

On every trip into the wild, there comes that electric moment when you realize you've truly left the safety and confines of the modern world behind. Ahead lies adventure, discovery, and — if you're going to any self-respecting wilderness — large, wild carnivores who can, and will, eat you. I live for these moments. My last one came while driving to the start of a tour, about twenty miles of dirt road outside of Fernie, British Columbia. Cell phones had long since lost signals (always a good sign), darkness was

settling over the forest, and the van steered onto progressively narrower and fainter roads.

Looking up from the map at silhouettes of towering black trees crowding the roadside, I said to my cohorts, "Well, I think, as of this moment, we have officially abandoned civilization."

If there was any doubt about this proclamation, it was put to rest the next night, the first official night of the tour, when a moose cow and calf nonchalantly clomped into our camp. A mama moose, of course, is one of the most unpredictable and potentially dangerous animals in the woods. Somehow she

hadn't heard the four of us slurping down freeze-dried stroganoff, and my nerve endings let loose with an internal Pavarotti solo as she took a couple of unknowing steps toward us.

Fortunately, she must have caught a whiff of the odor coming from my brother Matt because she suddenly raised her enormous snout, bucked 180 degrees, and rushed, calf in tow, into the forest.

"Wow, a moose," Ron said. "I've always wanted to see a moose."

Ron is a fifty-something businessman from New Jersey on his first bike tour. An old family friend, he's been joining my father,

brother, and me on our annual backpacking trips for years. This trip, I proposed we bicycle, and I was hoping it would go over well. I figured my dad would be fine — at a hard-charging sixty-one, he was probably fitter than I was. But Ron hadn't biked much, and Matt, while a strapping twenty-six-year-old, had a vigorous training regime that consisted mainly of barhopping or, as he puts it, "pursuing a master's degree in the importance of local watering holes."

The true depth of Ron's lack of cycling experience, however, became clear at the end of that first day of riding. Though it had all been climbing, I'd intentionally planned it

short. "Well, we rode ten miles today," I announced as we trundled in to camp.

"Really!" Ron said. "Ten miles. I've never ridden ten miles in my life. That's an accomplishment."

It took a minute for this comment to sink in as I considered what lay ahead of us. We were in the far southeastern corner of British Columbia, only a dozen or so miles north of the Montana border. Our ultimate goal was to reach Alberta and Waterton Lakes National Park, but to get there we had to climb old logging roads over the mountain range we were camping in, and pedal thirty miles across a wide river valley. Then, we had to climb up

another, higher mountain range on jeep trail and singletrack before crossing the very spine of the Rocky Mountains and the Continental Divide into Waterton. If Ron thought ten easy miles was an accomplishment, getting to Waterton was going to be like summiting Everest. Naked. Carrying a moose.

The valley we were crossing is called the Flathead Valley in Canada, and its lower half reaches into Montana and the wild northwest corner of Glacier National Park, where it's called the North Fork Flathead Valley. Accessible only by many miles of rough dirt road, it's not only remote but untamed — many experts consider it the most ecologically

A person wearing a yellow jacket and a yellow helmet is riding a bicycle on a dirt trail through a dense forest. The trail is narrow and surrounded by lush green foliage and tall trees. The person is seen from behind, riding away from the viewer. The overall atmosphere is serene and adventurous.

The Wildest Valley

intact and wildlife-rich valley in the Lower 48. Thanks to an old family cabin on the Montana side, I'd been adventuring there since childhood. But there was no (legal) border crossing, and for years I'd gazed longingly at the peaks on the Canadian side, so familiar yet so out of reach. Now, finally, it was time to explore them.

The next morning, our first big day of riding, we pedaled slowly up a smooth gravel road beneath darkly forested slopes that swept upwards to emerald meadows and sharp, craggy peaks. Even in early August, patches of snow clung to the mountainsides. Everyone adapted quickly to pulling the trailers, and the climb to the pass came easier than expected. We rested there for a while, taking in the view amidst a carpet of wildflowers and patches of perfectly ripe wild strawberries.

