

PRINCE ALBERT NATIONAL PARK INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM

by RON DUTCHER*

National Parks have always been the subject of controversy. This situation exists because of the various values placed on parks by different people or groups. Even the dedication clause of Canada's National Parks Act appears to reflect this variety of values — it states that the parks will be used by the people of Canada, but used in such a way as to leave them unimpaired for future generations. Debate over what constitutes appropriate use and unimpairment have added considerable warmth to both public and private discussions.

In the mid-1960's, Parks Canada began a major effort to help people understand and appreciate their parks. Park interpretive programs were not a new idea; they had been underway in some provinces and in the United States for quite some time. Indeed, some effort at interpretation had been made in several National Parks — Grey Owl's work, based in Prince Albert National Park in the 1930's, was essentially that of a park interpreter. But the effort of the 1960's was to establish active interpretive programs as an important activity in all Canada's National Parks.

This initiative was welcomed by natural history groups throughout the country. I suppose there were a variety

of reasons for this enthusiasm, and one of these was recognition of the opportunity to interest a large number of Canadians in the natural world. The interpretive program in the Prince Albert National Park, which developed from this initiative, began with the appointment of a permanent Chief Park Naturalist in 1967. Now that the program has been operational for 8 years, it seems likely that its supporters in the Saskatchewan Natural History Society would welcome a status report. As well, there are probably a number of members who are unaware of what is involved in an interpretive program, and what it can mean to them — this is a good opportunity to supply that information.

When the majority of park visitors come into a park they lack the information they require on how to make the best use of their time, how to more thoroughly enjoy the park. The basic purpose of an interpretive program is to remedy this problem: interpretation endeavours to bridge the gap between the resources which led to the creation of a park and the visitor.

How is this done? There are a number of traditional techniques, and a constantly evolving series of new ones. In Prince Albert National Park all the following activities are planned as part of the 1975 program:

1. Conducted Walks — these are one of the traditional interpretive activities which have been highly successful over the years. Visitors meet

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and travel to a nature trail where a naturalist explains the environment through which the trail passes.

2. Evening Programs started out as talks given around a campfire by a naturalist. Development of sophisticated and effective audio-visual techniques and equipment have considerably modified these activities; they now range from programmer-operated multi-image presentations to the more traditional naturalist and a slide projector. Evening programs also include films or demonstrations related to some element of the park story. Still effective, and still part of our 1975 interpretive program, are campfire specials complete with sunset (clear nights only!), tea prepared over the campfire, and stories and legends about the park.

3. Car Caravans are much like conducted walks except the use of vehicles permits dealing with a larger area. This ability to move over a larger park-scope is particularly useful when looking at geomorphology — one needs to travel over several miles to appreciate the landforms and their inter-relationships. One other element of the Prince Albert National Park story is the transition from grassland to forest, and north-south car caravans are used to explain this transition.

4. Children's Programs were added to the activity schedule in 1974 and proved to be a popular event. The events are quite flexible, but usually involve something like the preparation of spore prints or the identification of plants by drawing leaf outlines.

5. Special Events are an attempt to provide as varied a program as possible. While a special of some sort is guaranteed every day, the places and times are varied to allow us to take advantage of conditions ideal for the events. Specials that have occurred frequently include seine hikes to net fish, wolf howls, a buffalo caravan, and

a sunrise special. These events are listed in advance in our weekly newsletter.

6. Wolf Country. For the 1975 season, the specials program will also involve some entirely flexible events such as a trip to Grey Owl's cabin, a roving naturalist who will seek out groups and stop to talk with them, a look at what's underwater on a warm day at the beach, and an all-day hike. We are also asking the public to suggest additional activities which we will attempt to arrange.

In addition to these naturalist-conducted activities, a number of self-interpreting devices have been developed over the past 8 years:

1. Interpretive Centre — for the 1975 season the exhibits in the Centre have been completely re-done. The function of this building is to provide visitors with an understanding of the overall park story. It differs from a museum in that visitors are encouraged to go out and see the park. While much of the story is carried by the exhibits, there is also a new theatre which complements the exhibits with sound and slides, and a naturalist is on duty to answer questions.

2. On-Site Exhibits — Two major on-site exhibits have been constructed in the park, and additional ones are in various stages of planning. The Height-of-Land exhibit is located a few miles south of Waskesiu near Highway 263. The exhibit consists of a 40 foot tower atop one of the higher hills in the park. A new sign will be installed this summer to interpret the height-of-land between the Saskatchewan and Churchill Rivers, logging history in the park, and to provide general orientation to the superb view.

The second major exhibit explains the phenomena of ice-push, which produces characteristic ridges around most park lakes. The exhibit is located on the Narrows road on the south



The boardwalk to a beaver lodge at Tripps Beach.

shore of Waskesiu Lake and is constructed upon an ice-push ridge.

3. Two self-guiding trails have been developed. The older of these — Mud Creek Nature Trail — was prepared as a self-guiding trail in 1970. Last year, the new Boundary Bog Nature Trail was opened in August. Pamphlets have been prepared for both these trails.

4. Interpretive Signs are located at a number sites throughout the park. They provide a two-or three-sentence capsule of the site story.

Now that some of the basic elements of the public part of the Prince Albert National Park Interpretive Program have been outlined, let's take a look at some of the faces that conduct the activities. Two naturalists, myself and Mr. L. Bilodeau work in the park year round. The main portion of the public program is conducted by Seasonal Naturalists who work for 4 months, May to September. These people are

usually university students majoring in some area of natural or human history. When considering applications for Seasonal Naturalist positions, we look for people with either a good general background, or some specific knowledge of one area of natural history; and the ability to communicate this knowledge in an imaginative way. *Both* elements are necessary.

One of the things that park interpretive programs can mean to members of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society is the opportunity to share their knowledge and interests with others. Some members may be interested in doing so directly by applying for naturalist positions. Another way that developed a few years ago may interest others: the annual meeting of the society was held in the park in the spring of 1970 — following the meeting, a number of contacts were maintained. One of these



Buffalo caravan at Elk Meadows' stop.

resulted in a weekly presentation of a slide/poetry program prepared by two society members.

A third way to share is simply to introduce yourself to a Naturalist. The field of natural and human history is much too broad for an individual to have exhaustive knowledge of all areas. When a person stops by with a detailed knowledge of some subject, he can often provide great assistance to the Naturalist trying to interpret that subject. Moreover, the very occurrence of discussion is stimulating to the Naturalist, and he and the public will benefit from his increased enthusiasm.

Interpretation involves more than the simple communication of information — it attempts to convey a

feeling for concepts like wilderness, parks, and the things that one finds in such places; it attempts to create and nurture attitudes to support this feeling; it attempts to attain these objectives initially for the park visitor but also to extend them beyond the park to the surrounding area, to the nation, and to other nations. This article outlines what we have done in interpretation in Prince Albert National Park, and by implication, what has been done in other National Parks across the country. It is also an invitation to the Saskatchewan Natural History Society — an invitation to participate in the various activities offered and an invitation to share your knowledge and interests.



Hikers on Mud Creek Trail.



Conducted hike.