



O'Hara 2012

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If You Go Out In The Lake O'Hara Woods Today....

It's very unlikely that you'll get a glimpse of the handsome young grizzly that visited the area sporadically in 2012. He (she?) wandered through a few times in August and September, mostly digging intently for snacks (also known as Columbian ground squirrels). He came up from deep in the McArthur Valley, through linear meadow systems and an old historic horse trail to Schaffer Lake. Via the big larches, then the verdant slopes west of Mary Lake, he gained the top of west opabin about 4 o'clock in the afternoon of August 23, then casually reversed direction and headed out. Back down the hill west of Mary Lake again, he ended up near the Elizabeth Parker Hut a few hours later. Two alpine club members there were thrilled to have the unimaginable experience of being alone, outside the huts, brushing their teeth, when the grizzly casually sauntered out of the woods and through the meadows before them. The following morning, he had worked his way further south where we watched him dig ground squirrels near the placid waters of Lake McArthur. By 11:00 AM that day, he was again moving back down the valley of McArthur Creek. A brief 18 hour visit to our (and his) paradise to see "what's new".

We gleaned all this knowledge as a result of a short study funded by Parks Canada last fall, where we were consulted to monitor area wildlife movements – especially over McArthur Pass. Daily checks of pieces of thread draped across wildlife trails, diligent field surveys and the wonderful technology of remote cameras, helped us put it all together. The cameras placed in closed areas at the pass recorded large mammal movement detected by motion sensors or by time lapse imagery of larger meadow systems.

And this is what we found...

Wolves from the Bow Valley in Banff National Park move up Cataract Brook, over Odaray Plateau and into McArthur Valley to hunt mountain goats and mule deer. Grizzlies (never common) come and go via this same route with the odd side-trip into Duchesnay Basin. Porcupine were observed on cameras a few times which may be a concern as our earlier work here in the 1990s (joint funded by the Lake O'Hara Lodge, Lake O'Hara Trails Club and Parks Canada) suggests that their numbers were higher then. Goats come from Duchesnay and over Odaray Plateau to access Schaffer and Park Mtns. Moose make this same journey, but mostly after the larch have lost their golden garb and the valley has been well



Remote camera captures a grizzly at a rub tree.

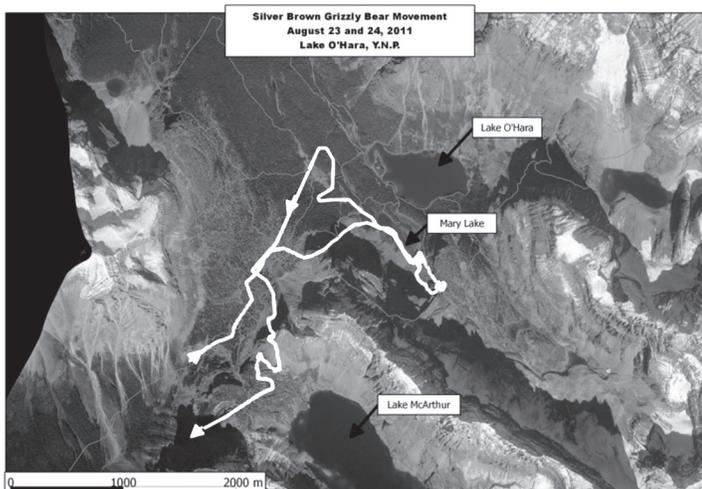
frosted. Ubiquitous deer browse the Odaray meadows through which these same moose moved. Our cameras did not document cougars in 2012 (but have in prior years) however tracks were observed along the big larches as they too passed unobtrusively through our hiking heaven, to disappear over McArthur Pass. And we even documented one of the rarest weasels—the wolverine, as it, too, traversed Odaray Plateau heading to and from McArthur Valley.

And this is what we conclude...

This three-month study is simply not long enough to note population trends, but it does provide some fascinating but preliminary inferences. We know from radio-collar telemetry studies that these animals, especially the large carnivores, require large intact patches of habitat to support their life-time home range. Consider this: To protect the territory of the wolf pack discussed, you would need to protect an area almost ¼ the size of all of Banff National Park, or almost the entirety of Yoho National Park! These carnivores need huge areas to satisfy the daily requirements of finding mates, denning areas, and diverse food sources. So we know that the Yoho bears for example, move into Banff. Banff grizzlies need habitat in Yoho, and wolverine—well they seem to have need to roam everywhere!

Now think about this...

