

Western Parks

Duck Mountain Provincial Park



Introduction

With an area of 1,424 km², the park is characterised by forested hills interspersed with lakes. River valleys, wetlands and streams are characteristic of the area's glacial origins. Classified as a Natural Park, its purpose is to preserve areas that are representative of the Western Upland Natural Region, and to accommodate a diversity of recreational opportunities and resource uses.

The park will:

- provide nature-oriented recreational opportunities such as hiking, canoeing and mountain biking in a largely undisturbed environment
- Provide high-quality cottaging, camping and angling opportunities, and accommodate associated facilities and services
- Promote public appreciation and understanding of the park's natural features and cultural heritage
- Accommodate commercial resource uses such as forest harvest, where such activities do not compromise other park purposes.

In 1997, significant boundary adjustment occurred for Duck Mountain Provincial Park. An additional 325 km² of land was added to the park, creating a total of 469 km² of protected park

land. As well, 200 km² of land was removed from the south end of the park to offset the impact of protected park land on forestry activities.



Roaring River Valley

Origin

The shapes of landforms and bodies of water which make up Manitoba's diverse landscape are largely the work of the last Ice Age and of glacial Lake Agassiz formed from meltwaters. About 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, when the glacier was receding northward, the now familiar form of Duck Mountain emerged as one of the first areas of dry land. Early nomadic tribes came to this new land to hunt animals such as the now extinct mammoth.

Duck Mountain is one segment of a long series of highlands in western Manitoba, collectively known as the Manitoba Escarpment. The highlands, and also the broad valleys that now separate them, have a similar shale core that was formed between 60 and 130 million years ago at the bottom of a salt-water sea. When the sea disappeared the land was lifted and a long period of sedimentation was followed by a long period of erosion. Ancient rivers and advancing glaciers wore away the areas of softer shale. This grand-scale erosion created the valleys and left the highlands with a steep eastern face or escarpment.

In his account of his travels in Swan River country during the 1790s, David Thompson comments on the high elevation of Duck Mountain when seen from the east. However, from the west it appears as a gentle rise in the landscape. Duck Mountain lies between the first prairie level, which includes the south-central Manitoba Lowlands, and the higher second prairie level that stretches across central Saskatchewan.

When the last glacier melted it left an accumulation of clay, gravel, sand and boulders on the shale core. This material is clearly visible at cuts along PR 366 and 367, the park's main roads. In some places the glacial drift is about 260 metres deep.

The irregular deposits have left "the Ducks" with a hilly terrain. Copernicus, Ketchum and Initial are some of the higher hills. Baldy Mountain is the highest elevation in Manitoba at 831 metres above mean sea level. Visitors can drive to the top of Baldy Mountain and from a 12-metre observation tower look over a forest of tall spruce and aspen. Southward, across the Grandview Valley is the northern shoulder of Riding Mountain. One of the first fire lookout towers was built on Baldy Mountain in the early 1900s, when the mountain was part of a federal Forest Reserve.

Water and Forest

The park's lakes and ponds are a legacy of glacial times and changes, that have occurred since then. Meltwater filled the depressions forming many pothole lakes. Some of these have since filled in with vegetation to become black spruce bogs. Other lakes, fed by springs and spring run-off, have remained clear. East Blue Lake is one of the province's clearest lakes. It is almost 60 metres in depth. The centres of development in the park are at Blue, Wellman, Singush and Childs lakes.

Native and stocked fish species are plentiful in most of the lakes and streams. The variety of trout (rainbow, brook, speckled, brown, lake and hybrids) are a flyfisher's delight and with walleye, yellow perch, lake whitefish, northern pike and muskellunge, angling opportunities of all kinds are available in the park during the open water season and the winter months.

Water drains down the escarpment to rivers and lakes in the surrounding lowland. Streams and creeks merge to form such rivers as the Shell, Valley, Pine, Duck, Favel and Roaring. During the spring melt they run at full force, and over the years they have carved deep channels along their courses. By midsummer, however, many become dry riverbeds.

The climate of Duck Mountain is ideal for forest growth, while a long frost-free season makes the lowlands suitable for agriculture. There are three distinct plant communities in the area due to varying altitudes and different soil conditions.



