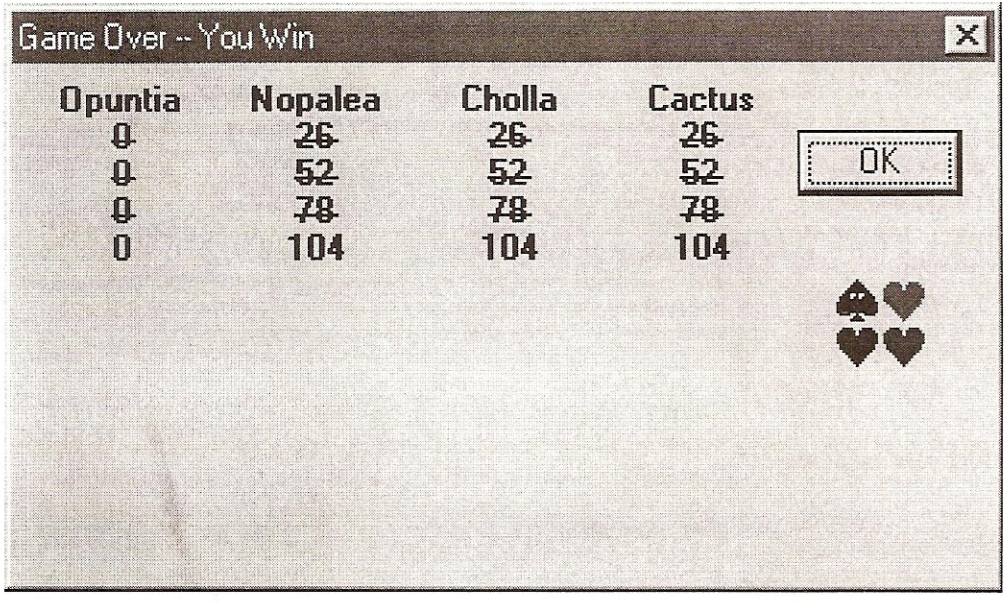
OPUNTIA 46.5B



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Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

ART CREDIT: Proof of my expertise in wasting time. Incidently, I use the reverse strategy in playing Hearts, which is to deliberately throw away low-value cards and try to collect all the point cards. This finally enabled me to get a perfect score in the game, winning four trumps in a row. Thus progresses the computer age; not one SF writer predicted the major use of computers would be to play games, rather than calculate starship orbits or run the One World Government.

MOUNTAIN TIME BY DAYLIGHT 2000-08-14

Monday today, the start of my weekend, since I work Friday to Sunday. Away to the extreme southwest corner of Alberta, into the Crowsnest Pass, a distance of 250 kilometres in about 2.5 hours. It's been 25 years since I was last out that way. The forests of British Columbia and Montana are burning in this hot, dry summer. The mountains normally stand out crisp and clear on the horizon, but now they are blurred by blue smoke. As I passed through the Peigan tribal Reserve just before Crowsnest Pass, I could smell the smoke.

And The Wind Never Stops, But It Always Complains

Southern Alberta has continual strong winds across the prairies which come out of the Crowsnest Pass. Maritime weather systems from the Pacific cross the Rockies, then slide down the slopes of the Front Range onto the steppes. Traffic going into the Pass is constantly buffeted by headwinds, while eastbound traffic can cruise at 100 klicks in third gear on about ten drops of fuel.

Just west of Pincher Creek, between the Peigan Reserve and the entrance into the Crowsnest Pass, are fields of wind turbines, none of which were there when I last drove the highway more than two

decades ago. The first set I passed were vertical-axis eggbeaters, but none were turning. This struck me as odd, as while I can believe that one or two might be down at any given moment for maintenance or repairs, why would all of them not be earning money for the power companies?

The next field of wind generators I encountered were the horizontal-axis three-blade propellers. They were all standing immobile as well. The wind was not immobile though. My low-slung Honda Civic rocked in the headwinds, and every time a logging truck passed in the opposite direction, its blast wave just about stopped the car dead in its tracks.

