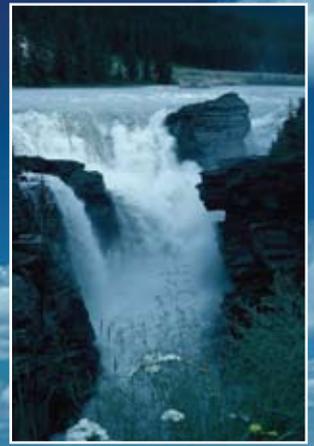


Trail Running in the Canadian Rockies



We drove into the Banff National Park having landed in Calgary at the height of the El Nino summer of 1997. This was our first visit to the Rockies and the initial impression was of the sheer scale of the forests. Conifers filled the broad valleys and spread up the slopes towards scree, rock and glaciers. Another apparent feature of this stunning country was the suggestion of vast areas of wilderness spreading out from the narrow strips of man-made development.

We had six weeks ahead of us and a car full of camping, climbing and running gear to help fill the days. For a number of years previously we'd spent our summer holidays in the European Alps, adopting a routine of climbing when the weather was good and trail running when it wasn't. The intention of our trip to the Rockies was to find something similar... but different. Even though the Alps and Rockies have many similarities (in terms of geology, climate and the potential for adventure) we found the extent of their difference is surprising.

Initial forays into the hills around Banff provided some great days out on rocky peaks overlooking valleys, lakes and the expanse of trees. A particular highlight was an ascent of Mount Rundle with its summit ridge giving fine open views stretching from Canmore in the south and then for miles up the Trans-Canadian Highway towards Jasper further north. Again these views hinted at adventures to come in the weeks ahead. What had really drawn us to the Rockies were the higher alpine peaks giving the opportunity to follow snow covered routes onto the ridges and summits. However initial trips onto the glaciers revealed the full extent of the damage being caused by El Nino. What would usually be snow covered valleys of ice with occasional crevasses to bypass had been melted into miles of grey, rubble covered mush with gaping holes everywhere. Speaking to the local climbing guides revealed the magnitude of the problems caused by this meteorological phenomenon and explained why the routes we'd attempted bore little resemblance to those described in the guidebooks. Local knowledge

however did point us towards some great days out on the peaks surrounding the Wapta Icefield and also a particularly memorable ascent of Mount Athabasca, where at dawn we were privileged to see a breathtaking display of the northern lights.

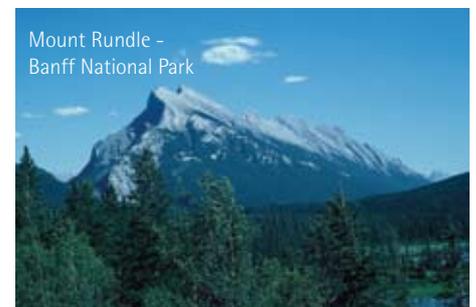
We were by now starting to think about possible alternatives to scratching around on collapsing glaciers, while dodging rocks falling from the cliffs. A move to explore the trails into the endless forests and beyond seemed an attractive proposition. We had also quickly come to realise that very few of the locals actually ventured high above the tree line and onto the alpine peaks, as is traditional in Europe. One of the differences here is that the experience of time spent in the valleys, or "backcountry", really does mean getting away from civilisation and travelling through the wilderness. The national parks of Banff, Yoho and Jasper have hundreds of miles of excellent trails passing through impressive forests, with stunning views of mountains and lakes, and are home to more wildlife than you're likely to see anywhere else.

Our first run around the trails of Lake O'Hara revealed the huge potential for inspirational running along the network of trails developed for walkers to travel into the backcountry. From the car park on the Trans Canadian Highway we decided to warm up by running the 9kms along the access track, rather than wait for the shuttle bus which runs up and down the gravel road. Lake O'Hara Lodge provides accommodation and meals for those who wish to stay at the head of the valley to explore the area. Beyond this one of the most extensive trail systems in the national park traverse the mountainsides and visit the many small lakes, with Lake O'Hara itself being an unreal and luminous azure blue. The running was fantastic, with the views being dominated by the same peaks that form the impressive backdrop to Lake Louise – the continental divide of Mounts Lefroy and Victoria. The trails were so well maintained that road shoes performed well with no need for studs, and the weather so settled that we were able to travel light. At the end of the afternoon, having

run for hours in the sun and swam in some of the lakes, we negotiated the final twisting descent down to Lake O'Hara Lodge and the last bus back to the valley. It was a surprise to find the bus fully booked with a walking party. The dawning prospect of a return run down the 9kms of, by now very hot and dusty, access road was not a welcome one. At the end of the day however the lasting memory was of amazing scenery and superb running which alternated from atmospheric conifer forests to open mountainside. Some of the more open trails were reminiscent of the paths across the tops



