

PATHFINDER

Winter 2024



A NEWSLETTER FROM THE GREAT DIVIDE TRAIL ASSOCIATION



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Cover Photo: The ridge after Carthew Lakes
in Section A by Gabrielle Dionne

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Letter from Kate

Dear Friends and Volunteers,

Another summer season has come and gone, and what an incredible one it's been! As always, I want to express my gratitude for your support of the Great Divide Trail. Whether you are a volunteer, a donor, or an advocate, thank you for everything you do.

If I were to sum up the past few months into two words, they would be *collaboration* and *community*.

Over the summer, I had the privilege of being invited to go backpacking with staff from the Continental Divide Coalition and the U.S. Forest Service to discuss opportunities for collaboration between our organizations. Sharing breathtaking landscape across the Continental Divide, we discovered that both routes have many similar attributes and potential. Future ideas include co-branded hang tags or merchandise, [joint articles in our newsletters](#) to highlight shared values, and presenting at each other's events. With so much in common, the possibilities are truly limitless!

We are proud to continue our partnerships with the Jr. Forest Rangers of Alberta and the Wild Montana Field Institute, who join us each year on trail maintenance trips. Our High Rock Trail adopters, the Crowsnest Bible Camp, have also remained dedicated to overseeing the trail and performing light maintenance. These partnerships are vital for engaging future leaders with the Great Divide Trail and the GDTA's mission. How do we continue inspiring young people to advocate for conservation, recreation, and volunteerism? By fostering meaningful connections with both the GDT community and the natural world. We are also collaborating with other great trails organizations; Bragg Creek Trails and the Friends of Kananaskis to create a volunteer recruitment film (coming soon!) Thank you to Alberta Forestry and Tourism for believing in us and the importance of trails by funding the project.

October's community event highlighted the importance of our history and communities. With this year marking the [50th anniversary of the Great Divide Trail project](#), which originated in the Crowsnest Pass, the event brought these elements together beautifully. It was inspiring to hear Jenny Feick speak about her experiences with the GDT in the '70s, and it was wonderful to gather among friends, fellow GDT trail builders, and community members.

Amid many positive initiatives, this summer was also marked by the extreme devastation that countless communities faced due to wildfires. The beloved Gateway Community of [Jasper](#) will undoubtedly feel the impact for a long time. Many of us have friends, family, or personal connections who lost homes in these fires. I extend my sincere sympathy and offer any support we at the GDTA can provide.

As we wrap up the season, thank you once again for being part of the Great Divide Trail community. Your dedication and support make everything we do possible, and I'm looking forward to seeing what we can accomplish together in the coming year.

Happy trails,
Kate

Kate Hamilton is the Executive Director of the Great Divide Trail Association



2024 Trail Building and Maintenance Highlights

By Kristine O'Rielly

Above: Treadwork on the Collie-Ensign Trip

Under the leadership of the Trail Building and Maintenance Committee (TBMC), Trip Leaders and Volunteers completed maintenance on many sections of the GDT, cleaned up and repaired facilities at campsites, and started building the new Erris Lake Trail. Over 5,390 dedicated field work hours were contributed by 123 enthusiastic volunteers.

June: The field season started at the end of June with two trips into the Blaeberry.

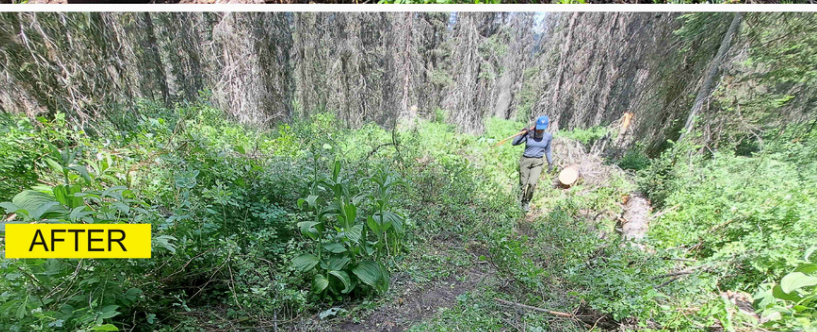
- On the Collie Creek Alternate trip crews trimmed and cleared 11km of the historic/new trail, restored and repaired existing tread, and flagged access routes to the Amiskwi Ridge alternate.
- On the Blaeberry trip, crews improved temporary log bridges over both the Blaeberry River and Cairns Creek. In addition, they cleared deadfall on the David Thompson Heritage Trail, and repaired facilities at Lamb Creek campsite.

July: One of our busiest months ever – 8 trail maintenance trips.

- Trail building started on the new Erris Lake Trail. Four trips were completed (Erris A-D); all had tread crews, three also had chainsaw crews, and two had student groups join for a few days. For these trips, a base camp was established at Fred Creek Bridge (the south end of the new trail). The side-by-side and trailer was used to transport equipment and gear from the Dutch Creek Parking area to base camp. Crews hiked from base camp to their work sites each day. In total 6km of trail was cleared by chainsaw/brusher, and 4km of tread built.



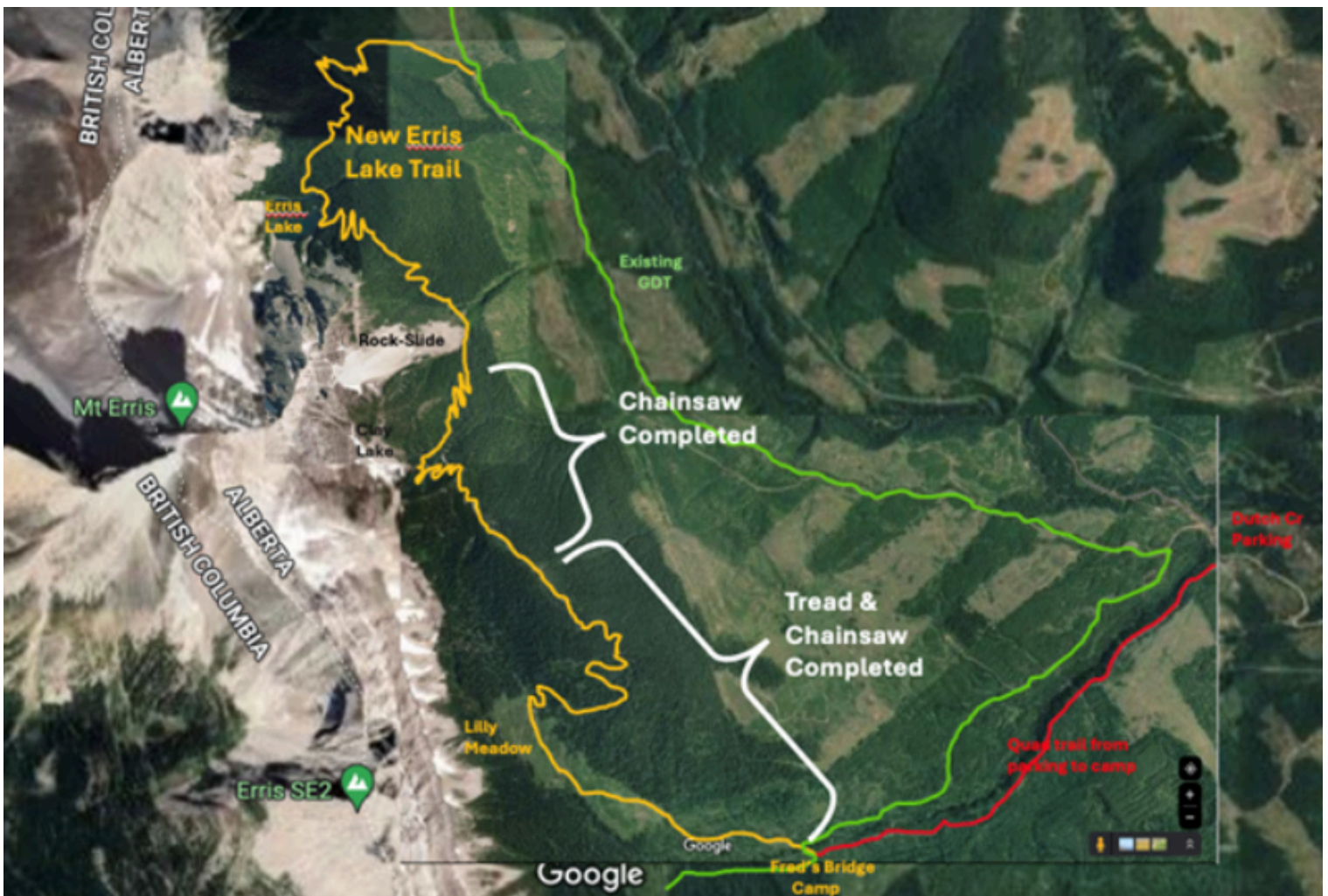
Left to right, top to bottom: clearing deadfall on the women's trip; crossing Mount Morkill's SW col on the Shale to Sheep trip; trail sign at Erris; treadwork on the Height of the Rockies trip; clearing deadfall in the Height of the Rockies



