

Why do we do this? How is this fun?

A WWC Attempt to Hike the Sawback Circuit – September 20 to 25, 2018

Westman Wilderness Club (WWC) members organize a variety of outdoor activities throughout the year, ranging from gentle to rugged. Typical activities include: group walks and bicycle rides around Brandon; cross country skiing in the Brandon Hills, Spruce Woods, Turtle Mountains and Riding Mountain; walks, hikes and bike rides in these same recreation areas; canoeing and kayaking; backcountry bike or hike camping trips; and winter camping. Most years, the most rugged activity is a several day long backcountry, backpacking excursion. This year it was a six day, five night backpack on the Sawback Circuit in Banff National Park. For information on the club, past events and upcoming events, go to <https://www.westmanwildernessclub.ca/>

There are two Sawback hikes, the Circuit and the Trail. The Circuit is noted as being a little shorter and less rugged than the Trail. Long time WWC club member Eldon (retired letter carrier) led a hike on the Trail (74 km running from Banff to Lake Louise, or visa-versa) in the late 1990s. The 2018 expedition crew was five: Di (retired nurse, event leader and youngest member of the crew); Sue and Rick (grandparents to eight, not retired, happily married (to each other), and cordial to each other before, throughout and after the hike); Ed (retired teacher, photographer, scuba diver) and; Bert (me, an engineer who doesn't work much, but isn't quite ready to commit to retirement, picture taker, scribe). All five have participated in WWC multi-day wilderness backpacks in recent years.

We assembled at a condo in Canmore the day before the hike. From here, the shoppers cruised the outdoor adventure stores in search of any new gizmos or gadget that promised to improve the wilderness experience. Then off for a fine supper in the Spice Hut. Back at the condo, we sorted out backpacks and gear, debated how much food and which articles of clothing we needed, then weighed in. Full pack weights ranged from 34 to 49 pounds.

Thursday morning, September 20, we had breakfast in the condo before heading to Johnson Canyon, the trail head for our hike. The first two and a half kilometers of the trail are in the spectacular Johnson Canyon, between steep rock walls, alongside several waterfalls. This part of the trail has paved walkways, catwalks over the river where there is not room alongside and guardrails which impede Darwinism from eliminating any of our species. I think it is wrong to take measures (e.g., guardrails) in nature reserves that interfere with natural selection.

The next three kilometers of trail were less developed but still heavily travelled. It took us to the "Ink Pots", a series of small, interestingly coloured ponds fed by underground springs with a very picturesque mountain backdrop where most hikers stop for a picnic lunch before making the return hike to the trailhead. On the way up, day-hikers commented on the size of our packs to which we responded that we ate big lunches.

Ed and Bert took lots of pictures along the canyon and at the Ink Pots, but we were under grey, overcast skies so their pictures didn't do justice. Pictures in the following websites better capture the views on this section of the hike.

<http://banffandbeyond.com/johnston-canyon-hiking-in-spring-summer-and-fall/>

<https://www.hikebiketavel.com/the-ink-pots-hike-via-johnston-canyon/>

The trail to the Ink Pots was busy with Asian and European tourists speaking many languages. At the Ink Pots we visited with some Floridians and a Swiss couple who marveled at the sites and the lack of crowds. While we saw it as a busy place, for Europeans it wasn't. Let us

appreciate it while we can. After the Ink Pots, we were mostly alone on the trail. At Larry's Camp (about km 9) the trail split, NNW towards Badger Junction which was our route and east towards Mystic Pass through which we intended to return. Here, we met three guys fishing in the creek. They were on an eight day hike from Lake Louise to Banff. A few days earlier, they enjoyed a snowfall that storm-stayed them for two days. They still seemed to be getting along and having fun.

We pressed on for another 9 km to the Luellen Lake Junction campground under grey skies that produced a bit of drizzle. Backcountry trails are not always well marked, so for added security, we had a GPS downloaded with a trail map. But trails change, in which case you need to decide whether you follow the trail in the GPS or the trail on the ground. We had such a circumstance - the GPS showed the trail continuing straight ahead along the creek while a sign on the trail and a well-worn footpath indicated it went up and up and up a hill to the right. A decision was taken to avoid the hill and follow the creek. The trail taken was strewn with deadfall and boulders. Had the creek been higher, significant sections would have been underwater. It was obvious it was no longer the chosen path but it was quite navigable.



After 18 km and about 8 hours on the trail, we dragged our tails into camp at the Luellen Lake Junction, pitched tents, tried to start a campfire and prepared our suppers. Although the 2 km return hike to Luellen Lake was noted as being very scenic, we yielded to rapidly diminishing daylight and completely diminished energy levels, and did not much other than eat supper and try to keep a fire going with wet wood.

