economic" component of the study seeks to identify why, where, when and how visitors use the trails at Lake O'Hara. To provide this snapshot of visitor experience, researchers from Simon Fraser University are using techniques as varied as the day's weather on the continental divide.

Last summer, over 200 visitors shared information with researchers about their favorite trails and trail features. This information has been used to develop the full-scale visitor survey being conducted this summer. It also forms the backbone of a recreational inventory of trails. This inventory will tell managers which trails visitors use to find the features and experiences that they enjoy. In a sense, it is a map of visitor's appreciation of the area.

A five hour hike through vistas of

jewel-like lakes, snow-capped mountains and flower-filled meadows can often leave the brain in a state of disordered bliss! Understandably, visitors often found it difficult to articulate to researchers exactly what it was that affected the scenic quality of a trail. In an attempt to overcome this, 20 visitors were let loose with disposable cameras and accompanying log books. They were so successful at recording views, features of interest and locations, that this novel technique may be pursued on a wider scale in the summer of 1996.

Many of you who encountered the whir or flash of a camera along one of the trails last summer probably realized that these cameras were placed there to photograph you, and not the bears. Though recording visitor movement with cameras was only a small part of the study, it proved to be the most time-consuming and challenging. Defying gravity, braving snowstorms, and learning to think like a rodent became part of the daily routine.

Far from being a new form of back-country espionage, these cameras provide researcher Jean-Paul Molgat with a way of rating the accuracy of trail counters. The problem is that a counter on its own can not distinguish between a hiker, a porcupine, or even a snowflake. Once calibrated, the trail counter should allow Molgat to determine the number of people using each trail, by time of day and time of season. Results from last summer are encouraging. After many painstaking re-adjustments, he was able to predict actual numbers of hikers within 20 percent from numbers recorded by counters. Hopefully the counters will be able to operate without cameras in the near future.

As well as still cameras hooked up to trail counters, solar-powered video cameras on cliff-top perches giving a bird's eye view of visitor movements provided Molgat with much excitement. The difficulties associated with getting a 2 foot by 4 foot solar panel and 30 pounds of car batteries secured to a cliff in one of the most crumbly mountain ranges in the world proved a cinch, compared to the struggle to

outwit a crafty and hungry bushy-tailed wood rat. In the end, it took chew-proof piano wire, pitons and chicken wire to thwart the pack rat's ravenous appetite for electronic hardware. After overcoming these problems, the resolution of images capturing several trails in a single frame was often too poor to discern hikers, especially on cloudy days or during light conditions. This component of the study is currently being reviewed and may be discontinued.

After data collection has been completed this summer it will be analyzed by a computer based Geographic Information System. A G.I.S. works by displaying information about a particular trail, lake, or area of bear habitat stored in the computer's memory in map form. Different maps can then be laid over one another to identify areas where trail or habitat characteristics are compatible or in conflict. Managers will be able to use this information to make decisions which maximize visitor enjoyment and safety, while minimizing the potentially harmful effects of human presence in a sensitive Grizzly habitat.

The Lake O'Hara Steering committee would like to express our appreciation to all of you for your patience and cooperation and extend of thanks to all who have participated in the research.

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## A History of O'Hara through the Eyes of a Warden

*By Allan Knowles*

The first time I visited Lake O'Hara was in 1956 when, as a student, I was working on the new Trans-Canada highway near Field. The grandeur of the area captivated me, and many times during the course of that summer I returned to camp, hike, and climb, and have been returning each year since. Over the last forty years, there have been a number of changes, most of them for the better. The grandeur remains the same, captivating each and every person who sees it.

When first I came to O'Hara, I hiked in. Invariably there would be moose grazing on the flats around Narao lakes and Cataract Brook. With the commencement of the bus service in 1958 upon completion of the new highway, the sighting of moose became more of an exciting rarity.

