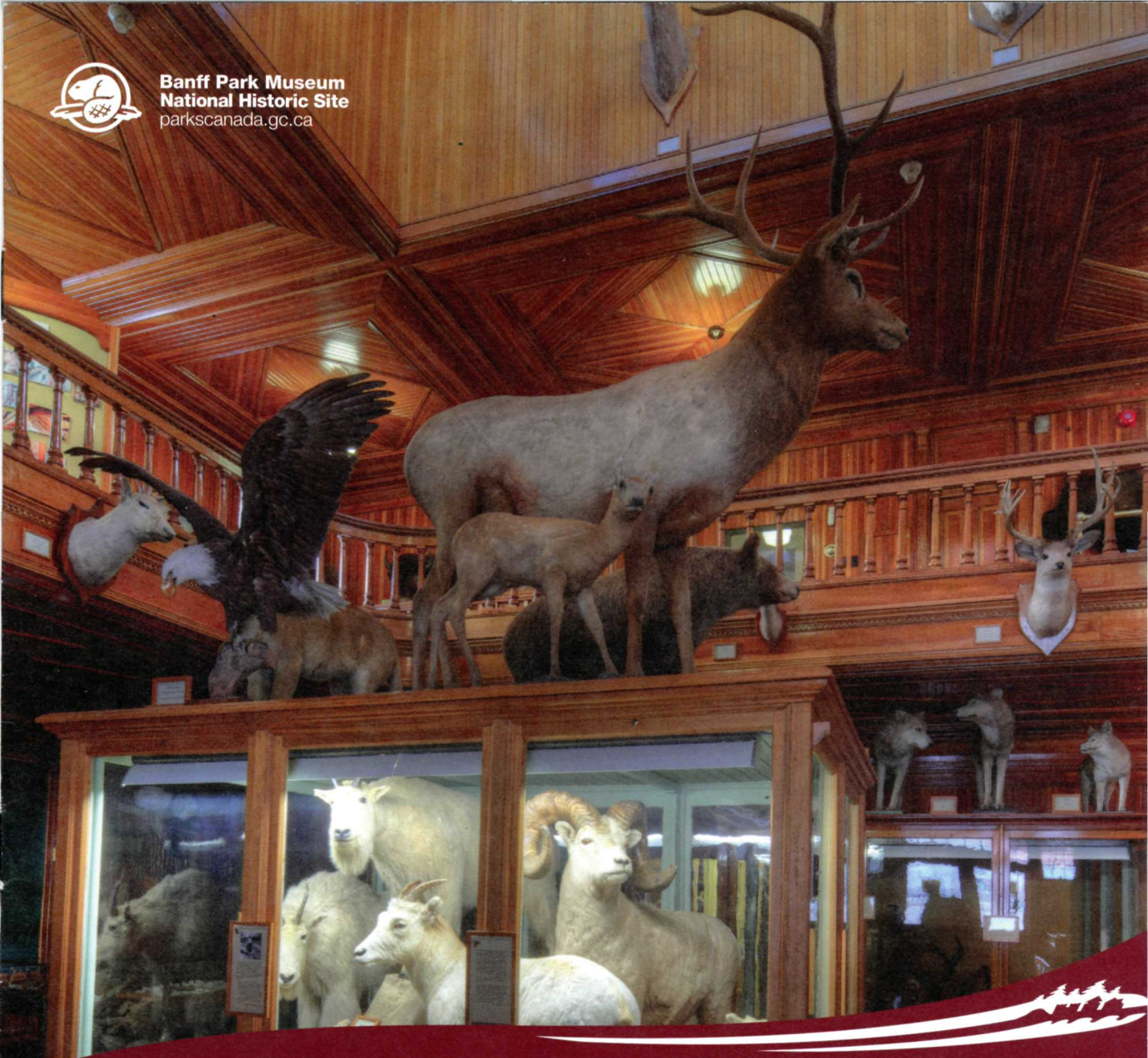




Banff Park Museum  
National Historic Site  
[parksCanada.gc.ca](http://parksCanada.gc.ca)



Parks  
Canada

Parcs  
Canada

Canada



Photo: Amar Athwal

## Welcome

Welcome to one of western Canada's oldest natural history museums, and the oldest surviving federal building in a Canadian national park. This brochure will help you create your own experience of the stories behind the Museum's architecture, collections and exhibits. Discover how natural history was interpreted in Canada during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and meet some of the characters that helped create this 'University of the Hills.'

