

RETURN TO THE

WILDEST VALLEY

Story and photos by Aaron Teasdale



Our trailers loaded with camping gear and our spirits thirsty for a week in the wild, we pedal away from the crystal waters of British Columbia's Flathead River onto a faint dirt road that climbs into the hills. Deeper into the mountains we ride, the scent of spruce thick in the air, until an unruly creek charging across the road forces us to shoulder our bikes and ford its thigh-high waters. The mid-July sun warms our skin as we remount and weave between piles of wolf, moose, elk, lion, and bear scat. Wrapping around a hillside, the old road opens into what feels like an entirely new place, a new valley, this one narrower and leading us away from the airy river bottom and into a world of deep forest, roaming wildlife, and peaks that close in on all sides.

Suddenly, I grab the brakes and silently thrust my hand in the air, giving Dad and Ron the halt-for-a-large-furry-creature-ahead signal. They stop next to me without a word as my forefinger stabs the air towards a large, brown shape a couple hundred feet ahead. A grizzly bear, probably weighing more than the three of us combined, is lolling in the roadside flowers with its back to us, raising its snout to the sun as if reveling in the beauty of its world. My first thought is simple: *please don't have cubs.*

"Stay together," I say under my breath, as I slip a hand into my pack and pull out camera and binoculars. "And keep your pepper spray handy."

For several minutes we watch the bear before it notices us and, no cubs in sight, casually lumbers across the road. Ron, a New Yorker with an abiding fear of grizzlies, is glued to the binoculars, his hands gripping them with undue force, as the bruin, filling his field of view, pauses and turns its head to stare directly at us. For one electric moment, Ron looks straight into the eyes of the beast. As it lumbers into the forest and Ron lowers the binoculars, only one word escapes his lips, "...Wow."

Being in no rush to continue on the road at this particular moment, we let the adrenalized tension ebb from our bodies through smiles and laughter as we marvel at our encounter.

"We're sure going to hang our food at camp tonight!" Ron says enthusiastically.

The conversation stops awkwardly for a moment, as I hesitate and slowly look at my father, "Did you bring a rope?"

"No," he says, "I thought you brought the rope."



Into the Wild. Heading up a side valley, the crew is minutes away from a grizzly encounter.

We look at each other just long enough to realize neither is joking. Ron lets out a deep sigh.

After giving the bear ample time to find new lolling grounds, we begin to yell, Ron with particular gusto, to prevent surprising the giant, toothy creature as we prepare to ride where it stood only minutes before. As we start to pedal, I mention that I've read grizzlies never attack groups of three or more.

"We'd better stay together then," Ron says, without missing a beat, "Because the bear won't necessarily believe us if we tell it a third guy is coming."

Scientists will tell you the Canadian Flathead has the highest concentration of grizzly bears in inland North America, approximately one bruin every 15 square miles, and Ron's, uh, *lack of enthusiasm* for encountering grizzlies aside, this is exactly why we've come here. One of the continent's only remaining unsettled major valleys, wildlife biologists say the Flathead is the most vital place for carnivores in the Rockies, and label it "the Serengeti of North America" for its unrivaled concentration of wildlife and plant species. In short, it's the wildest valley we have left.

Sliced in two by the international border, the valley's cabin-and-campground-speckled southern half lays in Montana, where Glacier National Park extends down to the Flathead River. Here in the British Columbia half of the valley, the eastern mountains rise to the Continental Divide and the border of Waterton Lakes National Park. But the Flathead Valley itself and its surrounding mountains are unprotected and largely overlooked, which keeps the crowds away but comes with its own perils, as we'll soon see firsthand.

It's our annual summer trip together — Dad, his best friend Ron, and I — and we've come here for a week of exploration,



Pick-me-up. Never underestimate how shockingly cold water in snow-melt creeks can be.


adventure, and the unique form of family bonding that comes from spending a week shoehorned together in the same tent. For almost 30 years, since I was a 10-year-old boy, we've been taking these trips, first backpacking, now bikepacking, to soak in the sweet elixir of wilderness together. Five years ago we rode our bikes across this valley and into Waterton Lakes National Park (see "The Wildest Valley" in the Sept/Oct, 2005 *Adventure Cyclist*), and I've dreamed of returning ever since.

