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Wildlife Encounters in the Canadian Rockies

Life lessons from a marmot, and other meetings

Lisa Densmore



UNDER MY SLEEPING BAG, THE GROUND RUMBLLED, NOT A CONSTANT shake like an earthquake tremor but a metered series of thuds that shook the earth. "Must be a ranger on horseback passing by our camp. I wonder where he's camping tonight," I thought, as I drifted off to sleep. Our camp was secure from bears, our food hung from the designated log crossbar 15 feet in the air 100 yards from our tents. Our permit was valid. There was nothing to rankle a ranger here, except perhaps the bugs. The mosquitoes in Jasper National Park in northern Alberta, Canada, were tenacious after sunset in early August. Unwilling to give up any more of my blood to their omnipresent proboscises, I had retired shortly after dinner to my tent.

I had spotted a wolf track that evening here. We were sleeping in one of the primitive backcountry campsites along the Jonas Pass–Brazeau Lake Loop. The odds of a wolf hunting a caribou here were low because we were well below timberline. However, caribou are not the only hoofed mammals in the park. The next morning, I rounded the back of my tent to retrieve the coffee from our hanging food bag and found a sizable pile of scat a mere 15 feet away. That was no ranger clomping by last night! A moose had nearly stepped on me! Suddenly my thin nylon and mesh tent seemed extremely flimsy.

After pouring a round of steaming java into our metal mugs, I relayed my morning discovery to my backpacking partners, Jack Ballard and Bill Powell. The three of us had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro together two years earlier. Bill had climbed other mountains—Rainier, Aconcagua, and Elbrus. Jack had spent a lifetime bushwhacking into remote areas of the Rocky Mountains in search of trout and big game. He also had hiked with me through the Adirondacks while I was researching one of my guidebooks.

As we sipped our coffee and swatted mosquitoes, we recounted the remarkable number of other wildlife encounters on the Jonas Pass–Brazeau Lake Loop compared with other mountain regions into which we had ventured. Every time we've ventured into the backcountry, we've seen animals, but the main focus was reaching a goal, such as the top of a mountain. With that goal came not just a can-do attitude, but also a feeling of me-against-the elements and the terrain. Here, we certainly had a goal, of completing the loop, and we certainly had our share of weather and terrain to surmount, yet this trip was different. I felt acutely a guest in this alpine kingdom, allowed

The remote Brazeau River in Jasper National Park attracts moose that rumble through campsites under cover of night. LISA DENSMORE

to pass through and glimpse the lives of its residents but incapable of joining them. By the end of the route, I gained an enduring respect and admiration for the rugged conditions in which the animals here survive and how truly soft my everyday existence is. I also learned that wildlife are as opportunistic as humans, only in the context of basic survival.

It was night four of a six-day, five-night backpacking trip, a 50.6-miler, the bulk of which was in Jasper National Park, but which started and ended in Banff National Park just to the south of Jasper's boundary. We were camped at the Wolverine South campground next to the Brazeau River, 36.5 miles into the route. My backcountry debut into the Canadian Rockies, this trek had tested me physically with a 16.4-mile day on the second day, my longest ever carrying a 50-pound pack. But the route, known as the Jonas Pass–Brazeau Lake Loop, rewarded handsomely with endless views of snowcapped peaks, the most scenic lakeside campsite I've ever visited, an eight-mile alpine traverse, acres of wildflowers, and a variety of unexpected wildlife encounters. It was the opportunity to see one particular threatened species, woodland caribou, that initially drew me here.

Jasper National Park is committed to caribou conservation. The park has always been known for its caribou herd. Like elk, caribou populations are susceptible to overzealous wolf predation, but caribou have one key advantage. They are well adapted to deep snow, in which wolves have difficulty hunting. The hoof of a caribou is concave and spreads out, giving this 175- to 400-pound member of the deer family better buoyancy in snow. It also has sharp edges, which the caribou uses to dig through the snow to feed on the lichen below. In addition, the two toes on each hoof grow longer during the winter, allowing better traction on ice.

