

ICEFIELDS PARKWAY

driving guide



an eBook from *Parkways of the Canadian Rockies*,
the region's original and most comprehensive driving guide | by Brian Patton

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ICEFIELDS PARKWAY

Of the many exceptional roads in the mountain parks, the Icefields Parkway is preeminent for scenic grandeur and a variety of interesting features.

The Icefields Parkway is by far the longest tour in the four mountain parks, stretching 230 km (143 miles) from the Trans-Canada Highway in the south to the town of Jasper on the north. The route followed is unusual as well, tracking along in the shadow of the Continental Divide in a general north-south direction rather than just cutting across the range east to west in the manner of other main park highways. With an average elevation of 1,550 metres (5,100 ft), it is the highest road in Canada, and Bow Summit (2,069 m/6,790 ft)—the highest point on the Parkway—is the second highest point reached by a public highway in the country.

All the terrain traversed by the Parkway has been heavily glaciated, and the features left in the wake of these many ice ages are a highlight of the tour. Not all the glaciers have disappeared either, and well over 100 are within sight of the highway between Jasper and Lake Louise.

The Icefields Parkway is also one of the best roads in the Canadian Rockies for viewing wildlife. Travellers should be on the lookout for elk, moose, mule deer, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, black bear, and coyote—all animals which are frequently seen along the route throughout the summer. Other animals observed from the road—though less frequently—include grizzly bear, wolf, caribou, and lynx.

Of course, the focal point of the Icefields Parkway for most travellers is the Athabasca Glacier—a six-km (3.7-mile) long tongue of ice extending from the Columbia Icefield. Not only is this the only glacier in the parks accessible by road, it is part of the largest body of ice in the Rocky Mountains. The features surrounding the Icefield are of grander proportion than anywhere else, with huge rock and gravel moraines rimming the valleys, glacially-carved amphitheatres gouged into the sides of mountain peaks, swollen silt-laden rivers, and mountains that rise to over 3,600 metres (11,810 feet) above sea level.

Some people make only half the trip along the Icefields Parkway, venturing south to the Athabasca Glacier from Jasper or north from Lake Louise, then returning the way they came. Yet, the fullest and most rewarding trip is to travel the route in its entirety, moving at a leisurely pace and taking time to explore some of the scenic hiking trails wandering through subalpine forest and flowered alpine meadows. Or better yet, spending a week travelling the Parkway by bicycle, staying at the conveniently spaced hostels along the way.

Note: many of the features and pull-offs are not signed on Banff National Park's section of the Parkway, so you may want to pay closer attention to your odometer to locate these points-of-interest.



Lower Waterfowl Lake lies beside the Icefields Parkway



Winter drivers enjoy the spectacle of a frozen Tangle Falls.

ICEFIELDS PARKWAY

TRANS CANADA HIGHWAY
TO HECTOR LAKE VIEWPOINT

0.0 Junction with the Trans-Canada Highway, 2.7 km (1.7 miles) west of the Lake Louise interchange and seven km (4.4 miles) east of the Continental Divide.

Slabs of orange-red slate are tilted steeply toward the sky in this roadside outcrop at the junction. Part of the Miette Group, the 600-million-year-old formation is one of the oldest in the four mountain parks.

0.8 Niblock Gate. Northbound travellers are required to show their park pass—or purchase one—at this booth. add: Passes can also be purchased online at www.parkpass.banfflakelouise.com.

3.3 Herbert Lake. A beautiful roadside lake with a picnic area set within a forest of lodgepole pine. Beyond the lake, to the south, the peaks of the Bow Range form a dramatic backdrop. These are the high mountains surrounding Lake Louise, and the highest is ice-capped Mount Temple (3,544 m/11,626 ft), visible furthest to the south. The closest mountains in the range, rising directly across the lake to the southwest, are Mount St. Piran (2,649 m/8,691 ft), Mount Niblock (2,676 m/8,786 ft) and, standing behind those two summits, Mount Whyte (2,983 m/9,786 ft).

Like many small valley-bottom lakes in the Rockies, Herbert has no visible outlet stream. It is a “kettle” or “sink” lake, and its basin was formed by the slow melting of a detached block of ice buried in glacial gravel deposits near the end of the Wisconsin glaciation.

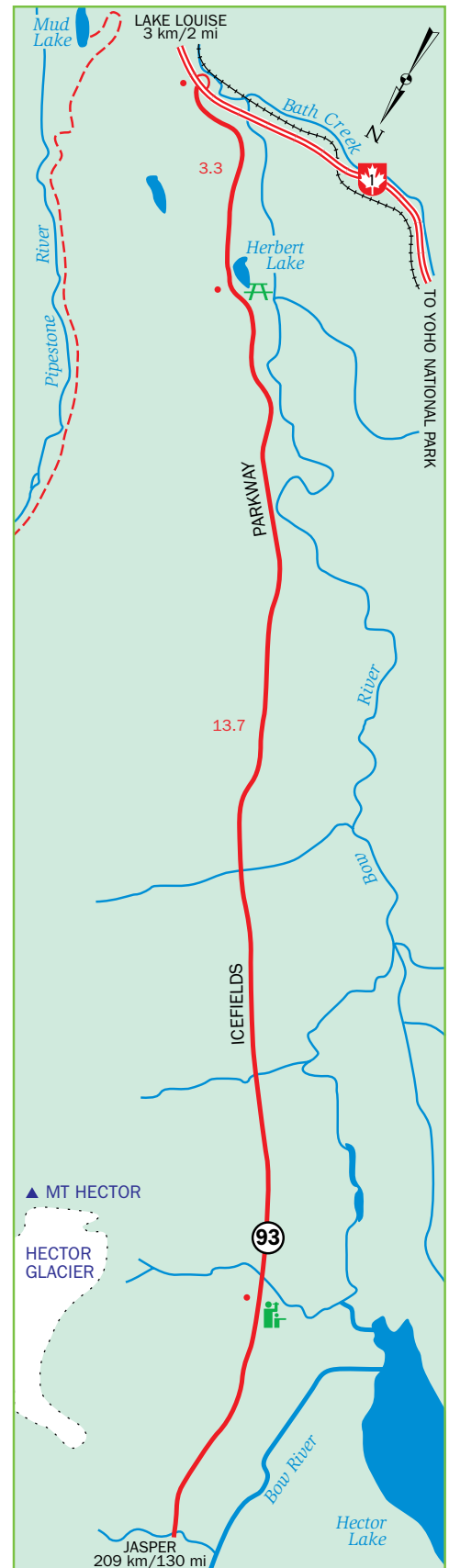
Herbert is not a particularly deep lake, only 13.3 metres (44 ft) at its deepest point, so it often gets warm enough in mid-summer for residents of nearby Lake Louise to use as a swimming hole. (But then, Lake Louise folks are a hardy lot!)

Between Herbert Lake and Hector Lake Viewpoint, northbound travellers have good views of Mount Hector, while those heading south look upon the massive north wall of Mount Temple and the peaks of the Bow Range surrounding Lake Louise. The Waputik Range follows along on the western horizon between the two viewpoints, exhibiting numerous cirques (bowl-shaped depressions carved by glaciers) and avalanche paths descending into the forest from the ridge-tops.

17.0 Hector Lake Viewpoint. Hector Lake is in the valley below this viewpoint, and two km (1.2 miles) distant as the raven flies. With a surface area of nearly six square km (2.3 square miles) and a maximum depth of 87 metres (285 feet), it is the largest and deepest totally natural lake in Banff National Park.

Hector Lake is named for Dr. James Hector, the geologist with the 1858 Palliser Expedition, who was the first white man to travel up this valley. The range of mountains surrounding the lake and trailing away to the south is the Waputik Range (Waputik is the Stoney name for “white goat”).

The mountain rising above the near end of the lake is Pulpit Peak (2,725 m/8,940 ft). On its slopes grow some of the most northerly stands of alpine larch in North America. Larch are the only deciduous conifers in Canada. In autumn, their needles turn from pale green to gold, giving a splash of colour to the slopes of Pulpit Peak before they





Herbert Lake

fall from their branches. As with all the slopes of the Waputik Range, distinct avalanche paths finger down from the upper slopes of Pulpit Peak into the forest below.

Many bowl-shaped depressions are visible along the slopes of the mountains above Hector Lake and the Waputik Range to the south. These cirques were carved by the eroding and plucking action of alpine glaciers that once occupied the slopes (some still do). Probably the most perfect example of these glacially-carved bowls is located on the northwest slope of Pulpit Peak, directly above Hector Lake. This cirque contains a small tarn called Turquoise Lake. The lake's outlet stream tumbles over the cliff at the mouth of the cirque and runs down into Hector Lake. Cirques like this are also known as "hanging valleys". While the Turquoise Lake cirque was being carved into the slopes of the mountain, a larger glacier was flowing down the valley that contains Hector Lake. When the ice retreated, the cirque was left "hanging" on the side of the valley.

Mount Hector looms above this viewpoint to the east. Looking up-valley, Bow Peak is the first mountain north of Hector Lake, while the castellated towers of Dolomite Peak rise near the head of the valley.

23.0 **Noseeum Creek.** No sign at Noseeum Creek, which is a shame for
14.3 such a colourfully named stream. No-see-ums are small blackflies noted for their vicious bite, and the creek may have been named by harried road workers during the construction of the Banff-Jasper Highway.



Tiger Lily

24.1 Mosquito Creek Campground and Hostel. In recent years, the campground has been the only one on Banff National Park's section of the Icefield Parkway to remain open year-round. 32 unserviced sites.

Established in 1952, HI-Mosquito Creek Wilderness Hostel is across the creek from the campground. Like other hostels along the Icefields Parkway, it is a simple facility with no electricity, showers, or phone. Amenities include a communal kitchen, sauna, fire pit, outhouses, and dorm beds for 32 guests. It's open May to mid-October and late December to March. For information and reservations, call (403) 670-7580 or visit www.hihostels.ca.

By wandering around open areas of the campground, or down to the flats by the Bow River, you will find good views of the complete circle of peaks in this section of the valley. Across the Bow River to the west rise the reddish-orange quartzite cliffs of Bow Peak (2,868 m/9,409 ft), its bedding dipping away to the west. The jagged cliffs of Mount Hector (3,394 m/11,135 ft) dominate the southeast skyline.

Further north, beyond Bow Peak, is Dolomite Peak. Dolomite's strata are nearly horizontal, creating a castellate, or layer-cake, shaped mountain. The many towers along the mountain's ridgeline are a typical erosion feature of mountains with horizontally oriented strata.

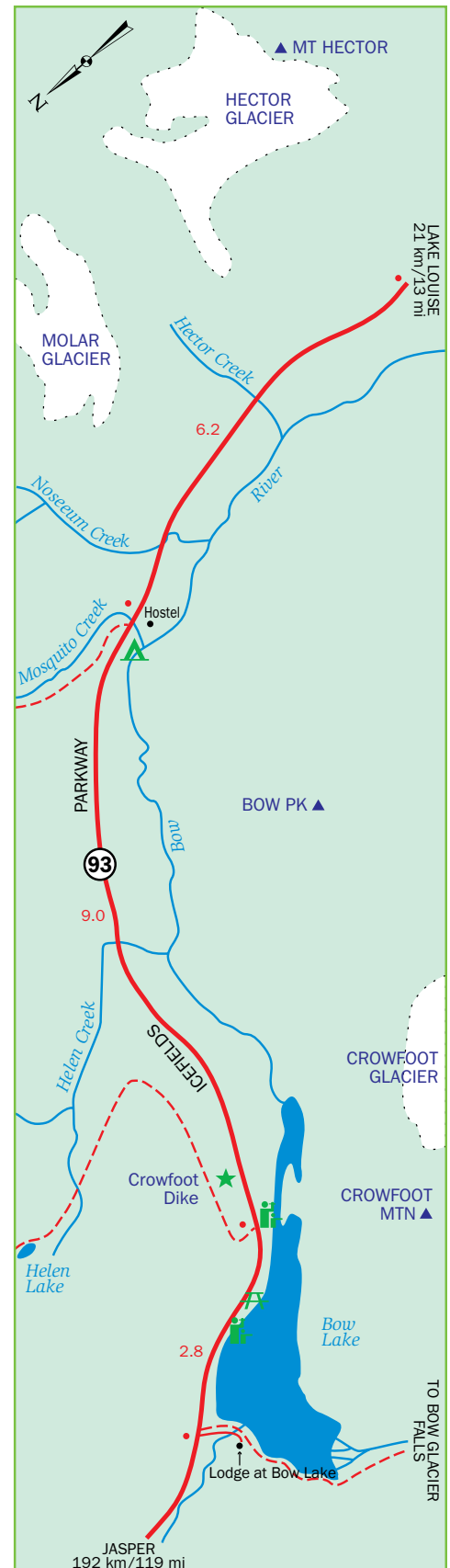
Mosquito Creek Trail. Across the highway from the campground, the Mosquito Creek trail strikes off to the northeast, climbing through subalpine forest and meadows of the narrow valley to the alpine expanses of Molar Pass, 10 km (6.2 miles) distant.

28.6 Helen Creek. South of the creek approximately 150 metres (0.1 miles), a major avalanche has swept a narrow path down through the forest to the very edge of the pavement. This slide occurred during the heavy-snow winter of 1971-72.

