

## Hike the Golden Bear!

Our trip began last summer with what was supposed to be my last venture into the Wilderness. Because it was to be my last, I saved extra money so my wife Janet could join me. Looking back now, I see clearly the flaw in my plan, as her love for the wilderness seemed to double mine. We went with Greg and Blake Williams of Charlie Lake, British Columbia. I had been with them in their previous area in Central BC, and his new area in the Northwest section promised to be even bigger and better. Also new was his partner, Gerry Raker of MI, who is also a strong supporter of our youth group.

We spent 2 weeks observing wildlife, flying in their 185, exploring rivers in their 20 foot jet boat, eating and relaxing by a fire. The wilderness worked its magic and well before the end of the trip, we had 2 more trips planned, one more for just me in the fall and one with me and Janet and some of our youth group, 1.2.3.Go... in the summer. It had been a dream of ours to share the wilderness with teens for years, and after those 2 weeks, we knew we had found the place where dreams come true. The Golden Bear.

Bringing a group of teens into the wilderness presents certain logistical problems. We discussed the jet boat, as the scenery was spectacular and ever changing, but our group was too large. The boat would be perfect for three or four people. Then Greg said: "I could fly your group to the mine and you could walk out the mine road". There was a slight twinkle in his eye. "How far is it?" I asked. "About 80 miles" Greg's twinkle was now a grin....

"We'll do it" was my reply. Janet looked at me with one of those, 'now what are you getting us into' looks.

What we got into was the trip of our lives.

I would not hike 80 miles on trails in the wilderness, as I would have to spend too much time picking my way to stay on the trail. A moose trail can be followed and end nowhere, plus with the teens, I felt safer with the open space of an old road in front of me. This space also gives you time to enjoy the scenery, as you don't have to watch where you put your feet all the time. The Golden Bear mine was abandoned about 5 years ago and the road is still there and useable for hiking.

We had a few meetings with the parents and teens of 1.2.3.Go... to set out our dream. Someone asked, "who can go on this trip"? My answer was straight forward "those that want to". After a fundraiser and as many training hikes as we could jam in, the number of teens was 4 with Janet and I and one staff, along with our trusty scout and guard dog. For our group, it made sense to drive in our motor home. For many flying would be better. There are major carriers that fly into Juneau, AK, and from there Ward Air can complete the trip into BC and the Golden Bear Area. I have been there both ways and both flying and driving are beautiful.

Our route was to go up the Alaska Highway (Highway 97) to the Yukon and then down Highway 37 to Dease Lake and on into Telegraph Creek. On the return trip we planned to continue down Highway 37, which for us was 300 miles shorter and we were seeing a different area of both BC and Alberta.

It took us 4 1/2 days to drive up as we had 3 stops planned at supporters houses in both the US and in Canada. It took 4 days to get back to Arizona. We spotted and photographed bear, moose, both Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep and Stones' sheep, caribou, bison and elk right from the motor home.

We planned 5 days for the hike with an extra day to fly in. When the fly in day turned rainy and windy, we had to go the next day. In my travels in the North, I have learned not to even think about arguing about flying in weather with the pilot. If he says we should not fly, then we don't fly. Because we were flying in the general direction that the mine road followed, we decided to land and start hiking where we had planned to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> day. This gave us a buffer.

We left our motor home at the airstrip just outside of Telegraph Creek on the Stikine River. This is the home of the Tahltan First Nations tribe, and was the last known tribe to be inundated by the Europeans of the Hudson Bay Company in the 1860's. In the 1920's it was also the starting off point of the telegraph line that went to Atlin, BC around 250 km away. Greg carefully showed both Janet and I where it crossed the Golden Bear Road so we could take it on the 20 mile hike back into Telegraph Creek. He also showed us a forest fire that was burning in the area.

The teens and our dog had never flown before in a small plane, but did fine as Greg is an excellent bush pilot. It took 3 trips to get us in, landing on a wide spot on the road. We took pictures and Greg was off. The rest of the day was mostly downhill to the Shesley River, then up to where the road finally flattened out near a lake. Greg had left ½ our food there to help lighten our load. It was 11:00 pm and still light enough to set up our tents. We had flown in and then walked about 17 miles. I knew the next day would have to be easier.

We walked down a side road to a cabin by a lake and fished and relaxed. This was the hottest day, with the group finding shade to take our breaks in. The next two evenings it rained right after we set up our tents. It was fascinating to hike on the Golden Bear Road for every few minutes the view would change, lakes, creeks, snowcapped mountains, always different, always new.

The mine and the area is named for the Golden Grizzlies that are found there. The larger ones seem to darken with age and size, and have the characteristic silvertip. There are black bear also, but the bulk of the sign and tracks were Grizzly. We had planned to hang up our food but Greg said the Blacks can climb trees so we did not take the time, but did move it away from the tent area. We had three things going for us in the bear prevention department, the first being noisy teens and second, our ever watchful dog. (She ran off 2 unidentified animals and definately earned her keep.) The third thing was a 45/70 lever action rifle. It brought my pack to about 50 lbs, but it was worth it. Pistols are seriously frowned upon in Canada, but the rifle paperwork was easy.

Some may not be in favor a carrying a weapon, but the other option is to roll up in a ball.....to each his own.

With the first two items, we did not need the third, as we saw no bears. If a group went earlier in the summer, they might not have the same results.

To hike 75 miles in 5 days we needed to average 15 miles a day. For some this would be no problem, for others they would have to have more time built in. If it had not stormed the first day, we would have flown in the full 90 miles and needed another day to hike for sure. Our packs ranged from 36 to 50 lbs fully loaded.

There was enough water along the way, but we carried it just in case. We carried 2 filters but boiled our cooking water and was careful about where we filled our drinking water bottles, not drinking anywhere near beavers. No one got sick. I prefer bottles to bladders as 2 of the bladders failed on the trip. All the major rivers are bridged, and most of the smaller ones. There are only about 2 small creeks to cross, but the above the ankle Danner and Meindl boots worked fine, giving support with only minimal blisters.

Once we started, the only person we saw was the Constable a few miles from Telegraph Creek. We had the whole area to ourselves. The peace and solitude was powerful. The weather, after the first day, worked out well. Bring a top quality raincoat and pants, just in case. A satellite phone is another must have item.

The teens accomplished something that will give them confidence individually and they learned to work as a team. We don't know for sure, but we may have been the first group to make this hike. It was a trip of our lives, one that won't ever be forgotten.

Give Greg or Gerry a call. They have many options for summer trips, the weather is moderate and beauty almost beyond words.