For a number of years, Nordic skiers glided into the interior of Jasper National Park on snow-covered roads, packing down the snow and thus inadvertently helping wolves access the caribou's winter range in subalpine areas of the park where wolves would otherwise be unable to hunt during the winter. To protect the caribou, the park now closes those roads during early winter and midwinter when skiers would have the most impact. By late winter, when the snow has naturally compacted and wolves would travel in the caribou range whether humans skied there or not, the park reopens the area.

Humility Before Bears

Before even shouldering our packs, we had seen a black bear while driving along the Icefields Parkway toward the trailhead. It calmly pulled ripe red berries off a roadside shrub with its black tongue, oblivious to the intermittent automobiles that slowed to watch it dine. Though not as large and intimidating as the grizzly bears that prowl the wilderness areas in both Banff and Jasper national parks, a black bear is just as able to kill a human. We stopped long enough to snap a few photos from the protection of our car, then rolled on to the trailhead at Sunwapta Pass.

The roadside bear was a blatant reminder that both grizzly and black bears could be dangerous if hungry or annoyed. After shouldering my pack, I touched the canister of pepper spray hanging by my hip, making sure I could grab it quickly. Bill and Jack also carried canisters.

Though pepper spray was better than nothing, I didn't kid myself about how limited its protection would be if I met an aggressive bear. The typical pepper spray found at outdoors stores contains capsaicin, which is extracted from chili peppers and produces an acute burning sensation in mammals. It is extremely irritating to both the respiratory system and the eyes, but some bears don't feel it or simply ignore it.



A roadside black bear reminded three hikers how common bears are in Banff and Jasper national parks. LISA DENSMORE

In a study of 66 incidents in the field in which black bears and grizzly bears were hit with pepper spray, Stephen Herrero, PhD., professor emeritus of animal behavior and ecology at the University of Calgary and the author of the landmark book, *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance* (Lyons Press, 1988), and his colleague, Andrew Higgins, found pepper spray deterred some bears, but not all. In sixteen situations in which attacking grizzly bears got a blast to the face, three bears attacked the sprayer. Of twenty merely curious grizzlies who were sprayed while scavenging human food or garbage, all stopped, eighteen left, but two of those came back later.

Pepper spray had less of an effect on black bears. In the Herrero–Higgins study, only 19 of 26 black bears blasted with pepper spray stopped rummaging through food or garbage. Fourteen left, but six came back. And in four situations with aggressive black bears, though pepper spray stopped the attack, the bears did not depart.

Although the Herrero–Higgins study did not include enough bear encounters to draw more than anecdotal conclusions, it was enough to convince me that, at best, my pepper spray might give me a chance to escape if I encountered a backcountry bruin. However, even an escape was fraught with risk because running could trigger a prey–chase response. In addition, pepper spray would be useless if I were downwind of a bear, in the rain or in heavy brush. I pledged to keep a spotless campsite; look as big and burly as my 130-pound, 5-foot 8-inch body would allow; and to talk or sing loudly for the entire six days on the trail. I did my best with the first two but failed at the last. The scenery from the moment we left the trailhead took my breath away.

Huge Red-Orange Squirrels

We started hiking in early afternoon, traversing several expansive meadows abloom with acres of red and cream Indian paintbrush, hot pink fireweed, and golden cinquefoil. Our goal the first day was to climb over Nigel Pass (elevation 7,201 feet) then descend to Four Points Campground, a distance of 8.6 miles. In Banff and Jasper parks, all camping is by permit and only at designated campsites, which limits the number of people in the backcountry at any one time. Our permit for the first night was for Four Points.

During the 1,200-foot ascent to the bouldery top of Nigel Pass, a flash of gray fur caught my eye. A Columbian ground squirrel scurried across a rock, leapt effortlessly to another rock then paused to look at me. I've seen lots of

squirrels in my backcountry wanderings, but never one quite this big nor this color. Its body was 10 inches long, and it had red-orange fur above its nose and on its legs and belly and a white-tipped tail.

