

Elk Island National Park

Alberta

Introducing a park and an idea

Canada covers half a continent, fronts on three oceans, and stretches from the extreme Arctic more than halfway to the equator. There is a great variety of land forms in this immense country, and Canada's national parks have been created to preserve important examples for you and for generations to come.

The National Parks Act of 1930 specifies that national parks are "dedicated to the people... for their benefit, education and enjoyment" and must remain "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Elk Island National Park, 76 square miles in area, is in the northern section of Alberta's Beaver Hills, which rise 100–200 feet above the surrounding plain. It was named after the large herds of wapiti or elk which once lived in the area. Viewed from the air, the park looks like an island of rolling, forested hills, with many lakes, ponds, and bogs, set in the comparatively flat, fertile farmlands of central Alberta. The entire park is enclosed by an eight-foot fence, while another fence encloses the recreation area to keep out the bison that are the park's best-known attraction.

The land: a legacy from the ice age

The Cretaceous bedrock which underlies the park's rolling hills was formed from sand, gravel, and mud laid down perhaps 100 million years ago in an ancient sea that once covered the land. However, there are no apparent surface outcrops of bedrock in the park.

Elk Island's rolling topography is a legacy from the Pleistocene Ice Age, which took place between one million and 10,000 years ago. The landscape, known as a "dead-ice moraine", was created when the vast ice sheets which once covered most of the northern regions of North America stopped in their advance. During its slow northeastward retreat, the melting ice left behind deposits of glacial debris in the area, forming a landscape characterized by knobs (ridges) and kettles (depressions). In the park, this debris averages 100 feet in depth, and contains boulders and rocks which the ice sheets carried from the Canadian Shield to the north and left scattered around the park area.

Bogs, lakes, and ponds have formed in the depressions in the glacial debris. The largest lake in the park, Astotin Lake, measures 2½ miles wide and averages 10 feet in depth (though a considerable portion is between 12 and 18 feet deep). The name Astotin is believed to derive from the Cree, meaning "lake of many islands". There are 21 islands in this shallow body of water.

The plants: a northern community

The park's plants, have colonized this relatively young landscape only within the last 10,000 years.

Most of the 240 plants which have been identified are typical of the mixed-wood forest regions found in much of



central Alberta. The park's dominant tree at present, the trembling aspen, controls by light and moisture much of the plant life within this region. Its moisture-loving cousin, the balsam poplar, is also common, while large-leaved herbaceous plants such as the hunchberry, sarsaparilla, wintergreen and violet, occupy the shady park floor.

Berry and nut-bearing shrubs, including the choke-cherry, pincherry, saskatoon, rose, and hazelnut, are particularly abundant where the trees are not too dense and there is a greater amount of sunlight penetration.

Within the groves of white spruce, found on the major islands and in the northern section of the park, horsetail and twin flower are the common ground plants.

Grass and sedge meadows contain numerous prairie plants whose flowers bloom from late June to late August. Many shrubs and herbaceous plants, including some sub-arctic varieties, are also found in these areas.

The numerous ponds team with plant and animal life. By mid-summer the tiny, floating duckweed covers many with green. Pondweeds thrust tropical flowerheads above the water, the floating, globular blossoms of the yellow pond lily are conspicuous on a few ponds throughout July and early August, while the showy, white blooms of calla and arrowweed, are ranked near the margins.

All the bogs here are small. A number is still vigorous, although some are nearing the end of their life span, and

are slowly changing to sedge, willow and birch swamps. Their plant life is unique, though limited in variety. The foundation of Sphagnum moss creates an acidic, nutrient-poor peat. In this flourishing black spruce and, to a lesser extent, tamarack, Labrador tea, cranberry, blueberry and cloudberry form a low, dense shrub layer, while three-leaved Solomon's-seal (a lily) is one of the few flowers. Branching, and greyish-white, the reindeer moss (really a lichen) forms patches on the drier hummocks; other lichens grow on tree trunks and branches.

The park contains plants no longer locally common outside its borders. Among these are the marsh marigold, wild sarsaparilla and representative plants of the orchid and lily families. Still common within the park, the white or paper birch trees are remnants of the once-abundant giants from which the Indians made canoes, shelter, dishes, and clothing.

The animals: each seeks its own habitat

Animals frequent those areas which best supply their food and shelter needs. Most of the park's wildlife belongs to the boreal world, but species native to the surrounding plains are also seen here.

