

A Mountain View

From this viewpoint you can see all three of Banff National Park's life zones: alpine, subalpine and montane.



Not much can grow on the rocky, wind-swept summit of Mount Rundle, although hardy wildflowers carpet the park's high alpine and subalpine meadows. In summer, grizzlies, bighorn sheep and elk may move to these high meadows to graze. Lower down on the mountainsides are the dark forests of the subalpine zone.

You are in the montane zone, the lowest and most rare habitat type, making up only 3% of Banff National Park's vast landscape. Many of the large mammals in the park rely on this zone for winter survival. In spring, buds and shoots here provide wildlife with much needed nutrition while the higher slopes are still covered with snow.

The Night Shift

As the sun sinks behind the distant mountains, some creatures are just waking up.



The forest darkens. Secretively, tiny masked shrews begin to forage for insects beneath the leaf litter. Meadow voles scurry along runways among the grasses and sedges in search of seeds and lichens. A coyote sniffs about the meadow, detecting and then pouncing on unsuspecting voles.

As darkness deepens, deer mice become active. Sensitive whiskers help them navigate along the forest floor as they search for berries and conifer seeds. Their large ears constantly listen for predators.

Little brown bats leave their roosts in hollow trees and head for the wetlands where they use sonar to track and catch night-flying insects. Great horned owls swoop silently down on their furred and feathered prey, offset ears pinpointing the exact location of small sounds in the darkness.

Your Own Oasis

Take time to connect with nature here. Let its patterns, its rhythms and its life forces inspire you.



Admire the light and shadow on the forest floor, and in the clear waters of the creek. Notice the rich colours and textures of the lichens growing on the tree trunks. Listen for the small sounds of nature. Look up through the branches to the sky and observe the shape and speed of the clouds as they pass by.

Breathe in the forest air. Take a moment to reflect on the memories you will take away with you.

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of autumn.

John Muir

Advice for the Trail

Please respect wildlife and fellow trail users by staying on the trail and leaving the area as you found it. For the safety of wildlife, your pet and yourself, keep your pets on a leash and pick up after them.

Although the Fenland Trail is close to the town of Banff, it is home for wildlife. Please be alert and aware of your surroundings. Watch for, and stay well away from, all wild animals.



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Self-guiding brochure for the

Fenland Trail

Discover this natural oasis for local plants, wildlife and people.

It takes about 30 minutes to walk this easy 2 kilometre loop trail.

Please see the trail map on the back of this brochure.

Telltale Signs

While you may not see all the animals of the Fenland, you can discover what they have left behind.



The lower sections of the aspen trees in front of you were scarred by elk feeding on the nitrogen-rich bark in winter. Elk also come here in spring to eat willows, wildflowers and grass and to give birth to their calves in the relative safety and seclusion of this forest. In fall, bull elk often shred the bark of young trees as they rub the velvet from their antlers.

Black bears, scrambling up these trees for safety, made the slanted claw mark scars further up the aspen trunks. Bears are seldom seen here, but clues like these remind us of their presence.

As you continue along the trail, look for other animal signs. You may notice animal droppings, or scat, right on the trail – another reminder that we are not the only ones who walk here.

When a Tree Falls...

What may look like disorder in the dense forest is actually nature at work, creating healthy new life.



Old age, insects and disease have weakened these trees, and wind has brought them crashing to the ground. Sun-loving species such as aspen and poplar quickly fill the space, protected from elk by the tangled deadfall. White spruce saplings also thrive in this forest opening.

Beneath and within the fallen trees live the forest decomposers – a miniature underworld of fungi, bacteria, earthworms and insects. These small creatures break down dead plant and animal matter, returning the basic elements to the air, soil and water to be used again.

Fire is another important forest recycler in the Rocky Mountains. It reduces logs to mineral-rich ash and opens up the woods, creating a variety of habitats that can better support a diversity of plants and animals. There has been no fire in the Fenland for many years, leaving the big job of forest renewal to the tiny decomposers.

Life on the Sunny Side

Feel the warmth of the sun on your face. A rich variety of plants and animals thrive in this open, sunny area.



Plants soak up sunlight to grow. This sun-energy is, in turn, passed on to the insects, birds and mammals that feed on sap, buds, leaves, flowers or seeds.

The hole in the poplar tree beside you is evidence that even in death, plants meet the needs of wildlife. Trees provide homes for insects and their larvae, which are, in turn, searched out by probing woodpeckers. The cavities that woodpeckers carve may give shelter to smaller birds such as chickadees.

Stand quietly, what do you hear? In spring, the songs of breeding birds that nest and feed here fill the air. These are replaced by the sounds of buzzing insects in summer. Listen for elk bugling in the fall. Throughout the year, you may hear red squirrels scolding, chickadees whistling their name or woodpeckers drumming. On windy days, even the trees creak and groan.

Heart of the Fenland

This trail is named after the open area in front of you, the fen. It is an attractive refuge for birds and mammals.



A fen is a type of wetland that is fed primarily by nutrient-rich groundwater. This fen also floods each spring. The availability of water throughout the growing season creates a productive and fertile oasis in this generally dry and sparse mountain environment. Plants such as sedges, grasses and mosses thrive here.

In spring and summer, elk come to feed on the flowers, willows and red-osier dogwoods that border the fen. In winter, they graze on grasses and sedges. Look for areas of grass or snow that have been flattened by sleeping elk.

Canada geese also visit this fen. Some nest and raise their young here, filling up on water plants in spring and summer and on grass seeds in the fall.

Living Together

In the mountains, the best travel routes and habitat – for wildlife and people – are in the valleys.



The grand scale of the mountains may make you think that wildlife have an easy life here. But the mountain environment is harsh and difficult to travel through. Valley bottoms offer the most hospitable places for wildlife and for people.

Several measures have been taken to help wildlife and people coexist in this busy valley. If you look west toward the Trans-Canada Highway, you can see the fence that keeps wildlife away from traffic. Every few kilometres, special passageways allow animals to cross the road safely. From here you can spot an animal underpass. It is used by elk, deer, coyotes, bears, wolves and cougars.

Watch for wildlife pathways crossing the Fenland Trail – part of nature's network through the Bow Valley.