



Lake O'Hara Trails Club Newsletter

2021
Issue

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Rockies Repeat: a century of change

In the summer of 1930, Catharine Robb Whyte first captured the snowy expanse of the Biddle Glacier from the shores of Lake McArthur. This past summer, a group of artists set out to document that scene again, marking the changes that the past century has wrought.

Rockies Repeat is a documentary, exhibit, and digital storytelling project that aims to bear witness to climate and cultural change in the Canadian Rockies, including at Lake O'Hara. The Lake O'Hara Trails Club has contributed \$1700 in support of the project.

Rockies Repeat director Caroline Hedin describes the project's creative process:

"In fall 2020, we left the Elizabeth Parker Hut under a veil of smoke blown into the Rockies from California wildfires. We packed up our painting supplies, shouldered our camera equipment, and set off for the shores of Lake McArthur.



"We were there to film *Rockies Repeat*, a short film documenting our collective of Indigenous and settler artists, as we return to sites where Catharine Robb Whyte painted a century ago. The journey is taking us to several iconic Rocky Mountain places within the traditional territories of the Ktunaxa Nation, Secwépemc First Nations, As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw Nation, Treaty 6, 7 and 8 Nations, and the homeland of the Métis Nation of Alberta — including the Lake O'Hara area.

"By retracing these steps, we follow in the footsteps of our creative ancestors to bear witness to a disappearing landscape, while using the power of art to mobilize the next generation of stewards of the Rocky Mountains.

Rockies Repeat artist Kerry Langlois with her original artwork at Lake McArthur. Photo: Viktoria North

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2020 Trail Report: a very different year

With all the unknowns of the COVID pandemic swirling around in May 2020, it was 'touch and go' whether Lake O'Hara would even have a trail crew last year! Parks Canada had to implement COVID-safe work protocols prior to hiring staff, but then acted quickly to appoint new crew-member James Barker to assist Lake O'Hara trails foreman Steve Bertollo. As James adeptly learned the ropes of trail crew work, Steve began referring to him as his "secret weapon" – no rock too large for James to move!

Fewer hikers during 2020 turned out to be a silver lining for the crew, as there were major gully wash-outs on the lakeshore trail to repair, as well as a significant rockslide on the Oesa Trail.

Snow, wash-outs, rockslides

The winter/spring of 2020 brought plenty of snow. The crew was still shoveling snow to keep hikers on correct trail routes into July.

Heavy rains in June didn't help matters much; washouts in the gullies along the Lakeshore Trail required clearing of avalanche debris as well as new rock bridges. Due to all the snow, Steve didn't discover the major rockslide near Victoria Lake on the Oesa Trail until the end of June. Refrigerator-sized rocks weighing up to two tons littered the area; it was quite the sight! Parks' Public Safety was notified, as many of the giant boulders were sitting on snow that was melting out, making them very unstable. By mid-July the crew was able to begin stabilizing the rocks so that working around them could be done safely. Using a "come-along" (a hand-powered winch), they moved enough boulders out of the way to create a pathway; then, using some of the boulders as steps, built a beautiful staircase through the disaster area. After 32 person-days of hard work, the trail was better after the rockslide than before!

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Rockies Repeat: a century of change (continued)

“At the end of our trip to Lake O’Hara, we left with our hearts full of bittersweet emotion. We were moved by the quiet power of these glacial landscapes, yet felt the undeniable presence of climate change that threatens the future of the places we love — if we do not act.”

The *Rockies Repeat* documentary and exhibit will launch in Spring 2022. The Lake O’Hara Trails Club hopes to present *Rockies Repeat* at a future Le Relais speaker night.

To follow the project, visit rockiesrepeatfilm.com or check Instagram and Facebook @Rockiesrepeat.

Catharine Robb Whyte’s original 1930s painting lined up with the current view of Lake McArthur, showing the extent of glacier melting. Photo: Viktoria North



A summer like no other

Like many places in the world, Lake O’Hara was strangely quiet during summer 2020. Due to the global pandemic, last year marked the first year since 1958 when all visitor access to Lake O’Hara was on foot. No buses rumbled up the road. Lake O’Hara Lodge was shuttered. The campground and Elizabeth Parker Hut operated at limited capacity. Fewer hikers strolled past Morning Glory Lakes or dislodged pebbles from the Yukness Ledges.

Lonnie Wake and Jonathan von Ofenheim, who took over management of the Lake O’Hara Lodge in 2020, normally share it with up to 60 guests and some 20 staff. For most of last year, it was just the two of them.

