

Elk Island National Park

Alberta





ELK ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

by W. F. LOTHIAN

IN almost the exact centre of Alberta, and within an hour's drive of Edmonton, the provincial capital, lies Elk Island National Park — unique among the many great areas which have been set aside in Canada for the protection of wild-life and as national playgrounds. Situated in the extensive rolling region known as the Beaver Hills, it contains well-timbered knolls and coulees, broad open meadows richly covered with wild hay, and numerous small lakes, ponds, and sloughs which lie in hollows left by the retreating glaciers of the Ice Age. Completely enclosed, it is the home of Canada's national herd of plains buffalo, descendants of the great herds that once roamed the vast prairies of the West. It is also a natural range for such big game species as elk, mule deer, and moose, and its lakes are favoured resting places and breeding grounds for waterfowl. Recent developments have been carried out in the park to enhance its many natural attractions, and it now ranks as an important centre for outdoor life and recreation. Each summer it is a mecca for thousands of visitors.

Elk Island Park was established for the preservation of wapiti, or elk, and was the first national park in Canada to be set aside primarily as a wild animal preserve. About the beginning of the present century these magnificent members of the deer family were fast disappearing from Western Canada before the incoming tide of settlement and the inroads of hunters. In 1903 it was brought to the attention of the Dominion Government that a number of elk roaming the hills east of Edmonton — probably the last wild herd in existence in the region — were in danger of extinction. On representations of a number of public-spirited persons interested in wild-life conservation, the Government, in 1906, set aside and fenced as an animal park an area of sixteen square miles from the Cooking Lake Forest Reserve. The animals enclosed included more than twenty elk, a number of mule deer, and a few moose. In 1922 the boundaries of the park were extended to include a region to the south, and other small additions have

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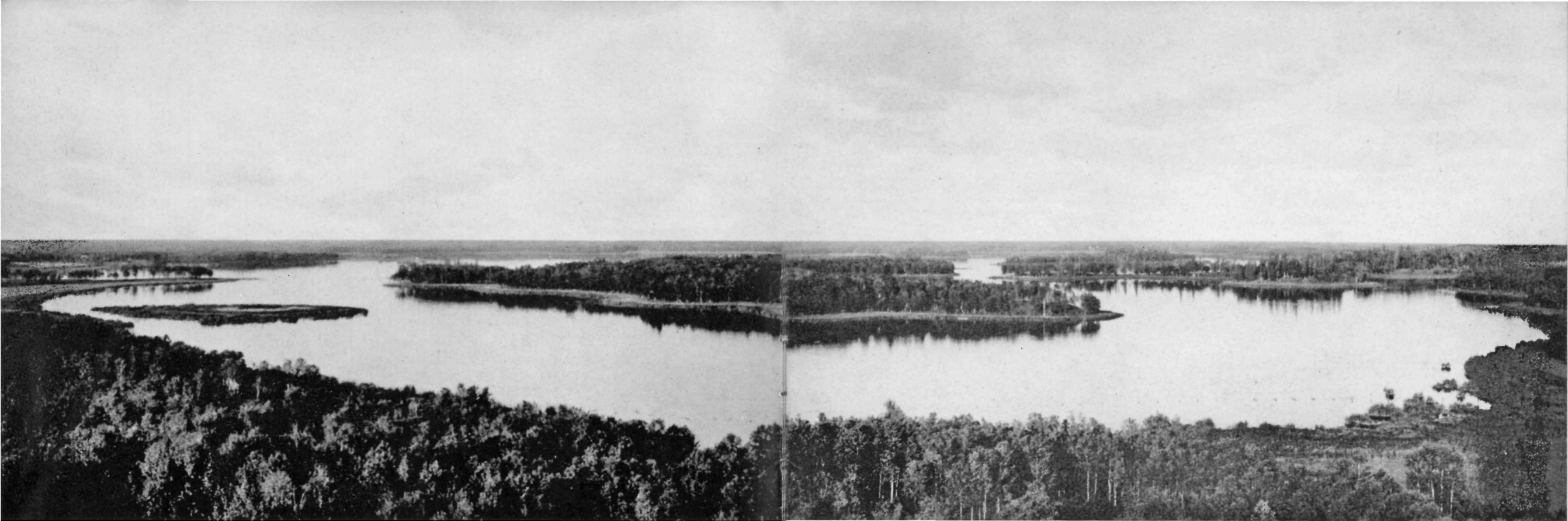
since increased its area to 51.2 square miles.

