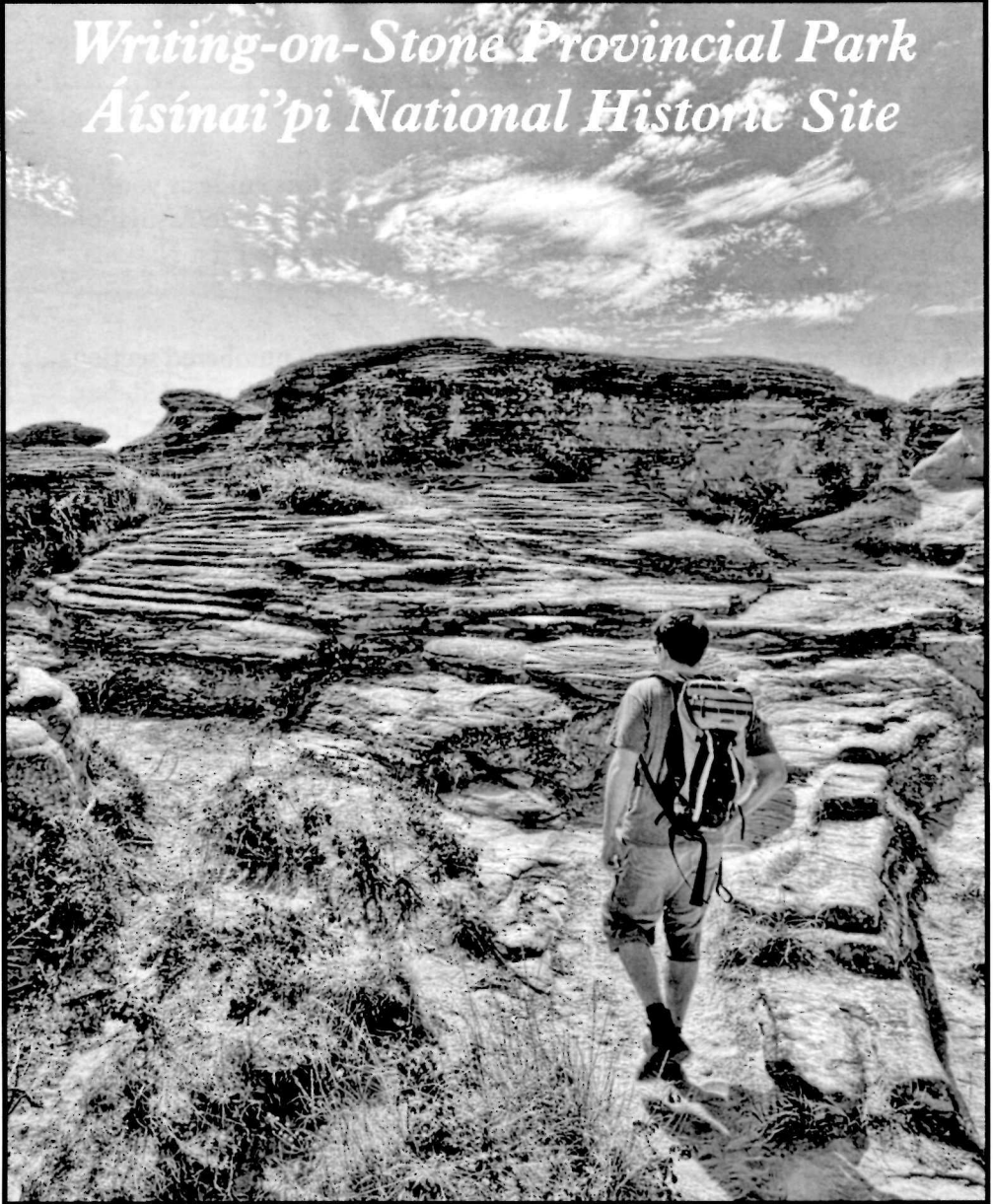


Hoodoo Interpretive Trail

*Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park
Aísínai'pi National Historic Site*



Self-guided Trail Brochure



If you no longer require this brochure, please return it to one of the boxes found at the trailheads. Thank you.