"Now comes the fun part!" I called out as gravity began pulling us down the long, serpentine descent to the valley bottom. Steering for hours down a twisting brown ribbon through the forest, we saw a continuous procession of animal tracks and scat on the roadside that reminded us we weren't

the only creatures using this travel corridor. I couldn't help but feel we were the daily special on display in a wilderness cafeteria, with all of the lions, wolves, and bears sizing us up, just out of sight, from the forest shadows.

"Gee, these soft, defenseless humans are skinnier than the ones who ride horses."

"Yeah, hummer. I'll take the one in back."

Seeing signs of wildlife was exciting. It reminded me how much I love exploring wild places, places where the predators are savage and the prey abundant. I can't tell you exactly why these places call out to me in my dreams or why I seek them out with an almost religious fervor, but I do. Maybe it's because they seem whole. All of the actors are there, and the rest is the savage theater of the wilds — the greatest show on earth.

Of course, finding these wild places is getting ever harder, and finding wild places that can be explored by bicycle is harder still. Canada's Flathead Valley is such a place.

But, like so many of our remaining unspoiled landscapes, it's imperiled. The battle over its future is currently being

fought in capital cities a world away as politicians and mining executives in British Columbia draw up plans for tracts of coalbed methane wells and open-pit coal mines. Their opponents, including Montana's governor and other leading figures in the United States and Canada, are trying to thwart the mining, proposing instead that Waterton Park be expanded to protect a large portion of the valley. Which side will win remains to be seen, but we're happy to experience it as it is now, without coal mines or gas wells, and we hope future generations will be able to do the same.

We set up camp that night along a creek in the valley floor. We'd seen a handful of pickups in the river bottom that day, and a couple had pulled off the road and set up camp near ours. A white-haired man with a weathered cowboy hat and deep wrinkles sauntered over to us with the kind of stooped, bow-legged walk that suggested a lifetime of horse riding. His belt buckle had at least as much metal as my bike and trailer combined. There was no holstered six-shooter on his waist, but there should have been.



Wild climbing. Riding up forgotten jeep roads high above the Flathead Valley in an area proposed for Waterton Park expansion.

"You'd never catch me on one of those things," he said with a chuckle and a nod at our bikes. "I won't sit on it if it don't got legs or a motor."

He generously offered us firewood, and then — while he drank beer from a can and we sipped electrolytes from plastic

bins around Wall Lake, the old-timer boomed, "They used to call that Grizzly Basin." Ron, who has a deep and abiding fear of grizzly bears, instantly went saucer-eyed and shook his head. "You know, I didn't need to know that," he groaned.

Then, perhaps sensing that we

Ron stared up at the dark clouds and asked, only partly in jest, "Isn't this where we're supposed to sit by the fire and drink hot cocoa?"

bottles — he told us stories about his life leading hunters into this valley, about the wolf packs that still roamed here despite his generation's best efforts to extirpate them, and about all the trappers over the years that had been killed by grizzly bears. When I mentioned our intended route over the divide to Waterton, he replied, "That's an old Indian trail. Then all the trappers and hunters started using it."

When I mentioned we were planning a day hike from the divide into the moun-

tain around Wall Lake, the old-timer turned as he walked back to his camp and said, "Hope you've got lots of bear spray!"

There were two tough days of climbing between us and Akamina Pass at the Continental Divide, and the steep pitch out of the valley's floodplain the next morning quickly reduced us to pushing our rigs. I knew we were going to make it, though, when a passing truck, the last we would see until Waterton, stopped to offer us a

