

Western Parks

Turtle Mountain Provincial Park

Wildlife Self-guiding Trail



Introduction

Turtle Mountain Provincial Park is home to a variety of wildlife. Wildlife is any bird, plant or animal that lives on its own, without human help. Chickadees, moose, damselflies and wild mint are all wildlife—examples of what you might hear, see or smell on this walk.

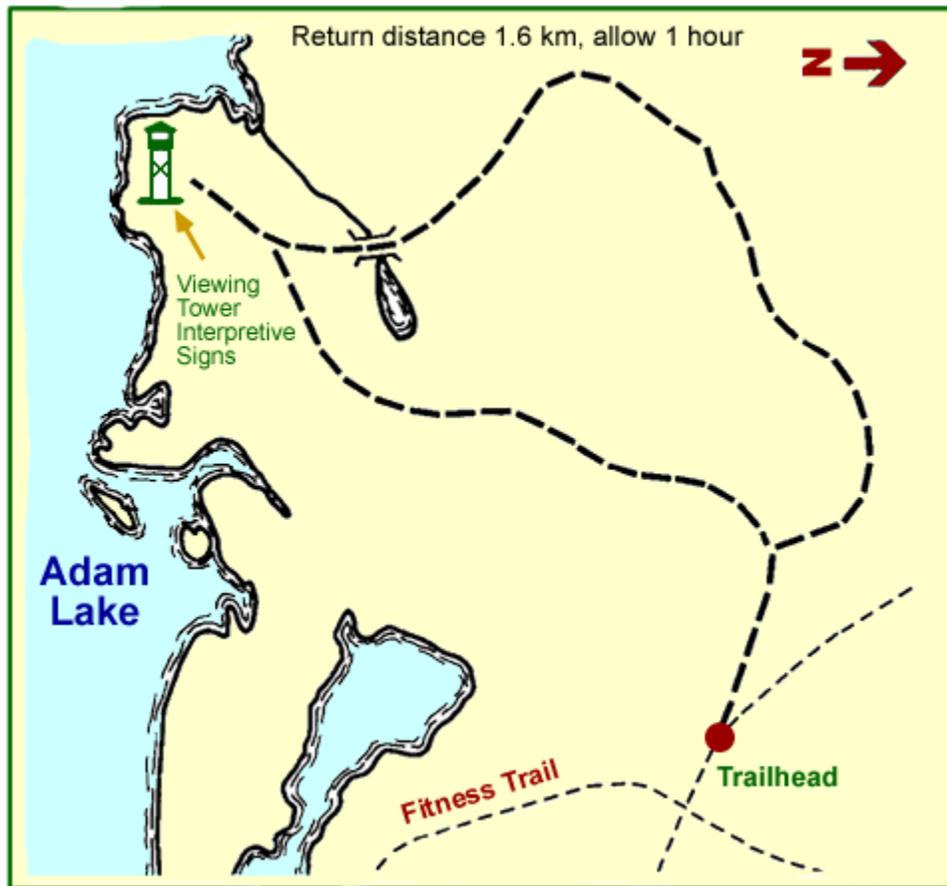
The purpose of the Wildlife Trail is to explore this home and find out what lives here. In doing so we will discover some of the inter-relationships among life here, and among people and wildlife. We will reflect on the importance of habitat, and habitat preservation. We will also learn how Turtle Mountain came to be.

You are standing on a combination of glacial till and soil from decomposed plants. The soil is relatively new; the till, on the other hand—clay, sand, gravel and boulders—was left here when the last glacier melted some 10,000 years ago. In places it is more than 100 metres deep, the length of a football field. After the last ice age Turtle Mountain was the first land in this area to be free of ice, and inhabited by people and wildlife.

The first forests to follow the ice were coniferous ones of spruce and pine, but gradual warming over thousands of years produced change. A succession of deciduous trees followed, chiefly aspen, green ash, willow and oak, which you see today. This is important because this forest,

combined with the 200 or so lakes and sloughs (called wetlands) on Turtle Mountain, provides ideal habitat for animals such as beaver.

