ELK ISLAND National Park

Visitor Guide

Aussi disponible en français
Fuel for the soul

REJUVENATE YOURSELF
Breathe in the invigorating fresh air. Relax to the sound of song birds. Dream under the stars.

NOURISH YOUR IMAGINATION
Explore nature’s unexpected art. Fill your inquisitive mind. Uncover stories of the past.

RELEASE YOUR INNER CHILD
Wander the forest floor. Skip to your next adventure. Have fun in nature’s playground.

FREE YOUR SPIRIT
Conquer trails. Canoe down the wind. Lose yourself in the scenery.

Welcome
Have you ever visited a place where you were scared to blink your eyes in fear of missing a single moment? Ever seen something so beautiful that it took your breath away? Experienced something that made the hairs on the back of your neck stand up?

The staff and I at Elk Island welcome you to a place of wonder and adventure! I encourage you to learn about Elk Island; to appreciate its many wildlife species, both big and small; and to enjoy this amazing place while leaving it untouched, so that others may also enjoy it after you. Please take in the many interpretive and special events that are offered for your enjoyment and learning. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask our friendly and knowledgeable staff. We will make every effort to ensure that your visit is one that becomes a very special memory for you. The untamed beauty of Elk Island will impress you for a lifetime.

Stephen Flemming
Superintendent

PARK USER FEES
Park user fees support the maintenance, conservation and protection of Elk Island National Park. Park fees are an investment in the future, so that generations to come will also enjoy this beautiful place.

Day Pass:
Valid from the date of issue until 4 p.m. the following day. Children under 6 are free. For longer stays you can use your day passes as a credit to upgrade to an annual pass within 30 days of date of purchase.

To Purchase Your Park Pass:
• call us at 780-992-2950 or email elk.island@pc.gc.ca
• call toll free at 1-888-773-8888 or visit www.parkscanada.gc.ca to purchase online
• Parks Canada Discovery Passes are available for purchase at the Park Gates, Visitor Centre or Park Operations
• Day passes are available 24-hours a day from Automated Pass Machines located at each entrance gate; major credit cards, cash or coin are accepted
• Early Bird discounts are available for Elk Island National Park Annual Passes from Dec. 1 to March 31.

Vehicles must display a valid park pass at all times.
PLACES TO VISIT

**THEATRE PRESENTATIONS**
Laugh, learn and participate in fun and informative theatre performances at the Astotin Lake Theatre.

**STORIES & STAR GAZING**
Escape the city lights for a starry night and listen to campfire stories told by a park interpreter or guest speaker. View stars with experts and their telescopes.

**GUIDED HIKES & TOURS**
Join an interpreter for a walk of discovery or tour a bison handling facility. Learn how Elk Island protects wildlife, our history and nature’s diversity.

**EXPLORA**
Let your smartphone be your guide! Using GPS technology, Explora tells you Elk Island’s stories using images, sounds, videos and quizzes while guiding you through a gentle 3km hike. Don’t have a smartphone? Borrow an Explora device from the Astotin Lake Theatre.

**ASTOTIN LAKE THEATRE**
Touch real animal mounts and artefacts displayed in the theatre. Chat with park staff and learn about the unique transition zones that exist in Elk Island captured on a stunning wall sized mural.

**VISITOR CENTRE**
Located just after the south entrance off Highway 16, the Visitor Centre welcomes you to Elk Island National Park. Watch out for the bison stampede as you open the door! Check out the stunning wall sized park mural, while friendly staff assist you with your visit!

**STORY FOR EVERYONE...**

**UKRAINIAN PIONEER HOME**
In 1951, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent officially opened this replica of a typical home built by early Ukrainian settlers. Located in the Astotin Lake Area, the 60 year old home is federally designated as the oldest purpose-built Ukrainian museum in Canada.

**ASTOTIN LAKE**
Aston Lake is a place to enjoy any time of the day. Stroll down the Living Waters boardwalk and watch mist rise off the lake highlighted by the sunrise. Listen to birds sing good morning to you as you jump in your canoe for an early paddle; what a way to start the day! Have a seat on a park bench and watch the breathtaking sunset as the sky turns orange. The Pavilion is the oldest building in the Astotin Lake Area and remains a popular gathering place for family and friends to share a rustic meal or a warm campfire.

**WOOD BISON TRAIL**
Looking for an invigorating day hike? Cross Highway 16 and visit one of the longest trails in Elk Island. 16 km in length, this trail offers great views of wood bison, elk, moose and waterfowl. Hike or snowshoe the trail; choose your own adventure!

