

Stories in the Snow

-Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba-

By **Debbie McKeown**

“[The] rhythm of the snowshoe trail, the beckoning of far-off hills and valleys, the majesty of the tempest, the calm and silent presence of the trees that seem to muse and ponder in their silence; the trust and confidence of small living creatures, the company of simple men; these have been my inspiration and my guide. Without them I am nothing.”
Grey Owl

Driving west from Winnipeg, Manitoba the landscape stretches to the horizon as a vast white ocean of endless prairie. My husband Jack and I are heading towards Riding Mountain National Park and are, quite frankly, wondering how there could possibly be a mountain anywhere in the vicinity. We pass through serene countryside of farmland, quintessential grain elevators and big prairie skies. I recall my high school Canadian Literature class as we travel through the town of Neepawa, former home of author Margaret Laurence. We turn north on Highway 5 and suddenly there it is ... not exactly a mountain, but a long dramatic escarpment that rises high above the surrounding farmland. We have found Riding Mountain.



Riding Mountain National Park is a unique spot as it is the core of a much larger Biosphere Reserve that aims to take a collaborative approach to conservation and sustainable resource use. The

Park preserves the most southerly tract of boreal forest in Manitoba, along with the

wildlife that depend on it for survival. Riding Mountain National Park and 15 surrounding rural municipalities constitute the Biosphere Reserve and, as we learn over the course



of our time here, there is a strong sense of community and commitment to working out a balance between humans and nature.

We already feel we have left our city lives behind in favour of the more peaceful offerings of nature as we check into the friendly Elkhorn Resort at the south end of the Park. A big comfortable bed and in-room fireplace beckon, but instead we dig into our suitcases for snowshoes and warm clothing.

We are meeting Celes Davar for an evening snowshoe hike. Celes is owner of Earth Rhythms, who describe themselves as “an award-winning Canadian learning adventure company offering small group and boutique experiential tourism experiences.” After several outings with Celes over the next few days, we will discover exactly what this means, at least to us. In short, it’s about slowing down a little to savour the subtle beauty of Riding Mountain National Park and taking the time to learn about regional ecology and culture. Snowshoeing is an excellent way to do this, and we can’t wait to get started.

Under an almost-full moon, we make the short drive to Grayling Lake where we strap on our snowshoes and head out. One of the wonderful things about Riding

Mountain is that with consistent cold temperatures all winter long, you can essentially snowshoe anywhere. Lakes, beaver ponds and creeks provide frozen pathways into boreal forest, and are perfect canvases for a collage of animal footprints. The silence of the forest at night awakens our senses as moonlight casts long shadows on the frozen lake. We switch on our headlamps for a better look at some tracks that Celes helps us identify as snowshoe hare and coyote. Everywhere there are stories in the snow. We talk about the



subtle changes in the landscape since Celes' most recent snowshoe excursion at Grayling Lake with his family. Why has this tree dropped lower into the creek? What prompted the coyote to traverse this frozen creek? The stories are all there, waiting for our interpretations.

The next morning we are eager to explore further. Our drive takes us through farmland on the edge of the park toward the Lake Audy bison enclosure. Suddenly we are stopped in our tracks by the sight of a large bird in the treetops. We count ourselves

fortunate to have a good look at the Northern Hawk Owl, and later note with satisfaction that it is listed as rare in the Park's bird brochure. We watch as it dives to the ground and snatches its breakfast, presumably a small rodent.



Excited about what else the day might offer, we continue to the bison enclosure for a look at these large mammals. To me, the plains bison epitomize the history of the prairies and that delicate balance between nature and the needs of humans. Bison have been absent from this landscape for many years, yet they acted as a life-sustaining force for Native Canadians. Re-introducing plains bison to Riding Mountain is a positive step in restoring and protecting the prairie ecosystem.

As part of the Park's management system, bulls are currently in a separate enclosure from cows and calves. As we enter the bulls' enclosure, we note several dark shapes against the white meadow and one closer animal who prances and pirouettes as we watch in amazement. The cows and calves graze peacefully as we slowly approach, using their large heads as shovels to access grass buried under the snow.

