

Horses on Patrol by Kelsey Robson,
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1926. Horses helped early fire-fighting efforts in Kootenay National Park by carrying heavy equipment.

Credit: Parks Canada

“The saddle horse has been an integral part of the national park warden service since its inception. During the formative years of the service, horses provided the principal means of transportation for the wardens, for they were particularly suited for travel on narrow mountain trails where vehicles could not penetrate. As fire roads and improved secondary roads were developed throughout the national park system, the motor vehicle partially supplanted the saddle horse for the transportation of fire-fighting equipment, for patrol duties and for personal use, but a substantial number of horses have been maintained in the mountain parks and to a lesser extent in other park regions.”

-Robert J. Burns. Excerpt from *Guardians of the Wild: A History of the Warden Service of Canada's National Parks*, published in 1999



1981. Morning preparations at the Wolverine Patrol Cabin. Horses carried wardens into the backcountry to protect the park and improve visitor safety.

Photo by John Taylor

Long-time park naturalist Larry Halverson, now retired, has many fond memories of horseback patrol trips through Kootenay National Park. From the saddle, it was possible to cover a good distance in a day. Riders could stay highly tuned to their surroundings while the horse managed the trail and changing terrain. On these patrols, Larry was responsible for photographing and recording wildlife observations, carrying a saddle axe for clearing trails and providing information to backcountry users. Larry recalls that “visitors would always come up to talk and wanted to pet the horses.”

According to Larry, one of Kootenay’s patrol horses left behind an interesting legacy. Named Star, the horse passed away from old age in 1976. Star gave many good years of service to the park! As was the practice at the time, Star’s remains were moved from the pasture to a site along the West Kootenay fire road. The horse’s scent was picked up by a grizzly bear. Hans Fuhrer, a park warden at the time, followed the bear up the fire road in his truck. He remembers that “when the bear found the horse it

jumped up and down on it like a kid finding a bag of candy.” After several days, the grizzly gained a lot of weight and had to rest.



Photos by Larry Halverson

It is fitting that Star's last contribution as a Parks Canada horse was to the ecosystem of Kootenay National Park.

Parks Canada still uses horses for safe and efficient backcountry travel in some parks. Over difficult terrain, there is no substitute for a level-headed, sure-footed horse! When not actively patrolling and protecting our national parks, horses are wintered at Ya Ha Tinda—the only federally operated working horse ranch in Canada.