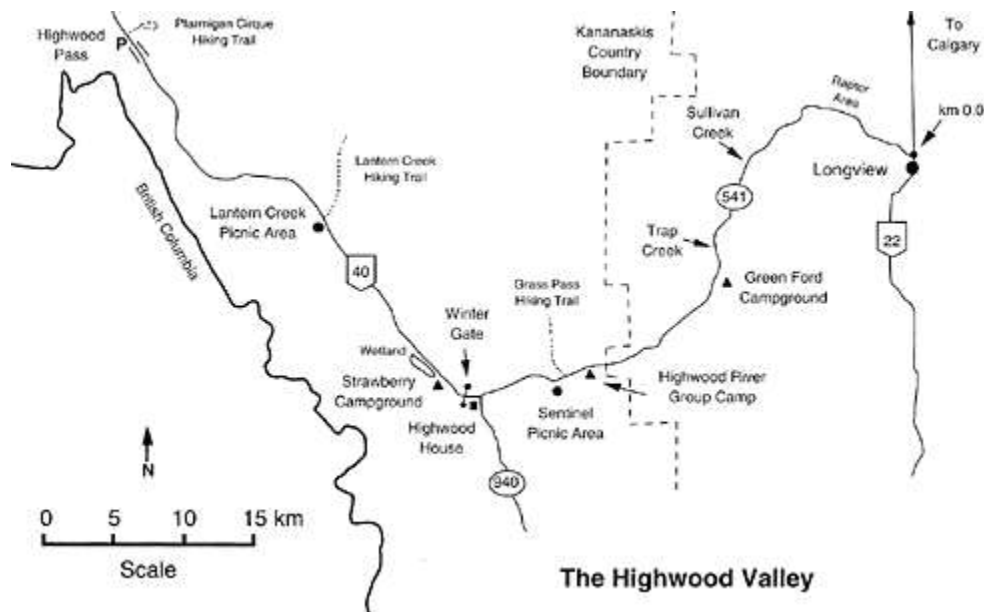


The Highwood Valley by Richard Clarke (1993); revised 2012

The drive from Longview to the Highwood Pass is one of the most beautiful in southern Alberta, starting on the prairies and ending at the highest pass in Canada that can be driven. The road is an excellent paved highway with picnic areas, campgrounds and hiking trails giving the birder access to a wide variety of foothill, subalpine and alpine habitats. White-tailed Ptarmigan, Calliope Hummingbird and Lazuli Bunting are some of the sought-after species to be looked for here. It should be noted that Hwy 40 (Kananaskis Trail) is closed between Highwood Junction and Peter Lougheed Provincial Park (north of the Highwood Pass) from December 1 to June 15 each year.



To reach the start of this route, head south from Calgary on Hwy 2 and take the Hwy 2A exit for Okotoks. Continue on Hwy 2A for 11.5 km to the junction with Hwy 7. Turn right (west) on Hwy

7 and drive for 19.3 km to Black Diamond, then turn left (south) on Hwy 22 for 17.2 km to the junction with S.R. 541 (Highwood Trail) in Longview.

Turn right (west) on S.R. 541 (km 0.0). All distances are given from here to the access points and do not include side trips. Between 6.5 and 9 km a low ridge parallels the highway to the north. This is an excellent location for migrant raptors, particularly from late March to early May. Swainson's, Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks, Prairie Falcon, and both Bald and Golden Eagles can all be expected. In some years Golden Eagles summer in the area and it is worthwhile stopping to check the ridge as they may often be seen resting on the ground.

In this section the valley and rolling hills are a mosaic of open pastures and aspen woodland. Mountain Bluebird is an early migrant and may be seen along the highway by the end of March. Lewis' Woodpecker has been

observed in this part of the valley. Good stopping points along the highway are at Sullivan Creek (14.8 km), Trap Creek (21.4 km), and at Green Ford Campground (24 km). Species to watch for at these locations include: Western Wood-Pewee; Alder, Least and Western Flycatchers; Eastern Phoebe; Eastern Kingbird; American Dipper; Warbling Vireo; Tennessee and Yellow Warblers; Chipping, Clay-colored, Vesper, Savannah, Song, Lincoln's and White-crowned Sparrows; Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds; Northern Oriole; Pine Siskin; and American Goldfinch. Check all sapsuckers carefully; they may be either Yellow-bellied or Red-naped.