32.2 Igneous Rock. (There is no sign or pull-off at this point-of-interest, so watch for an outcrop of dark massive rock on the east side of the road.) Igneous formations—rock that was once molten—are quite uncommon in the Canadian Rockies. In fact, the outcropping of dense greenish rock by the side of the road is the only roadside igneous rock in Banff National Park. Known as the Crowfoot Dike, it is a diabase intrusion that, when in a molten state, forced its way through and across the bedding of the surrounding layers of sedimentary rock. Following the intrusion, like basalt, it cooled slowly under the surface of the earth and was eventually exposed by erosion.

33.1 Crowfoot Glacier Viewpoint. Perched on the sheer face of Crowfoot Mountain is the Crowfoot Glacier. For the last century, glaciers in the Canadian Rockies have been in retreat; Crowfoot is no exception. In the early 1900s, when the first pack trains wound their way northward from Lake Louise, this glacier resembled the foot of a crow, with three large toes of ice hooked across the face of the mountain. However, by the middle of the century, the lowest toe had disappeared. Only a well-defined ridge of terminal moraine on the slope below the cliff bears witness to the extent of the glacier's last advance.

Below the viewpoint, the turquoise waters at the southern end of Bow Lake narrow to form the Bow River. Beyond Crowfoot Glacier





Looking across Bow Lake to Crowfoot Mountain

to the southeast, separated from Crowfoot Mountain by a low col, is Bow Peak (2,668 m/9,410 ft).

You are in the heart of the subalpine life zone at this elevation, surrounded by a forest of Engelmann spruce and alpine fir, with a few stands of lodgepole pine where forest fires have burned in the past century. The open meadows, which finger through these stands, are filled with wildflowers during July and August.



Helen Lake Trail. The parking area for the Helen Lake trail is immediately opposite the Crowfoot Glacier viewpoint. The trail climbs around the shoulder of Cirque Peak and into alpine meadows, reaching Helen Lake in six km (3.7 miles) and Dolomite Pass in 8.9 km (5.5 miles). A popular trail for day hikers and one of the great alpine experiences in the Canadian Rockies.

34.5 Bow Lake Picnic Area. The picnic area, and roadside viewpoint near 21.4 its entrance, provide outstanding views of Bow Lake—the headwaters of the Bow River. Bow is the largest roadside lake on the Icefields Parkway, measuring 2.4 km (1.5 miles) long and, at its widest point, just over one km (0.6 miles) across; its surface area covers 280 hectares (690 acres) and, at its deepest point, it is 51 metres (167 feet).



Num-Ti-Jah Lodge is a wonderfully historic lodging overlooking Bow Lake.

ICEFIELDS PARKWAY

BOW LAKE TO BOW SUMMIT

Crowfoot Mountain's shadowed northeast-facing cliffs rise above the lake's southern arm, and the red roof of the Lodge at Bow Lake can be seen across the main body of the lake beneath Mount Jimmy Simpson (named for the lodge's founder).

35.9 Lodge at Bow Lake. (May to Sept., 403/522-2167, lodgeatbowlake.com) A short access road leads across a meadow to the Lodge at Bow Lake and the trailhead for Bow Glacier Falls.



The first lodge was built here in the 1920s by pioneer outfitter and guide Jimmy Simpson. Before the construction of the Banff-Jasper Highway in the 1930s, the lodge was only accessible via a long and arduous horse trail leading north from Lake Louise. In those days it served as a base for sportsmen, primarily from the eastern U.S., who came to the Canadian Rockies to hunt for trophy bighorn sheep. A new enlarged lodge was opened in 1940, in time to serve motorists on the new Banff-Jasper Highway as one of only two lodges with dining facilities between Lake Louise and Jasper. The lodge in its present form was completed in 1950. Simpson died in 1972 and the mountain behind the lodge was named in his honour the following year. The lodge still provides accommodation, as well as a dining room, café, and gift shop.



Bow Glacier Falls Trail. From a public parking area 150 metres (0.1 miles) before the lodge, a 4.7-km (2.9-mile) trail leads along the north shore of Bow Lake and into the amphitheatre at the head of the valley to provide a close-up view of the waterfall beneath the Bow Glacier.



Between the Lodge at Bow Lake and Bow Summit, the Icefields Parkway passes through an area of willow-covered meadowland. A combination of factors may account for the lack of trees in this area: excessive ground moisture; the slope's exposure to winds funnelling down from the nearby Wapta Icefield; heavy accumulation of snow in winter; and temperature inversions that seal colder air in the valley bottom. Watch for these and other microclimatic variations as you travel along the Parkway, particularly as they affect the upper limit of tree growth from one mountain slope to another.

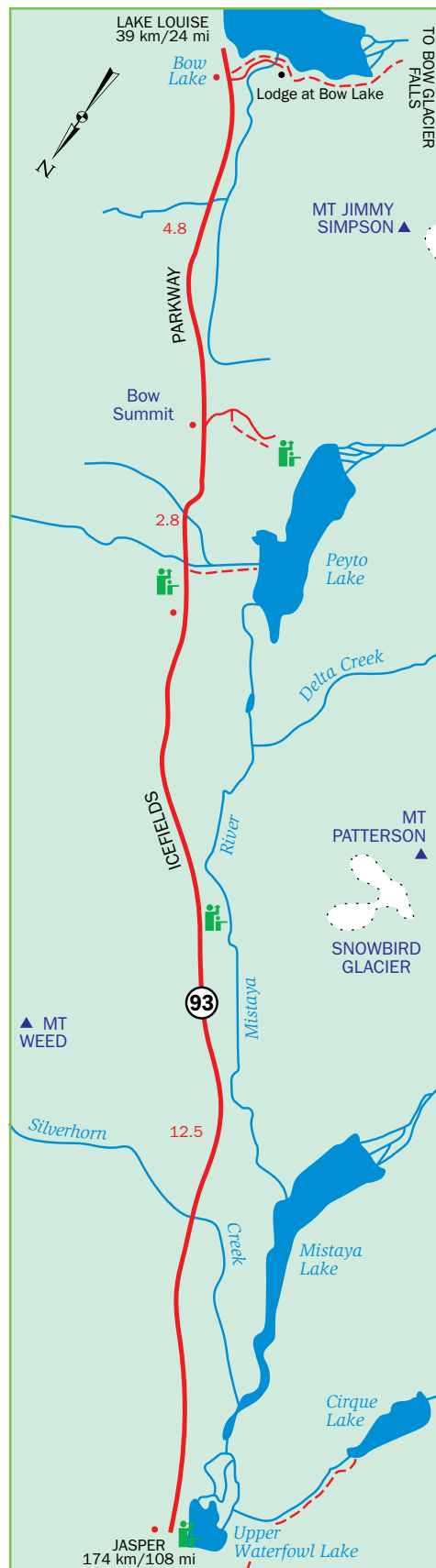
These meadows, with their brushy growth of willow and dwarf birch, are a good place to spot such birds as the solitary sandpiper, water pipit, savannah sparrow, and even the occasional mountain bluebird. Grizzly bears sometimes visit the meadows as well, much to the delight of park visitors.

Approximately halfway between Num-Ti-Jah and Bow Summit, the yellow and orange blooms of Iceland poppies carpet the roadsides throughout much of the summer. These flowers are not native to the Canadian Rockies, but escaped from the flower garden of the old Bow Summit Warden Station, which once stood just east of the highway.

40.7
25.3



Bow Summit (2,069 m/6,790 ft). This is the highest point on the Icefields Parkway and the second highest highway-accessible pass in Canada. The pass serves as the watershed divide for the North and South Saskatchewan River systems. Waters that split on this divide do not meet again until the confluence of these two great rivers on the prairies of central Saskatchewan. From there, the Saskatchewan River flows on toward Hudson Bay.





Peyto Lake

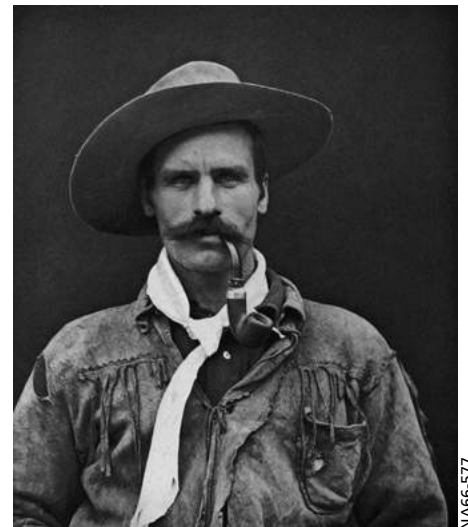
i- **Peyto Lake Viewpoint.** A spur road branches west from the Parkway on Bow Summit, climbing for 0.5 km (0.3 miles) to the parking area for the Peyto Lake Viewpoint. From this point, a 400-metre (0.2-mile) paved trail leads to one of the scenic highlights along the Icefields Parkway, a spectacular overlook for Peyto Lake—a turquoise body of water 240 vertical metres (790 feet) below. Beyond the lake, the Mistaya Valley stretches away toward a sea of peaks further north.

43.3 **Peyto Lake East Trail.** A 1.4-km (0.9-mile) trail descends to the shore of Peyto Lake from an unsigned parking area on the west side of the road. An enjoyable walk (though sometimes boggy and wet) through dense subalpine forest to a small gravel beach on the lakeshore.

26.9 **i-**

43.5 **Peyto Glacier Viewpoint.** From this parking area on the east side of the highway, Peyto Glacier can be seen to the southwest, descending from the expansive Wapta Icefield. The large mountain containing the glacier on the left is Mount Thompson (3,084 m/10,120 ft), while Peyto Peak (2,989 m/9,805 ft) rises on the right.

27.0 **i-**



Peyto Lake is named for Bill Peyto.
Credit: Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies

PEYTO LAKE

Peyto Lake is fed by the meltwaters of the Peyto Glacier, which can be seen to the southwest from the viewing platform. The glacier is a tongue of the vast Wapta Icefield, and like similar bodies of ice, it is continually grinding and pulverizing the bedrock over which it flows. The finely ground glacial flour, which is produced by this perpetual abrasion along the sole of the glacier, washes out in the meltwater and into Peyto Lake. A broad alluvial fan is slowly filling the lake at its inlet as this silt settles out, and one day the lake may disappear when it has completely filled with outwash silt and gravel.

The glacial rock flour is also responsible for the distinctive blue-green colour of the lake. At the inlet, the waters pouring into the lake are heavy with silt—an obvious murky grey. But much of the finer material disperses through the lake and is held in suspension in the water, and as a result, sunlight does not penetrate very deep into the lake. The glacial flour absorbs most of the colours of the spectrum, except for the blue-green sector, which is reflected back to the human eye.

Though the Peyto Glacier is retreating (it has receded nearly two km/1.2 miles since 1900), it once advanced well down the Mistaya Valley. A glacier carries a great deal of rock material on its surface and locked within its ice. This material is deposited along the edge of the tongue as lateral moraine and near the point of furthest advance as terminal moraine. The basin carved by the glacier and the terminal moraine deposited at its point of furthest advance created Peyto Lake, whose maximum depth has been measured at 49 metres (160 ft).

Glacial advances down the Mistaya Valley during the Pleistocene ice ages are also responsible for the distinctive U-shape of the valley. Valleys carved by stream erosion have a sharper V-shape appearance.

Peyto Glacier and Lake are named for pioneer packer and guide Bill Peyto (pronounced “pee-toe”). Bill guided some of the early packtrains northward from Lake Louise at the turn of the 20th century, and he was noted for his colourful outspoken manner. One of the campsites on the trail north was here at Bow Summit, and legend has it that Bill would often pack up his bedroll in the evening and head down to the lake to spend the night, noting as he left his companions around the campfire that “it’s just too crowded around here for me.” So the lake came to be known as Peyto’s Lake.

Peyto Lake Trail. A steep trail descends from the Peyto Lake viewpoint for 2.5 km (1.6 miles) to the edge of the lake, allowing exploration along the lakeshore and across the outwash flats toward the glacier.

BOW SUMMIT— LIFE IN THE SUBALPINE

In July and August, the meadows above the Peyto Lake viewpoint are covered with wildflowers: white mountain avens and the heathers—white, yellow and red—grow close to the ground; the white-flowered western anemone and globeflower bloom in the damper environments; and the tiny blue alpine forget-me-not and cream coloured rock jasmine cling to the open rocky hillsides.

The forest at the viewpoint is typical of the upper regions of the subalpine zone. Engelmann spruce and alpine fir are the dominant trees, but stunted in size by exposure to the elements and the shortness of the growing season at this elevation.

Another tree that appears on exposed slopes near the upper limit of tree growth is whitebark pine. Whitebark is a five-needled pine, its needles growing from branches in fascicles (groups) of five rather than in pairs like the lodgepole pine. Whitebark produces one of the largest cones of all the pines found in the mountain parks. Clark’s nutcrackers collect the seeds from these cones and cache them at lower elevations for their winter food supply.

In addition to the noisy Clark’s nutcrackers fluttering about in search of a handout, there are a number of less obvious birds that make this high forest their home for all or part of the year. Hermit thrushes, crossbills, white-crowned and fox sparrows can be seen or heard in the forest, while higher up, alpine meadows are home to rosy finches and white-tailed ptarmigan.

