

# Banff Is His Backyard

*Dealing with  
angry bears or analyzing  
computer printouts  
— it's all part of the job  
for today's park warden*  
by BRUCE PATTERSON

It's out on the backcountry patrols where it really sinks in. A majestic golden eagle soars hypnotically overhead, scanning the mountainside for marmots and squirrels. The horizon is brilliant with the gold of larch needles as they defy the basic rule of evergreens and turn colour before dropping off. A grizzly rears up and carefully scrutinizes the intruder, then ambles off toward an alpine meadow.

Dave Cardinal has one of the most envied and sought after jobs in Canada. He's a national park warden, and he's stationed in Banff, the country's oldest and most prestigious park.

"It's exhilarating when you're out there on the trail. You realize that you are seeing a lot of things that most people never see in their lives. The park is like your back-

yard. You notice all the subtle changes."

The 29-year-old is part of a changing breed. There was a time when the park service didn't place too much emphasis on schooling. Wardens were recruited because of their basic skills in the outdoors. Mountain guides, hunters and packers were enlisted to keep an eye on poachers, find the occasional lost hiker and watch for threats to the wildlife.

Today, the service is looking for college and university educated recruits. Climbing, skiing, snowshoeing and other outdoor skills are as

important as ever but now there is more room to learn on the job.

Wardens can still find themselves face to face with 300 kilos of angry bear but they are also finding themselves faced with computer printouts of precise ecological data. They once relied on local knowledge and basic instincts to protect the environment. Now, they rely on biophysical surveys to produce environmental impact assessments.

They may be more sophisticated in their techniques and there may be new technology at their disposal but the essence of the job has remained the same — to protect people from the park and the park from people.

In 1971, Cardinal was one of 800 applicants in western Canada for jobs as seasonal wardens in the mountain parks. It was a typical year. Only one applicant in eight would even get an interview. Just a third of those final candidates would get a summer job.

Bruce Patterson

*Warden Dave Cardinal on patrol.*



Cardinal, a zoology student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, was number 35 on the hiring list. He finally got called for a job in Waterton Lakes National Park in the southwest corner of Alberta.

His father was a 25-year veteran of the provincial wildlife service, so Cardinal knew a little about the work; but it was still an eye-opening summer.

The lessons started from the very first day when he found that the job was not quite as glamorous as he'd thought. Cardinal had worked in Jasper during previous summer breaks and had always regarded the wardens as an elite group who stood out because of their distinctive uniform and stetson.

He arrived on the job to find his only government-issue clothing was a second-hand shirt. No stetson, no badge, no rifle. He had to rely on his wits or look for help from the senior staff when dealing with an armed and hostile hunter or a scavenging bear.

There was an even bigger surprise when he met his first boss, the chief warden in Waterton, Max Winkler. He hadn't seen him for years but he instantly recognized him. "He had saved my life four years earlier. I could never forget him."

Cardinal had been hiking in Jasper National Park when he had tried to ford Fiddle Creek, swollen by meltwater. The pole he was using for balance broke midway across and he was swept downstream, bounced off the bottom of the creek and knocked unconscious. Somehow, he was washed up onto the riverbank. "I spent the night lying half in and half out of the water. I almost died of hypothermia."

It was like a dream, he recalls, but he still remembers the face of the warden who found him by the creek. It was close to five kilometres to the nearest road but Max Winkler carried him on his back the entire way.

In Waterton, the rookie warden was teamed up with a veteran wildlife specialist, Keith Brady. Much of their time was spent tranquillizing bears that had become habituated to campgrounds and the townsite.

As a hunter, Cardinal had plenty of experience with bears but it had always been at a comfortable distance.

"When you get close to a bear you notice that it emits an odour. You never forget that smell."

It was a little disconcerting for the young trainee on his first transfer. He and Brady were having trouble lifting a 150-kilogram black bear into a trailer for shipping. Then they noticed that the tranquillizer was starting to wear off. "Amazing how we suddenly found the energy to lift it."



In Banff National Park, there is a steady stream of outdoor enthusiasts who head off into the wilderness. Most come prepared to cope with the mountain environment, but there are some who are just inviting disaster. They try to tackle a difficult rock face with street shoes, when experienced climbers wouldn't go near it without safety harnesses and the full range of protective equipment. Cross-country skiers head out into the backcountry with only a thin layer of clothing even though the temperature can drop dramatically in a matter of minutes. Campers take off on mountain trails with sleeping bags under their arms and pots and pans dangling over their shoulders.

