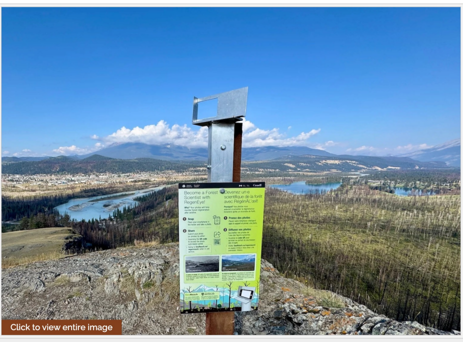
Revisiting Jasper One Year After The Once-In-A-Century Wildfire

By Jennifer Bain
September 30, 2025



A citizen science project asks hikers to snap a photo of the Jasper National Park landscape to monitor recovery from a once-in-a-century 2024 wildfire/Jennifer Bain

On a bedrock knob overlooking a mountain town in Alberta, I played citizen scientist by putting my smartphone in a holder and taking a photo of the fire-scarred landscape.

The picture captured Jasper National Park exactly one year after a state of emergency sparked by a historic wildfire was lifted. More poignantly, it captured how the forest is recovering.

I scanned a QR code to access the photo submission portal and got a grateful message from the RegenReach project thanking me for helping provide regular, standardized imagery of the flourishing understory.

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Along Old Fort Point Loop trail, there are signs of renewal after the Jasper Complex Wildfire/Jennifer Bain

“Together, we can make a difference in promoting environmental awareness and understanding of the natural landscape,” it read. “Your contribution to this project will help us create a comprehensive dataset for scientific research and conservation efforts.”

Glad to have done my tiny part that day to help Parks Canada, GeoReach and the University of Waterloo, I plunked myself down on Old Fort Point and thought about Jasper’s biggest wildfire in the last century.

The fire that began July 22, 2024 quickly forced 5,000 town residents and 20,000 visitors to flee. It burned roughly 80,000 acres and caused an estimated $943 million ($1.3 billion CAD) in damage to homes and businesses. People were kept away until the state of emergency was lifted Sept. 15.

WIPE YOUR FEET!
ESSUIE TES PIEDS!
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A boot brush station can now be found at the Old Fort Point Loop trailhead in Jasper/Jennifer Bain

I visited Jasper two months later just as it was reopening to visitors. This September, when I joined Jasper Food Tours for a “Wildfire Peak-Nic,” I was pleased that the first thing we did was use the boot brush station at the Old Fort Point Loop trailhead.

“One of the new things that we’ve got to do before going on the trail is scrub our boots all the time — absolutely mandatory if you’ve been outside of the park in the last couple days or so,” guide Nic Gosselin explained. “You want to remove all the seeds from your boots. All of the burnt area, the burnt ground, the soil is really ready for any seed coming from anywhere, so it’s the perfect time to spread those invasive species.”

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Jasper Food Tours guide Nic Gosselin talks about forest recovery on the Wildfire Peak-Nic tour/Jennifer Bain

For the next three hours, the avid naturalist led our group through “the burn scar,” explaining how Indigenous people always knew that forests actually need fire to be healthy but how Jasper’s dense forest had become unhealthy thanks to decades of government fire suppression policy.

“This is a much healthier looking forest,” Gosselin said, pointing out new growth greenery and saplings poking out of the ground. The hope now is that the land will be properly managed with more prescribed fires.

“It’s a new thing for all of us,” he allowed.

The Peak-Nic hike launched in 2022 with a focus on wildlife, plant life, Indigenous perspectives and, of course, lunch. Those elements remain but now Gosselin shares his memories of the mass evacuation and thoughts on the aftermath of the fire for Jasper’s residents and forests.

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Visitors to Jasper take a guided tour through the fire-ravaged landscape to witness new growth/Jennifer Bain

I also had a chance to hear Melanie Kwong — Parks Canada's executive director of operations for Alberta — speak to the GoMedia Canada Summit.

“National parks are more than protected landscapes — they are storyscapes,” Kwong said. “We’re part of a bigger story — one that includes everyone who loves these places.”

