

*Gillean Daffern's*

# **KANANASKIS Country Trail Guide**

4th Edition



## **VOLUME 1**

Kananaskis Valley | Kananaskis Lakes | Elk Lakes | The Smith-Dorrien

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## KANANASKIS COUNTRY

### THE NAME

Since the last edition the whole world has learned to pronounce the name 'Kananaskis': CTV's Lloyd Robertson, US president Bush, British prime minister Tony Blair, Russian president Vladimir Putin. One wonders what explorer John Palliser would have thought of it all.

The strange name dates back to 1858 when Palliser named the pass he was about to cross 'Kananaskis' ...*after the name of an Indian, of whom there is a legend, giving an account of his most wonderful recovery from the blow of an axe which had stunned but had failed to kill him, and the river which flows through this gorge also bears his name.* Possibly the Indian in question was the great Cree Koominakoos who lost an eye and part of his scalp in a battle with the Blackfoot in the Willow Creek area, but made a miraculous recovery and showed up at Fort Edmonton some weeks later ...*ready to take to the warpath again.*

### THE CONCEPT

Today, the Kananaskis Passes, Kananaskis Lakes and the Kananaskis River form the heart of Kananaskis Country (or K Country as it is more commonly called), a provincial recreation area owned by Albertans and established on October 7, 1977, to ...*alleviate congestion in National Parks, and to provide greater recreation opportunities for Albertans.*

Let's give credit to architect Bill Milne, who got the ball rolling. Alberta premier Peter Lougheed and Clarence Copithorne, then minister of highways, quickly came on board and a new Hwy. 40 was built. Their vision for the Kananaskis Valley was one of strenuous physical outdoor activity accessible from a good road but with minimal services. As we all know, that simple idea turned into a grand plan called Kananaskis Country, encompass-

ing a lot more country (over 4000 square kilometres) and a lot more development, with facilities for every conceivable outdoor sport.

Many people forget that Kananaskis Country has always been multi-use, meaning it is open to logging, cattle grazing and oil and gas exploration.

### LOCATION

K Country is located on the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rockies, west and south of the Olympic city of Calgary, Alberta. From the city outskirts the eastern boundary is only a 20-minute drive away.

The western boundary adjoins Banff National Park, then runs down the Continental Divide. The northern boundary is delineated by Hwy. 1A and the fringe communities of Exshaw, Dead Man Flat and Canmore. The eastern boundary coincides neatly with the Bow-Crow Forest reserve boundary, while the southern boundary is marked by Hwy. 732.

### GETTING THERE

Calgary is served by major airlines, several bus companies and by train from the east. Greyhound buses run west along the Trans-Canada Highway to Canmore, but stops are infrequent. That's it as far as public transportation goes. You need a car.

The core area described in Volume 1 is usually accessed from the Trans-Canada Highway via Hwy. 40. It can also be reached from the town of Longview on Hwy. 22 via Hwys. 541 and 40 over Highwood Pass. Another way in is along Hwy. 68 from the Trans-Canada or via Hwy. 742 from Canmore.

The northern portion of Elk Lakes Provincial Park is most often reached from Peter Lougheed Provincial Park on foot. The alternative is to drive to Sparwood on Hwy. 3, then take Hwy. 43 north to Elkford. From Elkford a gravel road follows the Elk River Valley to the park entrance.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

Volume 1 centres on the Kananaskis River Valley and its tributary Smith-Dorrien Creek, most of which now lies within Peter Lougheed and Spray Valley provincial parks. At the junction of the two rivers lies the heart of K Country at Kananaskis Lakes.

Radiating out from the lakes are a number of passes: Highwood Pass, which carries the highest paved highway in Canada, Elk Pass, which leads over to Elk Lakes Provincial Park in BC, and the infamous North and South Kananaskis passes to the west.

A large portion of the mid-Kananaskis Valley is taken up by the Evan-Thomas Provincial Recreation Area, which features Kananaskis Village, Nakiska Ski Area, Ribbon Creek ski trails, Kananaskis Country Golf Course and Boundary Ranch. Farther up the valley is Fortress Ski Resort (closed at time of writing).

The Fisher and Opal Ranges lining the east side of the valley are good for exploratory trips up canyons and along rocky ridges.

Separating the Smith-Dorrien and Kananaskis valleys is the Kananaskis Range, which offers something for every level of hiker: numerous lakes within cirques, meadows and passes, easy ascents and classic ridgewalks, Mt. Allan being the prime example. Logging roads often give access. In fact, the Smith-Dorrien and Mt. Shark ski and bike trail systems are based on the old roads.

In the west along the Great Divide, the K Country scenery reaches its zenith: high peaks (up to 3449 m on Mt. Joffre), glaciers, waterfalls, extensive alpine meadows, lakes, boisterous streams and old-growth forest. This is the scenario for the Canadian Rockies' most spectacular backpack, the exciting Northover traverse.

This volume also covers the north end of Elk Lakes Provincial Park, which is known for its lakes and B.C. bush.