Some 30 species of mammals have been recorded in the park. The smaller ones include the insect-eating shrew, red squirrel, pocket gopher, least chipmunk, striped skunk,

porcupine, Richardson's weasel, and several kinds of voles and mice. The coyote and mink are the largest carnivores or flesh-eating animals in the area. Beaver, exterminated by over-trapping, were re-introduced and are again abundant. Three members of the deer family, the moose, elk, and white-tailed deer, are common in the park. Plains bison, commonly called buffalo, range north of Highway 16, and during the tourist season an exhibition herd of these animals is kept fenced a short distance from the south gate. A herd of wood bison, a rare sub-species, is isolated in a section just south of Highway 16. The rest of the park's mammals roam freely in a wild state.

Ponds and sloughs are the prime habitats of many varieties of invertebrates (animals without backbones) including snails, leeches, and insects. The stickleback, a minnow-like fish, occurs only in Astotin Lake.

Just over 200 species of birds have been recorded in the park. Most of these occur during the summer and migration seasons. This part of central Alberta is crossed by major North American flyways, providing excellent opportunities for waterfowl observations during spring and fall migration. Flocks of sandhill cranes are particularly frequent in autumn, though most fly over without stopping.

Perhaps the most common waterbirds are the noisy gulls and terns, constantly calling to one another over the lakes. Populations of waterfowl often fluctuate over the

span of a few years. At present the mallard is the most abundant waterfowl, though widgeons, pintails, gadwall, and teal (both black-winged and green-winged) are common. Frequently seen diving ducks include the goldeneye, lesser scaup, bufflehead, and white-winged coot. A few of the Canada geese nest on some of the more secluded lakes.

The red-necked grebe's rattling call, the loon's eerie laugh, and the horned owl's hollow hooting echo across Astotin Lake, especially at night. Red-winged blackbirds nest in large colonies in the shoreline cattails and fill the air with their ringing songs. Killdeer, solitary and spotted sandpipers, and lesser yellowlegs frequent lake and pond margins. Though not yet common, the black-crowned night heron (first seen in Alberta in 1958) is now an established nester.

Land birds of the summer forest, shrub, and meadow communities are too numerous to detail. They include robin, grackle, tree swallow, yellow-bellied sapsucker, yellow-shafted flicker, flycatcher, kingbird, Baltimore oriole, yellow warbler, song sparrow, and clay-coloured sparrow.

Only a few species are year-round residents – hairy and downy woodpeckers, the rarely seen pileated and northern three-toed woodpeckers, ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, gray Jay, blue Jay, magpie, and black-capped chickadee. Winter visitors include pine grosbeaks and redpolls (both common and hoary) and, occasionally, bohemian waxwings, crossbills, evening grosbeaks, rose finches, and other irregular wanderers.

A brief park history

Numerous Indian bands hunted the game-rich Beaver Hills long before Anthony Henday, the first white man to explore the area, arrived there in 1756. At that time the area was occupied by a band of Cree called the Upstream or Beaver Hills People. They depended mainly on the bison for their livelihood and established an extensive trade in beaver pelts with the early traders.

As the bison herds dwindled and over-trapping eliminated the once abundant beaver, the Indians evacuated the area, and by 1870 only a few of them still lived in the Beaver Hills.

Homesteaders first settled this region in the 1890's. These early pioneers were of varied ethnic origins and included "Perry Sounders" (people from the east side of Lake Muroen), and Ukrainians from the province of Galicia. Evidence of their old homesteads can still be found in the park's central region. A replica of a Ukrainian pioneer home is located in the recreation area. Operated as a museum, it contains artifacts made by early settlers or brought here from the Ukraine. By the early 1900's, trapping, hunting, and settlement seriously threatened many of Alberta's large game animals, and the only elk known to

Lakeview nature trail



exist outside of the province's mountain regions inhabited the Beaver Hills.

The park came into being when five Albertans decided to preserve the last elk of the area by establishing a 16-square-mile wildlife preserve. These men were William A. D. Lees and F. A. Walker of Fort Saskatchewan; Johners Carscadden and Ellsworth Simmons, two Agricola farmers; and W. H. Cooper of Edmonton. On March 28, 1906, the five conservationists entered into an agreement with the federal government to fence the preserve for at least 20 elk.

In 1907, the federal government purchased 716 head of plains bison from the Pablo-Allard herd on the Flathead Indian Reserve in Montana, and planned to establish them on a national range at Watnighair, Alberta. However, since the fences at the newly created Buffalo National Park at Watnighair were not completed, 400 head were shipped to Elk Island National Park.

On completion of the fences in 1909, most of the bison were rounded up and shipped to the Watnighair park; but 48 eluded the round-up, and they became the ancestors of today's herd, which now numbers about 550.

In 1913, Elk Island was established as a Dominion Park. In 1922, owing to the increase in the animal population, 36 sections of land were added to the southern end of the original area. Elk Island became a national park in 1930.

