

# About *The Canadian Hiker's and Backpacker's Handbook* 2008 By Ben Gadd

*The Canadian Hiker's and Backpacker's Handbook* was published by Whitecap Books in April of 2008. I prepared this promotional video and showed it a few times. The last update was 9 January, 2024.

It was a lot of fun showing it at the book launch on 12 May, 2008 at the City of Calgary Outdoor Centre, 1111 Memorial Drive NW, by the Louise Bridge. Lonnie Springer, his daughter Sarah, Ed Hurgott, Bonnie Curran and John Wasch, whose photos all appear in the book as characters in the backpacking-story chapter, were there.

This is the version of the show that I have saved. It's easily adapted for showing when these people are not in attendance.

[This talk is usually accompanied by props brought by Ben Gadd, including his small backpacking pot, lid lifter, cup, spoon, Svea backpacking stove, MSR "Pocket Rocket" stove and Serratus "Summit" backpack.]

Before I begin, let me introduce Lonnie Springer, who took most of the photos in the book.

Lonnie and I go back a long way. We have been having adventures in the mountains since 1965. Lonnie's assistant on the photo shoot for the story part of the book was his son Aaron, a fine photographer in his own right, who is also with us this evening.

Let me also introduce our guests of honor, three of the people who appear in a lot of Lonnie's photos as the backpackers in the story section of the book.

Bonnie Curran, who played the role of "Jacquie," Ed Hergott, who played "Reg," and John Wasch, a.k.a. "Art."



# THE Canadian

## HIKER'S & BACKPACKER'S HANDBOOK

*Your How-to Guide  
for Hitting the Trails,  
Coast to Coast to Coast*



**BEN GADD**

Photos by Lonnie Springer | Foreword by Brian Patton





Here they are with the other characters. That's Bonnie on the left, then Ed standing next to her and Lonnie's daughter Sarah in the middle. She appears in the book as young "Shannon." Then John beside Sarah and Michelle Housley on the right end. Michelle was "Pat" in the story. She would love to be here, but it's a long flight from Dubai.





Here are a few behind-the-scenes pictures of these folks taken during the photo shoot in Kananaskis Country last year. In this picture I'm helping Michelle tie her umbrella to her pack. We used a photo of that in the section of the book about dealing with rainy weather.





Just like a real Hollywood film shoot, the food was catered.





Well, it was actually Lonnie's photo-equipment trailer doing extra duty. His wife Jan is sitting at the table preparing lunch for everyone. Sarah is standing by the table, and Aaron is at the right. My thanks to them all.



On to what's in the book. It starts by answering an obvious but little-asked question. Why do we go hiking and backpacking?

Here's fellow author Don Beers of Calgary. The photo was taken in 1958 in Banff National Park. Don has written and published quite a few guidebooks for Rockies hikers. That's Castle Mountain in the background. Don has a *lot* of stuff lashed onto that pack frame. He told me that he built it himself. And his reasons were heading into the wild were much the same as mine were way back then. I have no photo of me in those days with my own pack frame, which was an army-surplus version that was pretty similar. So I'll just leave Don's picture on the screen while I read this passage from the book.

It hit me in junior high school. Unhappy at being stuck in math class on lovely June afternoons, I would gaze out the window toward the Rocky Mountains. The peaks, the forests, the streams, the cliffs, the trails that led to it all—there they were, so close at hand, so real, so utterly different from *algebra*. My heart would lift, and I would get an excited, tickly feeling in my tummy as I thought about heading for the high country on the weekend. In 1959 a couple of friends and I had discovered what would soon become known as “backpacking.” We called our trips “overnight hikes.” Overnight hikers we were, spending single nights in the woods. We carried heavy canvas packs with unpadded straps and no hip belt. We slept on lumpy beds of conifer boughs hacked from some luckless tree, and we sheltered under a lean-to covered with more of those branches.

Our fondest hopes were that it wouldn't rain and that some animal wouldn't attack us in the night. We would lie awake at three a.m., shivering under our blankets, imagining the swish of paws through the grass. The wind, the sound of the creek nearby ... these had somehow become animate, perhaps deadly. We loved it.