To make these long-distance forays, they must cross the continental divide of the North America through which very few routes are easily navigated. One of the easiest routes, you too have likely taken, is when you leave Lake Louise and head up to Lake O'Hara, you can cross the divide along the boundary of Alberta/British Columbia. Now although you can by-pass Lake O'Hara if you want (but why would you want?)



Grizzly – continued

by travelling the CPR rail line or the Trans-Canada highway through the Kicking Hoarse Pass, most carnivores find the valley much too narrow and are forced too close to these busy transportation corridors, and are consequently rebuffed. As that corridor effectively inhibits carnivore movement, they have a single alternative, and that is to head south up Cataract Brook, to Duchesnay Basin, over Oday Plateau and McArthur Pass, then they're "home-free" to McArthur Valley and the rest of beautiful British Columbia.

I never forget to feel flattered when I work and play in that special part

of Yoho National Park. Where else in the Canadian Rockies could one hike country as spectacular as this? It's a "win - win" scenario! The little corridor over Oday Plateau appears functional and allows critical wildlife movement that is largely unimpeded in our opinion. And we're all still permitted to experience those giddy gleeful emotions having either completed an awesome alpine route, or having spent a tranquil day just sauntering along the quiet shores of O'Hara's lake.

Cam McTavish is a wildlife biologist who has spent many seasons studying animal movement in our parks.

Three "En-lightning" Experiences at Lake O'Hara

Mt. Yukness

I had just reached the top of Mt Yukness when a huge clap of thunder erupted right behind Mt Biddle... that is, right behind the peak immediately across Opabin Valley from where I stood.

Up until this point it had been a peaceful day, with blue skies and puffy white clouds. Now, out of nowhere a massive wall of black clouds was pouring through Opabin Pass and straight toward us (Mt Yukness and me).

In seconds I am racing down the sloping rock field that is the upper west face of Yukness. A few more seconds and another blast of lightning cracks the whip right in the Oday basin.

"Move brother!" it said. "I am going as fast as I can" says I, running down loose talus. "Holy cow", I'm thinking, "lightning seeks prominent points"! So I'm stumble-running, bent over, hands waving for balance, and then one hand reaches out further and immediately sparks are flowing out of my fingertips. I slow down. The black cloud curtain is passing over Yukness, but there are no more strikes nearby.

I stop. Things seem to be calming down. The wind is gone. Tentatively I straighten up, and in doing so my head and shoulders penetrate into an electrically charged layer. It is as if every hair on my head and face is made of steel filings being pulled directly away from by body by a gigantic magnet. The menacing layer is totally invisible. This makes me drop down instantly, and instantly the weird sensation is gone.

I crouch low for a minute to consider the situation. It is quiet around me now. So I give it another try and poke my hand upward, but no, it's still there, like an upside down acid bath. Now I tune into the sound, a deep buzzing hum that is right around me and I realize I am making it happen! Reach up and it gets louder, pull down and it disappears. I don't do that anymore. Obviously there is a sky full of electrolyzed atmosphere starting a few inches above my head. I might get zapped anyway.

All this takes place in a few minutes. As quickly as the storm materialized, it is disappearing, flowing away through the peaks. Safe!

Heading down I have to wonder how close I was to being the seed that could send the instantaneous explosive flow of a sky full of electrical energy into the ground...through little old me.

Mt. Oday

We are starting down from the summit of Mt Oday. An hour earlier, when we were climbing the last pitches up the northeast ridge, a storm had snuck up on us without warning, to swallow us in our own mid-summer snow storm. We had scrambled to get covered up and for fifteen or twenty minutes we contemplated the possibility of spending the night stormbound. When would the lightning add to the uncomfortable prospect? Then, quite suddenly the mini-blizzard had switched off, and left us to continue in a pleasant mist, through which we could see the sun and blue sky. Home free.

We traverse along the ridge, still in the shallow mist. I can hear the others coming along, chatting. As I climb over a small step, I glance back to see who is right behind me. But wait a second...there is no one close by. That's funny, I thought someone was right here....

A minute later, it happens again. What is going on? I could have sworn there was someone right behind me. Am I tired and imagining things? It occurs to me that something is not quite right! I stop and turn around to figure out just where everyone is. Again the awareness is that someone is still behind me. I look both ways and no one is there!

I listen carefully to sort out the others' positions and realise I have been listening to a very soft sound, and I can't figure out how far away it is. It is a very distinctive, soft, popping sound.

Then I get it. It is a soft popping sound, and it is coming from the top of my ice axe which is sticking up out of my pack. Static electricity! Right behind my head!

"Whoa everyone, hold it" I called into the mist as I slipped my pack-sack off as if it had a rattlesnake inside.