- The second annual women's walking trip occurred in early July to maintain 35km of the Original GDT. Extensive trail clearing, blazing, and a thorough assessment for backcountry campsites along the way were completed.
- The Height of the Rockies trip cleared deadfall on both North Kananaskis Pass and along the Palliser River.
- The Tornado Mountain trip re-routed and marked the trail up Tornado Saddle, repaired facilities at Dutch Creek campsite, and cleared trail around Dutch Creek Bridge.
- Two bridges were replaced in the Hidden Creek area, as well as light trail clearing and enhanced signage.

August: August plans were impacted by wildfires burning across the GDT region. One trip in Section G was completed. Unfortunately, wildfires resulted in the cancellation of the planned Maligne Pass trip and the re-scheduling of the Colonel Creek trip to September.

- The Sheep to Shale trip was able to go ahead as planned. The crew cleared 27km of trail from Shale Pass to 2km south of Casket Creek camp. The trail corridor was brushed, trimmed and cleared of deadfall and encroaching trees.





Building trail on Collie Creek



Brushing willows on the Shale to Sheep trip

September: Great weather and cooler temperatures meant several more trail building trips could be completed before the end of the trail maintenance season.

- Erris Lake E trip took place in early September. The crew worked on scouting, routing, and flagging the area, and were able to cut the remaining trail corridor to within 450m of Erris Lake.
- Colonel Creek trip was re-scheduled from August but was able to go ahead in September. Improvements were made to the Colonel Creek campsite and significant trail clearing was completed between Colonel Creek and Upright Creek. Scouting was also done for a possible future bridge over Upright Creek.

Other activities to note:

- On August 8th, The Great Divide Trail Association, Bragg Creek Trails, and Friends of Kananaskis collaborated to shoot a promotional video aimed at recruiting new members. The video highlighted the exciting opportunities available for hikers and trail builders within these fantastic organizations. It showcased the breathtaking landscapes, the camaraderie among volunteers, and the rewarding experience of contributing to trail maintenance and preservation. This initiative aims to recruit new trail building volunteers for the three organizations.



Great Divide Trail Association Strategic Planning

By Steve Harvey

Photo by Bradley Ayres

Over the past year, members of the GDTA Board of Directors and a handful of amazing volunteers have been working behind the scenes to develop a Strategic Plan which will guide the Association and the trail for the next 3-5 years.

Members, partners, communities, hikers, and the general public were interviewed or surveyed. There were lots of insightful comments generated, and a lot of great ideas proposed, but one thing was abundantly clear: people want us to keep doing what we are doing!

Of course, that alone doesn't make for the most inspiring of plans, so the insights from these consultations were used to guide the board through a Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats analysis. This exercise helped to identify critical foundational areas that warrant additional focus and momentum. In this article, we're happy to share the draft of these areas.

Themes

The areas that the GDTA will focus on can be grouped into three Themes: The Trail, Our Partnerships, and The Association. Under each of these themes we identified three Priorities and developed specific and measurable Goals for each of these priorities.

It is worth stressing that there is already a lot of activity happening towards these priorities (and others). In highlighting these specific priorities, the GDTA is focusing attention on them and working to track and increase momentum towards their completion.



Photo by Yoav Shlezinger

The Trail

Trail Priority: Develop and Communicate a Long-term Trail Plan

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- An inspiring long-term plan guides Trail development; priorities are clear and have been informed by community and partner engagement.

Trail Priority: Advance solutions that Improve Ease of Access

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- Prospective hikers face fewer logistical barriers in accessing and completing the trail.

Trail Priority: Improve awareness and Trail Recognition

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- The Canadian public has awareness of the Great Divide Trail and shares a sense of national pride in its existence.
- The GDTA and Parks Canada have a shared vision for the trail.
- The Parks, other landowners, and other stakeholders collaborate with GDTA on the formal protection and integrity of the GDT corridor.
- The GDT is officially recognized as a national long distance hiking trail.

Our Partnerships

Partnership Priority: Demonstrate a commitment to Reconciliation

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- The GDTA has taken meaningful steps towards Indigenous Reconciliation.
- GDTA members understand how the GDTA's reconciliation action plan has influenced change and is impacting the way we work.

Partnership Priority: Strengthen our Community Relationships

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- Important Communities see the GDTA as credible stewards of the land through which the trail runs.
- Communities and the GDTA experience mutual pride in their relationship.
- The GDT has strong allies and advocates within the Government of Canada, Parks Canada, and the Governments of Alberta and BC, helping to work for the protection of the whole trail.

Partnership Priority: Expand our Outreach

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- The GDTA has a larger, more diverse, and more engaged community behind it.

Photo by Barbara Kitzmantel



The Association

Association Priority: Increase Staff and Volunteer Capacity

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- Volunteer numbers and skills are sufficient to meet the demands of the Association.
- Staff numbers are reflective of the workload and adequate to accomplish the GDTA's goals.

Association Priority: Increase Unrestricted Funding

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- The GDTA has sufficient unrestricted funding to ensure the sustainability of core activities.

Association Priority: Improve on how the GDTA ensures Delivery

If you could see three to five years into the future, you would see that:

- Projects/work are being managed effectively by an overall master project list.
- Projects/work are being managed effectively and strategically, and fully leverages staff & volunteer capacity.
- The organization has clear roles and accountabilities.

Work on the Strategic Plan is starting to wrap up, and the plan will be refined and voted on by the Board between now and the new year. By advancing towards these objectives, the GDTA will ensure that the trail and the association are able to realize the vision of the trail. Committees are actively mapping their existing efforts against these priorities and brainstorming other activities to get us there. The Board of Directors is nominating a champion for each of the nine priorities. All projects and ideas are being tracked in a central location and prioritized against the resources available to the GDTA: Volunteer and Staff capacity, and funding.

If you have comments about the direction the GDTA is taking, or have ideas for the implementation of this plan, please reach out to volunteer@greatdividetrail.com. We can always use more hands!

