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NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART: TRAVELLING WILLMORE WILDERNESS PARK, 2003

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Willmore Wilderness Park, that splendidly wild 1,775 sq mi swath of land north of Jasper Park, has not made headlines in the *WLA* for some time for two reasons: it has not been in crisis and it has not been visited. Former AWA treasurer Jane Kennedy dubbed the area "Willow-More" when she visited it in the early 1990s, and that name is more apt now than ever before. I am left with two overall impressions of the Willmore in 2003: its raw, wild beauty and its incredibly awful willow-engulfed, boggy, rutted, dead-fall ridden, steep, rocky, horse-shoe-pulling trails.

It had been 12 years since my husband Dick and I had travelled into the Willmore, although we frequently traversed the area by foot and by horse in the 1970s and 1980s. A trip to the Willmore, especially from as far south as Calgary when trailering horses, is a serious undertaking requiring at least a full day of highway travel at either end. In August of this year, we did haul horses to the Big Berland take-off point south of Grande Cache and headed out for two weeks over old and new routes through the northern section, east of the Smoky River. This area is getting little use, probably less now than it got 20 to 30 years ago. West of the Smoky River the Willmore is even more remote and hard to negotiate. Around Rock Lake, Eagle's Nest Pass and along the border with Jasper, the Willmore is more used because these areas are more accessible.

This year we travelled through the valleys of the North and South Berland River, Snow and Zenda Creeks, the Sulphur and Muskeg Rivers and Walton and Sunset Creeks, in a big loop. Through most of this area the trails and campsites have become less accessible than they were in past decades due to willow growth and encroachment. Some trails and campsites have not been maintained in 50+ years. Where we remembered open valleys, campsites with plenty of grass and trails accessible to backpackers, many of these are now willow-choked with long stretches of trail being like tunnels through tall, dense willow and young conifer. Some trails are now uninviting to hikers who can't see out of them, or are even dangerous because of the possibility of close bear encounters in willow tunnel situations. We saw bear diggings everywhere we went – the animals may be preferentially following the horse trails because of the overgrown conditions.

For those who relish wild places, the Willmore has huge allure. There are few places like it, where you can travel for several weeks and encounter almost no one else. If we had scheduled our trip before the opening of sheep hunting season, we could have met no one else this year. Of the six parties we did meet, three were sheep outfitters, two were private hunting parties and one was, like us, just trail riding. Three of these six parties were at the fairly accessible Big Grave Flats. People you meet in such remote places are all characters, equipped with large coffee pots and tall yarns. They care passionately about holding onto places like the Bighorn and Willmore, where they are able to go with their horses and a few primitive luxuries for a couple of weeks of pure escape. To a man though, all said they would like a bit more trail signage and maintenance in the Willmore, if not for their sake, then for the sake of their horses.

Here and there local outfitters have cut out stretches of trail for their own use, and it is such a relief to reach one of these and travel for a while, just admiring the scenery. Willmore valleys, like the seldom-visited Walton Creek, can be absolutely lovely, and the couple of old camps along the creek (which have not been used in years) have everything aplenty that a horse party could desire - grass, water, wood, shelter and view. Once reached, the open alpine country, as in the vicinity of Adolphous, Jack Knife and Rocky passes, stretches out in a myriad of inviting, open ridges. Smoke from B.C. fires obscured the skies somewhat this year, making photography a challenge. Generally though, the Willmore was wet and





lush and we had two days of rain in two weeks. Nights usually dropped below freezing so that we awoke to frosty meadows and a centimetre of ice on the water buckets.

Old cabins, gravesites and the unique carved moose horn trail signs give the Willmore a sense of human use that is a part of the landscape. However, these interesting relics are perhaps melding a bit too much to last more than another decade or so. We worked to find, cut the willow away from and set the marker back in place on the grave of baby Delorme at Little Grave Flats. Around Little Grave Flats the old moose horn trail signs are still in good condition; however, in many areas, often at crucial trail junctions or where trails are obscure, they are missing or have fallen down and can't be seen.

Traditionally, the Willmore and environs would have been more open due to fire, both natural and set by native peoples and outfitters to clear meadows around campsites for game production and horse grazing. Several decades of fire suppression have resulted in remarkable changes that must be having a negative impact on wildlife populations. In the early half of the twentieth century, the Willmore was considered one of the world's great hunting destinations because of its abundance and variety of North American species. In two weeks of travel this year, we saw NO big game animals and not much sign of them except for bear diggings. It was the beginning of bighorn sheep hunting season, however, and hunters we talked to were seeing bighorns and mountain goats in high places. We did find cast caribou antlers and a few relatively fresh caribou tracks on a high ridge near Adolphous Pass, but no animals.

Another perennial trail hazard in the Willmore that has not improved in recent years is the presence of muskegs and soggy slopes. When the Willmore was much better used by native peoples living and trapping there, and by outfitters in the first half of the twentieth century, long stretches of trail were corduroyed with logs and streams were bridged. In the last 50 years, however, there has been no support for such work. Today the muskegs are often deep mud holes in the trails or are open bogs; some even contain the remains of broken corduroy and bridges, making them hazardous. A few muskegs have become downright dangerous. Some trails, such as the one to A La Peche Lake, are no longer passable before freeze-up because of bogs.

It was in trying to find a trail across a boggy slope where no marker existed that we ran into grief with our horses. An older packhorse tried to leap a deep boggy creek but slipped into its trench and soon became so thoroughly entrenched that we could not pull her out with our most powerful saddle horse. After several hours of trying, we broke the cinch on the pulling horse and were forced to make the terrible decision. Fortunately we carry a rifle with us for such a situation. Thankfully, her final resting place is truly magnificent. She is well off the trail (which we found later) and poses no danger to travellers. One consolation is that our old horse will likely ensure that some grizzly bear goes into hibernation in top condition. Such, though, illustrates the condition of travel in the Willmore – probably tougher now than 50 years ago when the trails were maintained, better used and far more obvious.

I kept a diary of each day's travel and the condition of trails and have written a detailed letter to the Parks minister, Gene Zwozdesky, and his local staff about our observations and recommendations. Right now the Willmore is in dire need of official attention, of prescribed burning and of trail maintenance. Alberta is losing prime tourism and recreation opportunities by neglecting the Willmore and allowing it to become so inaccessible. It has now become difficult for tourists and local people to use large parts of the area, especially if they are travelling on foot.