## WEATHER TRENDS

Generally, the hiking season starts in April in a few valleys at the north end of Hwy. 40. The Smith-Dorrien and Kananaskis Lakes area starts to open up much later, around the beginning of July. May is often a dry month, with rains starting in June. The flower months of July and August are the best for big trips, but be aware of late afternoon thunderstorms should that be the trend that particular year. Indian summers through September and October can be glorious. The mornings may be cold but the sunny, stable weather is a relief and the larches may have turned.

As in any mountain areas, snow can fall in any month of the year. In the rotten summer of 1992, for instance, snow fell on three consecutive weekends through late July into mid-August. Conversely, the summer of 1994 was consistently hot with the temperatures hovering around the mid-30s. At such times the area can be locked down to prevent forest fires. Generally, low cloud is not the problem it is in other, wetter ranges of the world and navigating by compass is an unusual event.

## NATURAL HISTORY IN A NUTSHELL

I urge you to buy the appropriate field guides or Ben Gadd's all-in-one *Handbook of the Canadian Rockies*.

**Mammals** Most commonly seen: big-horn sheep along Hwy. 40, moose along Hwy. 742, mule deer, elk, black bear and grizzlies, which frequently close down the Bill Milne bike path. Grizzlies most often frequent the valleys on either side of the Smith-Dorrien Valley, the high passes to the west and the area about Highwood Pass and Ptarmigan Cirque trail. Less commonly seen are wolves, goats, lynx (mainly in winter), and cougars at the north end of the valley. In the wet valley bottoms are muskrats, beavers and the odd river otter. Other critters include porcupines, ground and tree squirrels, and chipmunks, picas and marmots among the rocks.

**Birds** Most common: whiskey jacks (the ones that gather around when you stop to eat), Clark's nutcrackers, hummingbirds (wear red), ravens, thrushes, chickadees, kingfishers, owls, grouse in the forest, ptarmigans up in the alpine, loons on the lakes and various waterfowl in the valley wetlands. Dippers are common in fast running creeks. Golden eagle counting occurs during spring and fall migrations around the Ribbon Creek area.

**Fish** Trout in the lakes, which are stocked annually. Bull trout spawn at the mouth of Smith-Dorrien Creek.

**Vegetation** Trees range through fire succession lodgepole pine in the east to spruce and fir mixed with larch in the west. Balsam poplar grows in the more arid valley bottoms of the Fisher Range and are associated with dryas flats.

For too brief a time alpine meadows and grassy ridges are crammed with flowers in July and August. In particular, overseas visitors will be intoxicated by the gaudy colours of North America's Indian paintbrush. Glacier lilies cover glades near treeline.

Nibble on strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries and blackcurrants.

## HAZARDS & NUISANCES

**River crossings** The once wild Kananaskis River is part of the Bow River's hydro-electric scheme. Flow is no longer controlled by seasonal variations, but by the touch of a button, which has led to a few people getting benighted on the opposite bank. Upstream of Kananaskis Lakes this glacier-fed river and its tributaries can be impassable for much of the season.

Smith-Dorrien Creek and the Elk River in BC are impassable during spring runoff and after prolonged heavy rain as are many creeks running east from the Divide and the Kananaskis Range.

Conversely, creeks running west towards Hwy. 742 and Hwy. 40 are much smaller and manageable.

Caribbean water it is not, as Anthony Hopkins found out during the filming of *The Edge*. If cold water makes you feel sick to your stomach, wear neoprene booties.

**Bears and other beasts** At all times be aware of bears, but particularly in early spring after hibernation and in fall when the berries ripen. Most of the area described in this book is a high bear area. Many hikers carry a bear repellent and bear bangers where they can reach them in a hurry.

In the paranoia over bears we often forget that elk and moose should be given a wide berth too, especially in spring when with young and in fall during the mating season when males get very ornery. Lately cougars have become a year-round worry.

**Hunters** Hunting is allowed outside the provincial parks and provincial recreation areas, Marmot Basin being a prime example, but generally the area covered by Volume 1 is not a big hunting area.

**Ticks** Between about March and mid-June (and in certain areas right through to November) ticks are abroad and are found mainly in areas where there are lots of sheep.

**Loose rock** In Calgary an insurance company's ad on a billboard once read "As firm as the Rockies," which made me laugh aloud. The Rotten Rockies aren't called that for nothing, the sedimentary limestone being subject to extremes of heat and cold. Of course there *is* firm limestone, but it's safer to expect the worse. On scrambling pitches, develop the technique for pushing handholds back into place. Be particularly aware of rockfall in gullies. You will run into scree — lots of it. Utilize game trails where the scree is more stabilized and watch for the occasional bounding rock from people above you.

## FACILITIES

### Hwy. 40 (Kananaskis Trail)

**The Stoney Nakoda Resort Casino** has a hotel and three eateries. Peaks Cafe is open for breakfast at 7 a.m. Closes at 9 p.m. The Ridge Buffet is open 5–8 p.m. daily. Sunday brunch goes from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sidelines Lounge (full menu) is open until midnight Sun–Thurs and until 2 a.m. Fri–Sat.