The ptarmigan—a member of the grouse family—is one of the few birds that winters here. These birds are well camouflaged at all seasons: plumage is a mottled grey-brown in summer, blending well with the rocky alpine meadows, and pure white in winter. Uniquely adapted to this harsh environment, ptarmigan feed off the seeds of willows and other alpine plants, and in winter, when conditions are most severe, they dig down into the snow for insulation from the cold and protection from the wind.



Ptarmigan are common in the subalpine.

A short, self-guiding nature trail loops up through the forest from the Peyto Lake viewing platform to provide a first-hand encounter with this amazing high elevation environment.

44.1 **Rock Slide.** The highway passes the toe of a large slide of reddish-orange quartzite that tumbled down from the slopes of Observation Peak to the east.
27.4

47.9 **Snowbird Glacier Viewpoint.** Above the highway to the west, spread across the face of Mount Patterson like a white angel, is the Snowbird Glacier. The glacier is all the more interesting for the well-defined moraines beneath the cliffs of Mount Patterson. Showing up as two high ridges of rock and gravel debris, these moraines indicate the extent of the last glacial advance near the end of the 19th century.
29.8



51.8 **Silverhorn Overflow Campground.** This site is utilized as an overflow campground for the north end of Banff National Park.
32.2

56.0 **Upper Waterfowl Lake Viewpoint.** The view down to Upper Waterfowl Lake is mostly obstructed by trees, but since this shallow body of water is one of the most reliable locations for moose on the Icefields Parkway, it's always worth a stop for a look-see. (A better view of the lake can be obtained by walking a short trail that leads down from the viewpoint to the lakeshore.)
34.8



57.5 **Waterfowl Lakes Campground.** One of the most pleasant campgrounds on the Icefields Parkway is tucked between Upper and Lower Waterfowl Lakes. 116 unserviced sites. Open from late June through early September.
35.7



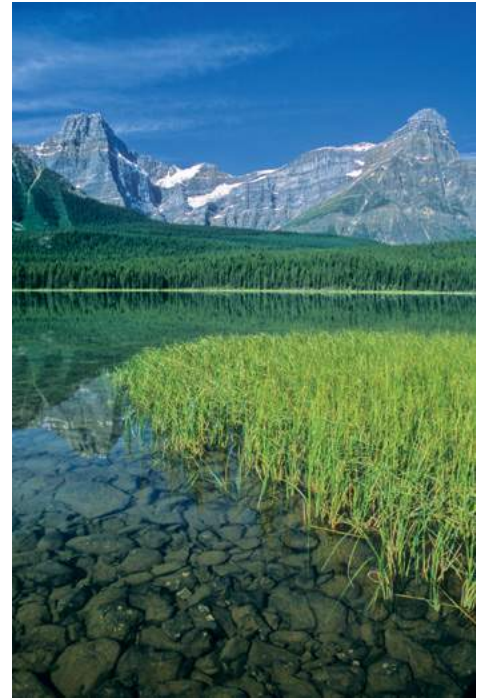
Chephren and Cirque Lakes Trail. At the rear of the campground, a footbridge spans the Mistaya River and a trail strikes off for two amphitheatres containing Chephren and Cirque Lakes. Both are excellent examples of glacially-carved cirques, with remnant glaciers clinging to their vertical headwalls and well-defined terminal moraines indicating the extent of previous glacial advances. Chephren Lake is 2.4 km (1.5 miles) from the bridge, Cirque 2.9 km (1.8 miles), and either lake can be visited in a half-day. (If you are not camping here, park at the end of the service road beyond the campground entrance kiosk.)



58.4 **Lower Waterfowl Lake Viewpoint.** A pull-off on the east shore of Lower Waterfowl Lake is a popular stop. Not only is the proximity of the lake attractive, but two of the valley's most distinctive peaks
36.3



Lower Waterfowl Lake



Walk downhill from the parking area for the best views of Upper Waterfowl Lake.



Lower Waterfowl Lake

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LOWER WATERFOWL LAKE TO
MISTAYA CANYON

12

rise beyond it to the west. Mount Chephren (3,266 m/10,715 ft) is the pyramid-shaped mountain across the lake from the viewpoint. If you look closely, you can see that the upper half of the mountain is composed primarily of grey-coloured rock, while the lower half exhibits cliffs of a reddish-orange hue: the grey formations are mainly Late Cambrian Period limestones, while the orange are slightly older quartzites. Howse Peak (3,290 m/10,790 ft) rises just as proudly to the left of Chephren, displaying the same geological structure.

Lower Waterfowl is not a particularly large or deep lake. It measures 1.8 km (1.1 miles) in length with a surface area of 72 hectares (178 acres), and at its maximum is only 9.5 metres (31 feet) deep. Though it is less than 20 km (12.5 miles) from Peyto Glacier, most of the rock flour that pours into the Mistaya River from the glacier settles in three lakes further upstream; as a result, Lower Waterfowl does not display the brilliant turquoise colour of most glacier-fed lakes. The water that feeds into the lake from the Mistaya River moves through it very quickly, totally recycling every two or three days. (This compares to Lake Louise, which only recycles about once a year.) Water temperature at the surface can reach as high as 16° C (60°F), which occasionally inspires overheated travellers to take the plunge from this viewpoint on warm summer days.

And, yes, there are fish in Lower Waterfowl Lake, but due to its proximity to the highway and campground, it is fished heavily—the success rate is poor and the fish are usually small.

64.5 **Kaufmann Peaks Viewpoint.** This unmarked pull-out on the east side of the highway is a good vantage point for the Kaufmann Peaks. This pair of rugged summits, festooned with a large glacier, are 3,109 metres (10,200 ft) and 3,094 metres (10,150 ft) high. The peaks are named for the Kaufmann brothers, Christian and Hans, early climbing guides who were brought to the Canadian Rockies from Switzerland by the Canadian Pacific Railway. Christian participated in the first ascent of the higher of the two summits in 1902, but shortly thereafter, the brothers were accused of poaching first ascents in the Valley of the Ten Peaks near Lake Louise. They were banished to Switzerland by head guide Edouard Feuz and never returned to the Rockies.

71.5 **Mistaya Canyon.** A 500-metre (0.3-mile) trail drops down from a roadside parking area to Mistaya Canyon—one of the more impressive limestone slot canyons in the mountain parks. A bridge spans this narrow gorge, providing a good perspective of how the rushing waters of the Mistaya River have cut deeply into limestone bedrock to form this deep sheer-walled canyon. From this vantage point, you can also see how the action of water has sculpted the canyon, dissolving the limestone to widen the gorge and, with the help of rocks and gravel carried in the powerful current, eroding rounded pothole depressions into the walls.

In the early 1800s, fur traders referred to this river simply as the South Fork of the Saskatchewan River. When the first packtrains passed this way at the turn of the 20th century, it was called Bear Creek. Later, the name was changed to Mistaya, the Cree word for grizzly bear.

Beyond the canyon bridge, trails carry on to the old Sarbach fire lookout site (5.2 km/3.2 miles) and Howse Pass (26 km/16.1 miles).



Mistaya Canyon is a short walk from the road.



looking across the North Saskatchewan River

74.8 Saskatchewan River Warden Station. On the south side of the North Saskatchewan River, this station has a public telephone outside the warden office should you require assistance.

75.1 North Saskatchewan River Bridge. The North Saskatchewan River, the major river in the north end of Banff National Park, is unsigned at this time, but you should have no trouble recognizing it as you travel across this 100 metre (330-foot) long bridge.

Saskatchewan River Crossing. The name of this area (which is also often referred to as "The Crossing") originated in the late 1800s. Outfitters leading clients to the Columbia Icefield were forced to make crossings of three major rivers in this vicinity—the Mistaya, Howse, and North Saskatchewan.

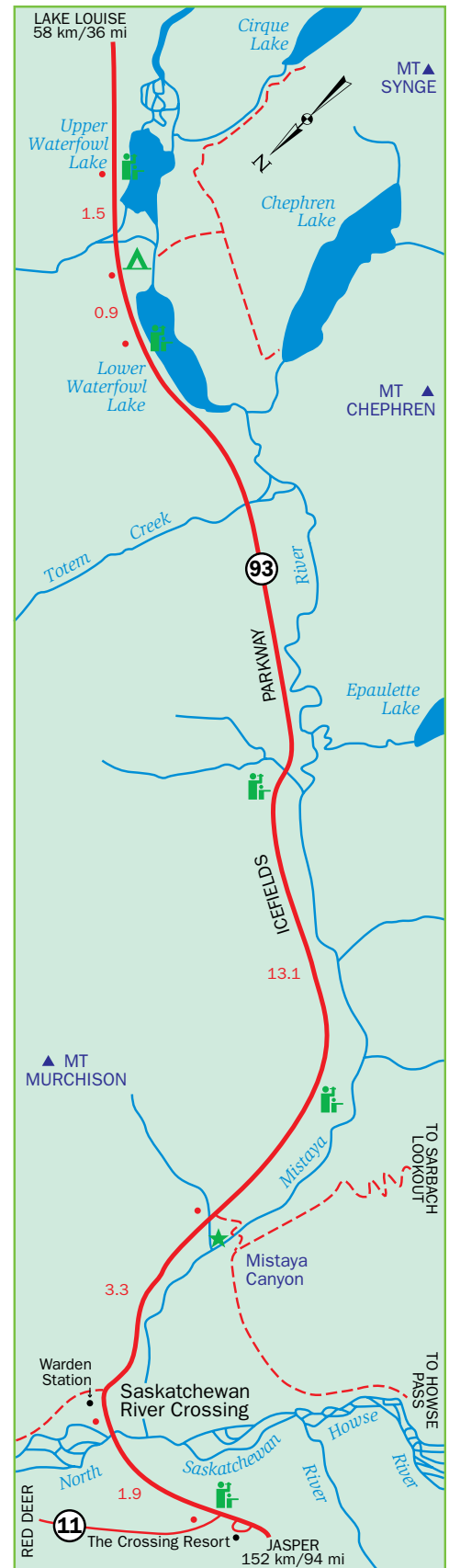
76.4 Howse Valley Viewpoint. Behind the picnic area, a viewpoint on the lip of a high bench overlooks the North Saskatchewan River. Off to the southwest, the broad Howse Valley stretches away toward the Continental Divide and the earliest pass used as a regular route of travel across the Rocky Mountains. Interpretive boards along the ridge describe what is now dedicated as Howse Pass National Historic Site.

The first white men to travel up the North Saskatchewan River and over Howse Pass were two North West Company voyageurs named Le Blanc and La Gassi, who were sent by David Thompson to winter on the west side of the Rockies with the Kootenay Indians in 1800. Thompson's party travelled up the North Saskatchewan Valley by canoe and horseback from Rocky Mountain House, passed below this point of land and, upon reaching the mouth of the Howse River (just out of sight beyond the river bend in the distance), ascended that stream for three miles until the canoes could proceed no further. To these prairie traders, the scene was quite awe-inspiring. Thompson wrote:

"Here among the stupendous and solitary Wilds covered with eternal Snow, and Mountain connected to Mountain by immense Glaciers, the collection of Ages and on which the Beams of the Sun make hardly any Impression when aided by the most favourable weather. I staid for 14 Days more, impatiently waiting the melting the Snows on the Height of Land."

After eventually crossing Howse Pass in 1807, Thompson established Kootenae House near present-day Invermere. He used Howse Pass for the shipment of trade goods and furs across the Rockies until 1811. In the autumn of 1810, the Piegan Indians threw up a blockade west of Rocky Mountain House to prevent the traffic in guns to their enemies on the western slope, and Thompson was forced to investigate a safer route through the mountains further north. The pass and river receive their names from Joseph Howse, a trader with the rival Hudson's Bay Company, who crossed the Rockies in 1810 to compete with Thompson.

From this excellent lookout point, a broad panorama of mountains opens up to the south and west. Rising nearby, to the left, is Mount Sarbach (3,127 m/10,260 ft). The prominent peak standing between the Howse Valley and the Glacier River valley to the right is Mount Outram (3,252 m/10,670 ft), named for a British mountaineer who made many first ascents of major Rocky Mountain peaks in the first decade of the 20th century. Just visible behind and to the right of Mount Outram is the pyramid-tip of Mount Forbes (3,612 m/11,872 ft),



the second highest mountain in Banff National Park. Further north is Survey Peak (2,676 m/8,781 ft) and the broad high summit of Mount Erasmus (3,265 m/10,711 ft) rising beyond.

76.7 David Thompson Highway Junction. This paved highway, designated Highway 11, runs due east along the North Saskatchewan Valley from the Icefields Parkway to Rocky Mountain House (180 km/112 miles) and Red Deer (257 km/160 miles), which lies halfway between Calgary and Edmonton.

Banff National Park's eastern boundary lies six km (3.7 miles) east of the junction. Around 20 km (12.5 miles) beyond is the Kootenay Plains, an extensive area of montane parkland preserved as the Kootenay Plains Natural Area. Because this pocket of grassland inside the mountains remains relatively dry and snow-free throughout the winter, Banff's first outfitter, Tom Wilson, operated a horse ranch there during in the early 1900s. Early fur traders and native hunting parties always found the plains to be one of the few reliable locales in the Canadian Rockies for game—particularly bison, bighorn sheep and elk. The Stoney have lived and hunted that section of the North Saskatchewan Valley for over 150 years, and today a variety of First Nations peoples make annual pilgrimages there to hold sun dance ceremonies.

