

EAST OF LETHBRIDGE



THE MILK RIVER

The Milk River is unique among western Canada's river systems. All of the others eventually drain into either the Pacific Ocean, the Arctic Ocean, or Hudson Bay, but the Milk River flows south to the Missouri River, eventually draining into the Gulf of Mexico. The area itself is historically unique for western Canada because it has been under the jurisdiction of seven different governments and countries, as well as the Hudson's Bay Company. During the 1700s, France claimed all the lands of the Mississippi, so a small part of Alberta was under French rule. Later, the same area was part of the Spanish empire, and it has also, at one time or another, fallen under the rule of the Hudson's Bay Company, the British, and the Americans. It finally became part of the province of Alberta in 1905.

DEVIL'S COULEE

On May 14, 1987, Wendy Slobada, an amateur paleontologist, was exploring the coulees near her family's ranch outside of Milk River when she discovered some fossilized eggshells. The find sent waves of excitement around the scientific world, and the site became known as Devil's Coulee Dinosaur Egg Site, one of the most exciting fossil discoveries ever made. What she had found were clutches of eggs that had been laid by hadrosaurs approximately 75 million years ago. Each prehistoric egg was about 20 centimeters (eight inches) long and contained the perfectly formed bones of embryonic dinosaurs. No other find in the entire world has taught scientists more about this part of the dinosaur's life cycle.

Devil's Coulee Dinosaur Heritage Museum (403/642-2118, late May-Aug. daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m.) is in the village of Warner (you can see the building from the highway), on Highway 4, 66 kilometers (41 mi) southeast of Lethbridge. It is only a small facility, but a display reconstructs the site. Tours to the site of the find leave from the museum weekends in June and daily July-August at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Tour cost is \$22 per person and advance reservations are required.

THE TOWN OF MILK RIVER

The town of Milk River (pop. 800) sits on the northern bank of its namesake, 86 kilometers (53 mi) southeast of Lethbridge. It's a terribly uninspiring place, existing only to serve highway travelers. Highway 15 through Montana crosses into Alberta 40 kilometers (25 mi) south of Milk River at the Coutts-Sweetgrass border crossing. This is the main route into Alberta from the United States and the crossing is open 24 hours a day year-round. A **Travel Alberta Visitor Information Centre** (403/647-3938, mid-May-Aug. daily 8 a.m.-7 p.m., Sept.-early Oct. daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m.) greets travelers about 35 kilometers (22 mi) after crossing the border. It provides copious information and an interpretive center highlighting aspects of tourism within the province.

WRITING-ON-STONE PROVINCIAL PARK

This park, off Highway 501 43 kilometers (27 mi) east of the town of Milk River, has the largest concentrations of petroglyphs (rock carvings) and pictographs (rock paintings) found in North America. But that's only one of the reasons to venture out into this remote part of the province: A warm river for swimming, great canoeing, intriguing rock formations, and abundant wildlife round out one of Alberta's premier nonmountain parks.

The park protects a stretch of the Milk River that has cut a deep valley into the rolling shortgrass prairie. Soft sandstone and shale cliffs are capped with harder, iron-rich sediments. Years of wind and water erosion have carved out the softer, lower rock, leaving mushroom-shaped pinnacles and columns called hoodoos. Several plant and animal species here are found nowhere else in Alberta. Look for pronghorn on the grassland, bobcats and mule deer in the coulees, and yellow-bellied marmots sunning themselves on sandstone outcrops. Don't look too hard for rattlesnakes, though, which are usually found in shady spots among the cliffs.

THE MEANING OF IT ALL

Writing-on-Stone was a place of great spiritual importance to generations of natives, a place for contact with the supernatural. They attempted to interpret previous carvings and paintings, added their own artwork to the rock, and left gifts of tobacco and beads as a way of communicating with the spirits of the dead. Much of the cliff art remains visible today, providing clues to the region's early inhabitants.

