



Wood Buffalo
National Park

Visitor Guide



Parks
Canada

Parcs
Canada

Canada



Welcome

Wood Buffalo is the largest national park in Canada, the world's largest dark sky preserve and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Wander through a boulder field at Grosbeak Lake, trek down to the largest Canadian salt flats, and experience and learn about the unique cultures, landscapes and wildlife of the boreal region.

The lands which are now Wood Buffalo National Park have been home to Dene, Cree and Métis Peoples since time immemorial. Today, Wood Buffalo National Park works with 11 Indigenous communities who continue to use the land for activities like hunting, trapping, fishing and medicinal plant and berry picking.

While visiting, you will be traveling on their traditional territories. Please respect and care for these lands.



Directory

Emergency
Dial 911

Wood Buffalo National Park
Duty Officer
867-872-0404

Wood Buffalo National Park
Wildfire Duty Officer
867-621-0136

Fort Smith RCMP
867-872-1111

Fort Smith Ambulance
867-872-3111

Fort Smith Fire Department
867-872-2222

Wood Buffalo National Park
Visitor Centre and Gift Shop
149 McDougal Rd,
Fort Smith, NT

867-872-7960
parks.canada.ca/woodbuffalo
facebook.com/WoodBuffaloNP

Wood Buffalo National Park
Visitor Centre
124 B Mackenzie Avenue
PO Box 38
Fort Chipewyan, AB
T0P 1B0

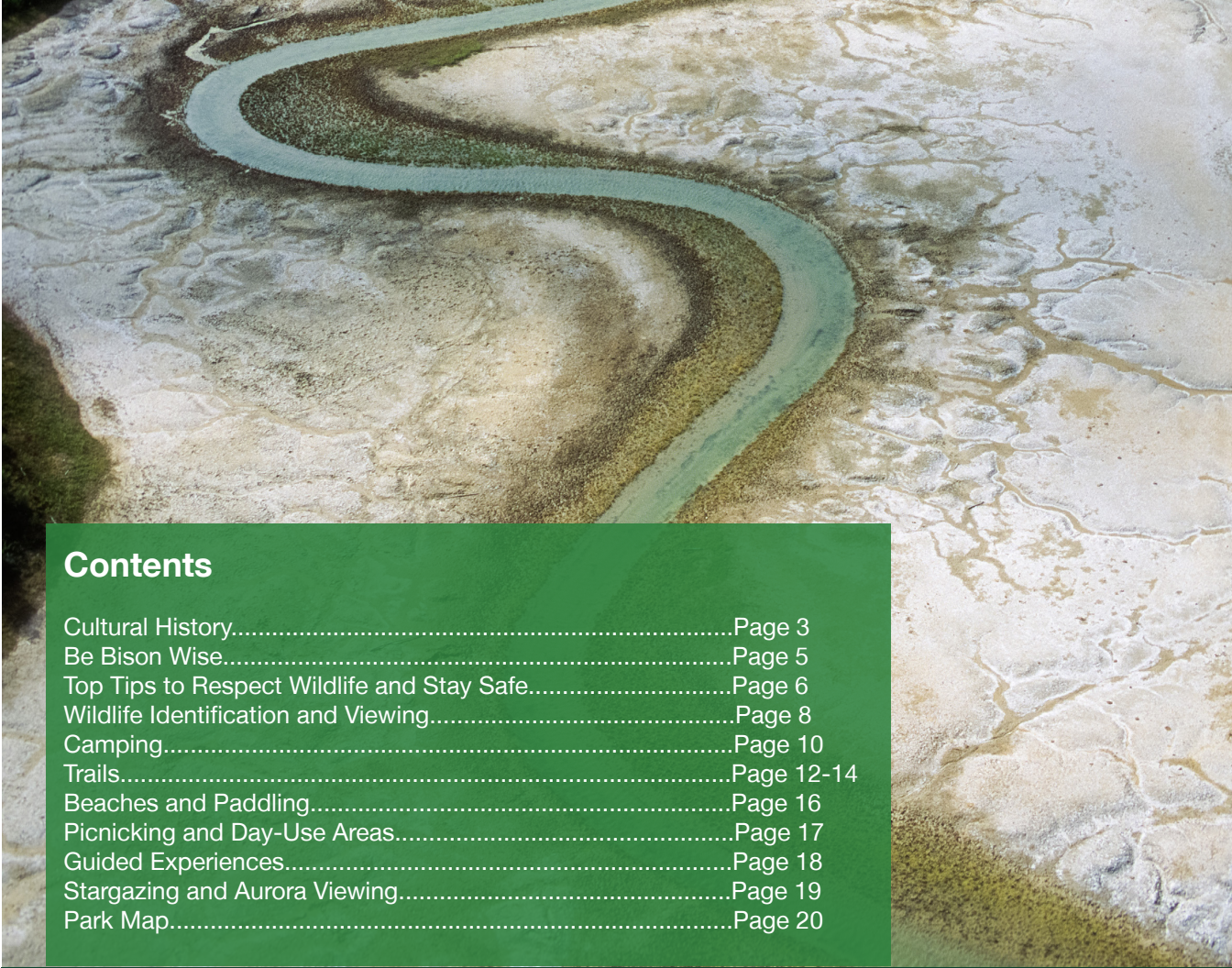
780-697-3662

Parks Canada Reservation
Service
1-877-737-3783
reservation.pc.gc.ca

Wood Buffalo National Park
Winter Road Hotline
867-872-7962

Regional Municipality of
Wood Buffalo
Winter Road Information
780-697-3600

Government of the Northwest
Territories Fire Center
867-872-7700



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Safety is Your Responsibility

Know before you go

- Cell phone service is not available in the park. Consider carrying a satellite phone or communication device.
- There is an emergency satellite phone located on the Pine Lake Day-Use Area road.
- Respect speed zones, trail signs, warning signs, closures and hazards.
- Visit the web for current conditions



Wood Buffalo National Park Duty Officer

The Wood Buffalo National Park Duty Officer is available 24/7. Reach them by calling or texting 867-872-0404.