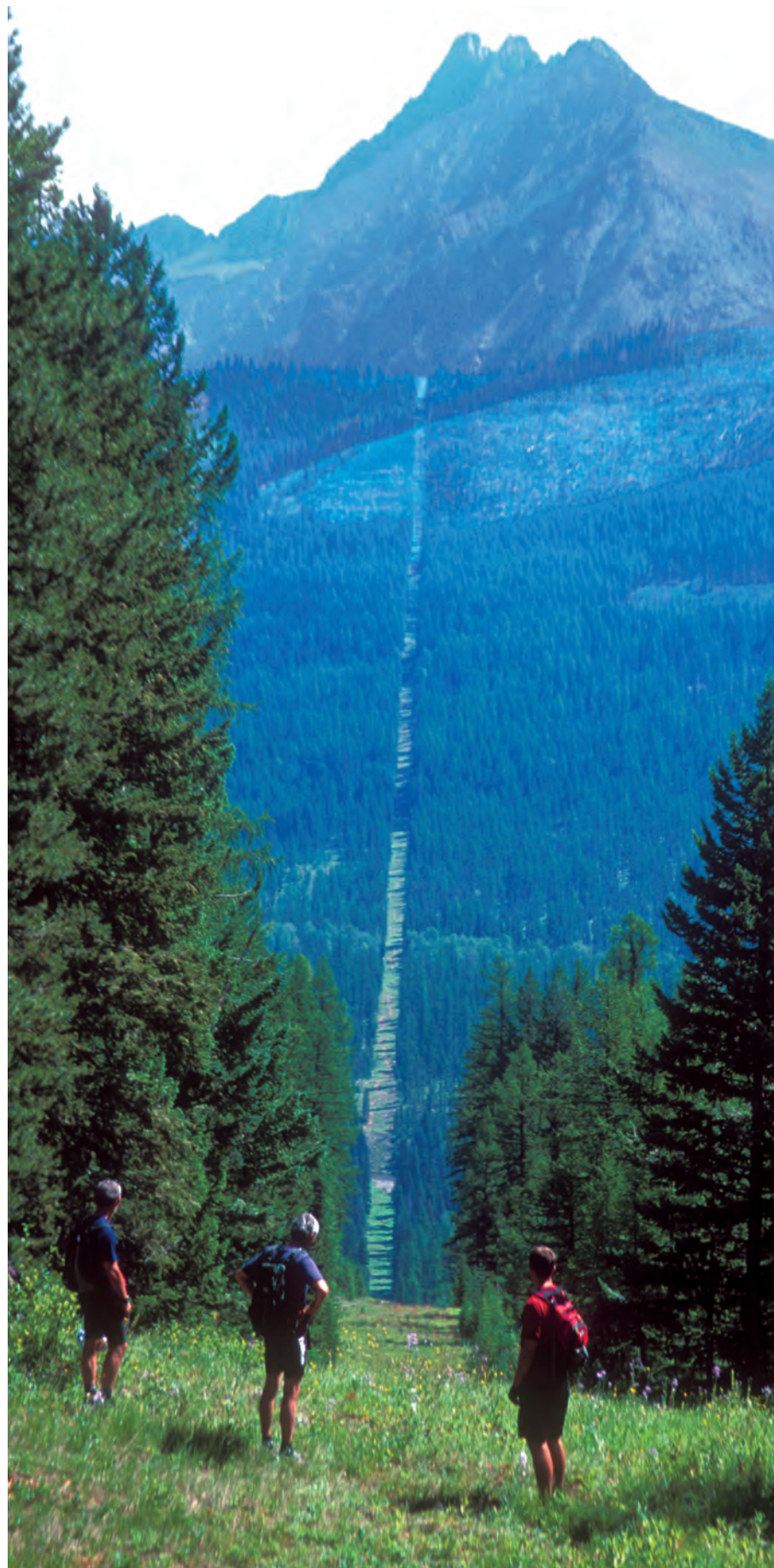
lift and no one accepted. It was a hot, hot, day and the climbing was tough, but everyone was truly enjoying the ride — even when it was a walk.

A short way up the road, we found the faint trail the old-timer had described the night before. Now only a couple hundred yards from the United States border, we headed down the trail in search of the imaginary division. It wasn't hard to find, nor was it imaginary — shady forest suddenly opened into bright sun where a forty-foot swath of trees had been cut in a perfectly straight line that extended as far as we could see in both directions, across the valley and up steep mountainsides.

Three days deep into our wilderness journey, this monumental line in the trees was shocking, impressive, and ludicrous all at once. It seemed the height of human folly, like siblings dividing their bedroom in half with masking tape. It was hard to believe that we could follow that swath all the way east to the Atlantic Ocean and west to the Pacific. I was just glad no one



Off the bike. The group takes a day to bike up to Wall Lake, encountering Akamina Ridge and Gizzly Basin along the way.



Interesting, yet odd. The shaved border between the United States and Canada.

had had the bright idea to fence it yet. Despite the warnings we'd heard about satellite cameras and descending paratroopers, we all stepped over on the United States side, just for fun, and maybe to spite the swath cutters a little too.

