



Looking west from our
turn-around point at Nigel Pass.



Riding the Remarkable ROCKIES

BY TANIA MILLEN

BOOM! CRACK! FLASH!

Instantly I was awake. Rain and wind was pounding the tent. Thunder crashed and lightning snapped. The storm was right on top of us and the sound was deafening. Intense flashes of lightning rendered my eyes useless. Unconsciously I pushed my spine into the ground, trying to make my body as small as possible while a myriad of thoughts spun through my head...

Were the horses okay? They were tied under trees in a slight dip. If the trees were hit by lightning, they'd all be killed. If they spooked and got loose, we'd probably never find them. Should I get up and check on them? I was afraid of standing up and becoming a lightning rod. Plus a hunched-over shape blindly feeling her way towards six worried horses through a roiling storm could cause them to panic. Better to stay in the tent, flat on the ground.

Were Tom and Sue okay? They were camped nearby but if I called out they'd never hear me over the torrential rain and crashing thunder. They'd just have to survive the best they could. Which made me wonder, what possessed us — experienced backcountry travelers — to camp on top of an isolated hill in the remote Upper Brazeau River valley of the Canadian Rockies, with a storm rolling in? My thoughts were interrupted by thunder banging around the valley.

The Upper Brazeau River Valley in Jasper National Park parallels the northern border of Banff National Park and is part of a popular hiking loop. It has a healthy grizzly bear population, interesting history, and stunning scenery. There are two trailheads on the Icefields Parkway — the main north-south road through the Rockies — which provide quick access to genuine backcountry.

In mid-July, a friend and I had planned to do a nine-day pack trip into the Upper Brazeau with four horses. Our final destination and turnaround point was Nigel Pass, but the trip was cut short when we couldn't cross the flooded Brazeau River. However, I'd planned a second trip into the Rockies with friends in August, so rather than venturing down a new trail, they agreed to pack into the Brazeau.



Brazeau Lake is one of the largest backcountry lakes in Jasper National Park.

Mountain trails can have steep climbs, such as this one out of the John-John Creek valley.



PHOTOS: SUE KEALL

Jasper National Park has a long history of human use and the Brazeau area is no exception. For thousands of years, First Nations people traversed the Rockies in search of game for food and trade. The first Europeans who travelled through the mountains were also chasing game — in the form of furs to purchase. The Yellowhead Highway (Highway 16) through Jasper began as a fur trader's route and was named after Pierre Bostonais, who was a scout and guide for the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1810s and 1820s. Bostonais was nicknamed Tête Jaune (French for "Yellow Head") due to his blond hair; hence the naming of Tête Jaune Cache and the Yellowhead Highway.

Traders were followed by surveyors, scientists, and explorers guided by outfitters. In 1885, the Canadian Pacific Railway was constructed through what is now Banff National Park to the south. It was another 25 years before the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway was constructed through the town of Jasper and the Yellowhead Pass, arriving three years after Jasper National Park was created in 1907. The two railways through the Rockies subsequently brought tourists and mountaineers to the mountain parks. The guides and outfitters they hired did most of the route-finding in the park and established trails for their pack trains of horses; park wardens also helped, having maintained Rocky Mountain trails since 1914.

The advent of the automobile in the 1920s increased the number of visitors to the mountains; however, fewer and fewer ventured into the backcountry. By the 1930s, lighter hiking equipment meant that people could carry all the supplies they needed for a two-week trip into the backcountry. These technological advances meant the end of the horse pack train era; development of new park trails ended, too.

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Trails along river banks are often washed out, so riding in the river itself is sometimes the only option. ^

Winter was coming; squirrels were stockpiling mushrooms in the trees. >

Reliable horses and well-prepared riders make pack trips safe and fun. v



The route we were following — Pobokton Creek to Brazeau River and Nigel Pass — follows the route of European fur traders and explorers on what was formerly known as the McGillivray-Coleman trail. In 1800, Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company collaborated with David Thompson to become the first European to visit the unnamed Brazeau Lake area in the southeast portion of what is now Jasper National Park. His party travelled west from Rocky Mountain House to the Brazeau River, up to Brazeau Lake, up John-John Creek to Pobokton Pass, and down Pobokton Creek.

In the late 1850s, the Palliser Expedition — including linguist Joseph Brazeau — travelled through the area, hence the Brazeau River's name. The route was traversed again by Arthur and Lucius Coleman in 1885, who then carried on to the upper Brazeau River and Nigel Pass areas. It was Arthur Coleman who named Pobokton Pass and Creek after the Stoney First Nation word for owl, *pobokton*, because of the large owls he saw in the spruce trees.

Then in 1908, Mary Schaeffer, a well-known explorer who hired seasoned guides and packers, travelled the Nigel Pass/Brazeau Lake/Pobokton Pass route on her successful search for Maligne Lake.

