Information Bulletin

RMNP WORKS TO MAKE TRAIL SYSTEM EVEN BETTER

WASAGAMING, MANITOBA, March 18, 2009

Photo Cutline: Hiking season is just around the corner! Sharla Boychuk of Swan River, MB enjoyed a warm afternoon on the Gorge Creek trail last fall. Like many of the trails in RMNP, this one changes dramatically from season to season and is worth revisiting several times to gain a greater understanding of this dynamic ecosystem [Photo courtesy of RMNP]

Alternate title suggestions:
Plan now, experience more
Trails for every interest and ability in RMNP

Does it seem a little early in the year to be thinking about next summer's hiking and biking adventures? Well, just like the avid gardeners who start poring over seed catalogues in January, those who enjoy exploring the great outdoors along our country's well-developed trail system are being prompted by the first hint of spring to pull out their dog-eared trail guides and tattered maps to start planning for the upcoming season.

With nearly 400 km of trails, Riding Mountain National Park (RMNP) strives to be the premier destination of trail users of all persuasions, whether they prefer travel by foot, bike or horse. There is something for every interest and ability from the handicapped accessible boardwalk trail of Ominnik Marsh, to the spectacular experience of a mountain bike descent on the J.E.T. trail along the North Escarpment.

Park interpretive staff offer a wealth of information

Patrick McDermott is an Interpreter with RMNP. He and his fellow staff members are more than just tour guides. They help people access experiences that will open their eyes to the treasures awaiting them in all corners of RMNP.

"If you want to take in a trail or two on your visit, we'll help you pick a hike that suits your needs," explains McDermott. "Come to the Visitor Centre. We have very capable staff who will offer several options for you to choose from because they want to make it a memorable experience for you."

McDermott suggests that timing can play a role in where you choose to go. Once the trails clear of snow, trekking along the escarpment is spectacular. The east side of the park offers breathtaking views of streams in full spring runoff. And if your timing is right, you will find many crocuses especially along the Gorge Creek trail.

"When you go down to the Gorge Creek trail be sure to look out for the 'snout' about midway down the trail," says McDermott. "It's a spit of land that juts out between two gorges and you can see the Manitoba plains in the distance. It's a really good example of how two ecological zones come together: there is oak savannah on the left, then a mixed wood forest of spruce and aspen on the right. Gorge Creek is a fairly challenging hike but your average hiker can make it. It's 13 km there and back."

A shorter and gentler but no less rewarding trail is Burls and Bittersweet located on the far east end of Highway #19.

"It's not hard to do and takes you into an idyllic forest setting," says McDermott.

There the vegetation is surprisingly diverse due to the more temperate weather conditions on the lee side of the escarpment. There are huge cottonwoods, high bush cranberries, plums, and hawthorn trees to be found along the trail. The short loop is 1km long and the long loop is 2.2km long. The trail straddles Dead Ox Creek offering varied terrain, and several scenic pauses at the edge of the water. This is one of RMNP's self-guided interpretive experiences with information panels dotting the trail and providing many interesting facts about the flora and fauna of this ecosystem.

Trail Guide available

For those outdoor adventurers who need a of quick fix to tide them over until the trails dry up, there is a RMNP Trail Guide (published by Friends of RMNP, in 2005) available at the Friends office in the Administration Building in Wasagaming. Once the Townsite businesses open again in early May, the guide will also be available at the Nature Shop in the Visitor Centre in Wasagaming, as well as other locations in and around the park.

Community involvement in upcoming trail improvements

To understand the trail system in RMNP, it helps to understand the history of the park. In the early days, logging was permitted and even encouraged for relief workers during the Great Depression. This led to a series of roads being built to provide access to stands of timber. When logging was discontinued in the park, these wide level tracks were converted into what still makes up the backbone of the trail system today.

"All these trails were basically built for horse drawn wagons, trucks and equipment to move around efficiently. They were not designed with recreation in mind," explains Steve Cornelsen, Resource Management and Public Safety Specialist with RMNP. "There are some newer spur trails to the scenic vistas but no direct routes to such places as Bald Hill, arguably one of the most spectacular views in the park. An improvement there would include moving the J.E.T. over to the edge

of the escarpment so that it follows that ridge for about 2 km of very dramatic views. This kind of trail would be suitable for biking, hiking and horses."

Also high on the "good idea" list, according to Cornelsen, is connecting the J.E.T. to the Bald Hill trail and the Bald Hill trail to the East Gate National Historic Site.

"It would be a rugged 'goat' trail but it would be suitable for the kind of challenging hike many visitors are looking for these days."

Through a series of community meetings, ideas like this are being brought forward to help develop a draft trail and backcountry use plan that people can have a look at this summer.

Horse and wagon trails

Horse and wagon enthusiasts were very well represented at these meetings and made known their wish to see better watering facilities at the campsites along these trails.

"We will be putting in wells over the next few years in the popular campsites where the public has identified a need for them," confirmed Cornelsen, himself an avid horseman.

(A word of caution though: these wells in the backcountry are not tested and the water is not considered potable. Campers will have to bring their own drinking water or be prepared to purify the water to ensure it is safe for human consumption. Information about how to do this is available when you pick up your backcountry camping permit.)

Given that the "Riding" in "Riding Mountain National Park" comes from the fact that at one time horses were the most efficient way to travel across the rugged landscape of the park, horse use is an important tradition along these trails. This activity is alive and well within the park and visitors are sometimes treated to the sight of an old fashioned wagon train or a group of riders out on the trails that accommodate these activities.

Hiking and biking

At the other end of the wilderness experience spectrum are the single-track primitive trails that accommodate foot and pedal powered transportation. Properly designed, this type of trail requires little in the way of maintenance and can also form the basis of partnerships between the public and the park. Several of these types of proposals are being considered at this time, especially on the Escarpment.

"If we ever got into a partnership with a mountain biking group I could see them building a set of single-track trails. We have to consider the plans carefully, especially in ecologically sensitive areas, but these sorts of arrangements will allow the trail system to grow because it won't create a big drain on existing trail personnel and resources."

People who have notable and rewarding experiences in the park soon become very connected to it. They frequently come forward and ask about volunteer opportunities. The management of RMNP is receptive to proposals from individuals and groups whose interest has gradually shifted from visitation to stewardship.

Steve's favorite trail

What about Steve Cornelsen's most treasured site in RMNP? Bear in mind that this is a man who has covered nearly every single inch of trail out there. After some humming and hawing, he finally 'fessed up that there is one spot that stands out from the rest for him.

"Seech Prairie south of Whitewater Lake and Whitewater Lake itself. I'd like to see a primitive campsite built there some day. There are presently no public trails in that area. Right now you have to follow an old warden patrol trail from Long Lake to Whitewater. If you camp there at certain times of the year, you are practically guaranteed to see wolves, elk, moose, and all kinds of waterfowl. There are beautiful spots on the shores of Whitewater Lake that would make ideal campsites. There really are lots of stunning places in this park where we don't have trails, and we think we should share them with everybody."

For more information about trails, camping and special events, please call 204-848-7275, or email rmnp.info@pc.gc.ca.

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