

# PATHFINDER

Winter 2025



A NEWSLETTER FROM THE GREAT DIVIDE TRAIL ASSOCIATION



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**Cover Photo:** Descending from Northover Ridge by Edward Dawson

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# Letter from Kate

Dear Friends and Volunteers,

As winter settles in, it is the perfect time to pause, reflect on the amazing trail season we have just completed, and look ahead to the exciting year to come.

This summer, we launched some incredible initiatives. One highlight was the introduction of the new hiker hang tags. These were a fun keepsake for hikers and also a powerful tool that helped raise awareness about permits, Leave No Trace ethics, and allowed us to gather valuable data on trail use.

Our Trail Ambassador Program was another inspiring success. The stories, photos, and trail reports that came in were both informative and heartwarming. It was a wonderful reminder of how strong our trail community is, driven by connection, stewardship, and adventure.

On a personal note, one of my summer highlights was hiking Section F with three long-time GDTA volunteers: Barb Lauer, Lynnne Wonfer, and Tyra Carleton. It was a privilege to witness Barb and Lynnne complete their 8-year journey of hiking the entire Great Divide Trail. Their dedication and determination are incredible. You can read Barb's trip report on page 17.

I also had the opportunity to lead the Maligne Pass clearing trip in collaboration with Friends of Jasper National Park. They are a pleasure to work with and strong supporters of the GDT. All the stories about difficult bushwhacking in the Maligne Valley were the opposite of my experience, thanks to years of volunteer efforts that have helped maintain this beautiful section.

Looking forward, we are in the midst of our largest and most important Trail Supporter Campaign yet. For the first time, we have an extraordinarily generous and anonymous donor who is matching all incoming donations, doubling their impact. With the exciting Blaeberry Cable Car Project ahead and uncertainty around next year's grant funding, this support could make a transformational difference.

As always, none of this would be possible without our amazing volunteers, both on and off the trail. Your passion, perseverance, and commitment keep the GDTA moving forward.

Happy trails,  
Kate

*Kate Hamilton is the Executive Director of the Great Divide Trail Association*

# Trail Work Updates



**By Kristine O’Rielly**

The GDTA is coming off another successful trail building season! The 2025 field season, spearheaded by the Trail Building and Maintenance Committee (TBMC), was our most ambitious yet. Some key stats and highlights include:

- 14 trail building trips were completed this summer in the following areas: 6 trips in the Erris Lake area and 2 trips in the North Racehorse Creek area of the High Rock Trail (Section B), West Castle River (Section A), Blaeberry River (Section D), Palliser River (Section C), Cache Creek (Section B), Maligne Pass (Section E), Sheep to Casket Creek area in the Wilmore Wilderness (Section G) and Cecilia to Kakwa Lake in Kakwa Provincial Park (Section G)
- 3 km of new trail was built in the Erris Lake area
- A new bridge was built over North Racehorse Creek
- Bear lockers were installed at 2 campgrounds – North Racehorse Creek and Cache Creek
- New switchbacks were added to Suicide Hill, reducing the trail grade from 25% to 15%

