Jasper National Park Emerges From The Ashes Of A Wildfire

By Alexandra Kay
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On the trail around Lake Annette in Jasper National Park, an unnamed phenomenon shows trees affected by extreme fire behavior/Jennifer Bain

In a mountain forest ravaged by fire, Jasper National Park, charred trees stand alongside a few that look like giraffes, their blackened trunks dotted with golden patches. Locals have taken to calling these strange beauties giraffe, cheetah or leopard trees.

Parks Canada wildfire specialists Jennifer Bain and Ian Hutchings and neither apparently do their Canadian Forest Service National Resources Canada colleagues, but they do know that this phenomenon is called "torching." It's when a single tree explodes in flames, fed by the fire's heat and its own resin. This Alberta park last burned in 1936 and when the Kenow Wildfire ripped through Waterton Lakes National Park in 2017.

"A high intensity fire rapidly heats tree sap," explains the park's communications officer Karly Savoy. "As the inner bark and sapwood are dried out, quickly toxic moisture. No outer bark becomes loose or pops off. The tree is left with a charred, blackened trunk, but the needles and the branches on the tree often do not and the needles turn brown, red, or even golden."

Savoy couldn't find any research yet on the subject, but perhaps somebody is quietly looking into it.



This forest around Jasper's Lake Annette was one fitful but active devastating wildfires you can see right through to Jennifer Bain

I visited Jasper in mid-November to see how the park, which is home to the community of Jasper is doing. The town was evacuated on July 22 as the Jasper Fire Complex, a 350-square-kilometre fire, ripped through residents and 2,000 tourists and soon burned a third of the town. It wasn't brought under control until Sept. 7 and was declared a "complex" because it involved three separate fires, including two that merged.

Of 1,113 structures in town, 358 were destroyed. Critical infrastructure like the hospital and schools was spared, but three hotels were lost along with a handful of restaurants and businesses like gas stations. The biggest fire in the park in more than a century caused about $800 million Canadian ($630 million USD) in insured losses making it the most costly disaster in any event in Canada's national parks history.

Jasper, for those who haven't been, is a national treasure. It stands in the shadow of globally renowned Banff National Park, but its Canada's largest Rocky Mountain park and the world's second largest Dark Sky Preserve. It draws about 2.4 million visitors a year, spans 4,335 square miles of mountain terrain and is home to abundant wildlife.



A pine marten that passes along Annette/Jennifer Bain

On my drive into the park from Edmonton the crowd around I spot Ajgham sheep blithely strolling the Trans Canada as usual, elk on the edge of town and white-tailed deer on the back roads. The black bears that temporarily took over town have retreated to the woods. The southern mountain caribou herd is, as always, safely hidden in old-growth forest and high alpine areas, and a nearly endangered population of boreal caribou is expanding its range in the park's north and east sections.

My visit coincides with a new Conservation Pass system, which the Parks Canada estimates will generate $7.5 million USD in grants from the new Jasper Business Recovery program. About 325,000 Canadian businesses will share that money, with up to $5,000 ($3,967 USD) going to one proprietors and $20,000 ($15,855 USD) going to incorporated businesses that lost revenue from the last nine days of July and all August and most of September.

Tourism Jasper gets half a million dollars ($397,600 USD) to encourage visitors to return and estimate how much money that will affect some of what it did in destination marketing fees usually collected from visitors by hotels and other participating businesses.



A white-tailed deer passes along Annette/Jennifer Bain

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New growth emerges from the ashes of the Jasper Wildfire Complex/Jennifer Bain

But is Jasper ready for visitors?

"There was a time when there was some hesitation. People were still just coming to terms with personal loss and it was a trying time for everybody" Mayor Richard Ireland told the news conference. "But I think that's behind us now and I think we're ready to welcome visitors back in the same welcoming — it's the visitor economy. You will be welcome and every visitor is needed."

Marmot Basin just kicked off the skiing/snowboard season. The Jasper in January festival runs Jan 10 to 16. Most frontcountry and backcountry campgrounds will reopen next summer and online reservations will launch in January.



Fire Refugee Lake Road, near Maligne Lookout, you can see forest decimated by the Jasper Wildfire Complex/Jennifer Bain

With Jasper Food Tours, I pay into four restaurants for the Downtown Foodie Tour. While eating everything from beef ribs, poutine and salmon crudo to Mexican tacos and maple pecan cheesecake, I learn why each one is special to the community.