Columbian ground squirrels live mainly in the Canadian Rockies along the Alberta–British Columbia border. Their range also includes Idaho, western Montana, and eastern Washington and Oregon. Sometimes called “red diggers,” they are avid burrowers. A typical red digger will expand its tunnels by as much as thirteen feet annually, impressive considering these portly squirrels are active only about three months per year, during which time they must also stash food for the winter and raise their young.

A highly social species, Columbian ground squirrels greet each other by “kissing.” That would have been fun to see, but this fellow apparently didn’t have any friends nearby. He wasn’t too concerned about me either. If he felt threatened, he would have chirped loudly to warn the rest of his warren. Instead, he stared at me with guarded curiosity like a local farmer wondering why an urbanite had wandered down his rural road.

Dark Skies

After cresting Nigel Pass, the rubble-covered route wound down to the headwaters of the upper Brazeau River. A short distance to the left, a powerful waterfall crashed over and through an exposed swath of rock then flowed down to another broad meadow below us. Eventually, we reached a branch of the river, crossing it on strategically placed rocks. I was grateful for my waterproof hiking boots and for the seasonally low water level.

We passed through the campground at Boulder Creek, pausing briefly to stash a small bag of food. We planned to spend our last night here and didn’t want to carry the extra weight until then, reasoning if a bear stole it, we could still survive the last night.

Four Points Campground was a mile farther, in a clearing overlooking the river. We set up our tents and consumed our dinner rations as the day gave way to dusk. It seemed a hundred stars appeared with each bite of one-pot pasta until they crowded the sky, layer upon glittering layer. In 2011, the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada named Jasper National Park an official Dark Sky Preserve. Encompassing more than 4,200 square miles, the park is the world’s largest such preserve. With virtually no light pollution, it was ironic how much light flooded our campsite. Even without a moon, I could see my shadow.



Eager for a salt snack, a bold marmot tastes a pack strap. LISA DENSMORE

We were back on the trail shortly after dawn anticipating a marathon day. Camping is not allowed in the alpine zone in Jasper National Park, therefore we needed to cover 16.4 miles over two alpine passes—Jonas Pass (elevation 7,612 feet) and Poboktan Pass (elevation 7,546 feet)—and one summit, Jonas Shoulder (elevation 8,104 feet), to reach our next campsite at John-John Creek.

The steady climb to Jonas Pass got my heart pumping quickly. The exertion and the chilly air invigorated me. The trail ascended over fine scree through an alpine valley shaped like a massive, endless half-pipe whose sides curved upward into vertical cliffs. Pale ribbons of water, the runoff from the majestic snowy peaks that pierced the azure sky, cascaded thousands of feet down the precipitous rock.

Encounter With a Marmot

The valley seemed to go on and on, ever rising, until we finally reached a large cairn crowned with a caribou shed marking the top of Jonas Pass. A rodent had delicately nibbled the tip of one of the tines. Antler sheds are a source of dietary minerals for small animals in many ecosystems. In the rugged, near-barren landscape atop Jonas Pass, we speculated what creature could possibly survive there. A pika? The nibbler turned out to be a huge hoary marmot.

As we rested by the cairn, the marmot, the size of a house cat, poked its head from behind a boulder, then wandered over to check us out, apparently

well versed in the ways of backpackers. I wanted to take its picture, expecting it to shyly scurry away, but it posed patiently, assessing us.

Hoary marmots are so named for the white and gray fur on their shoulders and back, the color of an old sage's beard. Most live in Alaska, though they also dwell in alpine meadows throughout the northwest including Alberta and British Columbia. In pioneer days, they were called "whistlers" for their high-pitched warning call. Whistler Mountain, which hosted ski events during the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, is named after this large rodent, the largest species of ground squirrel in North America. Adults weigh 17 to 22 pounds and are about 20 inches long. They are the perfect example of Bergmann's rule of zoology, which states that within a warm-blooded species, the higher the latitude and the lower the ambient temperature in which they live, the larger the animal. The Jonas Pass marmot was not only big; it was bold. Apparently, caribou sheds are not as desirable a source of salt as sweaty backpackers. The marmot marched straight to Bill's pack and started licking the straps. Then it attempted to lick his shirt, tickling Bill with its tongue. He didn't know whether to shoo her away and risk getting nipped or just let her indulge. Jack and I giggled at the silliness of the situation, but soon got sidetracked in conversation, leaving Bill to deal with his new furry friend.

