

Jasper/Banff Trip Report June 2-4, 2017

Maple Leaf University School – TRU

Six MLUS-TRU students, my daughter and I left the Kamloops, BC area around 4:45 on June 2 in a rented 8 seat Ford Transit Van. The vehicle was virtually brand new and we broke it in, putting 1602 kms on it in the next 48 hours.

The purposes of this trip were to see the large mammals that Western Canada is known for, be able to come into close proximity with a glacier, and to take in the amazing scenery of the Rocky Mountains. I had determined before we left to not do any bird-watching on this trip. The time we had and the distance we wanted to travel would simply not allow it.

We headed north on the Southern Yellowhead Highway from Kamloops with Valemount as our destination for the night. This portion of the trip was rather uneventful, only seeing two Mule Deer and a Red Squirrel as we drove. Because all six of the students were in my Geography 12 class, we also stopped several times to document and photograph geographic terms and concepts along the road. This highway follows the North Thompson River and we remarked at how high the water was, being the first week of June with peak snow melt taking place in the mountains all around us. At one point the river needed to only rise 0.5 meters to flood the highway we were on.

Upon arrival in Valemount around 8:00pm, we discovered that our hotel had actually been booked in Jasper and none of us were upset that we had another 1.5 hours to go through this beautiful area before stopping for the day. With the sun low in the horizon, we turned east onto Highway 16 and entered Mt Robson Provincial Park shortly thereafter. After stopping for the obligatory “sign picture” we rounded several corners and spotted a Black Bear Cub beside the highway. We looped around and soon discovered there were two cubs and their mother right at the roadside. With the light still easily bright enough for us, we filled out cameras with pictures and videos as the mother fed on vegetation and the cubs explored beside her.





Mother and cubs on the left. Close-up of the mother above.

Having done some prior research, we had learned that the aptly named “Moose Lake” was within striking distance before complete darkness and so we left the bears in search of Moose. These large animals can be difficult to see in the Jasper and Banff areas so we hoped we could add one to the list at this location before carrying on. Unfortunately, we came up empty at the extensive wetlands on the southeast end of Moose Lake even though the habitat and time of day seemed textbook to see one. By now darkness was setting in so we left to try to get to our accommodation in Jasper so as to not have to drive very far in the dark. Having nearly totaling my personal vehicle on a Mule Deer the weekend before, I was a bit apprehensive of travelling too far in the dark in such a wildlife rich area.

On the Highway 16 stretch between Moose Lake and the Alberta border, I picked out some shapes along the road which turned out to be a mother Grizzly Bear and two cubs. This was a target specie for the trip and we were delighted to see 3 right beside the road even if the light was not conducive to photography! After having beautiful views of these we set off again only to have another large adult Grizzly Bear also right beside the road 3 minutes later! I pulled the van around and put this one in our headlights as it was positively dark and some photos were taken. By this time, it was becoming apparent that driving another 1.5 hours on this day was one of the best things that happened. Seven bears (3 Black Bears and 4 Grizzlies) before we reached our first destination!



After these encounters we entered Alberta and found our hotel in Jasper. All were tired and with a 5:00am departure the next morning, all went straight to bed. We realized that upon entering Alberta the time had moved forward an hour as well, meaning less sleep.... We stayed at the Athabasca Hotel located right in the heart of Jasper.

At 5:00 sharp the next morning we met in the lobby, packed up our gear, and headed out for more mammal watching in the Jasper area. We encountered our first Elk quite near our hotel followed by a group of 7 Bighorn Sheep up on a ridge. After this we turned onto Maligne Lake Road which had been reported to be a drive rich in wildlife. Approximately 10 kms onto this road we turned around as the trees were quite thick beside the road and we hadn't seen any wildlife. We wanted to head back west on Highway 16 to hit the Moose areas again before heading south toward Banff and this also factored into our decision to abort the Maligne Lake Road drive. Back in Jasper, we stopped briefly at a Tim Hortons to get some food before a long day on the road. Heading west from Jasper on Highway 16, we travelled in the direction of the Moose Lake wetlands and encountered our first male Elk on the way. A little before we arrived at the wetlands we found our Moose feeding in a damp and weedy areas beside the road.