**Barrier Lake Information Centre** is open Mon to Thurs 9 a.m.–4 p.m.; Fri to Sun 9 a.m.–5 p.m.

**Sundance Lodges** offers unique accommodation in tipis and trappers tents. Bring your own bedding and cooking supplies or rent. Attached is a coin laundry, small grocery store and gift shop. Open mid-May to near the end of September.

**Boundary Ranch**, run by Rick and Denise Guinn (son and daughter-in-law of Alvin Guinn of Guinn's Pass fame) is the place to go for trail rides. Rick's Steakhouse is open during July and August for lunch and early dinner until 6 p.m. on weekdays and 7 p.m. on weekends. One of the few eateries where corn on the cob is a staple. Gift shop attached.

**Kananaskis Village** features two luxurious hotels: Delta Lodge at Kananaskis and Executive Lodge at Kananaskis, upscale restaurants, shops and bars. Woody's Pub has the cheapest eats. At the Village Centre is an information counter, Ribbon Creek Grocery & Deli (hot and cold snacks, open 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. year-round), a post office, a comfortable lounge, and Kananaskis Outfitters (rents, bikes and bike racks, canoes and hiking equipment).

Down the road at Ribbon Creek is **Kananaskis Wilderness Hostel** with fully-equipped kitchen, coin laundry, volleyball court.

The Summit Restaurant at **Kananaskis Country Golf Course** opens at 5:30 a.m. for early breakfasts and stays open until the last golfer has left the course.

**Fortress Junction** gas station sells gas, snacks, groceries, camping supplies, books and gifts, fabulous ice cream cones and has a cash machine. Open year-round.

**Mt. Kidd RV Park** has a snack bar, groceries and hot tubs.

### Kananaskis Lakes Trail/Road

The **Peter Lougheed Visitor Centre** dispenses information and has a comfortable lounge to relax in. The displays are a must see.

**William Watson Lodge** offers accommodation and a campground specifically for seniors and the disabled.

**Boulton Creek Trading Post** has a bistro and grocery store and rents road bikes. Bistro is open mid-May to mid-June (Thurs–Sun 11 a.m.–7 p.m.), then mid-June to Labour Day (daily 11 a.m.–7 p.m.). Store is open May 1 to mid-June (Sun–Thurs 9 a.m.–5 p.m.), then from mid-June–Labour Day (daily 9 a.m.–10 p.m.), then from Labour Day to mid-September (Sun–Thurs 9 a.m.–5 p.m.).

### Elk Lakes Provincial Park

**Elk Lakes Cabin** at the entrance is operated by the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC), and is open year-round for accommodation. Provided are stoves (bring white gas), mattresses, pots, dishes and cutlery. Reservations required. Pay here for campgrounds.

Nearest grocery stores: Boulton Creek Trading Post in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park and the town of Elkford, which has all amenities.

### Hwy. 742 (Smith-Dorrien/Spray Trail)

**Mount Engadine Lodge**, expertly managed by Andrew and Sharisse Kyle, offers accommodation with meals. Non-guests can enjoy all you can eat gourmet dinners at 7 p.m., but you have to book 24 hours in advance. Walk-in afternoon tea and buffet treats are available from 3–5 p.m. on weekends only between mid-June and Thanksgiving. Also on offer: guided hikes, mountain writer programs and the popular Music in the Meadow concerts.

## CAMPING

### HIGHWAY ACCESSIBLE CAMPING

**Campgrounds** fill up quickly in the summer. It's galling to find every campsite full of campers whose idea of exercise is the walk to the biffy, so book ahead if you can. Overflow areas with minimal facilities are often available. After Labour Day the situation eases. Prices vary depending on amenities offered and the number of vehicles in your party. An RV and a tent count as one unit. Generally, Alberta seniors receive a discount.

#### Hwy. 68 (Sibbald Creek Trail west end)

**Stoney Creek** group (beginning of May to the first week in October). Call Bow Valley Park Campgrounds, 403-673-2163.

#### Hwy. 40 (Kananaskis Trail)

**Sundance Lodges** (Mid-May to near the end of September). Besides tipis and trapper's tents it also has regular camp sites. Call 403-591-7122.

**Mt. Kidd RV Park** (year-round). Campers Centre features a grocery store, coffee bar, laundromat, showers, saunas. Outside area children's wading pool, tennis courts, horseshoe pits, volleyball court. Call 403-591-7700.

**Canoe Meadows** group (Apr 11–Oct 13). Call Bow Valley Park Campgrounds, 403-673-2163.

**Porcupine** group (May 1–Oct. 13). Call Bow Valley Park Campgrounds, 403-673-2163.

**Eau Claire** (May 15–Sep 1). Call Kananaskis Country Campgrounds, 403-591-7226, 1-866-366-2267.

#### Kananaskis Lakes Trail/road

**Lower Lake** group (year-round). Call 1-866-366-2267.

**Pocaterra** group (May 15–Oct. 13). Call Bow Valley Park campgrounds, 403-673-2163.

**Canyon** (June 13–Sep 1)

**Elkwood** (May 15–Sep 1)

**Boulton Creek** (May 2–Oct 13)

**Lower Lake** (May 15–Sep 15)

**Mt. Sarrail** (June 20–Sep 1)

**Interlakes** (May 15–Oct 13)

For all of the above call Kananaskis Country Campgrounds, 403-591-7226, 1-866-366-2267.