My preferred explanation for the inexorable pull this valley has on my psyche is the theory of some eco-philosophers who suggest that *homo sapiens* are inherently wild beings whose genome evolved over eons in wild, natural places. When we return to these places, the theory goes, we feel less stressed and more sane. Which

could help explain why so many of us love riding bicycles — it gets us outside into the sun and wind and the elemental world from which we came. (It also provides a handy scientific excuse I can offer my wife: "I know I spend a lot of time in the woods, honey, but who am I to argue with *my genome*?")

A mile or two after our brush with the bear, I ford another creek while Dad and Ron stay behind to filter water. This is our second day of riding (and our second grizzly — we saw one on our first day, too), and our goal is to climb into the mountains to the invitingly named Sunkist Pass, or as far as the terrain will allow. But after the creek, the old road deteriorates into a muddy, overgrown trail pocked with moose and bear tracks. I realize this is it — we're not getting our trailers any farther.

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Reporting my findings is a downer. We'd hoped to get farther today. Dad looks around at the walls of forest on all sides of our shadowy creek-bottom and sighs wistfully, "I must admit, I thought it would be more open country."

Spurred by a shared love of campsites with epic views, we backtrack a short ways to investigate a faint road we'd passed earlier. After climbing a quarter mile it emerges onto a long, perfectly flat clearing with views back down the distant lower valley and ahead into the high peaks that



Those who've gone before. In the Flathead, bear and wolf tracks far outnumber bike tracks.

cradle Sunkist Pass.

"Now this is more like it!" I say, jumping off the bike.

Then I notice a rusted metal sign sticking askew out of the gravel that reads "Shell Flathead #3." Turns out the Flathead is rich in more than biodiversity — there's plenty of oil, coal, and gold in these hills too — and the valley has a long history of narrowly averting industrial-scale extraction schemes. This raises an inescapable irony: we may treasure the valley's undeveloped landscapes, but it's only because of its

human "scars" — logging roads, exploratory tracks, even old Indian trails — that we are able to ride our bicycles here at all. In other words, we may not be thrilled about the drill pad, but right now we're actually pretty thrilled about the drill pad.

We pack up our food that night in airtight drybags and ensconce them in a kind of food fortress of carefully stacked trailers and bicycles. It may not stop a bear, but it would make a heck of a racket. Which is something. Plus, it would give us a chance to prepare our final line of defense: individual cans of pepper spray kept within arm's reach inside the tent, or in Ron's case, inside his sleeping bag.

A loud, wailing cry cuts through the silence the next morning as I lay in the tent. "What was that?" I say to Dad, who's standing just outside.

"Don't know, it was coming from over the hill here."

