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## IMPRESSIONS FROM MY CHINCHAGA LIFE

By Jonathan Wright

I have spent six winters in the Chinchaga wilderness monitoring wildlife in relation to oil and gas development. I am paid by oil and gas to do this. I have been out there in the forests and muskegs almost every day for six winters, observing. At night I live in the industry camps. I suppose this means I am better acquainted with the area than just about anyone alive today. I do not go around touting myself as an authority on the area, although relatively speaking, I undoubtedly am. Biologists in Alberta aren't getting out much these days, and I think this is how Alberta prefers it.

You don't generally get in here without a life-support system, without being bound to some machine or other, to save your heart from a rude and unaccustomed shock. For most Albertans, the figurative "iron lung" of choice is the pickup truck, the bigger the better. To enter Chinchaga, this wilderness surrounding the Chinchaga River, you will likely want one of these. In fact, if you are like most Albertans today, you will have allowed yourself to become physically incapable of going far without one, even if you wanted to. While I do not fall into the latter category, I still accommodate modern timelines and get around Chinchaga by pickup truck. Only mine is small. I also have a snowmobile, smaller yet, but I don't like it much. It is unnecessarily smelly and loud, but nonetheless a great asset at times.

I am not particularly taken with the landscape at Chinchaga, nor the ecosystem as a whole. I don't particularly dislike it either. I'm ambivalent. The boreal forest is not like the mountains or the plains – it is a place of subtler beauty and intrigue, and at times it appears devoid of anything redeeming to refined sensibilities. Chinchaga is intriguing to me then not for its landscapes, but rather for the handful of truly fantastic creatures it hosts.

The Chinchaga forestry road begins in a belt of farmland that was once the western edge of the Peace River Parkland. This is the artery by which a species of restricted mobility (ours) must enter this wilderness. The road carries a staggering amount of industrial traffic, so be very careful! Eventually, by following this road and its tributaries (some for winter use only), you can drive right through to the Alaska Highway in B.C. So without even getting your feet cold, you can get a good feel for what Chinchaga is.

The parkland becomes forest within fifteen kilometres or so. At first, the forest is of aspen stunted by the dryness of the Peace microclimate, but as you progress west, you will see how narrow the boundary between climatic regimes can be as the trees grow larger with each kilometre, until by kilometre twenty or so, you are in the great boreal forest proper. One of the best tracts remaining, I have heard.

The first hundred kilometres of the highway climb through the gently rising, rolling terrain of the Clear Hills. This is Chinchaga at its finest. These uplands support not only the most fabulous forests in the region, they also support the greatest diversity of life at Chinchaga. If one measures wilderness by the creatures it supports, than this truly remains a wilderness. Here lives the most intact population of grizzly bear outside the cordillera. Here dispersing wolverine travel their marathon adventures. There are fisher almost the size of wolverines, and marten and otter and beautiful beaver ponds and plenty of moose and therefore wolves, plenty of wolves, many of them hulking brutes of midnight black with burning yellow eyes and feet the size of pie plates.

The forest looks incredibly intact for all the trucks seen rumbling by, loaded down with old-growth trees. This is no accident. Where the land tilts to lend a more panoramic view, you will see that in many places what appears to be a healthy wilderness is an illusion created by the foresters in leaving a buffer of trees along the road, concealing the clear-cuts from the casual observer. It is as though the forest industry, so





quick to woo the public with how “green” their practices have become, are ashamed to show their handiwork. The Clear Hills. The Clear-Cut Hills.

Following the Chinchaga Road west, one finally begins the descent from the Clear Hills at kilometre one hundred. The descent takes over ten kilometres. The steep feature you are descending is the western slope of the hills, known as Halverson Ridge. This feature, along with the Milligan Hills, which barely enter Alberta from B.C., is my favourite part of Chinchaga. Here the boreal old growth is truly magnificent. Plenty of the spruce here are bigger around than even the largest beef-fed Albertan. It is prime lurking ground for grizzly and wolverine. It is this part of Chinchaga that is most worth incorporating into a protected haven. So it was that the forest industry strongly protested its being designated as such when the Chinchaga Wildlands Park was created during the Special Places 2000 initiative. And so it was that the park was whittled down to encompass mostly what lies beyond Halverson Ridge, and what you can glimpse spread out below you as you descend the great ridge on the forestry road.