Even if you are continuing along the Icefields Parkway, the Kootenay Plains area makes a pleasant detour from the busy Icefields Parkway.

77.0 The Crossing. This resort complex operates from early March through late October. Services include motel-style accommodations, a cafeteria, a dining room, a lounge, a large gift shop, gasoline, and a small selection of groceries. (This is the only gasoline station between Lake Louise and Jasper, although as noted it is closed in winter.) For information or reservations, call (403) 761-7000 or visit www.thecrossingresort.com.

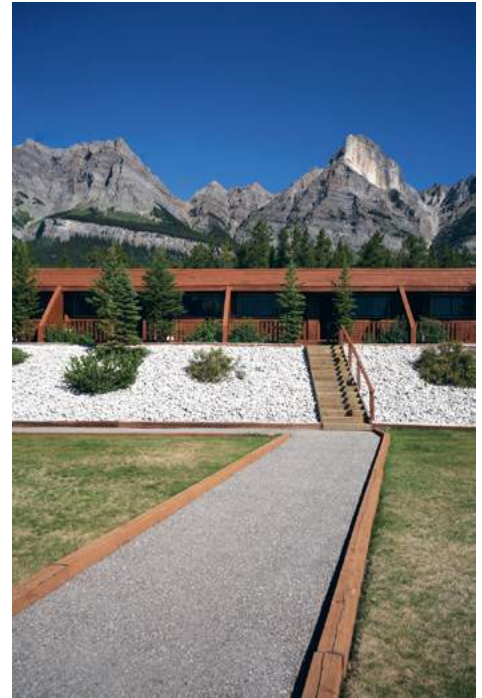
The two most impressive mountains seen from The Crossing complex are Mount Wilson (3,240 m/10,630 ft) and Mount Murchison (3,333 m/10,940 ft), situated to the north and south respectively. Since the North Saskatchewan River flows through this section of valley at an elevation of 1,390 metres (4,560 feet), these two mountains have an incredible vertical rise of over 1.6 km (one mile) above the valley floor. It is little wonder local natives believed Mount Murchison to be the highest mountain in the Canadian Rockies.

Both Mounts Wilson and Murchison are part of the western arm of the Castle Mountain Syncline—a downfold in the strata that runs unbroken from Castle Mountain near Banff to Mount Kerkeslin just south of Jasper. From this vantage point, you can observe the bedding of these mountains dipping eastward toward the axis of the syncline.

77.9 Glacier Lake Trail. An 8.9-km (5.5-mile) trail that leads westward through rolling forest of pine and spruce to the shores of an exquisite three-km (1.9-mile) long, glacier-fed lake. Beyond the west end of the lake is the tumbled icefall of the Southeast Lyell Glacier. There is a campground at the lake's east end, and this relatively low elevation hike is popular with early season backpackers.



A very pleasant short hike can be made along the first 2.3 km (1.4 miles) of this trail to a viewpoint overlooking the historic Howse



The Crossing



The trail to Glacier Lake crosses the North Saskatchewan River at this footbridge.

River. Along the way, a footbridge spans a canyon containing the North Saskatchewan River.

88.8 HI-Rampart Creek Wilderness Hostel. Located on the east side of the road, this lodging provides rustic accommodations in the heart of a spectacular wilderness. It's open May to mid-October and late November through March. For information and reservations, call (403) 670-7580 or visit www.hihostels.ca.

89.2 Rampart Creek Campground. The northernmost campground in Banff National Park. Due to its remote location, it is often the last campground to fill-up during busy summer weekends and holidays. 50 unserviced sites. Open from late June through August.



Looking down-valley from the campground entrance, the massive ramparts of Mount Wilson (3,240 m/10,631 ft) rise above the east side of the valley. (Mountain goats can sometimes be seen grazing the grassy slopes just below the mountain's cliffs opposite the campground.)

This section of the North Saskatchewan Valley displays the typical river-bottom landscape of a glacier-fed river—broad gravel flats populated by sparse stands of spruce, shrub willow and dwarf birch.

90.0 Rampart Ponds. An extensive area of valley-bottom marshland created by the alluvial fan of Rampart Creek, which has diverted the North Saskatchewan River to the west and nearly blocked the valley. This wetland creates excellent moose habitat, and it is not uncommon to see one of these animals feeding on the succulent underwater plants near dawn or dusk. The ponds are also a good place to look for a variety of waterfowl during the spring and fall migrations.

90.8 Mount Amery-Mount Saskatchewan Viewpoint. A slightly elevated pull-off on the west side of the road allows a good overview of the braided stream pattern of the North Saskatchewan River. At this point, the river is less than 30 km (19 miles) from its source, the Columbia Icefield. Its waters are thick with glacial flour throughout much of the summer, and much of this silt is deposited in these downstream areas. As it accumulates, the bed of the river is broken into several channels, which are constantly shifting and wandering on the broad alluvial flats. The silt and gravel-choked valley bottom with its multi-channelled river is typical of glacier-fed rivers near their source.

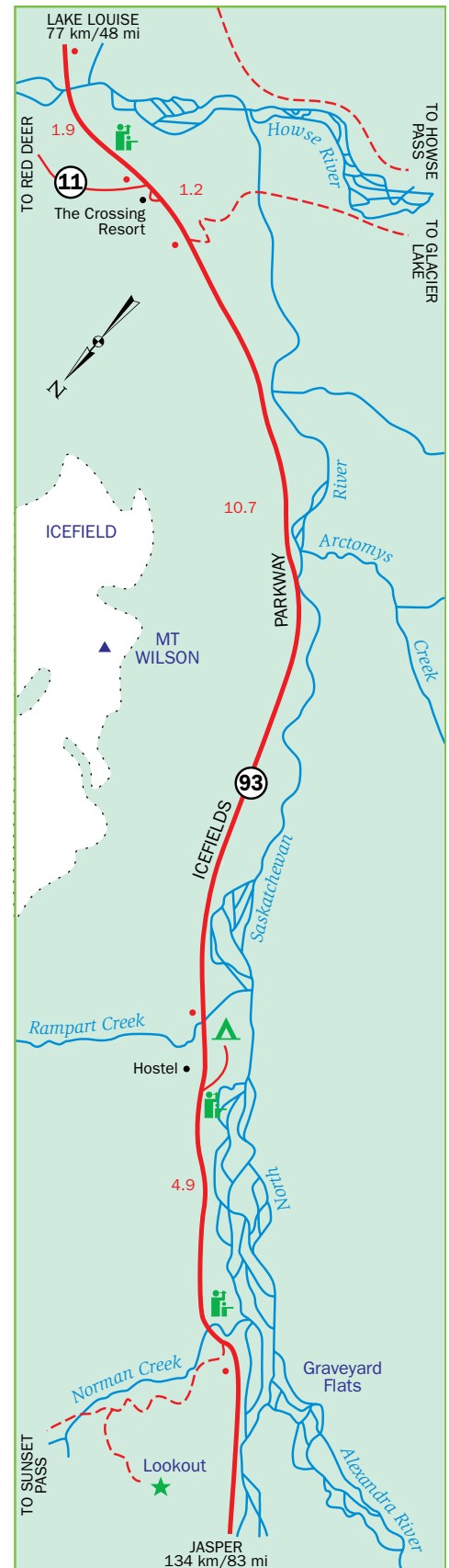


Across the valley, to the west, towers 3,335-metre (10,940-ft) Mount Amery, with a deep bowl-shaped depression carved into its flanks by the quarrying action of an alpine glacier. The broad snow-capped peak to the northwest, with the small glacier clinging to its slopes, is Mount Saskatchewan (3,342 m/10,964 ft). The sedimentary beds that compose these two mountains lie nearly horizontal, a factor contributing to their massive "layer cake" appearance.

91.2 Mount Coleman Viewpoint. A roadside pull-out with views back across the highway to Mount Coleman (3,135 m/10,290 ft), which was named for geologist Arthur Coleman.



93.5 Graveyard Flats. The Alexandra River flows in from the west, adding its own silt-ridden waters to those of the North Saskatchewan. The Alexandra takes its headwaters from the Alexandra Glacier and the Castleguard River, some 20 km (12 miles) west of this confluence.



These broad flats, opposite the mouth of the Alexandra River, were used as a campsite for hunting parties during the early years of the 20th century. Animals were often packed to the camp and skinned, and many bones and skulls were discarded here. In time, the campsite came to be known as Graveyard Flats, or simply the Graveyard.



Sunset Pass Trail. At the edge of the forest, opposite Graveyard Flats, a trail leads to the old Sunset fire lookout site (4.5 km/2.8 miles)—a spectacular viewpoint for the North Saskatchewan and Alexandra Valleys. A branch trail continues over Sunset Pass (8.2 km/5.1 miles) to Pinto Lake (13.7 km/8.5 miles) on the edge of Alberta's White Goat Wilderness Area.

99.8 Coleman Picnic Area. Beside the North Saskatchewan River, this is one of the few picnic areas along Banff National Park's section of the Icefields Parkway. The lower slopes of Mount Coleman, across the highway from the picnic area, are sometimes visited by mountain goats.

101.1 North Saskatchewan River Viewpoint. A pull-off on the west side of the highway looks down into a narrow gorge carved by the glacial waters of the North Saskatchewan River. A pedestrian bridge across the river just below the viewpoint to the north marks the beginning of the 21-km (13-mile) Alexandra Fire Road—the first 12 km (7.5 miles) of which are accessible to mountain bikes.

103.8 Cirrus Mountain Viewpoint. Undoubtedly, the dominant feature in this section of the valley is the massive wall of Devonian limestone rising 600 vertical metres (1,970 ft) above the highway to the east. These cliffs compose the base of Cirrus Mountain, and in spring and summer dozens of waterfalls cascade off the upper lip of the precipice.

105.6 Weeping Wall. Here, the flow of water over the sheer limestone cliffs of Cirrus Mountain is at its greatest. Throughout the summer, the wall is stained dark by the constant flow; in winter, huge sheets and columns of blue ice cling to the cliff, creating a playground for expert ice climbers.

This is one of the best viewpoints for the Castle Mountain Syncline along its entire length, which runs from Castle Mountain on the south to Mount Kerkeslin on the north. This syncline, a downfold or bend in the layers of sedimentary rock, was created when extreme forces were applied to the bedding during the formation of the Rocky Mountains. Looking up-valley, to the north, you can see the distinct bend in the rock layers of Parker Ridge, and the very axis of the syncline can be clearly seen in Nigel Peak, poking its head above a notch in the skyline to the right of Parker Ridge.

109.3 Nigel Creek Canyon Bridge. At this point, the Parkway spans a narrow deep gorge cut through the dolomite bedrock by the waters of Nigel Creek.

109.8 North Saskatchewan Canyon Viewpoint. This elevated pull-off provides a fine view down the North Saskatchewan Valley, which is a gigantic U-shaped canyon sandwiched between Cirrus Mountain on the left and the northeast ramparts of Mount Saskatchewan on the right. Though still a part of the Main Ranges, Cirrus contains rock formations which are much younger than what is normally



Graveyard Flats



Weeping Wall in winter

associated with the central core of the Rocky Mountains. In fact, the formations are identical to those found in the Front Range mountains surrounding the town of Banff, 160 km (100 miles) to the south. The cliffs in the top and bottom of Cirrus are composed of massive limestone, while the gentle sweeping talus slopes halfway to the summit, are formed of easily weathered shale.

The great syncline, or downfold, which runs through the strata of the valley is quite apparent from this viewpoint. Cirrus Mountain lies near the axis of the fold, and the limestone bedding in its summit is nearly horizontal. The mountain's lower cliffs begin to rise as part of the west arm of the syncline, while the bedding on the right side of the valley sweeps steeply toward the sky to complete the U-shaped bend.

110.4 Saskatchewan Glacier Trail. This trail starts at an unofficial pull-off created by the junction of the old Banff-Jasper Highway roadbed with the present-day highway. An old concrete bridge below the junction, blocked to vehicular traffic due to its dilapidated condition, makes the beginning of two easy hikes—one a short half hour jaunt to an impressive cataract, the other a round-trip of less than two hours to the vast morainal plain beyond the toe of the Saskatchewan Glacier.