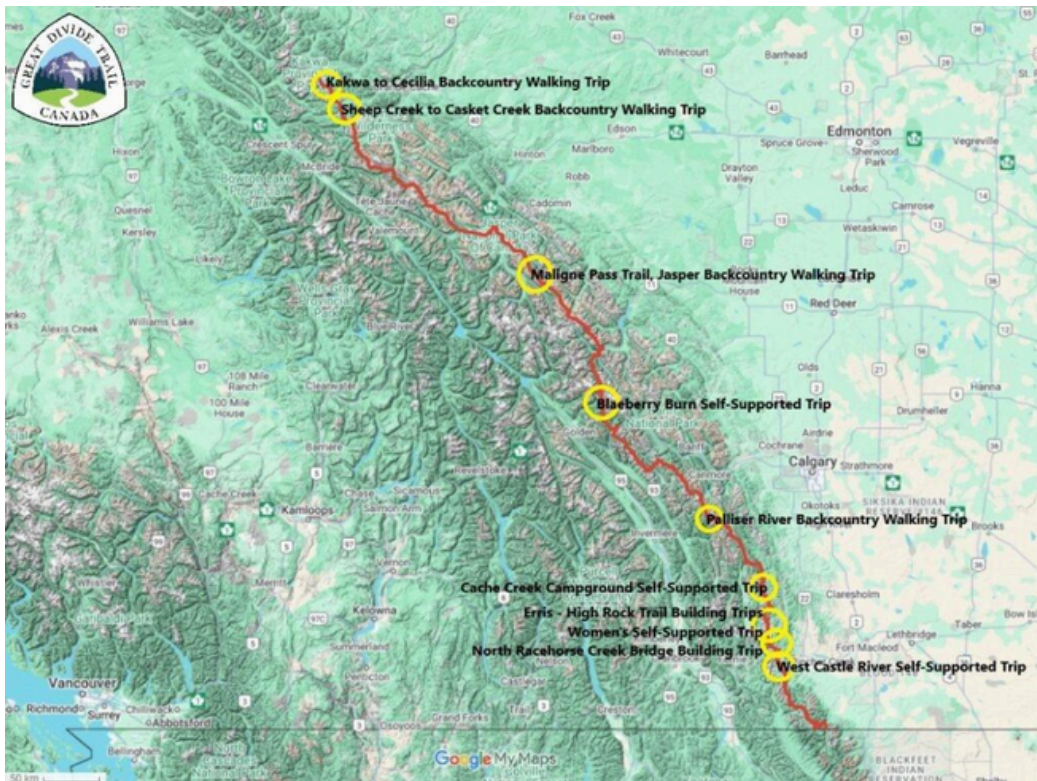


Figure 1 – Location of the 2025 GDTA Trail Building and Maintenance Trips

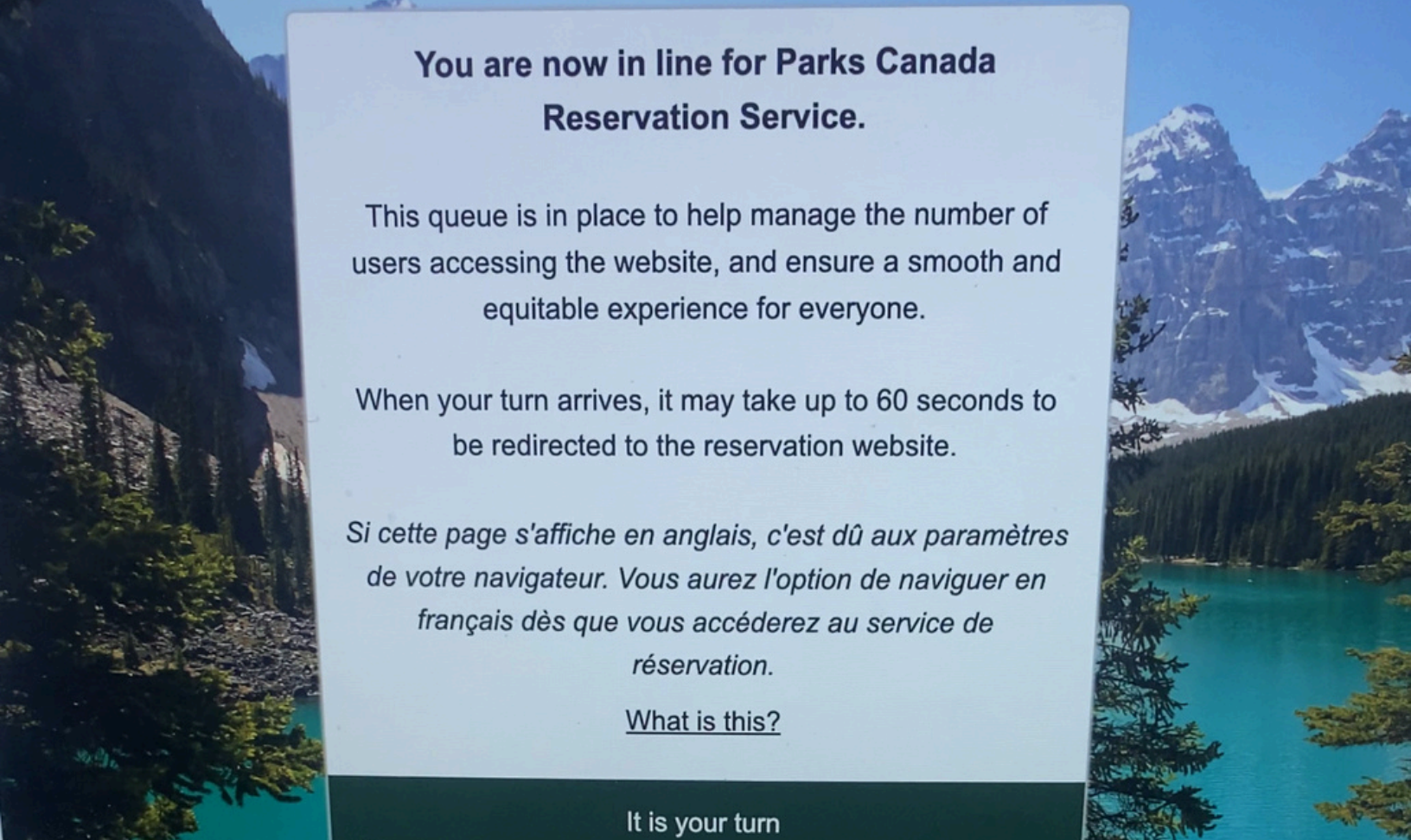
- A record-breaking 5,740 hours of field work were completed by 126 volunteers with 0 reported near-misses or safety incidents
- 2025 saw the first return of the GDTA Signature Trip since the pandemic. With a basecamp, group activities, and home-cooked meals, the Signature Trip is the perfect opportunity for those looking to ease into the world of trail building
- 2025 also saw the second iteration of our Trail Ambassador Program. Through this program GDTA thru-hikers apply to be ambassadors and collect key trail data for the Association. The program was a huge success, with 3 ambassadors participating.
- We also trialed having volunteers join us for weekends. This trip length was popular amongst volunteers, especially new volunteers, and we hope to be able to expand our weekend trip offerings in the future.
- The GDTA continued to work with community partners, including the Kakwa-Sherman Equestrian Group, Friends of Jasper, Wildsight, Wild Rockies Field Institute, and the Junior Forest Rangers, to maximize trail impact and provide youth educational opportunities.
- 2025 was also Year 4 of our High Rock Trail Adopter Program with Crowsnest Bible Camp. As part of this program, Crowsnest Bible Camp has been clearing deadfall between Atlas Creek and First Creek each summer.



Our trail building season could not be successful without the support of our funders, which include the Alberta Public Land Trails Grant, Alberta Equestrian Federation, Recreation Sites and Trails BC, BC Parks, Columbia Basin Trust, and Athletic Brewing Co. Thank you for your continued support of the Great Divide Trail!

On behalf of the entire GDTA, we would like to take this time to once again extend endless thanks to our volunteers! We had a record-breaking number of on-trail hours this year despite the unseasonably wet weather. Volunteers braved wet, cold and often mucky conditions this summer to help us build, clear, and re-route trail from Sections A to G. Trail building and maintenance is tough work and we couldn't do what we do without our amazing community of volunteers! Our field work would also not be possible without the support of our Trail Building and Maintenance Committee and other GDTA volunteers who support activities such as equipment management and maintenance, grant writing and land authorization, and permitting. There are many unsung heroes behind the scenes who make our annual field work possible!

Stay tuned for our 2026 trail season plans in the new year



**You are now in line for Parks Canada  
Reservation Service.**

This queue is in place to help manage the number of users accessing the website, and ensure a smooth and equitable experience for everyone.

When your turn arrives, it may take up to 60 seconds to be redirected to the reservation website.

*Si cette page s'affiche en anglais, c'est dû aux paramètres de votre navigateur. Vous aurez l'option de naviguer en français dès que vous accéderez au service de réservation.*

[What is this?](#)


It is your turn

## Permits, Permits, Permits. What sets the GDT apart from other major thru hikes.

By Meg Kaizer

This year the Great Divide Trail has had a hard launch into the public eye. With a significant increase in numbers of those hiking this year, posting on their socials while on their GDT hikes, and having Jessica (AKA Stitches) be the first woman to complete the CDT and GDT, we are excited to see an increase in interest in those wanting to thru hike the GDT. However, it comes up every year from potential hikers looking into the logistics of the GDT... 'What if I don't get my permits?' Here at the GDTA we have a hard stance on this: If you don't acquire your permits, we don't endorse your GDT hike. For years we have been working hard with Parks Canada, BC Parks, and Alberta Parks to advocate for the Great Divide Trail. While we are all GDT enthusiasts, it is still not a recognized or protected trail within the Parks Canada system. Therefore, we will always support the booking system in which Parks Canada has put in place, and keep our stance strong with pushing for everyone wishing to hike the GDT to get their permits.

This year we were alerted by Parks Canada that there was an increase in non-permit hikers for the GDT, and on top of those, certain GDT hikers were rude to Parks Canada staff while defending their right to be hiking without a permit. The GDTA was appalled and denounced these behaviors immediately. What we are hoping to stress this year is how, if we continue to see an increase in noncompliance hiking, Parks Canada can shut down their portions of the GDT, and therefore the GDT will not be a cohesive thru hike.



With that all out in the open, the question remains; why do we need to adhere to the permit system? Did you know that the GDT has limited carrying capacity? This means that the backcountry in which the GDT passes through can only handle so much foot traffic every hiking season. Parks Canada has taken their job seriously in preservation of the backcountry and have implemented the permit system to manage visitor numbers. The GDTA supports Parks Canada's efforts to maintain the sustainability of backcountry recreation.

To drive home how delicate the backcountry the GDT runs along is, the most that could be accommodated in a hiking season is only around 250 hikes according to Parks Canada. This is drastically different than hikes like the PCT, which annually issues over 7000 permits per hiking season. While we are always advocating for a thru-hiker permit, we are nowhere near getting one anytime soon. The permit system Parks Canada has in place is a part of the GDT experience. Having to plan out every kilometer, stress on booking days, and continuously using apps like Schnerp to see if the campground you need becomes available so you can do your hike is part of what makes the GDT a unique hike. We are always monitoring our Facebook, Instagram, and even Far Out comments and discussions on hikers' experiences and how the GDTA can make the booking system and navigating planning the GDT easier. We are continuously advocating and working towards potentially one year getting a thru hiker permit for GDT hikers. You can help us achieve this goal by becoming a GDTA member. With higher membership numbers, we can show how much support and interest there is in the GDT. We are so excited for the 2026 hiking season. Please, get your permits.

# Junior Forest Rangers



By Tyler Blaney

This past July, the Great Divide Trail Association (GDTA) partnered with Alberta's Junior Forest Rangers (JFR) for a week of trail work along the Erris corridor on Section B. Together, we built approximately 300 metres of new trail through rugged backcountry terrain that future generations of hikers will enjoy.

The Junior Forest Rangers arrived with enthusiasm and curiosity, ready to take on the challenge of creating trail through untouched wilderness. Guided by GDTA trip leaders Tyler Blaney, Brodie Bauer, and Maggie Gietz, the crew not only learned the technical skills of safe tool handling, but also gained a deeper appreciation for the vision and stewardship behind the Great Divide Trail.

Trail building is hard work, but also deeply rewarding. As JFR Crew Sub Leader Caleb Froehlich reflected:

"Our time on the GDT was hard work—but it was especially rewarding. Our crew got to leave their mark on history, a mark that their great grandkids will one day be able to experience... To me, it did not feel like a day at work. The scenery was beautiful, especially Erris Lake, which some of us swam in. Overall, 100% recommend."

For many, this was their first experience with trail construction, and the impact was lasting.

JFR Crew Leader Rachel Aldworth shared:

“What a breathtaking experience! I have never personally done trail building before and I could not have asked for a better opportunity. It was amazing to really see the work that goes into building and maintaining trail systems... I am so glad the Rocky JFR crew could be involved in the Great Divide Trail, something they can share with their families to come!”

