



EXPLORING CROWSNEST

MOUNTAIN RIDING IN SOUTHWESTERN ALBERTA

Story and Photos
by Craig Nicholson



We rode our Ski-Doo Summit sleds in fresh powder every day at Crowsnest Pass. More snow fell each night, blanketing the play areas like soft, thick comforters. The site reminded me of flying an airplane just above an unbroken mass of fluffy white clouds as far as the eye can see. Everything was deeply covered, with terrain contours obscured and smoothed by the billowy snow.

Our sleds sliced through that white stuff like hot knives through butter as we carved our way along snow-covered trails and across endless backcountry. The sensation was otherworldly – like floating on bottomless feather mattress. It cushioned us with gentle whoomphs and whooshed snow over our hoods and heads until we looked like little snowmen. I felt like a kid again, playing in the snow with my friends...

Glenn King and I visited Crowsnest Pass last March to discover why it continually receives accolades as “The Favourite Overall Snowmobiling Area in Alberta” and as “The Favourite Overall Snowmobiling Area in Western Canada”. I have to admit to some doubt as we drove in from Lethbridge looking at nothing but bare ground all the way. Even after some mountains loomed white on the horizon, it was still hard to imagine good snowmobiling anywhere when the streets and lawns of Crowsnest Pass itself were also brown.

I can understand why some snowmobilers might drive on through town searching for snow elsewhere, but that would be a big mistake. There’s really no need to drive any farther than Crowsnest, because the snow is usually no more than a few minutes up the hill. Or in our case, newly fallen right outside our door each morning!

GETTING STUCK

Riding in “fresh” is a mountain rider’s dream come true. So it was amazing to watch the easy way our guides, Joe Trotz, Doug Cox, Dan Forsyth and Andrew Bokkel, cut their sleds through the powder, looking as natural, graceful and effortless as ballet dancers. Constantly switching from side to side, they were one with their sleds, balancing on the running boards, manoeuvring with body English. But their level of skill and agility is foreign to many flatlanders like me who sit most of the time on their sleds. I tended to flounder along more like a walrus in waves than a seal slipping through water.

Don’t get me wrong. It was always great fun and I did improve marginally over the four days. Just not enough to keep these guys in sight! I also learned a whole lot about getting stuck – and unstuck. Did I say stuck?

Buried would be more like it. Even with our Summits’ 154” tracks, 2 ¼” paddles and 800R E-TEC engines, Glenn King and I managed to entomb them numerous times. It was as if our mission was to hit bottom, instead of floating over the top.

Fortunately, we were riding with experts at getting unstuck; they made that chore much easier than it otherwise would have been. I will note that while our guides didn’t get stuck often themselves, their interments were far worse than mine, largely because they are sufficiently skilled to avoid all but most difficult sled traps. Then it was helmets off and sweat on!

ABOUT CROWSNEST

The Municipality of Crowsnest Pass (pop. 5,565) is located in the southwest corner of Alberta, right at its boundary with British Columbia, in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. It’s



a rugged, wild and beautiful region, probably why the Crowsnest area is the setting for several episodes of the popular "Mantracker" series on OLN (featuring the aforementioned Joe Trotz as Terry Grant's sidekick).

Crowsnest Pass is actually a 1979 municipal amalgamation of the communities of Coleman, Blairmore, Bellvue, Hillcrest and Frank. These locales are strung out along Highway 3 like beads on a string and still retain some individuality of their own. Crowsnest

is the kind of place where herds of deer and elk graze beside the highway and the pace of life is slow and easy.

The elevation runs from 1,358 m (4,453') in town to 2,785 m (9,137') at the top of nearby Crowsnest Mountain. In between, you'll find some of the best mountain riding anywhere – and for new visitors, I highly recommend using a guide or riding along with locals to find the best places, the freshest snow and to stay out of trouble. And to be well fed...



Our lunches at the safety shelters were scrumptious. Egg rolls cooked by engine heat while riding. Brats roasted over the wood stove. We'd stop and all the condiments would suddenly appear by magic – plum sauce, ketchup, mustard, shredded cheese, two kinds of pickles, lettuce, tomatoes, plus cakes, cookies, other sweets and Gatorade.