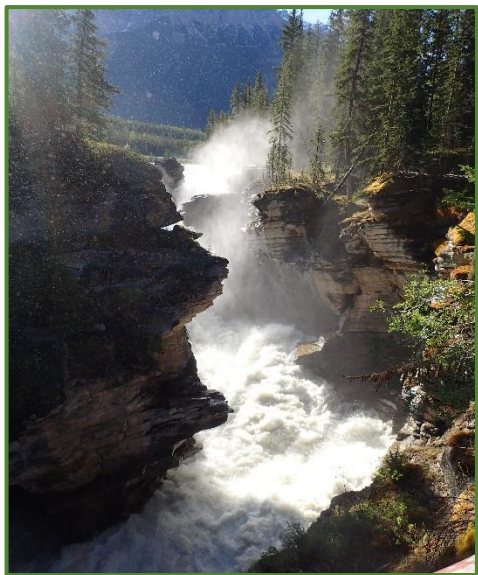
On the way back to Jasper on Highway 16 we saw several cars pulled off the road and people with optical equipment all looking in one direction. They told us a Grizzly Bear had just been seen but had disappeared moments ago. We drove forward a little and it came out of the bush right beside us. The people in the other cars took note and soon we were in the middle of the swarm of photographers. We happily joined in the photo frenzy as a large Grizzly Bear grazed on grasses right beside our van in full sunlight!



After our fifth Grizzly Bear in an hour or so of looking, we headed back to Jasper quite satisfied with how things were going. The only other specie we saw on this drive was a distant beaver swimming in a lake quite a ways from the highway. Back at Jasper, we topped up our fuel for the long drive to Banff and turned south onto the Ice Fields Parkway. By this time, most of the students were soundly asleep and I drove quietly further into the Rockies and enjoyed views the one below for around an hour.



I was so caught up in the scenery that I forgot to turn off onto 93A for a less travelled road that is supposed to be better for wildlife. As a side note to anyone going to Jasper, Marmot Road branches off 93A and reportedly had a mother grizzly with two cubs showing well each day around dusk near the top of it. Our next stop was a Athabasca Falls. This is a waterfall that was extra gorgeous because the Athabasca River was near flood stage from the snow melt and the water was pounding over it. Sleepy students woke up and most did the short walk to the falls. More Geography 12 vocabulary words were discussed and photographed at this site also.



Taking advantage of the students being awake (!) I stopped a short ways later for some group pictures with the Rocky Mountains in the background.



A short ways down the Ice Field Parkway we noticed some Mountain Goats feeding high up on a distant ridge. They were too distant to photograph but other encounters with this specie will be shared below. The Ice Fields Parkway has to be one of the most scenic drives in the world. The scenery is absolutely amazing the entire 350 kms or so. It climbs up to a glacier at one point and it is easily accessible to walk right up to a glacier from your car. The entire area has signs of glacial activity and I stopped several times to photograph features for my Geography 12 power points used in class. This enabled the students to stretch their legs and observe wildlife such as this handsome Columbian Ground Squirrel.



We did the 5 minute hike to the snout of the Athabasca Glacier and enjoyed the views from it. The pictures below are all from the Athabasca Glacier area.





The rest of the way to Banff included 2 more Mountain Goats, 2 Bighorn Sheep and a large Black Bear right beside the road. We didn't stop at Lake Louise as this was planned for the next morning. Once in Banff we found our hotel and rested for a few hours in the late afternoon. It had been an early start and long day of driving. We agreed to meet at the van at 6:00 to go for a nice dinner and do some tourist shopping followed by another wildlife drive near dusk.



After debating some supper choices we decided on Boston Pizza which is located in the tourist shopping areas of Banff. Too much food ordered ensured a nice breakfast of leftovers the following day...



The focus around Banff was on seeing Grey Wolves. I did some research and found some good roads to try. On the way to the wolf location we saw 2 more Mule Deer and the first White-tailed Deer of our trip along the highway. As it turns out, other people are also interested in seeing wolves which has led to the closure of 1A between Castle Junction and where it meets up with the Trans-Canada Highway further east. Apparently, there had been too much pressure on the wildlife along this route so the decision was made to close it for a few months. Camera traps are set up and it is part of a study of the impact of people on wildlife. We did drive the other portions of 1A between Castle Junction and Lake Louise slowly several times and met up with this large Grizzly Bear photographed below walking beside some railroads tracks. Another White-tailed Deer and more Elk rounded out the drive.