**WOOD BISON TRAIL**
Located just north of the south gate, drive this 1 km loop twisting through open prairie and scattered aspen. In spring, watch orange coloured bison calves clinging to their mothers. Listen to the constant deep low roar of bull bison during mating season as they impress the females (mid-July to mid-August). It surely is a sight to see! Remember, bison are wild animals and may charge if they feel threatened. Give animals a wide birth and never come between a cow and her calf.

**BISON LOOP ROAD**
Located just north of the south gate, walk, cross country ski or snowshoe this 16.5 km trail. Enjoy a hot meal or cool refreshment at the licensed café. Rentals are available. Enjoy a hot meal or cool refreshment at the licensed café.

**TAWAYIK LAKE TRAIL**
Get out into the thick of nature, bring your binoculars and see if you can spot any of the 250 species of birds found in Elk Island. Located just north of the south gate, walk, cross country ski or snowshoe this 16.5 km trail. At the trailhead, cap off your day by relaxing and enjoying a marshmallow over a campfire.

**GOLF**
Established in 1936, the Elk Island Golf Course celebrates 75 years of service by offering visitors a beautiful 9-hole course surrounded by the scenic beaver hills landscape. Club and cart rentals are available. Enjoy a hot meal or cool refreshment at the licensed café.

**PAVILION**
Come inside and become a part of history. Originally constructed in 1934, the Pavilion welcomes generations of visitors. The Pavilion is the oldest building in the Astotin Lake Area and remains a popular gathering place for family and friends to share a rustic meal or a warm campfire.
Choose your camping adventure!

Reserve Relax Experience
To reserve sites in the Sandy Beach Campground call 1-877-RESERVE (1-877-737-3783) or visit www.pccamping.ca

SANDY BEACH CAMPGROUND
Located in the Astotin Lake Area, this picturesque campground is open from the May long weekend to Thanksgiving (weather permitting). Reserve a site in the Main Loop, Walk-in Tenting or RV Loop. Each site is equipped with a picnic table and a fire ring. Flush toilets, showers, drinking water, wood supply (with purchase of a fire permit), sani-station and a pay telephone are just a short distance away. Self-registration is first-come, first-served in non-reserved sites only when no campground attendant is present at the kiosk. All sites are primitive (without power or water). Some areas are wheelchair accessible.

TEEPEE CAMPING
Enjoy a Plains Cree teepee camping experience! Teepees sleep up to 6 people and sit on raised wooden platforms with sleeping pads. Teepee campsites are equipped with a fire ring and picnic table. Communal fire ring and seating is also available for groups to enjoy.

GROUP CAMPING
Want to be close to all of the action and amenities? Then reserve the Sandy Beach Group Camping Area! Located in the Astotin Lake Area, this large site accommodates groups of up to 60 people (minimum of 10) and is suitable for tents, trailers or R.V.'s. The area is available May to September except on long weekends. To reserve call 780-992-0017 (in season) or 780-992-2972 (off season). Want to rough it and experience nature at its best? Then reserve the Oster Lake Backcountry Group Tenting Area! Located on the west shore of Oster Lake, this large tenting site can accommodate up to 75 people and is accessible by hiking, cross-country skiing or snow-shoeing Shirley Lake Trail (6 km) or the Oster Access Road (6 km) starting at the Tawayik Lake Picnic Area. To reserve call 780-922-5833.

WINTER CAMPING
Enjoy the winter season at its best! Winter camping is permitted free of charge for self-contained vehicles in the RV Loop of Sandy Beach Campground in the Astotin Lake Area. A valid park permit (day pass or annual pass) must be displayed.

In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.
John Muir

SAFETY TIPS TO INCREASE YOUR ENJOYMENT WHILE ON PARK TRAILS
- Take along a trail map.
- Be prepared for rapid changes in weather.
- Dress in layers; carry sufficient water, insect repellent and sunscreen.
- Travel with others on established trails during daylight hours.
- Pick trails suitable for your fitness level.
- Let someone know where you are going and when you expect to be back.

LICORER FREE LONG WEEKEND
In Elk Island, families can enjoy an abundance of activities, reconnect with nature and experience a national park at its best. To encourage this memorable experience the possession and consumption of alcohol is prohibited in the campground on all long weekends from May to September.

FIRE BAN
When a fire ban is in place, propane and gas cooking stoves only are permitted.

BARE CAMPSITE PROGRAM
Store all food and any other items that attract wildlife in a hard-sided vehicle when not in use to discourage animals from approaching your campsite. The “BARE” campsites program is in effect for your safety, enjoyment and to help keep the wild in wildlife.

