

# hiking the willmore

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Willmore Wilderness Park is Alberta's last great mountain wilderness. It is north of Jasper and embraces an area of about 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Altitudes vary from 3,000 to 8,000 feet and the scenery includes lush valleys, snow splashed peaks, alpine meadows and moist timberland.

Hunting is permitted in the Park in certain months and the early trapping and present overkill have sadly reduced the game. Campaigns by the ecologically conscious currently petition the government to give the Willmore a chance to recover. Helicopters cruise overhead daily the pilots looking for the signs of forest fires, but environmentalists challenge this practice as detrimental to the process of natural clearing and as a loss of opportunity for new growth upon which the ranging animals feed.

Weather patterns are very local here, with clouds forming and dispersing unreliably and with great rapidity, so that alternate clothing ready at hand is a must for the traveller. Rain, sleet, snow and sun can attend the hiker in summer months.

## August 2

Jim and I arrived via plane and bus at Hinton and were driven to beautiful Entrance Ranch where we joined 7 other hikers from Alberta and pitched tents on the spacious lawn. Log buildings dotted the landscape and Norwegian Duns grazed in the fields or whinnied at the fence lines (They were short, stocky, sand-coloured horses, each with a dark line from forelock to tail, distinguishing them from the hunter class riding horses sharing the field with them.)

The first evening, our hosts, Rocky and Anne Notness taught us two Eastern Greenhorns how to pack and balance 2 wooden saddle boxes with our food using a scale for accuracy. Everyone worked getting organized and making a car shuttle and then went to bed to dream of the morrow, in the fresh air of the foothills.

## August 3

We breakfasted, packed, and left everything in big piles, and drove to the starting point 50 km away, while horse vans and the truck with gear followed. The Notness family plus cousins and ourselves numbered 15 people and we unloaded 19 horses and gear for all. We hikers then started out with our day packs, leaving the others to the 2 hour job of loading the horses.

We walked upstream on gravelly flats, along a 2 track seismic line, or through evergreen forest on the slopes. We had to cross the river and many incoming streams many times on this and subsequent days, and quickly discovered various means of negotiating icy waters: 1) walk logs, 2) jump, 3) wade barefoot, 4) ford with running shoes, or 5) get the hiking boots wet. I tried every combination over the course of the trip and ruled out getting the boots submerged as a "no-no". Donning the old thin tennis shoes and taking them off again to hang dripping from the back of the pack was slow but had to beat for overall effectiveness.

That first day was an easy 15 kilometre hike at 4,000 feet in sunshine, and the pack train passed us at 2:00 p.m. the horses (foot hobbled) were grazing on the "flats" below, the outfitters tents were up, and our gear was piled nearby. We set up our own equipment, bathed, carried water, built a communal fire and cooked in 3 groups. Horse flies were very troublesome but we had no other problems.

## AUGUST 4

The six younger hikers set off up to the highest ridges (where one saw a bighorn ram), the pack train kept to the valleys, and Ruth, John, Jim and I hiked up the valley of Adam's Creek using the seismic line road (which

