

Northeast Parks

Grass River Provincial Park



Introduction

With an area of 2,279 km², Grass River Provincial Park is characterized by rivers and lakes of the Grass River system, and the contact zone between the boreal forest and the Manitoba lowlands.

Classified as a Natural Park, its purpose is to preserve areas that are representative of the Churchill River Upland portion of the Precambrian Boreal Forest Natural Region, and the Mid-Boreal portion of the Manitoba Lowlands Natural Region and accommodates a diversity of recreational opportunities and resource uses.

The park will:

- Preserve woodland caribou habitat and the high water quality of the Grass River;
- Promote canoeing, camping and fishing opportunities, and permit related facilities and services;
- Promote public appreciation and education of the cultural and natural history of the Grass River; and
- Accommodate commercial resource uses such as forestry and mining, where such activities do not compromise the other park purposes.



Loucks Falls

The Land

The southern portion of the park along PTH 39 is dominated by dolomite rock (light-coloured, sedimentary) of the Manitoba Lowlands, easily seen at rock cuts along the highway. Most of the park is underlain by the granitic rocks of the Precambrian Shield. This area is highly mineralized and attracted prospectors for gold, copper and other metals as early as 1913.

The boundary between the two geological regions is not hard to find. The shoreline of a lake along PTH 39 is surrounded by dolomite, while the first island or opposite shore is likely to be made up of granites. The change in colour and texture is striking.

The northern part of the park consists of a glacially scoured upland with rolling to hilly terrain and abundant rock outcrops, typical of the Shield. Some shorelines along the river and lakes, are more than 30 metres high. The Lowland is similarly scoured but is relatively flat. In wet, low-lying areas, where the water is near the surface and is slowly moving, communities called fens are dominated by willows, alders, sedges, and mosses. In some large fens streamlines form paralleling the direction of drainage with linear bands (strings) of stunted black spruce and tamarack. These are called string fens.

Both types of bedrock are largely covered by glacial debris. Some gravel debris is in distinct formations such as eskers, kames and drumlins. Eskers are winding ridges of sand and gravel left behind when the glaciers melted. They are the remains of river channels within the ice. When the ice melted only the sediments were left. Eskers can be seen west and east of Gyles campground on Simonhouse Lake. Kames are isolated hills of material that fell into openings in the melting ice. Drumlins are low, rounded hills formed by plastering of glacial till around some resistant rock mass.



Dolomite rock cut, along PTH 39

Special Places

The various landforms in the park provide many interesting places to visit. This includes deposits of ice that can be seen, even in the heat of summer, in deep cracks of dolomite cliffs on the south shore of Reed Lake. In early days, local people used these ice caves as natural refrigerators to keep meat year-round.

An underground solution channel or karst spring, near Iskwasum Lake, was formed by water flowing through and dissolving soft, sedimentary rock. Believed to start beneath Leak Lake, the channel flows through dolomite under PTH 39 and discharges as a small stream that empties into Iskwasum Lake.

The flat, poorly drained soils of the Manitoba Lowlands give rise to bogs, fens and marshes, all evident in the park. Examples of these are several discontinuous permafrost bogs that may be broken up by peat mounds or palsas. Palsas are low mounds formed by the expansion of ice in permafrost areas. Because the ice doesn't melt, the mound persists year-round. Since the mound is better drained than the surrounding areas, more vegetation grows on it. This further insulates the permafrost. An outstanding permafrost feature is the "palsa hazel" just south of Cranberry Portage. Because such formations are unusual this far south, it is protected as an ecological reserve.

Probably the most important feature of Grass River is its clean, clear water. This water has been designated as protected High Quality Surface Water by the Clean Environment Commission. The water carries very low amounts of sediments and pollutants because the peat deposits, through which most of the water passes, act as natural filters.



Calypso orchids

Fish, Mammals and Birds

Grass River park is best known for the fish-pike, walleye, and whitefish-which abound in its lakes. Simonhouse Lake is noted for large pike, while Iskwasum, Loucks and Elbow lakes are productive walleye fisheries. Lake trout are confined mainly to Reed Lake and Second Cranberry Lake. Rainbow trout have been stocked in Webster and Amphipod lakes to provide an alternative angling experience. The park's waterways are very popular in May and June when fishing is at its best.

The park also supports a wide diversity of mammals. Woodland caribou range throughout most of the park during the year, and are most often associated with mature forest and treed muskeg. Many islands on lakes such as Reed, Iskwasum, Wedge and Simonhouse provide important calving habitat. Cows and their calves tend to stay on the predator-free islands during the summer. Anglers may be lucky enough to spot one of these "grey ghosts" (as caribou are sometimes called) on one of the calving islands in May and June. They may also be seen crossing PTH 39, especially in the early morning and at dusk.

