

Western Parks

Spruce Woods Provincial Park



Introduction

With an area of 269 km², Spruce Woods Provincial Park is characterized by spruce parkland, upland deciduous forest, mixed-grass prairie, open and stabilized sand dunes and riverbottom forest.

Classified as a Natural Park, its purpose is to preserve areas that are representative of the Assiniboine Delta Natural Region; and accommodate a diversity of recreational opportunities and resource uses. The park will:

- Provide nature-orientated recreational opportunities such as hiking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding and wildlife viewing in a largely undisturbed environment;
- Provide opportunities for high-quality intensive recreational developments such as trails, campgrounds, day-use areas and picnic sites;
- Protect and profile Aboriginal heritage in the Spirit Sands area and the early settlement along the Assiniboine River valley; and
- Promote public appreciation and understanding of the park's natural features.



White spruce sentinels along the highway

Special Places

The park's most fascinating and fragile feature is Spirit Sands. There are a few places in Canada and nowhere else in Manitoba with such large stretches of open sand.

When the last great glacier began to melt locally about 12,000 years ago, the Assiniboine River was 1.5 km wide. It was laden with sand and other sediments from melting glaciers in what is now Saskatchewan. It drained into the huge Lake Agassiz just south of present-day Brandon. From the mouth, the fine sand fanned out into the 6,500 km² Assiniboine Delta which almost extends to Portage la Prairie. As the glacier continued melting northward and Lake Agassiz drained to the south, sands of the delta became exposed.



Assiniboine River

On July 12, 1806 the fur trader Alexander Henry, the Younger, wrote that the dunes were called *Montagne du Diable* (Devil's Mountain). "Many extraordinary stories are related of this mountain, both by Indians and Canadians-of the strange noises heard in its bowels, and the nightly apparitions seen at one particular place In crossing those hills our horses sank up to their knees in many places." For Aboriginal people, however, the sand dunes were a place close to the Great Spirit or Kiche Manitou, rather than a place or home of evil spirits. Its present name "Spirit Sands" recognizes the dunes' religious significance to early inhabitants.

The 4 km² Spirit Sands is the only remaining unvegetated area of the Assiniboine Delta. Its sand dunes are moved along by the prevailing northwesterly winds and cover everything in their paths. Only a few, hardy creatures such as the *Bembix* wasp and one type of wolf spider live here. Tracks of the olive-backed pocket mouse may be seen going into the sands from bushes at their edges.

The park protects the unique forest that gives Spruce Woods its name. It is a relict boreal forest, a remnant of the forest established across southwest Manitoba in the wake of the receding glacier. After several thousand years, when the climate became drier, the forest succumbed to prairie grasses. Besides white spruce, tamarack and black spruce are still found in cool, boggy places. The boreal forest today extends northward from Riding Mountain.

Most of Spruce Woods' open spaces are mixed-grass prairie, a transition zone between the endangered tall-grass prairie of the east and the short-grass prairie of the west. Big bluestem, the plant that gives tall-grass prairie its name, stretches 2 m high in some areas including the edge of Spirit Sands. In other places, pincushion cacti are almost unnoticeable until their magenta blossoms open.

Where the prairie meets forest or open sand, the unusual western hognose snake lies in wait for its prey, an unsuspecting toad. Manitoba's only lizard, the northern prairie skink can be found on grassy hillsides. Herds of majestic wapiti absent for decades, once again graze on the prairie.



Western hognose snake

Aspen parkland is another transitional plant community, between prairie and either boreal or oak forest. White-tailed deer, relative new-comers, find shelter in these forests and can be seen along its edges as they browse on shrubs or graze on grasses.

Along the Assiniboine River, the eastern deciduous forest reaches its limit in southwestern Manitoba. Its lush vegetation of basswood, green ash, American elm and Manitoba maple extend their shady canopies over moist riverbanks. Ruffed grouse, raccoons and various weasels are at home in this plant community.

With establishment of water control structures upstream, periodic flooding which played a role in the establishment of this forest, is limited now to fluctuations of the Souris River. The scourge of this habitat, Dutch elm disease has reached the park.

