



A group of Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies, led by Josh Watson of Alpine Stables, heads across the above-timberline Carthew ridge on the Carthew-Alderson trail in Waterton Lakes National Park in southern Alberta.

ADVENTURES

# High-Country Riding

A 95-year-old riding club celebrates the beauty and frontier history of the Canadian Rocky Mountains.

Story and photography by **CHRISTINE HAMILTON**

**F**IND YOUR TEPEE, put out your bedroll, beware the 5,000-volt bear fence around the kitchen tent. The group will be back to camp by 6 p.m. barring unforeseen circumstances.

Those instructions might be on a note you'd find if you show up mid-day at a Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies backcountry camp. Every summer since 1924, the non-profit club has held weeklong rides in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. But these are not typical trail rides. The TRCR is

dedicated to bringing people into a Canadian wilderness experience, horseback. They welcome all comers—all ages and all riding levels.

Guided by wilderness outfitters and based in a tepee camp, the group rides out every day on rugged high-country trails through Canada's most scenic and unpopulated wilderness areas, in or near a national park. Some trails go above timberline and require dismounting to lead horses over scree or slick rock. At night, after supper, the riders gather to sing frontier songs, hear

cowboy poetry and stories, square dance or perform skits.

"We ride horses and see the backcountry by day, and have fun at night," says TRCR President Stuart Watkins. "And by the end of the week people have an understanding of [Alberta and TRCR] history and culture. There's a lot of camaraderie."

It's been that way for 95 years. The club actually had its beginnings in an August backcountry trip through British Columbia's Kootenay National Park in 1923 organized by John Murray Gibbon, chief publicist for the Canadian Pacific Railway. An influential advocate for preserving Canadian culture and history, Gibbon invited a group of men and women that included notables such as Reginald Townsend, the editor of *Country Life in America* magazine; Harry Beach Clow, the president of mapmaker Rand McNally & Co.; and Illinois artist Reinhold Heinrich Palenske.

The horseback travelers saw glacier scenery, camped out, fished and

hunkered down through a snowstorm. They enjoyed it so much they set out to create opportunities for the recreational riding public to have similar experiences in Canada's national parks. Gibbon, Townsend, Clow and Palenske founded The Order of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies, and organized the group's first ride and meeting in 1924. The first president was Charles Walcott, then secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and the Canadian Pacific Railway provided sponsorship funding.

"Seeing the beauty of the mountains and enjoying each other's company was part of this from the word 'go,'" Watkins says.

The TRCR both fostered and rode a wave of growing public interest in national park lands in Canada and the United States. Early on, it established traditions that are still kept, such as holding nightly gatherings in the "doughnut" tent (a round canvas tent with a large hole in the roof to vent smoke from the campfire at its center),

**RIGHT:** Stuart Watkins of Lethbridge, Alberta, is a six-time president of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies. He grew up attending the rides with his family, and his father, Howard, also served as the club's president.

**BELOW:** Riders set out across the Waterton River below Vimy Peak in Alberta's Waterton Lakes National Park.

and awarding pins to ride participants. Tepees have always been the lodging of choice and the club has always held an annual Townsend Trophy photography competition for the photographers in the group.

Rides have attracted international visitors of all kinds, including a young King Prajadhipok of Siam and his queen in 1931; they rode far enough to earn an official pin. National media representatives have tagged along, from *National Geographic* and *Time* magazines to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. *Western Horseman* joined a 1968 ride and went along again in 2017.

Among Canadian outfitters, the TRCR was legendary in terms of the



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logistics and numbers packed into the wilderness. For several years, Gibbon arranged for a portable organ to be packed in for nightly entertainment until the third and last met its end over a precipice at the hands of a disgruntled packer.

Through the mid-1940s, the club held just one progressive ride each summer with more than 60 riders, camping in different spots. By the '70s and '80s, the group held as many as eight rides with upward of 30 riders in each, and they rode out of one camping spot, which is the format followed today.

In 1961, the railroad ended its sponsorship and the TRCR reorganized as an incorporated non-profit. Officially a club, it is now run by a volunteer board of directors, and the ride fee includes a club membership for participants.

The fact that members go to a variety of locations "makes us different," Watkins says, as does the fact that "people seem to get hooked" on the experience. In addition to newcomers, the decades have seen many repeat riders and multiple generations of extended families year after year. In 2017, three sisters and granddaughters of founder John Murray Gibbon joined the ride.

Challenges through the years have included burned-out board members and raising funds to replace equipment, along with increasingly restricted access to the parks. But the TRCR has continued to thrive. There were 85 participants on five trips at Waterton Lakes National Park in 2017. In 2018, it will offer five trips into the Castle Wildland in Alberta, a spot the group hasn't been in 10 years. The outfitter will be Dee Barrus of Blue Ridge Outfitting & Packing Ltd.

"It's the best of two worlds," says June Jansen of St. Cloud, Florida.

Horse owners, she and her husband, Scott, have been on two TRCR rides.

"You enjoy the horses and you have the hiking and the incredible scenery," she says. "As a horse person, I've totally enjoyed this. You spend a week with these people and you become family."

For more information on future rides, go to [trailridevacations.com](http://trailridevacations.com). 