It triggers an immediate response when veteran wardens see people obviously not prepared for the unforgiving environment of the Canadian Rockies. "You look at them going out and you associate it with the call you're going to get the next day telling you about the accident."

Wardens learn to live with the tragic side of mountain recreation but they never really get used to it and they always remember their first encounter with death.

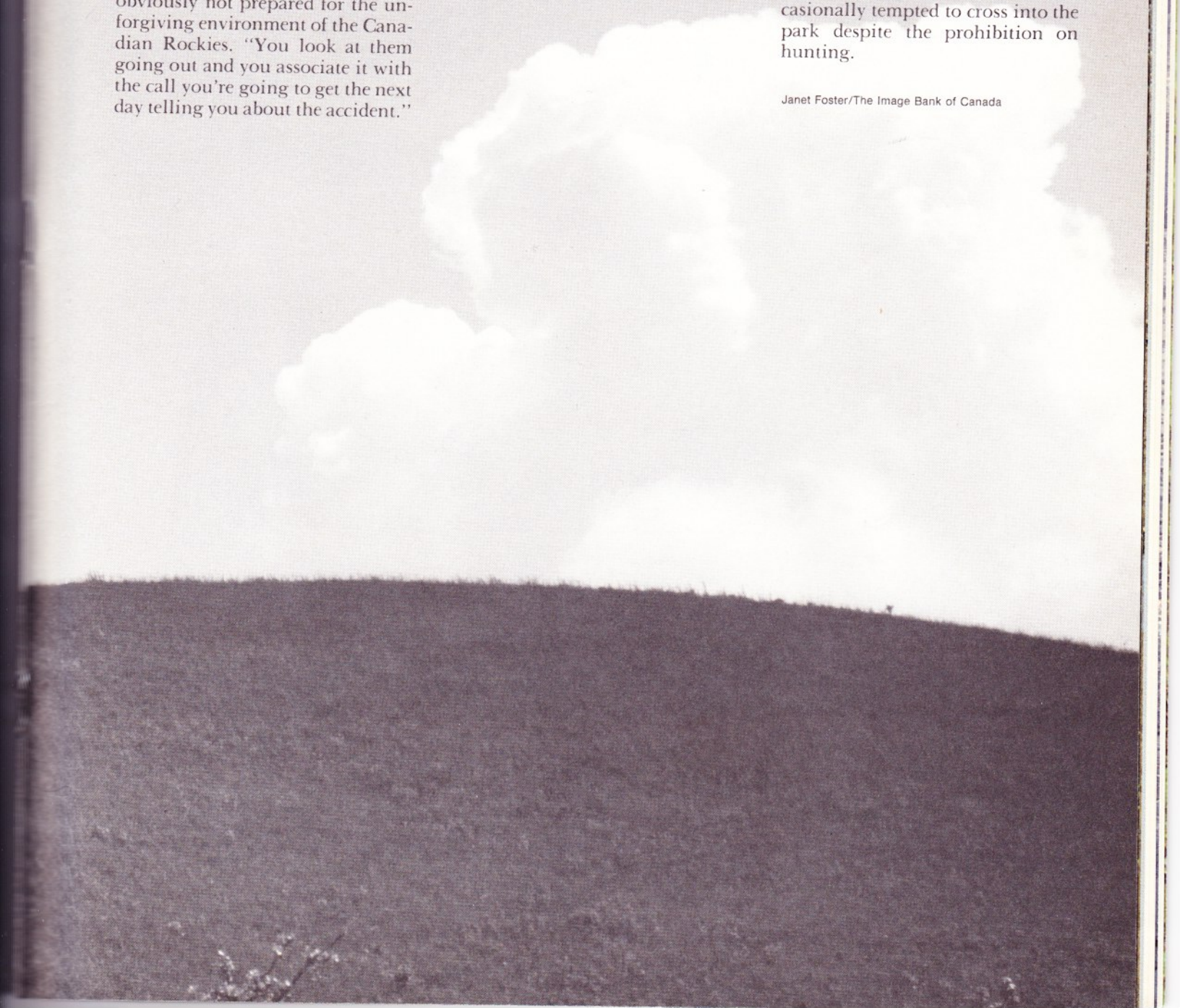
There was a group of youngsters out for a weekend hike in Waterton that first summer. It was a typical mountain accident, extremely preventable. There were too few adults to supervise the group. A nine-year-old straggled behind and wasn't missed until it was too late. He tried to take a shortcut to make it to a campsite but became trapped on a ledge. He fell 600 metres to his death.