The Assiniboine River, now a mere trickle of its former self, still carves the land that it flows through. As it twists and turns, its loops erode the land. Sometimes a loop becomes cut off from the main channel to form oxbow-shaped wetlands such as Kiche Manitou and Marshs lakes. Less obvious is the action of underground streams. These hidden water bodies created the eerie Devils Punch Bowl, Springridge and the Hogsback further east along the river.



Pincushion cactus

Early Life

People moved into the Spruce Woods area once the glacier retreated and boreal forest was established. Spear tips have been found in the vicinity that date back 11,000 years to the Clovis Culture. The Clovis peoples hunted very big game, including the now-extinct giant bison and mammoth!

For food, early nomadic people relied mainly on bison which were growing in numbers as grassland replaced boreal forest in this region. Advances in technology were developed. The

Woodland peoples of 2,000 years ago, for example, made ceramics, used bows and arrows, and developed pounds for capturing bison. Widespread trade with groups in the east and south also took place.

More is known about the lifestyles of the recent groups of Aboriginal people. The Assiniboine and Cree were predominant in the Spruce Woods area until the Anishinabe (Ojibwe) migrated here in the early 1800s. They came to the prairies as they followed the expanding fur trade.

Bison were an important source of pemmican and clothing for all people who lived on the plains. Pemmican was a mixture of dried bison meat, fat, and berries, which kept well for several years. Besides game, other important factors for living here were the spruce resin and rootlets or *wattap* which were used to repair birch bark canoes.

From about 1768 to 1781 three independent Montreal fur traders, Corry, Oakes, and Boyer (*Chaboillez*), maintained a provisioning post near the confluence of Epinette Creek and the Assiniboine River. This post was called Pine Fort or *Fort des Epinettes*.

In this new industry, the alliance of Assiniboine, Cree and Anishinabe traded furs and pemmican for a wide range of trade goods. The Montreal-based North West Company re-established the post nearby from 1785 to 1794 and again from 1807 to 1811.

The importance attributed to this area by fur traders is evident in the number of posts that were established. In 1806, Alexander Henry reported the presence of an XY Company, a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and a North West Company (NWC) post at the junction of the Souris and Assiniboine rivers. After many years of rivalry the NWC and HBC merged in 1821.

In the 19th century life changed irrevocably here, as elsewhere on the prairies. Due to overhunting encouraged by the fur trade, bison disappeared from Manitoba by 1860 and from the rest of western Canada by 1880. Bison had been the source of life for prairie people for many thousands of years.

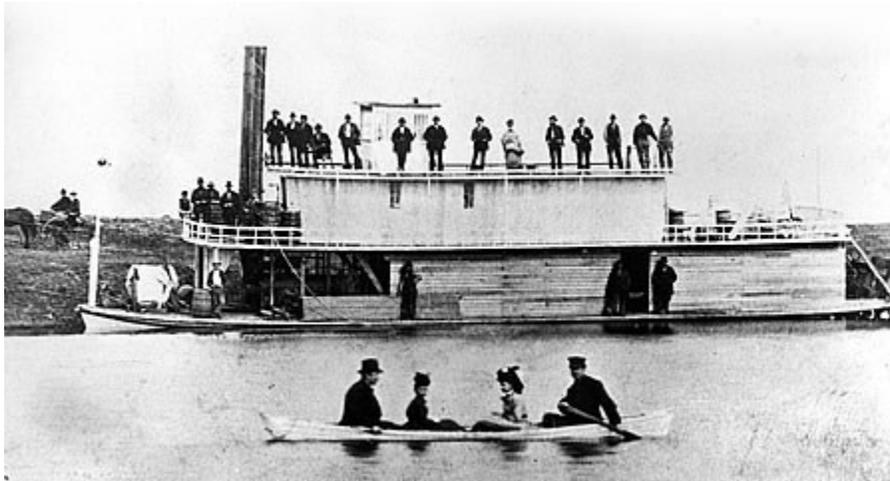
The New Era

A new craft appeared on the Assiniboine River in 1875 when steamboats began travelling the river between Winnipeg and Fort Ellice, near the present-day site of St. Lazare. Cargo included HBC trade goods, agricultural supplies and other freight. The *SS Alpha* was the last of this "Prairie Navy" on the Assiniboine; it went aground on April 27, 1885 near what is the east boundary of Spruce Woods Park. By that time, however, the railway was providing faster passenger and freight service.