Contact the Duty Officers for:

- Emergencies
- Park violations
- Bear incidents

For more safety information visit:



Weather



Wildfires



Road Conditions



Closures and
Important Bulletins



Before Wood Buffalo National Park

Before 1922, borders and boundaries of what is now Wood Buffalo National Park did not exist. Several Indigenous communities were living on the land, carrying out traditional activities and hunting and trapping in the area. They were practising their own forms of governance, carrying on cultural and spiritual traditions and living in harmony with the lands, waters and resources associated with their traditional areas.

These ways of life reflected thousands of years of history. Indigenous peoples protected the land and resources according to the learned principles of conservation and their worldviews that see humans as part of, and something that must remain in balance with, the land and ecosystems on which they relied.

Park creation and impact on Indigenous peoples

The creation of Wood Buffalo National Park in 1922 (and its expansion in 1926) brought significant change to many Indigenous communities.

Generally, during this time of creating parks, wilderness conservation policies considered Indigenous peoples incompatible with nature and so were not permitted to live in, hunt, or harvest within park boundaries. While Wood Buffalo National Park did permit some limited hunting and trapping, this allowance was applied arbitrarily to only select individuals. Traditional harvesting was considered a “privilege”, not an Aboriginal or Treaty Right. This remained the case until the 2000s, when several Supreme Court decisions resulted in Parks Canada recognizing the Treaty 8 Right to harvest in Wood Buffalo National Park and the Asserted Rights of the Métis.

Overwhelmingly, Wood Buffalo National Park’s history has been one of exclusion, not inclusion. The creation of the park with no inclusion of local Indigenous communities deeply impacted their ways of life, traditions and culture to varying extents. It also disconnected many communities from the land. This was not just a geographical disconnection but a total disconnection from an important part of their identity. Land is fundamental to practicing culture, spirituality, ways of life, and sense of self.

For many Indigenous peoples their relationship with the land is integral because everything comes from the land: food, clothes, shelter, water, and medicines, as well as stories, history, ceremonies, and law.

Today

A thorough understanding of traditional and scientific information is critical to preserving Wood Buffalo National Park. Traditional cultural use by Indigenous harvesters transmits Indigenous culture to future generations and contributes to the sharing and growth of Indigenous ecological knowledge of the land and waters in and around the park.

Working together is a priority for Wood Buffalo National Park, for without the inclusion of local Indigenous peoples in the work and management of the park, there is a vital input and perspective missing. A park that includes the knowledge, values, traditions and culture of Indigenous peoples is one that serves the best interests of the environment and everyone who lives in what is now known as Canada.

Learn more about the 11 Indigenous partners of Wood Buffalo National Park through their own voices here: <https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/nt/woodbuffalo/culture>

Traditional Harvesting

While visiting Wood Buffalo National Park, you will be traveling on the traditional territories of 11 Indigenous communities:



- Mikisew Cree First Nation
- Fort Chipewyan Métis Nation Association
- Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation
- Salt River First Nation
- Smith's Landing First Nation
- Deninu Kue First Nation
- K'atl'odeeche First Nation
- NWT Métis Nation
- Fort Resolution Métis Council
- Fort Smith Métis Council
- Hay River Métis Council
- Little Red River Cree Nation

Subsistence hunting, fishing and trapping takes place in Wood Buffalo National Park, as it has for centuries. Local Indigenous peoples harvest plants and animals for food, medicine and ceremonial purposes, which remains a vital part of their culture.

If you are visiting Wood Buffalo National Park, be aware that Indigenous people may be exercising their subsistence harvesting rights in the park. This may happen anywhere and any time in Wood Buffalo National Park, and is more likely between June and October.

