

Lowdown Adventure-2nd revision
explore
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There's a convincing argument to be made that hiking reaches its apotheosis in the Canadian Rockies. With glaciers, jagged peaks, turquoise rivers and fields of wildflowers and alpine meadows, it's pretty much impossible to reach a higher state of being. Bighorn sheep, mountain goats and grizzly bears only add to the sense of grandeur.

It turns out, however, that the region's most beautiful creatures go relatively unseen by the millions of people that come here to soak up the visual treasure. Several different trout and char species inhabit the many alpine lakes that shimmer beneath the towering glaciers that feed them. West-slope cutthroat, eastern brook, golden, rainbows and northern Dolly varden cruise these clear waters, many of them never seeing an artificial fly. Showing them their first one is as simple as grabbing your fly rod, then setting off on a great alpine hike.

You don't need a lot of equipment. In addition to the usual hiking gear, which should include bear spray, take a four to six-weight fly rod, floating and sink-tip lines, lightweight chest waders or – even better – a float tube and box of flies.

To protect your rod, carry it in an aluminum tube case, which also happens to make a handy hiking staff for maneuvering rocky crags on your way to trout heaven.

Bertha Lake

Fish aside, the hike up to this high-alpine jewel happens to be one of the most popular hikes in Waterton Lakes National Park, partly because of the elevator-like gain of 1,509 feet over six kilometres, but mainly because of the dependably stunning Rocky Mountain scenery. You'll be treated en route to an eagle's eye view of the Waterton townsite, Upper Waterton Lake and an endless dun-coloured prairie stretching to the east. You'll also pass Lower Bertha Falls, a 40-foot cascade of water. From there, the number of hikers thin as the trail gets steeper and switches back through patches of wildflowers and stands of big fir and spruce.

After about an hour and a half, you hike up onto a mystical looking hanging alpine valley often shrouded in fog. Then it's time to turn your attention to Bertha Lake, an emerald coloured expanse of water holding silvery rainbow trout, some of which get as big as 20 inches. Wading is difficult, but the numerous rocky outcrops make ideal casting platforms – there's even room for a short backcast. If you hike around to the far end of the lake, you're more likely to enjoy a solitary experience.

Flies: When they're not taking dry flies off the surface, Bertha's rainbows are partial to weighted streamers such as black and green Woolly Buggers with tungsten beadheads. Lead-weighted flies and lead split-shots aren't allowed in the national park. Getting there: From the Waterton townsite, follow Evergreen Avenue south across the west side of town and turn right after the bridge. The trailhead is in a signed parking lot. For more information: www.watertonpark.com

Rainy Ridge Lake

The steep first half of this four-kilometre hike will set your heart thumping like a Jamaican steel drum band. But as you pull yourself up that initial seemingly endless avalanche chute, pause for a moment, close your eyes and envision casting for scarlet-flanked golden trout in the lake at the end of the hike. Your pace will quicken from that point on. Guaranteed.

Two hours after setting out, you'll step out of the trees and stare in awe at one of the most beautifully stunning sights this side of the Continental Divide. Rainy Ridge Lake is nestled in an alpine valley fringed by rocky peaks and lush green meadows. Fallen trees and rocks dot the shoreline. On a calm day, you can spot the shadows of golden trout up to 18 inches cruising in the shallows. If you're really lucky, you'll see the surface dimples of fish feeding on the surface and you'll know it's time to break out the dry flies and waders. You've just struck gold.

Flies: Pheasant tail and scud – freshwater shrimp – nymph patterns and dry flies such as Parachute Adams and Mosquitoes.

Getting There: From Calgary, drive south on Highway 22 to Highway 3. Turn west and then south on Secondary Highway 507 to Beaver Mines. Follow Secondary Highway 774 west to the Castle Mountain Ski Resort, and then take a logging road about four kilometres south to the unmarked trailhead. The 82G/8 Beaver Mines topo map will help.

For more information: *Fishing the Canadian Rockies* by Joey Ambrosi (Assiniboine Productions)

Chester Lake

The first leg of this five-kilometre hike is along an old logging road, which seems a little too civilized for most backcountry hikers. The spectacular surrounding mountain panorama, however, is a major saving grace. The trail gets decidedly better about halfway up, where it narrows and veers off-road, ascending through sub-alpine forest. Half an hour later, it opens up into colour-splashed meadows of wildflowers fringed with larch trees that turn a dazzling golden in autumn.

After gaining 1,017 feet in elevation, you'll catch your first glimpse of the lake, which sits in the shadow of Mount Chester and presents itself like a classic painting from a Group of Seven exhibition. Follow the shoreline trail to a pretty waterfall at the base of a boulder and scree slope at the far end. That's a good place to start casting for Chester's scrappy west-slope cutthroat up to 16 inches long and tackle-testing northern Dolly Varden pushing several pounds. The cold lake drops off sharply, making it not very wader friendly. If you don't feel like lugging a float tube, casting from shore can be highly productive, especially if you change locations regularly.

Flies: Cutthroats and northern Dolly Varden will rise for dry flies such as Royal Wulffs and Parachute Adams. A beadhead Prince and scud pattern nymph, or small black Woolly Buzzer streamer, can be effectively fished with sink-tip or full-sink lines.

Getting there: From Calgary, head west on Trans-Canada Highway for 80 kilometres, then south on Highway 40 for 50 kilometres and right onto Kananaskis Lakes Trail. Turn north on Smith Dorrien/Spray Trail for 15 kilometres to the parking lot.

For more information: www.gov.ab.ca/env/parks/prov_parks/kananaskis/

Helen Lake

Without question, this is one of the most gorgeous fly-fishing hikes anywhere in the Canadian Rockies, partly because the trail mostly follows open ridge-tops and valley floors, offering unobstructed 360 degree views that will have your head swiveling like an owl's. The trail climbs steadily east from Highway 93, affording stunning views of the Crowfoot Glacier and Bow Lake, the genesis of the world-renowned trout river of the same name.

The six-kilometre hike takes about two hours, but rushing it is like scarfing down a fine French meal without really tasting it. This is a journey that should be savored every soul-touching inch of the way, from the yellow glacier lilies to the little streams over which you step. Helen Lake itself is a bowl-shaped piece of water about the size of two football fields. But don't be deceived by the size; schools of eastern brook and rainbow trout of up to 14 inches prowl the shallows within easy casting distance of shore. These trout are no pushovers, though, requiring a careful, low profile approach and delicate presentation. That's assuming, of course, that you can take your eyes off the scenery long enough.

Flies: Parachute Adams, Royal Wulff and Elk Hair Caddis dry flies; and weighted – remember, no lead in the national park – nymphs including brassies, scud patterns and Prince in sizes 16-18.

Getting there: From Calgary, travel west on Trans-Canada Highway 200 kilometres to Highway 93, then 27 kilometres to marked parking lot where the trail starts.

For more information: www.worldweb.com-parkscanada-banff

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