During my annual visits I would camp in the Alpine meadow near the Alpine Club huts which, at that time, was the campground. With no restrictions on camping, the meadows were showing signs of over-use, such as multiple paths, burned out sections from illegal campfires, cut trees, drainage ditches for tents, and scatterings of bottles and cans discarded in the surrounding forest. In all my seasons at O'Hara, I never once had a fire, eating cold food and enjoying it. It seems a small price to pay for the sake of preserving the natural beauty of the area.

Dr. George Scotter's 1972 study of the Alpine Meadow resulted in the closure of that area for camping. The present-day, 32 site campground was opened, west of Lake O'Hara. It was somewhat sad at the time, to remove campers from the open views, but preservation of the area came first. The meadow was left to regenerate, and that is slowly taking place, although there is still some evidence of the prolonged abuse.

Also as a result of Scotter's recommendations, the quota system was introduced which limits visitor access to the area.

Having joined Parks Canada in Banff in 1972, I was fortunate to be posted to Lake O'Hara in 1976 and have been there ever since. The use of the O'Hara area was, by 1980, 40% above what Dr. Scotter considered too high a use in 1972. The trails were beginning to show the impact from that use. In a 1980 report, I indicated the need for significant reductions in trail usage. This was approved. The result was extensive trail hardening, some re-routes, and the early season closing of certain trails when conditions are very wet. This seems to be a never-ending process, which, fortunately, has gained the support of the Lake O'Hara Trails Club. Hopefully, with a continuation of trail maintenance and public education, the impact on the area can be kept within acceptable limits so the majestic scenery I first laid eyes upon in 1956 can be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations.

*This year, Allan Knowles celebrates 20 years as a warden of the Lake O'Hara area. We thank him for his continual stewardship of the area.*

## The Whitebark Pine - an Integral part of O'Hara's Ecosystem

by Jon Stuart-Smith

Hiding at timberline in the Lake O'Hara area is an important member of the subalpine community, Whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*). It is the only conifer with needles in bunches of 5's at Lake O'Hara and is found mainly on rocky, west facing slopes such as the west side of McArthur pass and the steep slopes below Wiwaxy and Narao peaks. The candelabra shape distinguishes Whitebark pine from the more typical cone shaped conifers such as Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir, which are also found at this elevation.

Whitebark pine cones do not open, but keep the large fleshy seeds tightly enclosed. Unlike other conifers, the seeds lack a wing and must therefore rely on means other than wind for dispersal. This is where birds and small mammals play an important role. The Clark's nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*), a member of the corvid or crow family, is often seen around Le Relais along with the ever-present WhiskeyJacks. Nutcrackers are large grey birds with black wings and a long black beak which it uses to pry open

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## Remembering some of our Long-term Club Members

This year saw the passing of three long time Lake O'Hara Trails Club Members.

Aileen Aylard was born on June 7th, 1902 in New Denver, BC and passed away July 29th, 1995 in Victoria, BC. Aileen first visited Lake O'Hara in the mid 1930's to attend an Alpine Club of Canada camp. Through these camps, Aileen developed a love of alpine flowers and birds. By the 1950's, Aileen and her sister Muriel were regular visitors of the area, joining the Trails Club in 1973. Even during Aileen's last visit in 1993, she and Muriel could be found walking around the lake, always ready to share their knowledge of the tiny blooms hidden along the trail and the songs of distant birds.

Another BC resident, Jean Kidston joined the Trails Club in 1977. Born on August 10th, 1908, Jean passed away in Vernon on January 3rd, 1996. She first visited Lake O'Hara with her husband, Jack, in 1963. They too became regular visitors who enjoyed sharing the beauty of the area with both their children and their grandchildren. Never daunted by the weather, Jack and Jean would be found on the trails with the many friends they made at Lake O'Hara.

Maxine Aaron joined the Trails Club in 1969 and served as a director for many years. Born in 1904, Mrs. Aaron passed away on February 4th, 1996, in Pittsburgh, PA. She first visited Lake O'Hara with her husband Lester in 1951. Beginning in 1958, the Aarons became pillars of the O'Hara community, spending up to six weeks each summer leading family and friends on the many trails. On some of the most unpleasant days, the Aarons would be found walking around the lake before lunch, only to be found travelling the trail in the opposite direction in the afternoon - for a change of scenery!