How the park became the home of Canada's buffalo is one of the most interesting stories of wild-life conservation. The buffalo, or bison, was once the outstanding big game animal of North America. In its natural state it ranged in vast herds over the Great Interior Plains of the continent and through the open areas of the adjoining forest regions. To the Indians of the West it meant food, clothing, shelter, and fuel, and the supply appeared to be inexhaustible, for with primitive weapons the tribes made no greater demands on the buffalo than the annual increase of the latter could meet. Its numbers are believed to have reached millions, and it roamed in great herds, some of which are recorded as extending twenty-five miles in width and fifty miles in depth.

The arrival of the white man, however, with his more efficient fire-arms and his links with far distant markets, caused a disastrous inroad on the species. The mere pleasure of the chase led to the destruction of thousands, and both whites and Indians also found a livelihood in supplying the commercial demand for robes and hides. Single individuals are reported to have killed as many as 3,000 head in a single season, and, in a little more than a decade, both the great northern and southern herds of plains buffalo had been practically exterminated. By the turn of the twentieth century there is reason to believe that not a single buffalo remained on the plains of Canada in a wild state. Far to the north, in the vicinity of Great Slave Lake, was an isolated herd of what were known as "wood buffalo". In addition to these, a few scattered specimens of plains buffalo may have persisted in the upper Peace River Valley, and there were a few small groups of mixed origin in captivity.

Through the foresight of an agent of the Dominion Government an opportunity was afforded to re-establish the plains buffalo in Canada by the acquisition of the greater part of the only remaining large herd on the continent. The origin of this

Left:—Boating among the islands in Astotin Lake.



A panoramic view of Astotin Lake from the Forestry Tower.

In the foreground is Long Island and in right background, Elk Island.

herd, built up by two Montana ranchers, Michel Pablo and Charles Allard, dates back to 1873, when an Indian, Walking Coyote by name, captured four buffalo calves in the Milk River district of Montana near the International Boundary. These buffalo came under the care of St. Ignatius Mission in the Flathead Reservation of Montana, and by 1884 the original four had increased to thirteen. That year ten of the animals were purchased by the two ranchers, who apparently realized the investment possibilities of a nearly-extinct species. In 1893 they added to their holdings twenty-six animals from the "Buffalo" Jones herd of Kansas, part of which originated from buffalo developed at Stony Mountain, in Manitoba. On the death of Allard in 1896, his share of the herd, numbering about 300 head, was divided among his heirs and sold, providing the nucleus of many of the small herds existing in the United States to-day.

A few years later the remaining herd owned by Pablo was faced with dispersion or destruction through the cancellation of his grazing privileges on the Flathead Range. The Dominion Government was advised of this fact and offered to purchase the buffalo and move them to a suitable

tract in Canada. In 1906 negotiations for the purchase of the herd at a price of approximately \$250 a head were commenced, and, after overcoming many difficulties in the round-up and shipment, a total of 716 buffalo were safely delivered to Canada by Pablo between 1907 and 1912.

The first two shipments of buffalo from Montana, consisting of a total of 410 head, were made to Elk Island Park, as the fencing of a new preserve near Wainwright, Alberta, later to be known as Buffalo National Park, had not yet been completed. Seven head from an exhibition herd at Banff were also brought to Elk Island, and in exchange sixteen head of the Montana buffalo were shipped to Banff. By 1909 the new park was ready for occupation, and that year a total of 325 head were shipped from Elk Island Park to Wainwright. Owing to decreases and losses resulting from a change of habitat, it was found that the number of buffalo remaining in Elk Island Park was forty-eight, and these animals formed the nucleus of the present herd.