Elk in meadow

From higher latitudes, there is a southward extension of the boreal forest—a mixture of white spruce, jack pine, balsam fir and deciduous trees like aspen and birch. Ground cover includes bearberry, wintergreen, clubmoss and sarsaparilla. Some of the poorly drained areas are characterised by thick stands of black spruce interspersed with tamarack. This unique cone-bearing tree's needles turn yellow and are shed every autumn. Deciduous trees such as bur oak, elm and Manitoba maple from a more southerly habitat are found along the eastern slopes.

Upland meadows in the Roaring and Shell river valleys are small areas fringed by shrubs like chokecherry, saskatoon and snowberry. Their vivid green grasses are highlighted by wildflowers throughout spring and summer. The meadows are important feeding grounds for the mountain and valley elk population. Prior to settlement and cultivation, elk wintered in the valley's grasslands.

The varying landscape of Duck Mountain supports other animals such as moose, white-tailed deer, black bear, fox, lynx, coyote and timber wolf. A variety of birds nest in the marshes and forests. So, the call of loons, the howls of coyotes and wolves or the bugle of elk in autumn often add drama to a night's stay.

For decades, along a stretch of road north of the Blue lakes, visitors saw clear evidence of the forest fires, that periodically swept across the mountain. In 1961, fire consumed about 21,060 ha (52,000 acres) of the forest. Trees and other boreal forest plants have developed strategies for coping with the effects of fire. Half a century after the fire, black burned remnants have been replaced by thick, new growth of vegetation.

Fur, Timber and Farms

Duck Mountain's history is not well known. For early explorers and traders it was a source of furs and a barrier to be bypassed via the Swan and Assiniboine rivers. Several forts were built in sight of "the Ducks," the first being Fort Dauphin, established prior to 1750 by the La Vérendrye expedition. From the early 1800s to about 1875, salt was produced east of the mountain near Lake Winnipegosis for the Hudson's Bay Company by the evaporation of salt water from the local springs.

Fur trade activity around the mountain played an important role in the lives of the local people. The area was well known to the Assiniboine, Cree and Anishinabe (Ojibwe) who hunted elk and moose there, and trapped beaver and other fur-bearing animals. One of their travel routes was the Pine River Trail that cuts across the northern part of "the Ducks."

Perhaps Duck Mountain's importance in Manitoba's history is in its role as one of our last agricultural frontiers. With the completion of the Canadian Northern Railway to Swan River in 1899, settlers poured in; some from the more settled parts of North America and many more from Europe. Their first homes and barns, built of local logs, crowd close to PTH 10 just east of the mountain. This was the old settlement road and still earlier, a beach of Lake Agassiz. When J. B. Tyrrell studied this area late in the 1800s he referred to this beachline as the "Pitching

Track," possibly due to its gravel composition or perhaps because Aboriginal people frequently pitched their tents on this elevated ground.

At the turn of the century Duck Mountain became an important source of timber. In the winter the farmers went up into the thick forests to work in timber operations. With portable mills on the mountain and fixed mills in Grandview and Swan River, logging became the area's first major industry. Huge sleighs drawn by horses along ice tracks were first used to bring logs down from the mountain. As the loads increased, steam tractors replaced the horses. With money earned during the winter many a new farmer was able to buy much needed equipment, seed and stock.

Numerous small churches with cupolas highlight the settlements around the mountain. They represent the architecture and faith that people brought with them to the new land.



Skidding timber at Duck Mountain,
c 1900 (Duck Mountain Collection #3)
Manitoba Archives

Things to Do, Places to See

Backcountry Camping

Camping overnight along a canoe route or trail can be a rewarding experience. Park visitors who travel into the backcountry should be familiar with wilderness travel or be in the company of someone who is. Trails and canoe routes are all well marked on the ground and maps are available free of charge from campground and district offices. In general, camping is permitted only at designated backcountry campsites and fires are permitted only in fireplaces, that are provided.

Canoeing

Canoeing is a great way to explore Duck Mountain's lakes and wetlands for angling, wildlife viewing or overnight camping. Routes are fairly short and therefore ideal for teaching youngsters the basics of backcountry water travel. The two designated routes, described below, are easily accessible and provide primitive backcountry campsites. Portages are well marked.