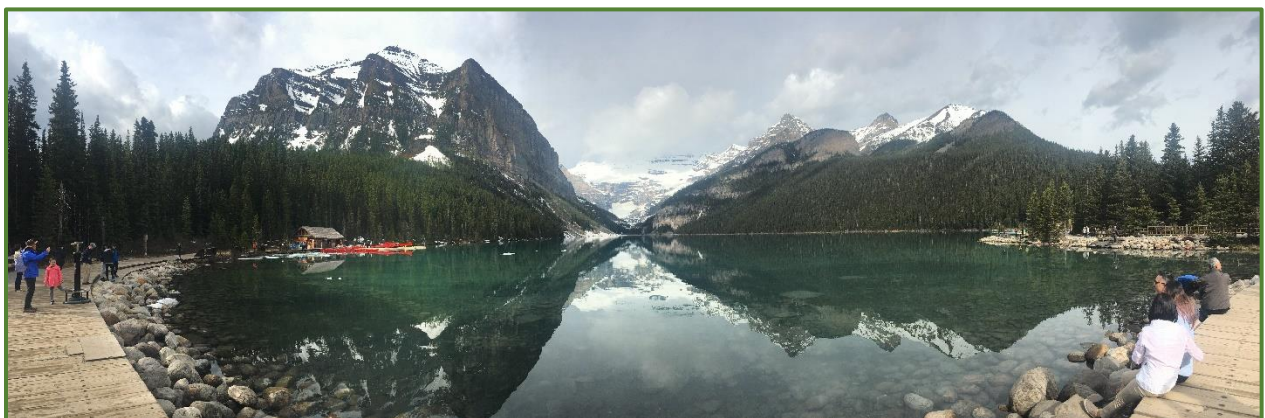


The above photo shows one of the wildlife crossings along the Trans-Canada Highway in Banff National Park. For more information search “a wild way to move” on youtube and watch the 5 minute clip put together by Parks Canada.

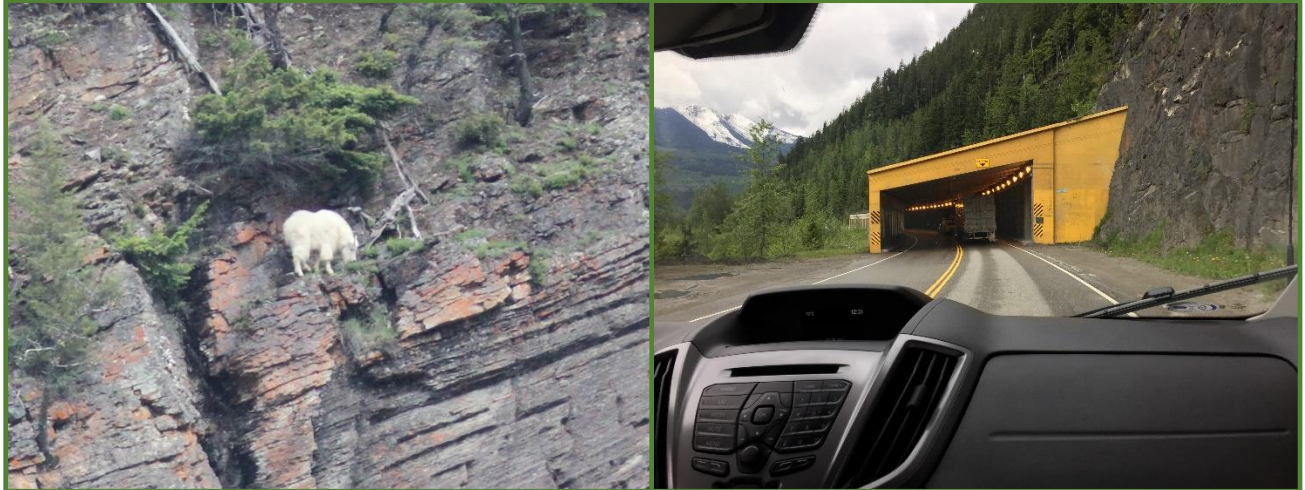
The next morning, we again left our hotel at 5:00am and headed up Tunnel Mountain Road. We had heard that this was an good wildlife drive and this turned out to be the case with a Coyote, 2 White-tailed Deer, and 3 Elk on the 5km road quite near the town of Banff. After this we drove up the Mt. Norquay Scenic Drive to the ski resort and saw 2 more Bighorn Sheep, two more Red Squirrels, and 2 more Mule Deer. The photo below is of us and a Bighorn Sheep enjoying the view of the town of Banff from this road. A White-tailed Deer is on the right.



This was followed by a short drive along Vermilion Lakes Road where we found more Columbian Ground Squirrel. Back on the Trans-Canada Highway we got off at Lake Louise and checked out this area including Moraine Lake for the rest of the morning. These are areas very popular with tourist busses and so there wasn't much wildlife to see. Even by 10:00 am the parking lots and trails were full of tourists. Still, the area is extremely scenic and we did find a Golden-Mantled Ground Squirrel there.

