

THE VANISHING JEWEL: Flying to and Touring Glacier National Park (Part 1)

by MATTHEW MCDANIEL

In cruise flight, we'd reached the halfway point across the expansive width of Montana. The smoke that had been looming ahead, obscuring the western horizon in a thick and dingy haze, was now upon us and reduced forward visibility to almost nil. Peering out the side window and downward, the terrain features were visible as though looking through yellow stained-glass in need of a good washing. Extreme drought had parched most of the western United States throughout 2015, contributing to a deadly wildfire season. The Pacific Northwest was particularly hard hit, with Washington and Oregon experiencing their most destructive wildfire seasons ever. I'd been watching the Park Alerts, NOTAMs, and fire-related TFRs for a couple of weeks, hoping the fires threatening Glacier National Park would soon be contained. After all, this might be my one and only opportunity to visit Glacier as a tourist, and the kids were at great ages to do so now. Most importantly, the old axiom that "you can always go next year because the mountains aren't going anywhere," does not apply to Glacier National Park (GNP). The park is best known as one of the few places to see true glaciers in the continental United States, yet those glaciers are disappearing at an alarming rate.

You Can't Get There from Here

It would be an understatement to say that GNP is remote. Nestled on the Canadian border, in northwestern Montana, the park adjoins Canada's Waterton Lakes National Park, which is in the extreme southwestern corner of Canada's Alberta Province, bordering British Columbia. Both parks are quite distant from any significant population – the closest sizable city to GNP is Kalispell, Montana (population: 21,000), about an hour's drive from the west park entrance. Those entering the park at the east gate most often come through Great Falls, Montana (population: 60,000), nearly four hour's drive away. My family and I had been trying to get to Glacier for years.

I received a taste of the area a few times when piloting business jets into Kalispell and Great Falls. While both airports have airline service, neither are served by anything larger than regional jets. That translates directly into high airfares for the minimal number of airline seats to choose from. Driving from our Wisconsin home would



Just upstream from the impressive McDonald Falls, McDonald Creek is a shallow, winding stream of ice-cold glacier watch.

take roughly 24-hours non-stop. Taking a train would be wonderfully scenic – both the east and west park areas are served by train – but the distances were still too vast for us to cover in the allotted time we had. Airlining into Great Falls would cost us almost an entire day in the park, due to the long roundtrip drive. Paying the expensive airfare into Kalispell, also required us to fly from the Midwest to the West Coast, then back east to Montana – not exactly the most time-efficient routing. For those reasons, combined with its short tourist season and our personal time commitments, we'd missed the annual window for visiting GNP, year after year. That frustration was only exasperated by our knowledge that the glaciers were melting away faster with each passing year. There was only one reasonable solution for a Cirrus pilot and his family – general aviation to the rescue!

Gateway to Glacier

We decided that flying ourselves into Kalispell's Glacier Park International Airport (KGPI) in a borrowed Cirrus

would be the time-saving solution we required. We would drive ourselves to southeastern North Dakota to visit family and friends there. As luck would have it, one of those friends owns a Cirrus that doesn't get much use that time of year, due to his large farming operation's harvest rush. The flight from North Dakota to northwest Montana is right at the max range of the G3 SR22TN (factoring in typical headwinds), so it was fortunate my kids are still young and we're a family of light-weights. We were able to top off the fuel, load ourselves and our baggage and stay well within W&B limitations. Our route inbound would take us just south of the park across the Lewis & Clark and Flathead National Forests, and Flathead Lake. Prior to reaching the mountain crossing, we'd broken out of the dense smoke and were now cruising well above broken clouds. This made the location of the ongoing forest fires obvious, as their smoke plumes rose well above our altitude. I asked to make deviations around the plumes, all of which had TFRs associated with them, mostly from 12,000 feet to the surface to clear the airspace for aerial firefighting aircraft. Initially, we were assigned the RNAV (GPS) Z Runway 2 approach into GPI, because the ILS was out of service. This required us to navigate well west of the airport to the Initial Approach Fix (IAF), as there was no eastern transition into that approach. Thankfully, ATC soon reported the ILS was again operational and offered us vectors to the ILS 2. We readily accepted this time-saving clearance and began step-descending as the mountains fell into the valley. After four hours of headwind-bucking flight, we landed and exited the runway adjacent to our chosen FBO.

Glacier Jet Center proved to be very helpful both before and during our visit, arranging for a rental car, and pulling it planeside upon our arrival on their apron. Fuel was reasonably priced and the facilities were first-class, yet loaded with rustic charm. The receptionist provided a local map to help us navigate to our hotel in West Glacier and

was even kind enough to mark a couple of known speedtraps along the route! She also had current information on road closures and travel restrictions associated with the fires. After the long flight in, we were ready for lunch and Jet Center recommended Montana Coffee Traders located in the little town of Columbia Falls. Far more than a coffee shop, it was a perfect introduction to the locals and their casual cuisine. The place was packed (always a good sign), the staff was friendly, and the food was excellent.