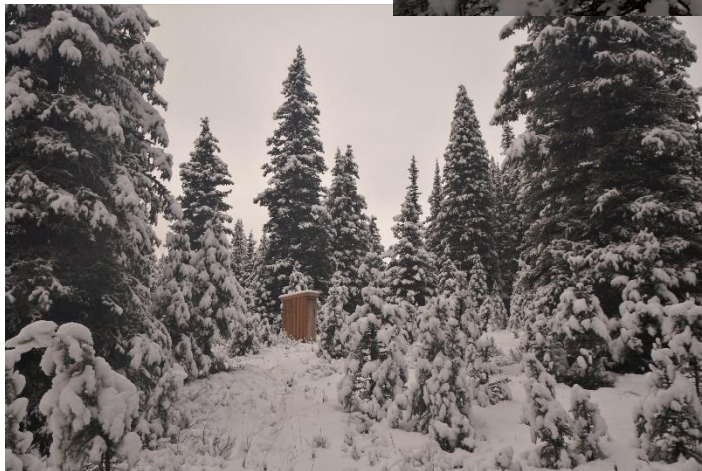
Overnight, the drizzle turned to snow making our tents wet and heavy for packing. We weren't on the trail until late morning, so it was good that we only had 8 km to the Badger Pass Junction, our next camp. It was a grey, drizzly day, with a bit of sleet in the mix. Despite the rain and sleet, we were able to source enough dry wood at Badger Pass Junction to make a decent fire. While sourcing wood, Rick cut his thumb, giving Di the opportunity to resume practice of her nursing skills.

I should mention that one of the first tasks undertaken when setting up camp was using Ed's tarp to make a canopy, under which we positioned benches so we could be out of the rain while cooking, eating and BSing the evenings away. I should also mention that the cooking and food storage areas were a "bear smart" distance from the tent pads – perhaps 300 or 400 meters of separation. I do support this effort to impede Darwinism.

Like many males on the sorry side of sixty five, I have inefficient kidneys that necessitate frequent strolls in the night. Thus I was well aware on this night that we were experiencing a heavy snowfall. While on my second or third stroll, Rick and Sue had become aware of the snowfall, as their tent was collapsing on them. From inside their tent they beat the walls to shake

the snow off, then had a long consultation. I couldn't make out their conversations but expect they were wondering what lapse in judgement had led a normally rational couple like them into this circumstance. I could also hear frequent rock falls and avalanches from across the valley.

In the morning, our world was a winter wonderland covered with 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 cm) of fresh, wet, heavy snow. It was stunningly beautiful. But it called for reconsideration of our route. The hike planned for day 3 was up and over Badger Pass, a 12 km hike that would include about 800 m of climbing, which would make it our toughest day by far. At higher altitudes would be deeper snow.



A little refuge in the forest. The seat may not have been heated but it was dry. What a relief!

Walking around camp was tough without a pack. Slogging up long, steep inclines with full backpacks would be brutal. On top of that, it was our understanding that the trail over Badger Pass and beyond was not well marked, and finding the footpath under a deep layer of fresh snow would be near impossible.

We had discussions and concluded that it was folly to go on. Unlike previous occasions when faced with rational and irrational choices, this time we chose rational.

Depending on your attitude, you may attribute the decision to the wisdom that comes with age or as a concession to the frailties of old age. Regardless, **we wimped out.** We would stay camp here a second night, hike up to the Pulsatilla Pass then on day four retrace our steps back to Larry's Camp.

As we hiked to the Pulsatilla Pass we heard and saw dozens of small avalanches as the new, wet snow slid off its perches. The hike up to the pass was glorious, and we experienced the first sunshine of our hike.

The trail had some creek crossings and pretty waterfalls, but it was the mountain vistas and skies that made this part of the hike worthwhile.



Di, Rick, Sue, Ed and Bert take 5 on the way to the Pulsitilla Pass



Back at camp, we found a good source of dry wood and our chief fire-maker and pyromaniac Rick built a grand fire which warmed our spirits and dried Rick's wet socks and boots. Ah, the aroma of three day old hiking socks roasting by an open fire. Moments like that are why we hike.

Sue commented that it "took a village" to build the fire, making reference to the group effort that fed the flames we were enjoying. Bert added that it also took a village to raise an idiot, not thinking of anyone in particular.