Soon we pull out our snowshoes for a hike to Hyde Lake where we negotiate hawthorn and hazel bushes, once again reading the stories of the Park. Under Celes' guidance, we feel we have become more observant to what is around us. We note where

hazel has been freshly browsed by moose for nutrients provided by the new branches. We see indentations in the snow where elk bedded down for the night, and learn to differentiate between coyote and wolf tracks. The energy in the Park is palpable. There are tracks everywhere, and wildlife sightings are frequent. A herd of elk crosses the road in front of us as we leave Hyde Lake, and we continually see and hear jays, chickadees and snow buntings.

Later in the day we have the pleasure of spending time with Angela Spooner, a Parks Canada Resource Management and Public Safety Specialist. Angela masterfully



unravels the Park's stories and carefully analyzes the needs of the landscape's flora and fauna that are under her charge. We walk with Angela to the site of a recent elk kill and listen as she describes the events that likely occurred. She talks about the wolves who

took the animal down, the smaller animals who subsequently fed on the carcass and her discovery of the site when she noticed a large flock of ravens in the vicinity.

Further excursions enrich our understanding of what Riding Mountain National Park has to offer. We enjoy that we can stop the car, strap on our snowshoes and venture into the wilderness anywhere. Or, for a more structured snowshoe hike, there are several groomed trails for exploration. The Brulé Trail is an easy four kilometre (2.5 mile) loop



highlighted by the scenic Kinosao Lake. For a longer excursion and to explore a bit of history, snowshoers can hike to Grey Owl's cabin dating from 1931 where he made early conservation efforts to

re-establish the Park's beaver population.

At the end of each day, there are numerous opportunities to kick off our snowshoes and relax, or simply switch to another mode of adventure. If we still have the energy, we can lace up a pair of skates and take to the ice on Parks Canada's skating rink in the village of Wasagaming. There's a large smooth surface for skating or playing hockey, as well as an ice trail that meanders through the trees. Although this looks appealing, we opt instead for less active pursuits in Elkhorn Resort's Solstice Spa. Jack and I agree that it's hard to imagine a nicer way to end a day of snowshoeing than by soaking in the warm mineral-rich waters of the Spa's Equinox Pool.

When we must finally depart Riding Mountain, we feel we have gained a fresh perspective on this peaceful and perhaps under-recognized region of Manitoba.

Snowshoeing provides a means of slowing down and taking the time to appreciate and understand the ecosystem of the Park. We have snowshoed some quiet corners of Riding Mountain National Park which have in turn provided us a rich offering of stories etched into the snowy landscape.

Practical Information:

Riding Mountain National Park (www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/mb/riding/index_E.asp) is located 265 kilometres (165 miles) from Winnipeg Manitoba, the location of the nearest international airport.

We stayed at the 4-star Elkhorn Resort (www.elkhornresort.mb.ca) at the south end of the Park in Wasagaming. Elkhorn Resort has everything you need to be comfortable and happy during your stay including on-site dining, snowshoe rentals and the luxurious Solstice Spa.

Earth Rhythms (www.earthrhythms.ca) provides customized travel experiences in Riding Mountain National Park and the surrounding area. Earth Rhythms will organize day and evening off-trail snowshoe adventures supplemented with story-telling, local cuisine and learning experiences of all kinds. If, after a day of snowshoeing you would like to



meet with a local artist, Earth Rhythms has it covered. A yoga class or a cooking lesson, no problem. Earth Rhythms owner Celes Davar organized learning excursions for us with two Parks Canada staff which were highlights of our trip. Talk with Celes about your interests and he will work with you to create a memorable experience.

We regularly frequented Prairie Seasons Bakery and Café in nearby Onanole. I strongly support their initiative to serve organic and whole grain food that is locally sourced, and that they do so by serving such delicious and imaginative fare is a real credit to this small family-operated restaurant. My flax seed pancakes were topped with local chokecherry syrup, and my salad was enlivened by saskatoon berry vinaigrette. Before visiting Prairie Seasons, I had no idea what I was missing.



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