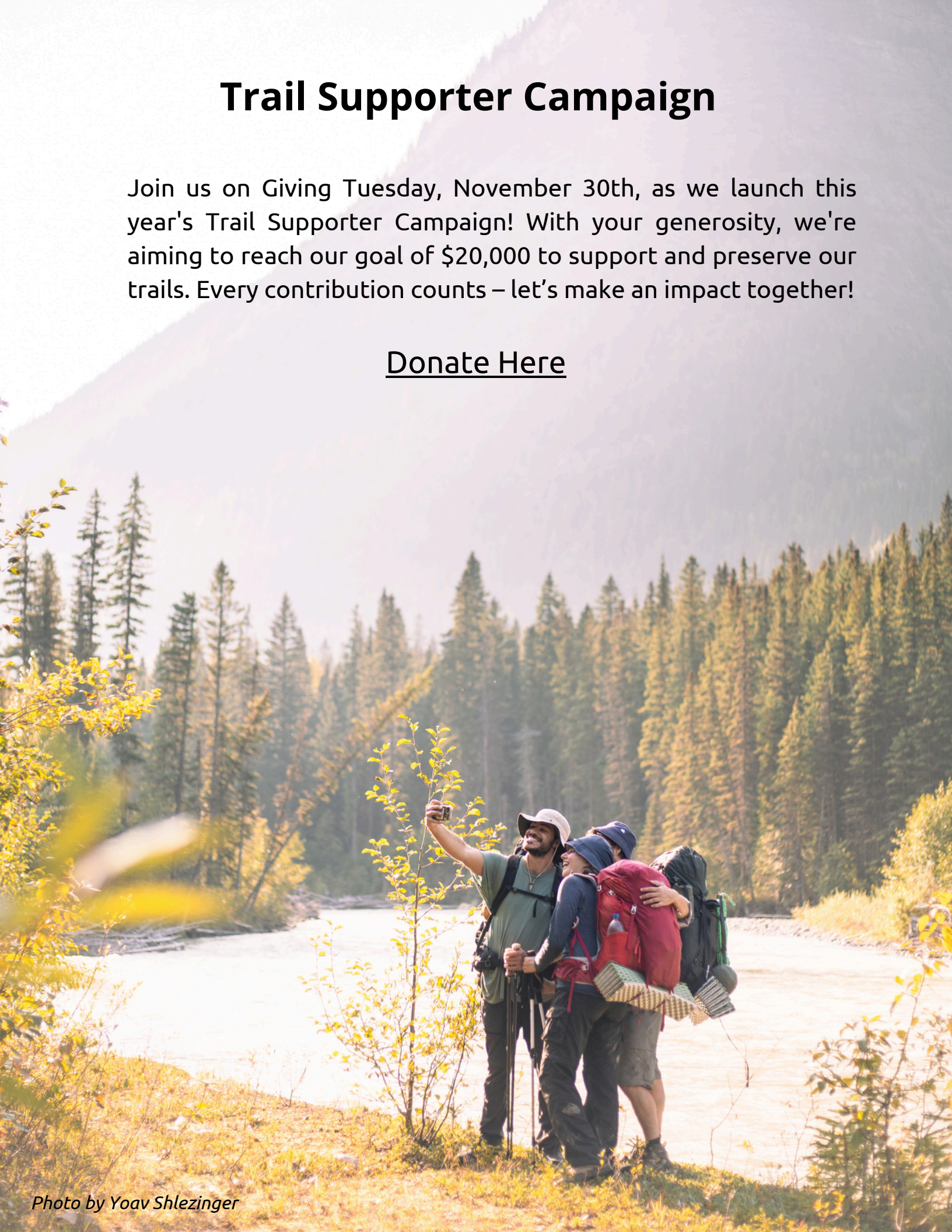


Photo by Mike Hopkins

Trail Supporter Campaign

Join us on Giving Tuesday, November 30th, as we launch this year's Trail Supporter Campaign! With your generosity, we're aiming to reach our goal of \$20,000 to support and preserve our trails. Every contribution counts – let's make an impact together!

[Donate Here](#)





2024 GDTA Events

We've had a fantastic year of educating and informing members and the general public, and advocating for the trail both online and in person. Below are just a few of our most successful and popular events. Follow us on [social media](#) or [sign up for our email list](#) to find out about 2025 events!

Webinars

January kicked off webinar season, and the GDTA's main push to provide information and education ahead of the hiking season. Webinars helped hikers with the permit process, and gear selection, and allowed questions to be answered. You can find recorded webinars on our [YouTube channel](#), and 2025 webinars will be announced soon.

Film Festival

The GDTA hosted another sold-out film festival in April to raise funds and awareness for the trail. This event will return on May 8th 2025, so get your film submissions ready!

Gear Garage Sale

Our first garage sale (generously hosted by [Gear Trade](#)) was a huge success! Donated and consigned gear helped raise funds for the GDTA. This event will be back on May 10th, 2025.

Event Booths

The GDTA has had a booth at multiple events, trade shows, and film festivals this year, including the Banff Mountain Film Festival, and the Ottawa Adventure Show. Booths give us an opportunity to raise awareness about the trail, and to promote the Association's work.

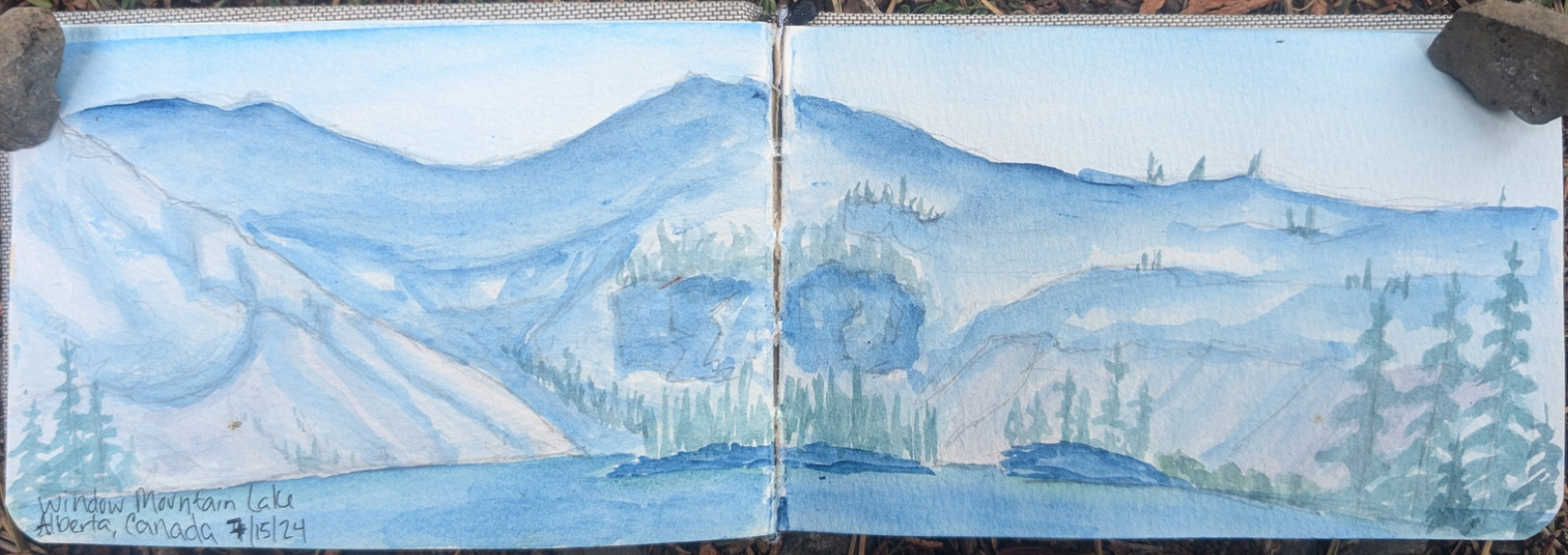
History Month

We celebrated the 50th anniversary of Project: Great Divide Trails this year with an October History month. Events in the Crowsnest Pass area and [online webinars](#) allowed us to share our history and accomplishments over the past half-century.

