

## Sheep Mountain



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*“The way Everest is guided is very different from the way other mountains are guided, and it flies in the face of values I hold dear: self-reliance, taking responsibility for what you do, making your own decisions, trusting your own judgment....” - Jon Krakauer*

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After driving the initial 32 hours straight through from Michigan to get out to the Canadian Rockies just west of Calgary, we took a couple of days to meander around the Kananaskis Valley and head up the Icefield Parkway Drive. The Kananaskis Valley is loaded with wildlife, and the Icefield Parkway Drive has some of the most beautiful country a person could ever experience.

However, the next destination for us was the Kluane mountain range in the Yukon, so we headed northwest, passing Mt. Robson in British Columbia along the way, as well as Haines Junction in the Yukon. As we entered into the Kluane Lake region, the geography of the area was absolutely fascinating...mountains to the left with snow capped peaks, a huge lake on our right that would run for over fifty miles, and a basin from where the water drained from the mountains into the lake. This basin area looked completely apocalyptic. It was as if a bomb had gone off in the area, and nothing had ever grown back. As we rounded the end of the lake on a road that was elevated from the dried up basin, we could see a ranger station at the base of a mountain with the Canadian flag proudly flying over top of its roof. The station looked like an ant compared to Sheep Mountain that loomed over top of it. Our campground was a couple miles around the bend where we would set up camp for a few days to take in the area. We rolled in late to Cottonwood RV Park, but the beauty of being that far north in the summer is that it doesn't matter at all in regards to daylight. It was after 11pm, but it looked like broad daylight. Not having darkness come late in the evening was actually exhilarating when we started thinking through all that we wanted to do, and none of it would ever get affected by darkness...hiking, fishing, setting up camp - it just wouldn't matter.

After surviving a night that was so windy I wasn't sure if our pop-up camper wasn't going to get flipped over, we got up to find a trail to hit in the area. Our first stop would be at the ranger station to collect information and see what our options were.

“Hi, we're looking to find a nice day-hike to do today and wondered what our options were,” Jen casually approached the counter with maps across the top of the desk.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. One of the nicest day hikes in our area is directly out the back on Sheep Mountain. We have a challenging trail that goes off the back side of it. You go back out to the main entrance by the gate, hang a left, and that will take you to a parking lot just over 3 kilometers where the trailhead for Sheep Creek Trail is. Take a map with you, but there are signs all along the way. That one should take you six to eight hours to complete from beginning to end. Most of that is pretty gradual, but today is the first day that it’s being reopened. It’s been closed down to heavy bear activity for a while.”

We all looked at each other wide-eyed! We knew that seeing grizzlies or black bears was not going to be an unusual experience in the Yukon and Alaska, but we had not fully processed how quickly we were going to be face to face with potential encounters. We were getting thrown right into the thick of it.

The ranger kept right on talking. “For those who are a little more adventurous, there’s another trail off the face of Sheep Mountain that overlooks Kluane Lake. The views up top are stunning, but it is an expert level trail. The Sheep Creek Trail on the backside is moderate difficulty.” And the ranger kept right on going, giving us other potential options in the area.

As we left the Ranger Station, we were a bit divided on what trail to do, so we decided not to do the same one. Caleb (20), Tara (17), and Karli (16) were itching to tackle the face of Sheep Mountain with the expert level trail, and Jen and I were looking for a more pleasurable and relaxing hike, so we were leaning towards the Sheep Creek Trail. We have done a lot of hiking and have complete confidence in the kids. They have dealt with and handled a lot over the years of being on the trail. With Caleb being a sophomore in college, we were comfortable with him leading their effort over the front of the mountain. The plan was that they would go up and over the mountain, and Jen and I would meet up with them on the back side at the end of our trail.