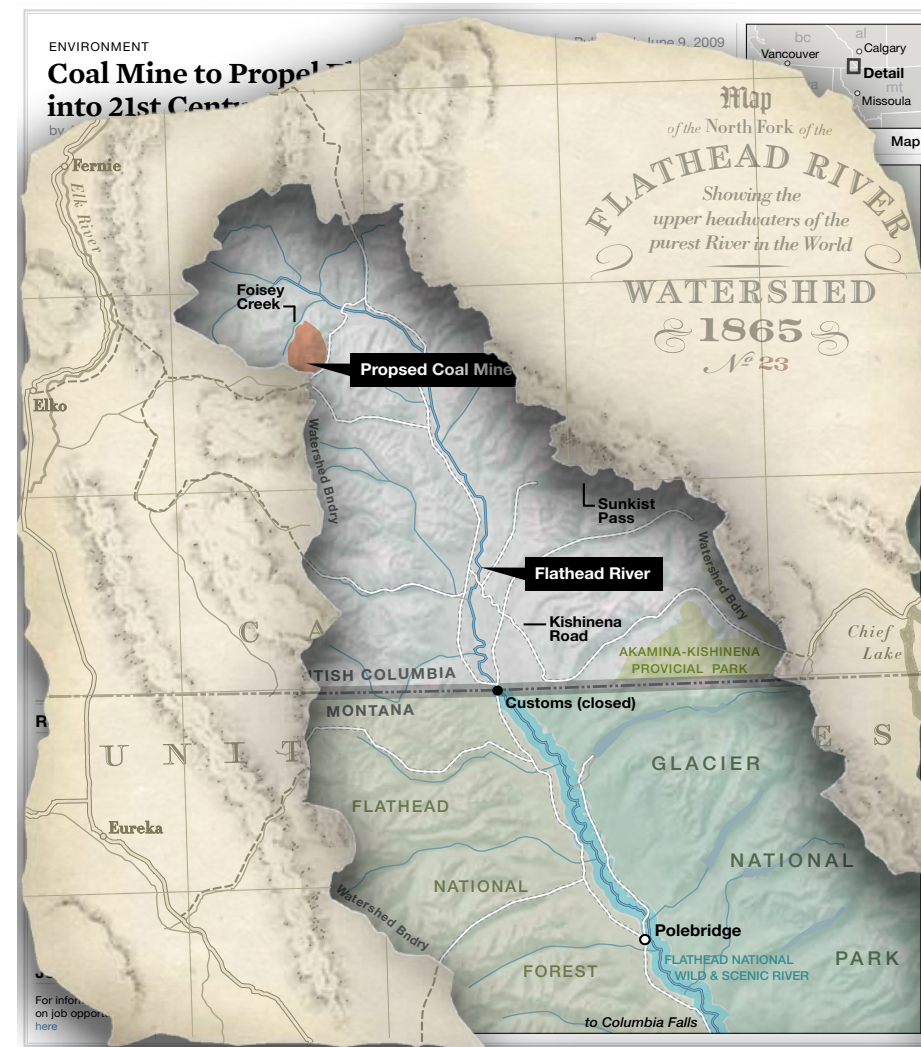
"Hold on," I say, grabbing for my shoes, "let's go check it out."

As we scamper up the hillside, the mysterious crying rings out every minute or so, drawing steadily closer. From the hilltop, we see nothing in the gladed meadows below, so I move into the brush, closer and closer to the noise. Dad finds a spot above and behind me on a small rise. All I can see is brush when I hear the cry again — it's just on the other side of the bushes, but I still can't see what's making it. I stay silent and have the sinking feeling I'm never going to see anything, which drives me crazy.

Then Dad starts gesturing energetically from above, pointing just past me, and mouthing something that looks an awful lot like "wolf!"

I stand ready, every sense straining, every nerve attuned, when suddenly a gray wolf bursts through the brush at a gallop, uphill and about 100 feet away. My eyes bulge to record size, but I make no movement or sound as the wolf, still unaware of my presence, runs straight at me. There is a camera around my neck, but not wanting to move or take my eyes off the wolf, I stealthily shoot from the hip, capturing an impressively abstract photographic sequence of its disembodied paws, snout, and tail.

Still it runs toward me, still I stay silent, until it's less than 20 feet away and I can see the wild blue of its eyes. Having never had a wolf bearing down on me at close range, I hesitate. Then for both our safety (and mine in particular) I realize I need to announce myself. Just as "Hey wolf" is



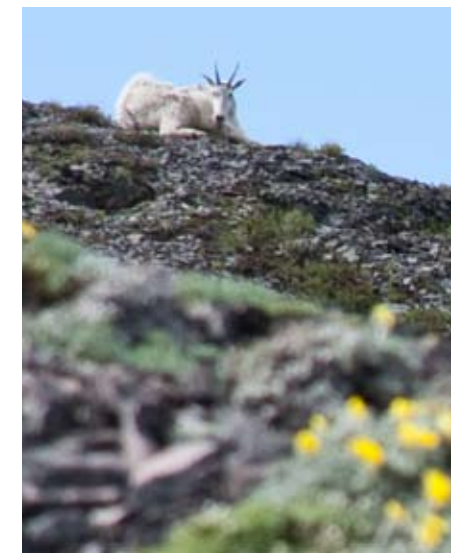
about to leave my lips, it sees me and stops in an instant. For one brief moment our eyes lock, the universe reduced to the 15 feet between us. I'm certain it can hear my heart battering my ribcage. There is no fear in its eye, no panic in its run as it pivots and lopes back up the hill. At the top of the



Wild things. Humans draw extra long stares from the valley's furrier inhabitants.

clearing, where it emerged moments before, it stops, turns, and looks at me again, pausing almost casually, as if trying to determine what manner of beast I am. This time I raise my camera, and then the wolf turns into the brush and disappears.

