



Glacier Centennial

AS ANCIENT AS MOTHER EARTH BUT NOT A DAY OVER 100 — ONE OF OUR FAVORITE NATIONAL PARKS CELEBRATES AN IMPORTANT BIRTHDAY.

By James Dannenberg

MY FAVORITE NATIONAL PARK CELEBRATES ITS 100TH BIRTHDAY IN 2010. NOT one to refuse free cake, I attended Glacier National Park's centennial kickoff party August 23 in East Glacier, Montana. Some 600 others took advantage of the perfect summer day to eat cake, listen to music and remarks by park personnel, and picnic on the Glacier Park Lodge and Lake McDonald Lodge lawns.

A great excuse to make yet another visit to Glacier. Not that I don't have other favorite national parks—Grand Teton, Yellowstone, and Yosemite, for example—but there's something special, something wild and remote, about Glacier. It was also an opportunity to reflect a bit on the park's past and its possible future.





IN 1910 GLACIER WASN'T CONCEIVED as a driving park; nor is it today, but one drive will knock your socks off. The 50-mile Going-to-the-Sun Road bisects the park and was an engineering marvel when hacked out of the mountains in 1932. It still is. From the west, at Apgar, it traces the wooded shore of Lake McDonald, then climbs quickly from 3,000 to over 6,600 feet at Logan Pass, a little more than halfway through the park. Hugging the sheer mountain faces and occasionally not completely cleared of snow until July, this grand road switchbacks up and down the heights, sometimes without any obvious means of support.

If lucky, you might see moose along the shore of Lake McDonald. It's likely that you will see mountain goats near Logan Pass, either on the road or clinging to the cliffs. And farther east, the road provides a stunning view of the Jackson Glacier, one of the park's 25 remaining namesake features.

Glacier deserves as much time as you can spare. Less-visited than some other parks, it gives away nothing in beauty and scope. The interior may be relatively inaccessible to cars, but exploration is worth the extra effort. Encompassing nearly 1,600 square miles of craggy glaciated peaks, interspersed with isolated lakes and valleys, and networked with more than 700 miles of trails, it's a hiker's dream.

There are several ways to enjoy Glacier: on foot, by car, and in the saddle. It has fine campsites with good facilities. The park hotels are excellent. And then there are the backcountry chalets, pretty much unique to the park. Though an avid hiker, I'll admit I haven't slept on the ground in a quarter-century, so it's either a hotel or a chalet for me.

Glacier has several hotels and lodges. For my money, though, the Many Glacier Hotel in the park's remote northeast truly captures Glacier's essence. She is a majestic but rumped old resort, isolated from the rest of the park, and, as the hub of many hiking trails, probably the best place to explore Glacier's natural wonders while maintaining some sense of creature comfort. The setting on the edge of Swiftcurrent Lake is unsurpassed, with broad views of mountains, forests, and glaciers all around. Built in the winter of 1914–15 by Norwegian carpenters, Many Glacier boasts a four-story-high lobby, a skylighted roof supported by giant timbers, and two huge fireplaces.

She also has rickety plumbing, functional furnishings, and mediocre food, but I wouldn't have it any other way. She's been my base for some of the most meaningful nature experiences in my life. How could I not be devoted?

PHOTOGRAPHY: LARRY PIERCE

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK ME WHY I travel. For the most part, I can't give them great answers—at least nothing beyond near-clichés about expanding horizons and testing new waters. But sometimes I find myself mesmerized—transfixed—within a moment when life seems to come to a full stop. I've had more than one such moment sitting on Many Glacier's balcony, watching the rising sun paint Grinnell Point with a palette of bronzes and golds. Just don't ask me—to use a phrase coined by my friend Tim Cahill—to commit philosophy by trying to explain further.

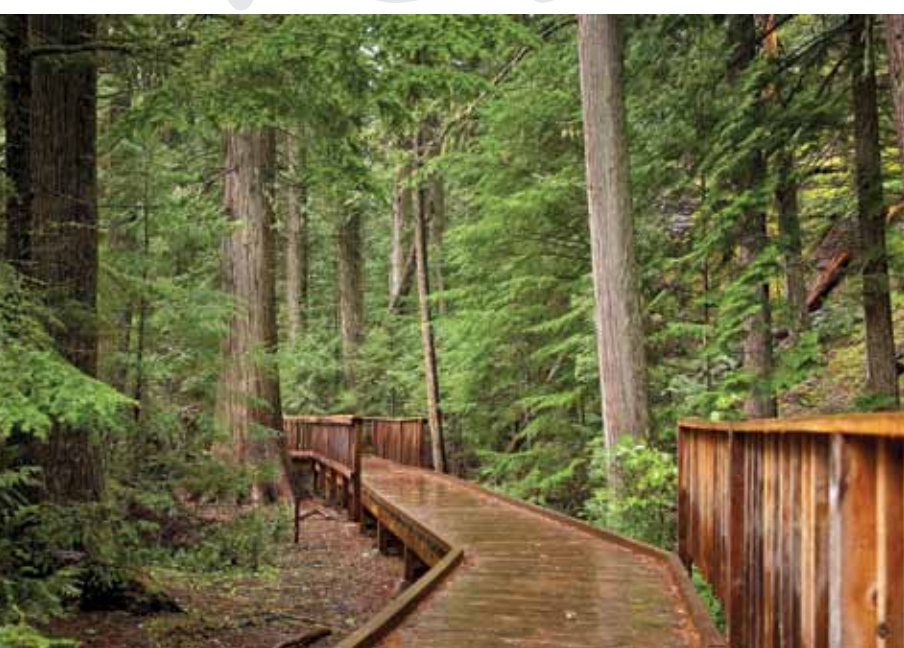
And then there are the bears, both grizzlies and blacks, more accessible at Many Glacier than almost anywhere else in the lower 48. I can recall one afternoon on Many Glacier's deck when I was able to count 10 bears on the side of nearby Mount Altn.

