

# Rocky Mountain High

By Ellen Morritt

Having trained standardbreds for most of my adult life, I thought I knew horses pretty well. A recent week spent horseback riding in the Rocky Mountains opened my eyes to the full range of capabilities of horses. I was struck by the contrast between my rough-and-ready ranch horse and my meticulously cared for standardbreds back home.

On the insistence of my teenage son, I booked a seven-day package with Anchor D Guiding and Outfitting, located just southwest of Calgary, Alberta. Based at a mountain camp at 6500 feet in the Sheep River Valley, we were to make day trips by horseback in the surrounding Rocky Mountains.

Though I expected breathtaking scenery, I was awed nonetheless. What I was totally unprepared for was the combination of unerring willingness, responsiveness, and athletic ability of my horse.

I rode Mouse, a 16 hand, bay gelding of undetermined age and breeding. Perhaps with some percheron in his lineage, he was well muscled front and back, with stocky legs, upright pasterns, and size four feet.

I rode Mouse seven hours a day, for seven days. He never balked, hesitated, or shied. He carried me over rocky, switchback trails high into the mountains. Other times my horse's legs were sucked down a foot or more into boggy peat. We dodged knee-knocking tree trunks and head-butting overhead branches. I felt sorry for Mouse as he was often smacked and prodded by belly-high spruce. I wore chaps, long sleeves, and a hat for protection.

On the sixth and most memorable day of my trip, in a little over three hours, Mouse carried 200 pounds (me, my saddle, and gear) up nearly 1800 vertical feet to the top of Rickert's Pass. The grade averaged 12% up to 30%! This was up a narrow switchback trail, littered with sharp rocks and small boulders. Sometimes we were in dense trees, other times exposed on steep alpine meadows. (If I did not have complete faith in my guide – a seasoned Alberta cattleman - I would surely have never attempted such a climb.) It took two hours to return to the valley floor, leading my horse down trails so steep I often slipped on loose rock and earth. All the while my horse followed quietly, one foot at a time.

The horses drank from streams, and ate whatever they could find on the valley floor whilst hobbled during the early evenings. (Before sundown they were collected, grained, and tied to trees overnight in camp.) A resourceful lot, the horses developed a new three-beat gait: the hobbled front feet hopping in unison, followed two-three of the hind feet. They could reach a fair speed at this rate!

So next time I hang a pair of hobbles on a pacer, I'll think of the hopping, three-beat gait of the hobbled horses. And, next time I scrupulously scrub a water pail, I'll think of my horse drinking deeply from a mountain stream. Or, when my trotter side-steps a puddle, I'll think of splashing water while cantering my horse down a stream bed.

Standardbreds spend most of their racing careers in a stall. In contrast, ranch horses out west are likely only inside while being shod, and that's only for the farrier's benefit. They are born outside and pastured outside in four seasons.

Standardbreds follow a daily routine of a half hour of jogging, except for training days and race nights. Ranch horses often work long days under saddle, and then may be turned out for days.

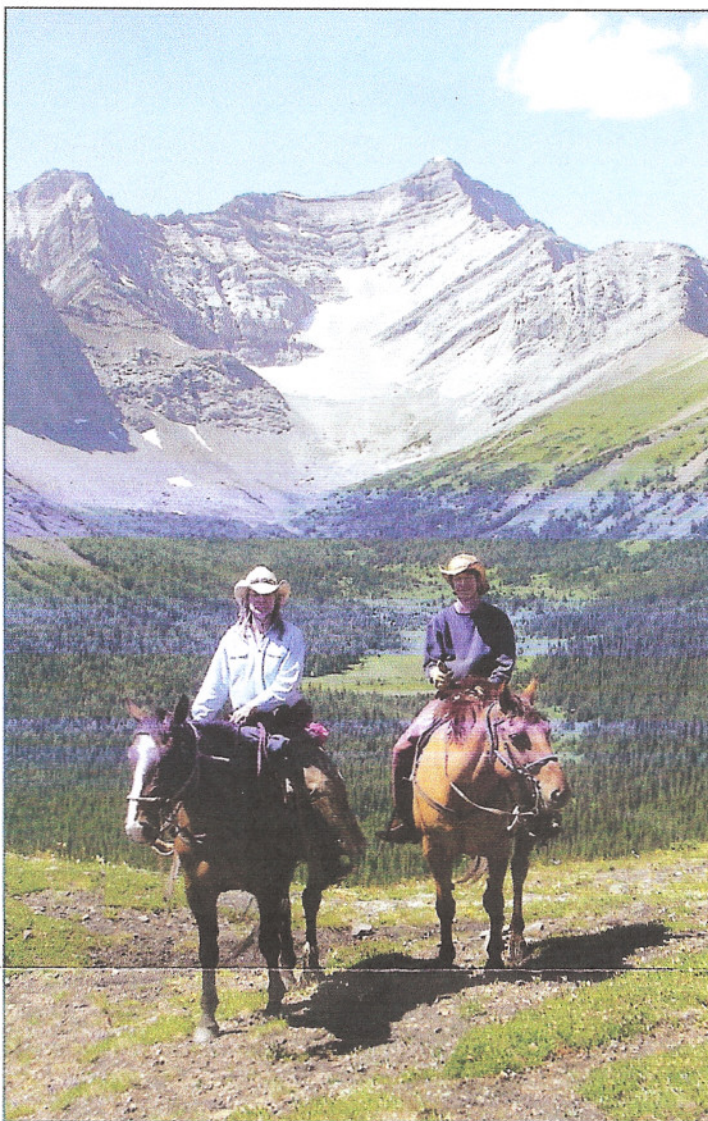


Photo by Garth E. Clegg

Ellen Morritt and her son Brett at 8000 feet on Misty Ridge with Storm Mountain in the background.

Very apparent to my son, western tack is pretty simple compared to a harness. Ranch horses never sport head poles, ear plugs, or stud supports. And wranglers never tie their horses' tongues or tails.

Like all working horses, ranch horses are grained and hayed accordingly. A regular schedule for deworming and farrier work is followed (four steel half-round shoes are typical). "No foot no horse" applies to all equine disciplines.

Age of a good, sound, saddle horse is of little importance. Spook, an appaloosa cross regularly used for trail rides, was known to be eighteen years old and still raring to go.

One of the most remarkable sights for me was seeing the horses step up into the stock trailer for the half-hour ride from trail head to ranch. Eleven horses, all saddled, rode head to tail, shoulder to flank. They were all geldings, but still remarkable!

My time spent on horseback in Alberta was unforgettable. I rode a horse up mountains. I rode where I never thought horses could go. Next November, when I circle the track on a rainy, bone-chilling day, I'll smile warmly and think of riding on horseback, through sunny alpine meadows, on top of the world.