When we return to camp we find out



that Ron, too, got up at the sound of the wolf. Unsure what the creature was, he went for the safest spot he could find — directly behind a lone, 100-foot-tall tree near our otherwise wide-open campsite. I'm nearly jumping out of my pants with excitement as we relate the story, and Dad says that from his perch he could see a second wolf running with the first. Ron appears conflicted — perhaps disappointed at not seeing the wolf himself, but also disturbed that they're running around within spitting distance of camp.

Two grizzlies and two wolves in just over two days? We're starting to believe this whole Serengeti of North America thing.

As if the wildlife are conspiring to back up the biologists' claims, by the time we reach Sunkist Pass that afternoon, after hours of biking and hiking up a ragged trail, we've seen a coyote, a marten, several bighorn sheep, a few elk, and a moose. After finding a mountain goat lounging on a summit as we hike ridgelines from Sunkist Pass, we're ready to see elephants and ostriches cavorting on the mountaintops.

When we finally reach our climb's apex, it's everything a mountain summit should be — thin-aired and wind-blasted, with views across a thrilling sprawl of mountains. We pose for pictures and study the peaks of Glacier Park to the south, looking for vanishing glaciers tucked in the mountain's north-facing bowls. Then, gazing down the valley we just rode, we see our campsite and tent, a distant speck in the binoculars. In the end, it will take us 10 hard hours to get here and back to camp, but, as always, it's worth every ounce of effort for our time on the summit, precious minutes looking out over the world.



Talking over breakfast at camp the next morning, we realize we've been in the Flathead for four days without seeing a single other human. The glorious expanse on all sides inspires us, as glorious expanses have a way of doing, to talk about life and how best to live it. Dad and Ron are both on later-life wisdom quests, and I soak up their counsel. My philosophy, I tell them in return, is simple: appreciate each moment as deeply as possible, because before we know it we'll all be gone.

Somehow, our talk turns to the life of corporate CEOs, which Ron and Dad, who both have busy, high-intensity careers, think would be fun. Rejecting it out of hand, I say, "Too scheduled and high-pressured, with long hours stuck inside all the time. No thanks."

"Life goes awful fast," I add. "I have every intention of enjoying it while I'm here."

At this we pause and take in the distant waterfalls, reddish mountain ridges, and remnant snow cornices adorning the mountains around us. The deep silence, a treasure in our modern world, is broken only when Dad quietly says, "Well, we're certainly in the right place to be having this kind of conversation."

As we're packing up later that morning, Ron looks up and says, "Aaron, you said something profound earlier."

"I did?"



Rise and shine. Morning sun and smiles at the world's most picturesque drill pad.

"When you described the job you didn't want, I realized *that's my job*," Ron says. "Now when I go back home I'm committed to making a change and getting outside more."

Then, as if a reward for this moment of clarity, we discover a swath of ripe strawberries on the open hillside below our campsite. An hour later, trailers loaded and

bellies packed with berries, we head back along the doubletrack road, ford the creek, and ride down into the wide-open country of the Flathead Valley bottomlands. We're eager to get to the river and try out our new, lightweight packrafts. Originally, we'd planned to float the entire Flathead in them, but we promptly shelved this idea after examining the river's powerful flow and realizing we might want to actually practice a bit before jumping into a multi-day wilderness float.