Explore over 80 km of trails from half-hour strolls to full day adventures.

Many trails offer unique experiences that will tantalize your senses. Watch the ever busy beaver as it constructs its dam, listen to the songbirds as they sing you a tune, or smell the fresh air as the wind caresses your skin. Most trails offer parking, exhibits, viewpoints, picnic facilities, fire rings, wood, washrooms, and garbage facilities. During winter many trails are groomed for cross-country skiing or snowshoeing; visit parks.canada.gc.ca/elkisland for updated trail reports.

Exploring on trails has never been easier thanks to modern GPS technology.
Geocaching is an entertaining high-tech adventure activity where participants use GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) receiver technology to “hunt” for various locations using mapping coordinates. Caching Elk Island is a GPS based learning experience and entertaining adventure activity highlighting the people, places and heritage unique to Elk Island. Visit www.geocaching.com or call the park general information number to learn more about where the caches in Elk Island can be found.

SO MUCH TO EXPLORE!
In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.
John Muir

SANDY BEACH CAMPGROUND
TEEEPEE CAMPING
GROUP CAMPING
WINTER CAMPING

Let the stars tuck you in at night and the sun greet you in the morning.
Discover Our Trails

1. Hayburger Trail (3-4h)
   10 km, flat terrain
   FEATURES: Exhibits, mix of spruce bog, open aspen forest and meadows. Remain on the trail; areas of quicksand may be encountered. Good for viewing bison, moose and elk.

2. Simmons Trail (1-2h)
   3.5 km, moderate terrain
   FEATURES: Aspen forest, meadows and beaver ponds. Good for viewing bison, moose and elk.

3. Shirley Lake Trail (3-4h)
   10.5 km, moderate terrain
   FEATURES: Aspen forest and meadows. Good for viewing bison, moose and elk.

4. Moss Lake Trail (3.5–4.5h)
   13 km, moderate terrain
   FEATURES: Picnic tables, camp-fire and exhibits. Mixed wood forest, great for viewing beaver and waterfowl.

5. Amisk Wuche Trail (1-1.5h)
   2.5 km, moderate to steep terrain
   FEATURES: Boardwalks through marsh and forest. Rich in aquatic life.

6. Lakeview Trail (1-2h)
   3.5 km, gentle terrain
   FEATURES: Poplar and spruce forest, good views of Astotin Lake, islands, beaver and waterfowl.

7. Beaver Pond Trail (1-2h)
   3.5 km, gentle terrain
   FEATURES: Aspen forest and sedge meadows, good for viewing bison, moose and beaver.

8. Living Waters (0.5-1h)
   300 m boardwalk, gentle terrain
   FEATURES: Floating boardwalk and exhibits. Great view of Astotin Lake, islands, beaver, waterfowl, and aquatic life.

9. Tawayik Lake Trail (4-5h)
   16.5 km, moderate terrain
   FEATURES: Picnic tables, picnic shelter, camp-fire, exhibits and lookout. Aspen forest and meadows; great for viewing elk, bison and waterfowl.

10. Shoreline Trail (2-3h)
    6 km return, gentle terrain (pavement)
    FEATURES: Parking lot across from Golf Course. Mixed wood forest, good view of islands, beaver and waterfowl. Beaver Bay Picnic Area; picnic tables and camp-fire.

11. Wood Bison Trail (4-5h)
    16 km, moderate terrain
    FEATURES: Aspen forest, great for viewing wood bison, moose, elk and birds.

Legend

- Information
- Accessible
- Interpretation
- Parking
- Exhibit
- Trailer Dumping
- Washrooms
- Lookout
- Camping
- Telephone
- Picnic Area
- Overlook Camping
- Golf
- Picnic Shelter
- Walk-in Camping
- Hiking
- Canoeing
- Group Camping
- Cross-country
- Kayaking
- Recreational
- Skiing
- Snowshoeing
- Boat Launch
- Playground
- Recreational Vehicles
Elk Island has one of the highest densities of grazing animals in the world!

Bison or Buffalo? So what is the difference anyway?

Simply put, the correct term for the largest land mammal in North America is bison. Bison may resemble their relatives but they are a different species than that of the Asian water buffalo and African buffalo that live in Southeast Asia and Africa. There are three distinct sub-species of bison in the world today. European bison live in Poland and European portions of the former Soviet Union. Plains and wood bison are exclusive to North America. We have both at Elk Island.

“Kindness” Kills Wildness

Human food may be difficult for some animals to digest and may condition them to being fed, resulting in the loss of their ability to fend for themselves.