On our final day, we made a surprise stop along the trail and feasted on real-meat burgers from Chippers, engine-heated during the ride. No wonder these mountain guys are all about making their sleds as light as possible. They carry so much in their packs – food, parts, emergency supplies, and avalanche gear – and eat so well that they'd sink out of site in the deep powder otherwise!

NORTH AND SOUTH

Crowsnest Pass provides snowmobilers with many distinct advantages. For sledding, it not only features many bowls and mountainsides for highmarking, but also offers plenty of rolling woodlands and meadows for boondocking. Plus it has 1,200 kilometres of trails, many marked

and mapped, including 200 km of main access corridors that are groomed regularly by the Crow Snow Riders Snowmobile Club.

What's more, Crowsnest delivers two separate playgrounds, one north of Highway 3 accessed from the Atlas or McGillvray Staging Areas, and the other south of town, accessed by the York Creek Staging Area. Both are within minutes of town. Each side is served by a club maintained safety shelter (and outhouse) heated by a wood stove, which makes a warm and comfortable lunch stop, a good place to dry out a bit, and if necessary, a safe haven in emergencies.

We rode both the northside and southside for two days each. Generally, the northside seems more popular, in part because it normally gets slightly more snow. Then too, the northside is more scenic since a major forest fire burned 20,000 hectares

of forest on the southside in 2003. What's weird is that while tens of thousands of dead trees stand denuded of foliage like stark telephone poles, they are interspersed with numerous clumps of living evergreens that miraculously survived the flames. The silver lining is that the sightlines are much more open for distance viewing on the southside and it's easier to boondock cross country there with so much of the undergrowth and foliage gone and the trees thinned out considerably.

RIDING CHOICES

The riding choices of Crowsnest Pass are important when deciding on a mountain destination. For our visit, the trade off for continuous fresh snow was an overcast sky with low clouds that reduced visibility at higher elevations and limited safe riding there. At the same time, spring-ish temperatures and new snow on top

of older base layers posed a serious avalanche threat, so the upper slopes were mostly a no-go zone. In many other mountain destinations, this combination of conditions would have meant either sitting in our rooms until they dissipated or piddling around close to a staging area.

Not at Crowsnest. First off, the north and south sides often have different weather. So if one is compromised somehow on any given day, the other can be good to go. Second, with 1,200 kilometres of trails, there's plenty of riding and access to backcountry powder without having to go high. As you can see from my photos, we never had the sunshine, blue skies and visibility that would have allowed higher elevation exploring, but we did loads of fantastic sledding anyway.

The other major benefit of so many trails is that Crowsnest is an easy place for casual riders, families, newbies and, yes, even



SGC Peak Season - Crowsnest Pass

flatlanders, to get a taste of mountain riding without having to do anything extreme. You can take in the incredible scenery, challenge your particular skill level or just enjoy the camaraderie of a memorable winter adventure, all in a safe place. On the other hand, if high and steep is your game, the trails get you quickly to enough slopes and bowls to satisfy your deepest craving for thrills and chills!

AFTER SLEDDING

Another factor that makes a snowmobiling destination popular is the quality of the experience when you're done for the day. This is where Crowsnest shines as probably the best value in mountain riding. Alberta has no HST. Gas costs less than in other provinces. And prices in town are reasonable and affordable compared to many other destinations. Surprisingly for a small town, Crowsnest is also blessed with many very good restaurants featuring a variety of

kinds and styles to satisfy the most cosmopolitan of tastes.

Lodgings range from beds & breakfasts to motels and there's even a rental site for holiday homes (crowsnestholidayhomes.com), if you prefer a true home away from home or want to socialize privately with a larger group. And don't forget that Crowsnest Pass also offers other winter fun for the non-snowmobilers in your life: downhill skiing at the Pass Powderkeg Ski Area in town or the more challenging Castle Mountain Resort, or cross-country skiing on groomed trails nearby.

About a two-hour drive from Calgary and a little over seven from Regina, Crowsnest Pass is an ideal mountain-riding destination for any time of the year. Snow comes as early as December and often stays well into April, so visiting Crowsnest early or late is also a good season extender. No wonder this destination a big award winner – and you can help keep it that way by purchasing a trail pass so the

Crow Snow Riders can continue to deliver unbeatable mountain riding for everyone!

