

The Chilcotin Ark

The Chilcotin Ark in southwestern British Columbia between Lillooet and Tweedsmuir Park is an ideal location for horseback riding and hiking in true Canadian wilderness, an area rich with wildlife, bio-diverse ecosystems and international ecological importance. It is an area that can be described as the Shangri-La of North America, nature's paradise. The Chilcotin Ark is reachable for just a limited time each year before snow makes the mountain passes inaccessible.

The Chilcotin Ark is 2.5 million hectares in size, an area of exceptional biodiversity, comprised of multiple different ecosystems that are tightly interconnected. Towering mountains, endangered wildlife species and the freshest mountain water are found in the Chilcotin Ark. It is a prime location for 11 of the 29 big game species of North America, including grizzly and black bear, mountain goats, California Bighorn sheep, the federally and provincially protected woodland caribou and cougar. There are many other important species in this highly connected ecosystem, including Clark's nutcrackers, bald eagles, marmots and wolverines. The Chilcotin Ark is also home to one of the most remote wild horse populations in North America. These horses are culturally important for the First Nations of the area, the Xení Gwet'in of the Tsilhqot'in.

The Chilcotin Ark is the only place where grizzly bears regularly give birth to four cubs at a time, all thanks to the endangered white bark pine tree. This hardy and highly-adapted species grows at tree line and produces cones about once every three years. The tiny pine nuts found in these cones contain more protein than salmon, allowing the grizzly bears to give birth to larger numbers of cubs at a time. The white bark pine is endangered in much of Canada, but its populations thrive here. The Chilcotin Ark provides unparalleled opportunities to see this important species that not only feeds grizzly bears, but also Clark's nutcrackers and squirrels. This shows how deeply interconnected all the species of the ecosystem are, each depends on the others to survive.

12 of British Columbia's 16 biogeoclimatic zones are found in the Chilcotin Ark. The huge variety of ecosystems in the Ark is clear from these biogeoclimatic zones – it has everything from Douglas fir forests to alpine tundra. The Chilcotin Ark is the only place in BC where all three alpine biogeoclimatic zones meet. The most northerly extension of montane grassland is also found in the Ark. This shows the high ecological value of the Ark and contributes to its huge biodiversity. The mountains of the Ark also provide security for wildlife and wild plants in times of climate change as it has three major climate regimes. In areas of flat terrain, wildlife have to migrate about 10 miles north every decade to escape the effects climate change, but in mountainous areas, wildlife need only move uphill 36 feet per decade to get the same benefit. This positions the Chilcotin Ark as a vital refuge for wildlife in times of climate change.

This area produces diverse food sources that have nourished the wildlife and humans that live here for generations – First Nations, hunters, trappers, ranchers, tourism operators. Some of these food sources include pine nuts, wild potatoes, wild onions and a plethora of berries – blueberries, soopallie berries, raspberries, thimbleberries, strawberries and choke cherries. Grizzly and black bears feast on these berries when they are ripe as they fatten up in preparation for hibernation through the long, cold winters.

The Chilcotin Ark is the largest water storage in western North America, the largest temperate icefield in the world and the source of four major river systems. The glaciers and mountain run-off that feed the turquoise lakes and rushing creeks of the Ark provide vital hydration of the purest mountain water to humans and wildlife alike and keep the flowering meadows green throughout the hot, dry summer. The

Chilcotin Ark is also a huge carbon storage area in the vast Douglas fir and pine forests. Water and carbon storage highlight the importance of the Chilcotin Ark in combating climate change, showing how it has a larger reaching impact than just within its own borders.

Mineral licks and springs bring wildlife such as California Bighorn sheep and mountain goats many miles to access these vital minerals.

50 million year old fossil walls are found at 6000ft elevation. When these animals were alive, they would have lived on the sea bed, showing the ever-changing nature of the Chilcotin Ark. Ancient volcanic eruptions and shifting tectonic plates have shaped the mountains to bring these fossils to their current elevation.

The Chilcotin Ark is easily accessible by horseback and hiking with options for every level of hiker, rider and horse experience in the back country. Campsites at many major trail heads allow you to drive or trailer your horses right to the park boundary. Then, you enter into the wilderness of the Chilcotin Ark. Many of the trails in the Ark are historical game trails, First Nation or mining trails – just wide enough for a horse to pass. These trails are from the days when all transport was by horse or foot, a true wilderness experience. You can ride or hike through the forests at lower elevations, or ride up through sup-alpine meadows to the mountain tops. Rolling mountain tops and plateaus make easy walking for horses and hikers alike.