During the years that followed, the buffalo in Elk Island National Park increased steadily in numbers, necessitating periodical reductions by supervised

slaughter to keep the herd within the grazing capacity of the range. In spite of these reductions, which have accounted for more than 1,650 head, the herd at present numbers over 1,000, or more than one and a half times the number originally purchased from Pablo. Under careful supervision, and provided with adequate forage, these buffalo are among the most magnificent specimens of their kind existing in North America to-day. Because of the shade provided by the forest growth of the park their hair is particularly dark and thick, and they are all sturdy and well developed. Regular biological inspections carried out have also revealed that they are free from diseases that have beset the species in other regions.

Under the sanctuary conditions provided, the other big game species have also flourished, and there are now in the park with the buffalo more than 400 elk and a large number of moose and deer. Smaller animals, including porcupine, gopher, and squirrel are also found.

Elk Island National Park is easily reached by the Provincial Highway System of Alberta from the south, west, and north. Highway No. 16 skirts the southern boundary of the park, and the south gate

is situated about twenty-seven miles east of Edmonton. An approach from the Town of Lamont on Highway No. 15 may be made via the northern gateway, and access is also provided by a county road which crosses the western boundary within a mile of the park headquarters. Lines of the Canadian National Railways pass within a short distance of the northern and southern boundaries of the park. The nearest railway station is Lamont, about four miles from the northern gateway. The city of Edmonton, thirty-six miles distant from the park headquarters, is served by the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railway systems, and also possesses one of the most important air ports in Western Canada.

After registering at a park entrance, the visiting motorist may drive along the all-weather road which has been built through the park from south to north. Winding through the forested sections, or skirting the broad, open meadows that fringe the lakes, he may observe the buffalo grazing placidly, or have the good fortune to see a young bull enjoying a sand bath in a "wallow" or sandy depression. The stately elk are often seen near the roads in the morning or early evening,



Summer sports are enjoyed at Sandy Beach.

and deer may peer shyly from a thicket or be seen jumping nimbly for the nearest cover.

Astotin Lake, the largest in the park, is about two and a half miles long and a mile and a half wide. It is studded with numerous islands, several of which are connected to the mainland by rustic bridges. Among these are Long Island, on the western side of the Lake, and Elk Island, off the south shore, which is used in summer as a Boy Scout camp. Other large islands include Lamont, Crane, Griesbach, High, Pine, and Archer Islands. In the southern part of the park are Tawayik, Little Tawayik, Oster, Paul, and Long Lakes, as well as many ponds and sloughs. In addition to paths which lead to and from the bridges, numerous trails wind through the park.

On the western side of Astotin Lake, about nine miles from the southern gateway, will be found the Park Administration Building and the residence of the Park Superintendent. Here information concerning the animals and other attractions of the park, as well as literature and printed guides, may be obtained. Almost

directly across the lake on the eastern side is Sandy Beach, the recreational centre of the park, where extensive developments have been carried out. As the name implies, Sandy Beach is a long stretch of fine, clean sand which shelves gently into the water and affords excellent opportunities for bathing.

Bath-houses erected for the convenience of visitors face the beach, and a board walk provides a point of vantage from which to view the lake. Extending back from the beach is a central park area landscaped with trees, walks, and flowerbeds, and provided with rustic seats and benches.

Facilities for the enjoyment of summer sports are numerous and varied. In the immediate vicinity of the beach will be found an area suitable for baseball, softball, horseshoe pitching, and other forms of recreation. Tennis courts are available for the use of visitors, and amusements such as swings and seesaws have been provided for children. Boating on Astotin Lake is popular, and water craft may be rented from a boat livery which operates during the summer season. South of the



Holing out on the ninth green of the Park Golf Course.

bathing beach in a beautiful grove facing the lake is a picnic ground containing a large number of tables, benches, and other conveniences.

Golfers may enjoy their favourite sport on a nine-hole course situated on a rolling plateau south-east of Astotin Lake. Flanked on both sides by forest growths, the fairways and greens are maintained in fine condition. Small ponds utilized in the layout add interesting hazards to the course. An attractive club-house where light refreshments may be obtained overlooks the lake, and is at the disposal of those making use of the course.

