



Wild Lands Advocate 12(5): 22, October 2004

Remote Willmore Wilderness a Pleasure and Challenge to Explore

Vivian Pharis

As we did in the summer of 2003, my husband and I, this year accompanied by a new adventurer from Sherwood Park, trekked into the Willmore Wilderness Park from the Big Berland takeoff point, southeast of Grande Cache. We knew to avoid the worst trails, and with the weather very much in cooperation, had a splendid trip. We also knew to curtail our trip and to spend more time exploring a smaller area. The Willmore is a big place, and with the trails and the weather often impediments, we have found it wise not to plan too ambitious a Willmore venture.

Each camp was a layover, with a day ride on the second day giving us a chance to more thoroughly explore some gem spot like Rocky Pass, the ridges above Adolphus Pass and the top of the Hoff Range. The packhorses also readily approved this plan, as they got a day of rest after each workday.

Adam's Creek is the obvious first destination from the Big Berland takeoff. We avoid it, as the area has attracted a summer outfitter and become popular for short trippers who can easily reach the area on old industry roads. Up the Berland River beyond Adam's Creek, the trails, which are a mix of overgrown roads and original horse trails, soon deteriorate into willow tunnels with nasty bolder-filled river crossings and steep deadfall-filled ascents and descents. Here and there are trail respites, where local outfitters have cut the deadfall or you strike a piece of well-placed original trail that remains in reasonable condition. As the locals will tell you, such rough trails serve to maintain the area as remote.

The interior of the Willmore is so large and, so far, relatively unused that we were almost always able to find an unused camp. This meant excellent conditions for the horses, with plenty of feed, shelter and access to water. Interestingly, this year we encountered several groups of backpackers braving the trails for a chance to experience real wildness.

More astonishingly, we met a mountain biker on the top of Rocky Pass, which is well-named for its expanse of massive boulders. He was on a five-day mission to cross the Willmore from Grande Cache to Rock Lake and by day two had made it to the top of Rocky Pass. He did confess that he had underestimated his food needs and had already consumed half his ration. As we emptied our saddle bags of lunch remains to give him, he told us he was practicing to develop a mountain biking business in the Himalayas!! We wondered how serious he would be about such a venture after he had humped his pack and bike the rest of the way to Rock Lake.

We were pleased with Community Development Minister Gene Zwodzesky for the strong stand he took this summer to thwart the latest lobby by OHV enthusiasts for a route across the Willmore from Grande Cache to McBride in B.C.

This year wildlife seemed much more in evidence than in 2003, although we again failed to see caribou. Bighorns were fairly frequent and twice we encountered, at a good, safe distance, a large grizzly bear. Bear diggings were everywhere, and why shouldn't they be, since the Willmore is some of their last, best habitat in the province.

