

Date End September 2007

Copy: North Fork & 999 trail (with sidebar for  
Curly Sands/weather dependent this add-on)  
Western Wheel

Early morning light and already the mercury's up a good 10 degrees from this time yesterday when the wind's sharp bite had my horses bickering for their first shot at oat breakfasts. There's no surface grass frost today despite yucky grey clouds scudding overhead. To the south and towards where we're going, the beginning of a Chinook line's beginning to form, white clouds swirling on one side and bright blue skies on the other.

Riding backcountry in the fall has weather as my prime concern. I look at what the deal is now, what I think it *might* do, and feeling still undecided – which is my usual reaction actually! - I go online. Environment Canada's medium useful to useless, usually in the end I telephone one of the Kananaskis information centres and ask their opinion. Besides, many of their teams work *and* play these areas, and there's a strong likelihood they were out on a trail yesterday you're might be riding today.

We load up the rig. First aid kit, layers of waterproofed clothing, an extra set of something warm and dry in case the weather turn's atrocious and you need to change out of wet clothes back at the trailhead at day's end. Feed (not oats or ***anything with molasses***, just-considering-going-to-sleep-bears will just rip open even locked trailer doors) to warm up sleet-cold horses at day's end, haynets jammed and hung high to avoid a foot going through, to munch on the way home. Knives, one in a pocket (along with waterproofed matches), one on the back cinch and one in the saddlebags along with blissfully light tooth flossing 'string' and electrical tape for emergency patching.

At the trailhead we begin throwing on saddles, saddlebags, slickers, an extra hoofpick tucked in a safe place. I take the bridles out of the truck's cab (the bits keep warm, nicer deal for the horses) and notice with pleasure there are five other trailers dotted around (mid-week at that!), people out savouring the high wild places. It's a whisker before noon, which is just about when I reckon the frost's seeping out of the ground.

By the time we sling a leg over the saddlebags, the sun's edging bright, hard and hot. At lunch we're in T-shirts on a south facing slope protected by one of the best poplar stands in the foothills, just up from the 999 trail. By Threepoint Creek we're up to two layers and at the top of Curly Sands we're shrugging on wind-proofed jackets.

The horses stride out, the views knockout and to quote Lou Reed, yep, ***It's Just A Perfect Day.***

NORTH FORK past MESA BUTTE, along NORTH FORK TRAIL,  
and returning either on GORGE GREEK ROAD, or the 999 TRAIL.

1. Time about 4 hours on medium plus fit horses.
2. Going may be wet in places (the last sections of the 999 trail approaching the main #549 road have been improved from the appalling muddy conditions of earlier years although still to be navigated with care)
3. On north facing or mossy slopes there is now serious frost in the ground, and even in the lower grasslands. If you get off your horse and stomp your heel into the ground you might be surprised.

From the #22 Highway at MILLARVILLE, drive westwards for 11 km along the #549 highway. It turns into well-graded gravel and then you're only minutes from today's destination. Officially Mesa Butte Equestrian Campground closes October 10<sup>th</sup> (the toilets are nailed shut already), but there's good grass roadside parking a mile or so earlier on the south side, when you go over a Texas Gate, and where there's a big obvious sign for the North Fork Campground (which is also shut, but with a helpful telephone there for emergencies by the gate).

The #549's pretty quiet this time of year, no dust either, and you walk westwards alongside it until you get to the far end of the Equestrian Campground, drop down and through Three Point Creek (or over the stout but open sided bridge if you think your horses are OK with that).

A new oil road went in about a year back, so the trail's not what used to be there. I've found these days I prefer to, having crossed the stream, turn left then almost immediately right following the oil company's gravel road, until I get to where there's a high wire fenced compound (you see it on the left hand side of the road and it's more than obvious). Ride right handed around the edge of that, and THEN resume along the horse trail.

Back in November of last year K-Country encountered almost hurricane force winds, some of which down-surfed on whole mountainsides, and this area really suffered. K-Country forestry folk have been busy re-building this trail and it's quite different from the old, with nice sound footing, a bit higher and less soggy.

As always there's a K-Country posted map where the North Fork trail and Threepoint Creek Trail split (that's another wonderful ride, stonier though underfoot), and where today you go left-handed onto North Fork, and begin to climb through old growth fir and spruce, before finally the trail heaves over the lip and out and into sunshine. Here you hang along the left hand

side of the open meadows (grazing lease cattle get moved out by October 15<sup>th</sup> and depending on when the Sheep Grazing Co-op are in action with their range riders, prize-winning photographs are a definite maybe!). There's a mega viewing spot, with a helpful hitching post here too, and then it's riding downwards into the valley again.

This part of the ride's rich with red diamond markings, one cattle drift fence (put there to prevent one rancher's cattle from getting into another's in these vast distances), and then you're on the gravel GORGE CREEK ROAD.

Your choice here.

You can either take the gravel road back (if you meet any motorized vehicles you'll be one of the minority who do) and which has good gradients great for conditioning horses (or teaching young ones to use their shoulders up and down hills).

Or you can commit to the longer, and wonderously scenic 999 trail back. The creek can be a bit picky depending on deadfall washed down in spring floods, but manageable, and there's one slurpy bit under the trees just before the meadows open up, where I suspect there's a hidden collection of sucked-off horseshoes.

Then meadows, a climb through some of the best poplar stands in Alberta, and a sun-heated tree-protected best-place for lunch venue. From the gravel GORGE CREEK ROAD through to the meadows to the final trailhead are only three red diamond markers, though, so bringing along a map is definitely a good idea!

The trail then narrows after your lunch spot, cooler now between the old growth tree shadows, and with underground springs deepening the going. Further down, though, where it used to be, frankly, an awful hock sapping mud bath, huge culverts have been dug either side of the trail, which has a sprinkling of shale on it these days. Still slightly slippery but, oh! what an improvement.

In the final open meadow (and another K-Country posted map), you can either go left here through the woods (and where it can be frosty and cold besides, in the shade) back to Mesa Butte Equestrian Campground (if that's where you decided to start from), or go straight on, through Threepoint Creek (useful for watering thirsty horse), through the wooden cattle gate, and, turning left (or west), simply walk back on the meadows for around one third of a mile or so, alongside the #549. Easier, really, outside of summertime conditions, to give you and your horse a nice easy finishing deal, easy underfoot and in sunshine, before returning to North Fork again.

SIDEBAR>>On this particular ride we also rode the view-heavy and always just drop dead gorgeous CURLY SANDS TRAIL (named after an early grazing lease range rider known for his variable dispositions). If Western Wheel readers would

like directions and a description, please email me at [Sunwired@hotmail.com](mailto:Sunwired@hotmail.com)  
One of my own personal favourites, it's also one I absolutely do not ride if there is frost in the ground, snow on it (even when sharp shod), or July thunderstorms are slithering in faster than dragons on a Middle Earth mission.

SIDEBAR>>The '999' was the brand of Alberta's famous black cowboy, John Ware, after which a local creek is also named. The family's cabin, now restored, these days is located at Dinosaur Provincial Park.

SIDEBAR>> HELPFUL HINTS:

1. GEM-TREK map BRAGG CREEK & ELBOW FALLS (the reverse side of the map has particularly helpful information). Available at most gas stations and bookstores.
2. KANANASKIS COUNTRY INFORMATION, Sheep River Field Office (tel 933-7172). Simply invaluable, they can tell you good trails to ride, bear activity, weather forecasts, anything and everything.

THE END