These days, how many of us truly delight in tapping our fingers on little pieces of plastic hour after hour while staring into a computer display full of accounting data? I submit that we do this only because we have to. That we are basically unsuited for the world we have made. Famed psychoanalyst Carl Jung might have agreed. He believed that we have “archetypal memories” of our collective past, hard-wired recollections of great days spent gorging ourselves in the berry patches and sticking spears into mastodons.

Sure, those were rough-and-tumble times. You could starve, or you could die from a simple ailment. Heaven help you if the sabre-tooth cats got you. But oh, life was fun! And often, as the Navahos say, you walked in beauty.

So here's the point. When we hike and backpack, I think we're recreating an essential element of that era, the journey taken on foot through wild surroundings. “Recreating” indeed. So much like the word “recreation.”

And here's the really terrific part. When we're tired and dirty we can come home to a hot shower and a soft bed. By golly, we have the best of both worlds.

Whatever your reasons for wanting to get into the wilds under your own steam, they are good reasons. Even if you can't walk very well, whether from lack of experience or lack of fitness, or from age or other physical limitations, go ahead and try anyway. You have nothing to lose and much to gain. With some medical conditions it's wise to check with your doctor first, of course. Then go for it to the extent that you can.





You may start by looking like this guy. But  
after a while you'll look more like this...