We hopped in the truck and dropped them off a few miles up the road where their ascent began. Everyone had their day pack with waters and bear spray ready to go. They headed up the mountain; meanwhile, Jen and I drove back to the trailhead of Sheep Creek Trail and hopped into our own adventure. We too loaded our daypacks with snacks, water, and bear spray at the side. Our trail gradually ascended and wove its way through forest and stunning overlooks back into a valley in the St. Elias Mountains. Though not an expert trail like the kids were on, our trail was a challenge, and Jen and I definitely felt the burn. With the previous report of the high bear activity, we were anxious and made sure we were doing lots of talking. Startling a grizzly bear in tight quarters on the trail was not on our list of goals for the day.

After about three hours of hiking had passed, we figured our trail end would be coming up relatively soon, so we started looking up at the ridge overhead for a sighting of the kids. We figured that we would arrive at about the same time to our half-way point. They had a lot more elevation to deal with than we did, but being young and vibrant, we figured their pace would compensate for the difference. We ended up hiking another 45 minutes before we actually got to our outlook, but we kept surveying the ridgeline overhead as we hiked.

Jen and I decided to open up our daypack and have some granola bars and water while we waited. A beautiful valley extended from our right and drained down to the left with a rifling river in the middle of our overlook. Back over our right shoulder, another valley joined into the one we had

already been hiking by. Time passed, and we had no sighting of the kids. Jen and I started to become concerned with not having a visual of them on the ridge, since we could see for miles upon miles. If they were on that ridge, it seemed like we should be able to get a glimpse of them.

Both of us were trying to keep our calm, but the reality was that we were on a trail four hours into hiking with no cell service. We had our two-way radios with us on the trip, but we had left them back at camp.

In an effort to do “something”, I told Jen that she should stay at the lookout point, and I would start to climb a ridge that led up to the area the kids should eventually come to. I wasn’t excited about us splitting up, but I figured that it was time to engage and help put our minds at ease. The trail up to the overlook had been well worn, and the trail did continue up the ridge I proposed climbing, but it was completely overgrown with shrub brush and nothing like what we’d already been hiking on.

Within 100 yards, I started finding areas where grizzlies had ripped up the moss and soil looking for grubs to eat. Each ripped up area was a sphere about the size of a grizzly, itself. I started counting them as I hiked up and stopped after THIRTY spots. It wasn’t too difficult to figure out that I was in a heavy, heavy active grizzly area, and do remember this was the first day the trail had reopened after having had bear problems.

Knowing that noise was a huge deterrent for bear encounters, I whistled and pulled out my harmonica to play as I ascended the ridge. My hair on the back of my neck was on edge as I continued to climb the ridge, not being able to see more than a few feet ahead of me in the thick brush that towered over top of me. If there were grizzlies bedding down, I would be at such a disadvantage being in such tight quarters. And to startle one, well, I just couldn’t let my mind go there...I needed to get to the kids.

About half way up, I hiked out of the brush and could see the surrounding area. I can’t express how relieved I was to be able to see in front of me.... As I looked up to the peak of the ridge I was aspiring for, I could see a rock scramble that lasted about the last quarter of a mile right below the peak. After about forty minutes of hiking, I came to discover that there was no way I could safely ascend anymore. My efforts to climb to the top of that ridge were in vain.

In the meantime, Jen had met another couple who had been hiking on the trail. She explained our predicament and asked the couple to keep their eyes open as well.

From where I was, I could see Jen sitting on the rock overlook waiting down below me. I decided to head back to her, so that she wasn’t alone down there, since she was extremely close to the area where the grizzlies had been ripping up the soil. The last thing Jen needed was an encounter with a grizzly all by herself.

I pulled out my harmonica and played all the way down. I have never been in the military, but in my mind, going back into the brush to get to Jen was like taking the steps that a soldier would take that led him into battle - it has to be done, but it’ll be done with a knot in your stomach and full of uncertainty with what the next few minutes might hold.