Clearly visible 40 km ahead of me despite the forest fire smoke was the scar of the Frank Slide on Turtle Mountain, the same now as it was 25 years ago, and indeed since 1903 when the north side of the mountain fell into the valley and buried 70 people in the village of Frank.

Prelude To The Pass

As the Crowsnest River comes out of the mountain pass, it drops over a low cliff in the glacial valley. The Lundbreck Falls can be visualized as a miniature version of the Niagara Falls, right down to the American and Canadian Falls and Goat Island in the middle. The Lundbreck Falls are only about 7 metres high. I made a pit stop at an outhouse there, then washed my hands in the clear river water a couple of metres from the lip of the falls. In the backwater pool where I did my ablutions, minnows swarmed, water striders scurried, and some kind of centimetre-long crustacean strode the river bottom. I wish I had that much activity going on in my aquariums back home.

April 29, 1903

97 years ago, at 04h10, the north face of Turtle Mountain broke loose. 80 million tonnes of limestone fell into the Crowsnest valley at 120 km/hr, and 90 seconds later the coal-mining village of Frank became a permanent mass grave. The boulders range from breadbox size to house size, but most are about the size of a Honda Civic.

Last time I was by, there were only a few interpretive signs on the roadside. Since then, a new museum has been built on the opposite mountain, and from its balcony I had a good view of the Frank Slide. It gives a better perspective of how the landslide, the largest in Canadian history, traveled across the valley floor. I also had to keep changing my perspectives. Gazing down at the slide, it looked as if the boulders were breadbox size. Then I would see a couple of tiny tourists along a boulder, and the human scale suddenly resolved the breadbox into a bungalow size boulder.

You Can't Go Home Again

One thing I was looking for but which had vanished was the Wigwam Motel, where I had stayed in those years before whenever I was out that way. Guy Lillian of New Orleans had a hoax bid going for a Wigwam Motel as a Worldcon site south of the border, and I hoped to send him a photo or postcard of the Crowsnest one. Alas, I had to settle for its replacement for my overnight stop, a generic two-story L-shaped box, the style found in every town. It did have the advantage of being on the south bank of the Crowsnest River, which made for a pleasant after-supper stroll.

Just before the British Columbia border is Crowsnest Lake. The old Highway 3 on its north shore had been abandoned for about a decade when I had been fossicking there in the 1970s. (The new highway runs along the south shore.) Back then the old highway was still in good condition with only a few weeds growing up through cracks. Now a cul-de-sac, it was and still is popular with fishermen. For me, the attraction had been beds of Devonian-age corals in the limestone outcrops by the roadside. As I drove it today, the road was now about half loose gravel but still with large slabs of asphalt. I revisited the fossil site but only found a few coral fragments. The location became well known to fossil collectors after I had been there and is now evidently mined out. The wildflowers, particularly verbenas, were still plentiful as ever.

PARC NATIONAL DES
LACS WATERTON LAKES
NATIONAL PARK

15.08.2000

Valid/Valide - 16h:
16.08.2000

DAY:AD IND/JR:1 ADULTE	4.00
Total	4.00
GST/TPS INCL	0.26
Cash/Comptant	4.00
9:43 Clerk 1	6
PARK GATE-DOGHOUSE	

GST#/No de TPS:R101530723

On To Waterton 2000-08-15

And so from Crowsnest the next morning, delayed only a few minutes by having to scrape the frost off the windshield. At Pincher Creek, I turned south on Highway 6 to Waterton Lakes National Park on the American border. The highway parallels the Front Ranges of the Rocky Mountains. Usually they would stand out crisp and clear, being only 20 or 30 km away, but they were almost invisible in the blue haze of forest fire smoke. The air was thicker than a Royal Canadian Legion hall regimental reunion.

On entering Waterton Park, I turned up a narrow two-lane highway to Red Rock Canyon. I've driven on lots of winding narrow highways in rural Alberta where the Ministry of Highways didn't want to spend a penny more than necessary on shoulders or wide lanes, but this road has them all beat. It was basically a one and three-quarters lane highway. Two compact cars passing in opposing directions had to slow down and carefully inch by. If there was an oncoming camper or motorhome, one of us had to pull over into a turnout. The highway was 15 km long and was a continuous no-passing zone, with a solid line down the middle of the asphalt the full length. I had enough trouble in my trusty Civic but it was white-knuckle time for motorhome drivers.

