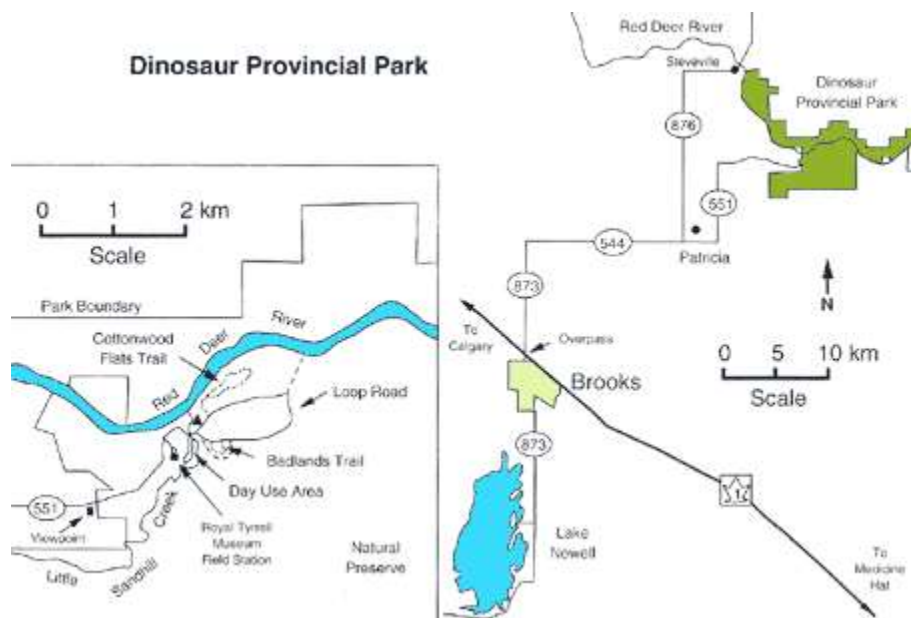


Dinosaur Provincial Park by Elizabeth Savoy (1993)

From Calgary, Dinosaur Provincial Park is approximately 3 hours or 230 km away by car. The park is reached by turning north off the Trans-Canada Highway at the Brooks overpass onto S.R. 873. This exit is clearly sign-posted as is the subsequent route, which follows S.R. 873, 544 and 551 north, east, then north again to the park entrance, past the hamlet of Patricia. The distance from the Trans-Canada Highway to the park entrance is 44 km. Dinosaur Provincial Park is suitable for a day of birding from Calgary, or could be combined with visits to nearby Lake Newell and other locations in the Brooks area on a two-day excursion.



Set in the Red Deer River badlands, Dinosaur Provincial Park encompasses a total area of 6,022 hectares. The park was designated a World Heritage Site in 1979 in recognition of both its rich palaeontological deposits and its scenic and wilderness resources. The

extensive badlands found in the park were formed during the final stages of glaciation. Differential erosion of sandstones and shales has resulted in dramatic badland features such as buttes, mesas, hoodoos and pipes, as well as the exposure of many Cretaceous fossils. Within the park, the Red Deer River is flanked by a 14 km stretch of relatively undisturbed riverine forest, containing dense stands of Plains Cottonwoods. Mixed grasslands are also found in the park, mostly on the prairie level around the perimeter. With such a diverse collection of landforms and habitats, Dinosaur Provincial Park is extremely rewarding for birders. It offers a great variety and abundance of birds in a relatively small and easily accessible area.

Badlands cover approximately 75 percent of the park and support a unique bird fauna. Common badlands species include Say's Phoebe, Rock Wren, Mountain Bluebird and Lark Sparrow. Large Cliff Swallow colonies are common, with some colonies containing more than 30 nests. Violet-green Swallows are often found nesting in association with the Cliff Swallows.

Several raptor species nest in the badlands. Prairie Falcons are quite common, nesting on cliffs and in piping channels. In 1988, four active Golden Eagle nests were found within the park; the eagles are frequently seen hunting over the prairie and badlands. Although there are more than 150 old Ferruginous Hawk nests in Dinosaur Provincial Park, only two active ones have been found recently. The Golden Eagles and Prairie Falcons generally over-winter in the park and are joined by one or two pairs of Bald Eagles.