What lies beyond is the “other landscape” of Chinchaga. The one of muskegs and peat fens. Compared to the uplands, it is an impoverished place. But just as life persists in our human slums, so life is to be found in the muskeg. A few forms even do quite well there.

The muskegs and fens are like a giant sponge, permanently at or near saturation. There are areas of permafrost. The sponge sports a thin mould of stunted willow and spruce and lichen. On drier ground, scraggly aspen and pine form a forest, no doubt, but certainly not something one would be inspired to travel a thousand kilometres or more to view, and certainly not what comes to mind when one hears the term “wilderness.” The average diameter of the trees is likely no more than that of a Spaniard’s thigh. This landscape covers an enormous area straddling the provincial boundary. Traversing it one feels as a louse might feel navigating a coyote in the advanced stages of mange.

Only on the rare well-drained hillocks can be found trees that approximate the grandeur seen in the uplands. But these token patches of prime forest occur here only as islands amid the wastes and do not support the diversity of life found in the uplands.

So what does live in this other landscape of Chinchaga?

Lynx live there. To me, no creature is more symbolic of Chinchaga than the Canada lynx. In the years I have been here, they have seemed preposterously abundant. If you are at all skilled as a tracker, you will discern this soon after entering the forest on the forestry road and without leaving your lung. Their distinctive round tracks punched straight and close into the snow can be seen with gratifying regularity along the road, where the cats have left the forest to cross to the other side. That they do so successfully on most occasions, despite the convoys of huge trucks, is borne out by the fact that after six years and tens of thousands of kilometres of travel on these roads, I have seen only one that was vehicle-killed. In fact, if my observations are taken as any indication, most of the carnivores here seem to have adapted to the road, or learned to avoid the road, and the only creatures that seem to be killed regularly are the spruce grouse. I wouldn’t be surprised if the road acts as a sort of “semi-permeable barrier” (a little bio-geek-speak there for your irritation) to such creatures as wolverine and grizzly.

Your chances of seeing a lynx in the flesh are very good here, perhaps better than anywhere else on earth. They are remarkably nonchalant about disturbance and will often permit fairly close approach. Frequently, you will see more than one at time – groups up to five or six perhaps – mothers with half-to-mostly-grown kits. Late fall seems to be the best time to spot them. They live far out in the wastes and right amongst busy oil and gas development, hidden just within the fringes of spruce, and sometimes not hidden, and apparently unconcerned. As long as there is prey and cover, they’re there.





Another defining feature of Chinchaga, and one that cannot be missed, is an anthropogenic one – the seismic corridor, or “cutline.” Chinchaga hosts one of the highest densities of such linear corridors in all of northern Alberta, which is saying something. I have examined maps depicting the patterns of these corridors in the northwest. The entire of northwest Alberta and northeast B.C. is analogous in these representations to certain photos I’ve seen of antebellum negroe’s backs.

Evidence suggests, depending on your interpretation of course, that this proliferation of linear features is having a detrimental effect on northern Alberta’s sacred cow, the woodland caribou. (Southern Alberta has a sacred cow too, and it’s called the cow.) Caribou are one of the few large species that actually likes to live on the big sponge. They choose to do so, so one theory goes, precisely because most other creatures do not. This includes another really abundant animal at Chinchaga, the moose, and its deadly predator, the wolf. Wolves at Chinchaga prefer to prey on moose. Moose do not live in fens. So wolves don’t go into the fens, except, it is said, when seismic lines allow them to do so easily and more rapidly, and then they get the caribou they wouldn’t normally have gotten. I suspect that if this theory is substantiated in the future, it will be found to be most relevant at calving time. The caribou I have observed in many dozens of encounters do indeed like fens. Any fens. They roam a lot, and spend plenty of time in moose habitat during their travels, and in fens of such limited extent that I can’t believe they lend any isolating effect.

Despite the proliferation of seismic lines, it should be remembered that they still only account for an overall removal of approximately two per cent of the forest canopy at Chinchaga at present, based on the most recent GIS analysis. But they are nonetheless having effects on the ecosystem. What are some of these effects, other than the ones purported for caribou?