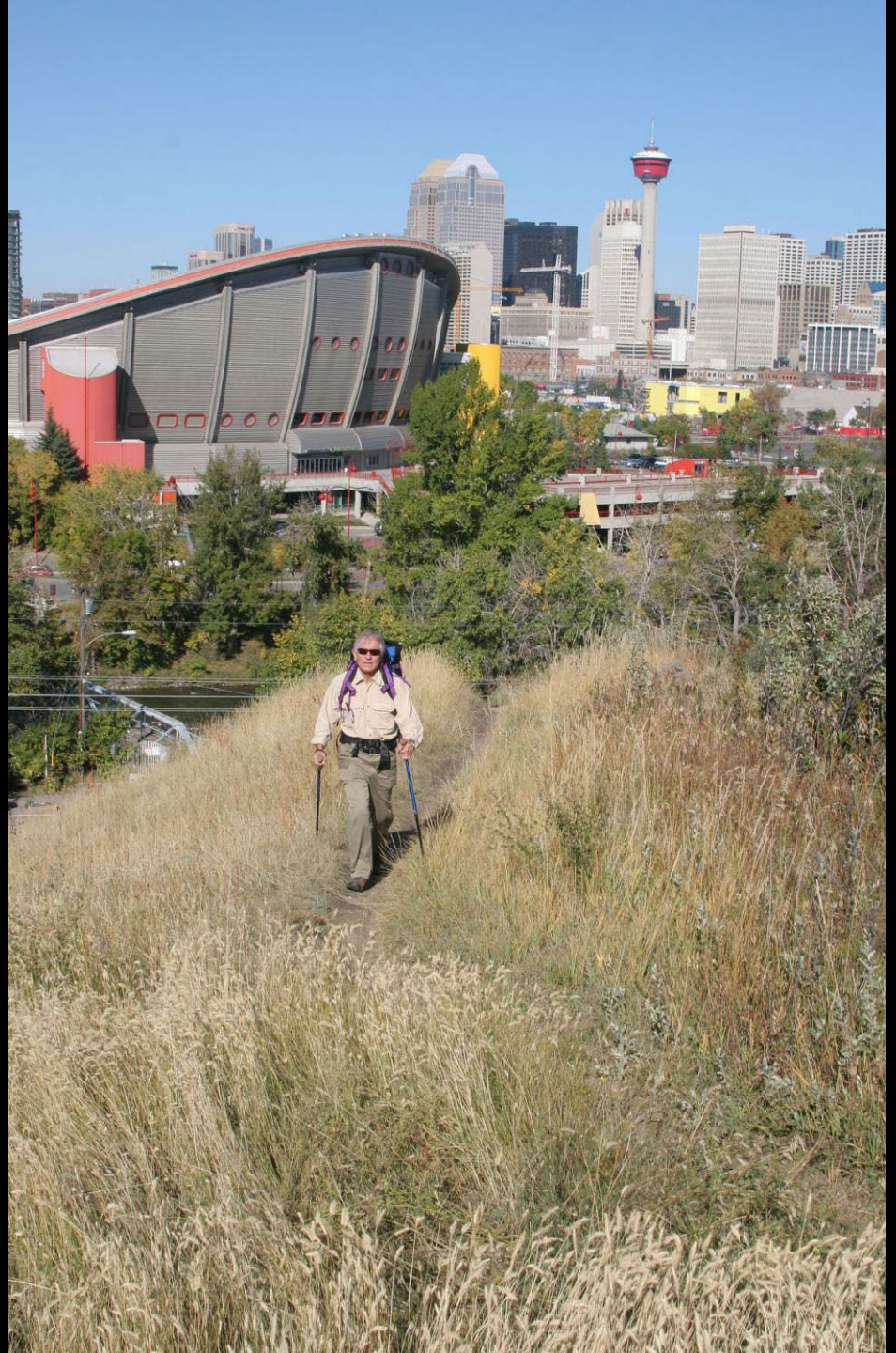




Where to start?

Go easy at first, gaining fitness without over-stressing your body.

Put on your new backpack with little or nothing in it, slip your hands into your new walking poles—the book tells you how to do that properly—and walk a kilometre or two. Do so anywhere at all. It needn't be in the wilderness. There are trails everywhere. Look how close Ed Hergott is to downtown Calgary.







Consider famed mountain guide Conrad Kain, the little guy on the left, there. In 1913 he made the first ascent of Mount Robson with the two chaps on the right.

Conrad Kain used to tell the following story. It may or may not be true. I couldn't confirm it. But it's worth passing along anyway. Here it is.

*While in his teens, Kain was taken for his first climb by a local guide, a much older fellow. Together they started walking up the trail. Young and full of energy, Kain grew impatient with the guide's slow pace. Kain knew the trail well, so he asked the guide whether it would be all right to go ahead, meeting at the start of the steep, roped section of the ascent. The older man said, "Yah, yah, Conrad. You go ahead." And he did, practically running up the path. He would grow breathless, sit down for a short rest, then get up and keep charging along. While resting he could see the guide far below him on the switchbacks.*

*During one such rest—and they were becoming more frequent—Kain realized that the guide was gaining on him. Yet the guide wasn't hurrying, just plodding steadily along. You know how this is going to end ...*

*Yes, it was the tortoise and the hare. Eventually the young man lay beside the trail, gasping, as the old guide stood before him, saying gently, "Conrad, Conrad. How are you going to climb the mountain when you don't even know how to walk?"*



Walking really *is* a skill. It's something you learn, and something you can teach others. There are two main points. The first is to pace yourself, meaning don't hurry, and the second is to take short steps. That's true whether you're going uphill or downhill. This guy is doing the opposite. Those leg muscles are pretty big, but they are going to tire quickly if he keeps walking like this.





Instead, walk like this, taking short steps and keeping your heels low. At the end of the day your legs will thank you.







Same for going downhill. Taking long steps like this, and landing on the downhill foot with the leg bent, will likewise wear you out.



Instead, take short steps. And as the photo illustrates, land on the downhill foot with the leg straight.

What? With the leg *straight*? Yes. It's designed to work that way. Not bent back, just straight.

I learned this from an old climber friend when I was still in my teens. He called it "the mountaineer's shuffle." He used it routinely to descend thousands of feet without getting what he called "rubber knees." That's when your thigh muscles tire and begin to hurt. They lose their strength. I knew about rubber knees because I was getting them all the time. On some descents it would get so bad that I'd have to walk backward grasping at trees! But once I learned the mountaineer's shuffle, this never happened again.





Try walking poles. They really *are* very useful, especially for keeping your balance while stepping from rock to rock across a creek. There's a left pole and a right pole. You need to put your hand through the strap in the correct way. Like gripping crss-country ski poles, have the strap going under your palm





And here's a bonus. When everyone has poles, you can be the Musketeers.





All for one and one for all!





In my book there's a lot of tried-and-true information about gear.  
For example, if you take your time when choosing walking shoes and boots, they'll fit correctly and not give you blisters. The book explains what to look for and what to avoid.







Backpacking food is not known for it's tastiness, especially at breakfast. Here's my son Will, who is now a well-known climber and mountain guide, choking down his Red River cereal at breakfast in the back country.





In comparison, freeze-dried meals taste pretty good. More importantly, they are very light in weight. You just tear open the packet and pour in boiling water. But you don't hold that bag like that...





