

*Alberta Parks and Protected Areas*

# Writing-on-Stone

*Áísínai' pi ... where the drawings are*



**Provincial Park**



*Where Histories, Stories and Dreams Become One.*

Writing-on-Stone is a sacred landscape; a landscape of special spiritual significance to the Blackfoot people who hunted and travelled these Great Plains since the beginning of time. All who visit this area feel inspired. For the Blackfoot there also is the traditional culture and religion based on a long and intimate relationship with the land. Abundant First Nations carvings or petroglyphs, and paintings or pictographs, which cover the sheer sandstone cliffs, are protected here as living legacy to this spiritual connection of a people with a place. This landscape is still part of Blackfoot tradition.

First created as a Provincial Park in 1957, the archaeological preserve was established in 1977 to ensure the protection of the largest concentration of rock art on the North American Plains.

## Alberta Parks Network

Protecting a superb example 1780 hectares or 4,400 acres of the dry mixed grass subregion of Alberta's Grassland Natural Region, Writing-on-Stone fulfills a substantial part of Alberta Parks and Protected Areas goal to preserve in perpetuity, representative examples of significant ecosystems throughout the province.

Near the Alberta-Montana Border and 42 km south east of the town of Milk River, Writing-on-Stone is a unique environment of spectacular sandstone formations along the meandering Milk River and adjacent to large stretches of unbroken grasslands. The river winds through a wide valley filled with an intriguing mix of cliffs, hoodoos, grassy knolls and coulees. Rich plant and animal life fill the main valley, coulees and adjacent stretches of open grassland.

As a tribute to a short part of recent history, a NW Mounted Police Outpost was reconstructed near its original location (now in the archaeological preserve), a showcase of the NWMP peacekeeping activities in the area from 1887 to 1918.



## Geology

Millions of years ago, a large inland sea covered much of the interior of North America, including the location that eventually became Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park. Sand deposited in and along this ancient sea by rivers was buried and compressed over millions of years to become sandstone bedrock. Approximately 12,000 years ago, the glaciers of the last ice age began receding. Great volumes of melt water flowing to the south and east carved through overlying rock, exposing the sandstone of the Milk River Formation and creating the valley through which the modern Milk River flows.

Upper cliff sections are primarily soft sandstone with some thinner harder rock layers which can form hoodoos. The lower cliffs are harder and provide the canvas for hundreds of works of traditional Blackfoot and other First Nations rock art.

The Milk River Formation also includes very soft bentonite clay rich layers. When these clay rich layers weather and erode, they form the mounds and soft grey pediments, which make up badland landscapes. The clay swells and becomes extremely slippery when wet, then shrinks to look like popcorn when it dries. You can see mounds of bentonite rich sedimentary rock as you drive towards the archeological preserve viewpoint.

## What is a Hoodoo?

A hoodoo is a mushroom shaped sandstone feature sculpted when the rock erodes primarily because of frost and wind directed rain, the resulting unusual looking capped rock shapes are known as hoodoos. The hoodoo “cap” consists of many small, harder rock layers that being more resistant to weathering, protect the underlying softer sandstone. As the softer rock breaks apart, the cap remains on top and the formation takes on its mushroom shape. Holes in the formations occur when very hard deposits of ironstone, rusty coloured, round-shaped rock, become dislodged and fall out as softer sandstone erodes.



## The Rock Art and Artists

There is evidence that people camped in this unique place for at least 3,500 years. The natural environment here sustained them physically with water, food and shelter, supernatural powers that they believe inhabit the sandstone cliffs sustained them spiritually. In the past, First Nations people created rock art to depict important events in their life, such as hunts, significant life experiences and battles. Rock art also played a ceremonial role, and some of the rock art may be a record of spiritual dreams attained during vision quests. Blackfoot people still hold the land here sacred and their traditions of ceremony and art continue.

