

IS THERE FAIR ACCESS TO PUBLIC LAND IN SASKATCHEWAN?

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My travels in Saskatchewan have convinced me that the province is a friendly place, until you want to access public land for nature appreciation. Recent encounters with several militant ranchers in the Great Sand Hills, a massive block of public land including a huge Ecological Reserve, indicates that public land seems to be treated by them as private and the public are decidedly unwelcome, viewed as trespassers.

I understand the Great Sand Hills is a fragile place and unrestricted vehicle access could unleash a litany of concerns. I note that all the rural municipalities have prohibitions on off-highway vehicle use — a very positive move. But, to close the door on access even on well-established, gravelled trails and to deny foot access seems an overreach, if protection of the environment is the reason for access restrictions.

Cattle grazing might be a benign and legitimate land use in the Great Sand Hills, but a grazing lease on public land shouldn't foreclose on a reasonable amount of use for recreational purposes, notably hiking, wildlife observation, botanical investigations, and simply to revel in big, wild space. That's not how the lease holders I dealt with felt, however, and they seem to have the support of the Saskatchewan government.

The ranching community should recognize that not only do they have an obligation to manage their public land leases well, they also do not own the land, legally, or morally with all the rights that would normally accrue to private land. The interactions I had followed a similar vein — "You wouldn't like it if I [the rancher] wanted to picnic on your front lawn." No, I probably wouldn't, but my lawn is not public land and it is patently absurd to use that excuse when the "front lawn" is public land and several thousands of acres in size.

The tenure for public grazing leases is at the pleasure of the public; the public that also eat beef produced on public land with generous grazing rates. It would seem that ranchers might consider this reciprocal arrangement — reasonable public access in return for access to grazing opportunity.

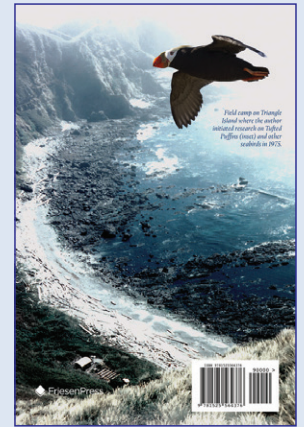
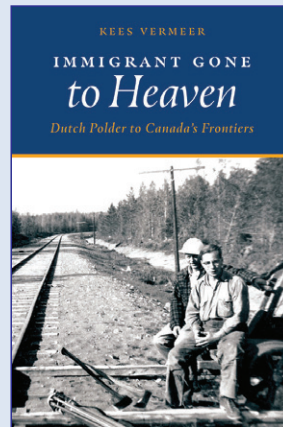
My observations of the situation in Saskatchewan are from a person who lives in a neighbouring province where we have had these debates over public access to public land. Most have been resolved with better policies, better and more accessible information over access provisions (unavailable in your province), and a maturity on the part of public lease holders over the rights for the public.

I would like to think of Saskatchewan as a welcoming place. Perhaps your government, lease holders, and the public might work out a better arrangement for accessing public land, so I do not feel unwelcome in your province.

Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Alberta Fish and Wildlife Biologist and a former Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary. 🐦

IMMIGRANT GONE TO HEAVEN

by KEES VERMEER



Immigrant Gone to Heaven is a remarkable book. It grips the reader from the moment the author joins an Emigration Training Centre in the *Biesbosch* region of the Netherlands with the goal of moving to Canada. We follow his experiences as he lands in Canada and works his way up from farm-hand to obtaining a doctorate in Zoology. The section of the book detailing his explorations in ornithology are as fascinating as the stories of immigration and the memories of World War II. The book takes the reader on a riveting journey of exploration in many facets of social history and science as viewed through the lens of an inquisitive and always optimistic upbeat man. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about World War II, immigration, bird behavior or even just in how a life's journey can unfold with all its unexpected twists and turns.

Tom Bijvoet

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