Suddenly Bill yelled, "Hey! Stop thief!" The large rodent had nabbed his small camera bag with his passport inside it and was romping away across the tundra. I jumped up and caught the trailing camera pouch, yanking the strap from the thief's teeth. The marmot ran off.

"Thanks!" said Bill, "That's the first time I've been mugged by a marmot."

From the top of Jonas Pass, we continued through the high alpine valley, soon climbing again, and more steeply. We reached the highest point in our trek 3.6 miles later, atop Jonas Shoulder, but dallied only long enough to regroup and take a few photographs. We still had 6.5 miles and one more pass to cross before reaching our next campsite by John-John Creek.

Elusive Owls

We descended the other side of Jonas Shoulder boot-skiing down the steep talus slope, eventually reaching timberline again. By the time we climbed over Poboktan Pass, my legs were numb from the mileage and my shoulders ached from the load on my back. I lay down by the sign marking the top of

the pass to rest my weary body, hoping to see one of the poboktans for which the pass was named.

Poboktan is a Stoney Indian word for owl. In 1892, a geology professor at the University of Toronto named Arthur Coleman explored the area, naming the pass after seeing several owls here. Coleman, who was likely the first nonnative to come to this mountainous region, also named Jonas Pass after Chief Jonas Good Stoney, who helped Coleman with information and by introducing him to guides during his exploratory forays into this remote alpine area.

Nary an owl hooted at me at Poboktan Pass as I pondered Coleman's visit 119 years ago. I imagined little had changed except for the addition of a few trail signs and campsites, and the fact that there were fewer caribou. I wondered how many grizzly bears Coleman's party fended off, then remembered the Poboktan valley was notorious for bear sightings. Separated from my companions, I suddenly felt vulnerable. I set off without delay, anxious to reach our next campsite at Brazeau Lake.

Brazeau Lake was one of the most beautiful places I've ever pitched a tent. The snow-capped Brazeau Range towered above the timber on the opposite side of the mile-long tarn. The glassy turquoise water shimmered dark green and gold, reflecting the late-day sun on the tall conifers. The clearing where we pitched our tents was at the outlet of the lake, which tumbled away to the east over watery boulders. Jack and Bill were already thigh-deep in the frigid water, casting for trout to supplement our freeze-dried diet.

I dumped my pack under a tall pine, relieved to be free of its load and anxious to try my luck fly fishing, too, when I noticed the weathered skull of a bighorn sheep nailed to the tree trunk above my head. I had forgotten that bighorns were common in Jasper National Park. This one had likely been a ewe because its horns were short and spiky rather than massive and spiraling. As I contemplated how its skull came to be nailed to this spot and whether its herd might still roam this area, Bill appeared, smiling broadly. He carried an impressive 18-inch rainbow trout.

"This is the largest trout I've ever caught!" beamed Bill. It was the tastiest, too, or perhaps we were all so hungry after our long day on the trail that anything would have tasted gourmet. Though a quarter the size of Alberta's record rainbow trout (20.4 pounds), which was also caught in Jasper National Park, Bill's fish was a worthy prize, especially from a body of water at such a high elevation (5,584 feet). Brazeau Lake is ice-free for perhaps three months per year, not a lot of "growing time" for a trout.

Angry Hummingbird

The next morning, we took our time breaking camp. It was a relatively short 5.2 miles to Wolverine South, our destination for the night, and we were loath to leave the lake, a truly spectacular spot. I regretted not reserving two nights there.