Petroglyphs are a form of rock art that is carved into sandstone with tools made from wood, bone, antler, horn and rocks. After 1730, metal tools may also have been used, although most First Nations people preferred traditional tools. Pictographs are painted on the sandstone with ochre. Ochre, made from a mixture of crushed iron ore and animal fat, produces red, yellow and orange colours. Some pictographs may also have been drawn with charcoal.

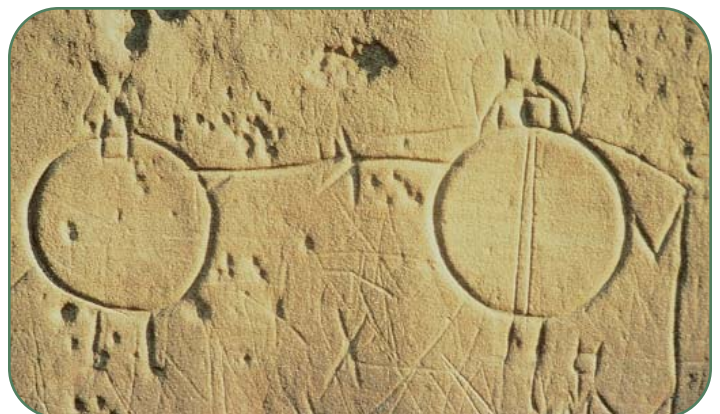
Although some of the rock art at Writing-on-Stone may be as much as 5,000 years old, the exact date it first appeared is not certain. The Shoshoni, Sioux, Assiniboine and Gros Ventre people may have carved the earliest known rock art. In the mid 1700's, the Blackfoot Confederation, which by this time had acquired guns, forced the earlier inhabitants from the region.

For many following traditional Blackfoot ways the rock art at Writing-on-Stone is the work of the spirit world. The strange hoodoo's and mysterious carvings fill them with reverence. First Nations people continue to visit the rock art sites for spiritual guidance.

Petroglyphs and pictographs are part of an extensive tradition of rock art in North America. Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park contains the largest concentration of rock art on the North American Plains.

## The Archaeological Preserve

Vandalism, which includes graffiti, has taken a heavy toll on the rock art. To protect the art from further damage, the Archaeological Preserve was created. It is illegal to damage any natural object in any Provincial Park. Persons causing damage to cultural and fossil resources in Alberta can be fined up to \$50,000. Guided hikes into the preserve allow park visitors to view one of more than 50 rock art sites. Park visitors may access the preserve on guided tours only. Tickets for tours (maximum of 4 per person) are sold on a first come, first serve basis. Tour schedules are posted throughout the park. Please do not approach or touch the cliffs or rock art. Petroglyphs are very fragile and easily damaged, even by light touching of fingers and tracing paper.



# Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park

## Backcountry Hiking

The Davis and Humphrey coulee areas south of the river comprise the 930 hectare backcountry hiking zone. The hiking zone consists of rolling grasslands, hoodoo fields and narrow sandstone canyons. There are no developed trails, however, a network of game trails provides easy access to most areas.

Overnight camping and fires are prohibited in the hiking zone. Fires are permitted in designated day use and camping areas only. Grasslands are prone to extreme fire hazard, especially during spring and fall, so please be extra careful with cigarettes and matches. Temperatures can exceed 40 degrees Celsius, so ensure that all members of your hiking party wear a hat and sunscreen, and carry at least 3 litres of water each.

Remember, if you discover bones, artifacts or other archaeological remains in the park, please leave them in place and report the find to park staff. Artifacts provide archeologists with a great deal more information if they can be studied where they were found, undisturbed.

## Plants and Animals

The Milk River Valley supports an amazingly diverse community of plants and animals. Vegetation in the park ranges from prairie grassland to cottonwood river valley or riparian habitat. The grassland is made up of many different grass species including June grass, blue gamma, northern wheatgrass and rice grass. Riparian species include aspen, both narrow leaf and plains cottonwood, wild rose, thorny buffalo bush, Saskatoon, choke cherry, current, wolf willow and prickly rose.

