

Western Parks

Asessippi Provincial Park



Introduction

Asessippi Provincial Park, 23.2 km² (9 mi.²) in size, is 370 km (230 mi.) northwest of Winnipeg and 16 km (10 mi.) west of Riding Mountain National Park. Designated as a provincial park on April 9, 1964, its focal point is Lake of the Prairies, an impoundment created with construction of the Shellmouth Dam on the Assiniboine River.

Asessippi was established to represent the Souris Till Plain Natural Region, one of twelve distinct landscapes included in Manitoba's system of park lands. It provides important regional and provincial water-oriented recreation opportunities, especially angling. Its significant, abandoned townsite provides opportunities to enhance public appreciation of late 19th-century, rural industry.



Lake of the Prairies and Provincial Road 482

Dinosaurs and Misfits

Asessippi is on the second prairie level and is underlain by the same shale and sandstone bedrock as Riding and Duck mountains. These sedimentary rocks formed from clay and sand deposited in ancient seas that existed 65-225 million years ago when dinosaurs dominated the Earth. Fossil records of marine reptiles and other organisms from that time are buried beneath a thick mantle of glacial debris left here at the end of the Ice Age. Bedrock exposures can be found at road cuts and wherever streams have cut through the blanket of clay, sand, gravel and boulders.

Major natural features of the present landscape were formed as a result of glacial activity, which ended about 10,500 years ago, and changes that have occurred since then.

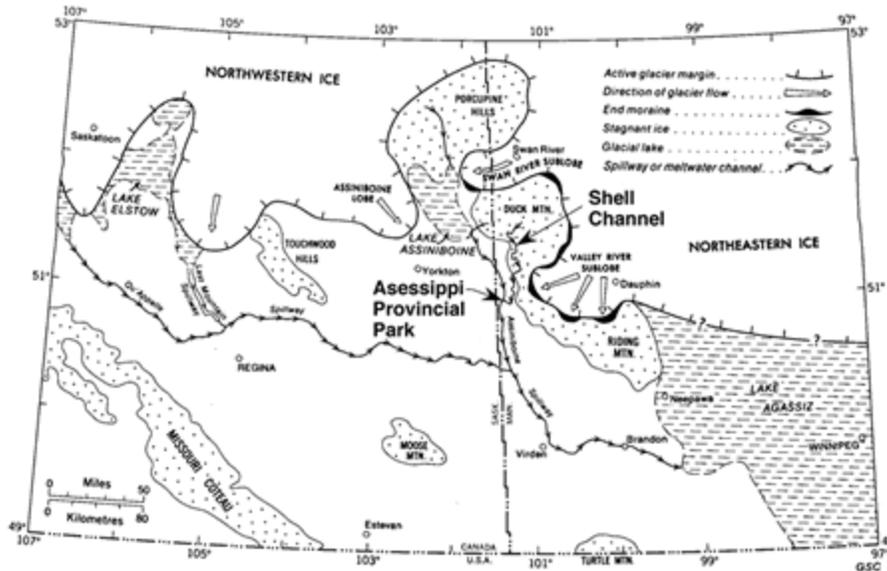


Figure 1: Glacial ice front about 14,500 years ago; note the Assiniboine River spillway
Courtesy of Natural Resources Canada

As the Keewatin ice sheet melted, torrents of meltwater spilled from its surface and from within, forming temporary glacial meltwater lakes in the region. Some of these lasted for centuries before they drained. Massive volumes of water moved along spillways and channels which followed the paths of least resistance to lower ground. In the process, they carved steep valley walls and deposited their loads of well-sorted sand, silt, gravel and boulders (alluvial till) along their courses to create the valley floors, or floodplains.

Assissippi is at the meeting place of two such river valleys. The Assiniboine River valley is a glacial spillway formed as water drained from the meltwater lakes, Assiniboine and Melfort, which developed northwest of here. It was also fed by meltwater from remnant ice left on Porcupine Mountain. The Shell River valley is described as a meltwater channel as it drained water from stagnant ice that was left on Duck Mountain by the receding glacier. The ancient Assiniboine River wound its way through southwest Manitoba and emptied into another temporary glacial lake, Lake Agassiz.

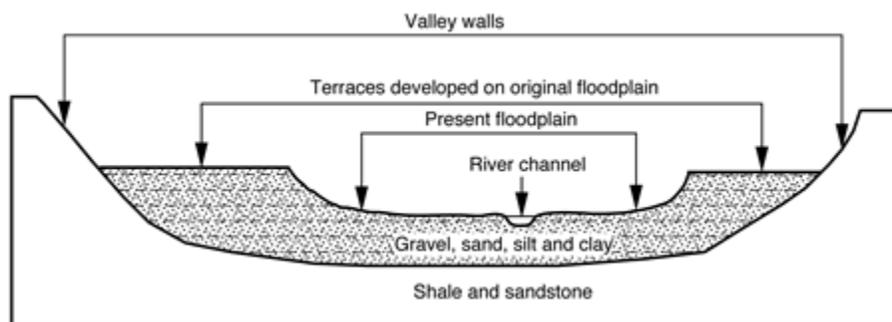


Figure 2: Simplified components of a river valley, with misfit river and terraces

When the glacial meltwaters disappeared from this region, the present Assiniboine and Shell rivers were left, fed only by precipitation and run-off in their drainage basins. Today's rivers are trickles of water compared to their former selves. Because they occupy valleys that are much larger than they can carve with their present waterflow, they are sometimes called underfit or misfit rivers.