68.6

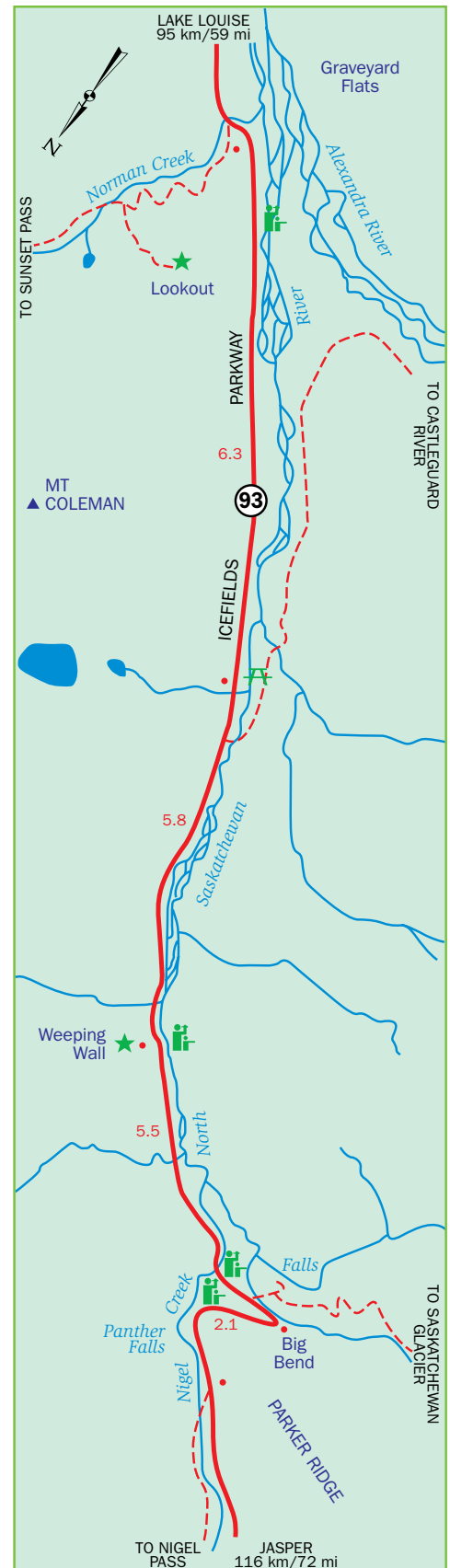

The first option follows the old highway downhill from the bridge for 400 metres (0.2 miles) to a series of waterfalls thundering through a narrow gorge. This impressive cataract used to be a popular stop on the old road, but it is seldom visited today.

The route to the Saskatchewan Glacier flats cuts right as a rough footpath on the opposite side of the bridge and traverses beside the North Saskatchewan River for a short distance before joining the track of an old road. (This road was constructed to the toe of the Saskatchewan Glacier by the U.S. Army in the autumn of 1942. The glacier was used as a testing ground for oversnow vehicles that were to be used that winter on the Alaska Highway project.) The road continues over a forested ridge and drops into a huge basin that was largely occupied by the Saskatchewan Glacier 150 years ago. The glacier has receded substantially since then, and today it is a rather long tedious scramble through its recessional moraines to reach the lake at its toe.

111.1 Big Bend. This long, sweeping highway switchback helps to hold a reasonable grade on what has been traditionally known as the "Big Hill". From the bottom of the grade to the top, a distance of some 11 km (6.8 miles), the Parkway rises a total of 425 vertical metres (1,400 ft).

From a pull-off at the apex of the Big Bend, you can see the North Saskatchewan River tumbling through a narrow canyon west of the highway. At this point, it is less than five km (3.1 miles) from its source, the Saskatchewan Glacier—the longest outlet glacier of the Columbia Icefield. Though it races across the flats and past this viewpoint in a very spirited fashion, it is a mere trickle compared to the broad and mighty river that leaves the park just 40 km (25 miles) further downstream.

Across the valley, to the south, a veritable gusher of water thunders down a long chute on the northern slopes of Mount Saskatchewan—one of the North Saskatchewan River's first tributaries.



112.7 North Saskatchewan Valley Viewpoint. A popular pull-off (often jammed with tour buses) that offers excellent views down-valley to the massive cliffs of Cirrus Mountain (3,267 m/10,720 ft) and the narrow canyon of the North Saskatchewan River. A distinct U-shaped bend can be observed in the rock composing Cirrus and the slopes across the valley from it: a cross-section of the Castle Mountain Syncline, which runs from just north of the town of Banff to just south of the town of Jasper.

113.2 Panther Falls Trail. Banff National Park's highest waterfall is hidden just below this roadside pull-off. A one-km (0.6-mile) trail to the falls starts at the lower end of the parking area and descends gradually to a viewpoint at its base. This thundering cataract, whose base is shrouded in mist, received its name from a party of early explorers who thought that Nigel Creek's leap from the lip of the cliff resembled that of a panther.

Bridal Veil Falls is the thin graceful column of water visible directly across the valley from the parking area. It is the second highest waterfall in Banff National Park.

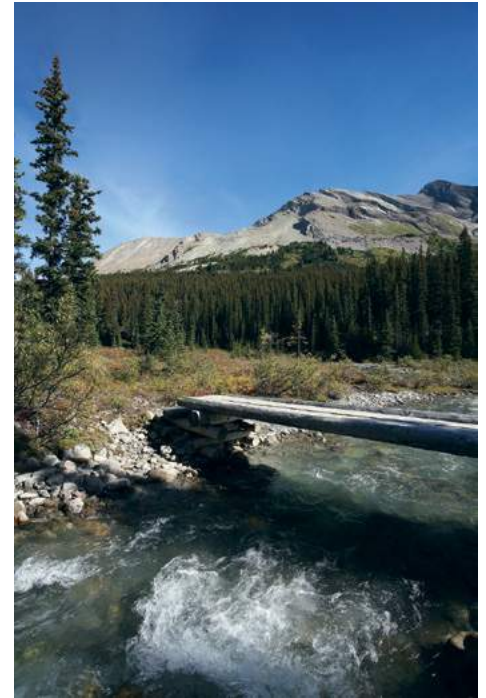
114.3 Nigel Pass Trail. A gravel road drops down from the east side of the highway to the parking area for the Nigel Pass trail (signposted from the highway as Nigel Creek). The trail runs up the Nigel Creek Valley to reach the summit of the pass in 7.2 km (4.5 miles). However, a shorter trip can be made along this trail by hiking for two km (1.2 miles) to old Camp Parker—a traditional campground since the days of the earliest horse parties at the turn of the 20th century, up and through the opening of the Banff-Jasper Highway in 1940. In addition to a number of interesting tree carvings at the old campsite, open meadows and the sparkling waters of Nigel Creek lie just beyond.

The name Nigel, which has attached itself to so many of the features in the vicinity, commemorates Nigel Vavasour, a packer who accompanied the first major climbing expedition to this area in 1898. The party camped at Camp Parker and, on August 18, two of its members made the first ascent of Mount Athabasca and discovered the Columbia Icefield from its summit.

116.0 Nigel Pass Viewpoint. The high subalpine valley of Nigel Creek leads away to the north and a broad rocky ridge—the summit of Nigel Pass. A trail runs along this valley (see above), over the pass and down into the Brazeau River valley in the remote southwest corner of Jasper National Park. The valley and the avalanche slopes descending from the slopes to the right, make excellent mid-summer habitat for grizzly bears, and signs of these animals digging for Hedysarum roots are often seen along the trail.

118.0 Parker Ridge Trail. A long parking area on the west side of the highway marks the start of one of the most popular short hikes along the Icefields Parkway. The Parker Ridge trail leads above the treeline and across alpine meadows to a ridge-top view of the longest valley glacier extending from the Columbia Icefield. Total one-way distance to the viewpoint is 2.4 km (1.5 miles), with an elevation gain of 250 metres (820 feet) to the 2,250-metre (7,400-ft) summit of the ridge. (The trail is usually closed until snow melts in early July.)

Once you reach the summit of the ridge, the trail angles left and contours south along the slope for 0.4 km (0.2 miles) to the



Nigel Creek



Saskatchewan Glacier from Parker Ridge

viewpoint for the Saskatchewan Glacier. The glacier extends from the central core, or *névé*, of the Columbia Icefield and is nearly nine km (5.6 miles) long (approximately 30 percent longer than the Athabasca Glacier). Like the Athabasca Glacier, it has been receding steadily for over 100 years, and today, its toe lies nearly two km (1.2 miles) west of its last point of furthest advance.

The growing season atop the ridge is brief, with a frost-free period of only a few weeks each summer. Life is precarious, and plants cling close to the surface to stay out of the desiccating winds that would sap what little moisture they find in the thin layer of rocky soil. All living things at this elevation have made special adaptations that allow them to survive cold, dryness and wind.

In mid-summer, the most beautiful ridge-top survivors are the alpine forget-me-not, buttercup, cinquefoil, rock jasmine, purple saxifrage and moss campion; mountain goats and bighorn sheep wander along the summit ridge from time to time; golden eagles and hawks regularly patrol the slope for Columbian ground squirrels; pikas inhabit a rockslide to the left of the trail just before it crests the summit; and a variety of birds nest at the forest margin and in the meadows and rocks above, including white-crowned and golden-crowned sparrows, white-tailed ptarmigan, rosy finches, pipits and horned larks.

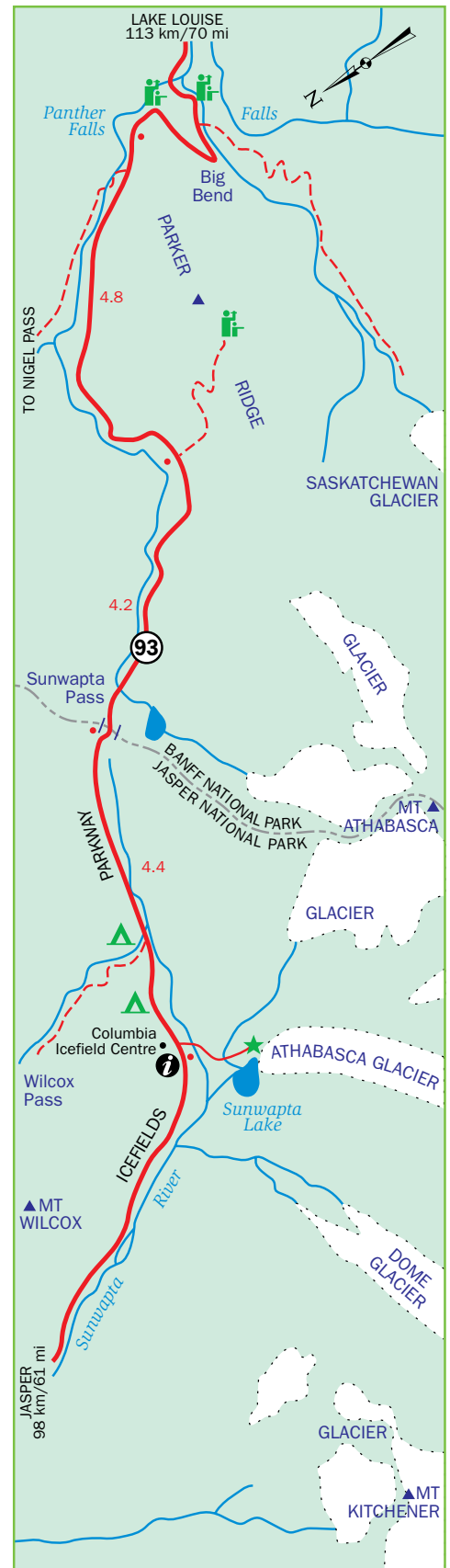
Even if you don't hike the trail, the parking area serves as a fine vantage point for the boundary line between the subalpine and alpine life zones. At a point approximately halfway to the summit of the ridge, stunted Engelmann spruce and alpine fir trees finger out into the treeless alpine. The timberline at this latitude is around 2,100 metres (7,000 ft) above sea level. Several factors affect the upper limit of tree growth, but the primary one is temperature. The general rule, which is consistent around the world, is that the mean temperature for the warmest month of the year must be at least 10°C (50°F) for trees to survive. Below that temperature, trees simply don't have a long enough growing season to function or reproduce. In fact, the tiny stands of trees that you see near the top of the ridge do not reproduce by spreading seed; too stunted to produce cones, they spread across the slope by layering, their lowest branches taking root in the soil, which allows this bonsai forest to expand in the manner of creeping ground cover plants.

119.1 Hilda Creek Viewpoint. A gravel parking area on the east side of the highway looks west to a deep, bowl-shaped depression carved into the slopes of Mount Athabasca. A glacier still occupies the headwall of this cirque, continuing the work of plucking rock from the side of the mountain and deepening the amphitheatre. Ridges of rock and gravel near the mouth of the cirque are terminal moraines, deposited by the glacier at the end of a previous advance.



The sharp spike of Hilda Peak, above the amphitheatre, is called a "horn"—a mountain that has had at least three glaciers quarrying into its slopes from different directions.


122.2 Sunwapta Pass (2,035 m/6,675 ft). This pass marks the watershed divide between the Athabasca River drainage to the north and the North Saskatchewan system to the south: Waters flowing north from this summit eventually reach the Arctic Ocean via the Mackenzie River, while those flowing south cross the prairies via the Saskatchewan and Nelson Rivers to Hudson Bay. Sunwapta



Pass also serves as the boundary between Banff and Jasper National Parks and is the second highest point on the Icefields Parkway.

A stone cairn at the pass commemorates the re-opening of the Icefields Parkway on August 3, 1961, after the original Banff-Jasper Highway was reconstructed to modern-day standards. An interpretive panel describes changes to the boundary between the two parks over the last century.

124.1 Wilcox Creek Campground. The highest campground in the mountain parks. Open from early June to early September. 46 unserviced sites.