Moose are fairly common in the park, especially along waterways. White-tailed deer have moved in from the south and their numbers are increasing.

Several wolf packs that roam through various sections of the park, are the ungulates' (moose, caribou and deer) main predator. Other predators such as lynx, marten, fisher and wolverine are found in varying numbers. Mink and otter are common in the lakes and rivers.

Colonial nesting birds such as double-crested cormorants, great blue herons, white pelicans, gulls and terns, can be seen on the lakes. Three gull-tern colonies have been recorded on Reed Lake, Leak Lake and Second Cranberry Lake.



Woodland caribou

The First People

The First People appeared in the Grass River area soon after the boreal forest began growing on the rugged tills and gravels left by the melting glaciers. They came from the great plains to the southwest. Forced from their ancestral hunting grounds by severe drought, these bison hunters arrived 150 to 200 generations ago.

The forest environment was strange to the newcomers. Unlike the plains they had left behind, the forest contained different animals to hunt and plants to collect. However, over time the new arrivals learned to hunt moose and woodland caribou with as much skill as they had hunted bison. Fish also became an important source of food. Soon, dried moose meat or fish, mixed with fat and berries, replaced bison in making pemmican for winter storage. Still, trips were made to the plains to hunt bison, especially in the early years before the people had fully learned how to live in the forest. As they became more accustomed to the forest environment and as generation succeeded generation, stories of the moose hunts replaced those of the bison around the evening campfires. For some families who had moved deep into the forest, the plains may have become a land of legend.

It is uncertain whether all of the First People who came to the forest remained there. Once climatic conditions had improved, some likely returned to the plains and resumed their old ways of life. Those families who remained in the forest would eventually have met others from further north who travelled south to escape the worsening climate of the subarctic. Knowledge and ideas would have been shared and marriages taken place between members of the two groups.

Soon the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Grass River's first residents were walking over deep winter snows on snowshoes and pulling toboggans laden with the products of their hunts. Both of these essential tools of winter were invented by residents of the boreal forest. In summer, light birchbark canoes glided across lakes to lift and set fishing nets woven by women

of the group. The canoe, and possibly the net too, were inventions of these forest-dwelling people. Later, clay cooking vessels were made for storing foods or boiling stews over open fires.

Pottery making, an idea brought to the forest about 2,000 years ago by people living in the south, was quickly accepted by the residents of this area as a useful innovation. Over time, potters improved upon the old designs and ways of making pottery. One type of pottery, developed in the forest about 1,200 years ago, is called Clearwater Lake after its discovery by archaeologists at nearby Clearwater Lake about 30 years ago.

For at least 3,500 years, and perhaps as long as 5,000 years, the First People lived and prospered in the Grass River area. They left a lasting record of their ways of life in the tools and campsites that they left behind. Part of their rich spiritual life is found as rock paintings located on the quiet edges of lakes or rivers. These paintings were made by Shamans whom the people believed had the power to look into the future. A Shaman was an important member of the community. A person with such power could help make decisions about where to hunt and make winter camp, or ask for help from the Great Spirit during times of bad fortune. One such rock painting can be seen on Tramping Lake. If you visit this place, please respect its spiritual importance. If it is damaged or defaced, our future generations will lose part of the legacy given to them by the First People of northern Manitoba.



Rock painting

A New Era

Life changed rapidly for the First People after the arrival of Europeans and the development of the fur trade. The first European known to have travelled the Grass River was Joseph Smith of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) who travelled downstream in 1763. Samuel Hearne used the Grass River in 1774, 1775 and 1776 to reach Cumberland House where he built the HBC's first

inland trading post. Twenty years later, David Thompson used the river on his famous western exploration expedition. Both Hearne and Thompson used Cranberry Portage to reach the Grass River at First Cranberry Lake.

Fur trading posts were established within the area. One was built by Malcolm Ross of the HBC in 1794 on Reed Lake. David Thompson wintered there in 1794 and referred to a competitor's post, White's House, near Woosey Creek on the northeast shore of Reed Lake. Thompson returned to Reed Lake in 1805 as a trader for the North West Company and established a third post on the lake. Fur trading and trapping continue in the area. Now the park is divided into registered traplines, worked by trappers.