The present rivers, with much smaller floodplains than their ancestral forms, carved step-like terraces into the alluvial till left by their predecessors. While most terraces in the park are inundated by Lake of the Prairies, part of an Assiniboine River valley terrace can be found by the west end of the Shellmouth Dam. The pavilion area and the old Assiniboine townsite are situated on Shell River valley terraces.



North Shell River valley wall

Within the last 10,500 years, the valley walls have been and continue to be changed by the slumping and creeping of its surface materials. Like the more dramatic landslides or avalanches, this ground shifting on sloped surfaces (called mass wasting) is caused by gravity. Plant growth helps to anchor land and slows down these natural erosional processes. Springs and run-off also contribute to the continuing changes in the valley walls. Wet ground materials are more vulnerable to movement than dry, and therefore are more subject to slumping and creeping. Springs have also carved the prominent ravines in the valley walls.

The Assiniboine River valley is one of the most prominent and scenic landscape features in southwestern Manitoba. Visitors can also explore other parts of the valley in provincial parks such as Grand Valley near Brandon, and Spruce Woods.

Plants and Wildlife

Assiniboine is in the aspen parkland which is a mixture of mixed-grass prairie and wooded communities dominated by aspen with some bur oak. Open area plants include grasses such as rough fescue, June grass and blue grama; flowering plants such as crocus, hoary puccoon, goldenrod, and wild bergamot; and scattered patches of shrubs like prairie wild rose, wolf willow, saskatoon, chokecherry and snowberry. The latter are often found at the edges of

forested communities which are mainly trembling aspen, balsam poplar, bur oak and also some birch. In moister habitats, Manitoba maple is found, as are groves of willow.

The varying topography creates a variety of growing conditions so that there are different kinds of plant communities within a relatively small area. This is ideal habitat for wildlife. Larger mammals include white-tailed deer, coyotes and raccoons. Moose and elk are occasionally seen.

Birds common in open areas include the prairie horned lark, American goldfinch, nighthawk and kingbird. In wooded areas you may hear rose-breasted grosbeaks, warblers and vireos. On and near Lake of the Prairies, there are pelicans, different species of ducks, great blue herons and belted kingfishers. This large body of water has also become an important staging area for western grebes during migration.

With the development of the impoundment, great changes occurred for aquatic plants and animals in the affected areas. River habitats characterized by seasonal water level fluctuations, moving water, little plant-growth and high oxygen levels were suddenly transformed into lake habitats. This newly formed environment favoured underwater plants and animals that thrive in calm waters.



Aspen on the valley slope

People and Resources

Asessippi and its regional setting have abundant natural resources which have attracted people for countless generations. Eastward are the heavily forested uplands of Riding and Duck mountains, and westward is the vast plain. Its two rivers have provided drinking water, food, a means of transportation and energy to operate machinery.

For thousands of years, First Nations harvested the region's bounty-bison on the plains, fish in the rivers and furbearers in the forests. Prior to 1870, small groups of Cree and Anishinabe travelled through the region taking advantage of seasonally abundant food sources. Important edible plants included Indian breadroot, sunflower roots and wild berries. Medicinal plants like

Seneca snakeroot, and those used in religious ceremonies, like sweet grass and prairie sage, are common locally.

During the fur trade era, between the middle of the 17th and the end of the 19th century, the area's important trade posts were Fort Dauphin, Swan River, Fort Ellice (near today's St. Lazare) and Fort Pelly (north of Kamsack, Saskatchewan). Furs, pemmican and trade goods flowed through here between the Red River settlement, Edmonton and points north. Water transportation vessels included canoes, scows, rafts, and in the 1890s, steamboats. The Assiniboine River's water levels were generally low, north of here, but several steamboats including the Alpha and the Marquette managed to reach Fort Pelly, further upstream (during wet years only).

Most freight was moved overland, in Red River carts. Métis often worked as freighters for the Hudson's Bay Company to supplement incomes from buffalo hunting and the sale of pemmican. The Pelly Trail generally followed the river's east shore, at the top of the valley, and was a major link between Fort Ellice and Fort Pelly. When a bridge was constructed in the pioneer town of Assissippi, a branch of the trail went through here.

The Shell River with its headwaters on Duck Mountain, became prominent for a brief time during the settlement era. Between 1900 and 1915, the Hanbury Lumbering Company used this river to float cut logs from Duck Mountain to the Assiniboine River, and then to its mill in Brandon. Log drives began in spring when water levels were high enough; the logs reached Brandon, via the Assiniboine, in mid-June.