**The Milk River:** The river itself is home to several fish species including the northern pike, sauger and lake chub. Other species such as the stonecat, mottled sculpin and silvery minnow are considered **At Risk** in Alberta because they are only found in the Milk River.

**The Rivers Edge and Coulees:** Leopard frogs and Weidemeyer's Admiral butterflies live in the parks coulees and river valley; both species are considered **At Risk** in Alberta. The rugged sandstone cliffs lining the coulees and Milk River valley are critical nesting areas for **Sensitive** and **At Risk** birds of prey. Birds, such as the prairie falcon, ferruginous hawk and golden eagle use the steep sandstone cliffs as nesting sites. Cliff swallows live "Condo Style" under rock ledges along the water, while their relatives the bank swallow nest in tunnels they excavated in the riverbanks. Rock wrens build nests in rock crevices in the cliffs, nests whose entrances they pave with small pebbles and pieces of rock. The piercing whistle of the yellow-bellied marmot echoes among the hoodoos as they send a warning of intruders to their neighbours basking on sun-warmed sandstone.

Shoreline trees such as water birch and peach leaved willow provide ample nesting and perching sites for many bird species, including the rufous-sided towhee and brown thrasher. Canada geese, kingfishers, western meadowlarks and yellow warblers frequent the bush close to the waters edge. Little brown bats perform aerobatics each evening, keeping the insect population in check.

In the evening mule deer, skunks and raccoons become active in the valley and early morning finds the Nuttall's cottontails catching the sun's rays at the edges of cottonwood groves.

**The mixed grass prairie:** On the surrounding prairie upland, pronghorn, ground squirrels, and coyote can be spotted, and sometimes a red fox or badger. Much rarer grassland species include the short horned lizard, another At Risk grassland species and the spadefoot toad. The prairie rattlesnake and bull snake live both in the grassland and among the rocky outcrops of sandstone in the valley. Be on the lookout for snakes on the roads, basking in the morning sun.

## Activities

**Explore:** Hike to excellent viewpoints throughout the park, or follow a self-guided trail. Bring field guides for prairie wildflowers and birds, these together with the parks checklists will make your walks much more informative! Maps, trail guides, plant and animal checklists, rock art and other fact sheets are available in the park. Ask park staff for help finding the information you are interested in.

**Discover:** Attend interpretive programs, held almost every evening during the summer months. Plan ahead and know the schedule and ticket sale procedures for daily summer interpretive hikes.

**Relax:** Spend a warm afternoon in the shade of the cottonwoods or on the sunny beach watching the cliff swallows dart back and forth across the river.

Carry your binoculars, bring drinking water, wear a hat and cool clothing so you can safely stay out on the trail for a few hours!

Sandstone and vegetation is fragile and easily damaged; please stay on trails.

## Facilities

A modern comfortable 64-unit campground and two group use areas are nestled among the riverside cottonwoods and willows. Showers, six power hook-ups, tap water and flush toilets are available.