77.1  Wilcox Pass Trail. From along the campground access road, this four-km (2.5-mile) trail strikes off uphill into an alpine pass between Mount Wilcox and Nigel Peak. The hike provides an outstanding overview of Mount Athabasca and the Athabasca Glacier, and is one of the most dependable areas in the mountain parks for seeing bighorn rams in a backcountry setting. Even if you don't make it to the pass, there is a fine viewpoint for the Athabasca Glacier after 2.5 km (1.6 miles).

125.4 Columbia Icefield Campground. Open from mid-May to early October. 33 campsites.

126.6 Staff accommodation. A restricted-access road leads to green-roofed buildings on the west side of the highway that house staff working at the Columbia Icefield Centre.

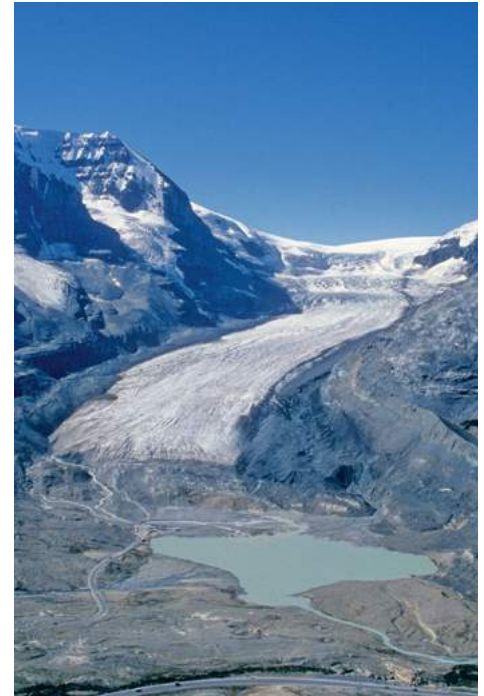
126.7 The south access road to the Columbia Icefield Centre is for buses transporting visitors to the Athabasca Glacier. Public parking is available further down the hill.

127.2 Athabasca Glacier access. A road opposite the Columbia Icefield Centre leads down to a parking area at the toe of the Athabasca Glacier. From this point, a short trail climbs to the edge of ice, allowing visitors to walk onto the surface of the glacier. Conditions are always changing, however, and the slippery surface and crevasses can be quite treacherous. Any exploration of the glacier beyond the edge of ice should only be attempted by experienced mountaineers armed with ice axes and ropes.

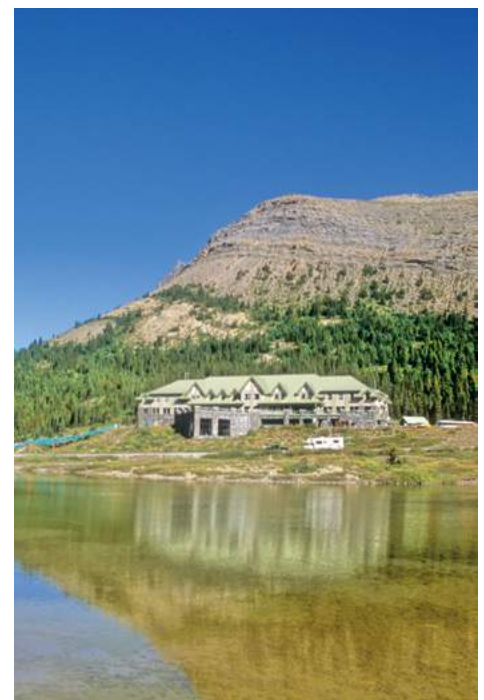
Along the road down to the glacier, watch for roadside markers showing how far the glacier has retreated in recent years.

127.3 Columbia Icefield Centre. Rebuilt in 1996, the Icefield Centre lies across the road from the Athabasca Glacier, the most accessible arm of the Columbia Icefield. The complex houses the Glacier Gallery interpretive display, a Parks Canada visitor centre, two restaurants, 32 hotel rooms, and a gift shop. It is also the starting point for Ice Explorer tours onto the glacier.

Ancient Forest. As you drive the section of highway two km (1.2 miles) north of the Icefield Centre, the Icefields Parkway passes beneath a stunted forest of spruce on the lower slopes of Mount Wilcox. You may wonder how these trees manage to survive in this inhospitable rock garden and at an elevation that is barely below the level where trees can sustain life. Well, the answer is: Quite nicely, thank you. This stand contains some of the oldest living trees in the mountain parks, including the oldest Engelmann spruce tree ever discovered in Alberta. (The tree began its life around 1265 A.D.)



the view of the Athabasca Glacier from Wilcox Pass



Columbia Icefield Centre

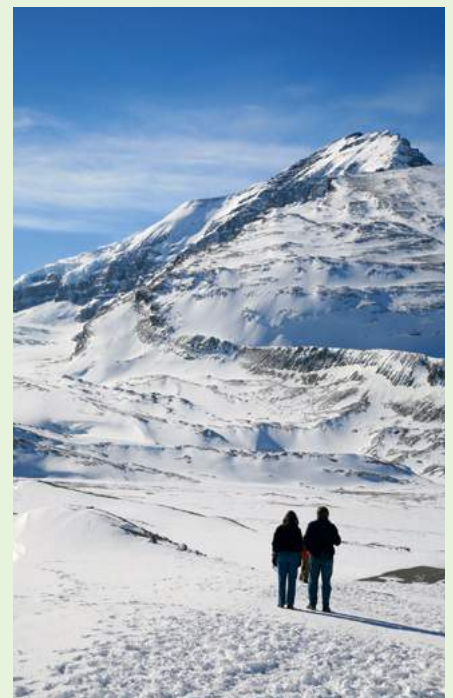


The best way to experience the Columbia Icefield is by taking an Ice Explorer tour.

COLUMBIA ICEFIELD

Covering an area of some 325 square km (125 square miles), the Columbia Icefield is the largest body of ice in the Rocky Mountains, or any other North American mountain range south of Alaska and the Yukon. The core of the Icefield, which lies out of sight from the Icefields Parkway above the Athabasca Glacier, feeds five other outlet valley glaciers that radiate out from its central accumulation zone, also known as its névé. Ringed by lofty mountains, this core area is a large basin with an average elevation of around 3,000 metres (9,800 ft).

Snow Dome is the broad ice-capped mountain between the Athabasca and Dome Glaciers. While there are many peaks in the area that are higher than Snow Dome, it is the highest covered by the Columbia Icefield. As such, it is considered the hydrographic apex of North America. Precipitation that falls on this mountain eventually makes its way to one of three oceans. To the west, meltwater flows into the Bush River and then the Columbia River, which flows into the Pacific Ocean at Astoria, Oregon. On the southeast side of the mountain, meltwater finds its way to Hudson Bay and the Atlantic Ocean via the North Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan and Nelson Rivers. And finally, on the northeast side, the outflow runs to the Sunwapta and Athabasca Rivers, then makes its way north via the Athabasca, Slave and Mackenzie Rivers to the Arctic Ocean.



the Icefield in winter

Annual snowfall on the Icefield can reach seven metres (23 ft), and some of this snow never totally melts in summer. As this old snow builds up and ages, it turns to ice and begins to flow downhill. Eventually it finds its way out of the névé and descends as outlet valley glaciers until it eventually melts. It has been estimated that it takes 150 years for ice to travel from the edge of the névé to the toe of the Athabasca Glacier and that some of the ice at the toe could be more than 400 years old.

Despite the forward flow of the ice, the Athabasca Glacier is currently retreating—an indication that the melting rate at the toe is greater than the rate of forward flow. In the first half of the 19th century, the toe of the Athabasca Glacier was located near today's Icefield Centre complex, but since 1870 it has been receding, having retreated over 1.6 km (one mile) in just over 135 years. Along the road from the Parkway to the toe of the glacier, markers indicate where the glacier front was at various points over the last century. (Look for your birth date on the markers and see if you have receded as much as the glacier over the years.) All other outlet glaciers have been retreating as well, with the exception of the Columbia Glacier on the Icefield's northwest corner.

Looking at the Athabasca Glacier from the Icefield Centre, one gets a good perspective of this tongue of ice along its full length. From the horizon (the main body of the Icefield) to its toe, the glacier drops from an elevation of 2,800 metres (9,190 ft) to 1,900 metres (6,230 ft) in six km (3.7 miles); the tongue is approximately one km (0.6 miles) across at its widest point. It flows over three cliffs on its descent from the Icefield, visible as steep broken icefalls. Any irregularities in the bedrock that the ice flows over will cause it to buckle and fracture, creating crevasses that can be as much as 30 metres (100 ft) deep.

The thickest part of the glacier is in the centre just below the last icefall, where it reaches a depth of just over 300 metres (1,000 ft)—deep enough to bury the tallest buildings in the world, and even Toronto's CN tower would

FAST FACTS

COLUMBIA ICEFIELD

Total area: 325 square km
(125 square miles)

Maximum ice depth: 365 metres
(1,200 ft)

Average elevation: 3,000 metres
(9,800 ft)

Annual snowfall: seven metres
(23 ft)

ATHABASCA GLACIER

Length: six km (3.7 miles)

Width: one km (0.6 mile)

Maximum ice depth: 300 metres
(980 ft)

Ice flow rate at icefall:
80-125 metres (260-410 ft)
per year

Ice flow rate at toe:
15-20 metres (50-65 ft) per year



looking across the Athabasca Glacier

barely poke above the surface of the ice.) Ice depths in the névé, beyond the horizon, reach 365 metres (1,200 ft).

A glacier carries great quantities of rock debris along its sides and locked within the ice along its sole. When it retreats, much of this rock is deposited. These deposits are called moraines: lateral moraines are deposited along the flanks of receding glaciers as narrow sharp ridges of rock debris (the road to the upper Snocoach terminal follows along a humongous lateral moraine); where the glacier has hesitated in its retreat, low ridges called recessional moraines form along the stationary ice front; and rolling random deposits spread in the wake of the retreating ice are ground moraines (you pass by and over recessional and ground moraines on the road from the Parkway to the glacier's toe).

It is obvious that global warming is playing a significant role in the recession of the Columbia Icefield as well as glaciers around the world, and most scientists would lay the blame on human-generated carbon dioxide. But it is interesting to note that the glaciers have receded quite dramatically in the past, long before the Industrial Revolution. Around 8,000 years ago, the world experienced a period (the hypsithermal) that was much warmer than today, and there is evidence that the Athabasca Glacier may have totally receded back into the main body of the Icefield. Glaciers have been advancing and retreating for at least the last 250,000 years, and they are likely to keep on doing so long after you and I have receded to our final resting place.

DISCOVERY, EXPLORATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The Columbia Icefield was one of the last major landscape features to be discovered in the Canadian Rockies—and certainly its greatest. Late in the morning of August 18, 1898, two British mountaineers, J. Norman Collie and Hermann Woolley, set off from a camp just south of Sunwapta Pass to climb Mount Athabasca. They struggled upwards throughout the afternoon and at 5:15 p.m. they reached the summit. It was a first ascent of the mountain, but of more importance is what they saw when they got to the top. As Collie later wrote:

“The view that lay before us in the evening light was one that does not often fall to the lot of modern mountaineers. A new world was spread at our feet; to the westward stretched a vast ice-field probably never before seen by human eye, and surrounded by entirely unknown, unnamed, and unclimbed peaks. From its vast expanse of snows the Saskatchewan glacier takes its rise, and it also supplies the head-waters of the Athabasca; while far away to the west, bending over in those unknown valleys glowing with the evening light, the level snows stretched, to finally melt and flow down more than one channel into the Columbia River, and thence to the Pacific Ocean.”

Collie was undoubtedly correct that no other human had ever seen the Columbia Icefield before. Though native hunting parties and white explorers had seen its outlet glaciers and ice-capped peaks from close-up or afar, the only way the true extent of this great body of ice could be truly discovered was from the summit of one of the 3,400-metre (11,000-ft) peaks which

ICEFIELD CLIMATE

ICEFIELD CENTRE – SUNWAPTA PASS

Annual precipitation:
80.1 mm (31.5 in)

Annual snowfall:
5.93 metres (19.5 ft)

Normal high temperature,
July: 15.2°C (59°F)

Normal low temperature,
July: 2.9°C (37°F)

Normal high temperature,
January: -9.4°C (15°F)

Normal low temperature,
January: -19.0°C (-2.2°F)

Snow on ground, end of
February: 1.99 metres (6.5 ft)



The lunar-like landscape around Columbia Icefield is like no other in the mountain parks.



Brewster has been operating tours on the glacier for many decades. This style of vehicle operated between 1968 and 1983.

surround it. Like huge sentinels, these mountains had guarded its secret for all time up until that golden moment in the summer of 1898.

Four years after Collie and Woolley's discovery, James Outram—who had made the first ascent of Mount Assiniboine in 1901—and his guide, Christian Kaufmann, visited the Icefield and made three first ascents, including Mount Columbia (3,747 m/12,294 ft), the highest summit in the area and the second highest in the Canadian Rockies. Following a visit by interprovincial boundary surveyors in 1919, climbers returned to the region with a vengeance, and by 1927 every major peak in the district had been climbed.

In 1924, less adventurous tourists began visiting the Icefield on horseback as part of a conducted tour between Jasper and Lake Louise promoted by Jasper outfitter Jack Brewster as "The Glacier Trail." Other trail rides followed, including the annual outing of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies in 1929. In the early 1930s, a number of ski expeditions were mounted to the area from Jasper, which included tours onto the Icefield and ski ascents of some of the most accessible peaks.