The week was also a powerful lesson in perseverance and teamwork. Junior Forest Ranger - Leader In Training, Trice Black captured it well:

“Creating new trails out of pure wilderness was truly a ‘thrown into the deep end’ kind of experience. The crew pushed through with sweat, grit, and more blisters than they’d like to admit. Carving a path through naturally untouched nature, this project stands as a testament to what our youth and community can achieve together.”

Beyond the physical work of trail building, the week was about connection—between people, place, and purpose. Around campfires and along the path, stories were shared about the history of the GDT, conservation challenges, and the responsibility that comes with stewarding wild spaces. The Junior Forest Rangers not only gained practical skills but also joined a larger community of people committed to keeping the trail alive for future generations.

The GDTA is grateful for the dedication, resilience, and spirit of the Junior Forest Rangers. Their contributions this summer will be felt for years to come, both on the trail and within the broader community of backcountry stewards. Together, we showed that when people unite with passion and purpose, remarkable things can happen.





# GDTA's New website

*Dedicated to building, maintaining, and protecting the Great Divide Trail*

By Steve Harvey

When is a website like the GDT?

When it's built with love by volunteers! In October 2025, the GDTA rolled out a major refresh to our beloved website. Built collaboratively, entirely by GDTA volunteers, the new website stays true to its roots of being the spot for hikers to find all the information they need to plan an epic adventure on the Trail.

So what's new?

- The most referenced pages should be even easier to find with more links in more places;
- You'll find additional content related to the Association's commitment to [Reconciliation](#), [Responsible Recreation](#), and the [History of Trail Work](#);
- Our [Supporters](#) page has been updated to better represent the amazing companies that contribute to the GDTA and make the GDT a reality;
- The prominent news section makes it even easier to stay up to date on what's happening on GDT and with the GDTA;
- The new landing page for [Trip Planning Resources](#) makes it even easier to find the info you need to plan your hike;
- We've expanded the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) to answer more questions;
- And every page has been refreshed and adorned with fresh new images (many courtesy of our annual [photo contest](#)). Check out our [credits page](#) to learn more about who contributed these beauties!
- And we're just getting started! We have big plans for additional content and additional features. Maybe you'd like to help? We'd love to have more volunteers to help with:
  - a. Adding new features to the website
  - b. Writing, editing, or updating more content

We hope you like the new look! The look may be new, but the GDTA remains committed to ensuring that the website provides [critical information for future hikers](#).



## Allison Falls Trails

By Jenice Smith

If you are looking for a family-friendly short hike in Crowsnest Pass that links with the Great Divide Trail, the Allison Falls Trail checks all the boxes. Big mountain views, easy grade, and a picture-perfect waterfall make this trail a destination.

Beginning at the Atlas Staging Area, 5 km northwest of Coleman on the Atlas Road, the trail winds from the staging area to the base of the falls and links to the Great Divide Trail with a loop back to the Staging Area. This 2 km trail has 60 meters of elevation and takes about an hour to complete. If you are looking for more adventure, hikers can continue west towards Chinook Lake and link to a trail that circles the picturesque mountain lake.

Volunteers with Alberta Hiking Association donated over 1100 hours of their time to construct the trail and improve the loop with support received from the Public Lands Trail Grant Program. Working with the Great Divide Trail Association and connecting to the Great Divide Trail has created a great spur trail option to view Allison Falls and build on the trail network in the area.

# Trail Adopter



## The Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp Trail Adopter Program

By Daniel Vanderpyl

Summer camp is often where people first encounter a love for the outdoors. They are animated places that introduce kids to the wilderness, often for the purpose of teaching responsible recreation in the places we love. And that's exactly what happens at Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp.

Our camp put 726 people on multiday backpacking trips this summer, many following along—or adjacent to—the High Rock Trail portion of the GDT.

We've been hiking these forests since the 1950s. The story goes that our founding board members decided to skip on-site amenities like swimming pools, ziplines, and jet skis, and instead bring campers into the wilderness. 70 years later, we are still doing it in the same forests as the GDT. I remember the first time I went over the ridge from Smith Creek to First Creek before the GDT was in these bowls, petting the larches while on snowshoes, and navigating the contours on a pre-season guide-training trip. Now, our organization gets to hike these same history-laced bowls each year, but on the GDT-placed single track.

In 2021, the GDTA approached our summer camp to pilot the Trail Adopter Program, while summer 2025 marked the fourth successful year of the collaborative Trail Adopter Program between Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp and the Great Divide Trail Association. It made sense. We already had a deep connection with this stretch of trail, and we had a long history of wanting to give back to the places that shape us. Stewardship wasn't new to us, but this program gave us a focused and meaningful way to practice it.

There is something powerful about returning to the same trails year after year, not just to hike them, but to care for them. It turns a trail into something more than a route. It becomes a responsibility. A classroom. A story.

Today, our involvement continues because it adds real value to our camp. It helps our staff and campers understand that being in wild places is a gift, and caring for them is part of that gift. It strengthens our programs, deepens our sense of place, and builds a culture of outdoor responsibility that goes far beyond one hiking season.

So what does our trail-adopter commitment look like? It's simple and fun: we hike our adopted sections of trail (28 kms) one to two times a year to perform small/medium maintenance and report larger maintenance needs. Pragmatically, it means we take care of a few fallen trees each year, with occasional tread work or large-issue reporting.

Something changes when you walk a trail you help care for. It turns a trail from something you use into something you belong to. The GDT is being improved each year with its new builds; trail maintenance will always be ongoing, and much of the trail needs annual stewards to join the trail adopter program, like summer camps...like you.

Daniel Vanderpyl, MA  
Director of Outdoor Programs  
Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp Association

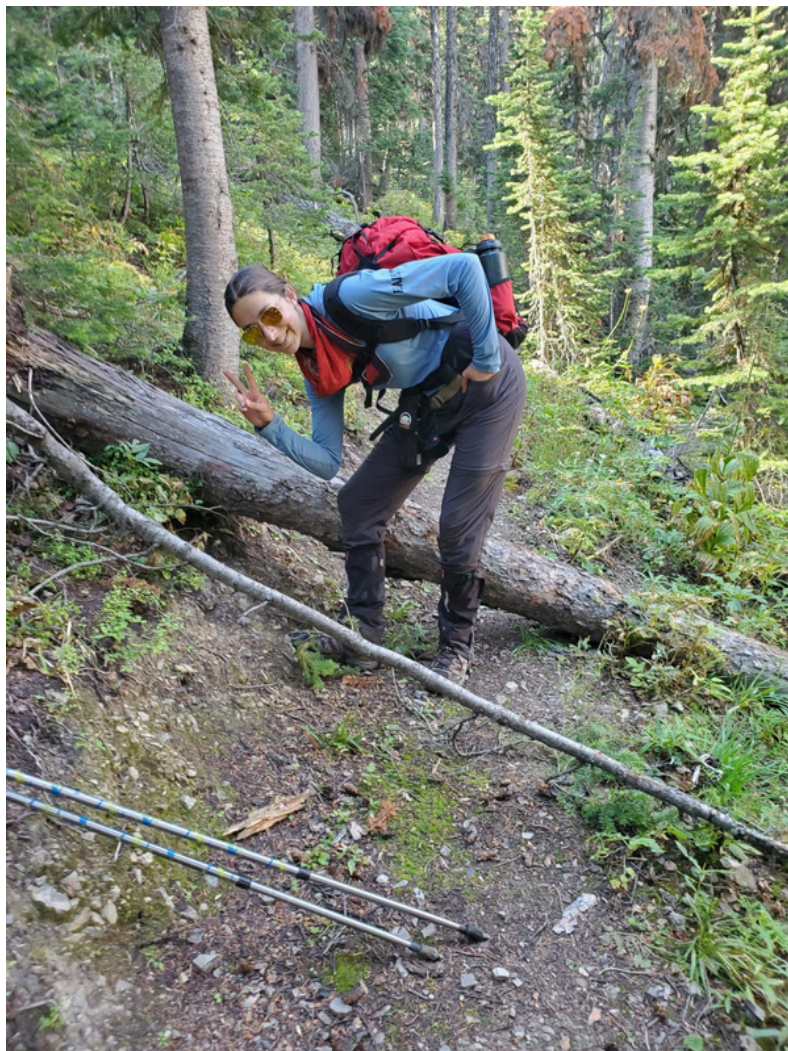
From the GDTA:

The Great Divide Trail Association is grateful to have Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp as a trail adopter for many reasons. First and foremost, their team actively supports trail maintenance and provides valuable on-the-ground insights to our Trail Building and Maintenance Committee, helping shape future trail work plans. They also bring deep knowledge of the land and surrounding wilderness, and their strong connection to the area makes them exceptional stewards.

