



DISCOVERING WONDERS IN MY OWN BACKYARD

by KATE ROBERTSON

“The tug is the drug,” says Cam, my fly-fishing guide, and after my first catch of a small rainbow trout, I’m hooked. We’re fishing from a small flat-bottomed fishing boat that you can stand up in, called a jon, in the middle of Black Water Lake #2, a small backcountry lake close to Golden, BC.

Initially we trolled along the lake’s edges, casting with a dry fly and got some nibbles, but it’s when we switched to a wet fly that the nibbles turned into bites. Like most guides, Cam is a wealth of information, not just about casting technique, but also about the region and where to go to catch the “big one,” like the coveted bull trout that can weigh up to 15 kilograms.

This was my first in-province trips after restrictions eased from the pandemic; an opportunity to explore both Yoho and Kootenay National Parks, and their gateway cities of Golden and Radium.

Golden’s abundant activity list has continued to grow since the Golden Skybridge opening in 2021. The facility boasts Canada’s two highest suspension bridges: one, a scary 130-metres high; the other, 80 metres. Both crossings allow plenty of time for a bird’s eye view of the canyon and the crashing creek below on my wobbly totter across the 150-metre span to the other side.

Across the valley, I visit Boo, the 650-pound resident grizzly at Kicking Horse Mountain Resort, where he’s foraging for food close to the fence. “Bears can smell 14 kilometres away, and more if it’s wet out,” says interpretive guide, Cala, as she describes the treasure hunts that staff set up for Boo each day. His current fave food is corn on the cob, which he husks with his 18-cm-long front paw-toes. Boo has lived on this 6.9-hect-

ares of mountain terrain since 2002 when a poacher shot his mom. He was five months old.

For a different perspective of the Serlkirk and Purcell mountains, I booked an ATV tour with Canadian Off-Road Adventures. We travel on forestry service roads up the mountain to the Gorman Lake trailhead, where there’s still plenty of snow on Gorman Peak. Owner Che Koroll is one of our guides and he knows all the local peaks and trails from ATViing and sledding up here for years. On the way back down, things get exciting as we branch off on wagon trails and bounce through puddles and over rocks. When we cross Gorman Creek, the water is so high my shoes get wet, and it feels like the ATV starts to float.

Only a half-hour’s drive away, Yoho is Golden’s national park playground, as it is for local hiking guide and interpreter, Laura Crombeen, owner of Self-Propelled Adventures. Walking down the shaded Wapta Falls trail, Crombeen stops to give educational chats about interesting things like burls on trees (often caused by bacteria or fungi disturbing the cell growth) and to identify the local fauna. Even though it’s late June, spring is late this year, so early bloomers like anemones and glacier lilies can still be spotted.

ABOVE | (Left) The author on the Golden Skybridge. (Right) Emerald Lake.
PAGE 9 | Che Koroll, owner of Canadian Off Road Adventures at Gorman Lake trailhead.
TOC | Boo the Bear at Kicking Horse Resort. Photos: Kate Robertson

At 18 metres high, Wapta Falls is the largest waterfall on the Kicking Horse River, with a width of more than two football fields at 107 metres, and the spray of water reaches us even though we’re standing far past the waterfall base.

One of the beauties of Yoho is several attractions just a short drive off the main highway, like Emerald Lake, surrounded by the towering peaks of the President Range. Emerald rivals any of the more famous Rocky Mountain National Park lakes when it comes to beauty. Yoho is home to a large number of glaciers, and Emerald Lake is full of rock flour (rock particles finely ground by moving glaciers) that refract the light in a vibrant display of colours, hence the name. Summer melt-season is when the green-blue colour is most vivid.

An hour’s drive along highway 95, which skirts the Columbia River (keep your eyes open when driving this stretch, the extensive wetlands is habitat for more than 250 species of birds,



including eagles, osprey and herons), brings me to Radium Hot Springs. Just inside the gates of Kootenay National Park, I meet Chris Skinner, guide and owner of Playwest Mountain Experience, to hike a local favourite: the Kindersley-Sinclair loop.

Summer is grizzly bear season, so Parks Canada has signs at the trailhead advising groups of at least four. “There’s no known grizzly attack on a group of four or more,” reassures Skinner, as we start our ascent through dense forest.

Biologist Leah Pengally is joining us today to educate about grizzly facts,

and she says the chances of a grizzly sighting are high. They frequent the avalanche chutes here, where vegetation they love, like cow parsnip, glacier lilies and dandelions, grows abundantly. Although we didn’t see a bear, at the summit, as well as stellar views of the surrounding valleys and snow-covered peaks of the Rockies, we did find plenty of “digs” (grizzlies dig deep holes to catch ground squirrels), some over 1.5 metres deep.

Kootenay National Park is unique in that it was established in 1920 to build a 94-kilometre highway from Banff to the Windermere Valley (most people still just drive through the park without stopping), and the park’s long, narrow shape is due to the initial agreement, which set aside park lands on either side of the road.

Several massive forest fires have swept through the park in the past few decades, leaving residual burn sites that give it a distinctive gothic-romance feel. Stanley Glacier Parks Canada guide Vicky Mont educates visitors on the natural forest regeneration cycle. “Fires are not bad,” she emphasizes, as she pulls photos out of her backpack to show us the Stanley Glacier area 100 years ago versus today.

After a 365-metre hike up, the group arrives at a boulder field at the base of the glacier. But this isn’t just any boulder field. Although Burgess shale fossils were discovered in Yoho National Park in 1886, the fossils here were not discovered until 2012. Unlike most Burgess Shale locations, where a guide is necessary, at Stanley Glacier you can hike on your own to find fossils, which clearly show the visible details of bones and insides of creatures from the underwater ecosystem that existed for a short time after the first explosion of multicellular life on earth over 505 million years ago.

As I travel back home, I’m thankful I had a chance to explore the wonders in my own backyard. |

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