If you were to plunge your head beneath the snow in any of the forested areas of Chinchaga and peer around in that little subnivean space at ground level, you would be greeted by peevish cinereous and dusky shrews, and especially by a pretty little character known as the southern red-backed vole. He’s fast food for martens and weasels, particularly, and the prevalent small rodent of the area. If you were to perform the same feat a metre or two onto a cutline, you would meet another totally different species of vole, the familiar and larger meadow vole. The entirely different habitat created by the grassy openings is his domain, and he’s likely much more abundant out here in an otherwise hostile environment for the presence of the seismic lines. Lynx are quite fond of hunting him, as I have witnessed many times. I don’t know if they make up an important part of the lynx diet on a percentage basis. His presence also tends to focus the attention of great grey and hawk owls on these openings.

If it sounds like I am leaning toward suggesting that the proliferation of seismic lines at Chinchaga have increased biodiversity there, it’s because I am. I have witnessed what seems to be an increase at Chinchaga of other creatures that prefer the anthropogenic equivalent of forest edge habitat, and that, more tellingly, are not typically creatures of the unbroken boreal forest. White-tailed deer. Coyotes. Magpies. Puma. Is this change good or bad? I don’t know. It depends on your viewpoint, to some extent. Ultimately, time will tell.

I also believe these lines, which are reseeded by law to a variety of grasses and herbs, result in an increased carrying capacity over and above that of the forest in its pristine state, and as a result, an overall increased biomass. The creatures that absolutely relish foraging on these lines, and one might assume are therefore gaining some benefit, include moose, caribou, grizzly and black bear. By benefiting moose alone (which, incidentally, are also benefited by the later seral stages of regrowth on these lines), and given the presence of wolves to prey on the moose, one benefits much of the ecosystem. I don’t think the same can possibly be argued for clearcuts – remember, we are talking about an approximate two per cent canopy reduction here, with the majority of pre-existing growth remaining, as opposed to... *yikes!* These creatures listed are the major wilderness players out there. They are what, in my estimation, define Chinchaga as a still-healthy wilderness...





(Okay – we'll pause here to allow for the inevitable shouts of “paycheck bias” so that those predictable ones among you can get it over with. It is an understandable viewpoint coming from a culture of wage-slavery, so pardon me for not caring if you think it. It is human nature to project one's own motivations onto others.)

The *obvious* negatives – and I'm not saying there might not be others – of seismic corridors are these: they provide *much* easier access to market and ego-driven human predators – hunters and trappers. (And so as not to sound *too* biased, meddlesome radio-collar bearing biologists.) But let's not lay this problem entirely in the lap of industry. There is a great need for hunting and trapping reform, and has been for years, at Chinchaga as elsewhere in Alberta ... as on the rest of the continent. The north, for instance, has been allowed to remain completely blanketed by traplines. It is a solid quilt of traplines, as though every inch of the land owes some trapper a living. There are no “buffer-zones” between these lines. It's a potential furbearer clear-cut. Hunters are also allowed to run rampant. They are allowed to access the area by iron-lung, and quad and argo, and all manner of ATVs. The solution here is a return to long-abandoned fair-chase ethics. Get these lazy guys out there on those cutlines *stalking on foot*, with bows and arrows, and you won't have to worry any more about these anthropogenic effects of linear corridors on wildlife. Don't laugh. This is exactly what some eminent hunters are advocating, too. I stole the idea from hunters. Let the hunters actually cultivate some hunting skills!

Is Chinchaga worth seeing? I suppose so. You may not put it at the top of your priority list. It's like the mountains, really – without the mountains. An underwhelming landscape. It is representative of much of what this country is about. It is our Siberia.

Is it worth protecting? Absolutely! All the major wilderness icons are there. This is how Chinchaga shines. How many places can you say that about anymore?! What landscape there is in most imminent peril of devastation? The uplands. The Clear Hills and Halverson Ridge. The few remaining stands of magnificent boreal old growth. They are still there at Chinchaga to be saved. Will they need saving? Of course. Hungry, greedy thoughts are hovering over them as you read this. They are counting on the fact that few will even be aware of what's there at Chinchaga before it's gone.

In fact, if you want to get a preliminary glimpse of the Chinchaga wilderness, you needn't even enter the forest. Go no further than the motel café at Manning, the gateway to Chinchaga. Take a seat by the window, and as you sip your coffee the old growth will come to you...

...loaded on convoys of trucks that never quit.