Not really a problem though, as the scenery meant we were all driving slow anyway to admire the view when not distracted by some Bert-and-Martha-from-Saskatchewan motorhome oncoming. The highway went up from the prairies over the glacial moraines and into the mountain valley.

My first stop was at Coppermine Creek, which turned out to be an almost dry alpine meltwater run trickling through a boulder-strewn gully. I've seen more water flowing from leaky sprinklers in the parks I look after in Calgary.

But finally into the parking lot at the base of Red Rock Canyon. Its stream was hardly flowing anymore faster than Coppermine Creek, but the difference was that it was through thick layers of billion-year old hematite. This may not be a big deal in most places of the world, but red bedrock is extremely rare in Alberta. Most of the province has blue/grey limestone/dolomite, yellow/brown sandstone, or blue/black shale as bedrock. Huge layers of red rock are an unusual sight in this province, and makes it a tourist attraction for us. It doesn't take much to amuse an Albertan. Alberta is mostly a sedimentary geosyncline, that is, a huge valley that filled up with sediments until flat. Fortunately the sediments then filled up with oil.

The canyon is only about 5 metres deep at its outlet into Blakiston Creek by the parking lot. The red bedrock is streaked with layers of white mudstone, making it a colouful photo opportunity.

Tourists were clambering along the bed of the creek to take photos, while squirrels clambered along the pathway guardrails to take food from tourists. Halfway up the mountain the footpath looped back along the opposite canyon wall. Here the canyon was 50 metres deep. Those of us leaning over the footbridge tried not to get vertigo. The pathway was busy with people but we all moved along steadily, encouraged by the blackflies that settled on our faces the moment we stopped moving.

Blakiston Never Went Near The Place

At the base of Red Rock Canyon I turned up the Blakiston Creek trail. The sign announced the Blakiston Falls were 1.5 km upstream at the base of Blakiston Mountain. The waterfalls were a series of long chutes and high rapids flowing over ledges of bedrock tilted upstream into the water.

There was a set of lookouts hanging over the canyon walls, each with its clump of tourists gazing down 30 metres at the foaming water. Having spent a half hour hiking along the canyon path to the falls, we admired the scenery from each viewpoint for at least two minutes, determined to get our money's worth before moving on to the next site. That way, we didn't feel guilty at the expenditure of time and fuel on the drive out. Much longer than two minutes per site brought on boredom. There is not an awful lot one can do looking at one bit of foaming water, save try to memorize it or take photos.

I watched a squirrel watching me. It grew tired of watching me and went off to nibble on some seedpods. The wildflowers have finished blooming here and are busy drying off next year's seed crop which the squirrels are busy eating off.

No Prizes For Guessing How This Place Got Its Name

On the way back, I stopped off at a turnout at Lost Horse Creek, which cut through a small cliff of red rock. I walked a short distance up the creek bed, there being no foot trail. There was a good flow of water here, but it was shallow and easy to step across. I trod on slabs of billion-year-old fossilized ripples, laid down when life was just a unicellular rumour on the other side of the planet.

I walked over to the opposite side of the creek to make a closer inspection of the red rocks when I was distracted by a 13-lined squirrel scurrying along the boulder wash of the creek. I stopped to contemplate it. It stopped to contemplate me. It blinked first, and scampered off upstream. I'm beginning to think I can outstare any squirrel in the country.

Actually this was a technique I learned a long time ago for wildlife watching. Most animals run and hide when they see you coming. Pick a suitable site, then freeze. Don't twitch a muscle, don't move your head, just stand or sit immobile. Wild animals are curious if they perceive no immediate threat. After the initial alarm, they will poke their heads out to get a closer look at you. Initially walking up Lost Horse Creek, I saw only the one squirrel fleeing. Sitting on a boulder, after a few minutes I saw about one squirrel every five paces.