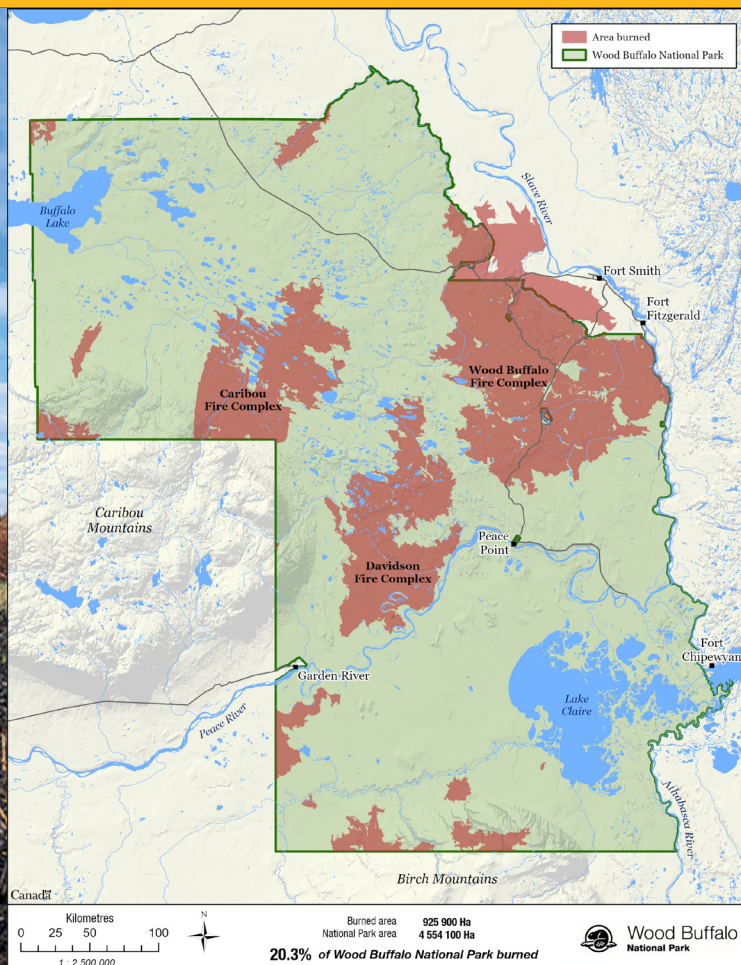
If you see harvesting occurring during your visit, please be respectful of these rights.

- Don't interfere with any harvesting activities. Be considerate and courteous of others.
- Exercise caution and use good judgment if you see someone harvesting in the park. If needed, make your presence known, or just leave the area if it's safe to.
- Don't approach harvesters unless you're invited to, and do not take photos or videos unless you have permission.



Wildfire

Parks Canada is committed to reducing the risk of wildfires to communities, visitor infrastructure, natural and cultural resources.



The Importance of Fire

Fire is a natural part of the boreal forest ecosystem in Canada. It is one of the main ways the forest renews itself. Although we often view natural disturbances as destructive, they play a crucial role in keeping ecosystems healthy. The boreal region's cold climate slows the decay of logs, leaves, and other organic matter on the forest floor. Fire reduces this material to mineral-rich ash, releasing and recycling nutrients into the soil, which encourages the soil's microbial activity and plant regrowth. In 2023, Canada experienced a historic wildfire season unlike any other, exceeding 13 million hectares burned. Several fires burned within Wood Buffalo National Park totaling 929,521 hectares or approximately 20 percent of the size of the park.



What To Expect

The Wood Buffalo Complex Wildfire impacted the park in many ways. This wildfire burned 504,752 hectares, both inside and outside of the park and impacted all of the recreational trails within Wood Buffalo National Park as well as the Salt Plains Day-Use Area.

We're committed to continuing to provide you with a great experience. There are a few things to consider when visiting post-2023 fire season:

- Fire-related area closures may still be in place due to remaining hazards. Please respect all area closures. To get the most up-to-date list of open and closed areas, please visit our website parks.canada.ca/woodbuffalo.
- If you've visited us before, many forested areas may look different than the last time you were here. Look for new growth and wildlife in the post-burn landscape.
- Be cautious of fire-weakened trees. Many trees are still standing post-fire but they can be weakened or have burnt-out roots, causing them to fall over without warning. Be aware of changing conditions, like wind, and avoid these areas if in doubt.
- Open visitor areas have been deemed safe by specialists. When adventuring outside of these areas, consider the risks. Ash pits are hard-to-see holes in the ground where fire has consumed underground fuels and created an empty space. They can cause burns and injuries, so be cautious when traveling in backcountry areas.
- Report any wildfires or suspicious smoke to the Fire Duty Officer at 867-621-0136.



Did You know?

1. After fire, the mineral content from ash improves soil, which promotes new growth and helps create new habitats for animals.
2. The benefits of fire can be seen almost immediately, with new vegetation sprouting in a matter of weeks thanks to the new deposits of mineral rich ash in the soil.
3. Plants and animals in the boreal ecosystem have evolved to adapt to fire on the landscape and some species, such as jack pine, rely on fire to open their seed cones to reproduce.
4. Long term, fire increases food sources for animals and encourages habitat variety and abundance.
5. Fireweed is often the first plant to grow following a forest fire. Keep an eye out for this purple flower during your visit.



Respecting Wildlife and Staying Safe

The chance to see wildlife as they go about their lives in their natural habitat is an incredible experience. **But, you must treat wildlife with respect.**



Keep your dog on a leash at all times.



Carry bear spray; make sure it's accessible and know how to use it.



Never feed wildlife and pack out your garbage.



Slow down if you see wildlife beside the road, stay in your vehicle and move on.



Keep your picnic site and campsite clean.



Travel in groups and make noise to let wildlife know you're nearby.



Do not use drones; they disturb wildlife and are prohibited in all national parks.

3 bus lengths/ 30 meters



10 bus lengths/ 100 meters

Bison are wild animals.

They can be unpredictable and dangerous, even if they appear calm.

Bison Safety

- When you see bison on the road, stay in your vehicle.
- Keep at least 100 metres between you and bison at all times.
- Bison are more aggressive during mating season (rut) from the end of July until September.