Crown of the Continent

The vast ecosystem of Glacier and Waterton Lakes is one of the most pristine remaining in North America, with its thousands of native plant and animal species and hundreds of glacier-fed lakes, rivers, and streams. In 1932, the combined U.S. and Canadian parks were designated Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park – the world's first international peace park. Both parks are also designated World Heritage Sites; locations of cultural and natural importance to all humanity. While GNP itself covers over one million acres (1,500-plus square miles), all associated protected lands on both sides of the border encompass 10.2 million acres (16,000-plus square miles)!

The wild solitude of Glacier beckons hikers, photographers, and naturalists with its 700-plus miles of marked trails, yet it is teeming with sites and structures on the National Register of Historic Places. Those interested in geology will find some of the best preserved and most accessible examples of ancient rock in the world, due in large part to the Lewis Overthrust. As the Rockies formed millions of years ago, this area of rock – hundreds of miles long and

One of the dozens of 1930's White Motor Coaches operated as tour shuttles within Glacier National Park, makes a photo-op stop along the Going-to-the-Sun Road. Since the early 2000s, they've been riding on modern Ford chassis, with clean-burning propane engines and other safety improvements.





A deer doe and her two fawns graze and drink peacefully along a rocky shore of Lake McDonald, near Fish Creek. Observing quietly from a safe distance, we were able to watch them for about 10 minutes before they moved back into the forest.

several miles thick – was forced upward, displacing newer rock. The end result was upper rock 1.5 billion years older than the lower rock it now rests upon, leaving fossilized records of some of the earliest life anywhere on the planet. These fossils were once part of an ancient seafloor that now lies among mountain summits. Scientific significance aside, even the casual tourist is enthralled by the easily spotted wildlife, the 200-plus waterfalls, and the sweeping vistas of Glacier that seem to refuse to relinquish your gaze.

West Glacier

Reaching West Glacier, we checked into a motel of the same name. While small and basic, it was clean and served its purpose for us. Best of all, a few steps outside our door was a beautiful, wildflower-filled gorge of the Flathead River (Middle Fork). Trails down to and along its banks were accessible on either side of the bridge, straddling the river between West Glacier Village and the park entrance. We ventured into the park to get the lay of the land and updates on the fires and smoke. My biggest concern was whether the famous Going-to-the-Sun Road, which traverses the park, would be open, as the Reynolds Creek fire threatened parts of its eastern half, both north

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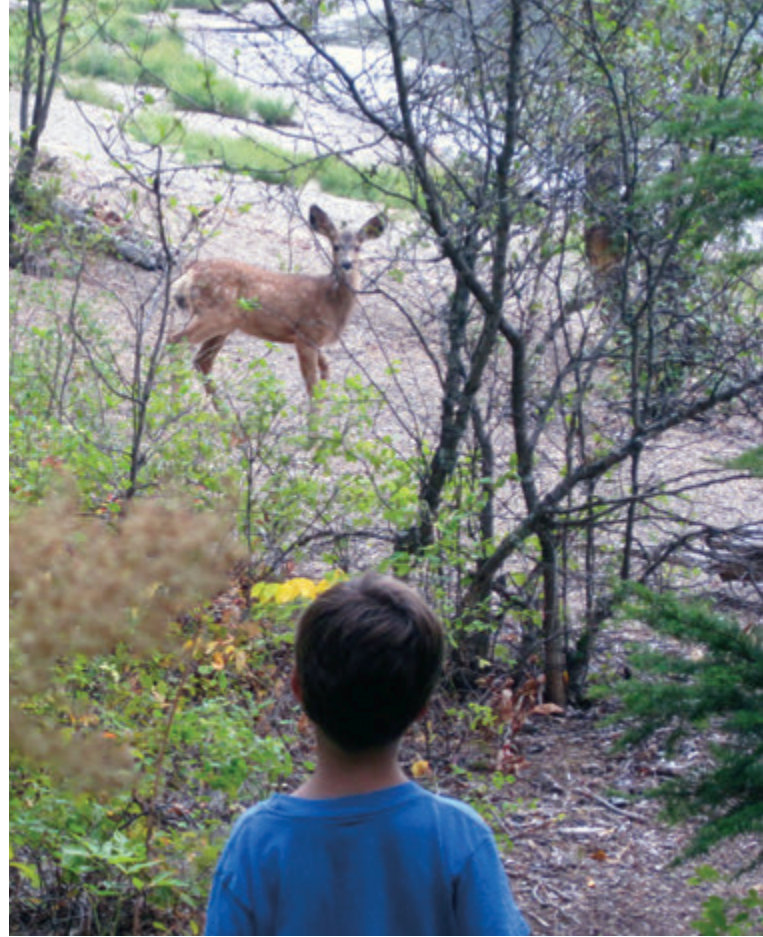
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and south of the road. We were relieved to learn the whole road was open and that stopping was restricted only on the eastern third. The fire had been contained and only hot-spots remained.