Waterton Lakes

Leaving the Red Rock/Blakiston road, I drove into the main townsite of Waterton Lakes village. I bought some food from the general store and walked over to the marina to eat it. I munched a chicken fajita while admiring the view. On the cliffs of the south shore across the water was the Prince of Wales Hotel, built a century ago by the Canadian Pacific Railway as a tourist draw in the usual baronial edifice style of that era. Named after a different Prince of Wales, of course. On the western shore and eastern shores, jagged mountains towered.

Close to me in the marina was an excursion boat "Miss Waterton", strangely enough registered at Vancouver, British Columbia. The two decks were packed, enough to make the national headlines if she overturned in the middle of the lake. The tour guide's initial briefing boomed out over the marina, near enough to me to be loud, but far enough away that I couldn't make out his words, what with all the echoing from the mountains. Two toots of her horn, and the ship backed out of the pier, puttering around the marker buoys of a sandbar, and out into the lake. The guide's spiel echoed across the water: "*On your right* ... ". I twisted around to see what was on the right but could only see a village motel. He must have been talking about the mountain again.

At the park bench next to me, a teenaged boy, evidently with too much energy and nothing to apply it to, was chasing a seagull up and down the length of the harbour breakwater. A few minutes later, another tour ship, the M.V. International, backed out of its berth, and headed south to Montana. The lakes run north-south across the 49th parallel. If you want to win a novelty bet with your friends, ask them a true-or-false question: Is there steamship navigation between land-locked Alberta and Montana?

Smoke On The Water

From Waterton Lakes village, I drove up another narrow two-lane highway to Lac Cameron, just inside the Alberta/British Columbia border. The alpine wildflowers were still in full bloom as the road climbed up to the lake, even though those same species were in seed down at the Waterton lakes. The road

runs along jagged

cliffs, with waterfalls and rapids foaming far below. There are a few turnouts for admiring the scenery, but mostly one has to watch the road closely, as the shoulders are only about 1 cm wide before dropping straight down 100 metres. Like the Red Rock highway, it was essentially a 15 km no-passing zone.

I sat on the shoreline and contemplated the glaciers at the far end of the lake. The smoke was much thicker since the British Columbia border is just on the other side of the mountain and the fires only a few tens of kilometres away. About once an hour I saw a helicopter thudding overhead with a water bucket dangling beneath it.

How Fast Can You Run?

For some reason, a morbid thought occurred to me. What if one of the hanging glaciers on the far mountain fell into the lake? I would be in direct line for the resulting tsunami. Let's see, I calculated. Volume of ice about 200 metres wide by what? 20 metres deep by 100 metres high, multiplied by density to give the mass. X million tons of ice falling at y metres per second from a height of 1 km would take z seconds to splash into the water. There would be mumble-mumble megajoules of energy released to form a wave 10 to 20 metres high, which would then propagate across the 3-km long lake at so many km/hr. Would I have time to sprint 200 metres up the parking lot to my car, beat the panicked traffic out, and get back

up the mountain pass before the tsunami hits the near shore? Yes, but I would probably suffer a cardiac arrest from setting an Olympic record for the 200 metre sprint up a hill.

A Doe, A Deer, A Female Deer

Walking back along the shoreline, I saw a female mule deer foraging. Tourists were clicking away with every camera available as she high-stepped between them, alternately munching on vegetation and picnic table goodies. She walked to the water's edge to drink, nudging aside a startled couple who had been admiring the view and hadn't noticed her behind them. The doe was a big hit with a group of Mennonite young mums and their children, who followed at a safe distance. I also followed and watched as she busily and insistently poked her nose into every picnic larder basket on the way. She was particularly enamoured of one couple's bag of carrots. They had to pack up and abandon the table because she wouldn't take no for an answer.

The outlet of Lac Cameron drains a short distance into Lac Akamina. The doe followed the trail, and picnic tables, down the outflow. Where the picnic tables ended, so did she, veering off into the rainforest and soon out of sight. I continued down the trail and to the lower lake. It was a basic muskeg lake, surrounded

by semi-aquatic grasses and reeds. I walked as far as its outlet, the one that would go roaring down the mountain pass into the Waterton lakes.

And So To Home

On the three-hour, 300-km return trip to Calgary, I took a shortcut through the back roads across the treeless prairie. As is always the case, I ran into the inevitable re-paving crews, this time on Highway 810 in the middle of nowhere. You can run but you can't hide from roadworks.