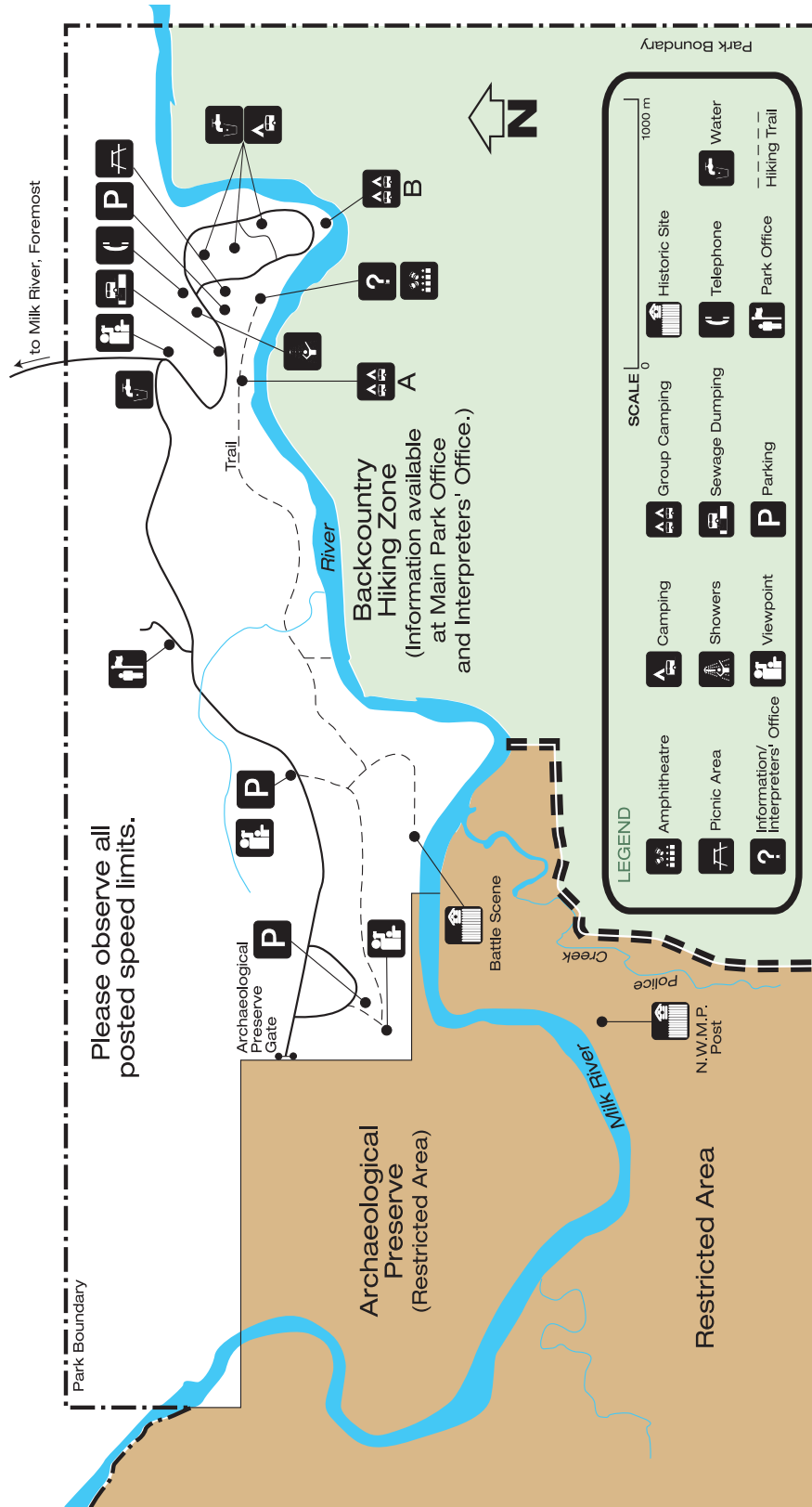
## You are in Rattlesnake Country

Contrary to popular belief, prairie rattlesnakes are very timid creatures and will try to escape from humans if given the chance. They rarely strike at large moving objects unless they are provoked. Leave them alone and they will leave you alone.