#### Elk Lakes Provincial Park

Park entrance next to the parking lot.

#### Hwy. 742 (Smith-Dorrien/Spray Trail)

**Buller Mountain**, a winter-only campground, is presently closed. Call 403-673-3985.

### BACKCOUNTRY CAMPING

For official sites you need permits costing \$8 per person plus a \$10.00. maintenance fee plus GST. Children under 16 are free, but still require a permit. Permits can be picked up from the Barrier Lake and Peter Loughheed information centres. The easiest way is to phone 403-678-3136, give them your Visa or MasterCard number and ask them to fax or email the permit to you or tell them you'll pick up the permit en route. In Alberta the number is toll free. Dial 310-0000 first. It will have occurred to you that backcountry camping can cost considerably more than highway-accessible camping.

Random camping is not allowed in provincial parks and provincial recreation areas. Outside of these areas you can camp almost anywhere except in a few areas which are regulated as follows: random permitted with permit, restricted random with no access April 15–Sept 30, no random camping and no access Dec 15–June 15, bivouac random April 15–Sept 30, bivouac random April 15–Sept 30 but with no access Dec 15–June 15. Confused? Contact an information centre for clarification.

#### Off Hwy. 40

**Jewel Bay**, regular and equestrian (June 16–April 14), **Ribbon Falls** (May 16–Nov 30), **Ribbon Lake** (May 16–Nov 30), **Lillian Lake** (late June–Nov. 3), **Elbow Lake** (June 15–Nov 30).

### Off Kananaskis Lakes Trail/road

Point, Forks, Three Isle Lake, Turbine Canyon, Aster Lake.

### In Elk Lakes Provincial Park

Lower Elk Lake, Pétain Creek, Pétain Basin (bivouac). Cost is \$5 per person per night. Children under 16 go free. Pay at the Elk Lakes Cabin. Random camping is not allowed.

### Off Hwy. 742

#### (Smith-Dorrien/Spray Trail)

Rummel Lake, winter only.

For up-to-date info on campsites pick up *Explore Kananaskis Country and the Ghost Area*, which is published once a year by Friends of Kananaskis Country. Copies available at all information centres in K Country and elsewhere in Alberta.

## INFO

### A FEW RULES

- Respect seasonal trail closures.
- No registration is necessary for overnight trips. However, registration books are available at information centres and at some trailheads.
- Respect open-fire bans. Should you wish to report a fire, telephone numbers are listed on trailhead kiosks.
- Dogs must be on a leash.
- Anglers require an Alberta or BC fishing licence.
- There are some restrictions on backcountry camping. See “Backcountry Camping”
- There are some restrictions for mountain bikers. Read the trail description or contact an information centre.

### SEASONAL ROAD CLOSURES

**Hwy. 40** between Kananaskis Lakes Trail/road and Highwood Junction is closed between Dec. 1–June 14. During this time, skiing, snowshoeing, walking and biking is allowed.

**Valleyview Trail/road** is permanently closed between Elpoca day-use area and Little Highwood Pass day-use area. Walking and biking are allowed except at specified times when the road is used as a dumping ground for road kill. Check the K Country website.

### FRIENDS OF KANANASKIS COUNTRY

is a not-for-profit registered charity that works in partnership with Alberta Tourism, Parks & Recreation “for the benefit of Kananaskis Country and its visitors.” See [www.kananaskis.org](http://www.kananaskis.org).

### VOLUNTEER TRAIL CARE GROUP

As before, K Country needs your help in maintaining selected trails. To volunteer, phone 403-678-5593 or write to [trails@kananaskis.org](mailto:trails@kananaskis.org)

### CHECK THE K COUNTRY WEB SITE

Check the K Country trail report for trail conditions. Especially useful are the “Important Notes,” which among other things give warnings about bear or cougar sightings and temporary trail closures. See [www.Kananaskis-Country.ca](http://www.Kananaskis-Country.ca).

### CHECK OUR BLOG

**KananaskisTrails.com** is a blog site maintained by Gillean and Tony Daffern. It covers all things Kananaskis, including notification of new trails, trail changes and trail issues.

### CHECK THE WEBCAMS

Webcams in this area are Barrier Lake Station and Nakiska.

## USING THE BOOK

### ARRANGEMENT OF TRAILS

Trails are arranged by highway and are colour coded. Refer to map on page 16.

### TYPES OF TRAILS

**Official Trails** officially maintained by Kananaskis Country, Alberta Tourism, Parks & Recreation, and Alberta Sustainable Resources are a mix of new and old trails, logging and exploration roads, fire roads and cutlines. Expect parking lots at trailheads, biffies and the occasional picnic table. Junctions are marked with signposts of the “You are here” variety. Some trails have directional arrows or coloured markers on trees or posts. Unless the trail is equestrian, expect bridges over creeks.