MORE MOUNTAINS YET 2000-08-21

A week after Crowsnest/Waterton, another weekend starts this Monday. The beautiful sunny weather is still ongoing, so I decide to be going on. My choice this weekend was to visit Kootenay and Yoho National Parks, in British Columbia on the far side of Banff National Park. Far enough, also, north of the forest fires, so no smoky valleys.

I left the house 07h00 to the whooshing sound of propane burners. Directly across the street from my house is a remnant of natural prairie, a favoured launch point for hot-air balloonists. They pass 10 or 15 metres directly above my roof as they run the burners full blast to gain altitude.

PARC NATIONAL
BANFF
NATIONAL PARK

21.08.2000

Valid/Valide - 16h:
22.08.2000

DAY:AD IND/JR:1 ADULTE	5.00
Total	5.00
GST/TPS	0.33
Cash/Comptant	5.00
8:26 I.P.	28

GATE/BARRIERE-BANFF

GST#/No de TPS:R121491807

I love being the Parks Dept. Weekend Trouble Calls Foreman, not the least of which is because of moments like this morning, zipping out to the mountains with the sun behind me, while incoming commuters stop-and-go in long lineups facing into the rising sun.

Normally I take the scenic route along the old Trans-Canada Highway to the mountains, but because of the distance of Kootenay and Yoho, time is more critical, so I drove the 'new' highway, which is already several decades old. It cuts straight across the prairie steppes to the mountains instead of meandering along the Bow River valley. The highway is an easy 140 km/hr cruise in a straight line, then 120 klicks through the tribal Reserves, then 100 klicks as it drops down into the valley where the Bow River exits the Rockies. Pausing to ante up $5 at the Banff National Park gates for a vehicle pass (good for all national parks), I bypassed the townsite and go up the valley to Highway 93 into British Columbia.

Silent On A Peak, or, Stout Cortes Never Slept Here

Highway 93 takes the Vermilion Pass through the Rockies. It is a long climb up the pass to the continental divide, which at this point is roughly 1.5 km above sea level. I stopped at the divide and stood with one foot in the Pacific drainage and the other foot in the Arctic/Atlantic drainage. Since the continental divide is also the border between Alberta and British Columbia, I also had one foot in each province. Thirdly, it is the boundary between Banff and Kootenay parks, so I also straddled two national parks. It was very chilly in the morning air. Since there was nothing to look at except the roadside sign and survey marker, I didn't linger or look at anything with wild surmise. And so down the other side of the pass, stopping off to see Marble Canyon.

Marble Canyon Is Made Of Dolomite

Carved down through the joints of mountainous dolomite blocks (its discoverer didn't know diddly about geology), Marble Canyon is very narrow. The glacial meltwater is pale blue opaque turquoise from its load of finely-powdered sediment. There are several natural bridges but the feature of the canyon is how thin it is. In most places it could be jumped across, excepting that the dolomite is slippery and the canyon is five storeys deep. In places, it is so deep and narrow that one cannot see the water foaming way down there.

Not too many other tourists yet for the 1 km round trip walk up to the waterfalls at the top of the canyon. The morning sun was still

rising over the mountain at 09h30. As I ascended the trail the canyon became narrower and deeper. Not even a metre wide at some points, but deep enough that if you slipped stepping over, you'd be bouncing off canyon walls a long way down before the final splat onto the boulder rapids.

When on the footbridges that criss-crossed the canyon, I didn't spend too much time leaning over the railings admiring the view far below. Being a prairie boy, I am much too susceptible to vertigo. Finally at the top of the canyon, there was the rumbling of stepped waterfalls where the creek fell out of a hanging valley into the canyon.

Time To Think

The canyon was carved through 500 megayear old ocean sediments over a period of 14,000 years. It makes one think about Time with a capital T, not just time. Deep Time, some people call it. Back down at the canyon outlet, I glanced up at the mountains and saw a half-moon floating over the peaks in the morning sun. What other animals in the long-vanished ocean saw the Moon? Did they even notice it? The dolomite peaks scraped the water out of passing clouds. From deep ocean sediments to cloud scrapers in 500,000,000 years, and then dissolved away in only 14,000 by the canyon waters. Highway 93 is considered an historical route because it was the first road across the Canadian Rockies. It was built in 1922. Eighty years isn't even a blip on the chart.