Hoodoo Interpretive Trail

WELCOME to the Hoodoo Interpretive Trail. Use this guide as you explore the unique natural environment of Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai'pi found along this trail, and discover the close relationship First Nations people have to this place.

The numbered posts along the trail correspond to the numbered sections in this guide. Starting the trail at the campground is recommended, but the trail can be followed in either direction – feel free to hike all or just part of the route. The trail length (excluding the Battle Scene trail) is 4.4 km return. Starting at the campground, the distance to the Battle Scene is 3.5 km return. The map in the centre of this guide illustrates the trail route, access points and distances.

For your comfort and safety wear good walking shoes on this trail. Carry water, wear a hat and use sunscreen – temperatures exceeding 40°C are often recorded among the hoodoos. There is no smoking allowed on the trail; a match or cigarette can quickly start a grass fire.

The environment which you are about to walk through is extremely fragile. Climbing on the hoodoos can easily damage these rock formations, and the passage of many feet will quickly trample the vegetation, leading to soil erosion. To prevent this damage, and to keep our park in a natural state, **please stay on the trail at all times.**

Under the Provincial Historical Resources Act, fines of up to \$50,000 and a jail term can result from altering, marking or damaging any archaeological resource, including rock art. It is also illegal to deface, disfigure or mark the sandstone cliffs and hoodoos anywhere in the park. Please help us to protect this area by reporting acts of defacement.

Stop 1 - A Magical Landscape



J. HAWKWOOD

LOOK around you – these strange sandstone formations, called hoodoos, make Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi a unique place on the prairies. The result of thousands of years of erosion, hoodoos began forming after glaciers exposed the sandstone bedrock during the last ice age. Rain has sculpted the rock by wearing away softer sections of the sandstone faster than harder sections. Wind-blown sand has softened the edges of the hoodoos, while frost has split off large blocks of sandstone to form cliffs. These processes have created fantastic shapes and a magical landscape.

***FIRST** Nations people have used this valley for at least 3000 years. On their seasonal rounds, indigenous people left traces of their passing – bits of bone and stone. Many archaeological sites have been found in the park, dating from 1000 BC to only a century ago. The cultural identity of the earliest First Nations groups at Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi is uncertain, but during the 1700s and 1800s, this area was part of the territory of the Blackfoot People. They reacted to the strange landscape of Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi much like park visitors do today – with awe and wonder.*

Stop 2 - The World Created by Napi

THE valley before you seems much too large for the small, meandering river which flows through it. Starting about 20,000 years ago, the glaciers of the last ice age began receding to the northeast. Great volumes of meltwater, flowing to the south and east, carved down through the soft sandstone, creating the wide glacial spillway we see today. The relatively tiny Milk River, part of the Missouri-Mississippi drainage system, now follows the path of this huge glacial torrent.

***IN** Blackfoot traditions, the world was created by Old Man, or Náápi. The Milk River valley was just one of many features he made in the first days as he travelled across the plains. Everywhere Náápi went, he formed the landscape and placed plants and animals upon the ground. Then Náápi taught the first people how to use the things he created – food, medicine, clothing and tools were all provided by the land. Here at Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi the land remains much as Náápi created it.*

Stop 3 - The Summits of a Sacred World

REACHING an elevation of 2128m some 12km to the south, the Sweetgrass Hills of Montana tower above the surrounding prairies. About 48 million years ago, magma from inside the earth forced its way upwards, and then cooled into a huge dome of igneous rock just beneath the surface. Millions of years of erosion stripped away the softer overlying sedimentary rocks, leaving the harder rock behind as isolated hills above a flat plain.

