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Surprising Saskatchewan

PART 2



Frenchman Valley Campground, Grasslands National Park

GRASSLANDS NATIONAL PARK WAS THE STAR!

Story and Photos by Dale Dunlop

It's late in the afternoon as Dale and I arrive at the headquarters of Grasslands National Park in the small town of Val Marie. The Interpretive Centre is extremely modest by national park standards. Outside, there is this interpretive panel with a list of the Top 12 Amazing Experiences. As we have only one night and day here, we won't get all twelve in, but we are anxious to get started.

In the Interpretive Centre we pick up a map, and the lady on duty points out where we are most likely to see the bison herd, as well as the only campground in the western section at Frenchman Valley. There are so few visitors to Grasslands National Park that there is no entry fee. From Val Marie, it's still a fair drive to the park entrance, and once you leave the town, there are absolutely no services, so you need to have everything required before entering the park. All roads in the park are dirt, and quite rough in some places. The drive to the park gate is very scenic, with

the occasional abandoned farmstead. We passed only one vehicle going the other way.

Almost from the moment you pass through the park's boundaries, you start seeing things you won't see outside the park - massive, solitary bison bulls, and prairie dog towns. I'll come back to these when we drive the Grasslands Ecotour Road in its entirety tomorrow.

The Frenchman River, and the valley it has cut, is the dominant feature of the western sector of Grasslands National Park. We have crossed it three times already just getting here from Cypress Hills. Each time, the valley gets wider, and the descent from upland, steeper. The road down to the valley and the river crossing is so steep that a truck hauling a trailer in front of us decides to turn back. That gives us pause, but at about 15 kilometres per hour, we do inch the RV down onto the valley floor, from where its relatively clear, if not smooth sailing, all the way to the Frenchman River campground.



Great way to finish the day

As noted, this is the only campground in the western sector, and approaching it, I can't help but notice that there are only three other groups here, all in RVs. Imagine, we have over 100 square miles, and there's only us and these few other people.

The campsites do have electricity, and there are taps for potable water. The toilets are compostable pits. There is one large building in which to take shelter. On the map, it is indicated that there is Wi-Fi here, but there isn't, and there certainly isn't cell coverage. So, if you like getting away from it all, Frenchman River Campground is a great place to do it.

We arrived quite late in the afternoon, and after cooking supper on one of the gas barbecues on site, we set out to watch the sun set over the Frenchman River Valley. There is a path that leads up to an overlook of the valley where Parks Canada has wisely placed two of its rapidly becoming famous, red chairs. From here, my son Dale and I watch, and sip our wine, as the sun becomes a glowing bright ball before it sinks below the horizon.

Grasslands National Park is a Dark Sky Preserve, and famous for its display of the northern lights and the Milky Way. Unfortunately for us, it clouded over, and we didn't get to see one of the main attractions of the park. However, we did get one nighttime experience at Frenchman Valley campground that was worth staying for, just to hear. That was the sounds of coyotes in all directions around us. They were yowling and yipping in a way that indicated that they were clearly communicating with each other, and occasionally one would let out the baying that is the most iconic sound you can hear in the Canadian west.

The clouds cleared up once they made sure we couldn't see the stars for the increasing light of day.

The sunrise was not that great because the actual rise was obstructed by the hills surrounding the campsite, but what was really neat were the great shadows thrown by the sun as it crested the horizon. It bathed the entire prairie in a beautiful suffused light that made for great photos.

There are many ways to explore the western sector of Grasslands National Park, but by far the most common, is to drive the 80-kilometre Ecotour Drive. Only about half of it is inside the park, and we were advised at the Interpretive Centre that this is where we would see the majority of the wildlife that is the feature of this drive. Having completed the entire loop, I can say the advice we were given was dead on, as we saw little outside the park boundaries other than lots of deer and one loggerhead shrike. Still, the landscape outside the park is beautiful rolling ranchland. The park boundary is also a good place to see the difference between what is true mixed grass prairie, and land that has been transformed by human activity. The difference is striking.

We got up at first light and headed south on the Ecotour Drive with the understanding that this was the best time to see wildlife. Someone forgot to tell that to the prairie dogs, as at the first prairie dog town we came to, they weren't up yet. Our next stop was at the head of the Larson Interpretive Trail, where a rabbit had apparently spent the night on a picnic table.



A true mixed grass prairie

This was a great spot to actually walk through a true mixed grass prairie, and believe me, it was not like anything I'd seen before. There was a wide variety of grasses with a lot of wildflowers thrown in. My idea of the prairies being a collection of fields all growing one crop was shattered for good.