We will still have records of our history 80 years from now. Only the general details of the human race will exist 14,000 years from now, assuming we haven't destroyed our civilizations. 500,000,000 years from now *Homo sapiens* will certainly be gone, long since replaced by other sentient species, we hope, and long since gone to the stars, we hope. Deep Time.

Rust Never Sleeps, But It Does Seep

A few kilometres down Highway 93, in the next valley over from Marble Canyon, are the Paint Pots. Where once the aboriginal tribes used to collect ochre for war paint and tipi decoration, us tourists now dutifully walk up and down, ticking off yet another item on our lists of things to see.

The Paint Pots are a series of mud flats, seeps, and cold springs on the lower part of the side valley draining into the Vermilion River. They are various shades of yellow, orange, and red. The colour comes from dissolved iron oxides precipitating out on the surface. After the aboriginals were evicted, the Paint Pots were mined for a few decades for use in printing ink and house paint. The mining ceased in the 1920s not long after

Kootenay National Park was

created, but the shallow pits and mounds of abandoned ore are still there. Rusted mining artifacts have been piled by an interpretive sign. A rail car chassis, a farm plow to turn up the 'ore' (mud, actually), and some horse-drawn scoops, are slowly dissolving into the mud.

The source of the mud is just up the valley a short distance, a series of low, red, packed mud cones bubbling up water from underneath. We can walk out onto them. No railings, no warning signs. They are cold springs after all, not volcanic vents or boiling hot springs. You can't vandalize mud, so the park wardens are not worried about maintenance. Slip and fall in at your risk and expense for dry-cleaning. Not a real problem though, as any muddy clothes could be washed in the river below.

Numa Falls

Another short drive down the highway, which parallels the river, brings me to the Numa Falls. Here the Vermilion River drops off glacial gravels into a 10 metre deep shale canyon with Honda Civic-sized boulders.

I've suddenly noticed an oddity about my fellow tourists. At every site today, I've seen at least two or three couples with leashed dogs accompanying them. I didn't notice this in Waterton or Crowsnest, but as soon as I crossed into British Columbia, every other couple seems to have a lapdog. On the footbridges, the dogs poke their noses through the railings. Do they understand what they see far below? Perhaps they are like some ocean-dwelling animal from 500 megayears ago, staring up at the Moon in total lack of comprehension.

I ticked the falls off my list.

Wow Park 2000-08-22

Yoho National Park gets its name from the Cree word for 'wow!' and well deserves it, having the most spectacular scenery of the mountain parks. There is no direct road connection between it and Kootenay even though they share a common border, so one has to drive around through Banff National Park and loop about 50 kilometres on the Trans-Canada Highway to enter it.

The mountain pass into it is Kicking Horse Pass, after a regrettable incident back in the 1850s that an explorer had with a pack horse. The horse won, by the way, laying him out cold. The pass is very steep, a 4.5% grade, which means that you climb or drop 45 metres in each kilometre. A truck driver's nightmare, especially in winter when frequent avalanches close the Trans-Canada. Rockfalls are equally frequent in summer, and there were new drifts of them scraped back off the road. Freshets washed

down the mountainside everywhere. My ears popped continuously going over the pass, and I had to ride the Civic's brakes all the way down the other side.

It-is-magnificent Falls

On the other side of the pass, just as the road touches bottom on the valley floor, there is a turning for a 13-km side trip to Takakkaw Falls. See above for the Cree translation. Warning signs announced that trailers were not allowed on the road, and there was a parking lot at the base of the side valley for them to be dropped off. The road starts at the junction of the Kicking Horse and Yoho rivers and goes up the latter valley on a narrow two-lane road as bad as the Red Rock Canyon route.