Our route was from north to south and back again, over 100 years after the first European explorers. We started our trip at Sunwapta Warden's Station on Pobokton Creek along the Icefields Parkway and followed the creek upstream for 20 km to our first camp at McCready's. Most of the horse camps in the Rockies are named; teasing out the story of how they got their name is difficult. I still don't know who "McCready" was, but he/she had selected an excellent horse campsite that is protected by trees, westward sloping to substantial grazing terraces, and adjacent to a creek. Park wardens had complemented the campsite with a corral, hitching rails, level tent areas, picnic table and fire ring. There was even a roughly carved sign stating "McCready's" to ensure that we didn't miss the turnoff. Who said backcountry camping was rough?

The second day of the trip was a great example of how spectacular horse pack trips can be. It was sunny and cool while the horses sweated up to Pobokton Pass at 2,270 metres (7,450 feet), where we stopped for the view and a few pictures. Then we led the horses down a heavily switchbacked trail to John-John Creek — a tight little valley with rocky ramparts reminiscent of the desert and

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Subalpine Pobokton Pass provides great views.

PHOTO: SUE KEALL



There is fantastic grazing at Brazeau Meadows.

PHOTO: TOM DAVIES

canyon lands of Utah. At one point, spring meltwater had gouged a deep gully through the trail which required tricky route-finding to traverse. A boulder-lined creek crossing led to spectacular views of seldom-visited Brazeau Lake, while a second (bridged) crossing allowed access to our next campsite - Brazeau Meadows.

It's unusual to find large grassy areas such as Brazeau Meadows on mountain pack trips, so the campsite was ideal for a rest day. Unfortunately, the meadows in the Rockies are shrinking.

Comparison of air photos and historical reports indicate that brush and evergreens are growing at higher and higher elevations and slowly encroaching on mountain meadows, thereby changing the Rockies' ecosystems. So grazing meadows are harder to find - not only for the occasional horse pack string - but more importantly, for the mammal populations that Canada's Rocky Mountain parks help conserve.

Former fire suppression protocols haven't helped, either. Fires are natural and help prevent encroachment, so wardens conduct spot-burning to imitate nature, and new park policies allow fires to burn in the parks. The area around Brazeau Meadows had been spot-burned before our trip, and the horses delighted in seeking out succulent grass stems which had sprung up post-burn.



Muddy looking for treats during a pre-dinner snack.

PHOTO: SUE KEALL

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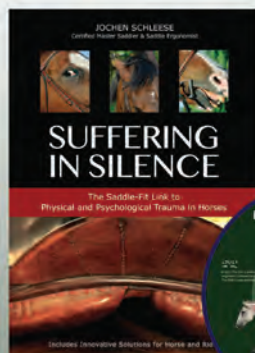


The Brazeau River dropped 0.6 metres or two feet from its flood levels in July, allowing a safe crossing.



The route crisscrossed the Brazeau River several times.

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Following a rest day, we rode west up the Upper Brazeau River valley, crossing the Brazeau River three times at unbridged crossings. Several years of high floodwaters and years of reduced federal funding have rendered many national park trails impassable to hikers; however, horse travel is still viable for those willing to ford creeks and clear trails.

Upon arriving at Cline campsite, we were disappointed to find a less than ideal horse camping situation. Although a lovely knoll provided exceptional grazing and views, the campsite was across a creek, far from the trail. Since horses love to disappear down the back trail and leave their riders stranded, allowing the horses to graze close to the trail while we camped across a creek would be a poor choice. So we camped on the knoll, had a spectacular view of the storm rolling in, and subsequently regretted our decision immensely.

Having stayed in my tent while thunder and lightning crashed overhead, I snuck out and checked the horses as soon as the storm eased. Thankfully they seemed rather relaxed and none the worse for wear. The next morning Tom, Sue, and I discussed the violence of the storm and our poor campsite

choice before excitedly chatting about the day's destination - Nigel Pass.

After a quick breakfast, we tacked up and followed grizzly tracks upstream through the subalpine Brazeau River Valley. Rounding a bend in the trail, we came upon a massive rockslide. Chunks of rocks the size of school buses were jumbled together above a steep-sided canyon for half a kilometre. Route-finding through the slide would have been a nightmare; fortunately a horse-friendly trail wound through the slide. After the slide we crossed the much-smaller Brazeau one last time and arrived at Nigel Pass.

Following our difficult night, the superb riding, stellar bluebird day, and view of seemingly endless snow-encased mountains from Nigel Pass was delightful. Although

Thanks goodness for bridges, and horses that aren't fazed by them.



THREE RIDERS PHOTO: TANIA MILLEN • RIVER CROSSING PHOTOS: SUE KEALL



Happy riders sporting their warmest wear.

we were only halfway through our trip, and had to ride back the way we'd come, Nigel Pass was our destination and we were grateful to have been rewarded with such a lovely day.

As often happens with horse pack trips, our journey provided much more than we expected: bear sightings, challenges, views, and even a glimpse of the not-so-common "pobokton." It reminded me, once again, that magnificent surprises await those who choose to explore the wilderness of our wonderful country. ❄️

Tania Millen is a backcountry rider, author and environmental consultant based in Terrace, BC. Her book Pack em Up, Ride em Out: Classic Horse Pack Trips in British Columbia and Alberta is published by Caitlin Press. www.taniamillen.com

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