***KNOWN** to the Blackfoot as Katoyíssiiksi, the Sweetgrass Hills are another of Náápi’s creations. In the past, the Blackfoot often used the tops of the hills to look for bison herds; most of the Blackfoot territory can be seen from their summits. A powerful presence in the centre of their world, the hills are sacred to the Blackfoot People. Young men often climbed the hills in order to undertake an itsíyisi (vision quest) – an important ritual fast resulting in dreams of the spirit world.*

Stop 4 - A Riverside Oasis



THE Milk River constantly shifts its channel, first eroding sediments from the steep-sided cutbanks and then depositing them on sandbars on the inner side of bends. Occasionally, large floods blanket much of the valley bottom, creating the “alluvial flats” visible across the river. A profusion of trees, shrubs and grass grow in this fertile mud, creating shelter for numerous birds and animals. From this vantage point, mule deer are often seen browsing upon the riverside vegetation.

SHELTER from the wind, abundant wildlife, lush vegetation – all of these things drew First Nations people to Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi. While hunting and gathering food, they often camped in this valley. Whenever the river flooded, it buried traces of these campsites beneath layers of mud. Today, remains of campsites, bones and artifacts such as arrow heads and pottery fragments are often found eroding out of the river bank – invaluable evidence for reconstructing prehistoric lifestyles. Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai’pi continues to be an important place for Blackfoot people to visit.

If you discover bones, artifacts or other archaeological remains in the park, please help preserve them by leaving them in place. Artifacts provide archaeologists with much more information if they are left undisturbed and many have great cultural significance to indigenous people. Report the find to park staff, who will be happy to investigate it further.

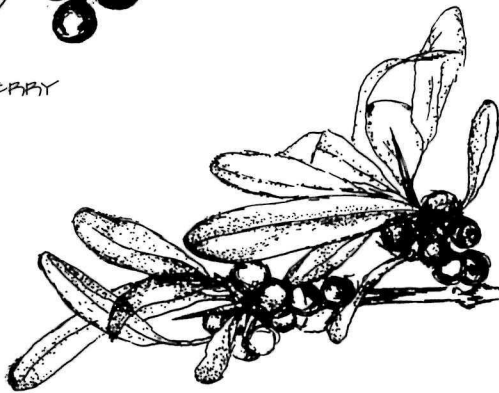
Stop 5 - Where the Berries are Many



CHOCHECHERRY



GOLDEN CURRANT

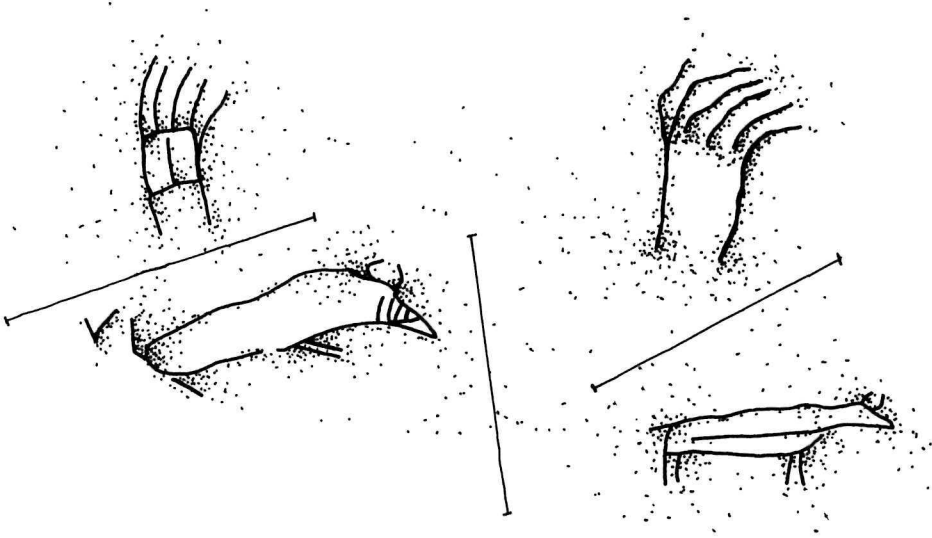


PALOBERRY

ALONG the river, conditions are moist and cool; this riverside environment is known as riparian habitat. Small trees such as river birch and peach-leaf willow flourish here, providing nesting sites for many bird species, including the spotted towhee and the brown thrasher. Birds and animals are also attracted here to feed on the abundant fruits of summer – golden currants, saskatoons, chokecherries and buffaloberries.

