

Five Days on the Bighorn Historic Trail



By Heinz Unger, *AWA Past-President*

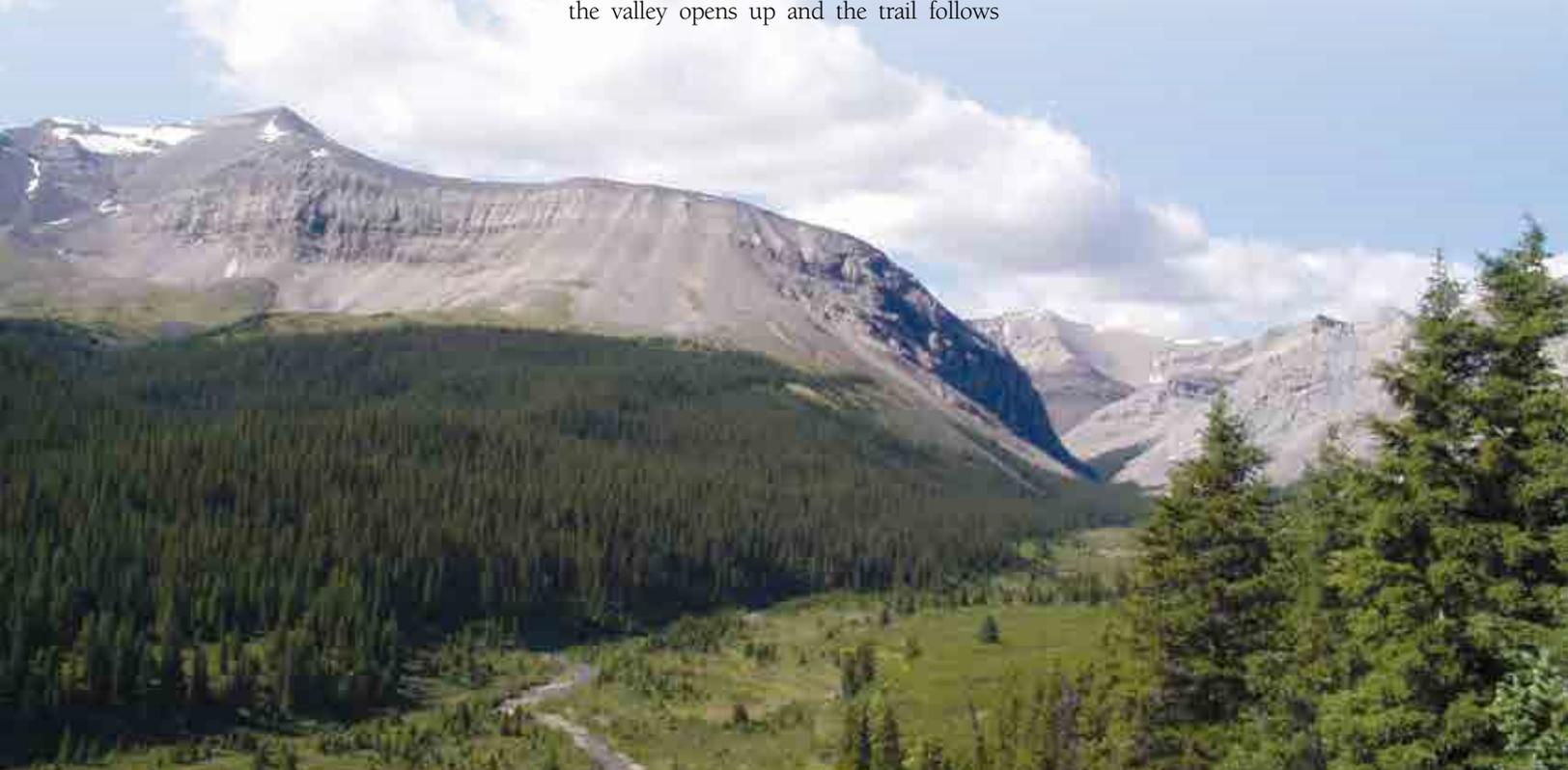
Gourmet food, with vegetarian options, home-cooked on an open campfire, ice-cold beer after a day's work on the trail, a full moon rising over the tall pines, morning yoga exercises on a mountain meadow with horse bells tinkling in the distance – but hold on before you think this trip was all fun and pleasure. There was also dust, heat, thick smoke in the air from forest fires nearby, long hikes in and out with many stream fordings, and the hard work on the trail using heavy brush cutters, pickaxes, shovels, hatchets and handsaws. Read on for the full story.

One Monday in early September 2017, Joanna Skrajny and Nick Pink, AWA conser-

vation specialists, together with volunteers Sean Nichols, Joel Van Riper, and Heinz Unger, took off from the AWA office in Calgary for the long drive to the trailhead in the Blackstone/Wapiabi Forest Land Use Zone (FLUZ) in the Bighorn Backcountry. This FLUZ is about 50 kilometres north and west of Nordegg as the crow flies, and the Blackstone Gap trailhead is less than 20 kilometres east of the Brazeau River where it forms the boundary to Jasper National Park.

The Blackstone Gap offers the shortest foot access to the Bighorn Historic Trail in that FLUZ. The Blackstone Gap is a dramatic river valley gap where the trail barely clings to the scree-covered steep mountainside. Then the valley opens up and the trail follows

George Creek, a tributary of the Blackstone. The Bighorn backcountry is immense and beautiful. It boasts wide open, gently sloping valleys, clear streams, and thick forests of spruce and pine, interspersed with wet meadows near the source of the creeks. Its scenic backdrop of rocky ridges and peaks certainly isn't hard on the eyes. Likely due to the hot and dry summer, fall colours had already started to show in the valley, adding to the beauty of the scenery. On the hike in it was clear that the trail conditions had deteriorated over the years. Flooding and washouts shared the blame for this deterioration with the vigorous growth of willows, shrubs and conifers on both sides of the trail.