When Glacier was designated our 10th national park by President Taft on May 11, 1910, the only practical access was by rail; travel within the park was by boat and horse. The park's main developer, Louis W. Hill of the Great Northern Railway, built a series of nine backcountry chalets between which tourists traveled on horseback. As auto access increased, larger hotels gradually supplanted the chalets, but two of the chalets, Sperry and Granite Park, remain—and you can still get to them on horseback or foot.

Sperry and Granite Park are quite different: Sperry provides meals while Granite Park offers only kitchen facilities. What they have in common are remote locations accessible only to hikers. My favorite route to Sperry is via the 14-mile Gunsight Pass Trail, accessible near the Jackson Glacier Overlook, with a six-mile downhill return to the Lake McDonald Lodge. Granite Park is on the spectacular seven-mile Highline Trail, beginning at Logan Pass, with a seven-mile return over Swiftcurrent Pass to Many Glacier. Challenging hikes, but they provide access to the best that the park has to offer: expansive mountain and valley views, glaciers, and wildlife. And clean sheets await you at the end.

PHOTOGRAPHY: LARRY PIERCE





THE CHANGES TO GLACIER DURING its first century were mostly to means of access—the building of roads and hotels—but as with most centenarians, she’s showing other signs of change, too.

Sometimes less is more. Glacier’s distinctive mountains are more the result of erosion and glacial scouring than, say, the dramatic uplifting of the Teton Range. The jagged peaks and knife-edged walls that characterize Glacier’s skyline are what’s left after nature—ice, water, and wind—has done her work on the rock. Of course, this sort of change continues, even if it is too gradual for our short attention spans, but sometimes it intrudes in the form of a rockslide on the higher trails; those giant boulders weren’t born there.

Sometimes less is less. Park authorities say there are currently 25 glaciers in the park; it should be remembered that as recently as the mid-19th century, there were 150. The disappearance and shrinkage of the glaciers have been documented for a long time, but concern has escalated in recent years as global temperatures have risen. When I asked ranger-naturalist Kass Hardy how long the remaining glaciers would last, she surprised me: “They might be gone by 2020,” a full decade sooner than the dire predictions I had recently heard, in fact, she fears that two may have been lost this summer alone. As the grizzly on the California state flag disappeared from its own state long ago, it isn’t much of a stretch to imagine a visit to Glacier National Park devoid of glaciers in 10 years.

The disappearance of the glaciers won’t just be an aesthetic loss. “When the glaciers are gone,” Hardy reminded me, “so will many of those species of plants and animals relying on glacial melt water.” With more than 1,400 different species of plants (28 found only in the park and surrounding national forest) and hundreds of species of animals, what would a loss like that do to a place revered as “The Crown of the Continent Ecosystem”?

It’s easy to see how rising temperatures cause ice—even ancient ice—to melt, but warming and accompanying drought also have another disastrous effect on the park. Even casual observation reveals massive forest damage. The most obvious is from recent fires: 50,000 acres along Lake McDonald went up in flames in 2003, and fires in 2001 and 2006 along the eastern boundary burned thousands more. But beyond increased fire danger is the greater threat to the trees from less-dramatic sources, including mountain pine beetles, root rot, blister rust, and spruce budworm, all empowered by warming weather and diminishing winter freezes. The growing percentages of dead and dying trees are obvious throughout the Rockies even

PHOTOGRAPHY: LARRY PIERCE

if Glacier’s losses seem fewer than in more southerly parks. Even the untrained eye can see how stressed its forests are.