Or this happens.





No, you either hold the bag at the top, risking a burn if the hot water spills on you, or, in the case of Mountain House freeze dries, you spread the bag at the bottom so that it sits upright by itself, like this. Clever packaging, Mountain House.





And here's a trick. After the water has been added and stirred in, and after the food has been set aside for a couple of minutes to rehydrate, cut down the bag with the scissors on your Swiss Army knife. Surely you have a Swiss Army knife with you? Every backpacker should carry a Swiss Army knife.





With the bag cut down, it's much easier to get at the food.





Oh, yum!  
C'mon Michelle. You can feign your delight in eating this glop better than that.





On my guided backpacking trips I always carry a water bag. Instead of constantly running down to the creek to fill a small pot, I fill the bag, carry it back and hang it over a tree limb, ready for everyone to use.





Just remember that any surface water is suspect. Use a pump filter to remove parasites such as *Giardia lamblia*. A case of “beaver fever” can spoil your whole summer.



Here's a hiker showing off his nylon clothing, which is mosquito-proof and easy to wash on the trail. He's wearing low gaiters over his boots to keep the little rocks out that are always trying to get inside. And he has poles, of course. Note the length of the poles. He has this right. With his hand in the strap, the pole makes a right angle with his lower arm. And the strap is running correctly.







Sarah Springer, a.k.a “Shannon” in the book, is telling us that rain is falling. The others are demonstrating various ways of dealing with it.

Ed is wearing a Gore Tex rain jacket. Michelle has her umbrella tied to her pack, freeing her hands for walking poles, which at the moment she is not using. John is holding his umbrella in one hand. No walking poles for him. And Bonnie is dressed as I do for light rain. She’s wearing a fleece pullover instead of a rain jacket. Never mind the breathability of Gore Tex. Once it’s wet, it no longer breathes. You get sweaty and clammy. But fleece always allows your body’s moisture to escape, even when it’s quite damp. I can hike comfortably in light rain all day in fleece. I can’t do that in Gore Tex. With the fleece, rain can soak all the way through, but you’re still warm. And when it stops, the fleece dries on your body surprisingly quickly.



Carry a pack that's big enough and fits you well. A large, comfortable pack will work just fine if it's only half-full, but a pack that's too small or fits you poorly will always be uncomfortable, no matter how much or how little you've packed into it.

This is my Serratus "Summit" backpack. It holds 80 litres of gear and food, which is enough for a five-day backpack.

That's for me, a guide who must carry extra stuff. You can probably make do with less.

Which you should do. In backpacking, less weight means happier hiking. The book includes lists of suggested clothing, equipment and food.





Here's the harness on my backpack. Notice the wide, well-padded hip belt, which is very important, and the small straps joining the tops of the shoulder straps to the pack. These are essential for keeping the pack close to your back and avoiding sway from side to side.







When it comes to tents, every penny spent on good design and materials is a bargain when you get a night like this one...





Springtime in the Rockies, eh? These two guys, who camped near Jasper in April, told me they were going to pack up pronto and head back to California.





A down-filled sleeping bag is still the best bet in most of the country. In rainy British Columbia you're better off with synthetic fill. To keep your hip off the stones under the tent, a cheap, lightweight closed-cell foam pad will be enough when you're young. But when you're as old as I am, you'll want an inflatable pad. That's what Ed and Michelle have. Thermarests.



Here's what you do if your tent-mate won't get up in the morning. Not actually. Neither the tent nor Michelle is strong enough. What she's actually doing is shaking the tent with the door open and pointed down, such that whatever you dragged into it on your knees will drop out. Be sure to check the spot after. What dropped out may be your car keys.





So far, everything I have shown you is the latest and greatest. And it ain't cheap. But you can go backpacking with simpler and less expensive gear, as shown in this amusing cartoon by Derek Hammell, from Jasper.





For example, instead of a pricey backpacking stove you can stop by the hardware store and pick up an empty 3.8-litre paint can and its lid. Punch some holes around the bottom and the top...





And build a very small fire in it with twigs.





Put the lid on. The heat will come out through the upper holes, which unfortunately I haven't shown in this photo. They're only on one side of the can, the side away from the camera.

Heat up a can of chili instead of the water for an expensive freeze-dried meal.