We procrastinated half the day before starting down the trail, which followed the swelling Brazeau River. The river was heavy with water that rushed over hidden rocks in a roiling race toward Lake Louise. Fishing was nearly impossible in the untethered, bucking current, but I paused frequently to watch the river, mesmerized by the untamed torrent. At one bend, just before reaching Wolverine South, I spied a mother harlequin duck leading her chicks through the frenzied flow. Harlequin ducks are known for their propensity for fast-moving water and crashing coastal surf. This was the first time I had seen this species of waterfowl. They are listed as endangered in Canada. As I marveled at their ease in such turbulent current, I reflected on how perfectly adapted the many species I had encountered on this backpacking trip were to this northern realm. My visit, during the gentlest time of the year, gave me merely a glimpse of the diversity of Jasper's animal life despite the rugged terrain and severe arctic climate.

By the time I reached Wolverine South, Jack and Bill were already waging war on the buzzing battalion of mosquitoes that relentlessly dive-bombed them. Bill consulted our topo map between slaps to his neck and face.



A mother harlequin duck leads her ducklings through the frenzied flow of the Brazeau River. LISA DENSMORE

“Maybe we should skip our last night at Boulder Creek and hike out tomorrow,” he suggested, “These bugs are driving me crazy.”

“How far is it?” asked Jack, who was trying his best to keep his mood sociable despite the growing number of small red welts on his hands, neck, and ankles. “These mosquitoes are biting me through my shirt!”

“It’s about 12 miles to the car versus five miles to Boulder Creek,” Bill said.

After our 16-miler two days earlier, 12 miles seemed like a reasonable day, particularly because we wouldn’t see anything new. We had already passed through Boulder Creek campground on the first day. It offered no prospect of good fishing and would likely be buggy. We decided to have lunch at Boulder Creek if our food stash there was still intact then continue to the trailhead.

As it turned out, instead of swatting mosquitoes at Boulder Creek, we fended off a kamikaze hummingbird.

“It surely can’t be attracted to my smell,” Bill joked, as he ducked to avoid one overzealous flyby.

As we chuckled at the tiny bird with the audacious attitude, I got the sense that it was simply annoyed at our intrusion. Though the Stoney tribe had passed through these wildflower-carpeted valleys and over these alpine ridges long before 1907 when Jasper National Park was established, humans were interlopers in this mountain domain. It belonged to the bears, wolves, and caribou; the ground squirrels, marmots, and bighorn sheep; the harlequin ducks, hummingbirds, and countless other species that lived in this fragile yet complex ecosystem. I might not have seen all of the wildlife that existed there, but evidence of the animals had been constantly around me.

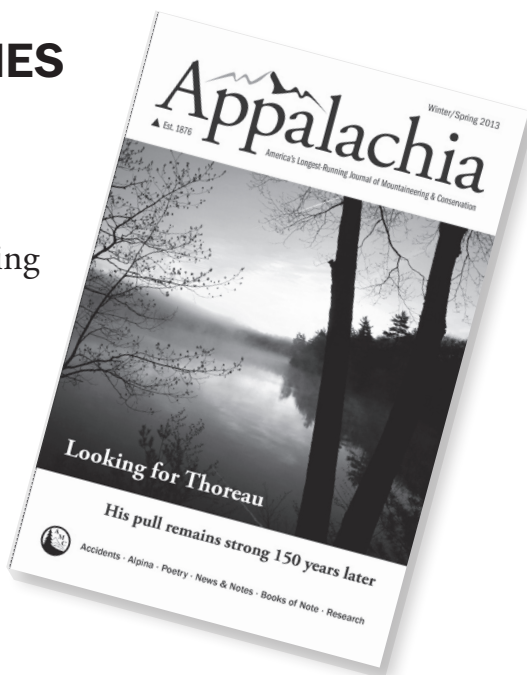
LISA DENSMORE is an award-winning writer and photographer. She splits her time between Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York, when she’s not exploring a mountain range somewhere in the world.

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