A watercolor illustration of a mountain landscape. The scene features a prominent mountain range in the background with various shades of blue, grey, and white, suggesting snow or mist. In the foreground, a lush green valley is bisected by a winding brown river. The overall style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and blended colors.

GREAT DIVIDE TRAIL IN WATERCOLOURS

By Stephanie Ray



Window Mountain Lake
Alberta, Canada 7/15/24



The Niblet @ mt Assiniboine
Canada July 26th, 2024

Many backpackers obsess over gear—sleeping bags, pads, backpacks, and even the decision to trim toothbrush handles. While I cared about pack weight, my true obsession was with my watercolor gear. After experimenting with different setups, I finally distilled everything down to a compact 4-ounce collection.

I thought I had figured out a good packweight—until I hiked with the most dedicated ultralighters I've ever encountered in my 15 years of backpacking. With them, I realized that ultralight living was truly a lifestyle. When I revealed my watercolor setup to one of them, one of them let out a gasp of disbelief. For many kilometers, there was a wholesome joke and a lot of giggling about all of the extra weight I carried (I was also carrying a hacksack, binoculars, and a metal massage ball, in addition to my watercolors).

At first, my fellow hikers would raise their eyebrows, amused by my setup and extra weight. But gradually, as they watched me attempt to capture these fleeting moments we all were experiencing, their skepticism turned to curiosity. They began to see the beauty in taking a pause, in soaking in the scenery, and dare I say, carrying extra weight for the sake of a hobby.

One by one, they started to join me, and even encouraged me to capture certain landscapes. They began sharing stories of art classes they took at home, and even provided me tips on certain techniques. We spent time discussing the colors of the sunrise or the way the light danced on the water, and how we could try to capture the essence on paper. They were very supportive and encouraging when they saw that the water used to paint each picture was from the water depicted in each painting. It became clear that while ultralight hiking was about minimizing weight, it didn't have to mean minimizing experiences.

Eventually, some of them even asked for tips on watercolor techniques, intrigued by how I attempted to capture the essence of The Great Divide Trail. It was a wonderful exchange: they introduced me to new lightweight gear that made my hikes more comfortable, and I showed them how to appreciate the artistry of maybe carrying a little extra weight, capturing the essence of our fleeting trek.

In this blend of passions, we found a balance—embracing the thrill of the trail while also savouring its beauty. Together, we learned that every step and every stroke of paint enriched our journey, creating a shared appreciation for the landscapes that invoked a deep sense of 'aw'. Through our collective experiences, these once-purist ultralighters became advocates for a broader perspective on the trail, celebrating not just the destination, but the journey itself and the extra weight carried to support that.

Maybe one day they may all carry watercolor sets. Probably not: they are ultralight hikers after all. But at least they understood why I carried mine and became incredibly encouraging about the little extra weight I had in my pack.



Egypt Lake, Banff
Canada July 27th, 2024



Marmot Lake, Alberta
Canada 7/17/24



Mistaya Canyon, Icefields Parkway



The “Nature from the Great Divide” Natural History Education Series

By Jenny L. Feick, PhD

The transition period between Autumn and Winter, the periods of frigid -30 degree C temperatures on the shortest days of the year, and the slow slide into spring in the high country all provide ample time to learn about things that interest you. This winter, you have the opportunity to study the natural history of the Great Divide area thanks to a series of nine video webinar presentations that I recorded in 2024 and that the GDTA posted on their YouTube Channel. Entitled the “Nature of the Great Divide Series”, each presentation explores a different topic and provides suggestions on ways to safeguard nature along the Great Divide. You can view them at your convenience.

In addition to these nine videos, geologist, Connor Elzinga MSc of the University of Alberta did a livestreamed webinar entitled “Geology, Glaciology and Historical Locations of the Great Divide Trail” on April 4, 2024 (1 hr, 2 min) that was recorded and posted on the GDTA’s YouTube channel. This is the first Natural History webinar that you should watch as it lays the foundation for all of the subsequent ones that deal with the climate, ecological zones, and biodiversity of the Great Divide. You can find all videos under our [playlist](#). After watching the videos, you can amaze your hiking companions next summer on the GDT when they ask you questions like, “Why is there snow on one side of the trail and not on the other?”, “What is that weird black stuff on the young conifer beside the trail?”, “Is that a mountain goat or a bighorn sheep?” or “Is that berry edible?”

Nature of the Great Divide Series Topics

Video #1: The Big Picture (37 min, 22 sec)

Video #2: Tiny But Mighty (43 min, 34 sec)

Video #3: Trees and Shrubs (47 min, 23 sec)

Video #4: Wildflowers (40 min, 59 sec)

Video #5: Worms and Molluscs (36 min, 12 sec)

Video #6: Arthropods (1 hr, 17 min)

Video #7: Fish, Amphibians, Reptiles, and Birds (1 hr, 2.5 min)

Video #8: Mammals (1 hr, 15 min, 49 sec)

Video #9: Seeds, Berries, and Fall Foliage (1 hr, 13 min)

If you have questions after watching any of these natural history education videos, please post them in the YouTube comments section at the end of that video.



RACING AGAINST THE FIRE

By Jackie Bourgaize

I love solving problems – that’s why I love backpacking (civilization is another matter, sheesh). This year I got more than I bargained for.

I had a few adventures earlier in the year: Escalante Trail in the Grand Canyon in April, Ghost Wilderness in May, The West Coast Trail in June, The White Goat Wilderness in August, and Aster Lake in September, but this particular adventure started in July on the Icefields Parkway. That’s where I accessed the Great Divide Trail to complete Section E via Poboktan Creek Trail, solo.

The days leading up to Trapper Camp had been fantastic. Clear blue skies. Grizzlies got out of my way. I had survived the crossing of the Maligne River, and I was successfully managing a damaged biceps tendon. From here on, the trail was more civilized: tables, tent pads, bear lockers, bridges, and probably people!

There was a fire ban in place, so when I smelled fresh campfire on my right, I called out ‘Hey, I thought there was a fire ban?!’ The nonverbal response was a blast of superheated air. That was weird. Ahead, through a break in the forest, I glimpsed a smoky haze. ‘Probably from BC. Happens every year.’

I had decided to bypass Maligne Lake and get right onto the Skyline Trail. ‘Humph, I was no tourist; I was an ultralighter. No gift shop for me.’ But the sky didn’t look quite right. I decided to slog through the anticipated throng and get some information. But the Maligne resort was deserted. Not a soul. The few cars in the parking lot looked abandoned. The café and outbuildings were padlocked. It was apocalyptic.

‘Maybe it’s just a weekday...What day is it anyway?’ When you are solo you have no one to bounce ideas off; well, except your shoulder angels. The devilish one goads ‘Head up to Little Shovel. We’re here and everything is fine.’

That pesky other shoulder angel reminded me that I’d better stop and filter some water. I lay my emergency device under a patch of clear sky. Ping! My husband. ‘Jasper is closed.’ ‘Ok. New information. How will he pick me up? Clearly I need more data. Let’s carry on up to Evelyn and re-assess.’

As I walked I realized there were no sounds but the occasional turbulent express-train gust of wind. All was silent. No people. No birds. No wildlife at all. Not even insects.

I started to think about the video ‘Wildfire Safety’ I had just reviewed and posted in WayPoints, the Great Divide Trail Association’s monthly newsletter. I recalled:

Deciduous trees resist fire better than evergreens. Move away from combustible material. ‘I am surrounded by tall fir trees!’

Fire goes uphill. ‘And where am I going...up!’

Soak any cotton clothing; artificial fibres will melt to your skin. ‘Well, at least I have my Unightie in my pack!’