In a pinch you can forget the fire completely and eat the chili cold. Don't knock it until you've been hungry enough to try it.







Wherever you go in the wilderness, as much as possible leave no trace of your presence.

This photo is from the Mayfield Lakes area at the north end of the Rockies, a wild place indeed.

When I packed my tent up, the only sign of my being there was some flattened wildflowers and crushed caribou lichens growing on the ground. The flowers would spring back up, just as they would if a moose had slept there. The bits of lichen would blow away in the wind and continue to grow wherever they landed, which is how this kind of lichen reproduces.



When you're hiking, if there's a trail, use it. If there's no trail, don't make one. These two people were walking with me in the high country of Jasper National Park. This particular valley had no trail to follow, either for humans or animals. So we didn't make one. We walked a few metres apart. It's as simple as that. Keep your distance from others in your party. Yet we humans usually walk in a line, following one another. Which can leave a visible track that lasts the rest of the summer. Resist the urge.







Avoiding trouble is way better than having to deal with it, so be cautious.

Choose outings that are within your abilities. Go with people you trust, and keep the group together. Read the guidebook. Bring a map. Carry food and water, and pack the proper clothing and equipment, all of which you may need in case the weather goes bad or the trip takes longer than expected. Learn about the common maladies that befall hikers and what to do about them. Leave word, in case rescue becomes necessary.

And to quote that well-known scout's motto, "Be prepared." These people are.





This is the most common hiking injury. A heel blister.

The idea is not to let these happen. Buy your boots with care, using the little sloping test surface available in so many outdoor-equipment stores to see whether they rub on your heels.

If they do rub, tighten 'em up. Still got up-and-down motion in the heel pocket of the boot? Don't buy them.

Try others until you find a pair in which the boot comes up with your heel when you bend at the toes.



Yes, you can take the kids into the back-country. Even when they are very, very young.





Here's our elder son Willy at age three, hiking in the backcountry with my wife Cia. Take a close look at Cia's pack. Little Toby, just a month old, is in there asleep. See his feet poking out from the top?





Here is Toby again. This time he's old enough to carry his own pack. And he could have crossed that stream, too, holding Cia's hand. But she took pity on him and carried him across. He is clearly happy about that.





Perhaps it was that early exposure to hiking that kept Toby at it when he grew up. Here he is with his wife Alix and their son Max, who is cuddling their dog Kip at a rest stop.





In many Canadian national parks you can also bring your dog. Here is "Bo Bo," our blue-heeler-something-or-other cross, following, yes, right behind Cia's heels.

Do you see the leash? It's one of those thin ones that unrolls from a reel in my hand. Or in this case, the reel is clipped to my belt so I can use my walking poles. Always keep your dog on the leash in the wilds. If not, one day your beloved pet will tangle with a porcupine. You really, really don't want that to happen.





The last few chapters of my backpacking guide provide basic information on places to enjoy this pastime elsewhere in the country than in the Rockies.  
This couple is exploring tidal pools along the West Coast Trail in British Columbia.





Here is the sort of scenery  
you can experience along the  
East Coast Trail.





The leafy woods of eastern Canada are a nice change from the endless evergreen forests of Alberta and British Columbia.





And you can hike the great Canadian north, too. That's what Leanne Allison is doing here, in the Dog Creek Basin, way up in the northern Yukon.

This is one of Karsten Heuer's photos from the caribou-following odyssey he and Leanne did in 2003. That amazing hike spawned Karsten's now-famous book *Being Caribou*.

Canada truly does reach from coast, to coast—to coast. What a country! We are so lucky to live here.





And that's the end of my talk.  
Thanks for listening.

## Expert advice from one of the country's most respected wilderness guides

In his latest handbook, award-winning naturalist and bestselling author Ben Gadd offers up the best advice from more than 40 years of hiking and backpacking experience. In this compact guide, Gadd shares his knowledge on how to plan a trip, what to bring and how to stay safe. Read about:

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***This is the essential how-to handbook  
for all Canadian backpackers***



Chic Scott photo

*Ben Gadd has been an independent nature guide in Jasper National Park in Alberta for over 20 years. He is the author of eight other books about the Canadian Rocky Mountains, including the award-winning Handbook of the Canadian Rockies.*

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