The Red Deer River floodplain covers approximately 15 percent of the park and supports an extremely diverse and abundant bird fauna. Some of the highest breeding bird densities in Canada have been found in these cottonwood forests. The dawn chorus amongst the cottonwoods in the campground is definitely worth waking up for! American Kestrel, Common Nighthawk, Western Wood-Pewee, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Warbling Vireo, Rufous-sided Towhee and Northern Oriole are just a few of the species that a birder can be rewarded with after only a short time on the floodplain. Loggerhead Shrike and Yellow-breasted Chat occasionally nest where there is a dense tangle of Thorny Buffaloberry bushes. Northern Mockingbird has occasionally been sighted in the cottonwood forest, but no evidence of breeding has been found to date. In 1989 a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers nested in a cottonwood, close to the park campground. The floodplain is also an excellent area for migrants such as Orange-crowned, Blackpoll, and Black-and-white Warblers; American Redstart; Rose-breasted Grosbeak; and White-throated Sparrow. Further away from the river, extensive areas of tall sagebrush are inhabited by Clay-colored, Brewer's (occasionally), and Vesper Sparrows, and Western Meadowlark.

Mixed-grass prairie surrounds Dinosaur Provincial Park and covers approximately 10 percent of the park. Northern Harrier, Long-billed Curlew, Horned Lark, Vesper Sparrow and Western Meadowlark are some of the species that are frequently sighted on the prairie. Less commonly seen are Ferruginous Hawk, Marbled Godwit, Loggerhead Shrike, Brewer's Sparrow and Lark Bunting. In winter, large flocks of Snow Buntings are common and Snowy Owls have been seen around the boundaries of the park.

The park campground, day-use area and Royal Tyrrell Museum Field Station are located on the south side of the Red Deer River. Much of Dinosaur Provincial Park is designated a "natural preserve" and cannot be entered except on a guided tour. However, there are a number of areas that can be easily accessed. Several hiking trails exist, beginning from the day-use and campground areas. These trails allow visitors to explore all of the main habitat types found within the park. Also, a 3.2 km loop road with fossil displays, can be walked or driven through the badlands and along the edge

of the floodplain; two self guiding trails lead off this loop road. The Badlands Trail is 1.5 km long and winds through some spectacular scenery. The Cottonwood Flats Trail is 1.6 km long and cuts across to the Red Deer River through sagebrush flats and cottonwood forest. As this area of cottonwood forest is not part of the natural preserve, one is able to wander off the trail and deeper into the forest.

From the viewpoint at the park entrance, it is possible to hike along the prairie at the edge of the badlands, but the prairie habitat is perhaps best covered by car. Driving some of the numerous gravelled roads surrounding the park, such as S.R. 876 can yield many prairie species, including raptors such as Ferruginous and Swainson's Hawks. Isolated Thorny Buffaloberry bushes along the roadsides are good places to look for breeding Loggerhead Shrikes.

One of the most interesting walks to take is to follow Little Sandhill Creek south from the day-use area. Although the eastern side of the creek is in the natural preserve, the western side is accessible to the public and supports a large variety of birds, ranging from badlands species such as Prairie Falcon, Rock Wren and Lark Sparrow to birds which favour the dense Thorny Buffaloberry thickets found along the creek, such as Yellow-breasted Chat, Gray Catbird and Brown Thrasher. If you have only a short amount of time to spend in the park, this route is one of the most rewarding.

The north side of the Red Deer River is accessible by following gravelled roads and crossing the Steveville bridge (see map). However, the park on the north side of the river can only be accessed by traversing private or leased land. Permission to enter the park by this route must be obtained from the landowners.

Sturdy footwear is recommended when hiking in the badlands because of the rugged terrain and, more importantly, the abundant prickly pear and pincushion cacti! Rattlesnakes are occasionally encountered; they are quite common in the Steveville area. If a rattlesnake is encountered, the best defence is to remain still until the snake moves away. During July and August the mosquito population is considerable, especially on the floodplain - insect repellent is highly recommended!

When visiting the park in summer, perhaps the most hazardous feature is the temperature. Temperatures in the river valley are generally higher than on the surrounding prairie due to the reflection of sunlight from the white badland surfaces. It is not uncommon to experience temperatures of 40°C (104°F) or higher. A hat and a good supply of drinking water are essential, even on very short walks.

Birders should use caution when birding in Dinosaur Provincial Park because of the susceptibility of breeding raptors to human disturbance. Ferruginous Hawks are listed as a threatened species in Canada and are particularly susceptible; they will readily abandon their nests if disturbed whilst incubating. In general, raptors should be watched from a distance, using a telescope.

The Dinosaur Provincial Park campground has both powered and unserviced sites; there are pit toilets in the campground. Flush toilets and showers are available in the campground service centre, as well as a small selection of groceries and a sandwich counter. A day-use picnic area is located next to Little Sandhill Creek. Interpretive programs and tours are offered from May to October. On the north side of the Steeveville Bridge is a small, unserviced campground. No registration or fee is required for this campsite; it has pit toilets, but no running water.

Gas, food and lodgings can be obtained in Patricia, 16 km southwest of the park. The Patricia Hotel serves great bar food! Full tourist facilities are available in Brooks.