There had been no lightning strikes nearby at all but does this mean the first one can't be getting ready to hit right here, right now? Probably not, I suppose, but we get any of the potential lightning rods down and away just in case. No point in pushing your luck.

Well, I guess I can be just as jumpy as anyone else, in the presence of the ghost of lightning disasters of the past.

The Watchtower

The Watchtower is a large rock pinnacle perched above the O'Hara road about one third of the way up from the parking lot. Climbers can scramble up to the base of the tower in about an hour. It is a couple of pitches of steep climbing to the top.

Honestly, the first sign of lightning happened about two seconds after we reached the top. The storm formed up just across the valley by Cathedral Mountain, and the lightning strikes reached straight toward us.

We were scrambling to get down alright. The top of the tower is a pile of broken boulders. I reached the edge with a handful of rope coils just as the wind arrived. I tried to pitch the end of the rappel rope straight down the cliff, but the wind just lifted it back up over our heads and into a tangle amongst the boulders.

We were done for! We were standing on top of the biggest lightning rod for miles around. A huge blast right beside us actually hit ground in the gully below.

Unbelievably, that was it. As fast as it had formed, the storm was over. Count down one of our nine lives for each of us.

Tim Auger was the Lake O'Hara area warden from 1969 – 1975 and is one of the LOTC's newest Board members.

Wolverines - the “rock” stars of the animal world

“We noticed, going straight up the fall line, the fresh tracks of an animal perhaps the size of a dog. We could not imagine what sort of creature would venture to this place so far from vegetation. At the bench our tracks diverged, the animal apparently determined to go straight up”. (W. Tupper, Canadian Alpine Journal, 1962)

This entry by Tupper in the Canadian Alpine Journal 50 years ago of a mystery animal apparently defying gravity and all logic with regard to normal travel in the high mountains captures the essence of how we think of wolverines – determined, supercharged, a critter that rather than take the path of least resistance goes over rather than around, never backing down from steep rock, vertical cliffs, or ice-ridden couloirs. Their ability to cover their huge home ranges, defended even!, many times a month, is unrivalled. They are the winter endurance athletes of the animal world. But what more would you expect from an animal that is born in avalanche chutes and thrives in places that push the limits of mammalian existence?

Many wonder why they travel so far and have such huge home ranges, and then on top of it all, defend the boundaries, marking and viciously running off any wolverine that is not brother, sister, mate or offspring? The answer lies in that they have evolved and adapted to some of the most rugged and unproductive habitats on earth – alpine and subalpine areas. Nature has a place for all; they’re perfectly adapted to eke out a living in these very harsh conditions. As a result, they naturally occur in low numbers and have very low rates of reproduction. The vast areas are necessary for them to pull together enough food in the frozen habitats where they live. In winter they scavenge primarily on goat and sheep carcasses, or anything they can find alive, dead or long dead. They consume hide, bone and hooves... everything that most predators leave behind.

So, they roam over huge areas, because food is scarce, and are territorial, because they don’t want to lose what little food they have, and because food is often in short supply – their reproductive rate is one of the lowest among mammals. And because they evolved in high-elevation alpine habitats and areas with deep snowpack, they are now threatened by a warming climate that is eating away at the most critical habitats they depend on.

What better reason to begin study of wolverines in the Canadian Rockies? First, because we know nothing about wolverines other than the occasional sightings (most coming from O’Hara!) and second, we may be losing a wilderness icon in a matter of decades if we don’t have the science to conserve their populations.

During winter 2011-12, we initiated an extensive survey of wolverines over 6000km² of Banff, Yoho and northern Kootenay National Parks. Intuitively we’d think this area is a haven and safe refuge for wolverines, but we don’t know that. We know very little about wolverines in the national parks. If the parks are critical for long-term survival of wolverines, we have a major transportation corridor



Wolverine on hair trap.

that cuts right through Banff and Yoho parks. It splits these parks in half, and may split the wolverine population in half. And when you have two smaller populations rather than one large population, your chances for sustaining those populations - and keeping them from splitting even further and becoming smaller in number, becomes more difficult.

Our survey used “noninvasive genetic sampling”, i.e., no capture or handling required, but only “caught” them on camera and “snagged” a little bit of hair for DNA fingerprinting. Between December 2010 and April 2011, we put out 48 hair traps i.e., one frozen beaver carcass nailed 2m up a tree and with barbed wire wrapped below, each with a camera,. One month to set them all up and the next three months to check them all on a monthly basis. We skied over 2000 kms, we worked in teams of two and occasionally more on longer backcountry trips. By May, we had collected thousands of the most beautiful and curious wolverine photographs you could imagine, and more than 900 hair samples.