There was an extended search. Cardinal was stationed at a backcountry position to relay radio messages between ground parties, a helicopter and search headquarters. He was the one who had to transfer the tragic bundle from the helicopter to a waiting ambulance when the search ended.

"I just remember the tremendous letdown when I realized he had been found but had died. I still couldn't believe it. It's always hardest when it involves kids."

In Waterton, Cardinal found himself using his hunting skills on the other side of the fence, so to speak — to keep an eye on hunters. A world record trophy sheep was shot near the park, and with mature rams valued at up to \$10,000, big game hunters are occasionally tempted to cross into the park despite the prohibition on hunting.

Janet Foster/The Image Bank of Canada



The young warden recalls spotting one hunter poised with a rifle right on the park boundary during the elk season. Rather than confront the man, Cardinal simply sat back and watched for close to two hours. Finally, he saw the reason the hunter seemed sure an animal would come his way. Three companions were inside the park herding an elk towards the trap. All four were convicted of poaching.

Canada's mountain parks are world-renowned as winter playgrounds but park wardens fight a constant battle to keep the roads and recreation areas as safe as possible from avalanches.

In 1978, 13 people died in avalanches in western Canada when an unusual weather pattern created extremely unstable snow conditions. Park wardens try to minimize the risk of tragedy by taking detailed readings to predict when slides are likely to occur and by actually creating a number of controlled slides to prevent a single major avalanche. "It's quite an experience lighting the fuses on three nine-kilogram bombs and waiting to drop them out of the backseat of a helicopter," said Cardinal.

The helicopter has probably caused the biggest change in the warden's job. While horses are still used for backcountry patrols, the helicopter has opened up even the most inaccessible mountain terrain.

Esther Schmidt

*Black bear in the mirror of a camper. Park bears that have learned to associate people with food have become an increasing problem in recent years.*

It has virtually revolutionized alpine rescue work. While the aircraft can get to the scene of accidents quickly, it cannot always land on the steep terrain. It means wardens ride on a sling dangling beneath the helicopter, often hundreds of metres above the ground. "I remember my first time out in training and comparing it quite favourably to the wildest carnival ride I'd ever been on."

Dennis W. Schmidt

*A blizzard transforms Sunwapta Pass on the Banff/Jasper border into a snowy maelstrom unsafe for vehicles. Park wardens help stranded travellers and are responsible for avalanche control.*







Janet Foster/The Image Bank of Canada

*Helicopters are reserved for difficult mountain rescues. A warden rides with the victim in a sling dangling underneath the aircraft, and administers first aid en route.*

He automatically scanned every piece of equipment used in the sling technique and wondered how it might fail and just what might happen if it did in mid-air. "You get over that after a couple of flights."

Park wardens do get accustomed to the ever-present dangers of the job. Cardinal recalls only one particularly close call.

He was on a winter patrol to backcountry huts used by climbers and cross-country skiers when he and a companion were caught in a whiteout. The wardens were forced to bivouac on a mountainside and wait out the storm while avalanches sounding like gunshots crashed down beside them.

When the storm cleared they found themselves trying to ski out in waist deep powder. Progress was painstaking as the leader had to lift each ski above the surface to pack the snow into a track. "You could only go 30 steps before you had to rest. It took two days to go about 20 kilometres." But they made it out safely with just a few toenails sacrificed to frostbite.

Cardinal didn't always want to be a warden. His first choice was medicine but he didn't quite have the marks in university. Now he runs into businessmen, lawyers, doctors and countless others in Banff who would gladly trade jobs.

With a starting warden making less than \$20,000 a year, it's not a career for people interested in making a lot of money. It's more a matter of choosing a way of life. "It's the type of job that is extremely invigorating or very depressing with very little in between."

"The biggest frustration is with some people's inability to see man's place in a natural system, the people who dump raw sewage from their recreation vehicle onto the ground in a picnic area, the people who feed the animals with no regard for their well-being."

"My biggest satisfaction comes when I see people enjoying the park and doing it in a respectful fashion." □

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