A graded dirt road parallels the river for much of the valley's length and we follow it north for 10 miles, before turning off and riding across a low channel onto an island where we find a miraculously perfect campsite. For two wondrous days we stay here, playing on the river, sleeping to the sound of rushing water, and slowly but surely settling into the deliciously relaxed pace of Flathead Time. We raptly watch the swirling carnival of swallows gulp insects in the air above the river. We exchange long stares with a beaver that swims within a couple feet and stares as if it's never seen humans before. When rain pins us in the tent, we lay back for hours watching pearly water droplets dance on the rainfly, and when we emerge into the misty blues and oranges of twilight, the mountaintops are frosted white with a fresh dusting of snow.

Alas, our time at the river must end, and on our seventh and final day in the

valley we ride south along the river, back to our car near the American border, and load up for the drive out of the valley and back to the bustling world. But there's one thing we want to see on our way out, one more ride we have to take. High in the McDonald Range, amid a jumble of peaks in the valley's western reaches, we stop at an unsigned dirt road that climbs into the forest. I check my maps — this is the road.

We take the bikes off the car and pedal up, the tortuously bent and folded rock layers of the surrounding peaks slowly revealing themselves as we climb, higher and higher, until we've gained 3,000 feet and come to a viewpoint over the lands to the north. The mountains here are less dramatic — rolling, wooded summits that harbor the headwaters of the Flathead. This is where pure springs and streams and creeks bubble and tumble out of the forest, joining together to form the Flathead River and the cleanest water ever measured on our planet (water here is actually used by scientists as a baseline for water purity).

Ahead of us on the roadside, we see what looks like a pile of wooden pallets. Reaching them, we realize what they are — core samples, many of them pure black with solid coal. In front of us rises an unnamed mountain with fresh road cuts zig-zagging up its flank, roads that don't show on my map. I point out where the Cline Mining Corporation plans to cleave off the mountaintop and dig up 40 million tons of coal. In the thickly wooded valley at the mountain's base, I show where they propose to bury Foisey Creek, a tendril of the Flathead, in mining slag and tailings. The road we've just ridden to get here would be "improved" and driven by dozens of heavy trucks per day. I've read about all of this, but this is my first time seeing it with my own eyes.

"All the coal people see is coal," I say, my voice rising. "They don't see that this is the wildest valley we have left."

"Gosh, it would be a shame," Dad says.

I mention the coal seams exposed in the roadside rock that were visible as we climbed here, and then I scrape my foot across the black soil that's been lining the road for the last mile and say, "More coal — it's everywhere here."

"Wow," says Ron mischevously. "They should mine here if there's that much coal."

Joke or not, Ron has just hit the heart of the issue. If there's coal here, do we have

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to mine it? Are some places worth enough to us, to future generations, to other life on earth, to leave alone? A planned reroute of The Great Divide Mountain Bike Route will bring it into this valley soon. As cyclists, should we care? Would you rather ride through wilderness or coal mines?

One thing I know is that if we really do put mountaintop-removal coal mines here, no one will call it the wildest valley anymore. No one will confuse it with the Serengeti of North America.

As we hurtle back down the mountainsides, I imagine what would happen if we could pry those mining CEOs from their busy lives and get them out here with us on bikes for a week. Better yet, have them bring their kids — as Dad and I have learned, there are few things as life-affirming as sharing the richness of nature with your children. We'd both be happy to show them the valley beyond the spreadsheets. Show them the wolves and bears and moose. Show them the butterflies and eagles and wildflowers. Show them the river that runs clearer than crystal.

Maybe then they'd see things differ-



The core of it. Stacks and stacks of core samples prove it: these mountains are full of coal.

ently, I think as I lean into a sweeping switchback. The mountainside is clothed in strawberry flowers and the valley is silent except for the wind and a chorus of bird calls. There are mountains, there is forest, and it is vast and beautiful and free the way truly wild places are. The way I hope they will always be. **AC**

Aaron Teasdale lives in Missoula with his young family and is planning a return trip to the Flathead to float the entire river in his packraft this summer.

For more information on riding in the Flathead, see the "Ten Top Tours" feature in the January 2009 Adventure Cyclist at www.adventurecycling.org/ten_toptours. The Flathead Wild website is also a fount of information at www.flathead.ca.



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