As I approached Evelyn, the trail made an abrupt right to cross a small pallet-style bridge. I stood back to analyze the forest on the other side. The smoke looked denser than before. I felt a little distress in my chest. Smoke inhalation!

Place a soaked cloth over your mouth and nose. That's when I made a firm decision: I would race back to Maligne Lake. I would pitch my tent right on the shore. I'd have my Unightie soaked and ready.

When I broke out of the forest, I was surprised to see people hauling their kayaks off of the lake. They spoke French. I gathered that they had come from Spirit Island and that there was no room for me in their vehicles, but that I could talk to the guy with a boat at the dock. As I made my way down, I met a young veterinarian, Diana, from Edmonton. She and her canoeing buddies had also been camping on the island and she could give me a ride. That's when I became aware of two things: there were a couple of wardens organizing this evacuation of stragglers, and now in the open, I could see the roiling smoke taking over the sky.

Epilogue

The wardens organized a convoy with their trucks and escorted our two vehicles to the park boundary: 'It might look scary,' they cautioned, 'but do not stop!'

It had been a long, long day from Trapper. In 15 hours I was back in civilization at the Holiday Inn Express. I was exhausted and so looking forward to a big bed and clean white sheets. 'Can I see your photo ID?' requested the concierge. 'I was just evacuated from the Jasper wildfires,' I pleaded, 'I only have my credit card on my phone and my backpack. ID weighs 5 grams!' 'Then I cannot give you a room.' At his suggestion, I walked another half hour to a 'park' where presumably I could pitch my tent. At 9:30 pm I looked down from the edge of a ravine. It was an off leash dog park!

I got set up and walked with a lady and her dogs to get water, googled a breakfast café, and bought a bus ticket to Calgary, but I was so angry about not getting a room I couldn't sleep. I phoned to complain. The outsourced Filipino lady graciously empathized that they took complaints seriously. But the corporation never called me back. It was a problem that I could not solve.

When Dale met me in Calgary, he said, 'Bet you want a bath!' 'No,' I corrected, 'I want a hospital.' The hospital scheduled all kinds of tests and appointments for my damaged shoulder, and after just 4 hours in the pure hospital air I felt much better. 'Now, I want a bath!'



Wild Fire Safety Tips

- Watch the [Wildfire Safety Video](#) from the GDTA and Partners to ensure your safety during future hikes. All of the tips listed here are taken from that video.
- Plan ahead - be aware of trail conditions and active fires in the area. Make sure you know evacuation routes. Leave a trip plan with a trusted person.
- Fire moves uphill, so do not attempt to escape that way.
- Move away from fuel sources and towards water.
- Find a safe zone - bodies of water, gravel pits, rocky outcrops, and broad leafed, deciduous trees can all slow the progress of fire.
- Follow established trails as much as possible to increase chances of rescuers finding you.
- Wear bright colours to make it easier for rescuers to find you.
- If caught in a fire, remove synthetic clothing and place a wet rag over your mouth. Lie down in a shallow depression to find cleaner air.
- Be aware that fire danger is much higher with the three 30s (temperatures over 30 degrees Celcius, under 30% humidity and over 30 km/hr winds) and reconsider backcountry trips on days with these conditions.
- Carry a personal locator beacon and know how to use it.
- If you spot a fire, make sure you report it.



Trail Community Spotlight: Jasper



In the Spring 2024 edition of Pathfinder, we started a spotlight feature for some of the GDT's trail towns listing accommodation, dining and resupply options. Due to the devastating wildfires this summer, this edition of our Trail Community Spotlight looks a little different. Several Jasper businesses/non-profits directly support the GDTA by donating discounts for members and you can support them at the links below. However, hikers benefit from all businesses in town, and get to enjoy the entire wonderful community. If you have a different favourite Jasper business, please support them either through online donations, or in person next time you visit town!

Friends of Jasper National Park: local non-profit that offers GDTA members a 10% discount at their gift shop. Friends of Jasper is also a major partner for trail building and maintenance trips within Jasper National Park.

Jasper Downtown Hostel: dorms and private rooms in downtown Jasper, with a 10% discount for GDTA members.

Wild Mountain: local gear store and one of the best options in town for thru-hikers who need new shoes! GDTA members receive a 10% discount.



Photos courtesy Tourism Jasper



50th Anniversary of Project: Great Divide Trails By Jenny L. Feick, PhD

It seems hard to believe that it's been 50 years since the summer I worked on the crew of Project: Great Divide Trails, the trail survey and feasibility study for Canada's Great Divide Trail between Banff National Park and Waterton Lakes National Park that led to the establishment of the Great Divide Trail Association.

I think it was Mary Jane Kreisel (MJ) who suggested we should get the whole crew of six so-called "originals" together for our 50th anniversary. The last time all of us reunited was in August 2010 when we gathered at Cliff White's house in Canmore and hiked up to Burstall Pass. Much had happened since then. All but Chris Hart had retired from their careers. Prompted by young people on GDTA trail work trips, I'd published two editions of *Tales from the Great Divide* on the history of the GDT and the GDTA. My husband Ian Hatter and I had moved from Victoria to Invermere, B.C. Dave Zevick moved from Kimberley to Banff to live in his boyhood home, which he inherited from his mom. Dave's wife Mary Lou passed away suddenly in February 2022. Given the family, health, and other personal circumstances of some of the former crew members, we decided to have a low-key, informal gathering in the Calgary/ Canmore/ Banff area.

We agreed to meet on the weekend of the Fall Equinox to allow Chris Hart to finish his field season for his ongoing work as a consulting biologist in southern Ontario. That timing also allowed the rest of us retired folks to complete most of our planned summer travel and/or home renovation projects. Unfortunately, we did not know that the collective agreement for Air Canada's pilots would be up for negotiation in September. Given the threat of an Air Canada pilots' strike starting September 18, we wondered if Chris Hart would be able to fly out west as he was booked on an Air Canada flight. Fortunately, the pilots' union settled with its employer on the 15th, just four days before Chris's flight to Calgary from Toronto.

On Friday, September 20, just two days after completing another backpacking trip on the GDT, Dave Higgins hosted the so-called "original six", as well as my husband Ian Hatter and MJ's husband Phil, at his house in Calgary. After appetizers, we had an extraordinary feast; a meal Chris called the "real meatza smorgasbord". We speculated that we may have spent more on the groceries for that one meal than our entire budget for food during our entire 1974 field season. The conversation bounced from one topic to the next with peals of laughter erupting frequently. All felt grateful we had made the effort to see each other in person.

The following morning, we drove to Banff National Park to visit Sunshine Village, which was our base of operations for the last half of the project and where we wrote our final report. Instead of trying to “keep the revs up” in the three vehicles we drove up the gravel access road in 1974, we glided effortlessly in gondolas from the parking lot to Sunshine Village. We saw the building we used for our office, kitchen, and lodging 50 years ago. Chris had not visited Sunshine Village for decades so he really noticed the amount of development there. After sitting outside the lodge enjoying Sunshine’s sunshine and eating the lunch we brought, we took the Standish Chair and walked to the nearby viewpoint. From there, we paired off, not unlike what we did in the summer of 1974, and explored the area. Some of us hiked on parts of the GDT that thread through the Sunshine Meadows.

That night we reconvened in Canmore. Cliff and his wife Johanne hosted a fabulous BBQ supper at their place. In addition to marking the 50th anniversary of the project, we celebrated Mary Jane’s husband Phil’s 68th birthday. This was an especially joyous event as on October 5, 2023, Phil suffered a devastating heart attack. He was in a medically induced coma for 48 hours, then in intensive care for one and a half months with two more weeks in a general ward. With the excellent home care MJ provided following his release from hospital, he was able to hike a five-km loop at Sunshine Meadows that day with MJ, Ian, and me. While Phil had gone on fairly long walks during his recovery, none of them involved that much elevation gain and loss and at that high of an altitude (2,400 meters!). It really felt like a miraculous birthday worth appreciating. MJ later told us that “It was a great challenge for him and he really enjoyed the scenery and companionship.”

