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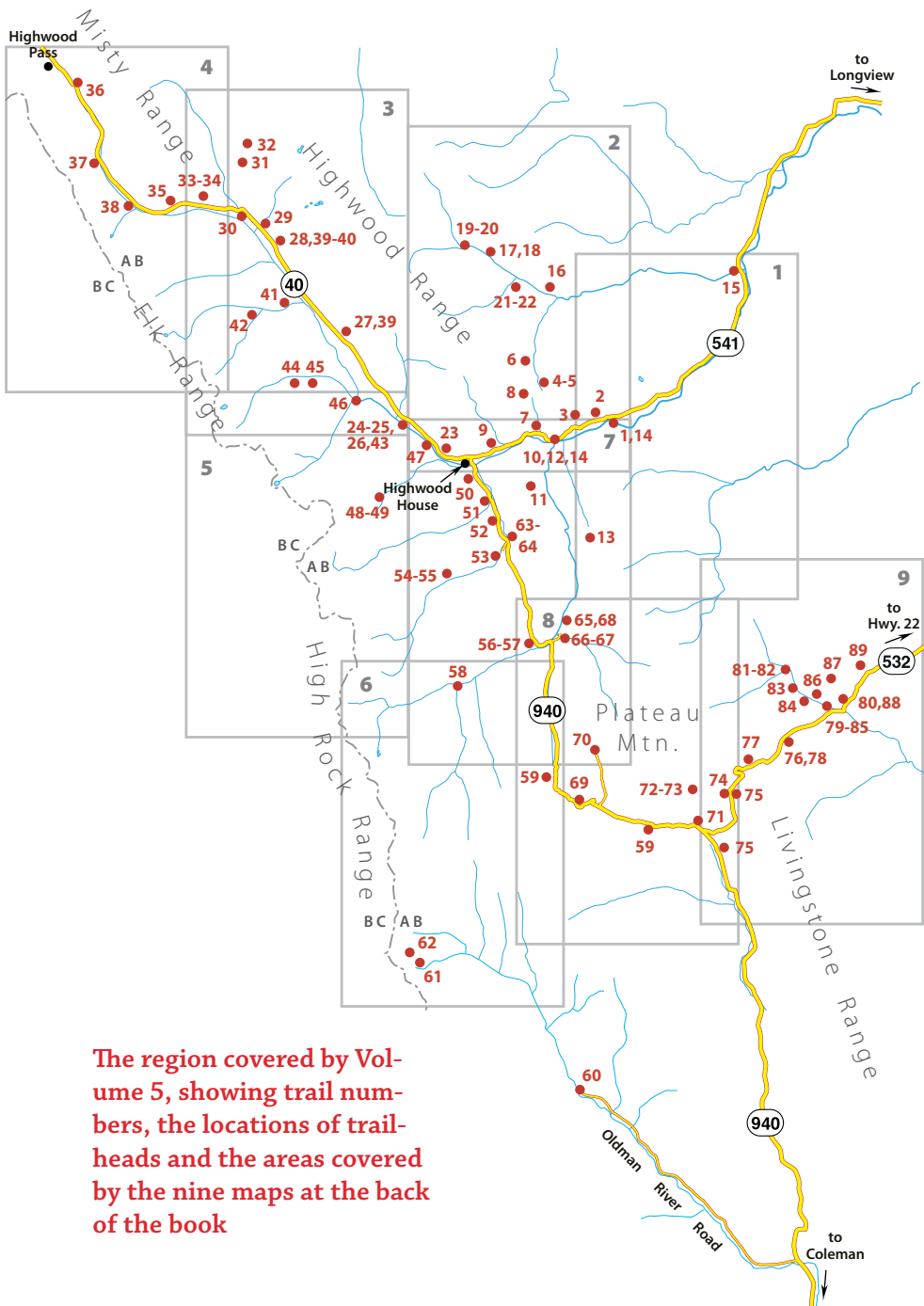
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KANANASKIS COUNTRY AND ADJOINING AREAS COVERED BY THE KANANASKIS COUNTRY TRAIL GUIDES



- * Information Centres
- Winter Gates
- Light Blue: Vol. 1 Kananaskis Valley, Smith-Dorrien, Kananaskis Lakes, Elk Lakes
- Light Orange: Vol. 2 Jumpingpound, West Bragg, Elbow
- Orange: Vol. 3 Ghost, Bow Valley, Spray
- Purple: Vol. 4 Sheep, McLean Creek
- Green: Vol. 5 Flat Creek, Highwood, Cataract Willow Creek, Livingstone



The region covered by Volume 5, showing trail numbers, the locations of trailheads and the areas covered by the nine maps at the back of the book

Kananaskis Country

THE NAME

Since the first edition the whole world has learned to pronounce the name 'Kananaskis': CTV's Lloyd Robertson, US president George W. 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.* Since then the name has been cannibalized in various ways: can'-un-ask'-us, Koonanaskis, Cannanaskis (better as Cannabiscus surely?).