Each of these women has contributed to the history of the Lake O'Hara area and their presence has enhanced the enjoyment that the rest of us have derived from our time at Lake O'Hara. We have been blessed to have had the pleasure of knowing each of them.

# The Whitebark Pine

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whitebark pine cones and extract the seeds. Up to 150 seeds can be stored in a pouch in the nutcracker's neck. Once this pouch is full, it will fly off and cache the seeds in small clumps on open rocky subalpine slopes. Some of these seeds are later eaten but many are forgotten and will grow into new trees.

The red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) also competes with Clark's nutcrackers for whitebark pine seeds. Squirrels will grab the entire cone off a branch and store it in an underground midden. A midden can contain hundreds of cones and therefore thousands of whitebark pine seeds. Grizzly bears have learned that finding a red squirrel midden can mean an easy meal. Pine seeds, which are high in fat, are an important part of the diet of a grizzly bear preparing for a long winter's hibernation.

Changes brought about by humans in the last century may threaten the important role played by whitebark pine. Whitepine blister rust, a European fungus, produces large yellow cankers on the stem and eventually kills the tree. Whitebark pine populations in Waterton Lakes National Park and western Montana are being killed by blister rust at an alarming rate. Whether whitebark pines in the Lake O'Hara area are infected is unknown.

Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir are better able to compete for scarce resources at timberline than whitebark pine. Fire may play an important role in opening up the subalpine forest, which allows whitebark pine to be more successful than other trees. Fire suppression over the last century may have disrupted whitebark pine regeneration. Controlled burns, however, may help to increase whitebark pine

seedlings' chances of growing to maturity and producing future generations. Research being undertaken this summer in the Canadian Rockies, including the Lake O'Hara area, will try to answer important questions about the ecology of whitebark pine. A healthy ecosystem requires all of its components to be successfully contributing. Without whitebark pine, it is questionable whether species such as Clark's nutcrackers, red squirrels and grizzly bears will survive. Understanding how all of an ecosystem's components interact and depend on each other is required in order to preserve beautiful places such as Lake O'Hara for future generations.

## What's Happening in '96

Plans are currently underway for two major projects we hope to see initiated this year. Firstly, our intention is to use donation money to revamp the signs for the trails system in the O'Hara area. Some signs are no longer standing and many are in need of replacement. This is proving to be no small task as costs are high. However, we feel it will be of great benefit to the thousands of hikers who walk the trails each season.

The other project being undertaken is the making of a topographical/information map for the area. Hopefully when Le Relais opens its doors on June 19, new maps will be for sale to area visitors!

We are also ready to print new T-shirts to be sold at Lake O'Hara and are interested in a wildflower theme. So, this is a call to all you budding artists out there! Please send us your

ideas to the new address below. We'd love to have a new shirt in place by mid-July.

And finally, take note... the Lake O'Hara Trails Club has a new address. While donations may still be mailed to our old address in Banff, please mail all future correspondence to the address listed below:

Lake O'Hara Trails Club  
Box 98  
Lake Louise, AB  
TOL 1E0

## We Need Your Help!

Your donation to the Lake O'Hara Trails Club will help further the preservation of Lake O'Hara and its trail system. The Trails Club is a registered non-profit organization and will issue a receipt for income tax purposes. You may donate directly at Le Relais, or mail your donation to:

The Lake O'Hara Trails Club  
Box 98  
Lake Louise, AB  
TOL 1E0

## Would You Like to Join Us?

Life membership in the Lake O'Hara Trails Club is available at Le Relais for a mere \$25. For this you will receive this newsletter annually and help support club activities in the Lake O'Hara area.

## ANNUAL MEETING

The 1996 Annual Meeting of the Lake O'Hara Trails Club will be held at Le Relais at 8:30 p.m. on Monday, July 29.



*Preservation  
through  
Appreciation*

Produced by the Lake O'Hara Trails Club in cooperation with Yoho National Park.

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