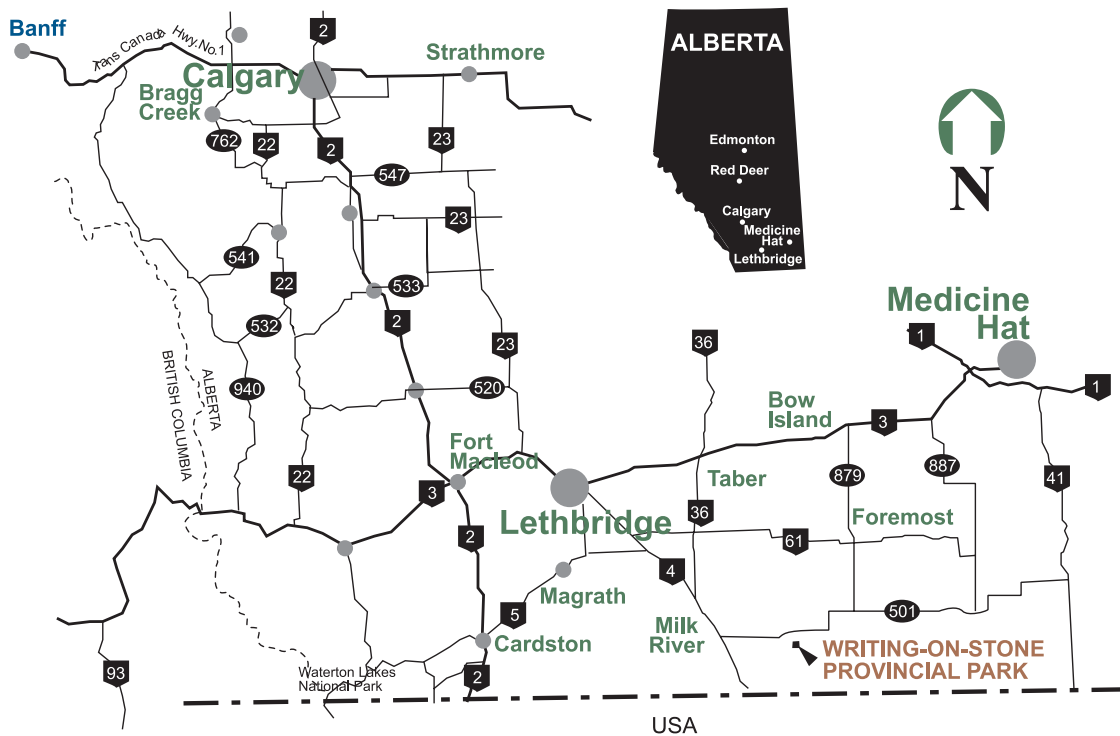
When you are in rattlesnake country:

- Watch where you are walking; stay on trails and out of long grass.
- Examine an area before you sit down to rest.
- Stop young children from running ahead and climbing hills and rocks.
- Do not let your dog off its leash; prevent it from putting its nose into bushes, holes or anywhere else a snake might hide.
- Do not put your hands or feet into cracks, holes and crevices, or into or under bushes; do not lift rocks or logs.
- Never poke or throw things at snakes; not only will you disturb them and make them more likely to strike, it is against the law to harm or harass animals in a provincial park, including snakes!
- Do not walk under ledges; never reach up with your hands if you can't see where you are putting them - there could be a snake up there!
- Never handle an injured or dead rattlesnake.
- If you hear a rattling sound, do not move until you know the snake's location, then move away.

# Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park Facilities



# How to get to Writing-on-Stone



## EMERGENCY HELP:

RCMP, Ambulance, Fire 911  
 Report a Poacher 1 800 642-3800

## FOR INFORMATION:

Interpretive Programs, Public Safety,  
 Resource Management &  
 Enforcement 1 (403) 647-2364  
 Connect toll free in Alberta dial 310-0000 for Service Alberta

Campground Services 1 (403) 647-2877  
 Group Camp Reservations 1 (403) 647-2877

Alberta Community Development  
 Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park  
 Box 297  
 Milk River, Alberta  
 Canada TOK 1M0

For information on Alberta Parks and Protected Areas visit:  
[www.cd.gov.ab.ca/parks](http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/parks) click on Gateway and search for Writing-on-Stone for  
 more park information, or call 1 866-427-3582.

Your one step portal to all fire ban information in Alberta: [alberta.firebans.com](http://alberta.firebans.com)