A new wave of Europeans began arriving in the Spruce Woods area in the 1870s, many via the Yellow Quill Trail which ran north of the Assiniboine River. Mostly Britons, these pioneers bought and settled on 1/4 section homesteads. Icelanders were another group that settled nearby.

One of the more famous groups of homesteaders was the Criddle family. First settling near Treesbank in 1882, father Percy kept a diary of pioneer life and its hardships. The book *Criddle-de-diddle-ensis* written by his granddaughter Alma, was based on these diary entries. Two sons, Norman and Stuart, became well-known naturalists.

Another famous pioneer-naturalist was Ernest Thompson Seton who lived for a time at his brother's homestead near Carberry. Appointed Manitoba's first Provincial Naturalist in 1892, Seton is best known for his stories and paintings of animals, many of which were set in the Spruce Woods area. One such book is *Trail of the Sandhill Stag*. Seton Bridge (on PTH 5 over the Assiniboine River) bears his name.



The Alpha, c. 1878

Manitoba Archives

Recent Times

While much land around Spruce Woods is cultivated, the region was originally not recognized as having prime agricultural potential. A Forest Reserve was created in 1895 to conserve the land. Permits for the grazing of cattle and horses were issued in 1915. The forest was an important source of fuelwood for the local population and some logging operations were carried out in mature spruce stands in the 1940s. Today, grazing and fuelwood operations still continue.

In 1915 the Department of Militia and Defense leased the western portion of the Forest Reserve for training troops from Camp Hughes (replaced by Camp Shilo in the 1930s). Under a NATO agreement, West German troops trained at CFB Shilo until 2001. Today, military training is still carried out by Canadian troops. The thunder that you may hear on a cloudless day is the tank and artillery training on the base.

Spruce Woods Provincial Park was created from the eastern portion of the Forest Reserve in 1964. Kiche Manitou campground was officially opened in 1970. Part of the military lease was returned to the provincial government in 1975 and developed into the Spirit Sands area.

In Winter

In the cold winter, Spruce Woods Park still bustles with activity. Easy or challenging cross-country ski trails are yours to experience. Skating rinks and toboggan hills provide fun for the whole family. Snowmobile trails allow you to visit many parts of the park.

As you travel along the trails, you will spot wildlife that remain in Spruce Woods year-round. If you don't glimpse a wapiti, grouse or coyote, their unique tracks leave reminders that you are not here alone.

A map and information on winter facilities are available from the park offices. Overnight accommodations are available nearby in Glenboro and Carberry.

Things to Do, Places to See

Bicycling

Roads and trails throughout Spruce Woods offer excellent cycling opportunities. Roads around the Kiche Manitou area provide safe and easy riding. Backcountry trails are available for vigorous mountain biking. Please note that the Spirit Sands/Devils Punch Bowl, Isputinaw, Marshs Lake and Springridge self-guiding trails are not open to bicycles. Updated information on cycling trails is available at the park offices.

Camping

Kiche Manitou campground is immediately south of the Assiniboine River off PTH 5. Unserviced and serviced (electrical) campsites are available. The park also offers 13 yurts. These large, fabric-sided, domed shelters offer an authentic camping experience. Amenities in the park include modern washrooms, central shower building and laundromat. Groceries and fast foods are available at the concession.

To accommodate larger groups of campers, group and family use sites are also available. Facilities include modern washrooms, showers, several picnic shelters and cold water supply. Free fuelwood is provided.

Hike-in camping is offered at five designated sites on the Epinette Creek Hiking Trails (10 km north of the Assiniboine River off PTH 5). The farthest site is at 20 km. Campers must self-register at the trailhead. All sites have firepits with wood, picnic tables and primitive toilets. Several sites have cabins for emergency use only. The trail is closed during big game hunting season.