**Unofficial Trails** are similar to the above, but sometimes have no obvious trailhead, are neither signposted nor marked in any way except perhaps, for the occasional piece of flagging, cairn or trimmed branches. Creek crossings are the norm. For the first time, this category includes trails demoted from official status.

**Routes** either have no trails or have long trail-less sections where you have to navigate from one intermittent game trail to another. Often there is some bushwhacking.

**Scrambles** Can have official or unofficial trails or be routes. They range from ridge walks to gruelling uphill flogs in excess of 1000 m to the top of a mountain. You can be sure of scree, and possibly a pitch or two of easy scrambling. There may be mild exposure. Special equipment is unnecessary *in optimum conditions when the mountain is devoid of snow and the weather is good.*

### HEIGHTS, HEIGHT GAINS

are given in both metric and imperial.

### RATING TRAILS

No attempt has been made to classify trails. What’s difficult for one person is easy for another. It’s all relative. Also coming into play is the length of a trail, its gradient, its remoteness from a trailhead, conditions underfoot and so on. Read the introductory description carefully. If you’re having a horrible time, it’s up to you to turn back and try something easier.

### RATING TIMES

Times are dependent on too many variables—everybody chugs along at a different rate. Some will be carrying heavy packs; some people, like me, like to make frequent flower stops. And then there are the underfoot conditions to consider, the weather and so on.

- Half day, up to 3 hours
- Day, up to 6 hours
- Long day, up to 10 hours plus. (Take headlamps )
- Backpack, overnight camping.

Some of the trips are designated “bike ‘n’ hike” and even “paddle ‘n’ hike.” Biking the first part of the trail can cut down the time considerably. In this way I’ve often squeezed a weekend trip into one day.

### DISTANCES

Distances are given in kilometres. Distances shown between each segment of trail are not cumulative, but show the distance between segments.

### TRAIL DESCRIPTIONS

Trail descriptions are arranged according to the character of the trail. Most trails lead to a single destination. But sometimes the destination is the springboard for further options under headings like “going farther,” “making a loop,” “optional descent route” etc. I sometimes describe the same mountain with different ways up and down, or an area with a number of trails or

peaks radiating out from the same access. Occasionally loop trails can be extended into longer loops. Long-distance trails, rarely hiked in their entirety, are described by segment.

### **DIRECTIONS**

Left and right refer to the direction of travel. Skier's left/right refers to descent, climber's left/right to ascent.

### **GRID REFERENCES & GPS RECEIVERS**

Where I give grid references you can follow along on your topo map.

Maps have blue grid lines running east/west and north/south. Each line is numbered. The first two numbers indicate the grid line forming the west boundary of the kilometre square in which your point is located, and the third number the estimated number of tenths of a kilometre your point is east of that line. The fourth and fifth numbers indicate the south boundary of the square and the last number the estimated number of tenths of a kilometre your point is north of that line.

GPS receivers are useful when bushwhacking or for finding your way back to a trail or a trailhead.

### **MAPS IN BOOK**

Sketch maps in the text are not always to scale and serve only to clarify complex areas where you might go wrong. Maps at the back of the book are based on today's topo maps, which come in a mix of imperial and metric. Therefore, the contour intervals vary. There are also errors like missing creeks, lakes, mountains and glaciers. Because of this these maps are intended as a guide only. Still, trails and routes are marked as accurately as possible.

- Red line: a trail, official or unofficial
- Red dash: a route
- Black line: trail in other volume.
- Dashed black line: route in other volume

### **BUYING MAPS**

Maps in the back of this book are for reference only. You need to carry a bona-fide topo map. The latest editions of Gem Trek maps come close to being the perfect maps for the area, with contour intervals at 25 m. They show grid lines, up-to-date road alignments, official trails, some unofficial trails, and major powerlines.

Government topo maps, depending on the edition, are in both imperial and metric, with contour lines at 100-foot intervals and 40-m intervals respectively (not so good). Occasionally, features like small lakes, streams, glaciers and even mountains are omitted, which leads to exciting discoveries. Generally, road alignments are corrected on maps post 1983.

Provincial Resource Base Maps from Alberta Energy & Natural Resources are updated fairly regularly and show what the other maps don't: all cutlines, all powerlines and exploration and logging roads. Unfortunately, the reality is sometimes nothing like what is shown on the map.

### **MAPS FOR VOLUME 1**

#### **Gem Trek**

- Canmore and Kananaskis Village: scale 1:50,000, contour interval 25 m.
- Kananaskis Lakes scale 1:50,000, contour interval 25 m.