After we said farewell to Cliff and Johanne, Dave Zevick returned to renovating his home in Banff. Dave Higgins, Chris Hart, Mary Jane and Phil Kreisel, Ian and I drove back to Calgary on a clear starry night to stay chez Dave. The next morning, Dave made us all a wonderful pancake breakfast. As everyone hugged goodbye, Mary Jane said she enjoyed our time together so much she suggested we aim for another gathering in five years’ time. Dave remarked, “At our age, maybe we should take it a year at a time.” The Kreisels headed back to Edmonton while Ian and I drove to Invermere. Chris flew home to Ontario on Wednesday. While all our lives had changed since the summer of 1974, we remain connected due to the adventure of a lifetime that was Project: Great Divide Trails.

Five decades ago in the fall/winter of 1974/75, Mary Jane Cox (now Kreisel), Dave Higgins, Cliff White and I made numerous public presentations to report on the project’s findings and try to garner support for the Great Divide Trail concept and the establishment of the Great Divide Trail Association. With Lani Smith, Jeff Gruttz, Dianne Pachal, Brian Prior, and many others who believed in the vision of a Great Divide Trail in Canada, the group started to form in 1975. The Great Divide Trail Association became legally incorporated as an official federal not-for-profit organization in April 1976, and obtained its designation as a federally registered charity on April 1, 1977. Hopefully, the Great Divide Trail Association will organize a fitting 50th anniversary event to commemorate the founding of the GDTA. There are many reasons for the GDTA to celebrate in 2025, 2026, and 2027.



Anyone interested in learning more about Project: Great Divide Trails and what happened to the so-called "original six" from the crew of 1974, can tune in to a recorded presentation on the GDTA's YouTube Channel entitled "[Project: Great Divide Trails, the Adventure of a Lifetime](#)". Project: Great Divide Trails is the subject of Chapter Three in *Tales from the Great Divide, Vignettes on the Origins and Early History of Canada's Great Divide Trail and Great Divide Trail Association* available [in pdf from Nature Wise Consulting](#) or as a [print on demand book from Amazon](#).



A heartfelt thank you to our partner, the GDTA, for your half-century of stewarding this remarkable natural, cultural and historic route. It's a privilege to celebrate our 50th anniversary alongside Project: Great Divide Trails, and we look forward to inspiring wilderness journeys together with the GDTA for another 50 years and beyond. See you on the trail.





Project: Great Divide Trails, the Adventure of a Lifetime

By Jenny L. Feick, PhD

The idea of the Great Divide Trail captivated me in the autumn of 1973 during my first year of an undergraduate degree at the University of Calgary. During various Geography field trips, I teamed up with two other students, Cliff White and Mary Jane Cox (MJ). Cliff told us about this big idea he had to scope out the feasibility for a Great Divide Trail south of Banff. Long-distance trails intrigued me. I was still a member of the Bruce Trail Association and had been a founding member of the Grand Valley Trail Association while still in high school in Kitchener, Ontario.

Cliff introduced us to his family in Banff. His father managed Sunshine Ski Area. Cliff took us to meet his Aunt Catharine, a kind, active, philanthropic woman to whom I took an instant liking. Catherine, along with her late husband Peter, had founded the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

While at Catharine's welcoming log home, we also met "Thor", a handsome, charismatic man who had completed trail surveys in the national parks in the late 1960s while working for Parks Canada. "Thor", whose real name was Jim Thorsell, had put forward a proposal to Parks Canada for a Great Divide Trail that their head office in Ottawa and even Minister Jean Chretien had endorsed. By 1973, "Thor" was moving on to finish his PhD and pursue a career in international conservation, but he inspired Cliff to carry on his vision for a Great Divide Trail. He urged us to survey the trails to see if it was feasible to continue the GDT through provincial Crown land between Banff and Waterton Lakes national parks.

I suggested we apply for an Opportunities For Youth or O.F.Y. grant to fund the trail survey. While in high school in Ontario, I successfully applied for and obtained O.F.Y. grants to support and expand a recycling program in Kitchener-Waterloo that I initiated in 1970. Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and his Labour Minister John Munro initiated these grants to decrease youth unemployment, encourage entrepreneurial spirit and innovation, and provide meaningful work experiences for young people. Cliff, MJ and I developed a grant proposal and budget. We obtained the necessary letters of reference. We walked to the Post Office and mailed the application package to Ottawa before Christmas exams. By winter's end, we found out we got the grant.

Our proposal called for a team of six. Most university students scoffed at the wage when we told them. O.F.Y. grants paid each worker just \$90.00 per week and each person could get paid for no more than 12 weeks of work, so the most anyone could make was \$1,080.00 for the entire summer. (equivalent to \$574.68/week or \$6,896.14/summer in 2024\$).

The other three guys who joined our team were not students seeking a summer job. They were working fulltime in jobs that paid them more money than we could offer. Dave Higgins, who had moved out west in February 1974, worked at Control Lighting in SE Calgary. He had a wealth of experience with the Bruce Trail and Grand Valley Trail in Ontario and was willing to quit his job to join our crew. Chris Hart was working for a landscaping company in Calgary. Dave and I invited Chris to join our trail survey crew if he had a car. Chris purchased a 1962 Notchback Volkswagen Sedan for \$75.00 to secure the job. Davey Zevick, Cliff's high school buddy, had landed a summer job, "riding shotgun on a garbage truck". With Cliff's promise of a summer filled with hiking in the mountains on work days and all the baloney he could eat, Davey quit his garbage collection job in Banff to join the Project: Great Divide Trails crew.

The Mission of Project: Great Divide Trails was to: inventory and map all trails in a 2,000 square mile (5,250 sq km) study area on each side of the Alberta/British Columbia border between Banff and Waterton Lakes national parks; identify natural, scenic, and heritage features along these trails; identify alternative routes for the Great Divide Trail that met basic criteria (existing trail, scenic, well-drained soils, free from spring snow, etc.); and recommend a route adjacent to,

along and across the divide, equally split between Alberta and British Columbia.

We began our research phase even before the project officially started by reading every book and report we could find that related to the study area. The Buffalo Head by Raymond Patterson and the report of the 1913-1917 Interprovincial Boundary Commission were especially helpful references for finding Indigenous and historic trails and features. We spent our first paid week on the project in Calgary at the Institute of Sedimentary and Petroleum Geology. Here we studied topographic maps and used stereoscopes and air photographs to remotely look at the study area. These were the days before Google Earth.

We based the project in two locations, the Crowsnest Pass for the first six weeks of field work, and the Sunshine Ski Area, for the last five weeks of the project. Bill and Nettie Kinnear hosted us on weekends in their backyard in Coleman, AB. The Frank Community Hall (now an art gallery) served as our office. Here we wrote up our field notes, kept our maps and files, and did trip planning for the upcoming week. Cliff's dad gave us a whole building to use for our lodging and office at Sunshine Ski, which was a winter-only operation then.

Our vehicle fleet included three cars. Cliff had the "Vair", a 1960 Corvair, one of the first 500 made. Fortunately, it proved to not be (as Ralph Nader warned) "unsafe at any speed" like the later models were. Davey Zevick was loaned his father's lovely 1965 turquoise Chev Impala with a white interior. "Betsy", as this car was called, proved the most impractical of vehicles for what we had

to do. Chris contributed his 1962 Notchback Volkswagen Sedan. Without "Old Blue", as this car came to be known, I doubt we could have accomplished our mission. This vehicle was truly amazing in terms of where it could go, how much it could carry (four backpacks, plus tool kit), how easily it could be repaired, and what indignities it could suffer and still carry on. As Chris says in the book *Tales from the Great Divide*: "This old, tough Volks Power Wagon took me and the GDT team on the adventure of a lifetime over mountain passes, down washed out logging roads, through rushing mountain streams and over deep beaver ponds for thousands of miles, safely and reliably. It was my first car and like a first love I'll never forget it."