Artifacts excavated from below the cliffs suggest that the area had been inhabited for at least 3,000 years, but any rock art of that age would have been destroyed by erosion long ago. Dating the remaining petroglyphs and pictographs is difficult. They aren't covered in the layers of sediment usually used to date sites, nor can radiocarbon dating be applied because that technique requires wood or bone to test. The only way of dating the rock art is to estimate its age based on recognizable artistic styles or the depiction of certain historic events (such as the arrival of the white man). Of the carvings visible today, the earliest are thought to be the work of the Shoshoni, created approximately 700 years ago. Their work is characterized by warriors on foot carrying ornately decorated shields, while isolated images of elk, bears, and rattlesnakes appear as simple stylized outlines. During the 1730s, the Shoshoni were driven into the mountains by the Blackfoot, who had acquired horses and guns before other native bands. The valley's strange rock formations led the Blackfoot to believe that the area was a magical place--a place to be respected and feared--and that existing carvings

were created by the spirits. The Blackfoot added their own artistry to the rocks, and many of the Blackfoot carvings are panels that tell a story. A striking change of lifestyle was documented on the rock faces, corresponding to the arrival of guns and horses to the Plains tribes. Mounted warriors armed with rifles dominate later artworks, the most famous being a battle scene containing more than 250 characters.

INTO THE 20TH CENTURY

An NWMP post was established at Writing-on-Stone in 1889 to stop the whiskey trade and curb fighting among natives. The Mounties passed time by using the petroglyphs for target practice and carving their names into a cliff that has become known as Signature Rock. The original NWMP post buildings were washed away by floodwaters, replaced, then destroyed by fire in 1918. In 1957, the area was officially designated a provincial park.

Access to much of the park is restricted to prevent further damage to the carvings. A reconstructed NWMP post sits within this area at the mouth of Police Coulee. The best way to get a feel for the park and its history is by participating in the interpretive program; details are posted on notice boards throughout the park. The Hoodoo Interpretive Trail is a two-kilometer (1.2-mi) hike along and through the cliffs, with numbered posts that correspond to a trail brochure available from the interpretive center. At the end of the trail, and beyond the cliffs, are some examples of petroglyphs and pictographs (including the famous battle scene) that have been ravaged by time and vandals.

THE DRY BELT

The drive described in this section, traveling east along Highway 61 deep into the southeastern corner of Alberta, may sound rather unappealing, but it is in fact a fascinating journey that will open your eyes to the hardships faced by those who earn a living from the land. I travel this route for every edition of this book--not because there's ever much to update, but because in some uncomplicated way, it's one of my favorite places in all of Alberta.

THE LAND, THE HISTORY

Not a tree in sight--just rolling shortgrass prairie, occasionally dissected by dried-up streams and eroded gullies. This is the sight that first greeted settlers to the area, and even with the help of complex irrigation systems, the land looks similar today. The far southeastern corner of Alberta has never been heavily populated, but not for a lack of trying. Before it was linked to the outside world by rail, settlers entered the area. Small villages emerged, but as was often the case, the CPR decided to bypass many of these fledgling settlements and create its own towns. Population bases moved, and towns slipped into oblivion.

Highway 61 passes through this dry, unforgiving part of the province, past the towns of **Wrentham** and **Skiff**, with their boarded-up buildings and grim futures, to the town of Foremost and on through other small communities whose future hangs in the balance.

FOREMOST

In 1915, the CPR built a rail line east from Stirling through to Saskatchewan with great hopes of the area becoming heavily settled. But they hadn't counted on years of heavy drought, dust storms, and outbreaks of influenza that severely affected the populations of towns in the area. One of the few surviving towns was Foremost, whose population of 500 has remained relatively stable through trying times. Irrigation has played a major role in Foremost's longevity. The interpretive center at **Forty Mile Coulee Reservoir**, 23 kilometers (14 mi) north of town, explains the importance of irrigation to these farming communities. Nearby is a viewpoint and day-use area.

ETZIKOM

Once a thriving center with many businesses and two hotels, Etzikom is now home to fewer than 100 people. The only museum along Highway 61 is **Etzikom Museum** (403/666-3737, summer Mon.-Sat. 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sun. noon-6 p.m., adult \$4, senior \$3.50), at the east end of town in the now-empty school. Indoor displays let you relive

the past--the railway, influenza, droughts, and the tenacity of its people--but it's an outdoor display of wind power in Canada that will catch your eye. More than a dozen windmills dot the old school yard, including a clunky European-style one and another that once stood on Martha's Vineyard.