Then we got into philosophizing about why we so enjoy excursions that involve significant physical discomfort, sometimes to the point of pain. Bert made reference to "The Joyless Economy", a book by Tibor Scitovsky which he read some thirty five or forty years ago when he returned to university in hope of learning some of what he missed the first time around. (If you had only read three or four books in your life, you would probably remember details from them all!) Scitovsky distinguished between comfort and pleasure.

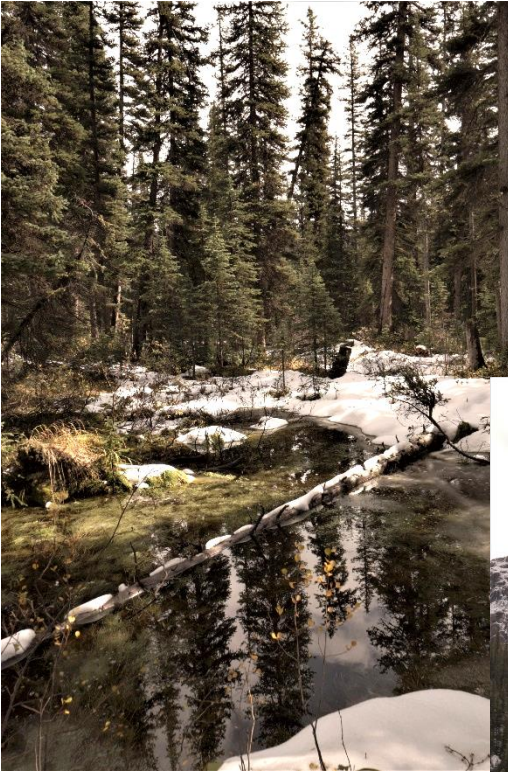
Comfort comes from being in a safe place, having sated your appetite and thirst, sitting in a chair or resting on a bed that fits your body just right, with fresh air and neutral temperatures, soft light and your favourite music playing in the background and pleasant thoughts in your mind. After a while, comfort gets boring. The time to boredom varies with a person's level of attention deficit disorder and/or level of hyperactivity.

Pleasure comes from change. If you have spent a long time out in the cold, you feel pleasure when you come into a warm space. If you have been in the heat, you feel pleasure when you step into a cold place. If you are very hungry, pleasure comes from eating almost anything. Same for thirst. If you have been driving on the prairies for hours, a curvy mountain road may bring pleasure, while after driving for hours on tight mountain roads, a straight stretch of road will bring pleasure.

So the enjoyment we get from events like this hike relate to the pleasure we get from moving from discomfort to comfort, or perhaps more accurately from discomfort to a situation without quite as much discomfort. Then there are the bonuses of spectacular views and the knowledge that we can still do "it", whatever that "it" is.

With that, the campers yawned and went to bed and the pleasure of silence, a much appreciated change from the monotonous drone of Bert's philosophizing.

It didn't rain on the forth night, and for the first time on this hike, tents were drier in the morning than they were the night before.



Di estimated the hike back to Larry's Camp at 11 km. None of us questioned how the return hike along the same trail could be shorter than it was on the way to here, but in time we figured it out. At the Luellen Lake Junction we took a wrong turn and ended up at Luellen Lake. That along with a math correction turned our easy, 11 km hike into an exhausting 17 km hike. But there was good news, too. First, the sun shone all day. Second, Luellen Lake was a gorgeous mistake. Third, we were going to spend two nights at Larry's Camp, with day 5 being a light day with a side hike to the Mystic Pass.



For the first time on the hike we had to share the campground with another hiker. Charles de Montreal (i.e., from Montreal) is a young computer engineer working with simulation

software for hydraulics, as in the hydraulics for power steering on heavy equipment and for heavy duty hydraulic rams. He was hiking alone from Banff to Lake Louise. His friends had tried to dissuade him from taking such risks. Charles was a second generation solo hiker, with some of his hiking and camping equipment being borrowed from his father, also an engineer, who had completed similar solo hikes in his youth.

Our crew questioned the wisdom of his hiking alone, which got Bert into philosophizing on risk and reward – how we each have our own measures for risk and reward. If the reward that we perceive for a given activity exceeds the risks that we perceive for the activity, then we pursue the activity. As example, he referenced his nephew who told of the incredible high he felt as a bull rider. In time, concern about reinjuring his badly beaten legs when the bull goes wild in the chute changed his perceptions of the risks enough that his perceived risk outweighed the thrills of the experience. Bert went on to say the same concepts apply to moto-crossers, race car

drivers, motorcyclists, downhill skiers, parachutists, recreational drug users, shoplifters, those that have something going outside their marriage and all other adrenalin junkies.

With that, the campers yawned and went to bed, seeking the pleasure of silence as a much appreciated change from the drone of Bert's philosophizing.