“References to *The Shining* abounded,” Lonnie laughs. “It definitely felt spooky, and also quite sad to be at the lodge without any other staff or guests. It was such a contrast from the usual bustling kitchen and dining room, the crackling fire, and guests socializing after a long day out on the trail.”

“We felt a lot of support,” she adds, “but also a real sense of loss from all of our guests whom we were unable to host. This place is so special to so many people, and I think that people really missed experiencing a visit to Lake O’Hara Lodge in a year when so many other things were also missing.”

Long hike in

The 11-kilometre hike up the road didn’t deter Banff’s Ann Morrow. She day hiked at Lake O’Hara on three occasions over summer 2020. “One thing I learned during the strange Covid summer was

that morning coffee really does taste better when you’ve carried it on an uphill march for a few hours. And when you sip it on a ‘breakfast rock’, in the warming sun, above Lake O’Hara’s turquoise waters,” Ann reports.

Ann says the Lake O’Hara trails provided a welcome respite. “It was a fine place to escape and inspire: stunning beauty everywhere you look, plenty of well-made trails to choose from, and no worries about people “breathing moistly” nearby!”

Parks Canada reports that just over 3400 day hikers walked into Lake O’Hara last summer. With the lodge closed, no day use bus visitors, and reduced capacity at the campground and Elizabeth Parker Hut, this represented a significant reduction in area visitors.

Happy hut users

While the Alpine Club of Canada’s Elizabeth Parker Hut hosted fewer guests, it was well used during summer 2020. The hut initially closed in March during the first wave of the pandemic, reopening in June for single-group (cohort) bookings with a reduced capacity of 15 guests.

Michael Geersteema, facilities administration manager for the Alpine Club (ACC), reports the hut was fully booked through to Thanksgiving. “The feedback was uniformly positive. People said the opportunity to experience Lake O’Hara with a small group was extraordinary.”

Two group bookings were accepted each week with ACC staff disinfecting the hut between bookings. “Guests told us it was the cleanest they’d ever seen Elizabeth

Parker,” Michael points out, “and they were thrilled to be able to skip changing the outhouse barrels!”

Pandemic projects

In a hint of a silver lining, 2020 proved to be the perfect summer to tackle maintenance projects. Lonnie reports that she and Jonathan were able to complete several behind-the-scenes projects at the lodge. With bus service suspended, Parks Canada used the opportunity to re-profile and resurface the 70-year-old Lake O’Hara access road using recycled material from nearby highway projects. Over at EP Hut, the ACC installed a new custom-built woodbox insert in the fireplace, and as noted in the Trails Report, lighter foot traffic allowed the trails crew to complete numerous projects.

Unfortunately, pandemic restrictions further postponed work to stabilize the slopes surrounding Abbot Hut. The hut has been closed since August 2018.

As the newsletter goes to print in early 2021, Parks Canada has announced it will operate the Lake O’Hara bus during summer 2021, and it appears likely that the lodge, campground, and Elizabeth Parker Hut will open with COVID-restrictions in place.

Lonnie Wake, for one, is hopeful. “We’ve got our fingers crossed! There appears to be a light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccines being rolled out, so we are hopeful that we will be able to operate as close to normal as we possibly can. We can’t wait to share Lake O’Hara Lodge with everyone once again.”

Debra Hornsby

2020 Trail Report (continued)

Other trail work highlights

- 1) Huber Ledges Alpine Route: major improvements were accomplished at the steep section near Wiwaxy Gap, including improved trail definition, some new steps and waterbars installed for erosion control.
- 2) Opabin Plateau Trails: the crew improved trail definition on braided sections, with major step-building and other measures to keep hikers on the Opabin East trail heading toward Opabin Lake.
- 3) Schaeffer Lake Trail: 5000 lbs of trail mix was flown by helicopter to re-surface a severely eroded section of this trail.
- 4) Lakeshore Trail gully washout repair: new stepping stones and rock culverts were installed over the gullies that were washed out between the Wiwaxy and Oesa junctions.

- 5) Lakeshore Trail general repair: spring runoff caused some drainage and erosion issues on the sections of trail that were improved during the 2019 Volunteer Workbee. The retaining walls had to be rebuilt, and new rock culverts to move water under the trail were installed.

The LOTC provides \$20,000 annually to cover the cost of one trail crew member for the entire working season from mid-June to early October. Despite the impact of the COVID pandemic, the crew logged 62 person-days of trail work in 2020. When the buses run again in 2021, hikers will be able to see all these accomplishments!

As always, the generous contributions of LOTC donors and members have made all the difference in ensuring a high-quality trail experience at Lake O'Hara. If you have any thoughts on our trails, please email us at info@lotc.ca or reach out to us on Facebook.

