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Surprising Saskatchewan

PART I

“Land of Living Skies”

YES, THERE ARE SWITCHBACKS
AND HAIRPIN TURNS IN
THIS PROVINCE!

Story and Photos by Dale Dunlop



This is the sixth year that my son Dale and I have spent one week on the road for *Canadian RVing*, and the first time we are headed out west. I won't begrudge the reader who might expect that we will be writing about the Alberta Rockies or the forests of British Columbia. No, instead we are going to Saskatchewan. "Saskatchewan" you might say. "Isn't it just flat and b-o-r-i-n-g?" Well, last year we dispelled the myth that Quebec was not a good place for English speaking RVers to visit, and this year we are going to show that Saskatchewan is not flat, and anything but boring. Join us as we visit two completely different national parks, two national historic sights that shaped the future of Canada, and learn about the only Prime Minister to hail from Saskatchewan. But, first we will spend two days in one of the most unique ecological areas in Canada – the Cypress Hills.

Our trip starts in Calgary where we pick up a Class C motorhome from Cruise Canada, which Tourism

Saskatchewan has been kind enough to assist us with. Ordinarily, the pick ups start after noon, but the folks at Cruise Canada know we are anxious to get on the road, and they have our unit ready for 9:00 am. Shortly thereafter, we are on the Trans-Canada Highway headed east for the three-hour drive to Saskatchewan. Our first stop is at the border where I get some maps, and Dale climbs onto the Welcome to Saskatchewan sign.

I spent my formative years in Manitoba, and travelled extensively throughout the Prairie Provinces, but the one place I never visited was the Cypress Hills area of SW Saskatchewan. The Cypress Hills are unique in Canada in that it is the only Interprovincial Park in the country, with parts of it in SE Alberta, and the rest in SW Saskatchewan. On the way to the border we passed the road to the Alberta side, but our mission is to explore the two distinct areas that lie in Saskatchewan.

The Cypress Hills are also unique in the manner in which they were created. While most mountains are



formed by the earth's tectonic plates crashing together and thrusting up huge chunks of material to create something like the Rockies, or in weathered down form, the Appalachians, the Cypress Hills are the opposite. Millions of years ago this area was at the bottom of a vast ocean, and huge layers of silt and rock solidified into a conglomerate after the waters dried up. The land around the Cypress Hills was softer and eroded away, leaving two huge plateaus that stand out hundreds of metres higher than the surrounding prairie. So essentially, it's not the Cypress Hills that grew so high, but rather the land around it that shrank. One other interesting fact - there are no cypress trees in the Cypress Hills. You'll find those in Florida or Georgia. The name is a corruption of the Métis word for jack pine - cypres, and you will find lots of those in the park.

We leave the Trans-Canada at the junction for Maple Creek, and head south to the East Block of Cypress Hills. This is the smaller of the two units of the park in Saskatchewan, but the one with almost all of the facilities. The motto on the Saskatchewan licence plate is "Land of Living Skies" and that soon becomes apparent as the skies change constantly, as the clouds seem to move at a faster pace than any place I've ever seen.

This is ranch country, and anything but flat. There are very few homes and no towns between Maple Creek and the entrance to Cypress Hills Park, where we are assigned a spot in the War Lodge campground. There are no less than six different campgrounds in Cypress

