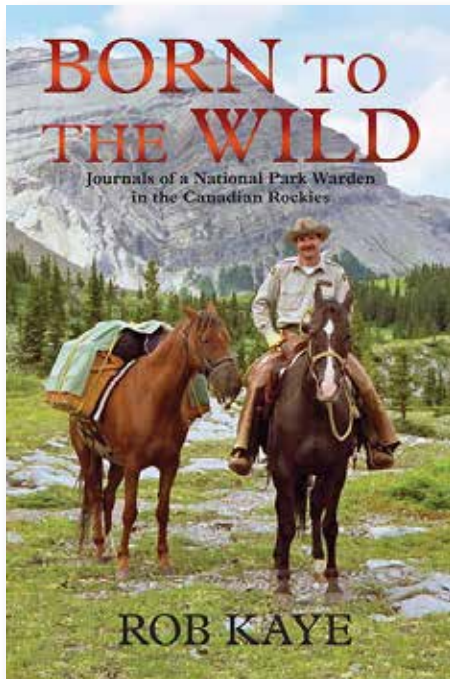


Reader's Corner

Rob Kaye, *Born to the Wild: Journals of a National Park Warden in the Canadian Rockies*,

(Grey Wolf Books, 2015)

Reviewed by Andrea Johancsik



Former Park Warden Rob Kaye relives his extensive commitment to and knowledge of Jasper National Park in his autobiography *Born to the Wild – Journals of a National Park Warden in the Canadian Rockies*. Read it, and you'll be exposed to wildlife encounters and challenging backcountry travel in the comfort of your home, but the frank realizations of future threats to Canada's parks remain real.

The 340-page book is full to the brim with lively stories about Kaye's experiences in the backcountry working as a park warden. Complementing his stories are numerous recollections of Rob's peers and mentors. Encountering wildlife is a theme that glues the book together, both the miraculous and the deadly – although fatalities and injuries from bears are rare, the tales that come out of them are gripping. Kaye describes many incidents in Jasper of encounters between people and black/grizzly bears as well as human encoun-

ters with wolves, cougars, and moose.

Kaye's early recollections from the 1950s paint a picture of the early days in the town of Jasper. Interactions with bears were an everyday occurrence as the town's open-pit dumpsite encouraged the bears to develop an appetite for human food. Kaye and his childhood friends snuck into the rodeo and attempted to jump on and off trains. In later years, their activities turned more sophisticated as they went fishing and backpacking on their own. These misadventures helped Kaye develop wilderness survival skills essential for his later career as a park warden.

Early on, the book also describes Jasper's indigenous and settler human history, and the brief window of time in which they coexisted. Setting this historical context against the sudden change in patterns of human occupation is an effective tool to help the reader make sense of Kaye's experiences and also to appreciate the significant ecological and management changes have occurred recently.

Kaye's career stretched from the 1970s to the early 2010s. The variety of duties he was responsible for over this lengthy career is remarkable. Kaye developed skills in avalanche safety and ski hill rescue and mountaineering; he was a first responder for highway accidents; he wrote reports and management plans and helped develop strategies; he repaired trails and telephone lines; he enforced the law against poachers; and he did all of these jobs while taking care of himself and a team of horses alone in the backcountry.

When it came to playing these many roles, it is clear from Kaye's recollections that he favoured the solitude and raw beauty of the backcountry to working at the townsite. He does a good job of describing the tranquility and satisfaction that nature provides, but words can only do so much. While Kaye yearns to relive his youthful summers in the backcountry, the reader can't help but also long to experience the same excitement in

the wilderness.

Wilderness – what does it mean, anyway? This question animates much of Kaye's writing. Misguided management practices like fire suppression and ungulate and predator culls, reinforced by global climate change and increased visitation, have reduced species diversity far from what it had been for thousands of years.

“Our parks have not been spared the spoils of human use: loss of habitat, serious declines in both number and diversity of flora and fauna species, the introduction of invasive non-native species, commercial exploitation, and overuse (loving our parks to death).”

- Rob Kaye

Because the changes happen incrementally, it took Rob his whole career to realize the extent to which humans have altered the once 'pristine' environments in Jasper National Park. Rob's retirement coincided with the severe budget cuts made to Parks Canada in 2012, cuts that gutted “thousands of years of corporate knowledge and experience.” It's clear from the book that Rob's strong generalized knowledge and on-the-ground expertise brought strength to the park's management that could be passed to future wardens – even the value of his mishaps shouldn't be discounted. Cutting funds and splitting roles aren't new phenomena in the National Parks, but the lasting impact of a widespread cut is likely impossible to quantify.

Kaye's career may be over but the themes and experiences he writes about will continue to be written through the many people he has influenced in his years with Parks Canada. His autobiography serves as a valuable memory. You might read an excerpt of the book at your next family campfire and through it gain a deeper appreciation of the magnificence of nature.