To drive 13 kilometres on the prairies would be five minutes, but constant stops at viewpoints along the way slowed me down. Us tourists kept passing and re-passing each other as we leapfrogged along the turnouts. I recognized at least one couple from the Kootenay. At the narrowest section, traffic was one lane as we all stopped to admire a bull elk grazing on the banks of the Yoho River. He had a six-point rack of horns. He stripped the leaves off alders as dozens of cameras clicked away from two tour buses and ten or so cars. However, I can only watch an elk stuff itself with leaves for a few minutes before getting bored, so I took the opportunity to leapfrog my compatriots to the next viewpoint.

Next up was the first set of switchbacks. I could see why trailers were banned. My Honda Civic has a very good turning radius, but even so, with the steering column locked all the way over, it swung out into the oncoming lane. I was very glad to beat the tour buses up, as on the return trip I had to wait several minutes while one of them backed its way around the tightest curve. The charter bus drivers on that route earn their money for sure. I hope they get hazard pay.

There were freshets and waterfalls all the way along the Yoho River canyon walls, but the Takakkaw Falls made them look like ochre seeps. The Takakkaw Falls plunge 250 metres off a rockwall, fed by a glacier hidden from view at the valley floor. That's about an 80-story skyscraper, to put the height into perspective.

The parking lot was almost full. I nodded hello to some familiar faces from other tourist stops. We were starting to recognize each other on sight since we were all following the same checklist. No dog-walkers though. A trail took us on a footbridge across the Yoho River to the viewpoint of the falls. Very crowded, as several tour buses of Japanese were already there. The path ended at a debris slope, through which the waters rushed down to the river. The base of the falls was actually at the top of the slope, and as it didn't look that high,

I thought I'd climb it.

The climb looked shorter than it actually was. The cliff was so high and smooth that it gave no sense of scale to the boulders in the debris slope. The boulders looked small, no bigger than a desk at most, but as I climbed, they resolved themselves into Civic-sized rocks. I saw small boulders suddenly resolve themselves into house-sized ones when tourists further up clambered out from behind them and gave them scale. The lack of scale played another trick as well. Closer to the base, the falls looked shorter because of visual foreshortening. I had to bend over backwards to make out the top of the falls.

En route, I stopped and sat to have a staring contest with a 13-lined squirrel. I won, as usual. Did the squirrel have any conception of the greater world beyond it? The source of its water? The Moon standing high above the glacier? I sat on a 500,000,000-year-old rock and contemplated Deep Time.

Going Postal

Into the village of Field for a quick snack. A tour bus of Japanese were munching hamburgers on the banks of the Kicking Horse River. I sat down at a nearby picnic table to munch my own food, a nutritious meal of potato chips, chocolate, and cherry Pepsi. The village is too small to support more than one eatery, and since I don't eat ground meats like hamburger, my selection was limited.

Small places are like that;
veggie pitas and cheese bagels are what
only some socialist city dweller would eat, not God-fearing snowplough operators. (Field probably has more snowploughs than any large city in Canada, because it is the service point to keep the Trans-Canada Highway and transcontinental railroad open.) As I started to crunch my way through the chips, a young Japanese woman from the picnic table next to me came over with her camera. With a bit of pantomime she made the request that I take a picture of her group. They posed with the river and mountain behind them, each pretending to take a big bite out of their hamburgers. I have a Nikon camera myself, so I was impressed to see one with Japanese labels, not English.

I walked over to a small museum that displayed some Burgess Shale fossils. My mother likes mail art and view postcards, so I always send some to her in Red Deer from wherever I'm traveling. The museum gift shop had a nice selection of postcards, books, and T-shirts, all related to British Columbia wildlife and scenery, as opposed to Banff, where the shops cater to the Japanese with shelves of Anne of Green Gables dolls and stuffed polar bears, neither of which have anything to do with the Rockies. The museum shop clerk was a 40ish woman with nose piercings. Call me an old fogey but even on young woman they look terrible, and are worse yet on one who should be maxing out her RRSPs.

The post office took a bit of finding, which is a common problem in small places with no public directories. But with only five streets in the village, I eventually located it. The entire post office staff was gone for lunch, but the sign said she would be back at 12h30. As it was 12h25, I walked around the village, not a lengthy task, and returned to find the postmistress behind her counter.