It was another dry night. Ed and Bert left their tent fly open and their tent and sleeping bags were almost dry by morning. After breakfast, our crew went to view Charles de Montreal's hammock and bivy sack, bid him adieu then headed off to see the Mystic Pass. This was another sunny day with glorious views, but there was quite a bit of fresh snow in the pass so even though we only had daypacks, it was not a cakewalk.



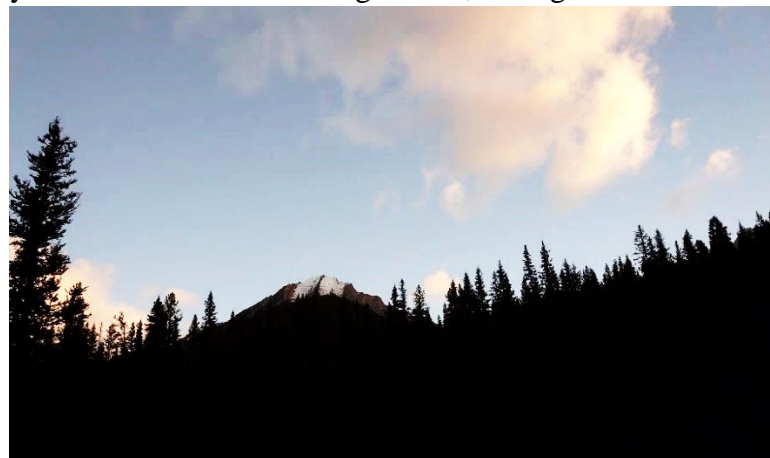


WWC members in the vastness of the Mystic Pass

Back at camp, we again had company. Brian, the Chief of Police for a suburb of Chicago was hiking with his son Tim, who does logistics for a rail company and likes taking pictures. They were camping one day in the backcountry, followed by one day in a better serviced campground. They hadn't sorted the out the art of selecting and packing food that would sustain them through more than one night on the trail. Their supper was a cup of instant noodles. Breakfast was instant oatmeal.

The previous night we hadn't found a good source of wood, so didn't have much of a fire, but during the Mystic Pass hike, an ample supply of dry wood was identified and gathered, and again we had a good fire late into the evening, that everyone enjoyed until Bert began philosophizing, and the campers yawned and went to bed and the pleasure of silence, a much appreciated change from the drone of Bert's yammering.

That night was the only time on our hike that it was cool enough for ice to form in our water bottles. And it was the first morning in which we made a fire. The morning was cold and clear, and we had a million dollar view from our breakfast table.



The million dollar view from our breakfast table

We took our time packing up before heading back to the Ink Pots, where sunny skies provided much better lighting for photography.



One of the Ink Pots with Ed and the mountains as a backdrop

Back on the built up trails, there were again lots of Asian and European tourists. Bert encountered a group of four young Indian men. One seemed to be scolding the others in what may have been Urdu. Bert told them that the Ink Pots were well worth the hike. The scolder said “That is what I have been telling them, but these lazy bums don’t want to walk that far.”

Bert, who believes a good story is worth telling even if it is a fabrication told the young men that there were many attractive, single, young women who hiked to the Ink Pots in hope of meeting eligible young men who were motivated enough to walk that far.

Further down the trail, near the lower falls, Bert encountered an old woman on a walker, being helped by a younger woman, perhaps her daughter. Their progress was very slow. When Ed and Bert arrived at the vehicles in the parking (Ed and Bert are always last because they are always taking pictures), Bert asked if the others had seen the old woman on the walker. They had. Bert said he spoke with her and she said “I hiked to the Ink Pots when I was a young girl, when there was only a rugged trail through the woods, and I am going to do it again today.” Ed rolled his

eyes and turned his back to hide his smirk while the others commented that that was a touching and inspirational story. Bert thought “a good story is worth telling even if....”

In the parking lot we weighed out. At the end of the hike, pack weights ranged from 32 to 37 pounds. Most of the weight loss was attributed to food consumed – at about 1.5 pounds per person per day.

When Eldon hiked this area in the late 1990’s, they saw five grizzly bears in the first hour, after being assured by the park staff that there were no bears in the area. We were warned of grizzlies but the only wildlife we saw were a few chipmunks, perhaps a weasel and a pica or two. With so little wildlife on the trail, it’s good we didn’t see a bear, because it would have been very hungry.



Sue, Rick, Di, Ed and Bert at the end of the trail.

Thank you to Di for organizing and leading this hike and to my fellow hikers for providing the company that makes these excursions so memorable.

Relief map of the Sawback Circuit

