



Snowshoeing in the Footsteps of Grey Owl

by Debbie McKeown

“Those who have not travelled in the vast, snowbound lake country of the North, or tramped on snowshoes in the Winter forest ... to them I will say that no matter what they have seen and done, life still holds something for them that they should not miss.”

Grey Owl

A sudden jolt of adrenaline kicks in as I look at the tangle of animal tracks. As the snow drifts gently down, all is silent and serene. Yet, there's a story in these tracks, a drama being played out in the dark frosty forest that surrounds us.

We are in Prince Albert National Park in Northern Saskatchewan and driving the quiet road back to our cabin after a day of snowshoeing. All day we have seen the tracks of animals large and small, from snowshoe hare to elk. So, what about these tracks has us shining our car headlights into the bush and trying to decipher what is taking place? We are watching the natural drama of a healthy forest take place ... we observe three sets of



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wolf tracks and one set of deer tracks. They have passed through very recently and are moving quickly. In other words, a hunt is in the works.

As we discover during our time here, Prince Albert National Park is indeed a special place that is alive not only with the spirits of the animals who call it home, but also with the



passion of many humans who care about the land and wildlife. My husband Jack and I feel privileged to spend a bit of time here exploring on our snowshoes.

As we drive north from Saskatoon towards the Park, we watch flat snow-covered farmland gradually give way to picturesque black-speckled stands of trembling aspens. Farther yet the terrain becomes rolling, and coniferous trees start to dominate the landscape. This was a perfect introduction to Prince Albert National Park, which protects a transition zone between the aspen-dominated parkland of the south and the northern boreal forest.

We are staying in the Park at Lost Creek Resort, a collection of cabins that sit in a clearing in the forest. Our cabin is warm and comfortable with a fireplace and shared outdoor hot tub. As we eat breakfast on our first morning, a pair of elk promenades through the falling snow in front of the cabin. Breakfast is quickly forgotten as Jack runs for his camera.



With elk photos and breakfast looked after, we can't wait to grab our snowshoes and head out. At Lost Creek Resort, you can step out your door and just start snowshoeing. It's as easy as that. We decide to point our snowshoes in the direction of the small town of Waskesiu,

which sits on the shore of Waskesiu Lake. We follow the lakeshore, enjoying the broad expanse of frozen lake and above that, the big prairie sky that has fascinated us since we landed in Saskatchewan. It is becoming clear to us why Saskatchewan is referred to as the Land of Living Skies, as the snow clouds shift back and forth to reveal patches of bright



blue sky. We snowshoe along one tunnel-like trail with overhanging snowy trees and bushes.

Suddenly a deer steps onto the path and we look briefly at one another before it bounds off, its white tail echoing the white of the fresh snow. Once again we are reminded that we are mere visitors and the land here truly belongs to the animal inhabitants.

Snowshoe destinations in the Park are essentially limitless. You can select from several suggested routes, or just head out almost anywhere you wish in Prince Albert National Park's 3,875 square kilometres. One cold morning we decide on the historic Freight Trail, formerly used by Canada's iconic Hudson's Bay Company to transport goods between area outposts. The wide trail is wonderful for

snowshoeing, frost glistens on branches and the trees snap and crackle in the frigid air. Under dazzling sunshine, it's hard to imagine a more perfect winter day.

The next afternoon we are joined by Marcia Klein, a Parks Canada interpretation coordinator who will help us learn more about the Park and the rapidly expanding snowshoe programs on offer here. We drive to the Narrows where Waskesiu Lake becomes just a slender strip of water. River otters love to hang out here and sure enough, we watch four otters tumbling playfully in and out of the frigid water. They roll, wrestle, run, and slide ... it's like they are possessed of total *joie de vivre*. We watch one pop out of the water and enjoy a freshly-caught fish.



Although we could spend hours watching the otters' antics, there are many more snowshoe opportunities. Marcia suggests we snowshoe the nearby Treebeard Trail, a great choice to see some of the oldest trees in the Park. Then on to the Kingsmere River Trail which links Waskesiu and Kingsmere Lakes.



As we strap on our snowshoes at the Kingsmere trailhead, Marcia reminds us that we are now in Grey Owl country. Our thoughts turn to this rather eccentric character as we set out on a route he would have snowshoed many times on his way to and from his small cabin on nearby

Ajawaan Lake. Although undoubtedly a master of deception, Grey Owl is also considered by many to be a father of Canada's conservation movement.

Born Archie Belaney in 1888 in England, he immigrated to Canada where he adopted the name Grey Owl and spent much of his adult life posed as a half-Native. Initially he



worked as a trapper and guide, but under the influence of a Mohawk woman named Anahareo, he changed direction and started to publish his passionate writings on conservation. The Parks Service became aware of his efforts and offered him employment and a cabin where he worked to help preserve Prince Albert National Park's beaver population. He eventually began a speaking tour to communicate his conservation message, but died of pneumonia in 1938 after the rigours of the lecture circuit left him tired and weak.

The Kingsmere River alternates between open water and thick ice. A recent thaw has ice slabs twisting and churning. In the deep of winter, Grey Owl likely would have snowshoed right down the frozen river with the forest rising on either side of him. We come to the fork leading to his cabin and notice snowshoe tracks heading in that direction. Indeed a few hardy souls snowshoe or cross-country ski the 20 kilometre trail to Ajawaan Lake, but most leave it to the summer months.

By the time we finish our hike and pack up our snowshoes, it is snowing harder and almost dark. It is during our drive back to Lost Creek Resort that we observe the fresh animal tracks on the road. We don't know if the wolves managed to bring down the deer, but suspect that with the advantage of greater numbers, they might have. As we stop the car and listen to the silence of the night, we feel a debt of gratitude for Grey Owl's vision as a conservationist. It is a wonderful legacy that his work is carried on by Parks Canada through their commitment to protecting wild areas like Prince Albert National Park.

Practical Information:

Prince Albert National Park (www.pc.gc.ca/princealbert) is a 2.5 hour drive north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in Canada. The Park Visitor Centre is located in the town of Waskesiu. Stop here to purchase a Park pass, pick up trail maps and talk with the friendly

staff about snowshoe destinations. When we were there, Grey Owl's snowshoes were on display.

This is a very snowshoe-friendly National Park. One major bonus for snowshoers ... recently the Park acquired a fleet of snowshoes that they will loan to snowshoers at no charge. Call in advance (306-663-4522) to ask about their free guided winter interpretive programs, fun opportunities to snowshoe with an interpreter to learn about wolves, otters and other Park highlights. Back and front country winter camping is also available in the Park. Ask at the Visitor Centre for details.

Temperatures can be very frigid. Bring clothing that is appropriate for cold winter conditions and consider including a balaclava or face mask.

We couldn't have been happier with our cabin at Lost Creek Resort (<http://www.lostcreekresort.com>). Everything you need for self-catering is provided, and groceries can be purchased in Prince Albert on your way to the Park.

Those who like their winter adventure to include a bit of luxury can opt for nearby Elk Ridge Resort (<http://www.elkridgeresort.com>) where they can enjoy the Salacia Spa and a variety of dining options. If you decide to eat in the upscale Copper Ridge Dining Room, try the artfully presented orange feta cranberry salad. Elk Ridge Resort also has a skating pond and toboggan hill for family fun.





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