At 34 km the "Kananaskis Country" sign marks the boundary of the Forest Reserve; this is public land with free access. The area is home to Mule Deer, Elk, Bighorn Sheep, Cougar, Coyote and both Black and Grizzly Bears. Birders hiking in this area should be aware that the hunting season for large game extends from the beginning of April to mid-May and from the last week of August to the end of November; shooting is not permitted within 365 metres of the highway.

The stretch between the Kananaskis Country boundary and Highwood Junction runs between grassy hillsides dotted with clumps of aspen on the north side of the road and scrubland with Balsam Poplars and some spruce stands along the valley floor to the south. MacGillivray's Warbler and Lazuli Bunting frequent the aspen clumps, while Rufous Hummingbird, Dusky Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo and White-crowned Sparrow can be found in the poplars and scrub. The spruce stands may contain Sharp-shinned Hawk, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Northern Waterthrush and Wilson's Warbler. Harlequin Duck, Common Merganser, Spotted Sandpiper and American Dipper may be seen along the river. Several picnic areas with parking places and toilets are located along this stretch, providing convenient access points. The Highwood River Group Camp and Picnic Area immediately after the Kananaskis Country sign is a good location for Lazuli Bunting, the best time for finding this species being late June.

At 37.8 km, on the north side of the road 200 m before the Sentinel Picnic Area, is the hiking trail to Grass Pass and the Bull Creek Hills. There is no trail marker, so watch for a rocky track heading upslope. This is easy year-round hiking in open country that is home to Northern Goshawk, Clark's Nutcracker, Common Raven, Mountain Chickadee, Townsend's Solitaire and American Pipit. In winter, White-tailed Ptarmigan and Snow Bunting have been found along the ridge tops at Grass Pass.

At Highwood Junction (43.5 km) the road becomes the Kananaskis Trail (Hwy 40). The convenience store at Highwood House usually has an active hummingbird feeder which may be visited by both Calliope and Rufous

Hummingbirds. A large colony of Cliff Swallows nests beneath the road bridge just south of the junction and Willow Flycatcher can occur along the riverbank. Listen too for Pileated Woodpecker.

There is an extensive wetland complex, formed by the action of beavers, on the left as the road climbs the hill (48 km) just after Strawberry Campground. This is good for Common Snipe; Calliope Hummingbird; Willow Flycatcher; Yellow Warbler; Northern Waterthrush; MacGillivray's Warbler; Common Yellowthroat; Wilson's Warbler; and Song, Lincoln's and White-crowned Sparrows.

The highway continues north, still in the Highwood valley, with the magnificent peaks of the Continental Divide to the west and the Highwood Range to the east. There are several day-use areas and campgrounds and from these are trails to the river and longer ones into the mountains for the more energetic. The Lantern Creek Trail (60.8 km), a strenuous 5 km hike to the tree line at Picklejar Lakes, can be rewarding in late June. In addition to the common mountain warblers and sparrows, watch for Northern Goshawk, Golden Eagle, Spruce Grouse, Ruffed Grouse, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Western Flycatcher, Steller's Jay, Clark's Nutcracker, Hermit Thrush, and both crossbills.

After about 70 km the road starts to climb to the Highwood Pass, which is reached at 81.5 km. Varied Thrush and Chipping, Fox and White-crowned Sparrows can sometimes be seen along the interpretive trail at the parking area. Follow this trail across the road to Ptarmigan Cirque, a 2.5 km hike climbing 230 metres into the alpine zone. The height is gained in the first kilometre, the trail then emerging from the trees into an alpine valley with superb views and which in July and August is filled with flowers. Species to watch for on this hike include White-tailed Ptarmigan (elusive; most easily located in fall after the first snows when their tracks may be followed), Clark's Nutcracker, Mountain Chickadee, American Pipit and Rosy Finch.

From Highwood Pass you can either retrace the route or continue on Hwy 40 for some 65 km to the Trans-Canada Highway for the return to Calgary.

Gas and meals can be obtained in Longview. Highwood House has a Park Ranger Office and Information Centre (seldom open), a seasonal gas station and a convenience store; these are closed in winter.