I like to have my postcards handstamped with the local cancel. This requires passing them across the counter and explaining what is wanted. If you just drop them in a letter box, they are shipped to a mail processing plant uncanceled, and will get a spray-on date mark of the big city where the plant is located, not the town where it was mailed.

Natural Bridge

From Fields, back onto the Trans-Canada Highway. Past all the avalanche warning signs, and over to the Kicking Horse River valley again. The feature to see was a natural bridge the river had carved through a limestone ridge. On inspection, I found it to be more of a natural culvert, but it doesn't take much to amuse a British Columbian.

The viewpoints were shaded from the blazing sun (it was now 13h00) so I lingered more than I would have otherwise. The interpretive signs noted that eventually the bridge would cave in and produce a gorge: "*Water flows through time and wears down mountains. In the moment of our lifetime we see but a part of the process. Yesterday's waterfall is today's bridge, becoming tomorrow chasm.*"

Deep Time thought: 14,000 years from now, the natural bridge will be long vanished, replaced by waterfalls and rapids that will have moved several kilometres upstream. 500,000,000 years from now, the mountains will be gone and the continent unrecognizable to our generation. The strata here that were once ocean mud are now slabs of rock tilted vertically by tectonic forces. As the dolomite slowly erodes, science fiction fans discuss on ephemeral listservs how to preserve their fanzines for posterity.

Hamilton Falls

Just up-valley from the Natural Culvert is Emerald Lake and Hamilton Falls. A footpath leads one up the mountainside away from the lake into the forested mountain slope. At the start of the path along the parking lot edge, I saw a Columbian ground squirrel clambering on the twigs of a viburnum shrub, methodically stripping it of its bright red berries. It didn't seem too interested in a staring contest, and after filling its cheek pouches, it scrambled down to the ground
and disappeared into the underbrush.

I walked up the footpath, through dense rainforest with dew and hair lichens dripping from the firs. It was a long vertiginous climb up narrow switchbacks. The sign back at the parking lot said 700 metres to the falls, but it soon became evident to me that this was straight-line distance read off a map. The switchbacks made it at least a kilometre horizontal in addition to 700 metres vertical.

The falls were low-volume, and whispered rather than roared as they fell down through a rill canyon. The trail gave me a few bad spots of vertigo, as the path's camber sloped to the cliff edges. At one point the path was only a 20-cm ledge along the cliff top, just wide enough to put one foot at a time. I don't mind looking at waterfalls from their bases, but peering over an unfenced edge and seeing a 10-story drop left me queasy. I was born and raised a flatlander on the prairies, not a mountain goat.

Emerald Lake

While pretty enough, with its opaque turquoise waters, Douglas fir forests, and towering mountains, the lake area is actually better known for the Burgess Shale fossil quarries. The quarries are restricted access, containing one of the few soft-bodied fossil deposits of the Cambrian era 515 megayears ago. They can be seen on the far mountain top, a day's strenuous hike away, just barely visible to the naked eye as a series of small horizontal scars in the cliffs.

I walked around the shoreline, a 2-hour full circumnavigation of the lakeshore in about 6 kilometres. I nodded hello to the usual gang of tourists, and strolled in and out of the usual busloads of Japanese, some of whom I recognized from Takakkaw Falls. In the alpine sun, the auburn hair of all the young Japanese women was quite noticeable. It must be the latest fad over there to colour their hair.

On the far shore of the lake, I sat on a Civic-sized boulder overhanging the water. There was absolute silence for the space of a half hour. The surrounding mountains block off the winds. No vertigo as I dangled my legs a couple of metres above the water. The turquoise sheet looked solid enough to walk on, notwithstanding the German tourists who coasted by in a canoe and gave me "Guten Tag", to which I replied with my best Canadianism "How's it going, eh?". To the north, the mountain peaks were scraping moisture off passing clouds and converting it to snow for the glaciers on their flanks. I could see Hamilton Canyon (but not the falls) on the far mountain, and saw that I had only climbed up a small fraction of the slope to the falls.

A peaceful scene, with the blue waters rippling, the breeze softly blowing, the cameras clicking, and the distant rumble of tour buses. I sat and looked up 515 million years to the sky.