But it wasn't until the completion of the Banff-Jasper Highway in 1939 that the Columbia Icefield became a focus for mountain parks' visitors. On June 15, 1940, the highway was officially dedicated, and the Brewster Transport Company opened its Swiss-styled Columbia Icefield Chalet opposite the Athabasca Glacier.

The first commercial snowmobile tours onto the Athabasca Glacier began in 1939, even as the road was being finished. Banff entrepreneur Alex Watt rigged a Model A Ford with metal half-tracks and transported just over 100 people onto the toe of the Athabasca Glacier that summer. These Ford-mobiles were replaced in the 1950s by six-passenger Bombardier oversnow vehicles. Later, after the snowmobile concession was taken over by the Brewster Transport Company in 1969, Foremost 56-passenger Snocoaches were developed.

Today, the original chalet has been replaced by the impressive Icefield Centre—combining interpretive displays with food services and accommodations—and Ice Explorers transport more than 400,000 visitors onto the glacier during the short summer season.

ICEFIELD CENTRE AND TOURS

Overlooking the Athabasca Glacier, 126.6 km (78.7 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Highway and 103.7 km (64.4 miles) south of the town of Jasper, the Icefield Centre is a large, modern complex filled with visitor facilities. In addition to being the staging point for Ice Explorer tours, it has a large display room, a Parks Canada information desk (780-852-6288), two restaurants, and a large gift shop. The third floor is occupied by the Glacier View Lodge (403-762-6700 or 877-423-7433; www.columbiaicefield.com), comprising 32 hotel rooms. The Icefield Centre is open April through October.

The best way to experience the Icefield is aboard an all-terrain Ice Explorer bus, which trundles out onto the Athabasca Glacier, with time allotted to walk on the ice. The tours are operated by Brewster (403-762-6700 or 877-423-7433; www.columbiaicefield.com April through mid-October. They depart daily between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.; no reservations required.

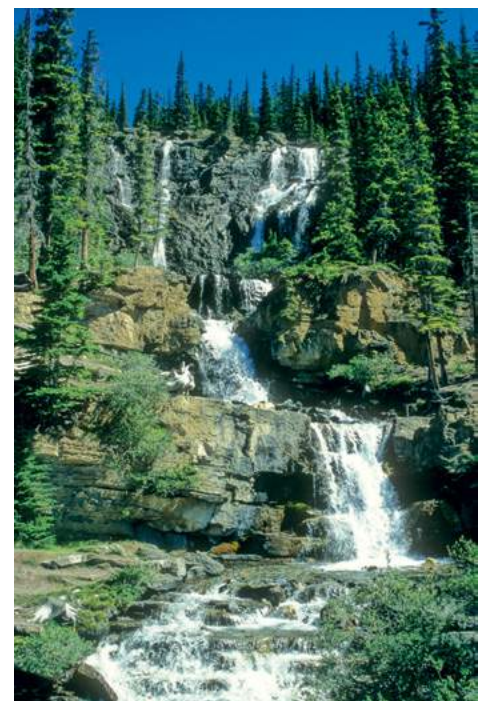


Columbia Icefield Skywalk

Across the road to the west, you will notice a small patch of spruce trees between the Athabasca and Dome Glaciers. This stand also contains some very old trees, but as you can see by the lateral moraines that bracket this forest, they barely escaped disaster during the Cavell Advance (Little Ice Age). This period of glaciation began around the time that many of these trees were born, and over their lifetime, they witnessed the advance of the Athabasca and Dome Glaciers down the valleys on either side, and then retreat. Many trees on the fringes of the forest were run-down by these icy bulldozers, toppled and crushed to splinters by advancing walls of ice.

133.0 **Columbia Icefield Skywalk.** This architecturally impressive attraction **82.6** projects out into the Sunwapta Canyon 280 meters (918 feet) above the valley floor. Access is by shuttle bus from the Icefield Centre (no passenger vehicles are allowed to stop), from where a short interpretive trail leads along the canyon edge and then out onto the glass-floored skywalk. Looking upstream from the skywalk, you can see the massive, ice-draped slopes of Mount Athabasca (3,491 m/ 11,450 ft) framed by the walls of the valley—a truly inspiring view of this great mountain. Directly across the valley is the ice-capped east face of Mount Kitchener. The Columbia Icefield is operated by Pursuit (403-762-6700, www.glacierskywalk.ca) May through October. Tours depart from the Icefield Centre daily between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m.

From the Skywalk, northbound travellers lose 300 metres (980 ft) of elevation over the next four km (2.5 miles), descending to the floor of the Sunwapta Valley.



Tangle Falls

134.2 Tangle Falls. Opposite this small roadside parking area, Tangle Creek plunges, in a series of steps, over cliffs of 500 million year old limestone. In winter, when the water freezes into massive columns of blue ice, the falls are a popular training ground for ice climbers.

135.8 Stutfield Glacier Viewpoint. The Stutfield Glacier, an outlet glacier of the Columbia Icefield, pours over the headwall of a huge cirque, dropping over 900 metres (2,950 ft) in a series of icefalls. Hemmed in on the south by Mount Kitchener (3,480 m/11,420 ft) and on the north by Stutfield Peak (hidden behind the avalanche-swept ridge to the right), the glacier continues to pluck rock from the headwall of this great amphitheatre, eroding even deeper into the Icefield plateau.

Diadem Peak (3,371 m/11,060 ft) can be seen down-valley to the northwest, while the Sunwapta River braids its way in several channels across the broad gravel flats below. (Diadem is another word for "crown", and British mountaineer J. Norman Collie named the peak for the crown of ice on its summit after he participated in the first ascent in 1898.)

141.0 Avalanche Path. Across the river from this long stretch of straight highway, an avalanche has ripped a narrow swath down through the forest to the valley floor. The trees that the snowslide swept from the slope lie in a pile on the river flats.

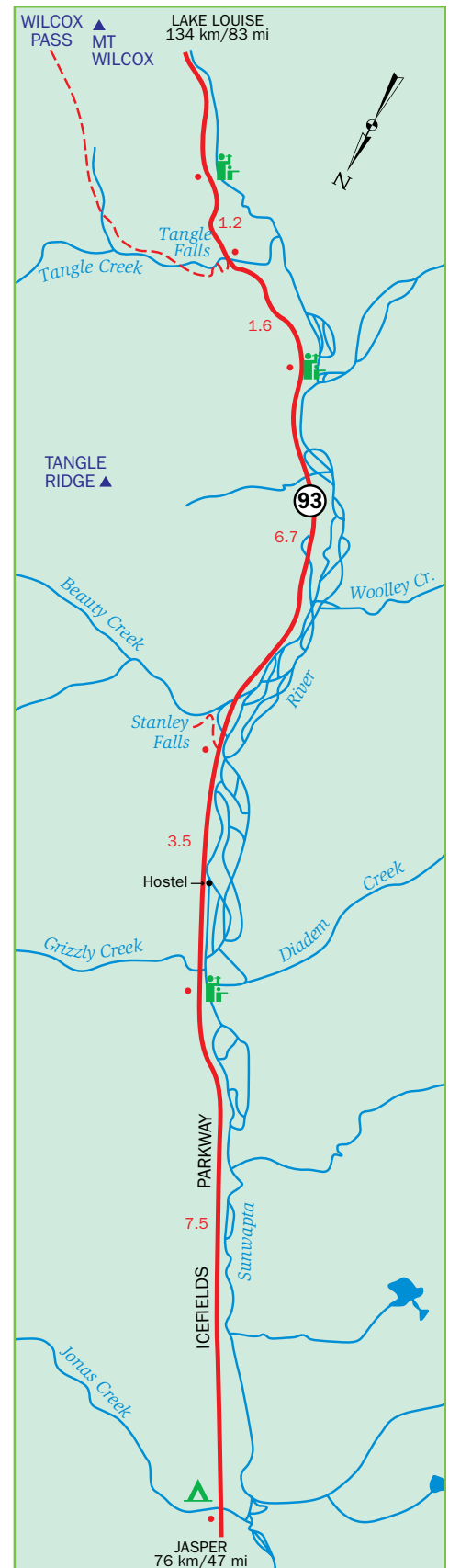
Throughout much of the summer, the roadsides and river flats beside the Sunwapta River are covered with thousands of fuzzy seed heads. Yellow mountain avens are a member of the rose family that blooms in June as a rather inconspicuous, single nodding yellow flower, but from late June through the remainder of the summer, park visitors only see this ocean of fluff.

Another noteworthy flower on these river flats is the broad-leaved willow herb. It is a close relative of the taller and much showier fireweed, but its purple-pink blooms still provide an obvious splash of colour to these otherwise barren expanses of outwash gravel along the Sunwapta.

142.5 Beauty Creek Trail. Though a popular short hike during the early days of the Banff-Jasper Highway, the Beauty Creek Canyon is bypassed by today's Icefield Parkway and seldom visited. From a small, unmarked pull-off on the east side of the highway, a trail leads along the crest of a water diversion dike to the old highway roadbed. Follow this old road to the right (south) for 600 metres (0.4 miles) to where Beauty Creek emerges from the forest (the old highway bridge across the creek is washed out). Follow a well-defined path up into the forest beside the creek. You will encounter eight cascades in just over one km (0.6 miles) of steady climbing, the last and most impressive being Stanley Falls. Total distance from the highway to the falls is 1.6 km (one mile).

144.4 HI-Beauty Creek Wilderness Hostel. This hostel, overlooking the Sunwapta River, operates from May through September with accommodation for 22. Facilities include a communal kitchen, sun-heated shower, fire pit, and pancake breakfasts. For information and reservations, call (780) 852-3215 or visit www.hihostels.ca.

North from the hostel, for around 15 km (9.3 miles), woodland caribou are occasionally sighted along the highway. Shy and easily





Caribou are occasionally spotted along this stretch of highway.

disturbed, these animals don't travel in massive herds like their Arctic relatives. Instead, they live in small groups, feeding on lichen as they travel between Maligne Lake and the Tonquin Valley year-round. Road signs show a reduced speed limit along this stretch of highway to protect these animals, which number less than 300 in the entire park.

146.0 Sunwapta River Viewpoint. Spectacular mountains rise to the south and west—the peaks of the Columbia Icefield region. Looking across the Sunwapta River to the west, there is another fine example of a glacier-carved cirque, or hanging valley; above this amphitheatre towers Diadem Peak (3,371 m/11,060 ft), with hanging glaciers clinging to its rugged face. The massive flanks of Tangle Ridge appear to block the highway to the south. Between these two giants, an even greater mountain looms in the distance—the broad, ice-capped Mount Kitchener (3,480 m/11,420 ft).



From this roadside stop, you can see how the valley bottom is choked with silt and gravel. The Sunwapta River flows across broad flats via several intertwining channels, creating a braided stream pattern. This feature is typical of a glacially fed river near its source. The Sunwapta is forever depositing silt and gravel washed down from the Columbia Icefield, and forever shifting its channels as a result.



The highway crosses this distinctive rockslide.

ICEFIELDS PARKWAY

JONAS CREEK TO SUNWAPTA FALLS

153.5 Jonas Creek Campground. 25 sites. Open from late May to early 95.4 September.

155.3 Quartzite Rockslide. On both sides of the highway, piles of pink 96.5 boulders lie strewn over a vast area. Looking up at the ridge to the east, a great rockslide descends all the way down the mountainside. Above the boulder field, near the top of the ridge, a distinct pink scar indicates where a huge slab of quartzite broke away and slid into the valley.

158.6 Sunwapta Warden Station. The parking area on the south side of 98.6 creek from the warden station marks the beginning of the Poboktan Creek trail. This is a wilderness route that backpackers can follow to reach the remote Brazeau Lake region to the southeast or Maligne Lake to the north.

Poboktan is the Stoney word for "owl", and when geologist Arthur Coleman explored the valley in 1892, he noted that "we named the pass and creek Poboktan, from the big owls that blinked at us from the spruce trees..."

169.7 Bubbling Springs Picnic Area. Named for a small cold-water spring 105.4 which bubbles to the surface in its midst, this picnic area on the east side of the road is enclosed within a dense forest of lodgepole pine, a sign that this section of valley was once swept by a forest fire. Lodgepole pine regenerates in dense, even-aged stands following a fire, but the trees are eventually replaced by more shade-tolerant spruce and fir in the absence of further fires. You will find lodgepole pine stands throughout most of the major valleys of the mountain parks.

These woods are home to numerous species of birds that are typical of the pine-spruce forests of the mountain parks. Watch and listen for gray jays, Swainson's thrushes, yellow-rumped warblers, dark-eyed juncos and chipping sparrows.

175.7 Sunwapta Falls Junction. A road branches west from the highway 109.2 beside the Sunwapta Falls Resort and reaches the parking area at Sunwapta Falls in 600 metres (0.4 miles).

Sunwapta Falls Canyon has been carved at a point where the course of the river makes an abrupt turn from northwest to southwest. Since it is entering the main Athabasca Valley at this point (it joins that river less than three km/1.9 miles downstream), it seems obvious the Sunwapta was diverted by a previous advance of a glacier down the Athabasca Valley. Wherever rivers were diverted by recent glacial events (15,000 years ago is recent geologically speaking), they usually find a cliff to fall over and create a waterfall. Today, the falls have cut back into the Cathedral limestone bedrock, eroding a deep canyon. The canyon displays the usual smoothing and potholing caused by the swirling action of gravel-laden waters.