Birders Paradise

The variety of upland habitat and extensive wetlands in Elk Island provides opportunities for many species to forage and breed. Of the 253 species recorded in the park, 137 are known to breed here. Astotin Lake is a major wetlands area where waterfowl can be seen on the lake. Walk Shoreline Trail (#10), Lakeview Trail (#6), Living Waters (#8) boardwalk, or drive the road along the south west shore of Astotin Lake and park on one of the road side pull offs to get a spectacular view of wetland birds. Don’t forget about the many other walking trails at Elk Island. Tip: transition areas are where you will spot the highest variety.

Having a safe visit...

You are in bison country.

- Stay in your vehicle, drive slow and do not approach bison on foot along the roadside
- During the mating season known as the rut (mid-July to mid-August), bulls are aggressive
- Avoid approaching bison where their escape routes are limited
- Do not approach bison while hiking; make them aware of your presence, walk slowly around them at a safe distance, always keeping an eye on them. If necessary, return to the trail head
- Never enter a heard of bison on foot or come between two animals, especially a cow and her calf
- Dogs must be kept on a leash at all times while in the park to prevent conflicts

How close is too close?

Keep at least 3 bus lengths (30 metres/100 ft) away from large animals.

Elk Alert!

- Cow elk can be aggressive during calving season (mid-May to late June)
- Bull elk are aggressive during the mating (rut) season (mid-September to the end of October)

If you are approached by a predator

Large predators are not resident in Elk Island, however black bears and cougars have been known to pass through the area on occasion.

- Yell, don’t run and slowly move away
- Do anything you can to make yourself look bigger
- Fight back aggressively, if attacked

CHECK OUT THE BIG SIX!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOOD BISON</th>
<th>PLAINS BISON</th>
<th>MOOSE</th>
<th>ELK or WAPITI</th>
<th>WHITE-TAILED DEER</th>
<th>MULE DEER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size: average length 3.9m</td>
<td>Size: average length 3.4m</td>
<td>Size: largest member of deer family at 6 to 7 feet tall</td>
<td>Size: second largest member of the deer family at 4 to 5 feet tall</td>
<td>Size: smaller and more solitary than mule deer</td>
<td>Size: larger and stockier than white-tailed deer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Weight: bull 840kg</td>
<td>Average Weight: bull 730kg</td>
<td>Average Weight: bulls up to 450kg</td>
<td>Average Weight: bulls up to 450kg</td>
<td>Average Weight: buck 90kg</td>
<td>Average Weight: buck 100kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet: grasses and sedges</td>
<td>Diet: grasses and sedges</td>
<td>Diet: twigs, leaves and aquatic plants for salt</td>
<td>Diet: grasses, sedges and twigs</td>
<td>Diet: twigs, saplings and shrubs</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

WHERE TO VIEW

- Wood bison are found south of highway 16 and plains bison are on the north side of the highway
- Walk a trail or drive the Bison Loop Road to get a closer look
- Bison begin to breed (rut) mid-July; listen for the deep low roar of bull bison as they entice females
- Seen around marshes and boggy areas foraging for tasty aquatic plants
- Easy to see in fall and winter when trees are bare
- Moose begin to breed (rut) in late September; listen for males grunting at females
- Quietly watch for elk while walking a trail or follow the boundary roads along the fence line
- Easier to see in fall and winter when trees are bare
- Elk begin to breed (rut) mid-September; listen for males bugling at females
- Quietly watch for deer while walking a trail or turn off your vehicle at a road side pull off
- Deer avoid noisy areas and will take refuge in bushes and trees
- Deer begin to breed (rut) in November; listen as males grunt at females


**IN THE BEGINNING**

For over 5000 years, Aboriginal people travelled through the western landscape. The Beaver Hills provided relief along the journey; a place to hunt, gather and rest. Elk Island has more than 200 archaeological Aboriginal sites; most were campsites and places where the Tsu T’ina (Sarcee), Nehiyaw (Plains Cree), Nakota (Assiniboine), Kainai (Blood), and Siksika (Blackfoot) people hunted for game.

**MEN OF VISION**

On March 28, 1906 Canada’s first wildlife sanctuary was established. Five local men pledged by bond to the Dominion Government of Canada to protect one of the last remaining herds of elk in Canada. The men signed a $5000 bond to establish Elk Park, a 41km² fenced enclosure around Astotin Lake. In 1908, Elk Park was renamed Elk Island Park.