Some stories go back generations, she continued, acknowledging that Indigenous Peoples have “lived with and cared for these lands long before they were parks. Their stories are foundational and ongoing.”

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Elk graze by the Athabasca River near Jasper townsite as new growth forest emerges after a wildfire/Jennifer Bain

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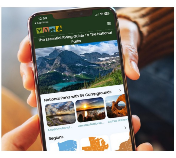
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During a walk with Cree Knowledge Holder Matricia Bauer of Warrior Women, I learned how the park's plant world offers important food and medicine.

“Mother Nature didn’t hold any grudges,” Bauer said over a chorus of territorial crows. “She wasn’t mad at us for lighting her on fire or, you know, not managing the forest. She just went about her business and produced these wild strawberries for us. It’s the most beautiful way to be gracious that I've ever seen.”

Bauer taught us how to introduce ourselves and “our water” to the river by wetting our hair. With dried wolf willow seeds and beads, she helped us make purse charms to remind us of the forest.

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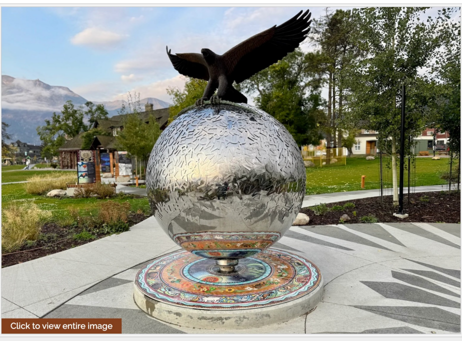
Warrior Women's Matricia Bauer tells a legend about trees, mice, wildfires and pine cones/Jennifer Bain

Holding a Douglas-fir cone, she told us a story about how a pine, fir and spruce tree refused to shelter mice from a forest fire. But how a Douglas-fir — the towering species with thick bark that usually survives fires — let the mice climb to safety and how you can now see "mouse legs and tails" going up into every cone.

“So out of everything I’ve told you today, you’ll probably remember that because it’s a story, right?” Bauer chuckled. “That’s the power of stories. They create something charming that we remember. They create synapses in our brains that make us smile. But stories also help us make sense of the world around us and so they’re really a powerful tool when it comes to passing on information.”

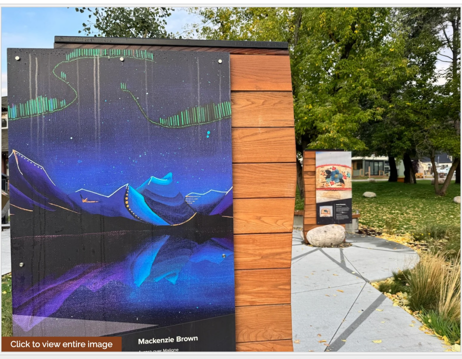


At the Jasper Indigenous Exhibit beside Parks Canada's Jasper Park Information Centre, the main collaborative piece is by sculptor Lionel Peyachew and Métis artists Lisa Shepherd and Kristi Bridgeman/Jennifer Bain

In the busy townsite that's preparing for ski season, the new Jasper Indigenous Exhibit acknowledges the connection Indigenous people hold to their traditional land in the park and creates a prominent place for their voices to be heard.

A grand opening last September was scuttled by the wildfire, but the outdoor gallery wasn't damaged when the blaze reached town. While most of the construction fences have been removed, the exhibit isn't quite finished.

The central collaborative installation *Wahkohtowin* — named for the Cree natural law that acknowledges kinship relations between all of the natural world — is up. A bronze eagle stands on a sphere that showcases words from six Indigenous languages and in turn sits above a representation of beaded artwork shown indoors at Parks Canada's nearby Jasper Park Information Centre.


