

MY SUMMER IN WATERTON LAKES NATIONAL PARK – THE SOUL OF THE WORLD

By Jeff Bone



I believe in wilderness conservation. The ultimate goal of conservation is to enable us to be of greater service to other living things and to the global environment of which we are temporary trustees. My thoughts about conservation have been shaped by my own personal experiences with nature - in particular, from my time in Waterton Lakes National Park, where visitors may still find some of the most untouched wilderness remaining in Alberta's national parks. Largely because Banff and Jasper are located respectively closer to Calgary and Edmonton, so Alberta's southernmost national park is left for those non-locals with a sense of adventure and a willingness to travel farther. Last summer I had the privilege of living on Crandell Mountain in a semi-wilderness camp fifteen minutes outside the town site in the valley of Mount Blakiston, the highest point in the park. When you are there you feel almost lost in the wilderness, hidden in the Crown of the Continent. My decision to live there was motivated by former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt who, as a young man, left his life and law practice after the death of his wife for the seclusion of a ranch in the Dakotas.

Waterton is a very ecologically important area in the world. This is where the mountains literally erupt from the prairies. There are no “foothills” in Waterton. Its geology features the prairie grasslands hitting the mountains and the inhabitants of both ecosystems living relatively harmoniously together. It was also joined to Montana's Glacier National Park in 1932 to form the world's first international Peace Park. UNESCO describes this Peace Park as “exceptionally rich in plant and mammal species as well as prairie, forest, and



Fly-fishing on the Belly River near a large timber reserve belonging to the Kainaiwa (Blood Tribe) within Waterton Lakes National Park.

PHOTO: © J. BONE

alpine and glacial features.” Since the parks are joined, wildlife moves freely across the 49th parallel. The Peace Park supports quite a healthy grizzly population, an iconic wilderness species that is in serious decline in other parts of the province. Few may realize that human activities in the park have pushed the grizzlies and resident black bears onto private ranchlands surrounding Waterton.

The Waterton parkland terrain was formed by a great continental divide, an abrupt colossal crash that took place over 100 million years ago. This massive tectonic collision resulted in giant blocks of sedimentary layers thrusting on top of one another. It resulted in younger rocks lying underneath much older rock and formed the Rocky Mountains. Waterton sits at the intersection of the Alberta, British Columbia and Montana borders

of this range. Although difficult to comprehend, the history of this land goes back much further than the birth of the Rockies. A thousand million years ago this area was flat and submerged under a shallow sea. Sedimentary layers were laid over the eons of time and eventually formed compressed rock.

Long ago, long before the first humans arrived but after the final of four extensive glacial periods, large blocks of ice melted and cascaded down to form deep and beautiful mountain lakes. Sprinkled throughout these lakes are populations of trout. Crandell Lake is one such place. It is accessible from the Red Rock Parkway and is located in Blakiston valley, out of the so-called Waterton wind corridor.

Crandell Lake provides an opportunity for still-water angling. With a Parks



Summer Meadows

16" x 32" acrylic on canvas

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Canada fishing permit it is open season from May 18 to September 2 subject to prescribed limits and prohibitions on catching protected species such as Alberta's provincial fish, the bull trout. There is no magic in predicting when Crandell Lake will actually thaw, but all bets are off until at least June. Any amateur fisherman or fisherwoman can catch a trout there, particularly if you try late in the evening around dusk. Although barbless hooks are not mandatory I use them to enable me to release fish more quickly and, hopefully, more humanely. I also find that synthetic nuggets are more effective than worms and artificial flies, especially the yellow ones which appear and feel like small marshmallows.

Mountain lakes rarely contain more than one or two species of fish. Crandell Lake is no exception. Today, Crandell is home to eastern brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*). The eastern brook trout, actually a char, is one of three species you often find in Alberta's mountain lakes. I believe it is the most strikingly beautiful char as it has light spots in contrast to the dark spots of many of its cousins. As the name suggests, eastern

brook trout are native to eastern North America. They were introduced into the Waterton aquatic ecosystem through ecologically modifying fish stocking programs dating back to the early 1900s. For this reason, I like to feel as if I have something in common with the brook trout of Crandell Lake. We are both non-

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native species trying to make a home in a foreign land. We are both "strangers in a strange land" as it says in Exodus 2:22, the biblical narrative I often reflect on in the evening by the propane light of my cabin. I feel we both have been introduced into this wilderness and then abandoned to fend for ourselves as best

we can.