### A Rare Bird

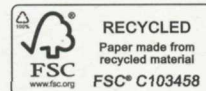
When this museum opened its doors in 1903 it was one of only about twenty Canadian museums. But it wasn't alone in the world. At the time, museums and public exhibitions were very popular; spanking new buildings opened to house collections including:

London's Natural History Museum (1881), Chicago's Field Museum (1894), Ottawa's National Museum (1912), and Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum (1912). Canada had about 40 museums by 1910; but it was not until the 1960s that museum building took flight in Canada and the Banff Park Museum was a rare Canadian bird for many years.

*Please help us protect this site by not leaning on the historic exhibit cases and by not touching the cases' fragile rolled glass panes. They are original, irreplaceable artifacts too.*

*Photographs are welcome!*

Front Cover Photo: Amar Athwal



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## 1) The Oldest Specimen

*(the loon and merganser case)*

Exploring the exhibits on this floor is like walking through a three-dimensional field guide. Beginning with the loons and grebes before you, and ending with songbirds, these exhibits are laid out in an order similar to that found in most guides to North American birds, from the most ancient species to the most recently-appeared.

The red-breasted merganser, collected in Toronto in 1860, is the museum's oldest specimen.

## (2) Black-billed Magpie

*(the crow, magpie, raven case)*

The animals in the museum are mostly local or regional, and black-billed magpies are commonly seen and heard in the Banff town site.

## (3) Oology

*(the display table with the hummingbird nest)*

Collecting and studying birds' eggs, called oology (pronounced oh-ah-leh-gee) was a popular Victorian hobby. Hollow eggs were displayed, like jewels, in cabinets such as this one. Can you spot the tiny hummingbird eggs in the nest?





#### **(4) Habitat Displays**

*(sheep and goat diorama)*

Many modern natural history museums display animals in three-dimensional, full-sized scenes. When Dr. Harlan Smith, an archaeologist with the National Museum in Ottawa, designed this sheep and goat exhibit in 1914, the idea of presenting animals in their natural habitat was considered a radical new approach.

Compare this presentation technique with the displays of birds in the cabinets that surround you.

How are they different? Which teaches you more? Which do you prefer?

#### **(5) Wolves**

*(wolves above bison diorama)*

Note the difference in size between the coyote and the wolves. Grey, black or white individuals of grey wolf can be found in the Bow Valley. The black one, killed on the Lake Minnewanka road, was one of the last specimens added to the collection in 1981.

The female bison in the habitat display was a member of one of the last pure-bred herds of bison remaining in 1907. The federal government brought the herd to Canada from Montana in 1907. Some lived at the buffalo paddock in Banff while others were sent to Elk Island National Park. This one died while being transported by train.



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## **(6) Why a Museum?**

*(reading room)*

The Hot Springs Reserve at the Cave and Basin (later expanded and renamed Banff National Park) was established in 1885. By 1887, the town of Banff had six hotels, nine stores, two churches, and a post office. At that time, the study of natural history was wildly popular, but exploring the largely unknown Rocky Mountains was difficult.

John Macoun and William Spreadborough, from the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC), came to western Canada in 1891 to 'make a collection of specimens of fauna and flora of the Rocky Mountain Park and vicinity for the museum proposed to be established at Banff.' The Geological Survey supplied the Museum with its very first collection, which included 8 mammals, 259 birds, 57 specimens of wood, 814 plants, 201 minerals and 1 turtle.