Sue Webb



Rockslide covering the Oesa trail near Lake Victoria, July 2020.



Boulders moved, new steps built!



Snow continued late into the summer in 2020, making trail work challenging. Photos: Steve Bertollo

Support the trails you love. Become a LOTC member.

Be part of O'Hara by becoming a member of the Lake O'Hara Trails Club (\$25 for a lifetime membership) and/or making a donation (fully tax-deductible). Your support will help us to preserve and enhance the Lake O'Hara area through trail maintenance and public education.

For more information on how to join or donate, go to www.lotc.ca. You can also forward your name, address, phone number, and membership fee and/or donation to

Lake O'Hara Trails Club

Box 98, Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada, T0L 1E0

2021 Annual General Meeting

Bill Warren Training Centre

Canmore, Alberta

5:00 p.m.

Monday, June 7, 2021

All Members Welcome!

Vote by proxy: download proxy form
at lotc.ca/agm

Prefer to attend via Zoom?

Email info@lotc.ca for meeting link.

Recording the dawn chorus

Parks Canada resource management officer Jocelyn Hirose is intimately familiar with the sights – and especially the sounds – of dawn at Lake O’Hara. On select days in June and July, she is on the road from her home in Canmore by 3 a.m., hiking at Lake O’Hara by 4 a.m., and hunkered down to wait for dawn by 5:30 a.m.

Jocelyn is one of a team of Parks Canada researchers who survey bird populations at Lake O’Hara, part of a larger research effort that uses key wildlife indicators to monitor the ecological integrity of the mountain parks.

At Lake O’Hara, bird populations are surveyed by recording dawn birdsong at three locations: Opabin Plateau, Odaray Prospect, and Ross Lake. Typically, each location or transect consists of ten recording points. Alpine birdsongs are captured using a high-quality digital recorder, topped with a fuzzy windsock known as a ‘dead cat’ to shield the microphone from wind noise.

Jocelyn describes a typical day’s work as a mix of adrenalin and meditation. “You arrive in complete darkness. You feel a sense of hyper-vigilance as you begin to hike. It’s cold, it’s dark, and there is complete silence. You are aware of the possibility of a bear encounter. Slowly as you gain elevation, you begin to warm up and shed layers. The light begins to creep in. You see pinks and reds on the mountain tops, bits of blue sky.”

“You’re checking your GPS, and feeling a bit of tension about getting to the first transect point on time. Once you reach that first data point, you set up the tripod, mount the recorder facing east, record the time, location, and temperature – and then walk away as quietly as possible.” Sound is recorded for 11 minutes at each location.

Morning bliss

“While I am waiting for the recording to finish,” Jocelyn says, “I sometimes feel a sense of pure meditative bliss. I feel grateful to have the opportunity to experience the alpine at that time of day – to hear the world come awake around me.”

The sound files are later analyzed, birdsongs identified, and species recorded by an expert ornithologist; but onsite researchers like Jocelyn also make note of what they see and hear.

“Depending on where we are at O’Hara, we hear birds such as Hermit Thrushes, Chipping Sparrows, Clark’s Nutcrackers,



Parks Canada’s Rebecca Smith recording birdsong.
Photo: Madeleine Wrazej

Spotted Sandpipers,” Jocelyn says. “And,” she adds, “lots of pika calls. Their day begins at about the same time as the birds!”

Jocelyn says she sometimes encounters hikers towards the end of her shift. “They are often envious that I’ve managed to get out there so early to see the dawn. I try to take the opportunity to do a bit of education about the research we’re doing.”

Bird surveys, which form one component of Parks Canada’s overall Ecological Integrity Monitoring Program, began in the mountain parks in 2007. In addition to birds, data at Lake O’Hara is also gathered on mammal populations using remote cameras, and pika populations by determining if pika ‘hay piles’ are active or inactive. To date, research suggests that bird populations at Lake O’Hara are stable, and the alpine indicator for Yoho National Park is rated as in “good condition.”

“I am one cog in a big wheel of researchers and scientists. It is the breadth of team that allows us to conduct this research,” Jocelyn points out. “What unites the people I work with is our passion for these natural spaces.”

Debra Hornsby



Preservation Through Appreciation

Save a Trail. Send us your Email.

In an effort to reduce our environmental impact, and devote as much funding as possible to trail work, we’re asking LOTC members to opt for an e-version of this newsletter. If you are a LOTC member, and if you would like to switch from a paper to an email newsletter, please send your name, current mailing address, and email to info@lotc.ca with the subject line “E-newsletter”.