Chain Lakes Canoe Route (5.8 km)

Accessible from PR 366, north of Blue Lake. Overnight campers must register at the Blue Lake campground office where they can ask staff for information about up-to-date angling opportunities. Portages are short, enabling access to a series of small sheltered lakes in the chain.

Beaver Lake Canoe Route (6.4 km)

Accessible from PR 366, south of Glad Lake or from Beaver Lake, off the Pine River Road. Overnight campers must register at the Wellman Lake campground office. Ask staff for up-to-date information about angling opportunities along the route.



Chain Lakes Canoe Route

Hiking

Trails abound in the park, providing visitors with plenty of opportunities that range from pleasant one-hour walks to rugged overnight camping trips. They lead through the mountain's boreal forest and by its lakes and wetlands. This is the best way to develop a sense of the landscape and to view wildlife species in their habitats.

Shining Stone Self-guiding Trail

Explore a peninsula that juts into West Blue Lake. Brochure is available at the trailhead. Return distance 1.1 km; allow 45 min.

Blue Lakes Hiking Trail

Terrain varies from level ground to rolling hills, with some steep slopes. Trail surface varies from packed topsoil, to clay and peat moss, that may be wet at times. Return distance 5.5 km; allow 2 h 30 min.

Childs Lake Hiking/Ski Trails

This network of loop trails is on the west shore of Childs Lake. Distances and facilities are shown on the trailhead map and on a site map available from district offices.



Common red paintbrush

Copernicus Hill Hiking Trail

Path winds to the top of the hill where you'll find a monument to the Polish-born Nicolaus Copernicus (1473- 1543); a plaque describes his work that changed the course of human history. A viewing tower provides a spectacular northward view. From here, hikers can access the Glad Lake trail. Return distance, from the Prieston Lake trailhead, is 1.2 km; allow 1 h.

Glad Lake Hiking/Ski Trail

Terrain varies from level to rolling, with a few steep slopes. Trail surface varies from packed topsoil to clay and peat moss. Short stretches may be wet in summer. Hikers can connect with the Copernicus Hill trail. Return distance 3.8 km; allow 1 h 30 min. Available for skiing in winter.

Shell River Valley Trail

Situated a few minutes' drive west of Childs Lake campground, the trail leads hikers through forest covering, a meadow, past the Shell River and through a calcium bog. Following a fairly steep incline to the viewpoint is effort well spent and hikers are rewarded with a spectacular view of the Shell River valley. During the day you may see elk beds in the meadow; or hear coyotes near sunset. Return distance 4.5 km; allow 1 h 30 min.

Spray Lake Trail

Terrain varies from level ground to rolling hills, with some steep slopes. Surface varies from packed topsoil, to clay and peat moss. Short loop: return distance 1.9 km; allow 1 h 15 min. Long loop: 3.5 km; allow 2 h.

Baldy Mountain Trail

Trailhead is situated on top of Baldy Mountain along with a picnic site. A short distance along the trail, hikers will find an old cabin and stable which were built in the early forestry days of Duck Mountain. They're located on the old Central Trail, that was used for travel from Grandview before PR 366 was constructed. Return distance 0.6 km; allow 30 min. The looped hiking trail leads to a viewpoint above a wetland where you'll find waterfowl and beaver activity. Return distance 3 km; allow 2 h. Viewing tower provides a southward view of the Grandview Valley and slope of Riding Mountain beyond it; interpretive signs portray the use of Duck Mountain's resources through the ages.



Baldy Mountain viewing tower

Mossberry Lake Trails

This multiple-use network of trails between Blue Lake and Childs Lake is available for hiking, cycling, horseback riding, and travel by ATV or horse and wagon. It provides angling opportunities and backcountry camping sites. Further information on distances and regulations is available on a free map that is available from district and campground offices.

Scuba Diving

The clarity and depths of East and West Blue lakes and Childs Lake in the park have made them popular destinations for SCUBA diving enthusiasts. When diving these lakes, remember that

they are 671-701 metres (2,200-2,300 feet) above sea level; therefore, make appropriate corrections for altitude diving.

Winter

Because of the mountain's elevation and forest covering, snow—the essential ingredient of winter magic and winter fun—is usually plentiful. Popular activities include cross-country skiing, angling and snowmobiling. Accommodations are available at Childs and Wellman lakes. Winter recreation maps can be obtained from district offices.



East Blue Lake