Chiefly because of its proximity to Lamont and Edmonton, the park as yet contains no hotel or bungalow camp accommodation. A large camp-ground near Sandy Beach, however, provides good accommodation for visitors bringing their own camping equipment or travelling in automobile cabin trailers. A permit issued by a resident attendant on payment of a small fee entitles the camper to the use of a camping lot and kitchen shelters equipped with camp-stoves, tables, benches, and firewood. An ample supply of fresh water is provided by spring-fed wells, and the

use of a large community building situated nearby on a hill overlooking the lake is available for sing-songs and informal entertainment.

The geographical location of the park combines with its natural features to make it one of the most important bird sanctuaries in Western Canada. In early summer the lakes are literally alive with waterfowl, many of which breed along the reedy shores. More than 200 species of birds, including migrants and common residents, have been identified by competent observers. Waterfowl found in the park include mallard, gadwall, shoveller, pintail, canvasback, redhead, baldpate, and ruddy duck, blue-winged teal, lesser scaup, white-winged scoter, coot, American golden-eye, Canada goose, and loon. Shore birds often observed include killdeer, sora rail, lesser yellow-legs, Wilson's snipe, spotted sandpiper, and Wilson's phalarope. Other water birds seen are Franklin's gull, California gull, ring-billed gull, and common and black tern.

Ruffed grouse are abundant, and great horned owl and sharp-tailed grouse are common residents. Species of the hawk family which have been identified are the



A quiet bay on Astotin Lake.

Scenic drives wind along the shores of Astotin Lake.





A buffalo family group.

Buffalo grazing near Astotin Lake.





Young buffalo bull.

Young bull moose.





The wapiti, or Canadian elk.

red-tailed, rough-legged, sharp-shinned, and marsh hawks. Smaller varieties include many song birds and birds of brilliant plumage such as yellow-shafted flicker, belted kingfisher, Canada jay, ruby-throated hummingbird, downy and hairy woodpecker, Baltimore oriole, kingbird, red-winged blackbird, Brewer's blackbird, hermit thrush, mountain bluebird, yellow warbler, robin, magpie, and catbird. Many other species not listed are also common to the park.

The most abundant forest growth in the park is aspen or white poplar, but black or balsam poplar, white birch, and willow are common, and tamarack, white spruce, and black spruce are also found. Shrubs abound and include hazel, highbush cranberry, saskatoon, choke cherry, pin cherry, and dogwood. During the spring and early summer wild flowers bloom in the park, and their perfume and colour impart

an added charm to the meadows and woodlands.

As one of the older units in the great system of public reservations which have been set aside and dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment, Elk Island National Park, for more than a quarter of a century, has been fulfilling a dual purpose. As a sanctuary for wild-life, it has not only helped to save for posterity the buffalo, claimed by a world-famous naturalist to be "the greatest ruminant that ever trod the earth", but it is preserving, in their natural surroundings, other interesting big-game species and wild birds. As a public resort it is also providing opportunities for outdoor life and recreation amid the unspoiled beauties of a beneficent Nature, and as time goes on, it will continue to render an increasingly useful service as one of Canada's National Playgrounds.