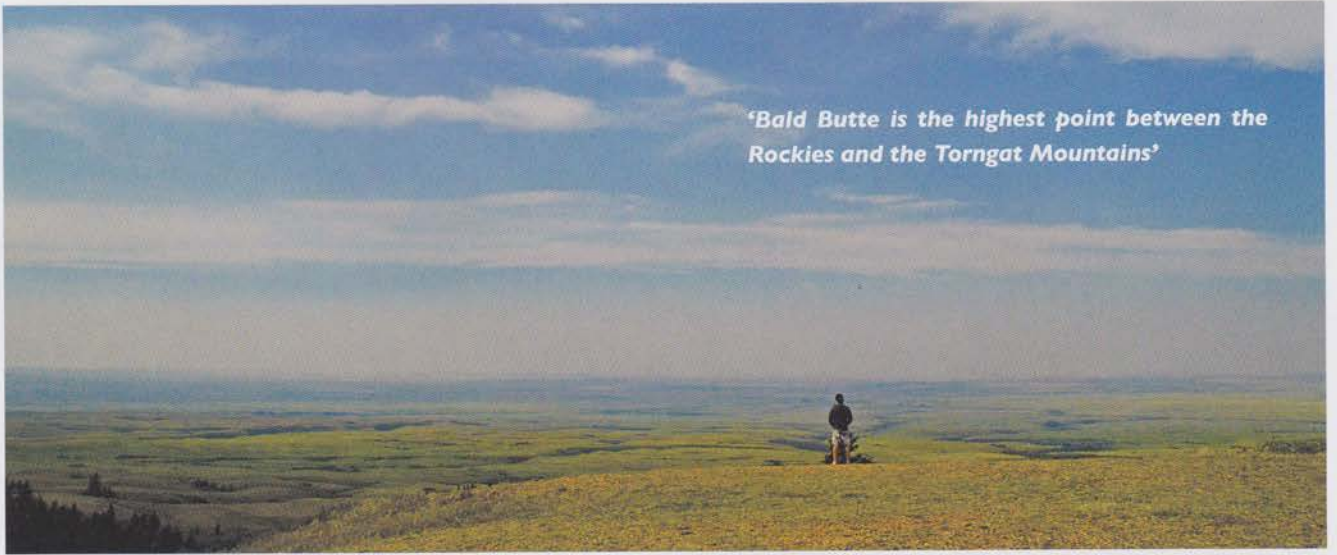
Hills. On the Saskatchewan Parks website, saskparks.goingtocamp.com, you can actually get a picture of what each campsite looks like before you book it. Ours is in the middle of a forest of huge lodgepole pines that grow straight as an arrow, up to sixty feet tall. There's free firewood, something that we found at every site in Saskatchewan, and a nice fire pit. There is electricity, but no water or sewer hook-up. That's fine with us, as I have found that if you want these extra amenities you usually have to settle for camping in a flat field. I'll take this wonderful pine forest any day.

The East Block of Cypress Hills is perfect for a family vacation as it has just about every activity one could think of doing on an RV trip - hiking, horseback riding, swimming, boating, fishing, golf, zip lining, biking (kids are riding them everywhere in War Lodge), and for night sky watchers, an observatory. We settle for a drive to two scenic lookouts, Lookout Point and Bald Butte. Believe or not, Bald Butte is the highest point between the Rockies and the Torngat Mountains in Labrador. So much for Saskatchewan being flat or boring. This is magnificent country, and it seems to be a well-kept secret as virtually all the licence plates are from Saskatchewan, with a few from Alberta.

There is a circular route in the park that includes the two lookouts, but the best advice is to retrace your steps after Bald Butte as the pavement ends here, and the road becomes very rough.

We end our first day around the campfire, keeping our eyes open for any one of the eight species of bats that call Cypress Hills home.

'Bald Butte is the highest point between the Rockies and the Torngat Mountains'



On day two we are headed for the Centre Block of Cypress Hills, which is far larger than the East Block, and with virtually no services. Our first stop is at the Daily Grind in Maple Creek, where they are just readying breakfast pizzas. While they bake, we take a walk around the Heritage District of this pleasant town, which is your quintessential ranchlands settlement. There are real cowboys in the pickup trucks.

The road to the Centre Block is a dead end, and has almost no traffic. There are cattle that roam freely once we cross a Texas gate, including some right on the side of the road, and frequent sightings of both mule and white-tailed deer.

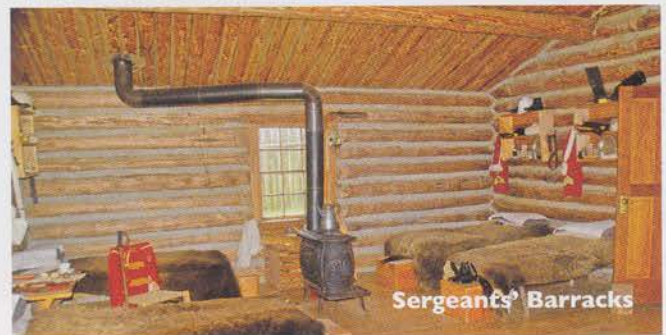
Arriving at the base of the Cypress Hills, we enter a series of switchbacks and hairpin turns (remember this really is Saskatchewan), and come out onto a high flat grassland plateau. Our specific destination is Fort Walsh National Historic Site, which is where the road ends. The road is okay for RVs, but not great. There is a large RV in the parking lot when we get there.