#### **Government topo maps**

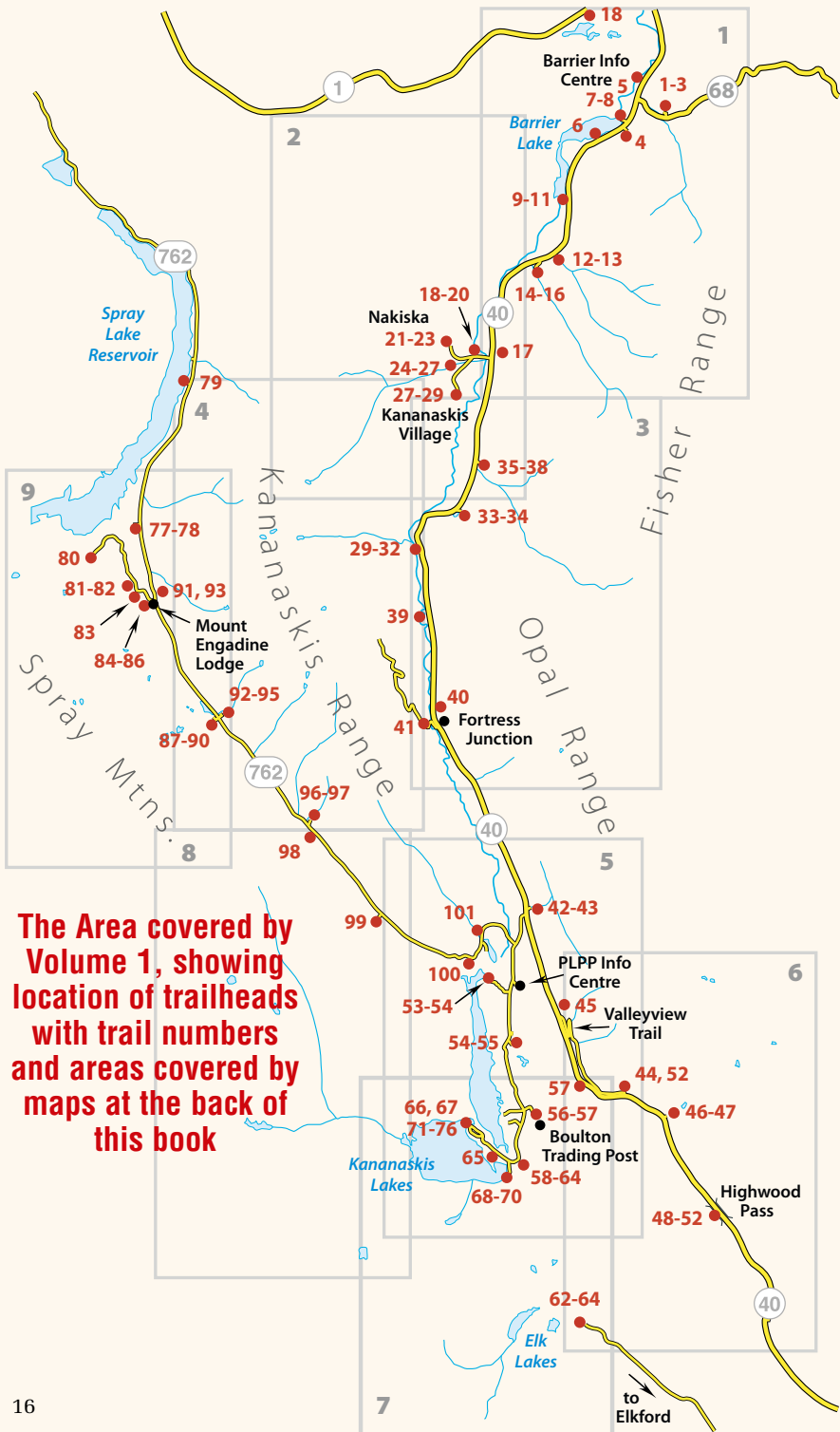
Scale 1: 50,000

Contour interval 40 m.

- 82 O/3 Canmore
- 82 J/11 Kananaskis Lakes
- 82 J/14 Spray Lakes Reservoir

Contour interval 100 ft.

- 82 J/10 Mount Rae
- 82 J/15 Bragg Creek
- 82 J/6 Mount Abruzzi



**The Area covered by Volume 1, showing location of trailheads with trail numbers and areas covered by maps at the back of this book**



## 88 BURSTALL PASS—map 9

**Long day hike, bike 'n' hike**  
**Official trail with signposts, creek crossings likely**  
**Distance 7.8 km**  
**Height gain 472 m (1550 ft.)**  
**High point 2362 m (7750 ft.)**  
**Maps 82 J/14 Spray Lakes Reservoir, 82 J/11 Kananaskis Lakes**

**Access** Hwy. 742 (Smith-Dorrien/Spray Trail) at Burstall Pass parking lot.  
**Also accessible** from #86A and B, Birdwood Lakes.

The Burstall Pass trail takes you into that cheerful green and white karst country above treeline. Once you are up high, there are many enticing opportunities for off-trail exploration: see options and scramble #89.

Not all of this route is scenic trail. It kicks off with 3.3 km of tedious logging road that we used to drive pre K Country. Now you can bike it to a bike rack. This cuts down the hiking to 4.5 km one way.