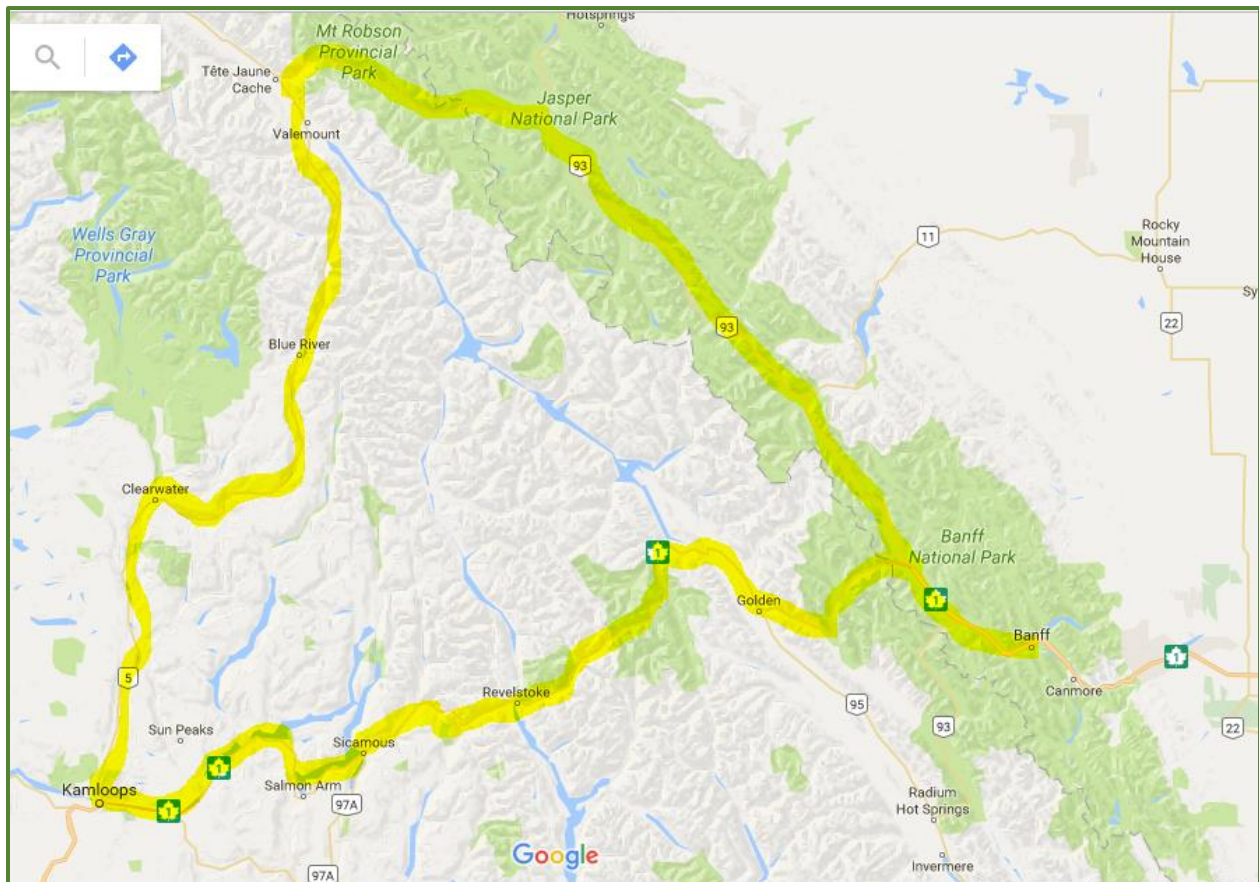


At this point we started driving west for the 5 hour drive back to Kamloops. Our rental van was due at 5:00pm so we could make several stops along the way. Wildlife seen on this portion of the trip included 2 more Black Bears along the highway, many more Mountain Goats on the cliff areas, and a Muskrat in a roadside marsh.



We arrived in Kamloops at 4:45 and did a quick unloading of our vehicle before having it back at almost exactly 5:00. 1602 kms in 48 hours!

A Google Map showing our route



What was your most favourite moment of the trip?

Shawn – The huge Grizzly Bear eating Dandelions along the highway

Felix – When we stood by the Athabasca Glacier

Richard – Drinking natural water (at a waterfall beside the road)

Agnes – Our teacher going crazy about seeing a moose!

Naomi – Seeing the mother Black Bear and her cubs and watching the cubs playing.

Anna – Seeing Lake Louise

Will – When I was so close to the large Grizzly Bear



Our second Moose crossing the Sunwapta River

What is one thing that you learned on the trip?

Shawn – Bears can eat vegetation

Felix – Glaciers can change landforms and weather

Richard – How river rapids work

Agnes – Rivers can be green and blue

Naomi – That Bighorn Sheep will charge a car that parks too close

Anna – People and animals can live together

Will – how to find animals in the wild

Complete Mammal List from the Trip:

1. Grizzly Bear – 6
2. Black Bear – 6
3. Moose – 2
4. Elk – 20
5. Mule Deer – 5
6. White-tailed Deer – 5
7. Bighorn Sheep – 9
8. Mountain Goat – 16
9. Beaver – 1
10. Muskrat – 1
11. Red Squirrel – 3
12. Columbian Ground Squirrel – 10
13. Golden-Mantled Ground Squirrel – 1
14. Snowshoe Hare – 1
15. Coyote – 1