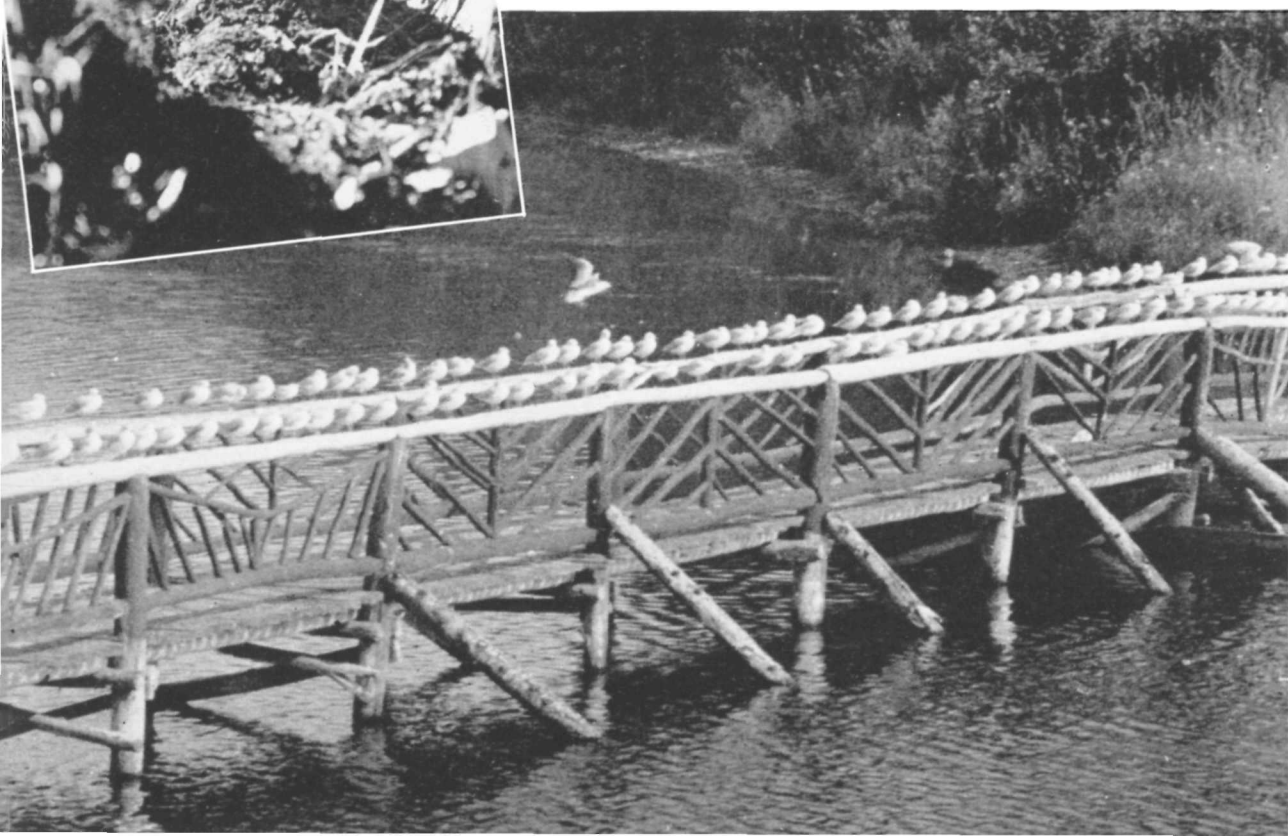
Photo by Dr. D. S. Rawson



Top:—Brewer's Blackbird and nest.

Left:—Whiskey-jack or Canada Jay.

Bottom:—A squadron of Franklin's Gulls.