Mackenzie Brown
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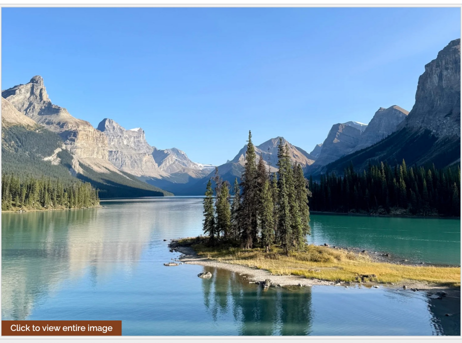
Artwork by Mackenzie Brown, who performs with her mother Matricia in Warrior Women, is displayed at the Jasper Indigenous Exhibit/Jennifer Bain

The project is touted as an example of Indigenous partners coming together with Parks Canada to work towards reconciliation. Wooden panels featuring Indigenous stories and art dot several paved paths through Athabasca Park near the new Jasper welcome sign.

One of these panels features *Aurora over Maligne* by Mackenzie Brown who performs with her mom as Warrior Women. Her painting honors the mountain spirits of Maligne Lake and has the northern lights beaded onto the canvas to signify ancestors dancing in the sky.

“The land holds spiritual and cultural significance,” the exhibit's welcome message explains. “We ask that you enter the mountains with this spirit in mind, in a joyful and respectful manner.”



For most of the year, Spirit Island is actually connected to shore. Visitors who arrive on the Maligne Lake boat tour are asked to view it from a respectful distance/Jennifer Bain

That's exactly what I did on a nine-mile trip down Maligne Lake on a boat called the *Leah Beaver* to Spirit Island, one of the most photographed places in the Canadian Rockies.

Tour guide Sydney Mason said the tiny island is home to 27 trees — mainly lodgepole pines, some dying thanks to mountain pine beetles — and is surrounded on three sides by the same mountain range. To the Stoney Nakoda First Nation, mountains are physical representations of ancestors.

Maligne Canyon was hard hit by the wildfire, but Maligne Lake was spared. There are no trails or roads to Spirit Island so you can only visit by boat. The island is usually connected to land, except during spring floods, but boat trippers can only admire it from shore and only for 15 minutes.

STOP!
Spiritual and
fragile area.
No access.
ARRÊTEZ!
Zone spirituelle
et fragile.
Accès interdit.
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Since Spirit Island is a "spiritual and fragile area," Parks Canada doesn't allow visitors on it/Jennifer Bain

First Nations people called this place Chaba Imne (Beaver Lake). Parks Canada explains that Mary Schäffer, a wealthy Quaker from Philadelphia, learned of the mysterious glacial lake in 1907, explored it thanks to a map from Stoney Nakoda guide and trail setter Samson Beaver, wrote about her adventures and made the area a popular tourist attraction.

She named it Maligne Lake after the river that flows from it, perhaps not knowing it's the French word for wicked. Schäffer dubbed the box canyon where Spirit Island sits “the Hall of Gods” and the nickname stuck. Her portrait of the Beavers and their young daughter is celebrated on an interpretive panel. We have Samson Peak and Leah Peak because she named the mountains surrounding the lake after the people who guided her journey.

"It's pretty special that this Stoney family is immortalized in our mountains forever," said Mason.

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A Jasper Hinton Air flightseeing trip over Jasper National Park includes yoga on a mountain steps from the park boundary near an area that barely touched by the wildfire/Jennifer Bain.

I actually got to soar over mountains in a helicopter and see parts of Jasper that were unscathed by last year's wildfire. Only about 80,000 of the park's 2.7 million acres were burned.

When we landed on an unnamed mountain to briefly do yoga, I found Parks Canada's stone boundary marker and stepped off Crown land and back into the park for a reflective moment.

On the return journey, Jasper Hinton Air co-owner/pilot Kristie Eccleston pointed out a small burned patch and shared how she did water bucketing during the historic blaze. She does flightseeing trips but also wildlife surveys, mountain rescues and firefighting.

Like everyone, she cherishes the Rockies and loves protecting and sharing them. "I like landing on mountains," she said as we flew as close to 20 feet above them. "Honestly, I just love mountains."

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Writer Jennifer Bain stands by a Parks Canada sign marking the boundary of Jasper National Park.

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