Fort Walsh is one of the most important historic sites in Canada. It is where the North-West Mounted Police, who became the RCMP, was created. The formation of the Mounties was in response to the massacre of over twenty Lakota Sioux by American wolf hunters who frequented the area in the 1870's. While today there is unquestionably an uneasy relationship between the RCMP and aboriginal groups, it is noteworthy that the force's original mission was to protect the native inhabitants, and track down the perpetrators of the massacre.

Today, Fort Walsh stands almost exactly as it did over one hundred and forty years ago. Guides are dressed in period costume, and we were treated to a very informative guided tour of all of the buildings by Ariel, escorted along the way by an orphaned calf named Nappy.



Fort Walsh



Sergeant's Barracks



NWMP Paraphernalia

While the NWMP were able to identify some of the Cypress Hills murderers, they were unable to get the state of Montana to extradite them for trial. They were more successful in helping to protect and negotiate the return of Sitting Bull and his Sioux warriors to Montana after the Battle of Little Bighorn. The famed leader and some 5,000 Lakota Sioux sought refuge in Saskatchewan after that battle, which is also known as Custer's Last Stand.

After touring the fort, we decided to hike out to the actual site of the Cypress Hills massacre. We started with a wrong turn, and ended up climbing a steep hill, only to find the famed red chairs that Parks Canada puts in every national park and historic site. Winded, we enjoyed the view of Fort Walsh far below.

Back on track, we had a wonderful two-hour hike through unbroken prairie and rolling hills with nary another soul in site. Experiencing the prairies as they would have looked to the first European settlers is something that every Canadian should do at least once. The grasses and flowers are quite distinct from those found on cultivated land. You will probably also see more birds of prey than you ever thought possible, as these lands teem with mice, voles and other rodents.

Before leaving the Centre Block, we made one more stop at Conglomerate Cliffs, which has an amazing view of the ranchland and prairie far below. The road to get there is rugged, but the payoff is worth it.

By the time we got back to the East Block it was raining, so we decided to eat at Ivan's, the restaurant at the Resort at Cypress Hills. Apparently, all the other campers had the same idea, as the place was packed, but we got a table and enjoyed a fine meal of ribs and chicken washed down with Saskatchewan craft Black Bridge Brewery's Pseudo Lager.

The next morning it was clear and we packed up, heading for the small town of Eastend. Our first stop was at the T.rex Discovery Centre where the world's largest Tyrannosaurus Rex is on display. We were given a guided tour by Fen, and were amazed to find that fossils from a period lasting 75 million years have been found in the hills around Eastend, including Scotty, the T.rex.

Our next stop was at the Eastend Historical Museum, which has a great collection of items from the early settlers in the area. Dale, being a mechanic, was most impressed with a massive 1903 Case steam tractor.

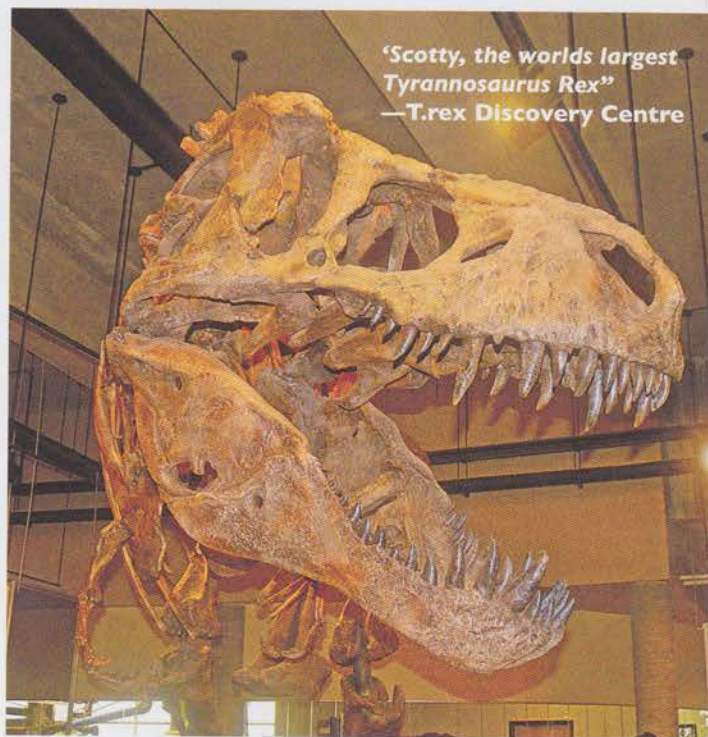
For literary buffs, Eastend is also the home of Pulitzer Prize winning author Wallace Stegner, who immortalized the people of this area in his novels including Big Rock Candy Mountain. I had always assumed