CONTINUING EAST

The farmland east of Etzikom is particularly poor. The railway town of **Pakowki** slipped into oblivion long ago, its early residents preferring to do business in **Orion**, the next town to the east. Orion itself was originally a thriving prairie town, but a terrible drought throughout much of the 1920s forced most farmers into bankruptcy. To the south of Orion on Highway 887 are the **Manyberries Sandhills**, a prairie phenomenon well worth the detour, especially in the berry-picking season. From Orion, Highway 887 heads north to Seven Persons and Medicine Hat. Highway 61 jogs south and east from Orion to the small town of **Manyberries**, which once had a population of 500, two grain elevators, and an annual rodeo. From this point, Highway 889 heads northeast to Cypress Hills Provincial Park or south then east to Saskatchewan; either way it's gravel.

HIGHWAY 3 EAST FROM LETHBRIDGE

COALDALE

The first town east of Lethbridge on Highway 3 is Coaldale, with a population of 7,200. The area was first settled in 1889 by Mennonites, and when the CPR built a rail line between Lethbridge and Medicine Hat in 1926, the company encouraged more Mennonite families to farm in the region. With their long agricultural traditions and doctrines of simple living, Mennonites were always welcome additions to prairie communities such as Coaldale. Today this rural community and its Mennonite population continue to prosper, mostly because of their proximity to Lethbridge.

The main reason to leave the highway here is to visit the **Alberta Birds of Prey Centre** (north of Hwy. 3 at 20th St., then left on 16th Ave., 403/345-4262, mid-May-mid-Sept. daily 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m., adult \$8.50, senior \$7.50, child \$5.50). The aim of this off-the-beaten-path center is to ensure the survival of birds of prey such as hawks, falcons, eagles, burrowing owls, and great horned owls, Alberta's provincial bird. Many of the birds are brought to the center injured or as young chicks. They are nurtured at the center until they are strong enough to be released back into the wild. The Natural History Centre features the works of various wildlife artists and has displays cataloging human fascination with birds of prey through thousands of years. Integrated with this

main building is an aviary where you can view birds that are recovering from injury and tame birds fly free (well, kind of, anyway). Entry includes an invitation to watch daily "flying programs" (10 a.m. and 12:30, 2, and 3:30 p.m.) and the opportunity to be photographed with a falcon.

TABER

Taber, 51 kilometers (32 mi) east of Lethbridge, is most famous for its deliciously sweet corn. It's also a base for the food-processing industry and a service center for the oil-and-gas industry. The name Taber was taken from "tabernacle," reflecting the religious influence of the early Mormon settlers. Local Blackfoot called the settlement *Itah Soyop* (Where We Eat From). Apparently, they mistook the name Taber for table, or so the story goes.

Taber corn, as it is called, can be bought throughout western Canada and is the cornerstone of the town's economy. Long hot days of sunshine and cool nights bring out a sweetness that is not found in regular corn. August and early September is the best time to look for corn vendors along the road. Or find corn and other fresh local produce each Thursday at the farmers market in the Taber Agriplex. On the last weekend of August, when the corn has ripened, the town's **Cornfest** celebration takes place, with a pancake breakfast, a midway, hot-air-balloon flights, a classic-car show, and, of course, plenty of corn to taste.

On the eastern outskirts of town is the Rogers Sugar Taber Plant, which processes more than 500,000 tons of sugar beets annually. After the fall harvest, enormous piles of beets sit beside the highway waiting to be processed into icing sugar, granulated sugar, and various powdered sugars. The factory does not offer tours, and judging by the smell outside the factory, this is a good thing.

RED ROCK COULEE

South of Seven Persons, the last community on Highway 3 before Medicine Hat, is a small area of badlands on a gentle rise in the surrounding plains. The bedrock here is relatively close to the surface, and wind and water erosion have cut through the topsoil to expose it. In some places, the erosion has extended into the bedrock itself, revealing varicolored strata laid down millions of years ago. This strange landscape is dotted with red boulder-shaped concretions measuring up to 2.5 meters (eight ft) across. These intriguing rock formations formed under the surface of a prehistoric sea, when sand, calcite, and iron oxide collected on a nucleus of shells, bones, and corals. They became

part of the bedrock as layers of sediment were laid down, but as erosion took its course, the surrounding bedrock disappeared and the concretions emerged. The formations here are believed to be the largest of their type in the world. To get there, follow Highway 887 south from Seven Persons for 23 kilometers (14 mi). Where the road curves sharply to the east (left), continue straight ahead uphill on an unsealed road and park at the lone picnic table. The boulders are laid out below and to the south.