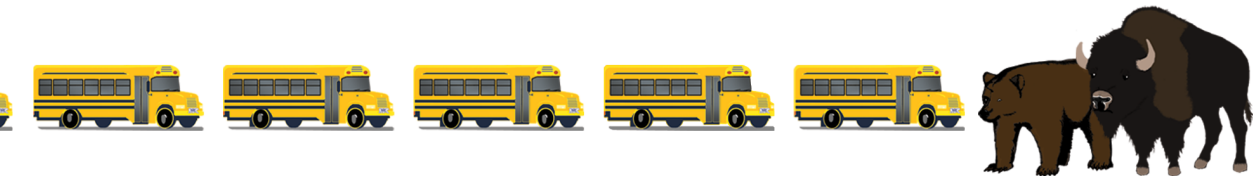
Bison Body Language

Bison may or may not display signs that they are becoming agitated. Be alert and know the warning signs.

- Snorting and head tossing
- Raising the tail
- Turning its back to you, raising the tail and defecating
- Pawing the ground
- False charging, do not run



Illustrated by Wes Olson





Wood Bison

Characteristics

Curved black horns, high hump at the shoulders, short tail.

Habitat

Forested areas, the Peace-Athabasca Delta



Black Bear

Characteristics

Comes in a variety of colours including black, brown and cinnamon. Small head with tall ears, short claws.

Habitat

Forested area



Moose

Characteristics

Long legs, shoulder hump, built like a horse with a large head and broad antlers.

Habitat

Wet and marshy areas



Whooping Crane

Characteristics

North America's tallest bird. White body with black wingtips and a red crown.

Habitat

Wet and marshy areas

Wildlife Viewing and Identification



Wolf



Characteristics

Built like a German Shepard, with longer legs. Colour can vary from white to black

Habitat

Forested areas, the Peace-Athabasca Delta



Lynx



Characteristics

Resembles a very large domestic cat, short tail, long legs, large feet, ear tufts.

Habitat

Forested areas, boreal forest



Top Spots for Viewing Wildlife

Along park roads - wood bison, gray wolves, moose and black bears may be traveling along the road or feeding on vegetation in the ditches.

Wetlands - especially during spring migration

Near the Pine Lake Rental Cabins - bison like to hang out in the field

Camping

Pine Lake Campground is 60 km south of Fort Smith in the heart of the park. Campsite reservations are made through the Parks Canada Reservation System by phone at 1-877-737-3783 or online at reservation.pc.gc.ca. You can also do self-registration once you arrive at the campground with three pull-through and 18 regular sites.

Amenities include:

- picnic tables
- firepits
- firewood
- nearby flushable outhouses
- bear-proof food lockers
- a playground.

Along the southern shore of Pine Lake, Kettle Point Group Camp offers a large log day-use shelter, spacious tenting area, semi-private beach, fire circle, firewood and playground. Available for groups of eight people or more. Reservations are required.

Backcountry camping is permitted almost anywhere in the park, although some restrictions do apply. Get your permit by calling 867-872-7960 or by visiting a Parks Canada team member at the Visitor Centre

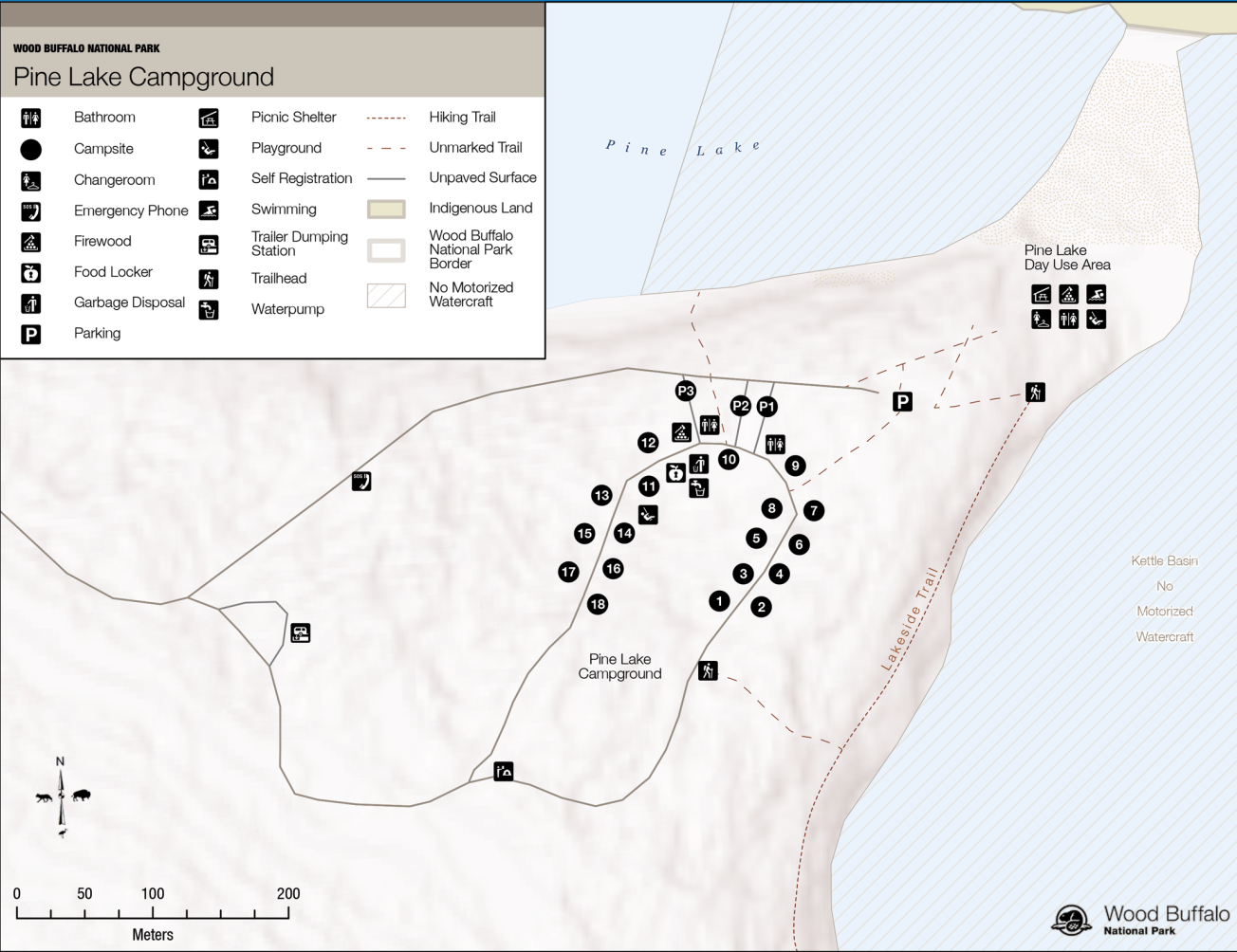
Pay for your stay at Pine Lake Campground:

1. Find the self-registration kiosk near the entrance of the campground.
2. Fill out the camping permit. Be sure to fill out all the fields.
3. Seal the payment envelope and put it in the vault.
4. Display the permit on your campsite post.

Keep in mind - Campground rules

- Quiet hours are between 11:00 pm and 7:00 am daily. Generator use is not permitted during this time.
- Fires are permitted within designated fire pits only. Never leave fires unattended.
- Maximum two vehicles per campsite.
- One wheeled camping unit and up to two tents are allowed per campsite.
- Dogs must be kept on a leash.





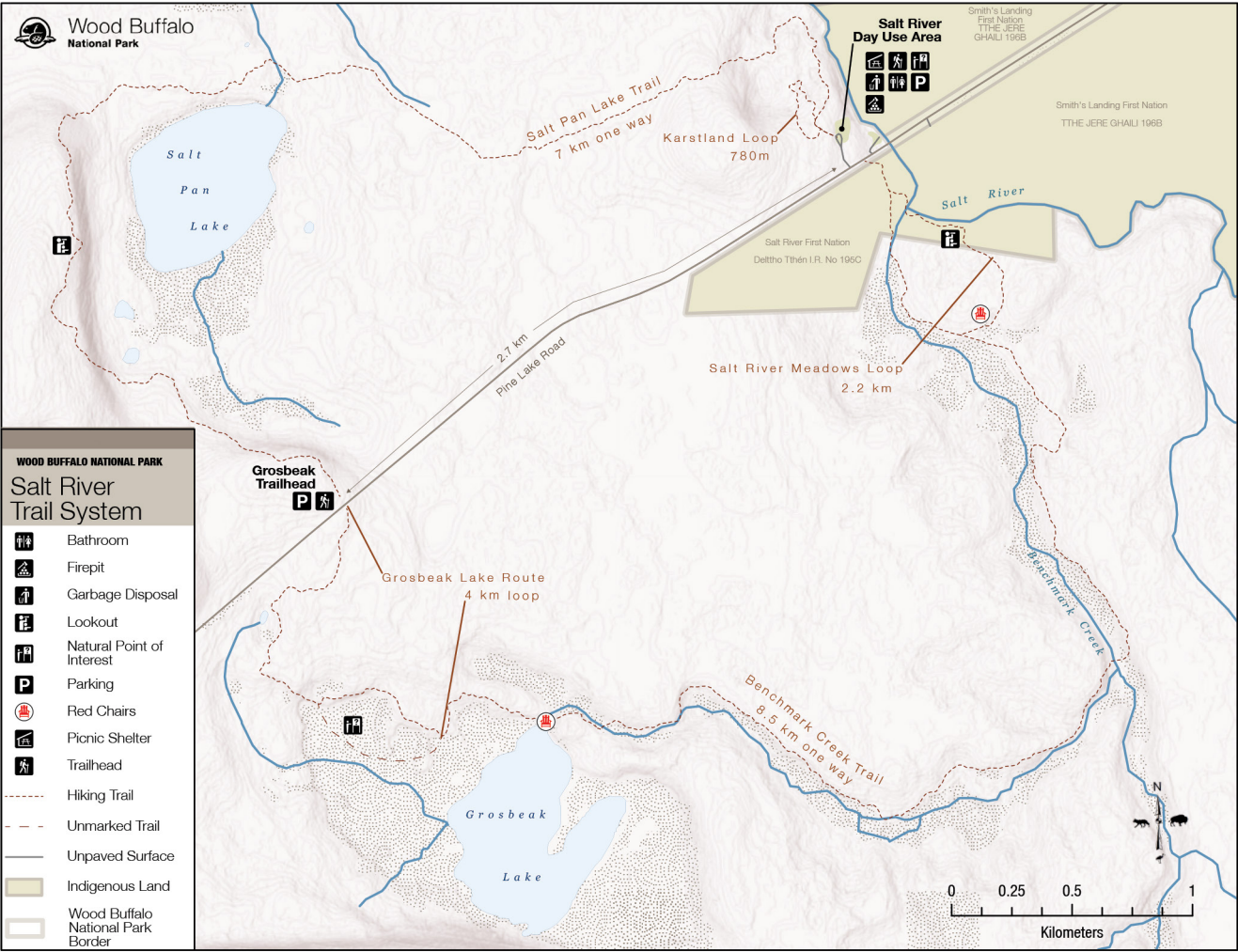
Keep a Bare Campsite

Secure your food and scented items in the provided bear-proof food lockers, your vehicle or hard-sided camper whenever you leave your site or aren't using them.

- Human food, dishes, pots, pans
- Garbage
- Toiletries
- Coolers, even when empty
- Pet food
- Recycling
- Barbeques and camp stoves

Please keep a tidy campsite. Human food and garbage kill wildlife.





Ratings

 EASY

- Suitable for those with little or no trail experience.
- Flat to gently rolling with no obstacles.

 MODERATE

- Suitable for those with basic trail experience.
- Gently rolling with short, steep sections and infrequent obstacles.

 DIFFICULT

- Suitable only for those with trail experience.
- Long, steep sections with frequent obstacles.



Hiking Trails



Salt Pan Lake