*Burstall Pass. In the background is Mt. Birdwood, Pig's Tail and Commonwealth Peak.*

Okay, so you may be walking your bike up some hills, but coming down is a blast.

Creek crossings on the flats are unavoidable, but after September you can generally cross dryshod.

As Joe Kovach and Bill Balmer noted on October 6, 1948, the pass can easily be crossed to the Spray River. Nowadays there is the luxury of a trail, so anyone off to Lemna Lake, Spray Pass or Palliser Pass can come this way in preference to slog-ging all the way up the Spray River trail from Bryant Creek. For details read *The Canadian Rockies Trail Guide*, by Brian Patton and Bart Robinson.

This is also the scrambler's access for Mt. Burstall, Piggy Plus and Snow Peak.

### **To bike rack 3.5 km**

Forgoing the gated gravel access road, cross Mud Lake Dam on trail. Join the road briefly, then swing right at the hiking sign onto Burstall Creek logging road. To left is French Creek pouring out of two culverts



*Burstall Pass (centre) from the lower south ridge of Snow Peak. To left is South Burstall Pass below Sir Douglas. At centre ridge 147230, showing both ascent and descent routes. To the right is Lemnan Lake between mounts Lemnan and Leval. The pointy peak is Talon Peak above Talus Lodge.*

into a holding pond, diverted from its natural course into Smith-Dorrien Creek to Mud Lake, a receptacle for all the muck carried down from the Robertson and French glaciers. At another hiking sign curve left up a hill. (To right is the flat Hogarth Lakes logging road.) At the top is a four-way junction. Turn sharp right at the hiking sign. (Ahead is the French Creek logging road.)

Continue to follow the Burstall Creek logging road, which climbs past numerous re-vegetating logging roads and skid trails, the result of Balmer's visit to look over the timber. Down to your right, Burstall Creek is closeted in a canyon. A side trail just after an intersecting logging road leads to a vertiginous viewpoint. Don't sue if you fall over the edge. Okay?

After the road descends a little, keep straight at km 1.7. (A secondary road to right heads downhill and crosses Burstall Creek. See #87B.)

Below the avalanche slopes of Mt. Burstall, the going is mainly flat with a few small uphill. Pass a massive boulder, and down to the right the three relatively drab-coloured Burstall Lakes, which lie out of sight from the road. Though not out of earshot. On a left-hand bend the roar you hear comes from the cascade at the outlet

of the middle lake. A short distance on, a side trail to right leads to waterlogged meadows surrounding the middle lake. (See side trip A, Avalanche Impact Pond.)

After another uphill, a cairn on the left side indicates the scrambler's route up Mt. Burstall. A few metres on, a short side trail to right leads to Third Burstall Lake, a detour worth taking for the view of Mt. Birdwood and Commonwealth Peak rising steeply above the water.

At about 3.4 km, a small meadow on the left-hand side—a former sawmill site—marks the end of the logging road. This is also where scramblers take off up a hidden valley to Piggy Plus. The road reverts to trail and dips sharply. Immediately after is the bike rack.

### **To the pass 4.3 km**

From the rack, a rooty trail descends gradually to the valley bottom and runs alongside Robertson Creek to a bridge. Cross and navigate a large willowy alluvial flat extending from Robertson Glacier moraines to west Burstall Lake. This



*Mt. Robertson, Robertson Glacier  
and Mt. Sir Douglas from the flats.*

entails following footprints in the gravel and signs on posts. During the summer glacier melt, paddling continually shifting braided streams is the norm.

Ahead is Snow Peak, the south ridge in profile. As you cross the mouth of Robertson Glacier Valley, look left for a view of the glacier slung between the vertical strata of Mt. Robertson and lordly Sir Douglas.

Enter forest again and climb the timbered headwall of Burstall Creek, which is a bit of a grunt with overnight gear and a six-pack. Some 120 vertical metres later you reach the long flat meadow below Birdwood Pass and Mt. Birdwood's Lizzie Ridge. This is where route 85A comes in.

Cross the meadow and climb steadily through open forest to a flattening where the trail turns right at a signpost. (The less worn trail ahead starts you off towards South Burstall Pass.)

The trail heads up right, zigs back left below a rockband into meadows, then right again, ultimately approaching the pass from the south. A national parks signpost marks the spot.

When the cloud's down, Burstall Pass is a hugely complicated terrain of barren ridges, confounded by a deep sinkhole on the west side. In fine weather it's a marvellous place to be. Mountains encircle you, Mt. Birdwood to the northeast and The Fortress seen through the gap made by Burstall Creek. Sir Douglas is pre-eminent to the south, while to the west, Assiniboine lords it over a welter of lesser peaks. Bounding the pass to the south is the unnamed ridge 147230, and to the north the oddly-named Snow Peak.

### GOING FARTHER

## 88A Leman Lake Viewpoint

**Official trail, route**

**Distance 0.7 km from pass**

If not climbing Snow Peak or Ridge 147230, this is the next-best viewpoint and requires little extra effort.