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

Since then K Country has been divvied up into public lands and parks of various designations: provincial parks, provincial wildland parks, ecological reserves. Many people forget that Kananaskis Country has always been multi-use, meaning the public lands sector, mainly to the east is also 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's Flats 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 and west. Bus shuttles run between the airport and Canmore. Roam Transit roams the Canmore to Banff area but that's it as far as public transportation goes. You need a car.

The area described in Volume 3, which is centered on the Bow Valley is accessed from the Trans-Canada Highway, Hwy. 1A and Hwy. 1X. The Ghost can be reached from just west of Cochrane via Hwy. 1A and Hwy. 940, and the Spray Valley via Hwy. 742 from Canmore.

72 Plateau Mountain

map 8

Day hikes, bike 'n' hike
Unofficial trails, routes
High point 2496 m (8188 ft.)
Maps 82 J/2 Fording River,
82 J/7 Mount Head

Access Hwy. 940 (Forestry Trunk Road) at Wilkinson Summit. NOTE Hwy. 940 is closed between Cataract Creek and Wilkinson Summit Dec 1–April 30.

1. Usual At Wilkinson Summit turn north onto Plateau Mountain Road and drive through the gate for ~3.9 km to the big bend at 744666 just before a second locked gate. Either park at the bend or closer to the gate on the right.

2. Dry Creek 820 m east of Plateau Mountain Road turn left at 753625 onto Dry Creek Road A little way along, park off road before the closed gate.

Also accessible from #72 Plateau Mountain, East Ridge Loop.

Comments Plateau Mountain is unique in the Canadian Rockies. Once a nunatak rising above the glaciers of the last ice age, it is today a steep-sided mesa of over 14 km² rising above the 2300 m (7550 ft.) level. There are no trails to the top, only company roads leading to lonely gas wells. I recommend biking the roads, wind willing. Once up there, it pays to get off the beaten track by either walking around the edges or just plain wandering about, field guides to hand, searching for uncommon alpinists such as pygmy bitterroot (*Lewisia pygmaea*), the flame-coloured lousewort (*Pedicularis flammea*) and *Primula egalikensis*, a smaller edition of the bird's-eye primrose. I'm happy to say the mountain is now an ecological reserve. This means no motorized vehicles, no sheep hunting, no collecting of rare plants and butterflies.

Resources Back in 1937, geologist Joe Irwin reckoned Plateau was the most perfect oil dome he had ever seen. It's true. Below the summit sandstones lurks an anticline of Rundle Group limestones harbouring oil and gas retained in traps. After the area's gold rush fizzled out in 1931, the search for oil was on in Savanna and Dry creeks and on Flat-top, or Table Mountain as Plateau was

A tree grows in the middle of a polygon.
Photo Jack Tannett



then called. A road was built from Skeen's Mine over The Hump to Dry Creek, where Anglo-Canadian Oil began drilling for oil. Things didn't really get going, though, until the 1950s when gas was discovered and Husky built roads extending from one end of the plateau to the other. Today, Centrica Energy in partnership with Direct Energy operates the two gas wells on the summit and two on the eastern slopes.

Geology Plateau is renowned for "patterned ground." What happened is that continual freezing and thawing during a colder, wetter era forced the larger rocks upwards and outwards from areas of finer material into an amazing self-perpetuating pattern of circles and polygons.

Caves There are three known caves on Plateau Mountain, but the most famous by far is Plateau Mountain Ice Cave, a much visited tourist attraction before it was gated in 1972 by the Alberta Forest Service. This closure came about after a visit by the McMaster University cavers in 1967 who concluded that a rise in cave temperature caused by too many visitors was having a harmful effect on the formations.

72A South end road

Well road, trail

Distance 6.8 km to south end

Height gain 316 m (1038 ft.)

High point 2496m (8188 ft.)

Comments This well road accesses the high point, the side road to Hailstone Butte fire road and the impressive southern edges. There is the option to return to Hwy. 940 via Dry Creek valley, for which you'll need another vehicle parked at access 2.

To the road junction 4.4 km

Beyond the gate the well road makes two long zigs out of the trees to a saddle with a view looking north towards Mr. Rae which stand head and shoulders above any other mountain in the area. Next to a cairn with a metal cross is an instrument used for measuring the temperature of the permafrost back in 1974-76. Holes were bored in 9 different locations on Plateau and thermocouple cables with 12 sensors inserted to depths of 15 and 31 m. This is no. 5.1. No. 5 is located a short distance away up slope.

The road then winds up the western escarpment to the top. En route you get your first introduction to Plateau's famous patterned ground. At 766658 come to an indeterminate road junction.