Finally, this partnership is a meaningful way to foster environmental leadership in young people, encouraging the next generation to care for the Great Divide Trail and the natural world it protects.

If you are interested in discussing a Trail Adopter program, please contact [info@greatdividetrail.com](mailto:info@greatdividetrail.com)

For more information about Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp, visit: <https://crowcamp.ca/>





# Trail supporter Campaign

## **The GDTA's largest fundraiser of the year.**

Did you know that the Trail Supporter Campaign has been the GDTA's largest source of non-grant funding? This funding is critical to enable all the work that happens behind the scenes in order to build, maintain, and promote the GDT. Your continued support contributes to the GDT's legacy, improving and protecting the trail for future hikers who will walk 1095 km from Waterton to Kakwa.

## **Exciting News for 2025**

The GDTA is fortunate to have the support of a generous backer who is willing to match all donations received during the Trail Supporter Campaign, up to a total of \$50,000! Help us make the most of this incredible offer by January 3<sup>rd</sup>. We know it's a lofty goal, but with your help we can make it happen!

## **How your donation helps**

Your donation will support our projects for the summer of 2026 and beyond:

- David Thompson Heritage Trail, BC – Installing a new cable car across the Blaeberry River to allow us to officially move the GDT off of the road and onto the historic Collie Creek Trail.
- High Rock Trail, AB – Complete new trail construction to Erris Lake, making the HRT an even better route.
- Original GDT, AB – Maintaining the original 100 km of the GDT, including campground upgrades and replacing old and damaged bridges.
- Remote maintenance of the fire-damaged trail on Colonel Creek in Mount Robson Provincial Park.
- Campground maintenance and enhancements.

## **Donate now!**

*The GDTA is a Canadian not-for-profit corporation and registered charity (#76191 1718 RR0001). All donations of \$20.00 or more receive a tax-deductible receipt.*

# OUR LAST SECTION

## Section F

By Barb Lauer





After taking a break last year (owing to Jasper wildfires), Lynn and I were back on the GDT this summer to finish what we started 7 years ago. By completing Section F, we effectively (plus or minus a few road walks and Willoughby Ridge in Waterton) finished the Great Divide Trail. Whoooooohoooo!!

Every winter, I would do most of the planning and Lynn would gather together a few other folks to help us tackle the section. This year we were joined by the mightily strong (and great leader!) Kate Hamilton and uber-experienced thru-hiker Tyra Carleton.

We planned to complete the section in 8 days... we weren't in a rush, we had the time to enjoy it. I had also planned that if we couldn't get across the Smokey, we would backtrack and come out the Moose River alternate. This was a non-starter that really only made me feel good during planning; there was no way we would have enough food for this "plan B". We were going to have to cross it come hell or high water.

Now to be perfectly honest, I wasn't really looking forward to Section F, Jasper to Robson. I didn't think that we'd saved the best for last. I had the impression that it would be wet with a lot of water crossings, through many trees, and with limited views. And with the weather we had, rainy and overcast most of the time, I wasn't that far wrong. That's not to say that it isn't a beautiful section because it is. I'm just not sure—what did we miss? That was one of the reasons that Tyra joined us, the last time she did Section F, they had a lot of rain. She's still not sure what she missed either.



Here are a few of my favourite photos. You can see by the photos, that we had a bit of sun at Grant Pass (left) our favourite spot! (Title photo for this article is also Grant Pass)

*Calmuet Creek after Moose Pass*



*After Smokey Crossing*

We started at the Miette River trailhead, missing the 20km road walk or bushwack from Jasper. The first day was a heck of a lot easier than it could have been. There were a ton of blow downs, too many to count, that had been cut and moved off the trail. Thank you Jasper National Park for the work that you did on the trail this summer! Sooo grateful, thank you!

When we first started the Great Divide Trail adventure, there were three things that I feared the most: rain, water crossings, and having enough fuel and food for a hot meal. We were tested with all three of these and you know, it worked out great!

We had days of rain and overcast skies. Rain gear wetted out. My tent leaked. Our feet were wet. It was a bit demoralizing. Ponchos were a must on this trip. And yet, somehow, when we needed it most, we got the sun. We had an hour on Grant Pass, which became one of our best views of the trip (see earlier pictures)! We had about 10 minutes of sun on the top of Moose Pass before heading into black skies on the other side. This was the epitome of "seize the moment"! And Kate, bless her, let us help her set her tent up in the rain as a learning experience. You know, when people hold the fly and the other person works under it to set up the structure. Somehow, it didn't work; I'm not sure what we did wrong!

Most of the water crossings in Section F this year were totally fine. It is definitely worth checking the depth of very slow moving water if you can't see bottom before setting off. It can vary significantly by just walking a few feet either side. We turned what could have been a waist deep crossing into knee deep. Phew!

A few water photos... You gotta watch the ponchos when crossing! The bridge is the crossing at Upright Creek, which was still intact.





*Left: crossing the Smokey*

*Below: an easier crossing on another river*



The one water crossing that was looming for us was the Smokey River. And unfortunately, it was on our penultimate day. We had to cross it. We followed all the “rules”—we crossed in the morning; waited for a solo thru hiker, Keiko, to join us; looked for the widest place to cross; pointed upstream. And it was still very intimidating! The water flow was fast and we couldn’t see the bottom. Tyra had been across before and had a bit of fear in her eyes and she recommended that we plan our line in advance because once we’re in the freezing cold, fast flowing water it would be difficult to change course. So true. The initial plan was for the four of us to group together, hold onto each other and cross over. I’ll be honest, this plan scared me a bit because I thought if I lose it, I’ll take others down with me. Not wanting to stand around, Kate created the plan—“Barb you go first, Keiko you take up the rear, and the three of us will group together.” Off I went. And you know, it wasn’t that bad until just before the other shore and I thought I’m almost there! Not a good idea to relax until you’re out of the water! All good though; I doubled down and made it across.

For best practice crossing in a group, check out Kate, Linnie, and Tyra crossing. The strongest person was at the front taking most of the water flow and coordinating the crossing. It looked incredibly strong. I know that Tyra’s footing felt a bit loose at one point during the crossing and yet everyone made it across safely.



*Moose Pass*

As for food and fuel, this year I changed things up—no more worrying about having enough fuel... because I didn't bring any! I did cold soak. I brought two plastic 475 ml containers (old ice-cream containers to be exact). I brought two just in case one leaked or something happened to it. I always had my next meal soaking – oatmeal overnight for breakfast, then after breakfast, ramen or couscous for lunch and then a dehydrated meal for dinner. I had cold coffee after my oatmeal to both clean my container and give me a much needed caffeine boost. [I tried no caffeine the second day .. not good!]. My food load was lighter because almost everything was dehydrated and dinner was ready as soon as we pulled into camp. No need to sit in the rain while it cooked. I really liked the system for longer trips, although the others were continually surprised that I was okay with it all.

Tackling the Great Divide Trail a section a year has been a great way to hike the trail. It's not a daunting hike or a big chunk of time away from family; the planning is easier (still not easy but easier); you don't have to do a thousand kilometers a day to get it done, it's easier on your body; and you have something to look forward to every year! I know I'm going to miss this next year.