A Canadian Visitor's Center, in West Glacier, is filled with information and exhibits about our northern neighbor's connected park and the many other National Parks and protected areas deeper into Alberta and British Columbia. Leaving there, we spent the remainder of the afternoon exploring Apgar Village and trolling about on Lake McDonald – Glacier's largest lake at 9.4 miles long, over 460 feet deep, and covering nearly 7,000 acres. Smoke limited our views, but not our enthusiasm, and we continued our trek into the evening. We wandered up Lake McDonald's west shore to Fish Creek for a solitary picnic dinner on a rocky beach and some casual hiking. We watched a deer doe and her two fawns grazing peacefully along the shoreline and drinking from the lake.

Going-to-the-Sun Road and Beyond

We rose early for a hearty breakfast at the cafe adjacent to our motel. We were discovering that the combination of the late season, at the end of August, and the smoke had made even the villages feel desolate. We were told many folks had checked out early due to the smoke. Their loss was our gain as the night had carried a front through and shifted the winds and smoke back west, creating much improved visibility over the previous day. We were



The author's son had a brief staring contest with a juvenile deer near Fish Creek, on Lake McDonald's west shore.

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One of the many archways along the Going-to-the-Sun Road which allow the glacier-fed waterfalls to flow, uninterrupted, under the roadway and into the valley rivers below.

anxious to drive the marvel of 1920's engineering – a 53-mile road that's impassable for eight months a year due to massive snow accumulations. Taking 11 years to complete (1921-32), it is both a National Historic and a National Civil Engineering Landmark. While we chose to drive the Going-to-the-Sun Road ourselves, I watched the public transportation navigating the switchbacks and steep grades with fascination. The National Park Service operates a fleet of about 70 1930's-era White Motor Coaches. Restored in 2001 by Ford, they now ride on modern Ford chassis, powered by efficient propane-burning engines. Their driver/tour guides, known as "Jammers," stop at the most popular scenic overlooks and visitor centers, as well as the major lodging areas on both sides of the park.

The road is narrow and lacks guardrails in the areas where the tons of snow and resulting avalanches have destroyed every attempt to build them, however, it's smooth and relatively easy to drive in a typical rental car (vehicles over 22-foot long are prohibited). We stopped at several scenic spots along the way to view magnificent peaks, valleys, and various wildlife. We spotted mountain goats perched precariously on steep cliff faces, hundreds of feet above us, and big-horn sheep grazing on rock-strewn meadows. At the apex of the road, several trailheads are located at Logan's Pass Visitor's Center. Hiking with kids, we skipped the famous Highline Trail, which winds along cliff edges

and mountain ridges. Instead, we chose the three-mile Hidden Lake Overlook trail. While mildly challenging in places, its scenery, wildlife, lakes, and glacier views did not disappoint. During our time there, I was trying to picture the whole of Logan's Pass, including the buildings, as in winter they are literally buried under a mountain of snow. Just a little further east are Big Drift, Garden Wall, and the Continental Divide areas, which often see snow depths of 80 feet! While it usually takes about 10 weeks for snow plow crews to reopen the Going-to-the-Sun Road each year, it can take a full month to clear just this one-mile stretch, using equipment that can move 4,000 tons of snow per hour!

Fire damage was obvious on both sides of the eastern portion of the Going-to-the-Sun Road, with vast swaths of trees standing naked and charred. Scenic overlooks were closed to prevent people from wandering into still-volatile areas; yet, the scenery was still majestic, when viewed with the knowledge that before modern firefighting, forests burned and rejuvenated and such fires were, in fact, necessary to sustain a balanced ecosystem. The final 10 miles of the Going-to-the-Sun Road follows the north shore of St. Mary Lake, Glacier's second largest lake, ending at the community of St. Mary with a year-round population of less than 50. There, we checked into our cabin at the St. Mary Lodge & Resort and picnicked on our porch, a few yards from Divide Creek, enjoying views of Otokomi and East Flattop Mountains. The St. Mary Visitor's Center provided tips for seeing the eastern park and we ventured out again for a quick hike to a historic ranger station.

Afterward, we decided there was enough daylight left for more exploring and proceeded north to the Many Glacier Hotel and the area known as the American Alps.

In the next issue, we'll continue our tour of Glacier National Park and proceed north to the adjoining Waterton Lakes National Park in Canada. Part Two will hopefully provide you more reasons to put a visit to Glacier on your short-list of "must go" destinations. Finally, we'll discuss departing the area via Cirrus. ⊕

Author's Note: Special thanks to fellow COPA Member and Cirrus owner, Carl Larson, Jr., whose generosity in making his aircraft available, made this trip and article possible.

Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 25 years of flying, he has logged over 15,000 hours total, over 5,500 hours of instruction-given, and over 5,000 hours in all models of the Cirrus. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he also flies the Airbus A-320 series for an international airline, holds six turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 80 aircraft types. Matt is one of 25 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for seven consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at matt@progaviation.com or (414) 339-4990.

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