I made it through that dreaded cover, full of consternation. Once back to the overlook, and with no sighting of the kids in place, Jen and I decided that it was time to head back. We were grateful

that it wouldn't get dark on the kids if they were stuck up there, but we hoped for something better than that as an option.

We reluctantly headed down the path to go back to the trailhead. The entire time that we hiked, we kept scanning the ridge hoping for any little sign that would indicate they were there. After about fifteen minutes of hiking and literally the last spot where we would be able to see the ridge clearly, Jen looked up and thought she saw a dot of white on the top of the mountain. Our daughter, Karli, has pure white hair, and it has always been her distinguishing trait - so much so that she has earned the nickname, Q-tip! We could be in the middle of the mall needing to find her, and all we would have to do is look for the white hair. We hoped the white dot, in this case, was her and not a mountain sheep. As we continued to look, it appeared there were three dots, and we were elated! I pulled out my air horn and gave it three shots, as we had predetermined that this would be our signal to verify it was us. Unfortunately, they didn't respond with their airhorn like they were supposed to. They were too far away to hear it.

We headed back to the overlook again, and they hiked in the same direction along the ridge - miles away over top of us. The talking between Jen and I picked up the pace, and the tone had turned from concern and anxiety to excitement to meet up with the kids.

Once we got to the overlook, we weren't sure if they were going to find the exact trail down to get to where we were, so I again ascended the grizzly infested trail I had already hiked up. And yes, the harmonica made a reappearance for the grizzlies' listening pleasure. By the time I had started hiking up, we had blown the airhorn again but this time with a response from them.

We were all on the same page....

I hiked up to the rock scramble and was able to point them to where they needed to go. If they hiked in the wrong direction, which they had done at points, they would find themselves at drop-offs where they may not be able to get back up.

I continued to play the harmonica while I waited for them to descend.

The first words uttered were from my white haired wonder, Karli, "Dad, your harmonica playing never sounded so good."

We all had a good laugh and shared in some prolonged hugs. For all of the worry that Jen and I had felt, the kids had also come to realize the seriousness of the situation. It was so good to see all of them safe. All the worrying and trepidation had been relieved.

Ambling through the overgrown trail with all our voices running at a hundred miles per hour alleviated the need for me to play the harmonica through that area. The bears were probably glad.

When we reached the overlook, Jen was waiting for them, anxious to hear their side of the story and what had happened. We hiked our way out, listening to each of them share different aspects of the adventure that they had had - everything from a rock scramble that was so steep there was no way to go back down, to encountering a herd of mountain sheep about thirty yards away, to having to conserve their water because they were about out, to climbing false peak after false peak... As it turned out, there was a whole lot more to the mountain than what appeared to us in the morning looking up.

Caleb had learned to read topographic maps in junior high for Science Olympiad, and low and behold, his ability to read maps led to them following the map up top of the mountain, as they hiked their way to our meeting point.

This mountain experience is certainly one that none of us will ever forget, but I believe that for our kids, it was a landmark event in their lives....

As parents, there comes a time where you have to turn your kids loose and let them test themselves. Caleb, Karli, and Tara had their own adventure. They went off on their own, and they had a mountain to climb, which is exactly what it may seem like turning your kids loose in today's world. There are so many obstacles that can get in your kids' way, and you may want to protect them, but eventually that's not your role anymore.

They have to face the mountain, and they have to climb it, without you or I there to assist.

As a parent, our job is to biblically train our children and help them develop their God-given talents, so that they can go out into the world and make their own impact for Christ. We may have to wait trepidatiously on the other side for a while, but really if we have done the job we're supposed to, we can claim scripture where it says, "The word of God does not return void." If we have raised our kids with God's word at the forefront of our homes, we can take comfort in lessons they have learned over the years. Who knows, maybe some lesson that seems inconsequential at the time - like topographical map reading, for instance- may just come in handy for them later on.

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*"My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place."*

*Jeremiah 50:6 (NIV)*

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