Finally, I've been involved with the Great Divide Trail Association for the past eight years as a volunteer, Board Member, trail maintenance worker (okay only one season—it was hard work!), and hiker. I know that these eight years are a drop in the bucket for some but I have to say it is a fantastic organization. I love how new people discover the trail and become really passionate about it! There is an energy with this organization that I haven't seen anywhere else. Thank you to everyone who volunteers or works for the GDTA!

I'm now looking forward to hiking other trails knowing that I've hiked Canada's best. Happy hiking everyone!



# **GDT Forest Fires Past, Present, and Yet to Come**

By Jenny Feick

Although the summer of 2025 was the second-worst wildfire season on record in Canada in terms of the total area burned, in the Canadian Rockies near the Great Divide it felt to me like a more normal summer with enough rain to keep the fire hazard at moderate for June, July and August. What a relief after the past eight years of hot, dry hiking seasons when GDT hikers faced heat exhaustion, forest fire smoke inhalation, potential evacuations, trail damage, and trail closures due to active fire, fire damage, and safety hazards like hazard trees. In July 2024, Parks Canada evacuated hikers from Jasper National Park due to the Jasper Fire Complex and partially or fully closed significant parts of the GDT.

The forests of the Canadian Rocky Mountains are no stranger to forest fire. Wildland fires play critical ecological roles in the subalpine and montane zones, and in the north in the boreal zone. Wildland fires sustain forest compositional and structural diversity. Before the late 1800s, while lightning strikes started some forest fires, Indigenous peoples also set low-intensity fires during cool and moist conditions to break up the continuous forests. They sought to improve conditions for certain wildlife such as deer, elk, and bears, and to stimulate the growth of berry bushes, and plants used for food, medicinal or ceremonial purposes. The exclusion of fire by governments since the late 1800s led to greater fire intensities and severities than would have occurred previously. More than a century of fire suppression in fire-dependent ecosystems in the Rocky Mountains also decreased biodiversity, and adversely affected forest health.

Suppression of fire from fire-adapted forests near the Great Divide also contributed to cross-scale disturbance effects such as increased disease and insect epidemics. This includes the white pine blister rust, a disease originating in Asia, which appeared first in Canada in 1910 on white pine seedlings imported from Europe to a nursery in Vancouver. From there, it spread to the Rockies by 1930 where it has had a devastating effect on the now-endangered whitebark pine. Without any periodic low-intensity fires, the underbrush proliferated, including the primary intermediate hosts for the deadly rust, members of the genus *Ribes*, especially currants and gooseberries. Likewise, the explosion of pine bark beetle populations in British Columbia between the late 1990s and 2005 affected 18 million hectares of forest, killing over 50% of the province's commercial pine volume. The beetles flew east with prevailing winds across to Jasper National Park in Alberta in 2005/06, affecting 98% of the park's extensive, thick lodgepole pine forests. Tinder dry, beetle-killed pine trees easily ignite as seen in Jasper National Park in the summer of 2024.

Fifty years before the Jasper Fire Complex, the effects of another forest fire were top of mind among those of us on the crew of Project: Great Divide Trails. That spring, we read in *The Buffalo Head* by Raymond Patterson about the 1936 Phillips fire, which started in the Elk Valley and spread via Weary Creek Gap into Alberta's Highwood Valley, burning over a million board-feet of timber. It was one thing to read about the devastation wrought by the fire and another to experience the fire's lingering effects 38 years later. We clambered over fallen dead burnt conifers and bushwhacked through dense stands of "dog-hair" lodgepole pine as we surveyed trails in the headwaters of the Highwood River in Alberta and the Elk River in British Columbia. The early GDTA trail crews were still dealing with the legacy of deadfall from the 1936 Phillips fire in the late 1970s and into the '80s, but they did not contend with active forest fires, forest fire smoke, or fire evacuations.

Cliff White, the initiator of Project: Great Divide Trails, became fascinated with forest fire ecology, history, and management. He did his Masters thesis on the topic and much of his career with Parks Canada focused on it. Cliff initiated Parks Canada's forest fire history research program. In the late 1980s, he influenced that agency's policy on forest fires so that parks staff took a more ecological approach. Cliff's pioneering work introducing prescribed burning in the Rocky Mountain national parks, especially Banff National Park, reduced the dangerous build-up of fuel loads in the forest understory. Parks Canada made great progress in the 1980s and '90s, and again after the catastrophic 2003 fire season in British Columbia, which affected Kootenay National Park.

Unfortunately, the Parks Canada Agency became increasingly sensitive to public criticism about smoke from prescribed burns adversely affecting the views and more risk averse with prescribed burning. Despite Cliff's warnings of the potential for future devastating fires in the national parks without preventative actions, after he retired in December 2009, fewer prescribed burns took place in the parks, especially after 2016. In the absence of prescribed fires, mid-summer lightning fires eventually regenerate forests. In large national parks in fire adapted ecosystems, these can sometimes be allowed to burn as their effect on settled areas is minimal. For example, significant areas of Kootenay National Park burned from lightning caused forest fires in 2013, 2017 and 2018. These burns affected areas through which the GDT passed, as anyone who has hiked from Ball Pass to Highway 93 and up to Floe Lake and beyond on the Rock Wall Trail will know. However, despite local efforts to thin the forest and remove beetle-killed trees near the town of Jasper, the Jasper Fire Complex of 2024 demonstrated how decades of fire suppression, years of drought, an intensely hot summer, and ferociously strong winds could converge to create exactly what Cliff predicted could happen, huge fires burning through large continuous areas of older forest right into a town.

Another extremely severe forest fire that affected the GDT was the Kenow Fire in Waterton Lakes National Park in September 2017. Dianne Pachal, one of the founding members of the GDTA and one of the first GDTA trail crew members, worked there then as the park's volunteer coordinator. My husband Ian Hatter and I visited Dianne earlier that year. We were shocked to get her emails and texts describing the experience. From a lightning strike on Kenow Mountain in the Clark Range of the Flathead watershed in B.C. on August 30, the fire grew into an inferno that roared over the low-forested Akamina Pass into the park on September 11, burning 38.6% of the park. Dianne, along with most of the rest of the park staff and residents of Waterton, were evacuated on September 8.

In early August 2021, Ian and I returned to Waterton to visit Dianne and hike parts of the GDT. Lani Smith, another GDTA founder and first trail crew member, joined us as well. We all remarked that the park looked completely different without its thick cloak of coniferous forest. Ian and I felt curious about the odd pattern the fire took as we hiked above Cameron Lake toward the Carthew Summit. The flames spared some white bark pine while annihilating others. We marveled at a clump of live green poplar and aspen trees behind a large fallen rock below the Alderson trail as we looked out upon a scene of hundreds of standing dead black conifers. We found study plot markers along the Carthew Alderson trail and learned later that botanists from the University of Lethbridge were researching post-fire plant succession. Above Upper Waterton Lake, Ian and I saw massive dead Douglas-fir trees with thick fire-repellant bark that had obviously withstood previous fires. The massive roots had burned along with the organic matter in the soil.



*Ian Hatter descending  
burnt part of Amiskwi  
Ridge*



*View of fireweed and burnt trees on the GDT (Alderson Trail) with Vimy Ridge in distance*

While in Waterton on that trip, we hiked briefly with an experienced female hiker (Mary Mallon) from Ontario who planned to travel solo on a significant portion of the GDT that summer. Although she had backpacked and thru-hiked many long distance trails, we learned later that month that she bailed from the GDT by the time she reached Beehive Mountain due to the intense heat and forest fire smoke from the many fires burning in the Pacific Northwest. Sadly, months of planning and food preparation went down the drain, but at least she minimized the negative effects on her body from prolonged heat exhaustion, dehydration, eye, nose, and throat irritation, coughing, shortness of breath, and long-term respiratory damage.