Wolverine peering out from a larch tree

Overall, 85% of the 48 sites were visited during at least one of the three monthly sessions. Of 142 sampling opportunities during the three sessions, wolverines visited the hair traps 89 times (63%). Wolverines didn’t visit only seven sites during the survey. The genetics tell us that we identified 19 different wolverines from our “hair trapping”; 12 males and 7 females. No females and only two males crossed the Trans-Canada Highway!

We will repeat our survey next winter (2012-13) over the same study area, hoping to collect additional genetic information, enough so that we can assess the effect of the Trans-Canada corridor on wolverine movements. The added bonus is we are also collecting vital information on wolverine distribution, occurrence and habitat use in the national parks – a first!

Wolverines are gaining attention fast; they are clearly the rock stars of large-scale landscape connectivity efforts. It’s taken time for agencies, Y2Y (Yellowstone to Yukon), and other conservation groups to figure it out. We recognize the wolverine’s conservation value, and continue to emphasize the need and urgency for wolverine research.

How can you help? Several ways...record any observation of possible sightings or tracks to the Wolverine Watch website (www.wolverinewath.org), consider helping with our wolverine surveys next winter (see “Volunteer/Sign-up” on website) or consider supporting our project through a tax-deductible donation (<http://www.highwaywilding.org>).

Tony Clevenger is a wildlife biologist living in Harvie Heights, Alberta. He works for the Western Transportation Institute-Montana State University and leads the world’s longest-running research project out of Banff National Park assessing the impacts of roads on wildlife populations. His research is part of the Highway Wilding Project.

A Call for Volunteers Wildlife Monitoring Blitz

Do you have an interest in the wildlife of Lake O'Hara?
Volunteers are needed to participate in an O'Hara wildlife count!

What is it? This project will hopefully become an annual event, aimed at getting a better, on-going picture of the O'Hara area's wildlife populations.

When is it? Thursday, June 28th 2012

What would I be doing? Small teams of volunteers will spend the day with a wildlife expert, hiking designated trails and keeping track of all wildlife signs and sightings.

Who can volunteer? Anyone physically able to hike the Lake O'Hara trails and interested in contributing to the scientific knowledge of the area. This will be a rain or shine (or snow!) event. You must come prepared to hike in any type of weather, and spend a full day outdoors. Up to 35 participants are needed.

What's in it for me? An opportunity to spend a day hiking and gain a new perspective on beautiful Lake O'Hara, as well as contributing valu-

able information to Parks Canada's science data base. Complimentary O'Hara bus transportation will be provided. Volunteers will be assisted by knowledgeable wildlife experts, and will have the use of GPS units, wildlife identification cards and tally sheets.

There will be prizes and refreshments at the end of the day. Bring your camera, as one very special prize will be awarded for the day's best photo.

How do I sign up? Contact Judy Otton at otton@shaw.ca or (403) 678-4208.

More detailed information will be sent out to registered participants.

This event is being organized by the Lake O'Hara Trails Club, with thanks to Parks Canada, Lake O'Hara Lodge and Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise.

LOTC 2012 Art Fundraiser

Many thanks to all of you who supported our very successful 2011 art fundraiser. A special thank you to Georgina Hunt who donated the painting "Above the Larches". The winner of this beautiful piece was a very happy Elizabeth Booth of Vancouver. For our 2012 raffle, we are grateful to J.R. Webb for his donation. To learn more about this year's fundraiser stop at Le Relais.

J.R. Webb

Throughout a thirty-six year career with the Engineering Service of National Parks and Public Works Canada, James Webb spent weekends and holidays hiking and skiing in the Rockies with a sketchbook and camera in his pack. Largely self-taught, Jim was a friend and disciple of Walter J. Phillips and took many of his early sketches and paintings to Walter's studio for critique. An eager student, Webb incorporated Phillips' advice and later studied watercolour technique and printmaking at the Banff School of Fine Arts. He retired to Victoria where he continues to paint, and shares his skills by helping long-term care patients at two hospitals explore the world of watercolour.



2012 Annual General Meeting

Warden Cabin at Lake O'Hara 4 p.m.

Thursday, July 26, 2012

All Members Welcome!



Preservation Through Appreciation

You can make a difference.

Be a part of O'Hara by becoming a member of Lake O'Hara Trails Club and/or making a donation.

Membership is \$25 and entitles you to receive the annual newsletter in your mailbox each year. Memberships fees and donations are fully tax-deductible.

Download a Membership/Donation form on line at www.lotc.ca or simply forward your full name, address and phone number with membership and/or donations to:

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