Moderate, 7.0 km one way, 14 km return

Trailhead - Salt River Day Use Area or the Grosbeak trailhead

Watch for bison as you hike through karst and forest to an escarpment overlooking Salt Pan Lake. To hike a longer loop (15.5 km) combine Benchmark Creek and Salt Pan Lake Trails.



Karstland Trail

Easy, 780 loop

This trail is closed due to a collapsed sinkhole. We're working on a new route.



Benchmark Creek

Moderate, 8.5 km one way, 17 km return

Trailhead - across the Pine Lake road from the Salt River

Day Use Area or the Grosbeak trailhead

Travel along a stream, through forest, meadows and salt flats. Take in views of the Salt River and its tributaries on your way to Grosbeak Lake. To hike a longer loop (15.5 km) combine Benchmark Creek and Salt Pan Lake Trails.



Grosbeak Lake Route

Moderate, 4.0 km loop

Trailhead - 2.4 km south of the Salt River Day Use Area on the east side of Pine Lake Road.

This trail through a boulder field at Grosbeak Lake is a “must-see” site in Wood Buffalo National Park. Walk through erosion-sculpted boulders scattered across a white salt pan to Red Chairs overlooking the lake.



Salt River Meadows

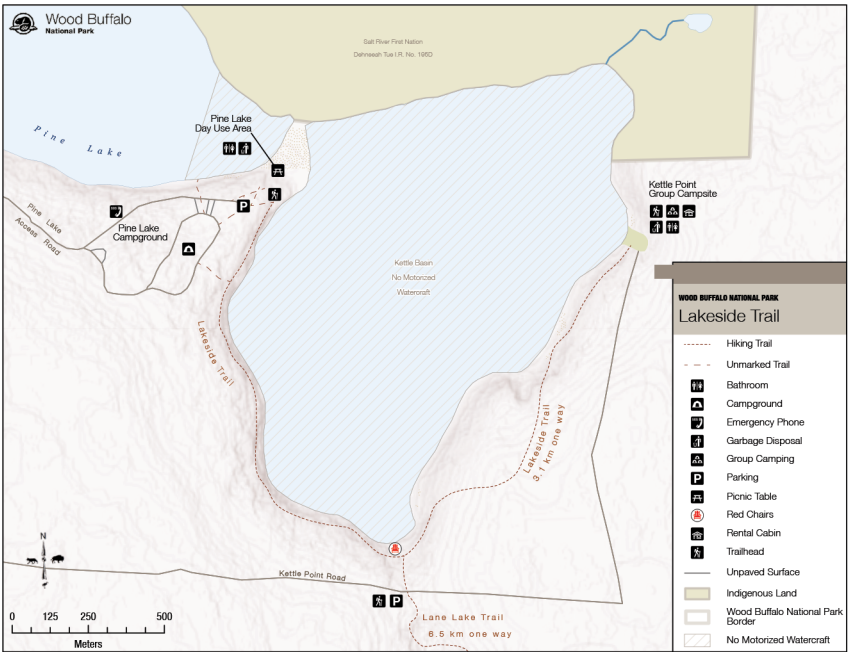
Moderate, 2.2 km loop

Trailhead - Park at Salt River Day Use Area and walk across Pine Lake Road to the trailhead.

Meander through wildflower meadows and along a saline stream. This wide trail starts across the Pine Lake Road from the Salt River Day Use Area parking lot.