We continued to visit Waterton to visit Dianne and monitor the changes wrought by the Kenow Fire along the GDT. In 2022, from the crest of Lineham Ridge, we looked down with sadness along the Tamarack Trail now bereft of live subalpine larch since the blaze. We also experienced the huge change in the landscape on September 22, 2023 as Kate Hamilton, David Savage, and I led a guided walk for the Waterton Glacier International Peace Park Association Rotarians from Goat Haunt in Glacier National Park in Montana to Waterton Townsite in Canada. For the first 3.7 km we walked on the Continental Divide Trail through lush moist forest, glimpsing mountains whenever we got close to the lakeshore. An hour and a half north of the International Boundary Monument at the US/Canada border, the view along the GDT opened revealing the effects of the Kenow Fire. We beheld mountainsides studded with black tree trunks, colourful thimbleberry bushes, scads of fireweed gone to seed, and layers of sedimentary rock clearly visible without the forest. In September 2024, Dianne, Ian, and I saw that blackened woodland still characterized Akamina Pass where the fire entered the park. While new plant life had emerged in the seven years since the fire, it was not as robust as we witnessed at lower elevations along the shores of Upper Waterton Lake.

I asked Lauren “Neon” Reed if she and Bethany “Fidgit” Hughes noticed forest fire effects during their epic GDT thru-hike in August/September 2021 as part of the [Her Odyssey expedition](#). Lauren said "Hiking southbound along the GDT in the late-season of 2021, I was very aware of the weather—that summer's heat dome had been all over the news, with record temperatures wreaking havoc across western Canada (and the U.S.). Our friends in Banff and elsewhere had warned us of fire smoke for days along the route. Having asthma, I was concerned if I would be able to hike in that kind of air without repercussions on my long term health. Also having left my home in Moab, Utah while a forest fire was burning itself out in the La Sal mountains right outside of town, I felt like I had one eye on the fire trackers while packing my resupply boxes. I was both grateful and hesitant when it rained for two full days at the start of our trek from Kakwa Lake, B.C. Walking along in the cooler, wetter temps of late summer into fall, I felt as though I was not only often walking the knife's edge of the Rocky Mountains, but also the tightrope walk between seasons—not too hot, not too cold (most days). Having spent a lot of time outdoors over the course of my life, I find my senses strengthen over the weeks, and they often tune in to differences in my surroundings. Traveling along the GDT, I found I would notice walking through the burn scars of different eras—some with taller tree growth, some with the underbrush and fireweed brazenly fighting for territory, some with standing dead trees and the faintly astringent smoky smell still clinging to the moisture in the air. There is no doubt the fires change the area they move through, though it's difficult to put into words exactly how—the birdsong changes, the animals travel differently, the flora grows in different ways. Having walked into Waterton from Goat Haunt (the CDT) back in 2013, coming in from the north in 2021 was a whole new experience—the whole energy of the area seemed to have changed, the winds and sun seemingly stronger, with the Kenow fire stripping the terrain of its protective tree covering. Some burn areas I would think ‘Wow, this is coming back so beautifully, I wonder how long ago this fire was?’ and other times I would find myself saddened, thinking ‘Will this place ever be the same again? Look at how ravaged it was by the fire.’"

In early September 2025, Ian and I hiked the Amiskwi Ridge Alternate Route north of Yoho National Park through an area of forest that burned in the summer of 2024 in the Amiskwi Valley Wildfire. The fire destroyed the flagging tape (and the trees they were on) that we found essential to finding one's way on that route. Using the FarOut GDT app we could carefully pick our way down through the burnt forest and over numerous fallen trees back to the main GDT, which was well cleared and blazed. We were impressed by how many different plant species emerged from the blackened soil, especially the common liverworts, which looked like green neon circles, and the bright yellow arnicas. We could see why both the GDT and nearby Amiskwi Lodge were issued an evacuation order when that fire was raging in July 2024.

Forest fires were on our minds since the skies were smokier than they had been in June, July, and August due to recent fires in the Bugaboos south-west of Golden and the Redburn Creek forest fire in the Blaeberry River drainage north of Golden. As we hiked through the burned forest, we recalled parts of the audio book *Fire Weather* by John Valliant, which we listened to this summer. Valliant expounds on the change in 21st Century forest fires that defy traditional firefighting methods and create their own weather systems, including fire-induced tornadoes. He explains the effect of forest fires on increasing carbon dioxide emissions, creating a dangerous feedback loop since high concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere increases the likelihood of lightning strikes that cause forest fires.

Despite this past summer providing a respite from the trend of hotter, drier summers and more frequent, intense forest fires in the Canadian Rockies, GDT thru hikers will forever need to keep forest fires in mind when planning their trips, and have a Plan B when fires ignite and affect the atmosphere, landscape, and/or travel routes.

*Alberta Boundary Marker at Akamina Pass 7 years after Kenow Fire*



# IN DEFENCE OF THE RAIN

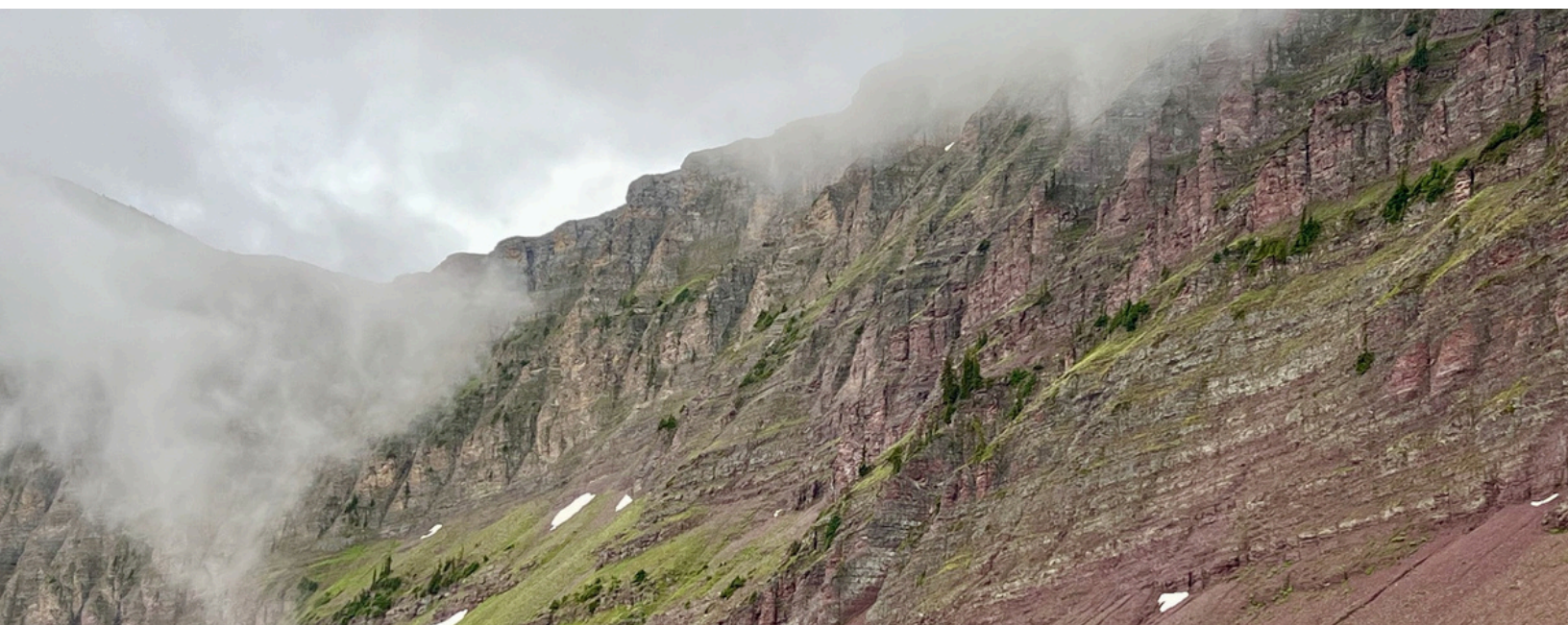
by Meghan Dwyre





The hallmarks of any enviable adventure are blue skies, crisp, wide vistas, and the occasional light-hearted misfortune. The misfortune, of course, is glibly described as a mere jape, rather than an aptly handled crisis. “Oh that—haha—I did run away from a goat as muscular as Dwayne Johnson while he tried to head butt me off the mountain. Worth it for the views!” These fortuitous moments are all captured in a well curated photo set and presented on the internet to much praise and acclaim.