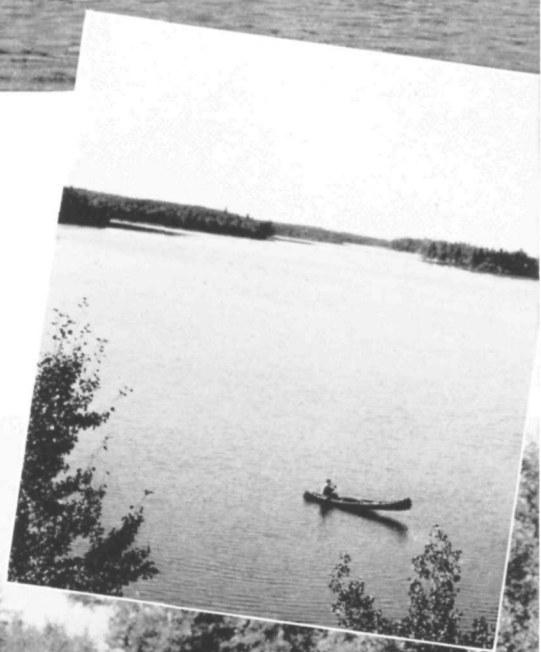


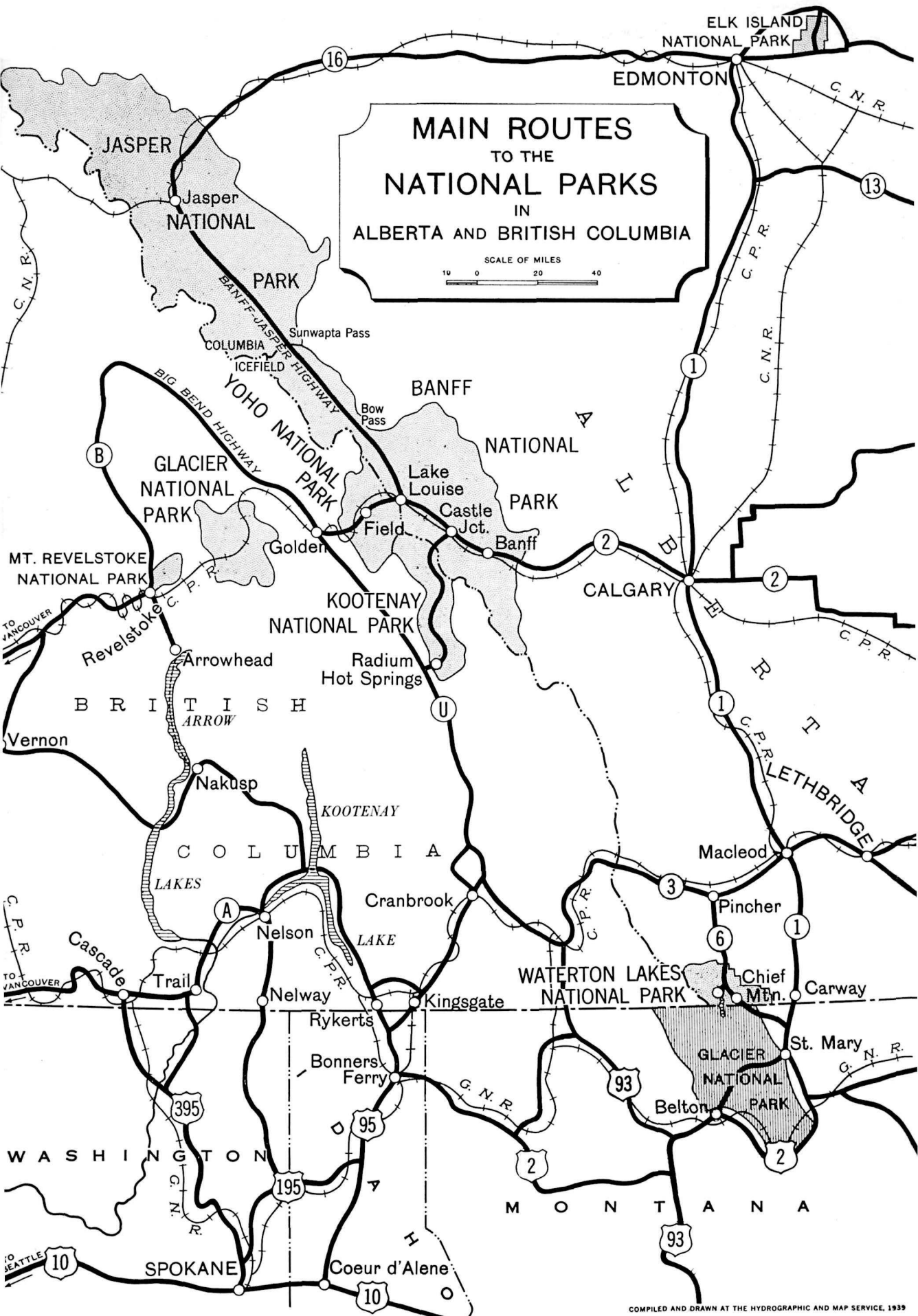


Top:—A holiday crowd at Sandy Beach.

Right:—Canoeing on Astotin Lake.

Bottom:—On the Park Highway.





THE NATIONAL PARKS OF CANADA

The National Parks of Canada are areas of outstanding beauty and interest, which have been dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment, to be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the pleasure of future generations.