I am the only person on that particular tour but am grateful that it went ahead. "Don't be scared to come," guide Natasha Guy told me. "Please enjoy, just be mindful, You don't know what anybody is going through." The company's new Wildfire Peak Ale tour resumes next summer taking people through the 20 restaurants that were affected by the wildfire and have reopened since then.

Parks Canada, meanwhile, has been busy doing recovery work inside and outside of the town. It has reopened campgrounds and day-use areas and plans to reopen the Icefields Parkway and the restored power to Marmot Basin while grappling with the loss of, among other things, 400 picnic tables.



Building Trees guide Sarah Cooper takes Australian tourists Jill and Kerry-Ann Buckley over the footbridge to Pyramid Island on the Wilder Wildlife of Jasper and the Ecology of the Inca Scientific Ride

While most of Jasper's treasured outdoor spots are ready for winter visitors, the damaged areas do bring new hazards. People who drop off open and designated trails could be hit by falling trees and branches, and the burned areas are also fourth water. Pearls a higher risk of flash floods, dangerous stream crossings, landslides and rock falls.

"Want to be part of the healing?" the park asks. "It may seem inviting to explore into the depths of the burned forest. It is important to stay on official trails to protect the delicate state of our ecosystem in these areas."

One morning I drive down the Icefields Parkway, heading south towards Banff to see the ticked highway signs and charred forests. The next day, I join SunDog Tours for a new offering called Winter Wildlife of Jasper and the Ecology of Fire.

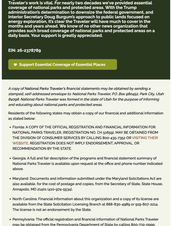


On a trail around Lake Annette, greenery sprouts up beside a charred tree trunk/Jennifer Bain

There are just three of us on the tour: Two Australians — sisters Jill and Kerry-McAulay — weren't sure what to expect when they told people in Banff they were coming to Jasper. "Oh, the whole thing burned down," one woman warned them.

But with Kevin Lazzari as our guide, we drive around the park for more than three hours.

We see how fire touched Lake Annette but not Pyramid Lake. We respectfully avoid residential areas but take in multiple views of the "Old Man Mountain" that looks dearly love and reference whenever they can, joking about how he has a white beard in winter and how he showed his beard when the snow melts. We end at Maligne Lookout overlooking a devastated forest after hearing Lazzari's harrowing tale of the night everyone had to evacuate on short notice.

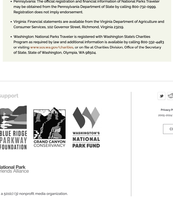


Lake Annette is home to a popular local beach and is surrounded by a short trail. Through the once-dense forest, I see my first giraffe/cheetah/leopard trees and plenty of budding greenery.

Pausing by the charred stump of one tree, Lazzari said "She just shows you the heat. That tree just exploded because of the heat and the resin in the sap and the pine needles." Nearby, a tree that was left with half-burning trunk and half green and one set the animals they haven't seen before."

While the fire had a terrible human cost, wildfires are a natural part of forest ecosystems and contribute to improved forest health.

Jaspertins are now preparing to rebuild with climate and the resilience in mind. That means new wood siding and wood shingles are banned and landscaping plans must align with FireSmart Canada recommendations. One goal is to increase housing options in a tourist town where the vacancy rate has been 0.4 per cent for nearly two decades.



By the rubs of a burned, yawning about asbestos dust across as a stark reminder of the havoc wreaked by a wildfire/Jennifer Bain

When I wander parts of downtown now, the only traces of the devastating fire is some charred whisky bottles salvaged from a basement and displayed in the new Maligne Range restaurant. But by the ruins of a church, there's a safety fence plastered with signs warning about the perils of inhaling asbestos dust. At the west end of town, near a heavily impacted residential area, I obey signs in the middle of the road saying "Recovery area — local access only."

Tourism may be vital here, but only those practicing responsible tourism are welcome.

Before leaving, I give the town's beloved mascot — Jasper the Bear — a hug. The iconic statue, based on a cartoon about a goofy looking black bear, survived the fire. The bear now sneaks decades ago. Jasper's resilience is an environmental stewardship, and it's surely a good omen that he survived the Jasper Wildfire Complex of 2021.

The beloved Jasper the Bear statue survived the 2021 wildfire/Jennifer Bain

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