This year, on the GDT, many hopeful thru-hikers set out on what was to be ‘The most excellent adventure’. Instead, many found themselves in a deluge of rainy days punctuated with a few moments of reprieve if not shy sunshine. I heard unverified, second-hand accounts of grumbling disappointment, and of hikers so dejected they quit or re-routed their plans. People who booked big days couldn’t make their planned sites because the resulting slicks of mud slowed them down, or infinitely worse, caused injury. I can imagine the devastation—all that planning, playing the campsite lottery, and money invested.





However—I welcomed the rain, and felt that overall, it improved the trip. Don't worry —I too grumbled like any reasonable person, wondering if once in a while I could feel the heat of the sun on my face. As a local Calgarian, spending time in the mountains over the last decade has been hit and miss because of unrelenting wildfire smoke and, sometimes, unrelenting heat.

The rain improved our trip in so many ways. It helped an epic number of wildflowers and mushrooms to bloom. It kept the meadows green and the typically fleeting streams running. Importantly, it kept the smoke at bay for all 52 days we were on trail. Wildfire smoke obscures views in a heavy, cataclysmic way. Rain clouds, however, ebb and flow in their opacity and facilitate the pensive mood of relentless walking. I prefer a Bronte over a Bradbury experience.

I packed an ultra-light tarp, anticipating using it for the occasional thunderstorm. However, we set it up often, and it became known as tarp-time: Tarp-snack, tarp-lunch, tarp-coffee.

We became tarp-masters setting up in just two minutes for a comfortable break. We made tarp-friends, passers-by, or campers needing a brief shelter. By some magic, the length of time we took to break for lunch or tea, was the amount of time it took for the thunder to stop, the rain to slow, and the views to open, even if just a little. Notably, many people passing through Fording Pass the same day as us missed all the views, choosing to push on through the rain. Because we had a tarp-lunch (and a hot lunch at that!), the clouds had time to lift over Fording Pass revealing 75% of its views for a truly ethereal feeling.

When we did get views, I would always remark “Oh wow, we’re so lucky to see this”, and I meant it. My gratitude was amplified because of the rain. It made the mountains even more special. I also experienced euphoric joy when the sun came out long enough to dry my clothes, my level of cheer compounded by the steam baking me dry.

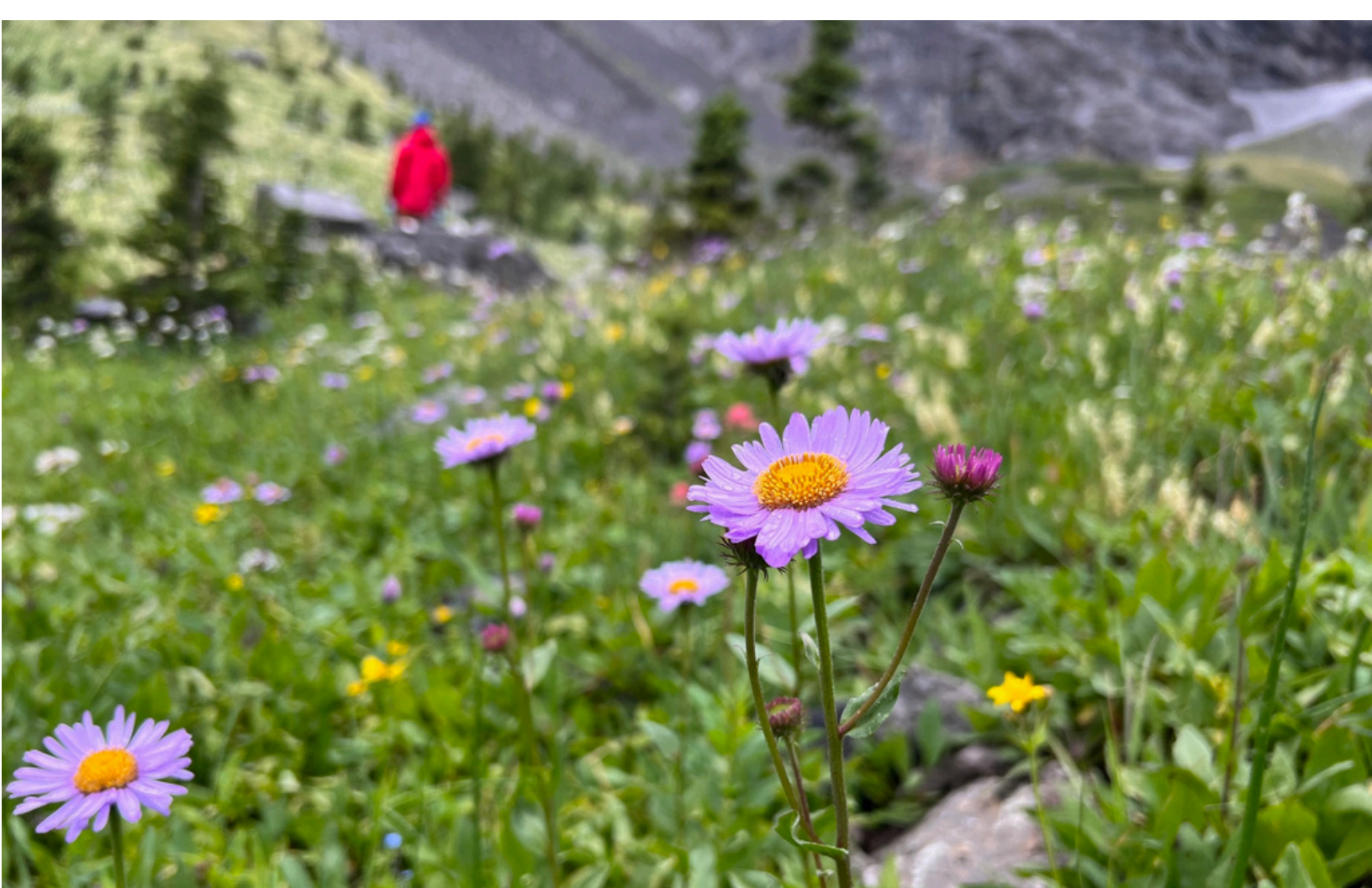
Importantly, those of us hiking past mid-August found ourselves ending our trips in the most magical 14-day streak of, dare I say:


Warm

Perfect

Clear

Blue Bird Days.



A hiker with a large backpack is seen from behind, walking up a rocky mountain trail. The trail is composed of loose rocks and patches of green grass. In the background, a large, rugged mountain peak rises against a clear blue sky. The hiker is wearing a blue shirt, red shorts, and a large blue backpack. The overall scene is a high-altitude mountain landscape.

For us, this happened right as we hit sections F and G—the notoriously soggy sections. This meant we got all the usual mud, marsh and bog, but also the most beautiful, bright and crisp mountain views. Oh, how the heart will sing, after such a long wait for the mythical hallmarks of such an epic, enviable adventure.

# The Story Behind the Picture



By Jenny L. Feick

This picture that I took fifty years ago has grabbed the attention of many individuals, including the late Jesse Heberton, the founder of GearTrade, who told Kate Hamilton in October 2022 that he thought it was “the coolest photo ever”. Jesse wanted to have the photograph enlarged to poster size, add the GDTA logo, and display it in his store. I was still seeking permissions from the individuals one can clearly see in the picture when Jesse fell ill with Glioblastoma. I hope we can still make Jesse’s wish come true.