Gurney Gold Mine c1937

Manitoba Archives

Recent Times

Early in the 20th century, mineral prospectors moved into the area and many claims were staked, especially from Cranberry Portage along the river to Elbow Lake. The miners were searching for gold and several small mines were opened. After the railroad reached Cranberry Portage in 1928 there was a flurry of mineral exploration activity, which continues today. Spruce Point Mine at Reed Lake was the only active mine in the park, in recent years. It closed in 1993.

Until the 1960s, the area experienced very little further development. The building of PTH 39 spurred the development of recreation facilities. The desire to protect an important Manitoba landscape, and to develop it for recreational purposes, led to the designation of Grass River Provincial Park in 1963.

Things To Do, Places To See

Canoeing

Grass River Provincial Park encompasses the headwaters of the historic Grass River canoe route. One can canoe from Cranberry Portage on the west side of the park to Wekusko Falls, east of the park on the Grass River. Many side trips can be taken into remote lakes or one may enter and exit the Grass River at any of the backcountry entry points. Long open water crossings, some

stretches of fast water and the distances between developed areas, suggest that this canoe route is not for novices. Topographic maps are recommended. A canoe route map with notes on the area and its history, is also available from Canada Map Sales outlets. In Winnipeg, phone (204) 945-6666 or toll-free, 1-877-627-7226. Web site: <http://www.canadamapsales.com>



Canoeing in the park

Fishing

Fish are abundant in Grass River park. Walleye, northern pike and lake trout are the most sought-after by anglers. Stocked trout waters are available in the park. Contact the Cranberry Portage district office or *The Angler's Guide* for more information. Four lodges in the park and others at Cranberry Portage and Snow Lake cater to anglers. Angling regulations are designed to sustain a high quality fishing experience. Catch-and-release fishing is encouraged, especially for very sensitive species like lake trout. Consult the provincial angling guide for specific regulations, seasons and limits.

Hiking

Karst Spring Self-guiding Trail, at Iskwasum campground, is the park's only designated trail. It follows the river upstream to a spring that is believed to drain Leak Lake, and returns along a ridge that is the northern limit of the Manitoba Lowlands. A brochure is available at the trailhead and several interpretive signs are situated along the way. Return distance is 3.2 km. Allow two hours.

For information about other hiking opportunities in the park, ask our friendly park staff.

Camping

Camping is allowed only on designated sites within the park. Fires are permitted only in the pits provided.

All campgrounds in Grass River have only unserviced campsites however, each has a gravity-flow, solar-heated shower. Toilets are non-modern and hand pumps provide drinking water. Each campground has a boat launch, dock and a fish cleaning shed.

- **Gyles campground**, on beautiful Simonhouse Lake, features a long natural sand beach. Large private campsites, horseshoe pits, a volleyball court and a playground make this a favourite family campground. Two walk-in tent sites are also available for a novel camping experience.
- **Iskwasum Landing** campground is located on the scenic Grass River between Iskwasum and Loucks lakes. Excellent walleye fishing and quiet camping are the main attractions here.
- **Reed Lake** campground, nestled on the south shore of Reed Lake, is an angler's paradise. Renowned for lake trout and northern pike fishing, Reed Lake also offers scenic islands and shorelines.



Fantastic fishing!

Backcountry Camping

Designated sites have been established along canoe routes and on popular remote lakes. Fire pits are provided but please limit your use of firewood. Light-weight camp stoves are recommended. Detailed information on location and registration for backcountry sites is available at the backcountry entry points, or from the Cranberry Portage office.

The food you take in should provide at least enough energy to carry the wrappings and containers back out.

Cranberry Portage

On the west boundary of the park, this town sits on a height of land between the headwaters of the Grass River and Lake Athapapuskow (part of the Saskatchewan River drainage basin). Services such as food, groceries, gasoline, supplies, accommodation, camping and repairs are available.

Snow Lake

This picturesque mining community is located northeast of the park, near Wekusko Falls Provincial Park on PR 392. Services such as food, groceries, gasoline, supplies, accommodation and repairs are available. Snow Lake also has a hospital, golf course, air charters and an airport.

Flin Flon

One of Manitoba's northern mining cities, Flin Flon offers all services for travellers as well as excellent recreation facilities, a mining museum, hospital and commercial jet service airport. Bakers Narrows Provincial Park near Flin Flon on PTH 10 offers excellent serviced campsites and recreation facilities.

The Pas

Located 75 km south of Grass River, the town has a full range of services and recreation facilities such as golf and commercial jet service. The Sam Waller Museum's collections and displays depict the natural and human history of northern Manitoba.

Clearwater Lake Provincial Park, near The Pas, offers camping and day use facilities on spectacular Clearwater Lake.