After two more hours of steep, rocky, doubletrack climbing, we reached the old outfitter's cabin hidden in the woods that the old-timer had told us about. We spread our sleeping bags across the graying wood of the front porch, and Ron and Matt promptly went to work lining up the bikes and trailers along it in a critter barricade. It was hard to imagine a 500-pound grizzly bear being turned back by a row of bicycles, but it seemed best not to say anything.

"Big day ahead of us," I said the next morning while building a fire. "Today we make it to Akamina Pass."

It was cold, and the skies looked like rain. Ron stared up at the dark clouds and asked, only partly in jest, "Isn't this where we're supposed to sit by the fire and drink hot cocoa?"

No one could deny that this sounded like an excellent plan, but the allure of higher country was strong. Thunder rumbled across the sky, and I said, contrary to all meteorological logic, "I think, if we climb higher, we'll be okay."

The rain came as soon as we started to pedal. A metal gate crossed the road to the pass, closing it to motorized traffic, and the doubletrack shrank to trail. Fog and cloud concealed the mountains as our bikes splashed through puddles and creeks. We were on the Indian trail now, and, as I fantasized about going back in time to ride Indian trails across the West, we worked as a team hoisting our bike-and-trailer rigs over fallen trees. Muscling through the wet, dark wood couldn't have been more different from the hot, open ride the day before. We were seeing the valley's many moods and starting to feel a part of its rhythms. No longer an audience, we were becoming characters in the theater.

The Kishenena Creek campground, tucked in the trees only a hop and a spit from the pass, is an unusually tidy backwoods resting spot. Each campsite features a perfectly flat tent-pad, wood-cut benches

overlook the central fire ring, and pre-chopped firewood sits in a neat stack nearby.

"Now this is my kind of campground!" Ron exclaimed as we leaned our bikes against trees near the fire ring.

Matt and I had gone to choose a tent site when a suspicious rustling noise caught our ears. About 200 feet away, we spotted the brown rear end of a bear that was digging enthusiastically into the ground. Now it was our turn to go saucer-eyed as I decided that, yup, it looked like a pretty big rear end.

Dad and Ron were chatting over by the bikes, oblivious to our campground companion. For its part, the bear seemed just as oblivious to us. Surely it could smell Matt, but it kept right on digging. Not wanting to aggravate the bear, but acutely aware that Dad and Ron had the bear spray, I started making "kssst!" noises towards them.

We stood there for what seemed like several hours — the bear digging and me going "kssst!...kssst!" — before Dad and Ron finally looked over. At the same moment, the bear casually turned and loped away into the forest. We saw then that it was a black bear, not a griz, and a youngish one at that. Certainly no trap-per-eater.

Despite its Grizzly Basin nickname, we saw no bears on our hike to Wall Lake



Wild bike camping. The group spends the night at the Kishenena Creek campground

the next day. Nor did we see any as we scaled the mountains around it — past snow fields and mountain goats and up a nerve-jangling scree slope to Akamina Ridge. At its peak, we stood in wide-eyed awe among a wild toss of arrowhead summits draped in glaciers and waterfalls. The sun seemed close enough to reach up and touch. As far as the eye could see, alp upon alp reached for the heavens. Glacier and Waterton's loftiest reaches were a stone's

throw to the south and east, Banff's sculpted summits lay in the distant north, and, to the west, sprawled the valley we'd crossed and the land, in some small way, we'd come to know.

We'd made it. The next day, mountain-side singletrack would lead us down to the town of Waterton where cold beers would be shared and heroic deeds recounted. Everyone had survived, even thrived, on the tour.

Dad had led the way, charging out in front as always; Matt, having sweated enough beer residue to fill a keg, had vowed to get in better shape; and Ron had succeeded in not being eaten by a grizzly bear. He'd also transformed, in one short week, from a cycling neophyte to a hardened, wilderness mountain-bike tourer. As for me, I'd finally explored the Canadian side of my beloved, untamed valley. Now it would be back to plotting the next tour and daydreaming about my next chance to return to the wilds and leave civilization behind. **AC**

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Valley overlook. Discussing what to do if Ron gets eaten by a grizzly bear.