he was an American, but visiting his boyhood home in Eastend, I realized he was one of us. For a small town, Eastend sure has a lot going for it.

By now we were hungry, and at the museum, we asked about a restaurant in nearby Shaunavon I had heard was good, but forgot the name. After some thinking, one fellow said, "You mean the Harvest Eatery. They've got a real cook there!"

The drive to Shaunavon was through lovely fields of ripened wheat and barley and oil wells, looking like modern dinosaurs, started to appear regularly. Just outside of town there was a large wetland developed by Ducks Unlimited, where I counted over a dozen varieties of waterfowl in just five minutes. Saskatchewan is known as North America's Duck Factory because of the thousands of small ponds that dot the prairies and are the breeding spots for millions of waterfowl annually. All through our trip, we saw hundreds of these small waterways, and they were all alive with waterfowl getting ready to migrate. If you are a birder, Saskatchewan, with over 350 breeding species, should definitely be on your bucket list.

The Harvest Eatery does indeed have a great chef. Garrett 'Rusty' Thienes is a Shaunavon local who found a way to enjoy life in a small town by simply starting a really good restaurant. Known for his burgers and homemade lox, we saw at least half a dozen take-out orders picked up while we ate. Rusty came over and discussed the menu with us, and made a couple of recommendations – porchetta sandwich for





Shaunavon Grain Elevators

Dale, and grilled cheese with Black Angus brisket for me. These were easily the best things we had to eat in Saskatchewan, where all our meals were very high quality (except maybe those we cooked ourselves). Washed down with another Black Bridge Brewery product, seasonal Peche Grisette, it made us forget that tonight we'd be miles away from the nearest restaurant.

This is a good place to say a word about the small towns of southwest Saskatchewan, like Maple Creek, Eastend, Shaunavon and Val Marie. They are real towns. By that I mean, they still have a main street where most businesses are located. It's what they don't have that makes them distinct. No Walmarts, McDonald's or even Tim Horton's, no strip malls and no supermarkets. Co-ops are still the main source of provisions and fuel. They reminded me very much of what other Canadian towns were like in the 1950's and 60's, before they became hollowed out by malls on the edge of town. Also, the people in these towns are super friendly, and we were constantly being waved at by passers-by.

One other feature of Saskatchewan towns that is fast disappearing is perhaps the most notable – the wooden grain elevator that may well be the most iconic thing about the entire prairies. In bigger centres like Maple Creek, the wooden elevators have been replaced by huge concrete structures that are probably more utile, but definitely not as photogenic. However, in many places, we did see the old style elevators, some obviously going to rot, while others were still in use. It's still a bit premature to pronounce the death knell for these symbols of rural prairie life, but you might want to get here sooner, rather than later, to see them.

On our way to Grasslands National Park, we did come across a genuine ghost town at Orkney where



Bracken Grain Elevator

only two out of about fifty buildings was still occupied. The abandoned church's steeple was tilted at an angle that made it resemble a witch's hat.

On that note, I'll close out Part 1 by tempting you with visits to Grasslands National Park, Prince Albert National Park, Batoche National Historic Site, and the home of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker in the next installment. Saskatchewan certainly has been surprising so far. **RV**

Come Celebrate with Parks Canada!

Next year, celebrate the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, and the 100th anniversary of Canada's national historic sites at more than 200 special places across Canada. For 2017, admission is free to national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas for the entire year! For more information, visit: www.pc.gc.ca/eng/voyage-travel/admission.aspx.