By damming water for their own use, beaver have shaped the forest-wetland habitats along this trail to the benefit of many other animals and plants. Mink and muskrat, wolf and moose, owl and crow, mint and willow—all have benefited by the beaver's work, and all are interconnected in the web of life. The muskrat, for instance, is the mink's favorite food, while the wolf eats moose and beaver. Great horned owls prey upon crows as they roost in trees at night. Owls are the crow's chief predator, besides people.



Trail map

1) All the Essentials

Forests and wetlands offer rich habitats for wildlife. This emerging meadow was once a slough or pond. Over the years, lower water levels (caused by weather cycles and sometimes by beaver activity) allowed grasses and cattails to dominate. Cow parsnip, with its large maple-like leaves, grows around the edges, providing food for deer and moose. Frogs and mosquitoes breed here. Depending on when you see it—spring or fall, dry year or wet—this emerging meadow might be deep in water or bone dry.

Habitats like these can be very sensitive to disturbance. If they are ruined, the wildlife living here may perish. Here in the park, habitat is protected for wildlife. The wildlife, too, is protected. Turtles, for instance, should not be removed. Yet the park allows for regulated and sustainable harvests of fur-bearing animals to control their populations and meet human needs. Without regulated trapping each winter, the beaver population would increase sharply, leading to habitat stresses, fighting and disease.

2) A Home in a Tree

Homes for wildlife may be quite small. This mature trembling aspen has large dead limbs, and may be a nesting site for warblers and sparrows. Owls have certainly perched here. Raccoons may nest in hollow parts of the trunk. Beetles infest the decaying wood, attracting woodpeckers and nuthatches. Even after the tree falls, it will provide habitat for mosses and fungi and eventually new trees that take root in its rotting trunk. In nature, everything is used and recycled.

The removal of trees, dead or alive, means that some plants and animals will lose their homes. A dead tree that seems useless to us is important to wildlife. We must ensure that there is adequate habitat for all wildlife.

Trees are energy and oxygen factories. Green plants alone can turn sunlight into sugars or energy. This amazing process is called photosynthesis, and it is vital to life on Earth. Here's an example.

Plants produce sugars, burn them to grow, and are consumed by insects and animals such as deer. By eating a deer, wolves gain energy the deer received from grasses and the sun. Photosynthesis uses carbon dioxide, which we breathe out, and produces oxygen, which we breathe in and need for life. Even small woodlots are important energy and oxygen factories, as well as important wildlife habitats.



3) Very Special Needs

Each animal and plant has its own special needs. They need the right mix of food, water, space and shelter—habitat. This south-facing slope is a special area for white-tailed deer. In the winter its exposure to the sun makes it a warm bedding area for deer, a place of shelter. The acorns from the oak trees are high-energy food for them. This one area seems small, but the combination of similar areas throughout the park is critical space for deer. Without them, deer could not survive.

Moose also like to bed down on sunny south-facing hillsides, but they differ from deer in some of their needs. Moose need lakes and water plants for the bulk of their summer food. Similarly,

different plants have different needs. Wild mint, with its slender leaves and square stems, grows in damp environments and would not survive on this dry hillside, where wild sarsaparilla thrives. (Sarsaparilla can be confused with poison ivy, which has only three leaves and a woody stem.) All of nature is inter-related and the removal of only one element of habitat may cause a species to suffer.



White-tailed deer
browsing on leaves



Dogwood Browse

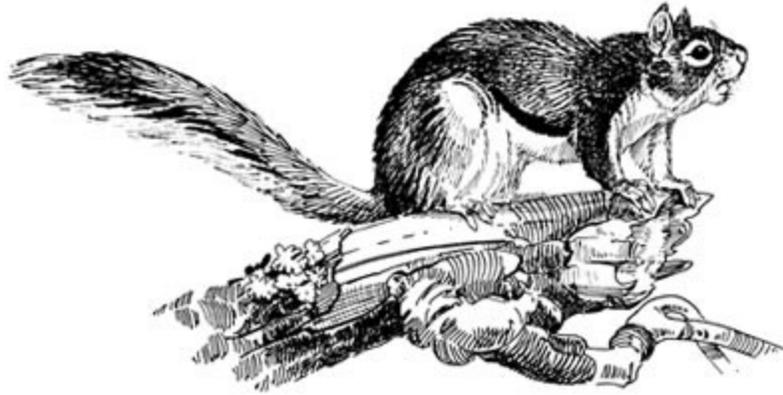
4) The Forest as Food

The beaked hazelnut and red-osier dogwood (also called red willow) forming the understory here are food for the moose of Turtle Mountain, especially during winter. Many of these twigs have been browsed by moose. This causes buds to sprout laterally and the shrubs begin to look like a pruned hedge.