THE Blackfoot often stopped to pick berries at Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai'pi during their seasonal travels. Long ago, Chief Káínaikoan remembered: *There are many berries there, especially chokecherries. So we camped there and the women did not have to go far to pick berries. The chokecherries were mashed and dried and put away in calfskin bags. Various plants, mostly gathered by women, provided a large proportion of the Blackfoot diet.*

Stop 6 - The Work of the Spirit World



FIRST NATIONS people came here for more than berries and shelter. On the cliffs above you, petroglyphs (rock carvings) tell of the spiritual lives of the indigenous people who came here. If you look carefully, you will see several animals, including two bison, and several bear paws or tracks incised in the sandstone. The bison and bear were both sacred animals; perhaps First Nations elders carved these petroglyphs as part of a ceremony.

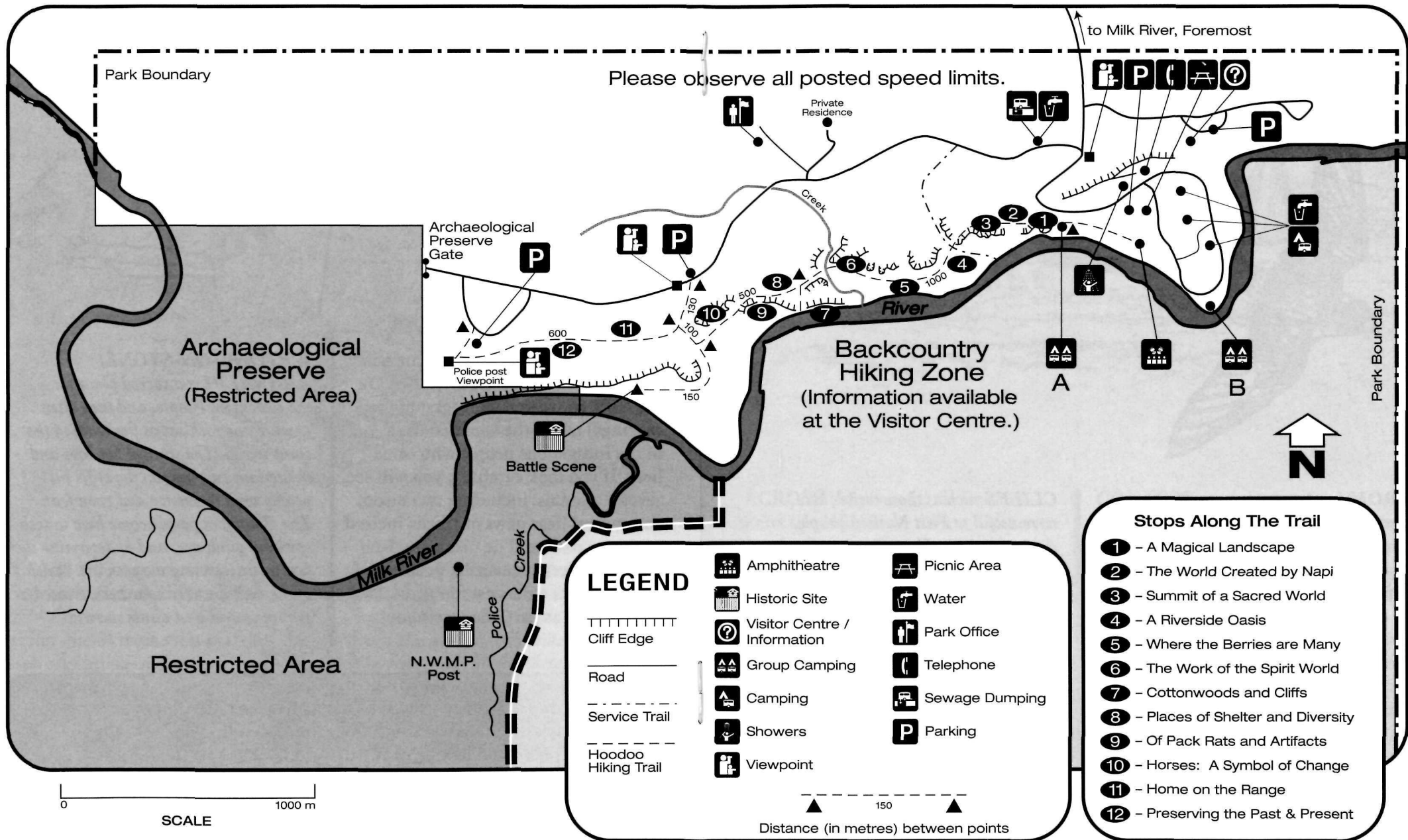
WRITING-ON-STONE/
ÁISINAIPI is a sacred place for the Blackfoot People, and they often describe the rock art as the work of the spirit world. The strange hoodoos and mysterious carvings on the cliffs fill people with reverence and even fear. The Blackfoot people come here to seek spiritual guidance, and to determine their fate by interpreting the rock art. Much of the rock art may have been created as part of rituals and vision quests.