The Larson Trail is a short 1.4 kilometre walk down to the banks of the Frenchman River. What was once pastureland for cattle and horses has now returned to original short grass prairie.

There are a couple of old buildings in the area, one being Will James' cabin. Will James was a character right out of a dime western novel. He came west at age 15, and became a cowhand travelling throughout the west. He was sent to prison for cattle rustling, and after his release, turned his life around and became a famous artist, novelist, movie actor, and all round symbol of a dying way of life. He spent a good part of his career in this cabin. Not bad for a guy whose real name was Joseph Dufault, and who hailed from St. Nazaire, Quebec.

There were four types of wildlife I definitely wanted to see on this Ecotour Drive: bison, prairie dogs, burrowing owls, and pronghorn antelope. A real bonus would be a black-footed ferret or a rattlesnake. As it turns out, we saw the first three, but not the others. The lady at the Interpretive Centre said that the antelope could be seen anywhere along the drive, but I guess they were camera shy the day we visited. Still, what we did see was more than enough to satisfy our needs.

The bison were found in two different ways. Solitary male bison were actually right beside the road at a



Will James' cabin

number of places, including one guy who looked like he came right off a buffalo nickel.

The other way to see bison was to find the main herd where the females and young would be congregated. We found the herd not far past Larson Ranch, some half a mile away. There were enough of them that the size of the herd gave us just an inkling of what these prairies might have looked like before the buffalo hunters came.

By now, the prairie dogs were up, and I regret not taking a video of them as they scampered, frolicked and engaged in other antics that make them the North American version of meerkats. I can remember seeing a prairie dog town outside of Fargo, North Dakota, when we first moved to Manitoba. I was fascinated by them, and returned years later only to see fields planted with oats. Farmers and ranchers hated prairie dogs, and they paid the price. We saw at least half a dozen of their 'towns' in Grasslands National Park, and I am eternally grateful that we have cut them at least a little slack.



Last up were the burrowing owls, who are also residents of the prairie dog towns. Like the little rodents, burrowing owls have become quite rare as their habitat has been ploughed under, but here they live in peace with their neighbours, and instead dine on mice and insects.

In addition to the animals above, we saw at least four species of hawks or falcons, grouse, and many smaller birds, including meadowlarks and horned larks. One could easily spend the entire day driving back and forth within the park looking for more.

There is something about Grasslands National Park that makes the overall experience greater than the sum total of all the things I've mentioned above. I know it's an environment that is unlike any I have seen before, and it's there for anybody who has the desire to look into the past and see the prairies for what they once were. On a trip with many highlights, Grasslands was the star.

From Grasslands, we headed north in search of more Saskatchewan adventure. We spent the night at Danielson Provincial Park on the shores of Lake Diefenbaker, which is a huge reservoir created by the damming of the South Saskatchewan and Qu'Appelle Rivers. Just about every type of water based recreation you can think of can be indulged in at Lake Diefenbaker. Even though there was a slight drizzle, that didn't stop Dale from trying his hand at paddle boarding. Turns out with his snowboarding background, he was a natural.

Next we drove to Saskatchewan's largest city, Saskatoon, where we dropped into the Diefenbaker Canada Centre on the campus of the University of Saskatchewan. John Diefenbaker was the only Canadian Prime Minister to ever be elected from Saskatchewan. He was a controversial figure to many, but a visit to the centre reminded us of his many accomplishments, including the Canadian Bill of Rights. Outside the centre, overlooking the city, we visited his final resting place.

Our final stop before having to head back to Calgary was at the site of the last major battle fought on Canadian soil. Batoche National Historic Site is located on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, in a fairly



Burrowing Owl

remote location off the main highway, between Saskatoon and Prince Albert. This is where Canadian troops, led by General Middleton, defeated those of Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont in a three-day battle that ended the North West Rebellion in 1885.

Today, it is a peaceful place with few visitors. At the interpretation centre, we learned the history of the Métis people, and the very valid grievances they had with the fledgling Canadian government. This was once a thriving community of over 500 people, but all that remains today are the church and the rectory buildings. Guides dressed in period costume took us through them, and afterwards, we walked the trails that lead down to the river. At the entrance to the cemetery, there is a moving memorial marking the reconciliation of the Métis people, the aboriginals, and other Canadians.

As I departed, I stood with Louis Riel, and realized that he was a truly misunderstood man who deserved a much better fate than to be hanged as a traitor.

On the way back to Calgary, I reflected on the wonderful days we had spent in Saskatchewan, and how our eyes had been opened to the natural beauty of the province. Also, we had learned some of the very significant historical events that took place here. As we neared the Alberta border, almost as if on cue, a male pronghorn antelope with four does posed in a field. Now we had seen it all. **RV**