In 1947, a further 24-square-mile area south of Highway 16 was acquired from the province of Alberta.

How to get there

Elk Island National Park is easily accessible by road. The south or major entrance is situated on Highway 16, 23 miles east of Edmonton's city limits, and the recreation area is about nine miles from this gate, on the east side of Astotin Lake.

The north gate is four miles south of Lamont, accessible from Fort Saskatchewan via Highway 15.

The west gate is two miles south and 14 miles east of Fort Saskatchewan. The park headquarters is close to the west gate on the west side of Astotin Lake.

How to enjoy the park

Season – The park is open all year, although the three entrance gates are manned only from May through September, and most tourist services are available only during these months. Summer is the busiest time, but visits to the park at other seasons are increasing every year. Hiking, swimming, canoeing, boating, golfing, and camping are the favourite summer activities, while cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are increasing in popularity during the winter months.

Boating – Rowboats and canoes are permitted on most of the park's larger lakes and ponds. Motorboats are restricted to Astotin Lake, and must conform with federal navigation regulations and carry proper safety equipment. There is a boat launching site in the northern section of the park recreation area, on Astotin Lake. Water ski-ramps are also located in this area.

Fishing – There is no fishing in the park. The small stickle-back in Astotin Lake is the park's only fish. **Hiking** – This is one of the best ways to explore a national park. The park's many miles of trails are marked on a topographic map, available from the administration office or information centres. The park's two self-guiding nature trails, the Parkland and Lakeview trails, pass through several different vegetation zones.

Swimming – From mid-May until mid-September there is supervised swimming at Sandy Beach on Astotin Lake. Facilities here include change areas, showers and washrooms.

Some don'ts

National parks are selected areas set-up as nature sanctuaries and special care is taken to maintain them in their natural state. For this reason, all wildlife, including birds and animals, and all plants, trees, rocks, and fossils are to be left undisturbed. Even the wildflowers are not to be picked; they must be left for others to enjoy. Feeding, touching, or molesting wild animals is not permitted.



Red-necked grebe's nest with eggs

How to get the most out of your visit

To help you understand and appreciate Elk Island's complex natural environment, you are urged to take advantage of the free interpretive program, conducted by the park naturalist and his trained staff. It will provide you with an insight into how climate, land forms, plants, and animals are interrelated, and it will make your stay more rewarding.

During the day there are conducted field trips; in the evening informative talks illustrated with slides or films are given in the campground recreation area. Self-guiding trails, exhibits, interpretive signs, and viewpoints also explain the park's natural features.

Information on the interpretive program is available from bulletin boards, information centres, and park staff. Special groups, including school, scout, and guide organizations, may take advantage of these programs throughout the year.

Where to get information

Detailed information may be obtained from the park information centre in the recreation area. Uniformed staff will answer questions, provide maps, outline travel routes, and refer visitors to the various areas and facilities in the park. Special events are posted on bulletin boards.

Park wardens and naturalists, though not primarily responsible for general information, will help visitors wherever possible.

Additional information about the park is available from the Superintendent, Elk Island National Park, Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. For information about other national parks, write the Director, National and Historic Parks Branch, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Ottawa, Ottawa, K1A 0A4.

Fires

Campfires may be set only in fireplaces provided for this purpose, or in outdoor portable stoves. Barbecues may be used only in campgrounds or picnic areas, and all coals must be dumped into existing park fireplaces. Fire permits must be obtained from a park warden for open fires during trail travel.

Anyone finding an unattended fire should try to extinguish it, or if it is beyond his control, report it at once to the nearest park employee.

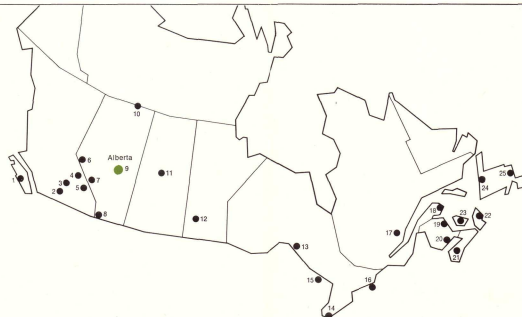


Note

This is but a reference map, designed to give you a general idea of what you will find in this park. It is not a hiking, boating or road map. To find your way accurately, you should obtain a topographical map, available from the information centre in summer and at the administration building all year.

- Legend**
- Highway
 - Secondary Road
 - Trail
 - Lake
 - X Picnic Area
 - Campground
 - Nature Trail
 - ⊙ Parking
 - Beach
 - Lavatory
 - Boating
 - 1 Highway Number

Elk Island National Park



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