Please do not approach or touch the sandstone cliffs and rock art at this, or any site, and view them from the trail only. The petroglyphs are very fragile and can be easily damaged – even by the light touch of fingers or tracing paper. Help preserve this ancient historical record for those who follow.

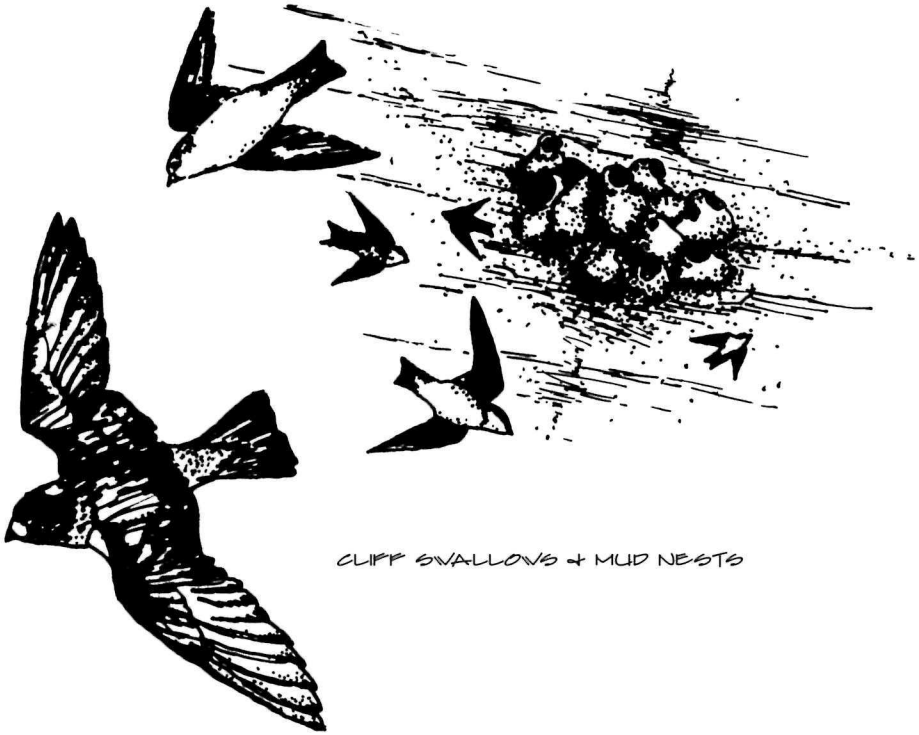
Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park