Most people when they see the picture chuckle at the clothing people wore on a backpacking trip in 1975 (Jeans?!) as well as their gear. Believe it or not, those Kelty-style aluminum external frame backpacks were lighter and more comfortable than their predecessor, the old canvas Trapper Nelson style popular from the 1920s to the 1960s. The excitement on the faces of the backpackers is also palpable to onlookers as they set out in July 1975 on a trip to promote the idea of a Great Divide Trail in Canada and to solicit interest in becoming part of the proposed Great Divide Trail Association

Dave Higgins and I organized and promoted the event. Several other founding members of the GDTA participated, including Glen Byers, Nick and Peter Allen, and Janice Darling. We travelled from the Dutch Creek access road in Alberta to the campsite below Tornado Pass on day one, arriving at dusk just in time to set up our tents and hoist our food and toiletries up a tree out of the reach of bears. We spent the weekend exploring the Tornado Pass area, including the summit of Tornado Pass with its historic monument from the BC Alberta Boundary Commission of 1913-1916, and what used to be called South Hidden Notch (now named Tornado Saddle). On Sunday, we broke camp, hiked back to our vehicles on the Dutch Creek access road, and drove home to Calgary.

The following excerpt from the second edition of *Tales from the Great Divide*, Vignettes on the Origins and Early History of Canada's Great Divide Trail and Great Divide Trail Association describes one of the experiences from that trip. NICK refers to Nick Allen and LANI to Lani Smith, and JENNY refers to yours truly, Jenny Feick. All three of us were among the founders of the GDTA. Nick and Lani worked on the first GDTA trail crew in the summer of 1976.

NICK: "I had a story about Tornado Pass as well. (Looking at Jenny) We had taken that trip up there [in July 1975]. You sent me some photos of that, actually, there was a group of us. And that was a trip organized, Great Divide Trail related, so it's relevant, and we walked up Tornado Pass. And my brother [Peter] and Glen [Byers] and I decided, it's such a beautiful weekend, to sleep out under the stars. We couldn't sleep, because it was so bright. I remember watching the moonrise come up.

LANI: (Lani holds up the picture of Glen Byers at Tornado Pass B.C./Alta. Boundary Monument; see Figure 261), There's Glen."



NICK: "That's the monument. The moonrise came up and lightened the mountains across the valley from us. There's a beautiful valley going across from where we camp up there. And just the light coming down from the moonrise. I don't know what time it was. We just couldn't sleep. The stars were so bright. It was the clearest night I ever remember being out in the mountains. It was the most clear I've ever seen it. It was a beautiful weekend."

JENNY: "We had wonderful weather. That was the first official organized hike, the first outdoor event on the trail, of the Great Divide Trail Association."

NICK: "And other people that were interested that weren't sort of Great Divide Trail people."

JENNY: "We advertised and got people."

NICK: "There must have been, I don't know, 20 people or something like this. For a hiking group, that's a pretty big group."

JENNY: "That was our first event, and we do have a picture of that. Lani, I don't know if you've got that picture of the very first Great Divide Trail Association hike."

LANI: "I'm looking for it."

JENNY: "It was 1975, and I think we had just been established as a group,<sup>1</sup> and it was in July."

LANI: "It was a perfect weekend."

JENNY: "It was. A perfect weekend. Couldn't ask for better weather. "

If you are interested in the history of the GDT and the GDTA, you can order a print on demand copy of the Second Edition of *Tales from the Great Divide* from [Amazon](#). The cost is Cdn ~\$85.00. The pdf is available from the editor on the [Nature Wise Consulting website](#). The cost is Cdn \$25.00. The editor who lives in Invermere, B.C. also has some copies of the print version for sale at cost for \$65.00. Reading *Tales* in the winter of 2025/2026 is a great way to mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the GDTA.



## Supporters

We are proud to be funded by these companies, organizations, and government agencies. Their generous support provides funds to build and maintain the GDT; feed, train and equip our volunteers; protect the trail; and make all our work possible. Each contribution sustains our efforts to build and preserve the Great Divide Trail. You can find out more about our supporters on our [website](#).

**\$100,000+**



The GDTA is grateful to serve as the Trail Manager of the GDT on Alberta Public Lands, and, through Alberta's Public Lands Trail Grant, the GDTA has received significant financial contributions and on-the-ground support that strengthen the GDTA's operations in the region.



The GDTA is profoundly grateful to Durston Gear for their generous financial support, in-kind contributions, and unwavering belief in the Great Divide Trail. Their commitment strengthens our work, our community, and the long-term future of this incredible route

**\$50,000+**



Columbia Basin Trust has been supporting the GDTA since 2021 and is currently supporting the Collie Creek Heritage Trails and Blaeberry River crossing project.

**\$5,000+**



The GDTA first received Athletic Brewing's Two for the Trails grant in 2023, and again this year, to support trail clearing in Section G from Sheep Creek to Casket Creek.



The GDTA is grateful to have volunteer agreements that allow us to complete trail maintenance in Height of the Rockies, Mount Robson, and Kakwa Lake Provincial Parks. BC Parks also provides financial support for this work each year through the BC Parks Community Park Enhancement Fund.



The summer of 2025 was the first year that the GDTA successfully received the Canada Summer Jobs grant. This funding allowed us to hire a Field Crew Assistant to support trail trips throughout the season.



Osprey partnered with the GDTA for the first time in 2024, coming on board as a corporate sponsor. Thank you, Osprey, for supporting the Great Divide Trail!



Recreation Sites and Trails BC

The GDTA is grateful to have a 10-year partnership agreement (established in 2018) with RSTBC to care for the David Thompson Heritage Trail. We are currently working toward another partnership agreement for the Collie Creek Historical Trail, which includes constructing a cable car over the Blaeberry River. This year, RSTBC provided both funding and the cable car components to the GDTA, in good faith, to work together to complete this project.



The Great Divide Trail Association was proud to be selected as the 2025 Green Bib Charity and is honoured to have been chosen again for 2026. Thanks to 632 runners who chose the Green Bib option in 2025, the GDTA received direct support for the protection, maintenance, and promotion of the Great Divide Trail.



ventureforcanada

2025 marks the first year the GDTA has received support from Venture for Canada. This funding was dedicated specifically to supporting the wages of our Field Crew Coordinator.

**\$1,000+**



The Alberta Equestrian Federation has been a valued supporter of the GDTA since 2016. Thanks to funding through their Trail Supporter program this year, the GDTA was able to construct a new switchback in Castle Provincial Park, re-routing the trail off a steep and unsustainable section. Thank you, AEF, for helping us create a safer and more sustainable trail experience!



GearTrade began partnering with the GDTA in 2022. In addition to donating annually, GearTrade hosts the official GDTA store, selling GDTA merchandise, and works with the GDTA on the now-annual GearTrade Garage Sale event, which is heading into its third year



BearVault and the GDTA partnered in 2022. In addition to providing financial support, BearVault helps the GDTA educate hikers about bear awareness, including presenting at our planning webinar.



The GDTA has been working with FarOut to provide mapping information to GDT hikers. Each year, the GDTA supplies FarOut with updated GIS data on route changes and waypoints. In return, FarOut provides the GDTA with a percentage of the income from app sales.



Sinister Sports has supported the GDTA since 2019, beginning with the transport of gear and equipment to trail-building camps using their ATV. In 2023, they expanded their support by becoming an annual donor to the Trail Supporter Campaign.

## Donations in-Kind

We thank the following companies and organizations who support the GDTA through generous, non-monetary, initiatives.



And of course all the generous companies that offer [GDTA Membership Benefits!](#)

**Want to support the GDTA?**  
Contact us at [info@greatdividetrail.com](mailto:info@greatdividetrail.com)

# Want to help the Great Divide Trail?

## **Become a Member**

Joining the GDTA is one of the most important things you can do to protect the trail. Membership numbers help in negotiations with land managers and allow us to advocate for the trail. Did you know you can become a lifetime member for only \$100?

## **Join a Committee**

Committees form the backbone of the GDTA and are a great way to volunteer your time. There's a full list of committees on our website, and with everything from trailbuilding to outreach to IT, there's sure to be something that interests you.

## **Join a Trail Building Trip**

Trail building and maintenance is essential for hikers to be able to access the divide safely. However, these trips are also **fun!** Volunteers can participate in everything from bridge building to flagging trail and scouting new routes. Trips are announced in the spring- make sure you're signed up to our email list to find out about next year's trips.

## **Donate**

Your donation is essential to help us maintain, promote, and protect the Great Divide Trail and preserve its wilderness experience for generations to come. You can also donate in honour of a loved one: a perfect gift for the hiker in your life.