Know before you go

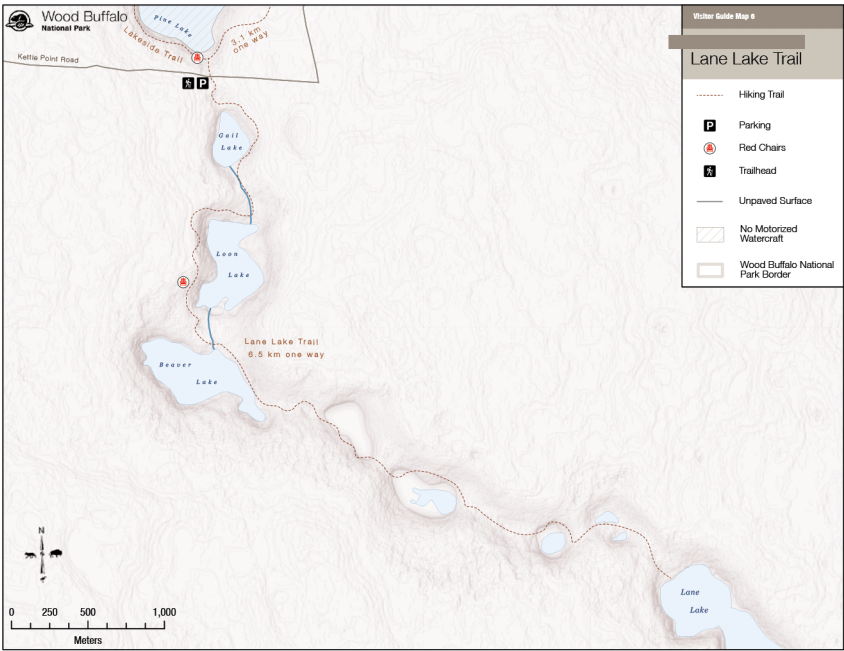
- Register at the Visitor Centre prior to all overnight backcountry trips.
- Respect area and trail closures.
- Carry bear spray and; know how to use it.
- Dogs must be on a leash at all times.



Lakeside

Moderate, 3.1 km one way, 6.2 return
Trailhead - access this trail from the Pine Lake Day Use Area, Kettle Point Group Camp or Kettle Point road

Follow the shoreline through the spruce and aspen forest between Pine Lake Day Use Area and Kettle Point Group Camp. Part way, you can also access the Lane Lake Trailhead.