Áísínai'pi National Historic Site

Hoodoo Interpretive Trail Map



Stop 7 - Cottonwoods and Cliffs

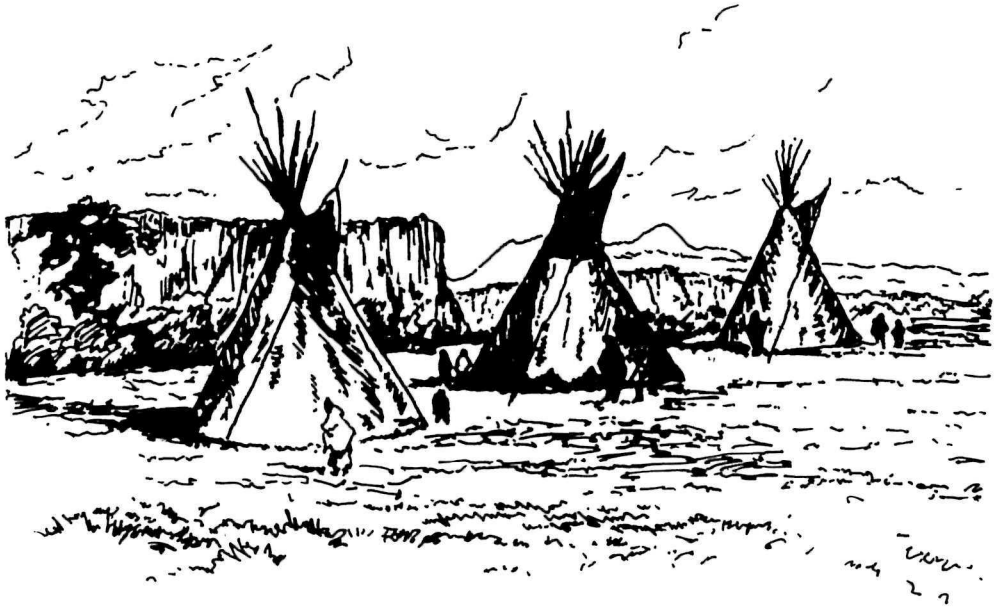


CLIFF SWALLOWS + MUD NESTS

FROM here, two majestic Plains cottonwood trees are visible. Cottonwoods are threatened along many prairie rivers due to the reductions of river flows. As well as cottonwoods, Writing-on-Stone/ Áísínai’pi shelters rare birds of prey. Prairie falcons, golden eagles and ferruginous hawks all use the steep cliffs for nesting sites. Hundreds of cliff swallows also build mud nests beneath overhangs on these cliffs. Watch for soaring birds of prey and swooping swallows above the cottonwoods and cliffs.

CLIFFS such as those visible here were useful to First Nations people. Accumulations of bison bones beneath some of the cliffs at Writing-on-Stone/ Áísínai’pi suggest that they were occasionally used as small “buffalo jumps.” Some of these bones were broken open to obtain the marrow, while others show evidence of being used as tools. Almost every part of the bison had a use for First Nations; only when too many bison were killed during a jump did any parts of the animal go unused by people.

Stop 8 - Places of Shelter and Diversity



ACROSS the river, Davis Coulee joins the Milk River valley. The term “coulee” comes from the French couler – to flow. On the prairies it generally refers to a narrow, steep-walled ravine which joins a river valley. Davis Coulee, like most coulees, is usually dry except in spring. Some coulees with small springs may stay wet year round. Coulees enhance biological diversity by acting as regions of ecological overlap between different habitats. Distinctive prairie features, coulees provide welcome relief from the flat plains.

COULEES were also beneficial to First Nations people. These dry valleys made excellent travel routes where hunting and war parties could remain concealed for long distances. The mouths of deep coulees – where shelter, wood and water were all handy – were also favoured camping spots. Occasionally the Blackfoot wintered in this area. In the fall of 1866, according to a Piikani story, “all the coulees between the Sweetgrass Hills and the Milk River were full of lodges. Wherever there was a spring, there was a camp of lodges.”

Stop 9 - Of Pack Rats and Artifacts



BUSHY-TAILED WOOD RAT

THE Milk River valley links this area to the Great Plains to the south and the Rocky Mountains to the west, creating some habitats similar to both areas. Two animals more typical of the mountains are found here. The yellow-bellied marmot can be spotted basking on sun-warmed rocks, while the bushy-tailed wood rat lives in holes within the sandstone. The nocturnal bushy-tailed wood rats, also known as pack rats, build “middens,” or rubbish heaps, of dung, bones, wood and any other objects they find. The dark accumulation within the crevices before you is part of a wood rat midden.