O.F.Y. approved \$400.00 for our food budget for the crew of six young people during the field work season. Mary Jane offered to plan and organize the meals. Cliff's dad kindly allowed us to purchase food at a discount through Sunshine's account with Bridge Brand. We made our own GORP (Good Old Raisins and Peanuts). We ate a mixture of frozen, canned, and processed products. Many of the amusing stories told in the book *Tales from the Great Divide* feature food-related experiences.

Our Study Area included provincial Crown land and private lands on either side of the Great Divide between Akamina Pass in Waterton Lakes National Park in the south and Palliser Pass at the south end of Banff National Park in the north. This was divided into nine sub-study areas with 27 units based on watersheds, access roads, and our nine week field season.

For each of the nine weeks commencing June 17, our six-member study crew, divided into groups of two, surveyed one of the nine areas. Each week's area for a two-person team was 83 sq mi (250 sq mi). On Mondays, each group of two would usually backpack with very heavy loads into an area that could be used as a base camp. We would then explore the sub-area with just our daypacks and clipboards until Friday. Sometimes we had to backpack continuously to cover certain watersheds. Each individual explored trails within their assigned unit. We worked dawn to dusk or later as required, often alone, experiencing many adventures. To survey an area, we first hiked all known trails. We then turned our attention to routes with recreational potential. Study crew members collectively hiked over 5,000 km during the trail survey period.

We noted characteristics of trails and routes using our clipboards. We gave a rating to describe each trail's type of use, plotted its exact location, approximating trail lengths and elevations on 1:50,000 topographic maps. We recorded features using symbols placed on those same maps including: interesting natural or historic features, land uses, trail-side vegetation, trail base material (soils or bedrock), steep trail grades, stream crossings, maintenance problem areas (poor drainage or erosion), viewpoints and campsites.

In his 1973 trail survey report, Jim Thorsell defined a trail as a "marked route for non-motorized travel". It became obvious within days of starting our field work that if we stuck with this definition, we would survey few real trails. In almost every valley, the old tracks of Indigenous peoples, trappers and outfitters had been superseded by bulldozer

and rugged vehicle tracks. Consequently, the study crew redefined "trail" as "a marked route not passable to standard automobiles". If the Corvair and the Impala couldn't do it, it was a trail. Blue was another story.

A major challenge was accessing the Study Area on the rough gravel roads and the toll that took on our vehicle fleet. Other realities included our daily, weekly and overall project time pressures. We had a lot to do in a short time. We received no news or weather forecasts during the work week. We had to be prepared for anything weather-wise. We had no means of communicating with each other, either our work partner, or the rest of the crew, family members or other people who cared about us. These are the days before cell phones, satellite phones, InReach, Spots, Zoleos or trail apps.

During the summer of 1974, we overcame numerous obstacles, including: clambering up rock walls; scrambling up notches between peaks; trying to find trails during a summer with an exceptionally late and significant snowpack; fording streams and rivers during a year with very high water; slogging through mud from the very rainy, monsoon-like spring; negotiating the aftermath of the 1936 Phillips fire which left numerous fallen dead trees laying across trails and throughout the young forest; and avoiding conflicts with wildlife and livestock, the latter being the only thing that scared Cliff, our otherwise fearless leader.

We all faced life-threatening moments in the summer of 1974. An overhanging lodgepole pine on the Vicary Creek mining road in Alberta that skewered "Old Blue" nearly killed Dave Higgins and I (see article "[The Little VW That Could or How We Skewered a Volkswagen](#)" by Dave Higgins in the Fall 2015 issue of The GDTA's Pathfinder Newsletter). A poacher in the Pickle Jar Lakes area of Alberta shot at Dave Zevick and MJ, nearly missing them. When MJ screamed as she and Davey ducked for cover on the forest floor, the poacher ran away! Chris Hart credits MJ with saving his life by grabbing his hand before he nearly ran off a cliff on an unstable slope on Sugarloaf Mountain in pursuit of a windblown \$1 bill. In *Tales from the Great Divide*, Cliff describes one of his near-fatal moments during the summer of 1974, which took place as he unexpectedly emerged from a forested trail into an overburden pile just as a giant mining truck was dumping its next load of rocks. "Making Molehills of Mountains" tells the sad and scary story of the Erickson Creek Valley in B.C. Fortunately, for us, Cliff had quick reflexes and a survival instinct.

During the summer of 1974, we explored headwaters of the major rivers of western Canada. We naively thought that governments protected headwaters. Certainly, the input from the extensive public hearings that took place in 1973/74 on the management of the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies favoured watershed protection above all other uses. A primary finding of Project: Great Divide Trails was bringing to light how both provincial governments were shirking their stewardship responsibility for watershed protection in these headwater areas.

On both sides of the divide, governments implemented the policy of multiple resource use on Crown land. We saw that roads associated with powerlines and resource extraction industries, along with seismic lines, had obliterated Indigenous and historic trails. We encountered free range cattle that were defecating in the streams that supplied the drinking water for communities downriver, and that were trampling fragile riverside and alpine vegetation. We skirted boundaries of oil and gas developments, observing the "Keep Out, Danger, Poison Gas" signs. The coal mining operations in the Elk Valley staggered our imaginations. The scale and extent of the industrial logging operations also shocked us. Abandoned work camps incensed our young, idealistic minds.

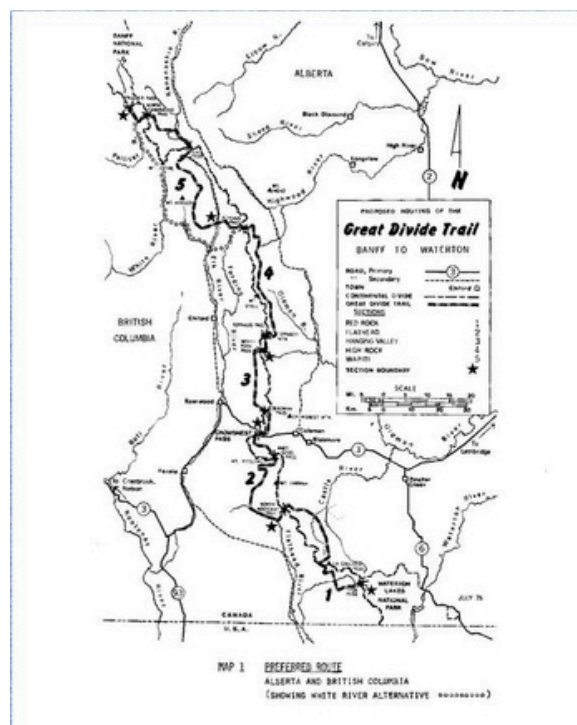
Project: Great Divide Trails surveyed, assessed and described 166 trails. The crew noted trails with the highest potential for recreational use. The crew determined that recent road construction had resulted in the region becoming the most accessible in the Canadian Rockies with no part of it exceeding 25 trail kilometers from a road. Nevertheless, the area offered scenic vistas, diverse vegetation patterns and wildlife species, interesting human history and cultural features, several wildland areas, and recently constructed access roads.

