

Glacier National Park, Lightly Toasted

LuAnn and I visited Glacier National Park a few weeks ago and made some arguably interesting (if random) observations.

There has been at least one wildfire every year of Glacier's existence - usually late in its four-month tourist season - and this year was no exception. At one of the talks given by park rangers we were told that Glacier has four seasons: June, July, FIRE, and winter.

At the historic Prince of Wales hotel just over the border into Canada, we were served high tea in its main dining room one afternoon. It has huge glass windows with magnificent views overlooking Waterton Lake and the vast valley below. So we were told. Much of the view was obscured by wildfire smoke, so we googled up images from the hotel's web site on our phones and held them up to the horizon to approximate what we should have been seeing.

Our National Geographic expedition leader has lived near Glacier most of her life and claims to have learned to speak Columbian Ground Squirrel. For example, she said their chirps of alarm vary depending on whether the threat is coming from the ground or air.

She also told a Canada joke I was surprised I hadn't heard before. In 1534 three explorers discovered a vast land in the north and couldn't decide what to name it. They ended up putting all the letters of the alphabet into a jar and took turns drawing them out. One explorer pulled out the first letter and said, "C, eh?" The next explorer drew out an "N"...

On one of our hikes through bear country, we passed two teenage girls who evidently had been lectured about making noise while hiking to avoid surprising a bear. They were whooping and yipping loudly, much to the amusement of Doug Chadwick, another naturalist along on the trip. "They sound like they're already being attacked," he commented, "that actually draws in other bears."

Doug is 60-something, a bit paunchy, has unruly white hair and is something of a legend in wildlife biology circles. He said he once did a study of Glacier's mountain goats, which involved solo back-country summer camping for six weeks.

He stopped shaving and went about his days in his hiking boots and boxer shorts, with a 45-caliber handgun strapped to his hip due to the bears. One day he rounded a turn on a trail and surprised a pair of young hikers who clung to each other fearfully as he tried to calm them by saying, "I've been spending entirely too much time with mountain goats."

In addition, he's a noted author who literally wrote the book on wolverines. He said they probably can generate more fury per pound than any animal on earth. That alone makes them a good choice for mascot at many high schools and colleges, including a certain Big 10 athletic program. On the other hand, it's also a member of the weasel family.

It's not widely known that Glacier National Park and its adjoining Canadian Waterton Lakes National Park together comprise the world's first International Peace Park, where both countries cooperate peacefully to resolve controversial natural resource issues that transcend international boundaries. It was established in 1932 through the work of the Rotary Clubs of Alberta and Montana and Rotary International, thereby becoming one of the current 147 peace parks worldwide.

Somewhat surprisingly in a first-world country, cell reception is nonexistent in much of Glacier. A very slow Wi-Fi was available in a couple of the hotels, but it took about two minutes to do a Google search. At the historic Many Glaciers Hotel, one of our group discovered a small retail store in the basement that had a slightly faster Wi-Fi for its checkout registers, so he logged onto it, hid his phone in one of the store's stock drawers and checked it every couple of hours for messages.

We bought a refrigerator magnet there depicting a cartoon bear clawing a cartoon Airstream trailer, with the caption, "Glacier Park Canned Food."

The Bulldog Saloon in nearby Whitefish, Montana for some reason has an autographed picture of a young Hayden Fry on its wall. We were half-surprised they were still playing the same '80's pop music we remembered from our ski trip visit there six years ago.

The Great Northern Railway built the huge Many Glaciers Hotel in 1915, hoping to lure travelers there on its passenger cars. With 240 rooms, it was the largest

hotel in Montana for decades. It was initially very unprofitable, and in 1936 employees spared it from a raging forest fire when they heroically spent the night putting wet mattresses on its roof and smacking out embers with wet mops. When wired that the well-insured hotel had been saved, the Great Northern executives in St. Paul wired back: "Why?"

There were far more glaciers to see back then. In 1850, the area that later became Glacier National Park evidently had over 150 of them. That number has dwindled to 25 today and is expected to be zero by 2030 due to global warming. So far there seems to be no initiative to change the name to "Glacier Memorial Park."

Writers group member Dave Parsons highly recommends you visit Glacier National Park. Soon. In June or July.