OCCASIONALLY, wood rats hide archaeological artifacts in their middens, in some cases taken from First Nations “burial” sites found nearby. Because Writing-on-Stone/Aísinaí’pi was sacred, First Nations people often left the bodies of important elders here after they died. The bodies, together with various offerings, were wrapped in hides and placed in crevices and caves in the sandstone. This allowed the spirits of the dead easy access to the afterworld. More than twenty such placements have been discovered in this area: all but a few were looted before they became protected by the creation of the park.

Stop 10 - Horses: A Symbol of Change



ON the cliffs before you are a number of faint pictographs, or rock paintings. Using a red ochre pigment made from crushed iron ore mixed with water, a First Nation artist painted what appears to be a hunting scene. Several horses, bison and human figures are shown. Rock art in cases like this may have been used to record important, biographical events such as successful hunts or raids. This rock art is very fragile and we ask that you do not touch or approach the pictographs.

THE depiction of horses in this scene dates it to sometime after the arrival of horses on the northern plains. The first horses arrived in southern Alberta approximately 1730, and were obtained by trading with First Nations groups who had contact with Europeans. By the mid-1700s, the Blackfoot were well-equipped with horses and guns, and these belongings completely changed First Nations culture – travel and hunting became easier, and warfare more common.

After leaving this stop you will arrive at an intersection with another trail. To see the Battle Scene petroglyph, turn left and follow the trail for 150 m. For more information on this site, refer to the Battle Scene brochure available from the Visitor Centre. To continue along the Hoodoo Trail, turn right and follow the trail upslope/north for 100m, and turn left at the next intersection.

Stop 11 - Home on the Range

THE grasses and other plants around you are well-adapted to the harsh prairie environment. They can survive in this semi-arid climate, where temperatures range from -40°C in winter to +40°C in summer and annual rainfall averages just over 300 mm. Despite these extremes, the grasslands are home to many species of birds, animals and plants. In spring, wildflowers splash colour across these slopes, while sharptail grouse and western meadowlarks nest among the grasses. Today, Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai'pi protects a small part of the original prairie – the last of the wild west.

***NOT** long ago, the prairies in this area supported great herds of bison. In turn, bison supported the lifestyle of the First Nations people for many centuries. The Blackfoot people survived the extremes of climate by making comfortable tipis out of hides and by wrapping themselves in thick bison robes. Dozens of other animals and plant species furnished food, medicines and tools. After the arrival of Europeans, overhunting soon decimated the bison herds. With the loss of their major food source, the traditional Blackfoot way of life soon came to an end.*

Stop 12 - Preserving the Past & Present

ACROSS the valley lies Police Coulee, where the past and present meet. Nearly 70 m deep in places, this long coulee crosses the Montana-Alberta border 9 km south of this point. The habitats within the coulee shelter leopard frogs, Weidemeyer's admiral butterflies and songbirds like the yellow-breasted chat – all uncommon species in Alberta. Police Coulee also holds rock art, archaeological sites and historical sites, making this protected coulee a significant feature of the park.

***BY** the 1870s, European traders had established themselves throughout Blackfoot territory, and First Nations people exchanged furs for knives, pots and other useful items. Some traders also sold First Nations people a deadly product – rotgut whisky. Police Coulee became a favourite route across the border for whisky smugglers. The Mounties marched west in 1874 to stop the whisky trade, eventually establishing a post at Police Coulee in 1887. A new era in the history of Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai'pi had begun.*

By turning left at the next fork in the trail, you will continue to the Police Coulee viewpoint and interpretive sign. A spectacular panorama of the valley and coulees is visible from this viewpoint and you will also discover more about the Writing-on-Stone North West Mounted Police (NWMP) Post. The trail to the right will lead you to the west trail head and parking lot.

