

The natural wonders
of the Canadian Rockies

Description

Images of one of the most scenic and awe-inspiring places on earth

Text and photography by **Marc Neal**

In the western provinces of Canada, mountains – big mountains – rise above the tree line. Wild pines curve up their flanks like a cloak of green, fast-flowing rivers chart their own course through the hills, meandering among



quoise,
are one

caught these images during the August long weekend along the **Thompson Highway** and the Icefields parkway. The equipment I used was a Nikon D850 along with 2 lenses, a 24-70mm 2.8 for wider-angle shots

and for the closer shots I used the 80-to 200 f 2.8. I chose evening from just before sundown and early mornings before sunrise to about an hour after sunrise for most of the shots.

The shots of the ice fields were taken mid-day in full sun so that I could capture the brilliant blue skies around the mountain peaks, which contrasted nicely with the white glaciers. There were some challenges due to haze created by the forest fires raging in British Columbia however I found early morning to have the clearest conditions.

The Thompson Highway heads west from Red Deer, Alberta, leading into **Banff National Park**. From the Park entry it is roughly 50 km via the Columbia Icefields Parkway from the Southern border of **Jasper National Park**. The Thompson Highway provides a less travelled area of the Canadian Rockies, away from the crowds that can often be found through the Banff or Jasper access points.



Once

inside the park region the highest peaks reach close to 3,400 meters. Within this region of the Rockies are four alpine zones in which you can find different flora and fauna, all of which are very accessible. The area along the **Columbia Icefield Parkway** provides wonderful opportunities to explore places that would normally be inaccessible.

The Nivel Belt, also known as alpine meadows, is the glacier zone and resides near the highest elevations along the route. There is little fauna and vegetation is mainly moss and lichens and small hearty arctic plants. This zone has very harsh conditions and a very short growing season. A good vantage point to experience the alpine meadows is the **Columbia Icefield Discovery Centre** where you can arrange a tour of **Athabasca Glacier** or guided icefield hikes.

From the Icefield Discovery Centre you will be able to see three distinct alpine regions: as mentioned earlier the alpine meadows; the subalpine region characterized by evergreens and wildlife such as the bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and bears (both black and grizzly), cougars and golden eagles; and the upper montane region which hosts a greater variety of plant life with some deciduous trees as well as deer, caribou and elk.

An exceptionally good day hike is along the **Wilcox trail**, located about 5 km south of the Columbia Icefield Discovery Centre on the east side of the road. The trail is considered a moderate hike, with a vertical climb of 560 meters and a length of 8 km return. It is well marked and takes the hiker up to the alpine meadows with spectacular views of the glacier on the opposite side of the valley.



There

is a very good chance you will see bighorn sheep along the trail, particularly in the early morning or at dusk. There is a serviced campsite that can accommodate tent and RV camping at the base of the trail. This is a very popular trail so expect to see other hikers along the trail. It is advised to stay on the trails to lessen the human impact on the surrounding vegetation. This is very important in the upper elevations where in the ecosystem of the alpine meadows zone the plants and animals require many growing seasons to establish.

The protected areas between Banff and Jasper are vast, covering an area of 17,500 km², just over half the size of Belgium, and offering thousands of kilometres of hiking, both day hikes and longer backcountry treks, camping and opportunities to experience Western Canada's natural richness.

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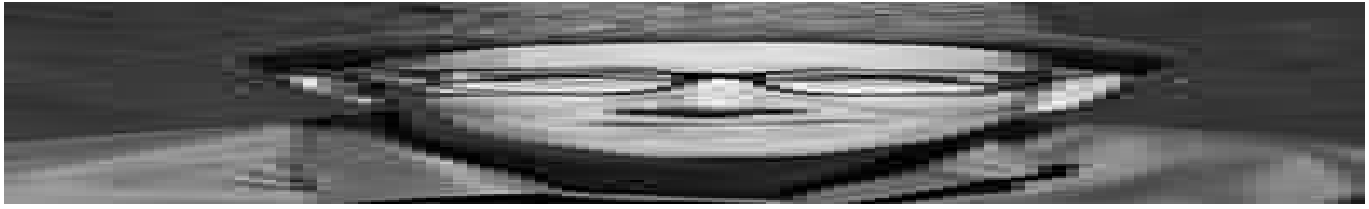
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Marc Neal was born in British Columbia. At the age of eight he picked up his first camera and, with a little help from an uncle, he learned the technical basics of photography. At the age of 19, Marc moved to Ottawa where he spent 20 years, followed by 10 years in Central and Southeast Europe. He now lives in Alberta.

Marc developed his skills through the study of art, his fine art photography having had several shows in Canada and Europe with good result. Being as long in the photography business as he has, Marc has shot almost every genre there is, though his preference is for fashion, fine art and documentary photography. He is currently working on several projects that deal with immigration and immigrants in photo documentary style for print.

To see a sampling of his work visit his blog site at marcnealphotographer.tumblr.com



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