Assissippi was named after the old townsite, which adopted the Cree word and name for Shell River. The park, ghost town and river, link us to all people who have benefitted from the area's natural resources in the past and those who will enjoy them in the future.



Shell River

Things to Do, Places to See

Asessippi Townsite

From PTH 83, visitors can look down into the winding Shell River valley at one of the earliest settlements in this part of Manitoba. It was a bustling frontier community during the 1880s and 1890s.

In 1882, with the hope of an early railway connection and with a federal land grant, the Shell River Colonization Co. founded the village of Asessippi. A dam, roller process grist mill, saw mill, shingle factory, brick works and cheese factory were all built at this site.

Some 50 Ontario settlers had homesteaded here by 1883. However, the railway did not arrive. Lacking access to a larger market, local industries failed and in 1888 the Government of Canada revoked the Company's charter. Most residents resettled in nearby communities like Shellmouth and Russell. For more information, refer to the publication *Asessippi Townsite*, available from Historic Resources Branch.



Asessippi bridge, circa 1902

Ancient Valley Self-guiding Trail

This trail explores glacial features that were created over 8,500 years ago and the results of erosion that continue to change today's Assiniboine River valley wall. It is a moderately difficult hike with some steep inclines. It winds up wooded slopes to open prairie which is dotted with wildflowers from spring to fall. Hikers should be in fairly good physical condition. Please wear proper footwear and long pants to avoid contact with poison ivy. Return distance is 3 km. Allow 1 h 30 min.



Poison Ivy

Shellmouth Dam

A cluster of interpretive signs relates the development of the Shellmouth Dam which was completed in 1972. This was a Manitoba/Canada joint program. Its impoundment, Lake of the Prairies is 67.2 km (42 mi.) long and reaches into Saskatchewan. The first 3.2 km (2 mi.) is the park's central feature.

Angling

Lake of the Prairies provides one of the most popular and intensively used walleye fisheries in Manitoba. Angling for walleye has produced good results during all seasons. Several derbies are held annually.

For those who do not venture out on the lake, there is a fishing dock with barrier-free access near the boat launch. Anglers also may hike along the long shorelines to find their own special site. Please help us keep the park clean. Pack out whatever you pack in.

In recognition of the value this fishery provides to local residents, communities and the province, a joint border water management agreement has been developed with Saskatchewan Fisheries to facilitate use by anglers and to ensure angling quality is sustained. Common angling regulations including reduced limits and size restrictions for walleye, are in place for Lake of the Prairies in both provinces. Licence reciprocity allows anglers from either province to fish the whole lake with only one fishing licence.

Boating

Lake of the Prairies is one of the largest waterbodies in south-west Manitoba and is popular among boating enthusiasts. Because adverse wind conditions can rise suddenly, water activities like water-skiing are best enjoyed on sheltered parts of the lake. Please practise boating safety

and be mindful of weather conditions. Boating channels and restricted areas near the beach are clearly marked with buoys.

Swimming

An unsupervised beach is situated near the pavilion. Visitors are responsible for their own actions in and near all waterways in Manitoba. Please ensure that you and those in your care, practise water safety.



Asessippi beach

Camping

There are excellent camping facilities in Asessippi park, with both non-serviced and electrically serviced campsites. Washrooms are modern and showers are available. Some seasonal campsites are offered to the public at the campsite draw which is held in spring. Group camping facilities can be arranged by contacting the Roblin district office.

Beat the rush and book your campsite in advance. Reserve by phone using the park's reservation number on the back of this publication.



The Frank Skinner Arboretum Trail

Located at the Dr. Frank Leith Skinner Nursery, near Inglis, this self-guiding trail honours the work of Frank Skinner. Dr. Skinner was one of Canada's most respected and innovative horticulturalists and plant breeders. He used plants from a variety of origins to develop hardy, hybrid plant stock more suited to the central and southern prairie climate. Some plantings date back to 1912. For more information, call (204) 564-2336.



Prairie Crocus

Inglis Elevators National Historic Site

Situated in the nearby town of Inglis, work is underway to restore five, wooden grain elevators that served the region throughout most of the 20th century. For further information, please contact the Inglis Area Heritage Committee, Inc., at (204) 564-2243.

Asessippi Ski Area and Winter Park

The ski area and winter park is a charming village, providing affordable and exciting winter recreation opportunities that include downhill skiing, boarding and tubing. With a sizeable food court and licensed facilities, the village can accommodate group functions, family get-togethers and race meets. In addition, the village is close to cross-country ski trails and is connected to snowmobile trail systems.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1, from *Quaternary Geology and Geomorphology of the Assiniboine and Qu'Appelle Valleys of Manitoba-Saskatchewan (Bulletin 228)*, by R.W. Klassen, 1975, is reproduced with the permission of the Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1995.