A healthy forest will provide a food supply for the moose and all the other animals of Turtle Mountain.

You might have seen slender young aspen trees snapped in two, the top part dangling. Moose do that to get at the tender top twigs. Don't worry about the "damage." Aspens grow quickly and thickly. If not pruned by moose, they would soon crowd out competing plants.

Red squirrels, like deer, feast on acorns. Blue jays eat them too. If the bur oak trees were removed from Turtle Mountain, what effect would this have on wildlife? How would the loss of aspen trees affect the moose and beaver populations?



Red Squirrel

5) Life at the Edge

With its open water this marsh is a meeting point of Adam Lake with its forested shores. A wetland is the “edge” between the forest and open water. This small marsh is home to many Turtle Mountain residents. Wood frogs feed here and set up a nightly chorus of calls. Dragonflies, which live two to four weeks, patrol for unwary mosquitoes and themselves may become prey for frogs and birds. Ducks nest here. Beaver and muskrat pass through here, as do mink.

Outside the park, wetlands are becoming increasingly scarce as they are drained and bulldozed. Such habitat loss is the biggest threat to wildlife today.



Raccoon

6) The Newcomer

As you look down from the tower, you might see a moose, the largest animal on Turtle Mountain. Moose can sometimes be seen here along the shores of Adam Lake, feeding on the succulent plants in shallow water. Habitat for moose must include large areas free of human disturbance, abundant food supplies and dense forests for winter shelter. Turtle Mountain Provincial Park meets all of these needs.

Until the 1980s, few moose were seen here. Since then the population has increased sharply, partly through migration from the Pembina valley to the east. Your best chance of seeing moose is at dawn or dusk along roadways or shorelines, where they feed. Cows will protect their calves and may see your presence as a threat, so keep your distance.

Ticks are a problem for moose. The insects irritate and weaken the animals, which rub against trees to remove them, taking off hair needed for warmth. Some moose get sick and die of exposure here each winter. Manitoba Conservation monitors this situation closely.



Moose

7) Creating Homes for Wildlife

Protecting their habitat is the first step in helping wildlife. Nothing can replace that. But we can also help by providing artificial alternatives for parts of their natural habitat that may be lacking. For waterfowl, loafing and nesting areas are sometimes provided.

Loafing islands can be floating structures or even hay bales. They provide a safe area away from shore where ducks can rest, feed or nest. Wood ducks require tree cavities to nest. Where these are uncommon a nesting box, as seen here, will serve the purpose. Other birds may also use these boxes.

8) Beaver Canals

With their front claws, beaver can excavate mud and dig canals such as this one. Canals allow passage from lakes into forested areas where trembling aspen grow. Out of the water, beaver can fall prey to wolves and coyotes; in water they are safer. In more northern regions otter, which are also excellent swimmers, will prey on young beaver. Along their canals, beavers haul out aspen and willow trees for winter feed. (They eat the bark, not the wood.) With their strong front paws they also pack their homes with mud, which hardens like concrete, keeping out predators and winter's icy blasts.



Beaver

9) Looking Back and Ahead

Along this trail you have seen how Turtle Mountain Provincial Park is a haven for wildlife. Its forests and lakes provide a home in a world where habitat is often threatened. Can you think of some ways that we can help to protect wildlife? By learning more about wildlife on this trail you may find ways to help wildlife in your own backyard, and throughout Manitoba. A diversity of plants, insects, animals and birds makes for healthy ecosystems and a healthier world for all.



Damselfly

Acknowledgements

This trail was developed as a cooperative effort with the Southwest Wildlife Group, an association of the following clubs:

- Wawanesa Game & Fish
- Hartney Game & Fish
- Souris & Glenwood & District Game & Fish
- Deloraine Game & Fish
- Killarney & District Wildlife
- Tiger Hills/Dunrea & Ninette Wildlife
- Antler River/Pierson Wildlife

- Turtle Mountain/Boissevain & Minto Wildlife

Illustrations: J. Carson