To the south end cairn 2.4 km

The major road turns right and runs dead straight to well installations.. To your right, the peaks of the Great Divide, nearly all pyramidal in form, are strung out along the horizon like an unfolded paper cutout. On your left the ground rises ever so slightly to Plateau's high point, which is determined solely by a cairn. Just before well 05-32 keep straight. (Grassy road forking left is #72.)

Come to road's end at 1.2 km amid a spate of warning signs advising you of well 06-29. Continue on trail past an RCMP radio tower and a weather station built by Canadian Western Natural Gas to the cairn at the edge of the southern escarpment overlooking Hwy. 940. A new view reveals Pasque, Beehive and Crowsnest mountains, The Elevators and, far beyond the Divide, the incredible overhanging profile of Mount Harrison, the last of the 11,000ers to be climbed. Down below in a draw at 764625 lies January Cave, much more easily reached from the highway 1 km east of Dry Creek.

Optional return via Dry Creek 4 km

From the southernmost well at 768646 walk west above the buried pipeline to the western escarpment. Find an access trail, shaped like the letter M on its side, that descends the steep grassy hillside to the right of the pipeline into Dry Creek valley, so named after drilling results were disappointing back in the 1930s.

At the bottom, the trail turns left through some bush, crosses the creek and descends to a basin of stones discharged from gullies during the flood. At its far end pick up a road at a pipeline installation and follow it out to Hwy. 940 at 753625.



Above: #70B. On the eastern edges.

Right: #70A. Centrica well 05-32 on the flay desert-like summit area. Interestingly, nonsorted circles are now forming in disturbed areas.



72B North end road

Well road, route

Distance 8.4 km to end of road

Height gain 240 m (787 ft.) to cave

Height loss 200 m (656 ft.) to cave

High point 2419 m (7936 ft.)

This old well road accesses the eastern and northern edges overlooking Salter Creek. A more exciting option is Plateau Mountain Ice Cave entrance at ~772702.

To the road junction 4.4 km

Follow the well road to the indeterminate road junction on the summit area.

To the north end 4 km

Turn left onto the forever road, which is a grassy track nowadays. For a few weeks each summer the whole tundra to the left is dazzling with yellow buttercups. Or so I thought back then. My friend said no. It was here I once saw grown men lurching around with butterflynets, stuffing unlucky captives into



the killing bottle. I was horrified to learn that selling our butterflies to Japan is a lucrative business. (This is one occasion when I would have welcomed a few stewards around for a ticking off.) So that's how I learned Plateau is also a butterfly hot spot—watch that caterpillar crossing the road!

Plateau's narrow waist about half-way along is the best place to access the eastern edge, which at this point is only a few steps away. A few scraggly spruce growing in the lee of the raised track precede the road's end at the site of an abandoned well where you'll find an interpretive plaque in the shape of Siamese-twinned hexagons.

The left-hand plaque under the very Canadian heading of "Sorry" explains that nearby Plateau Mountain Ice Cave has been gated to the public since 1972, it reckoned the small rise in air temperature caused by visitors would have a harmful effect on the delicate ice formations. Interestingly, recent visits by scientists disclose the ice is melting regardless.



GOING FARTHER

To the ice cave 830 m

To go take a look at the cave entrance, set off down the broad grassy northeast ridge. After the initial descent, climb over a hump into a bit of a dip. At a small spruce growing in the lee of a white rock turn right (southeast) and walk down the steepening side slope of grass turning to orange scree with evidence of footprints. Above a gully, traverse *right* above a low rockband. Where the band ends, descend alongside the rock to the top of another rockband, then shuffle left between the two bands on a very narrow ledge.

Where the ledge widens to grass are two caves, the first a pack rat metropolis, to its right the much larger ice cave entrance at 773700 with gate. For the benefit of us shutouts, inside is a glittering fairyland of hexagonal, plate-like ice crystals, extruded fingers of ice, rare and delicate ice flowers and corkscrew stalactites. The entrance leads to a large room partially floored with ice. Two decorated passages leave the room, one with a floor of ice and walls and roof covered by ice crystals. The ceiling gradually lowers until it's necessary to crawl under pendent ice crystals into a small ice-filled grotto.

Return option

Return the same way to the ridgetop. By way of compensation you can hop over the other side to Sheep Cave at 772703, a down scramble of 150 vertical m (492 ft.) as opposed to 60 vertical m (197 ft.) for the ice cave. Although short, the cave is described as impressive, with avens, vugs and scallops.



Top: #70B. The heavily gated ice cave entrance.

Below: #70B. Looking out of the cave entrance to Sentinel Peak. (See #73A for ascent information.) Photo Jack Tannett

Opposite top: #70B. In early summer buttercups cover the northern plateau. CHANGE???

Opposite bottom: #70B. Interpretive signs nowhere near the ice cave. Photo Jack Tannett