Crandell is a lower elevation alpine lake typically characterized by low nutrient production. Therefore, species of fish such as brook trout are often stunted because the growing season of plants and insects is very short. This forces the fish to spend a great deal of energy to feed on a wide variety of small organisms. However, I confess, you can still eat stunted brook trout and be fairly satisfied. I am not battling giant marlins like in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the total opposite in fact, but I think there is pride in still remembering, as Hemingway taught us, that the fish at the end of your line is your friend. We are partners in nature together, and have our respective roles to play.

One of the most unique features of alpine lakes affecting fish comes from their frigid temperatures. Cold water for cold-blooded animals slows their rate of metabolism. The pace of life in alpine lakes is already slow and easy. A fish living in a warm temperature prairie pond will metabolically burn itself out in five years. On account of the cold temperatures and the stunting, mountain

lake fish can reach extreme old age. Stunted lake trout can miraculously live 30 to 40 years. Eastern brook trout may live up to 25 years in Crandell Lake.

The fact these fish can live into their twenties does give me moments for pause. In actuality, I may be taking a fish that was alive when I was a boy. This realization invites me to muse about several other questions. Can a twenty-five year old fish have a personality? Would a fish who lives that long develop the cognitive capacity to understand its own nature? Not to my way of thinking but, as I watch all species in the park, I appreciate their struggles and ability to adapt to and cope with much larger forces, forces they cannot possibly control. I know that this is what we humans should strive towards. We should strive to simply “be” in nature and set aside our ingrained desire to control.

I know when I am happy, and I am happiest alone on Crandell Mountain with only the fish rising and splashing at dusk to keep me company. All this reminds me what a beautiful world it once was and still may be in some places. Some evenings I would look around and truly feel I was in a life size mural: a timeless work of art. I would hope you go visit this very special, quiet corner of the world. Part of me would like to keep it just for myself. I surrender this sanctuary with great reluctance, but know it belongs to everyone and hope those who visit will take care to ensure they do not leave any unnecessary footprints.

When I am in the mountains things seem to slow down. In that stillness I find moments, brief as they may be, of crystallized goodness. On my last day in Waterton as recorded in my journal entry, I woke up and looked around the valley framed by Mount Blakiston. It helped reveal many thoughts that were rolling around inside me. I felt how perfect the setting is, and despite its grandeur, how fragile it is as well. By so many measures this is an important park worth protecting.

Waterton is a land that once belonged to the Blackfoot people and now to all Canadians. The important value that defines a national park is that it belongs to everyone; not just the Crown, the



Few may realize that what people do in Waterton has pushed grizzlies and black bears out of the park onto private lands.

PHOTO: © J. BONE

wealthy or the privileged. The *National Park Act* states that parks are “dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education, and enjoyment”. However, it is often forgotten that it also says parks are to be left “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” This indicates the desire of this generation to explore wilderness and understand it, but reminds us of our promise and obligation to our children and our children’s children.

Today, as our country debates industrializing the last frontier, the North, I wonder if we still believe wilderness exists in natural abundance? This is a question we have to confront, about what wilderness means to us as a non-renewable resource?

For many, wilderness means silence. It is a monastery or a cloistered convent. Yet there are other ways to experience wilderness – wilderness should be a cathedral, a place to celebrate. Wilderness

imparts wisdom, it has many things to say, many things to teach, but it is difficult to know whether it says the same thing to each of us. To me, wilderness asks me to think small, to remember I am a part of everything else, to be more gentle on our connected living ecosystems, to give up the illusions of control I may exercise and to aspire towards an experience of sustainability, wholeness and environmental integrity. The natural beauty of this world is immense. Waterton is a glowing example of that beauty that all Canadians should treasure. We should view this as a responsibility of stewardship and a sustainable commitment for the future. 🌲

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