Jane overlooking Lake O'Hara



Mount Rundle - Banff National Park



Female Elk - Banff National park



The vivid Peyto Lake



Spray Lakes



Moraine Lake

of the Carneddeau, and yet a quick upwards glance always revealed a lake of unreal blue or huge rock wall fringed by glacial ice.

Other runs followed in the valleys around Lake Louise and the Yoho National Park. A particularly memorable two days were spent running up the Yoho Valley, visiting the many impressive waterfalls, and then arriving to stay overnight at the Stanley Mitchell Hut. The mountain parks of Canada are all well served with mountain huts or lodges, mostly owned by the Alpine Club of Canada. Some are well positioned to allow multi-day tours for trail runners without the need to carry camping or bivvi gear. They operate a system where bed spaces are booked in advance, and all you are advised to take with you is a supply of "white gas", looking very much like paraffin to us. Stoves and lighting in the huts run from white gas and it can be bought at any of the outdoor shops in the main towns. This arrangement is ideal for trail running and allowed us to travel light and move freely.

We arrived at the log built Stanley Mitchell Hut to be welcomed by a particularly excited group of backpackers. They'd just returned from exploring the surrounding forest searching for mushrooms to liven up their dehydrated rice with monosodium glutamate. However the excitement seemed somewhat out of proportion when looking at the contents of their mushroom basket. Once we'd got our breath all became clear as they quizzed us on how close we'd been to the bear that had just passed through. Obviously not close enough for it to register with us as we ran through the trees... what?... hadn't we even seen the pile of fresh Grizzly droppings, berries and all, right in the middle of the trail?... nope. I was disappointed as one of the benefits we'd realised while

BY JANE UMPLEBY



Banff and the Trans Canadian Highway from Mount Rundle

running in this area were the frequent chances to see wildlife from relative close quarters. Ben Gadd's *Handbook of the Canadian Rockies* was always close to hand and enabled us to identify most things we ran into – chipmunks, ground squirrels, white-tailed deer, bighorn sheep, elk, racoon, marmot and many more. Ironically having spent weeks in the Rockies our closest bear encounter was on a Vancouver Island beach. A black bear appeared from the forest and crossed the beach probably no more than 200 metres in front of us, pausing to size us up before heading to the shoreline for a spot

of fishing. There's a lot of hype in the Rockies surrounding bear encounters and how to avoid conflict. However many more people have been attacked by elk in the national parks than by bears. As long as the common sense advice regarding food storage is followed you are very unlikely to have any problems. Further advice about making plenty of noise while travelling along the trail has the downside of scaring everything away. If a bear is surprised at close quarters, decides you are a threat and charges, there are many schools-of-thought about what to do next. Fortunately for us runners school-of-

thought number one is... run like hell! Unless the bear is looking for a training partner this will probably be the end of the encounter. I guess it all adds to the adventure.

After a very comfortable night in the Stanley Mitchell Hut we left early to run back to the Yoho Valley via the Iceline Trail. A short section of forest soon opened out to reveal expansive views of the valley and the edge of the Emerald Glacier. Much of the higher section of the trail weaves between the terminal moraine of the glacier passing occasional small rockbound lakes. The latter part of the Iceline is a fine sweeping 3km descent back down to the trailhead at Takakkaw Falls. We'd only covered a small percentage of the trails in the Yoho National Park, leaving many possibilities for future trips into the area.

With some knowledge of the vast trail network, and location of accommodation in the backcountry, days and days of trail running adventure are there to be enjoyed. Hundreds of possible excursions exist from short training runs to multi-day expeditions through the wilderness. The scenery is truly inspirational and you can expect interesting wildlife behind every tree... well almost.

The Canadian Rockies is one of the destinations that Wide Open Trails are offering trail runners looking for adventure travel. Please go to: www.wideopentrails.com for 2009 tour details.



Lake District & Scotland



European Alps



Canadian Rockies



Himalayan Foothills



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