1. **Banff, Alberta.**—Mountain playground, typical example of Central Rockies. Massive ranges, ice-fields, and glaciers. Contains famous resorts, Banff and Lake Louise. Winter sports centre. Big game sanctuary. Established 1885; area, 2,585 square miles.
2. **Buffalo, Alberta.**—Fenced area originally set aside for the preservation of buffalo and other big game. Animal population since withdrawn; principal preserve now at Elk Island National Park. Established 1908; area, 197.5 square miles.
3. **Cape Breton Highlands, Nova Scotia.**—Typical example of rugged coast-line of Cape Breton Island with mountain background. Remarkable seascapes visible from motor road. Established 1936; area, approximately 390 square miles.
4. **Elk Island, Alberta.**—Fenced preserve containing a large herd of buffalo; also deer, elk, and moose. Recreational and camping area. Reserved 1906; established 1913; area, 51.2 square miles.
5. **Fort Anne, Nova Scotia.**—National Historic Park at Annapolis Royal. Site of early Acadian settlement of Port Royal. Historical museum. Established 1917; area, 31 acres.
6. **Fort Beauséjour, New Brunswick.**—National Historic Park near Sackville. Site of French fort erected prior to 1755. Historical museum. Established 1926; area, 59 acres.
7. **Georgian Bay Islands, Ontario.**—Thirty islands in Georgian Bay archipelago. Recreational area. Unique limestone formations and caves on Flowerpot Island. Established 1929; area, 5.37 square miles.
8. **Glacier, British Columbia.**—Superb example of Selkirk Mountain region. Snow-capped peaks, glaciers, luxuriant forests, alpine flora, and subterranean caves. Established 1886; area, 521 square miles.
9. **Jasper, Alberta.**—Largest national park in North America. Contains immense region of majestic peaks, ice-fields, broad valleys and beautiful lakes, and includes the famous resort, Jasper. Big game sanctuary, and alpine playground. Established 1907; area, 4,200 square miles.
10. **Kootenay, British Columbia.**—Mountain park enclosing Vermilion-Sinclair section of Banff-Windermere Highway. Deep canyons, remarkable valleys, hot mineral springs. Established 1920; area 587 square miles.
11. **Mount Revelstoke, British Columbia.**—Alpine plateau formed by summit of Mount Revelstoke on western slope of Selkirk Mountains. Reached by spectacular motor highway. Established 1914; area, 100 square miles.
12. **Nemiskam, Alberta.**—Fenced preserve containing a herd of prong-horned antelope. Established 1922; area, 8.5 square miles.
13. **Point Pelee, Ontario.**—Most southerly mainland point in Canada. Recreational area with remarkable beaches and unique flora. Resting place for migratory birds. Established 1918; area, 6.04 square miles.
14. **Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.**—Forested lakeland of northwestern Canada. Remarkable water highway system. Interesting fauna. Summer resort and recreational area. Established 1927; area, 1,869 square miles.
15. **Prince Edward Island.**—Coast-line strip twenty-five miles in length on north shore of Prince Edward Island. Recreational area with fine beaches. Established 1937; area, approximately 7 square miles.
16. **Riding Mountain, Manitoba.**—Rolling woodland, with crystal lakes, on summit of Manitoba escarpment. Big game sanctuary. Summer resort and recreational area. Established 1929; area, 1,148 square miles.
17. **St. Lawrence Islands, Ontario.**—Mainland reservation and thirteen islands among the "Thousand Islands" of St. Lawrence River. Recreational area. Reserved 1904; established 1914; area, 185.6 acres.
18. **Waterton Lakes, Alberta.**—Canadian section, Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. Mountain playground of unusual charm on east slope of Rockies. Fine motor drives and trails. Varied flora and fauna. Established 1895; area, 220 square miles.
19. **Yoho, British Columbia.**—Rugged scenery on west slope of Rockies. Famed Yoho Valley with numerous waterfalls, Kicking Horse Valley, Emerald and O'Hara Lakes. Established 1886; area, 507 square miles.

Additional information concerning the National Parks of Canada may be obtained from the National Parks Bureau, Lands, Parks and Forests Branch, Department of Mines and Resources, Ottawa, Canada.

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