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Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling – Your Ultimate Ride Guide". His snowmobile writing also appears in many newspapers, magazines and websites. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears on Snowmobile Television.

For more info, visit www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com



Tested on Tour GADGETS FOR DOWN UNDER PEACE OF MIND



Text | Craig Nicholson



SNOW FLAP SAVERS

Sometimes little things can make a huge difference. Last winter, I installed a small, boomerang shaped piece of metal at the back of each side of my tunnel, under the snow flap. I'd been led to believe that these "Snow Flap Savers" would do just that – keep my flap from rolling up and in to get caught in my track and chewed by my studs.

This annoyance usually occurs either when I'm backing my sled down my Triton trailer ramp, when backing up in loose snow or if the flap encounters the edge of a groomed trail when trying to turn around. The resulting jam up can be tough to pull back into position, unsightly to ride with and expensive to replace – but none of this happens with Snow Flap Savers. They're easy to install and I didn't have a flap issue all season. Check them out at www.tricked-toys.com.



ICE SCRATCHERS

Over the past several seasons, I've tried a variety of different ice scratchers. These are the devices that drag a tip on the surface on either side of your sled to throw spray up as additional lubrication for hyfax (sliders) and cooling for heat exchangers. The scratchers I tried attached to the side rails. They come either in torsion spring with non-flexible arms or a flexible cable design. All are primarily useful when riding hard-packed or icy trails when snow lube is scarce. Overall, they perform this function well, but not without challenges...

I can't recommend the ones with non-flexible arms for sleds with reverse, because unless you remember to lift the arm up before backing, you'll likely bend it out of shape sooner than later. Reverse is less problematic for the cable ones, which flex back and forth, but do tend to stiffen up somewhat in the cold. However, I've never been able to keep

two cable scratchers attached to the sled for any length of time.

A few times, the nuts holding them on worked loose or the carbide tip section that screws into the cable end fell off from riding vibration, no matter how much tightened. Frequently, because the cable arms won't stay up out of the way when not in use (hooked over the rail as they are supposed to be), they are scratching the surface most of the time. As a result, the tips tend to wear prematurely, but worst of all – I've sheered many arms right off when a tip caught on a rock, bridge deck or other trail protrusion. The likelihood of this happening increases with speed. And even after checking first that both scratchers are out of the way up on the sled rails, I've also sheered them off loading and unloading on a metal trailer ramp. So until someone comes up with a foolproof way to keep the arms up out of the way when not needed, ice scratchers are a good idea that still needs work.

CRAIG'S TOUR ITINERARY

WHO TO CONTACT

- Travel Alberta – travelalberta.com
- Crow Snow Riders Snowmobile Club – www.crowsnow.org
- Alberta Snowmobile Association - altasnowmobile.ab.ca
- Mr. R's Ski-Doo Rentals - www.mountainmemories.net

When Visiting Town, Please Patronize these Crow Snow Riders' Supporters:

Where We Stayed

- **Stop Inn Motel** - (403) 562-7381. Located on Highway 3 in Coleman, this roadside motel with house keeping units and WIFI is very clean and comfortable. Near gas, restaurants and convenience store.

Ample parking. Your Hosts: Tom and Ruth.

- **A Safe Haven B&B** - www.asafehavenbb.ca or (403) 563-5030. Located on Highway 3 in Coleman, this well-appointed bed and breakfast also offers a cabin and vacation homes. Tasty home-cooked breakfast, WIFI, secure parking and great beds. Your hosts: Alannah & Dan.

Where We Ate Breakfast

- Chris's Restaurant, main street, Coleman (403) 563-3093.
- Stone's Throw Café, main street, Blairmore (403) 562-2230
- A Safe Haven B&B, Hwy 3, Coleman (403) 563-5030

Where We Got Lunch To Go

- Chippers (403) 582-0103
- Side Trax Café (403) 562-8228
- Stone's Throw Café (403) 562-2230

Where We Ate Dinner

- River Ridge Family Restaurant, Hwy 3, Blairmore (403) 562-2252
- Bamboo Bistro, main street, Blairmore (403) 753-2222
- Vito's Family Restaurant, Hwy 3, Coleman (403) 564-4522
- Popiels Restaurant, Hwy 3, Coleman (403) 563-5555
- The Rum Runner, Hwy 3, Coleman (403) 562-7552