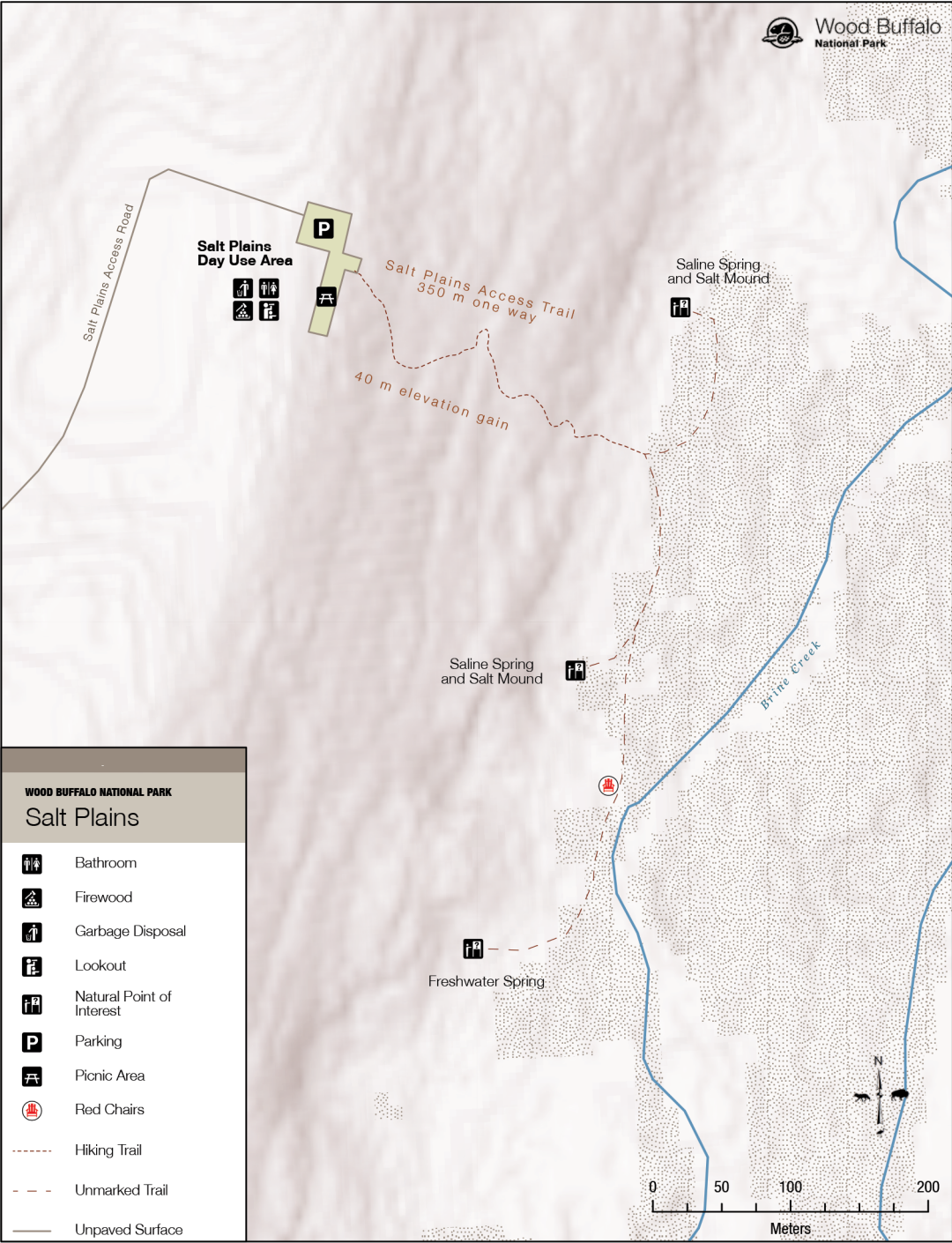


Lane Lake

Moderate 6.5 km one way, 13 km return
Trailhead - Kettle Point road

Follow a chain of small sinkhole lakes to Lane Lake. Watch for beavers, shorebirds and loons. Access the trailhead from Kettle Point Road, or make a longer hike by starting at Lakeside trail from Kettle Point Group Camp or the Pine Lake Day Use Area

With over **50 km of hiking trails** in the park our trail system offers short, relaxing strolls and long, scenic loops.



Salt Plains Access

Moderate 350 m one way, 700 m return

Make your way down a steep escarpment from the Salt Plains Viewpoint to the Salt Plains. For a hike you won't forget, search for the spring by the treeline and walk barefoot amongst the salt mounds.



Paddling and Beaches

Pine Lake Beach

On hot summer days people swim in the beautiful aquamarine waters of Pine Lake located 60 km south of Fort Smith, NT.

Paddling

Whatever you paddle, there's a route to suit your style. Paddle lakes, rivers, or even part of the Trans Canada Trail down the Athabasca River, rivière des Rochers, and Slave River.

Stop by the Visitor Centre to find out more about paddling routes in the park and to rent a canoe or stand-up paddleboard.

Water sports and safety

- Pine Lake and other park waterways become ice-free around the middle to the end of June.
- Water temperatures suitable for swimming are usually reached by July and continue until early September.
- Please keep in mind that Pine Lake drops off quickly.
- Pine Lake beach is unsupervised and there are no lifeguards on duty.
- Always wear a life jacket when paddling and boating.
- Use of personal watercraft, such as seadoos, is prohibited on park waterways.
- Recreational boating is permitted on the northern portion of Pine Lake.



Load up picnic essentials and head into Wood Buffalo National Park to share a meal against iconic landscapes. Enjoy the quiet, serene sounds of nature and the beauty of the boreal forest at several great picnic spots in the park.

Bring your own drinking water. No potable water is available in the park.

Day-Use Areas

Location	Picnic Shelter with Wood Stove	Playground	Picnic Tables	Toilets	Firepits and Firewood	Boat/Canoe Launch	Changerooms
Pine Lake Day-Use Area Spend the day at the beach!	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Salt Plains Day-Use Area This is the most spectacular picnic setting in the park. Hike 750 m down to the plains to explore and enjoy a moment in the Red Chairs.			●	●	●		
Salt River Day-Use Area Scenic views of the Salt River, nearby hiking trails and a community fire pit makes this the perfect spot for a group or family gathering.	●	●	●	●	●		
Angus Day-Use Area This is a great place to take a break.Look into the Angus Sinkhole, play on the swing and slide, or just relax in the quiet before continuing on your trip.		●	●	●	●*		
Peace Point² Home of the Mikisew Cree First Nation. Peace Point offers breathtaking views of the mighty Peace River and provides boat and canoe access.			●	●	●*	●	
Moose Island² Drive across the Peace River on the ice road in the winter at Moose Island. This winter river crossing is also a popular boat and canoe launch in the summer.				●		●	

*Firewood not provided
1 Boat Launch available nearby
2 The Pine Lake Road beyond Kettle Point narrows and is less traveled. The Carlson’s road to Moose Island is a single track dirt road that sees little through traffic in the summer.

Guided Experiences



Guided Experiences

Summer guided experiences are available during July and August. Meet a park interpreter in the park to learn more about the animals and landscapes that make Wood Buffalo special.

For this summer's offerings, check out parks.canada.ca/woodbuffalo or come visit us in the Visitor Centre.

Private Programs

Park interpreters are enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Private programs are available for school groups, organizations and large family groups





Stargazing and Northern Lights Viewing

Venture into the world's largest dark sky preserve (hint: that's us!) and take in all the dark skies have to offer. Look up and enjoy stars, constellations and northern lights.

While the sun barely sets May through July, late August and September offer dark, warm nights for dark sky viewing. Winter brings cold, clear nights with the best viewing opportunities.

Check with Visitor Center staff for up-to-date northern lights forecasts.

Top Spots to Stargaze

- Dark Sky Circle at Pine Lake
- Salt River Day-Use Area
- Salt Plains Lookout



Wood Buffalo National Park

	Backcountry Campsite		Emergency Phone
	Bathroom		Trailhead
	Boat Launch		Paved Surface
	Rental Cabin		Unpaved Surface
	Campground		Winter Road
	Day Use Area		Provincial Borders
	Group Camping		Wood Buffalo National Park Border
	Information		Whooping Crane Nesting Area
	Interpretive Signs		Indigenous Land
	Lookout		
	Natural Point of Interest		

