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## Whitegoat Traverse

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Whenever I despair over the rapidly disappearing wilderness in Alberta I plan a backpacking trip into the Whitegoat Wilderness to renew my faith. Two friends and I completed a spectacular four day traverse of the Whitegoat last July. The route which cut through the heart of the White Goat was a circle trip beginning and ending at the Nigel Pass trailhead on the Banff Jasper Highway. We somewhat overestimated our fitness level for that early in the summer and underestimated our ages while planning for this trip but the weather was great and we had the time.

The Nigel Pass trail soon opens to sub-alpine meadows and the route essentially remains in the alpine for the next 4 days. Upon descending from Nigel Pass we entered the open valley of the Brazeau, stopped for a rest at Four Points campsite and forded the knee deep but icy Brazeau. Our wake-up call came when we began the long steep bushwhack up to an alpine valley to the west of Afternoon Peak.

We arrived in the late afternoon and contemplated taking up a more sedentary activity like macramé. A hot meal later, we recovered and after a brief thunder shower drove through, we spent the evening glassing the slopes of Afternoon Peak looking for the rare Mountain Caribou which I have seen here several times before.

The following day took us to the middle fork of McDonald Creek. From above it looks like a huge expanse of alpine meadow but when you are down in it, it becomes a dense tangle of low willow and deep gulleys making travel difficult and slow. In the past there have been large flocks of Bighorn sheep here but not today.

My last trip here was 10 years ago and I found it remarkable and somewhat heartening that the distinct trails I traveled then had almost completely overgrown. The trails had been kept open by horses but upon designation of the White Goat Wilderness this activity, along with motorized activity, was prohibited. Our second camp was at the lowest lake in the Valley of Lakes.

The weather held the following day as we picked a route through the many alpine lakes of the rugged Valley of the Lakes. High on a ridge we spotted a marvelous stone monument, which, I expect, commemorates someone or something. Whoever crafted this remarkable structure had some skill and a lot of help to lift some of the larger rocks.

The upper valley becomes more rugged with dozens of alpine tarns fed by a hanging glacier that may be the largest in the White Goat. A band of Mountain Goats were spooked by our sudden arrival. The crux of this trip is a steep boulder and scree descent of a steep ridge down to Cline Pass but the spectacular views of the heavily glaciated peaks that make up this eastern boundary of Banff National Park are well worth the effort.

Cline Pass and the alpine meadows of upper Cataract creek are likely the most beautiful that I have seen anywhere. A glacier, which retreated ages ago, has left a scattering of erratics, which form welcome shelter from the winds that whistle through this valley. This is perhaps the most accessible and beautiful part of the White Goat. On the final day we first ascended Cataract Pass and then began the long steep descent to the valley bottom and eventually Nigel Pass to complete the circle.

We did not see a single person or even a footprint during the entire trip; in fact in 8 trips into this area over the last 20 or so years I have seen hikers only twice, two people off in the distance and a small





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group of hikers from Canadian Nature Tours lead by Brian Kregowsky. Brian had completed his master's thesis on the White Goat and it is from him that I learned of the infinite numbers of routes through this area. This is remarkable in these days of shrinking wilderness and is a testament to the value of designating more portions of our eastern slopes as benchmark Wilderness Areas like the White Goat.