**RETURN OF THE PLAINS BISON**

The plains bison in Elk Island originated from a private herd owned by Charles Alard and Michael Pablo of Ronan, Montana. For $245 a head, the Dominion Government of Canada purchased Pablo’s share of the herd. In 1907, approximately 400 plains bison were shipped to the park by railway, via Lamont, en route to their final destination, Buffalo National Park at Wainwright. Forty-eight animals eluded capture; their offspring remain in Elk Island to this day. Their return represents one of the most significant events in Canadian conservation history.

**GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

Elk Island Park was granted federal park status in 1913. By 1922 the park was increased in size to allow for growing wildlife populations. Development for visitor use began in 1923 and by 1924 the Elk Island Parkway was constructed from the north to the south. Elk Island was designated as an official national park under the National Parks Act of 1930.

**PREPARATION & RECREATION**

New recreation facilities were constructed after World War II including two bungalow camps, a dance hall, a band shell, tennis courts and a service station. Sandy Beach Campground opened in 1947. In keeping with the preservation mandate, a program was initiated to bring back the beaver to the Beaver Hills after centuries of over trapping. Today more than 1000 beaver reside in the park.

**WOOD BISON**

Thought to be extinct, a small herd of pure wood bison were located in 1957 in a remote corner of Wood Buffalo National Park. For conservation purposes, 23 animals were transported to Elk Island National Park. As a result of this action, wood bison are now found in Elk Island Park and throughout the park system. Their return represents one of the most significant events in Canadian conservation history.

**Did you see something amazing???**

Come and tell us about it! Visitors are our greatest adventurists and are out and about all hours of the day. There is a very good chance you will see something unique and exciting and we want to hear about it. Stop any park staff and share your story.

**Did you know???**

Elk Island is home to North America’s largest and smallest land mammal: wood bison and pygmy shrew.

**Elevation**

Elk Island is Canada’s only fully fenced national park.
National parks play an important role in regional conservation, providing a safe home for wildlife species by maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Protecting Cultural History
The landscape of Elk Island is rich in human history and the evidence is here in over 200 Aboriginal archaeological sites. Most sites reflect a short term use where people sat and waited for game to appear or repaired their stone tools and left small stone chips behind in the process. People have always been an intimate part of this ecosystem.

Moose Survey
In order to better monitor the causes of moose mortality in Elk Island, animals have been radio collared. When a collared moose dies the radio emits a signal so that staff can locate the carcass, then do a necropsy and collect tissue samples to determine the cause of death. Collars are monitored daily and can last for up to 5 years.

Trumpeter Swans
Trumpeter swans nearly disappeared from this area in the 1800s due to over-hunting and loss of habitat. In 1987, Elk Island began a trumpeter swan reintroduction program hoping to recover the swan population. After an absence of over a hundred years, the largest waterfowl in North America has once again firmly established itself in the park.

Ungulate Management
Elk, moose, plains bison and wood bison undergo close monitoring in order to sustain pure and disease free herds. Elk Island houses both elk and bison handling facilities in order to support this process.

What happens to surplus animals?
Elk Island National Park is renowned for its conservation efforts as a source herd for reintroducing elk and bison populations back into their historic habitats. When animal populations reach a specified capacity they are donated to other conservation initiatives throughout North America and even Russia in an effort to build these wildlife populations.

Beaver Hills Dark Sky Preserve (BHDSP)
On September 3, 2006, the BHDSP was designated through a partnership amongst Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture, the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada – Edmonton Centre and the Parks Canada Agency. The BHDSP includes all of Elk Island, Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area, Strathcona Wilderness Centre and the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village for a total protected area of 293 km². The BHDSP protects nocturnal habitats for present and future generations and encourages public enjoyment and awareness of the night sky. Come to Elk Island on Labour Day long weekend and other special times to celebrate the dark sky!

Management Planning
We want to hear from you. Help guide Parks Canada to protect this great park, connect visitors and Canadians with nature and our history, and engage the public, stakeholders and partners. To find out how to get involved visit www.parkscanada/elkisland.
A Personal Invitation:  
Become Part of the Conservation Legacy

It all began with five men in 1906 who sought to protect some of the last elk in the region. Since then, Elk Island has re-introduced native species to the park and has played a critical role in recovering elk and bison populations throughout North America—a remarkable story, that is not yet complete!

The second century of conservation for Elk Island poses many new challenges; yet holds just as much promise as the first century for people wanting to make a real difference. I encourage you to get involved, learn more about the accomplishments of the past and help shape the future of Elk Island. There will be many opportunities to help the park and its partners with hands-on ecological monitoring and wildlife management. Along the way you can expect to have a great deal of fun and make new friends around camp fires and social events. Join us in the next century of conservation; get involved, this is your park. Become part of Elk Island’s conservation legacy!

Stephen Flemming  
Superintendent