Nevertheless, Hardy, who is coordinating the park’s centennial, was optimistic about Glacier’s next century. She pointed out that Congress has appropriated significant funds for the park, including \$15 million for renovation of Many Glacier Hotel and \$27 million for the Going-to-the-Sun Road. So while the visiting public participates next summer in an extensive series of centennial programs ranging from art exhibits, concerts, and film festivals to the 100th anniversary rededication of the park at West Glacier on May 11, the National Park Service (NPS), along with private supporters, will also be working behind the scenes to increase the number of handicapped-accessible hiking trails, upgrade educational opportunities, and preserve existing facilities. The broader issue of climate change and its impact on Glacier will also be addressed at several conferences and programs, even though the NPS can do little more than monitor the effects.

Hardy told me that park attendance was up 11 percent this summer. Glacier has never seemed crowded to me—nothing remotely like the swarms in Yosemite Valley. More visitors diminish the park’s appeal. And how different might those visits be if the park is without glaciers and trees?

Wallace Stegner famously called the national parks “the best idea we ever had”—a line now famously borrowed by Ken Burns for his documentary series on our national parks—while advocating aggressive stewardship. After 100 years the urgency and burden of our stewardship over these emblems of our great national heritage seem all the more compelling.

Later that day, I experienced a Glacier Park moment that nonetheless left me feeling optimistic. Just a half-mile from the crowds of the Swiftcurrent Campground parking lot sits tiny Fishercap Lake, an easily accessible spot for predictable grizzly, moose, and deer sightings. That afternoon I watched a huge bull moose with velvet-encrusted antlers feed in front of a score of gawkers. And the next day I was privy to the playful antics of a cow moose and her calf.

PHOTOGRAPHY: LARRY PIERCE



Wildlife, Wildflowers, Whitefish

Glacier National Park is much more than glaciers and expansive mountain views. It's also home to an astonishing array of flora and fauna. Asters and beargrass, Heather and glacier lilies, Indian paintbrush and lupine. Bighorn sheep and mountain goats, elk and moose, black bears and grizzlies, whitetails and mule deer, beavers and otters, ospreys and eagles. It's more than the eye can take in, which is where the camera and paintbrush come in.



THE ART OF GLACIER

Glacier National Park has long inspired artists—what better occasion to showcase some of their work than the park's centennial. The Glacier Centennial Art Exhibit, a diverse collection of 14 artworks that capture the beauty and essence of the park, will be exhibited throughout the state of Montana until May 2010, when the pieces will be auctioned off

(proceeds from the auction benefit the park—visit www.cowboysindians.com for details).

Works range from the jewelry of Lucia Holt to the vibrant dye-on-silk of Nancy Cawdrey to the serene images of transplanted Czech photographer Bret Bouda. Bouda's work is also on view at Glacier Park International Airport in Kalispell, where 100 large-scale images—black-and-white, collages, and panoramic color views of the park—will hang through 2010. The artist will donate 50 percent of the price of the limited-edition pieces to the Glacier National Park Fund, the park's official fundraising arm.



GATEWAY TO GLACIER

Glacier is one of several national parks blessed with gateway towns that offer a mix of Welcome Wagon, a trip down Memory Lane, and an introductory tableau to the breathtaking environs in the distance. Whitefish, a quaint town of 7,000 full of Western hospitality, offers an invitation to the great wilderness beyond, but be sure to stay in town awhile.

Whitefish has been tucked up against Big Mountain for more than a century—the town celebrated its 100th birthday in 2005, five years in advance of the national park that is part of its lifeblood. The hardware store on its Central Avenue (aka Main Street) has not changed hands in three generations. Other icons remain as well. The old Great Northern Railroad freight line, now called Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, still runs along the edge of town, its tracks carrying more than 60,000 people annually into Whitefish aboard Amtrak's Empire Builder and depositing them at the historic train depot.

Yet, the town is rapidly turning into a nouveau hot spot. Whitefish has a dozen bars and about 40 restaurants, ranging from the Wasabi Sushi Bar to the Cajun-inspired Tupelo Grille to plenty of places serving up Western fare. Looming above Central Avenue, the picturesque Whitefish Mountain Resort (formerly Big Mountain Resort) offers world-class skiing on over 3,000 acres of terrain, including a number of black-diamond runs. Even with growth and tourism, Whitefish retains its authenticity.

Lisa Jones of the Whitefish Visitors Bureau says the town definitely is not the "Disney" version of the outdoors: "Whitefish is a real town where the locals work hard, play hard, and welcome visitors with the same life philosophies—those that have a deep appreciation for the great outdoors and real places."

Whitefish is 11 miles from Glacier Park International Airport, a jet-served airport that offers plenty of flights to choose from. For more information on Whitefish, visit www.whitefishvisit.com.



MORE ON GLACIER NATIONAL PARK

Visit www.cowboysindians.com for our online coverage of Glacier National Park:

- Get the C&I Trail Guide—what you need to know if you go, from hotels to hikes to horseback riding.
- See art from the Official Centennial Art of Glacier National Park exhibit.
- Read photographer Bret Bouda's amazing story.
- View Glacier slideshows—more from Bret Bouda, and images from author James Dannenberg's most recent trip.
- Learn about the land before it became our 10th national park.



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