Three characteristics of the Great Divide region between Banff and Waterton Lakes national parks made it challenging to find an ideal location for a long-distance trail running adjacent to or along the continental divide. First, the topography of the Rockies runs NW/SE, with the majority of the smaller, more scenic and easily travelled valleys trending in that direction, facilitating east-west movement. We found only a couple of valleys and passes across the divide that facilitated a north-south trending trail (Elk and Tornado passes). Second, land uses incompatible with trail recreation had been developed throughout much of the region. Trying to avoid them posed a major challenge. Third, many tracks in the area were accessible to and used by off-road motor vehicles. Existing trails not passable to such vehicles were tough to locate and poorly maintained.

We developed and used six guidelines to inform the GDT route: include roughly equal amounts of trail distance in Alberta and B.C.; follow or link together trails with high recreational value so that it becomes the most interesting route as opposed to the shortest; avoid areas where present or future extractive land uses will detract from enjoyable and safe trail use; allow side access at frequent enough intervals to encourage day and short overnight trips; use existing trails wherever possible, preferably those constructed to standards acceptable to hikers and equestrians; and avoid unique, ecologically sensitive areas that could be damaged by hikers and horses (e.g. wet alpine meadows).

A major objective of Project: Great Divide Trails was to assess and map potential routes for the Great Divide Trail between Banff and Waterton Lakes national parks. Dave Higgins compiled all of the field crew's edited and annotated topo maps onto master maps. He then meticulously hand drafted maps to depict the overall preferred route, and alternate routes for the GDT. He developed individual maps for each section of the proposed GDT. He did all this using acetate, technical drawing pencils and pens, compasses, protractors, and recent innovations like see-through rulers and the dry transfer lettering and symbols called Letraset™.

The Preferred Route for the Great Divide Trail as proposed by Project: Great Divide Trails in 1974 totaled 376.5 km, of which only 98.5 km of trail would require significant clearing and/or construction and 166.5km would require access restrictions on off-road vehicles. A total of 111.5 km was existing pathway passable to hikers and equestrians.



We identified five sections for the GDT between Banff and Waterton Lakes national parks. Unlike using letters of the alphabet as the name for a section as the GDTA does currently, we proposed using names that described the natural environment hikers would experience. From south to north these were: the Red Rock Section, the Flathead Section, the Hanging Valley Section, the High Rock Section, and the Wapiti Section.

We wrote our final report at Sunshine Village in late August guided by a checklist. We summarized what we did, stated our conclusions and recommendations, and included Dave's maps. We identified how we spent the grant money compared to our budget forecasts based on Chris Hart's meticulous tracking of our project expenditures. We mailed it to the O.F.Y. Program administrators in Ottawa by early September. Sadly, none of us had the foresight to retain a copy! We hope the AWA or another project sponsor who received a courtesy copy will find it in their files someday and put it in the GDTA archives at the University of Calgary.

Once we completed the final report, the six of us dispersed. However, the story of Project: Great Divide Trails doesn't end there. Three of the crew members returned to Calgary, Alberta and kick started the formation of the Great Divide Trail Association. The project results informed the establishment of Canada's Great Divide Trail between Banff and Waterton Lakes national parks.

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To learn more about Project: Great Divide Trails, read Chapter Three of *Tales from the Great Divide, Vignettes on the Origins and Early History of Canada's Great Divide Trail and Great Divide Trail Association*. You can download it [in pdf from Nature Wise Consulting](#). Various sources sell the printed version, including a few independent bookstores in Invermere, B.C. and Banff and Bellevue, Alberta as well as GearTrade in Okotoks, Alberta, or as a [print on demand book from Amazon](#). You can also watch the recorded presentation entitled "[Project: Great Divide Trails, the Adventure of a Lifetime](#)" on the GDTA's YouTube Channel.



*Dave Higgins recording features along trail Racehorse Creek Valley, AB June 1974*



# **EXPLORING DARK SKIES OF THE DIVIDE**

By Claire Cutler (she/her)  
Trail Policy Specialist for the Continental Divide Trail Coalition

Photo by Zack Stockbridge.

*The following article was submitted by our partners the CDTC as part of an ongoing collaboration between our organizations*

An often underappreciated asset of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDT) is its vast availability of night sky. The connected and protected CDT landscape provides access to viewing night skies in locations with very little light pollution, often referred to as “dark skies.” As human development increases, artificial outdoor light, such as from street lights and homes, makes it increasingly challenging to view the stars. Undeveloped areas or those where measures have been taken to reduce light pollution have become known as “dark sky places”, and these havens offer an opportunity to experience an unaltered night sky. The Continental Divide Trail Coalition (CDTC) is beginning to explore the role of dark skies and dark sky places as part of the primitive feel of the CDT.

Due to its often remote location, the CDT provides access to dark sky places along the Continental Divide, offering communities and visitors alike an opportunity to pause, experience pristine darkness, and sit in the awe that can inspire. As a National Scenic Trail, the CDT has a Congressionally-designated nature and purpose: “To provide high-quality, scenic and primitive hiking and horseback riding opportunities and to conserve natural, historic, and cultural resources along the [CDT] corridor.”

In addition to the experience that dark skies offer for outdoor recreators, they are also crucial for the well-being of wildlife. Data demonstrates the detrimental impacts of light pollution on mammals, birds, and other species across the country, including impacts on mating, hunting, navigation, migration, and more. Wildlife is an essential component of Rocky Mountain ecosystems and an exciting element of experiencing the CDT.

CDTC recently received funding to work with the National Religious Partnership for the Environment to host community roundtables and star parties in Southern New Mexico. These gatherings will encourage community members to reflect on and discuss the value of dark skies through religious and secular perspectives, with some gatherings hosted particularly for Indigenous communities. A stronger understanding of the cultural role of dark skies will help CDTC understand how individuals and groups along the CDT interact with the night sky.

Several locations near the CDT and its Gateway Communities are designated as Dark Sky Places by the International Dark Sky Association, providing opportunities to experience minimally impacted night skies. Outside the Gateway Community of Lake City, Colorado, the 58-acre Lake Fork Earth and Sky Center is an International Dark Sky Park. Near Lander, Wyoming, Sinks Canyon State Park is designated as an International Dark Sky Park, and park staff also host night sky programming and constellation tours. Finally, at the Crown of the Continent, Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park became the first designated Dark Sky Park to cross an international border. The designation adds significance to an epic landscape at the intersection of the CDT and the Great Divide Trail.

Whether heading north or south, many travelers begin or end long journeys in the mountains of the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park—and under the welcoming dark skies of the Continental Divide.

## Supporters

We are proud to be funded by these companies, organizations, and government agencies. Their generous support provides funds to build and maintain the GDT; feed, train and equip our volunteers; protect the trail; and make all our work possible. Each contribution sustains our efforts to build and preserve the Great Divide Trail.

**\$100,000+**



**Want to support the GDTA?**

Contact us at

[info@greatdividetrail.com](mailto:info@greatdividetrail.com)

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**\$500+**



# Want to help the Great Divide Trail?

## **Become a Member**

Joining the GDTA is one of the most important things you can do to protect the trail. Membership numbers help in negotiations with land managers and allow us to advocate for the trail. Did you know you can become a lifetime member for only \$100?

## **Join a Committee**

Committees form the backbone of the GDTA and are a great way to volunteer your time. There's a full list of committees on our website, and with everything from trailbuilding to outreach to IT, there's sure to be something that interests you.

## **Join a Trail Building Trip**

Trail building and maintenance is essential for hikers to be able to access the divide safely. However, these trips are also **fun!** Volunteers can participate in everything from bridge building to flagging trail and scouting new routes. Trips are announced in the spring- make sure you're signed up to our email list to find out about next year's trips.

## **Donate**

Your donation is essential to help us maintain, promote, and protect the Great Divide Trail and preserve its wilderness experience for generations to come. You can also donate in honour of a loved one: a perfect gift for the hiker in your life.