The Bighorn backcountry – the object of AWA's affection. PHOTO: © H. UNGER

AWA –Caring for the Bighorn for More Than a Generation

Starting in 1983 and for the following 10 years, horse-mounted AWA volunteers, with air-lift assistance from the Alberta Forest Service, cleared all major Bighorn valleys of old outfitter and industrial exploration garbage. Literally two tonnes of garbage a year were gathered and then airlifted out of the Bighorn. By 1993 it looked like AWA's summer volunteers were out of work, but not for long! The Forest Service initiated an "Adopt-a-Trail" program in 1994 and AWA was asked to assume maintenance of the historic Bighorn equestrian trail that stretches between Crescent Falls on the Bighorn River and Chungo Gap north of the Blackstone River. It took larger groups of six to eight people working very long days for the first 5 years in order to clear AWA's stretch of long-neglected trail. In later years, much of the maintenance was carried out by only four people, assisted by four saddle and four pack horses. However, repeated flooding in recent years and a great deal of vegetation encroachment means larger crews are once again needed to maintain this trail

- Vivian Pharis

Late that first afternoon the hiking group finally reached the agreed campsite and was greeted – no kidding – with ice-cold beer by Vivian Pharis, AWA Board Emerita and Norma Ruecker, a faithful volunteer. They had come in on horseback (including an extra packhorse), traveling over two days via a longer trail, starting at the Wapiabi trailhead further south. They had carried the tools and all the heavy gear from the helicopter drop location and set up the camp kitchen, ready to start cooking dinner.

Yes, this was a helicopter-assisted trail restoration and maintenance operation, and a very beneficial and effective collaboration indeed between Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) and the AWA. The latter contributed the manpower, expertise, and knowledge of the area, while AEP gave their agreement, provided some of the necessary tools, and dropped all heavy supplies and

gear a couple of hundred metres from the campsite.

The three horses were already happily grazing on the wide meadows to the south of the campsite when we arrived by foot. In addition to carrying people and loads, they continued to provide diversion and entertainment with their antics. Vivian and Norma were less pleased when they occasionally had to chase the horses after they started off to a better water source or down the trail despite being hobbled. But despite these expressions of equine individualism, they added much to the camp ambiance with their presence and their snorts and tinkling bells when they headed down to the pasture.

The daily routine for the group started at first daylight with re-starting the campfire. Everything was cooked sustainably on an open fire, using locally gathered deadwood and Vivian's camp cookware which has an



This is some of the garbage that AWA volunteers gathered on their stewardship trip into the Bighorn forty years ago. PHOTO: AWA

amazing black patina. The camp coffeepot was as black on its inside as on its outside but the line-up for fresh coffee was almost as long and as eager as at the local Starbucks or Tim Hortons. The breakfast was a cooked, hot meal, including porridge and bacon and eggs. Lunch was eaten on the trail to save time, but dinner started out with cold drinks and munchies. Vivian had an amazing meal plan and surprised everyone with new delights of full four-course dinners. As the dusk deepened and the moon rose various libations appeared, including Tang & Rum, and the storytelling began. Vivian and Norma had taken part in the Bighorn Historic Trail maintenance trips for many years in the past, and had lots of entertaining tales. It was an experience the best backcountry outfitters could not have provided for a few hundred dollars a day.

Everybody felt so grateful for the delicious meals that all chores – fetching water, cutting and splitting firewood, and doing the dishes – were done willingly like in the happiest and most cooperative of families. Joanna, the team leader, has a low key leadership style, and there was a minimal amount of organizing and assigning tasks. However,

safety was taken very seriously, starting with briefings, bear spray always at the ready (although we never saw a bear except for piles of scat on the drive out), and mandatory use of safety gear and vests, especially when operating power equipment. There was excellent camaraderie and collaboration throughout the time in the backcountry, and group members picked tasks and supported each other according to their respective inclinations and abilities.

On the first morning the team scouted the section of the trail past George Creek, continuing to the south. One of the worst problems that affect backcountry trails is deep rutting on steep sections where the trail is on a cutline. Better drainage and water bars (to divert flow off to the side) would greatly improve the situation. Wet forest and meadow areas are a different but equally serious problem, especially for horse travel during wet weather. New corduroy installation or plastic matting would be needed to fix those sections. AWA hopes to tackle some of those problems in the years to come – more opportunities to volunteer!

The actual trail restoration and maintenance work consisted of light-to-heavy

brush clearing using both power brush cutters and hand tools, such as axes and saws. The majority of brush clearing called for cutting overgrown willows and encroaching conifer saplings. Some areas showed signs of serious flood damage, such as erosion ruts and loose rocks covering the trail. Minor re-routes of the trail were made around unsafe and/or degraded terrain, and water bars were built where needed to divert drainage from the trail. Cut brush and unstable rocks were removed from the trail by hand. At some locations, the right trail was marked using flags and/or cairns.

On the way out the group could admire the greatly improved condition of the trail, although it was clear that more and continued efforts will be needed to maintain these old trails that open up this beautiful backcountry. The provincial government and AWA are to be commended for their efforts and good cooperation that helps to keep some of Alberta's special wild places open and accessible.

And...did I forget to mention that a group of seven volunteers had a great time out in the Wild? 🍄



Part of the Bighorn watershed PHOTO: © V. PHARIS