Camping is allowed only at designated areas in the park. Fires are allowed only in pits provided.



Camping

Canoeing

Spruce Woods is on the historic Assiniboine River canoe route, which starts in Brandon and ends on PTH 34, north of Holland. Camping is possible at Canoe Campground #1 (1 km east and 1 km north of Kiche Manitou campground) and #2 (13 km north of the village of Cypress River). These sites are for overnight excursions to, or from, other designated canoe launches only. Sites have firepits with wood, picnic tables, primitive toilets and water. The Assiniboine River Canoe Route Map is sold at the bookshop. A concession located on the Assiniboine River, north of the campground, offers canoe rentals and rafting trips on the river.

Hiking, Self-guiding Trails

Epinette Creek Hiking Trail System

Off PTH 5, 10 km north of Assiniboine River, this hiking system is a series of challenging trails. Return trips can be from 4 km (Spruce Trail) to 40 km (Newfoundland Trail). Please note that routes differ slightly for cyclists and during the winter ski season. In the fall, hunters may be encountered along the trail.

Isputinaw

This 1.4-km (45 min) loop is in the Kiche Manitou day use area. Interpretive brochures at the trailhead guide the hiker up the southern wall of the ancient Assiniboine River's shoreline, passing from a lush, damp habitat to an arid ridge.

Marshs Lake

Access to this 1.5-km (1 h) loop is off PTH 5, 2 km north of Assiniboine River. On-site signs help the hiker explore this oxbow lake and the life around it.

Spirit Sands/Devils Punch Bowl

These trail loops are accessible on the north side of the Assiniboine River at PTH 5. A return trip through the spectacular moving sand dunes can take as little as one hour or as long as three hours. A return trip to and from the scenic Devils Punch Bowl takes about two hours. Trail signs describe the land, the life that it supports, and the cultural history of Spirit Sands. Covered wagon rides are available at the start of the trail. Call Carberry district office or the campground office for information about tour times and fees.

Springridge

This 1.2-km (35 min) loop is next to Steels Ferry Overlook (4 km east of campground). Signs along the trail show how the incredible forces of the Assiniboine River and underground springs shape the land today.



School group tour to Spirit Sands

Horseback Riding

A guide to horseback trails is available from park offices. Staging areas are at the equestrian campground (9 km east of Kiche Manitou campground) and at Canoe Campground #2. Facilities include corrals, water, firepits, fuelwood and primitive toilets. Reservations are required for equestrian camping. Contact Carberry office for more information. Travel with caution as some routes are used by bicycles and/or vehicles.

Canoeists, horseback riders and backcountry campers should call the Carberry office, the Interpretive Centre, or campground office beforehand to check on travel restrictions and fire hazards.

Interpretation Programs

Programs about the park's natural and cultural history are offered during summer for school-groups and families. These include guided tours, family events, slide shows, films and special guests at the amphitheatre. Consult events boards or call one of the park offices for more information.



Mixed-grass prairie and white spruce

Mini-golf & Rentals

The concession stand located in the day use area, offers visitors a mini-golf course. Paddle boats can be rented here and used to explore Kiche Manitou Lake.

Park Centre

(Spirit Sands Bookshop and Interpretive Centre)

The Interpretive Centre with the Spirit Sands Museum and Bookshop is located in the day-use area, and is open May to September. The bookshop is operated by The Friends of Spruce Woods Inc. Consult events boards or call 827-8850 for more information.

Steels Ferry Overlook

Situated next to the Springridge Trail, the overlook affords a spectacular view of the ancient valley and the modern Assiniboine River. Picnic facilities are also offered. A nearby plaque marks the site of the Fair Valley School, which was attended by local children earlier in the century.

Swimming

The park's beach is located on Kiche Manitou Lake. It is accessible from the campground and the day-use parking lot where change houses are provided.



Kiche Manitou beach

The Friends of Spruce Woods Inc.

This non-profit organization provides opportunities to the public to participate in the enhancement of park interpretation, promotion and recreation. Information on membership and current projects is available from volunteers in the bookshop.