Start at Burstall Pass. The same trail continues into Banff National Park, traversing the left side of the sink. Instead of turning right as for the Spray River Valley, continue ahead to a grassy shoulder. Keep walking until the peacock colours of historic Leman Lake come into view. In 1901 Walter Wilcox named it Lake Castelleia after the wild flower observed on its banks, i.e. the Indian paintbrush.

While Leman Lake can be reached from the Spray River Valley you can miss out the backpack by driving Hwy. 93 and the Kootenay-Albert forest road and walking for an hour over Spray Pass. For details read *Hikes around Invermere & the Columbia River Valley*, by Aaron Cameron and Matt Gunn.

*Right: The impact pond and mound above Third Burstall Lake. Mt. Burstall in the background.*

### OPTIONS

## 88B Avalanche Impact Pond

**Half-day**

**Route, creek crossing**

**Distance 0.6 km from Burstall Pass trail, 3.2 km one way from trailhead**

Close to the northeast end of Third Burstall Lake is a small pond marked on the topo map at 173272. As ponds go it's a bit of a rarity. It's full name is "snow-avalanche impact pool" because it's been excavated by climax avalanches shooting down the 580-m-high gully from the ridge above. The ejected material piled up in a mound on the downhill side and the hole filled up with water.

Landform enthusiasts should consider making the pond a half-day destination from the trailhead. Take Texas and poles.

Start from Burstall Pass trail at 2.6 km from the trailhead. Head right on a narrow trail leading to a waterlogged meadow about Second Burstall Lake. Put on the Texas and make your way around the left shore to Burstall Creek between lakes. Follow it





South Burstall Pass area below Whistling Ridge. Photo Alf Skrastins

up and wade the creek easily at the outlet to Third Burstall Lake.

Ahead is the grassy mound, and behind it a green pond about 9 m deep. The best viewpoint is from a little way up the gully (see photo.).

It's hard to think of a better lunch spot than the back side of the mound that slopes down to the lake at sun-bathing angle and gives fine views across the water to Mt. Burstall and Whistling Ridge. Alternatively, some cleverly constructed seats made out of large rocks and deadfall are available close to the shore.

## 88C South Burstall Pass

**Long Day hike**

**Unofficial trail then route**

**Distance from main trail 1.7+ km**

**Height gain from main trail 168+ m (550+ ft.)**

**High point 2454 m (8050 ft.)**

The slightly higher pass at 155226 is really the culmination of the Burstall Creek Valley between Whistling Ridge to the east and ridge 147230 to the west. Much of it

is a rough walk on rock, but an exciting one for karst lovers.

Leave Burstall Pass trail at the signpost at 150245 where a fainter trail heads south. After it peters out choose your own route, more or less following the draw to a wide flat area of fissured pavement which is the pass. At a cairn look back. The four dog-tooth mountains: Smuts, Birdwood, Pig's Tail, and Commonwealth Peak have lined up four abreast. What you've really come for, though, is the close-up of Mt. Sir Douglas, its north face mantled with glaciers.

If you have time continue southeast into a cirque "of shattered karst full of depressions and blocked shafts."

On the return explore farther towards Whistling Ridge and Burstall Slabs ("one of North America's finest friction climbing areas"), "where small streams plunge into beautifully sculptured elliptical shafts" writes caver Jon Rollins describing Burstall Pots. He surmises the water may rise again at Karst Spring, though no water tracing has ever been carried out. Also have a look for the wee tarn.

## 88D Ridge 147230

### Day

#### Route, unofficial trail

Distance 2.3 km to South Burstall Pass

Height gain 244 m (800 ft.)

High point 2606 m (8550 ft.)

If motivated by fabulous views, traversing the ridge between the two passes is something you can't pass up. Most often it is combined with Option C.

Getting onto the ridge is not as straightforward as you might expect. From the signpost at Burstall Pass head southwest onto the big grassy rise 145239 through a break in the rock band. Steer south and gain a smaller rise by the left edge. Ahead rises the main body of the ridge. Sneak through the obvious draw on its left side, cut back right on steep grass, and finish with a simple scree plod on sheep trail.

Except for one short rise before the second cairn, the summit ridge is broad and flat, the right side falling away in cliffs to

the Spray River Valley. You'll revel in the view that takes in the whole of the Spray Valley from Bryant Creek to Palliser Pass, plus Mt. Assiniboine and all the peaks you could see from Burstall Pass. Look *down* on blue-tinted Belgium Lake, and across the pass to Mt. King Albert, named after the King of the Belgians who died in a climbing accident and not, I hasten to add, a member of the Royal Group. Carry on to the very end, dropping slightly to a spectacular grassy promontory that gives you the best view of the day—the classic shot of Sir Douglas.

### To regain the Burstall Pass trail

Most hikers drop off the left (east) side of the ridge onto South Burstall Pass. From the end point this is a fairly simple descent of alternating scree steps (the second is the steepest) and grassy terraces. Then turn left and wander back north through the valley karst.

Alternatively, head left along the lower terrace. Where the terrace slips a notch at mid point, descend to the flat meadow and pick up the Burstall Pass trail just below the pass.

*View of Sir Douglas from the promontory.*



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