The Museum provided generations of visitors with an opportunity to view plants and animals up close. Since those days, the town may have grown but the surrounding mountains and the tranquility of this room have remained the same. You can still sit, relax, enjoy the books and magazines and listen for the distant whistle of the train.

*We invite you to continue your tour on the second floor of the museum.*



Photo: Amer Alhval



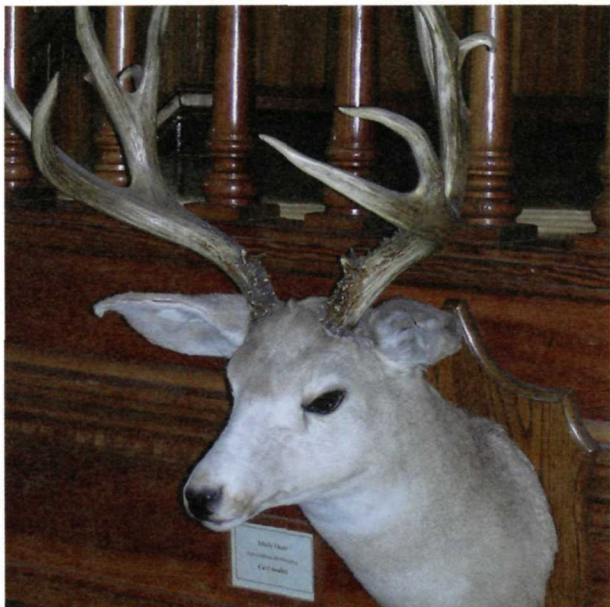
Banff Avenue. ca 1923.

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## **(7) Lantern Ceiling**

*(top of stairs)*

Built before electricity was available in Banff, the Museum was designed for natural lighting. Sunlight shines through the large lantern windows overhead to illuminate the displays on both floors. The architect John Stocks designed the building so that the outside walls supported the second floor by a cantilever truss system.



## **(8) Perceptions Change**

*(looking over the balcony by the two bears)*

Most of the museum specimens were collected between 1890 and 1930 when it was common practice to kill animals for identification and study. Close study of these and other natural history specimens formed the basis of our modern field guides.

The Museum's 1914 handbook described predators such as the wolf, as 'cunning and merciless,' while white-tailed deer were described as 'happy and carefree.' Look for the specimens in the museum that were mounted to reflect those beliefs.







Lantern Ceiling

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## **(9) Pipes and Points**

*(in cabinet of curiosities corner)*

As the museum evolved over time, it was decided that it would focus on natural history. While most of the cultural artifacts were sent to the Luxton Museum (now called the Buffalo Nations Museum) on the other side of the river, a few items were kept including this small collection of aboriginal and European tools. Look for the Simpson Register in the cabinet. George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, carved it in 1841, during his trip around the world. It was discovered just west of Banff in 1904.

## **(10) Keeper of the Museum**

*(Sansons office)*

Norman Bethune Sanson was the curator of this Museum for 36 years. He wanted to make the Museum a university of the hills. Sanson covered 30,000 kilometres on foot and horseback collecting specimens. As you look around his office, you get a sense of the diversity of his interests.

## **(11) A Zoo in a National Park**

*(upstairs south facing window)*

Banff's Central Park is located behind the Museum. From 1904 to 1937 it was the Banff Park Zoo. The cougar, grey wolves, lynx and turkey vulture in the Museum were once zoo residents.



White Museum of the Canadian Rockies na-71-2906 / Byron Harmon



Sanson's office



## *What's in a design?*

The Banff Park Museum is of national historic significance because this 'museum of museums,' developed by Norman Bethune Sanson, reflects an early approach to the interpretation of natural history in Canada, and because of the architectural style and detailing so characteristic of early federal buildings in the Park.

Take time to admire the original hand-carved Douglas fir woodwork of the Museum's interior as well as the distinctive overhanging eaves and cross-log details of the exterior.