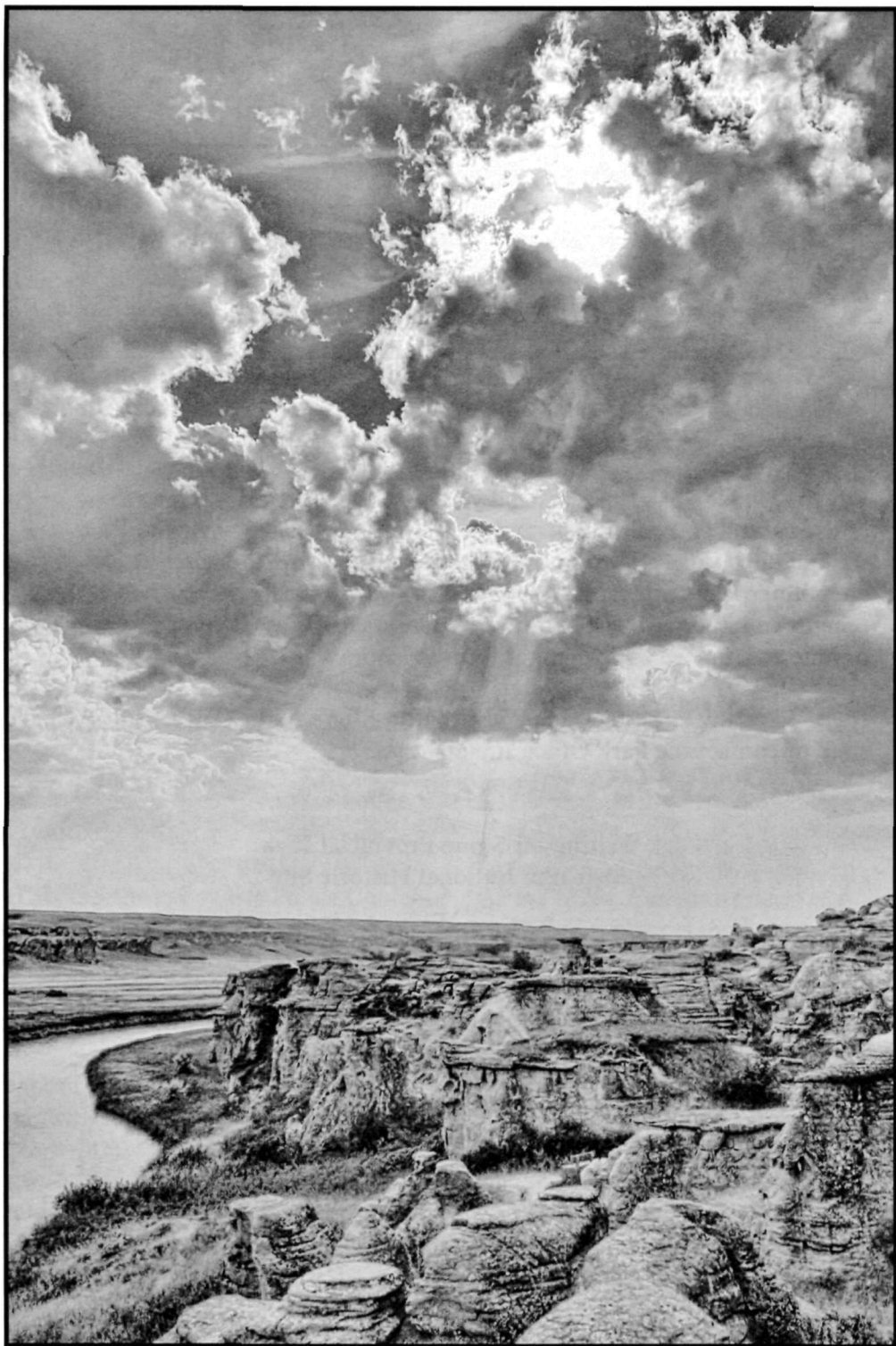
ON the Hoodoo Interpretive Trail you have encountered many aspects of the natural and cultural history of Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park / Áísínai'pi National Historic Site. These resources are both significant and vulnerable: with careful stewardship and wise management, they will remain an important part of our shared heritage. Please help us protect this unique area for the enjoyment of future visitors.

If you have any questions about Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai'pi, ask any park staff, or contact the Park Office at:

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