In addition to allowing a good view of the falls and its canyon, the bridge over the gorge provides access to the Fortress Lake trail—a 24-km (15-mile) wilderness trek to one of the Canadian Rockies' largest lakes.

Lower Sunwapta Falls Trail. If it is a bit too crowded around the main Sunwapta Falls viewpoint, you can always slip away to another falls 1.3 km (0.8 miles) downstream where you are sure to find more peace and solitude. Continue downstream past the upper



falls viewpoint to where the paved trail turns to dirt and begin the gradual descent through lodgepole pine forest toward the lower falls. Halfway to your destination, the trail breaks out of the trees and views open out across the Sunwapta River to the peaks of the upper Athabasca Valley. The lower falls have formed where the river is cutting a narrow canyon similar to that of the upper, but the effect is more of a staircase than a single cataract.

Sunwapta is a Stoney word for “turbulent river”, a name adopted by the geologist and Rocky Mountain explorer Arthur Coleman when he bushwhacked down this valley in 1892.

Sunwapta Falls Rocky Mountain Lodge, at the junction with the Icefields Parkway, provides accommodations, a café, a dining room, and a gift shop throughout a season running from early May to mid-October. For information call (403) 852-4852 or visit www.sunwapta.com.

178.0 Buck Lake. A short road branches east to a picnic area, from where 110.6 a short trail leads to Buck Lake. This is one of several small lakes on the flats near where the Athabasca and Sunwapta Valley glaciers once converged. When the glaciers retreated, detached blocks of ice were left to slowly melt away within the rock and gravel debris deposited by these glaciers. As the ice melted, the glacial drift gradually slumped to form the depression that now contains the lake. This type of lake is known as a “kettle” or “sink”.

179.3 Honeymoon Lake Campground. Open from late June to early 111.4 September, this small campground lies on the southwest shore of Honeymoon Lake. 35 unserviced sites.



Across the lake, there is the endless panorama of the Endless Chain Ridge—a long bastion of pink Cambrian quartzite that dips steeply toward the Sunwapta Valley to the south. One large boulder in the midst of the campground allows a close-up inspection of the predominant rock in this part of the valley.

179.9 Athabasca Valley Viewpoint. A long pull-out on the west side of 111.8 the highway is an excellent vantage point for the upper Athabasca Valley. Looking to the south, beyond the 3,170-metre (10,400-ft) summit of Mount Quincy, you can see nearly to the headwaters of the Athabasca River; the valley exhibits the characteristic U-shape that says a humongous glacier passed this way once upon a time. The river is fed by the Columbia Glacier, which flows from the remote northwest corner of the Columbia Icefield. The valley to the right of Mount Quincy leads to Fortress Lake—one of the largest lakes in the Canadian Rockies.

184.2 Mount Christie and Athabasca River Viewpoint. Here, the 114.5 Athabasca River makes a tight horseshoe bend. Someday the river may erode through the core of the bend, bypassing the horseshoe and leaving this channel dry.

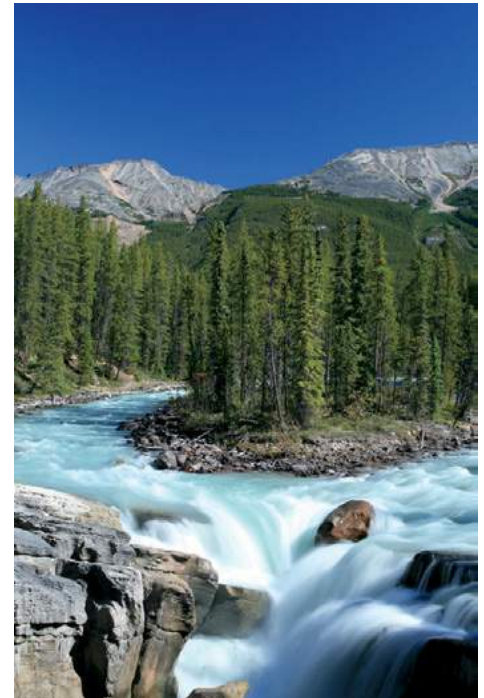


Across the valley, Mount Christie (3,103 m/10,180 ft) dominates the horizon. When Dr. James Hector of the Palliser Expedition visited the valley in 1859, he named the peak in honour of William Christie, chief factor at the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fort Edmonton.

189.1 Mount Christie Viewpoint. A pleasant roadside stop beside the 117.5 broad Athabasca River flats. Views across the river are to Mount Christie and, to its north, Mount Fryatt.



Just 100 metres (330 ft) south along the highway from the viewpoint, a small stand of aspen poplar have had the bark stripped from their



Sunwapta Falls



Buck Lake is a short walk from the Icefields Parkway.



Mount Christie and the Athabasca River

trunks up to a level about two metres (six ft) above the ground—or about the height of a tall elk. This is a sign to northbound travellers that they are entering elk country. (These animals use the bark of aspen as an emergency source of food in winter.) When Dr. James Hector of the Palliser Expedition visited the valley in the winter of 1859, he saw no sign of this member of the deer family, but today hundreds inhabit this section of the valley and its hard to miss them.

192.9 Athabasca River Viewpoint and Picnic Area. This elevated picnic area on the west side of the highway is a good viewpoint for this section of the valley. The powerful currents of the Athabasca River swirl by, cutting away at the steep bank of glacial till on which the viewpoint is situated. Down the valley to the south, two distinct peaks rise from the same mountain block—the pyramid-shaped summit of Mount Christie (3,103 m/10,180 ft) and, immediately behind, the steamship funnel of Brussels Peak. An appropriate name, perhaps, since the mountain is named for a merchant ship captained by a First World War hero named Charles Fryatt. And the next great mountain mass to the north is Mount Fryatt (3,361 m/11,030 ft), named for the captain.

Mountain goats living on the cliffs of Mount Kerkeslin to the east of the highway often abandon their lofty home to visit the steep banks of eroded glacial till exposed beneath this viewpoint. Mountain



mountain goat

goats, bighorn sheep, and other ungulates (hoofed mammals) often seek out natural mineral licks. These areas of exposed earth contain mineral salts which the animals crave and need. The animals visit the licks during the annual molt, acquiring nutrients necessary for renewing thick healthy coats and, perhaps, to reconstitute bone mass that diminishes during winter. This is one of the most reliable roadside locations for seeing goats in the mountain parks.

195.2 Mount Kerkeslin Campground. This small campground sits in a forest of spruce, pine and aspen beside the Athabasca River. It's open late June to early September. 42 unserviced sites.

The massive lower cliffs of Mount Kerkeslin rise across the valley to the east, composed of reddish-pink quartzites of Gog Group—a formation from the Early Cambrian Period that shows up in the cliffs around Lake Louise as well. From the campground, you can walk to the edge of the Athabasca River for views across valley to Whirlpool Mountain, the Mount Fryatt massif further to the south, and the twin summits of Mount Christie and Brussels Peak, further south yet. Mount Edith Cavell (3363 m/11,030 ft) rises snowy and majestic to the northwest.

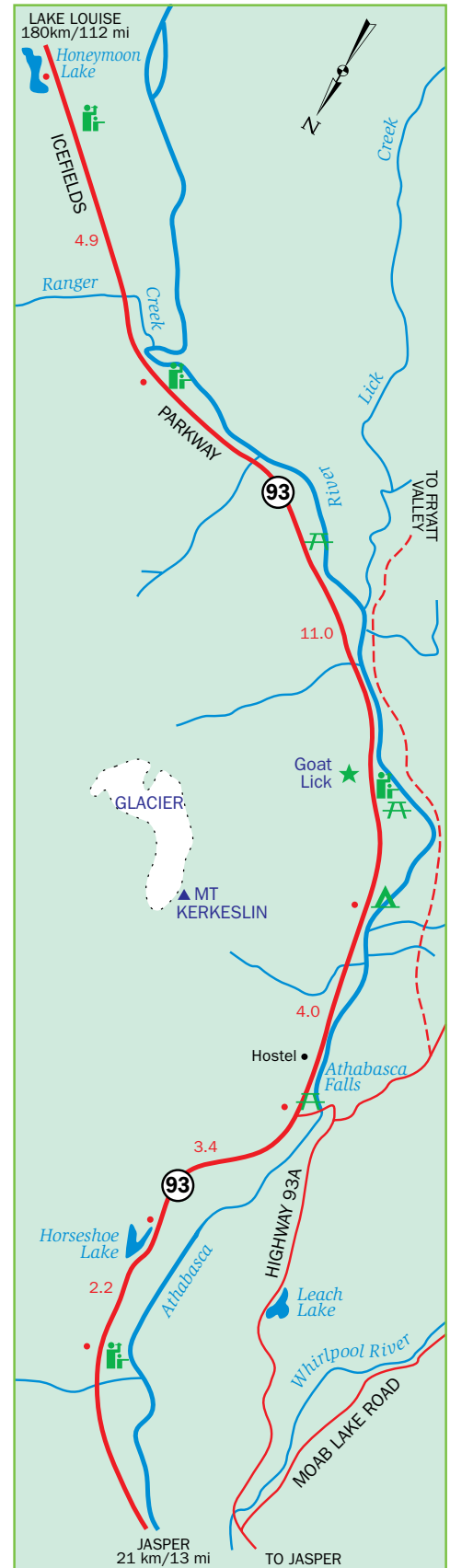
198.4 Hi-Athabasca Falls Wilderness Hostel. This rustic hostel, one km (0.6 miles) south of Athabasca Falls, accommodates 40 and is open year round. For information and reservations, call (780) 852-3215 or visit www.hihostels.ca.

199.2 Athabasca Falls—Hwy. 93A Junction. A stretch of old highway branches to the west at this intersection and provides an optional 24-km (15-mile) driving tour paralleling the Icefields Parkway. The road rejoins the Parkway 7.5 km (4.7 miles) south of the town of Jasper. Among the features along Hwy. 93A is a side-trip to the base of Mount Edith Cavell and Angel Glacier.

Athabasca Falls. The main viewing area for Athabasca Falls is 400 metres (0.2 miles) west of the intersection on Highway 93A. This waterfall, dropping over a lip of Gog quartzite and thundering down into a narrow canyon, is among the most powerful and awe-inspiring in the mountain parks. The entire force of the Athabasca River is funnelled through this gorge, and the walls of the canyon have been smoothed and potholed by the rushing waters and the abrasive gravel and sand swirled within the current. This is all the more impressive since quartzite is not a soft rock like limestone, which forms most of the Canadian Rockies' other canyons; you could take out your pocket knife and scratch away at this rock all day and all you would end up with is a knife with a worn-down blade. By walking around the falls to various viewpoints, this same smoothing, channelling and potholing effect can be seen in the forest bedrock—an indication that the river once flowed across a much broader area.

The canyon is very short, and by standing on the bridge below the falls, you can see where the Athabasca River quickly spreads to its normal width once more. The broad river flats by the picnic area, just above the falls, are covered with many rounded and smoothed rocks that were tumbled in the waters of the Athabasca over many years before being deposited on this beach.

The pink-purple cliffs of Mount Kerkeslin (2984 m/9,790 ft) rise as a backdrop to the falls across the valley to the east.

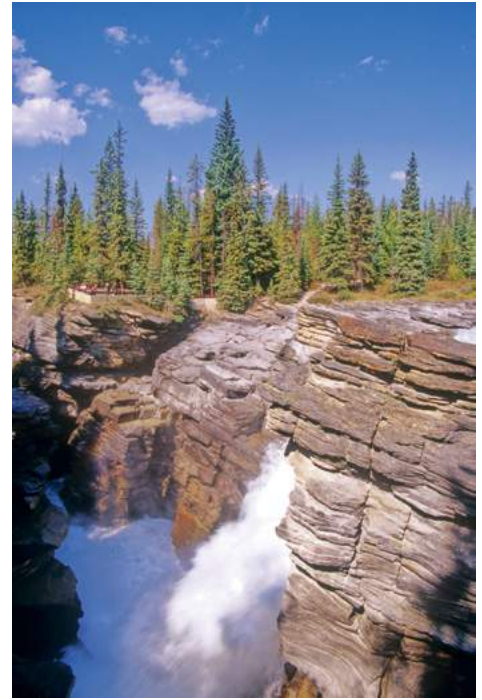


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202.6 Horseshoe Lake. A parking area hidden in the forest on the east side of the highway marks the short access trail to Horseshoe Lake, which, oddly enough, is shaped like a horseshoe. Good views above the lake to Mount Hardisty and down-valley to Mount Kerkeslin.

205.3 Whirlpool Valley Viewpoint. The sharp wedge of a peak directly across the valley is Mount Edith Cavell (3,363 m/11,030 ft), the highest mountain near the town of Jasper. In the days of the fur trade, the French voyageurs called the mountain La Montagne de la Grande Traverse, for it was here the brigades would leave the Athabasca Valley for the long arduous crossing of Athabasca Pass. This pass was the key to the first commercial trade route across North America, which was utilized annually by fur traders from 1812 until the 1840s. The broad low gap between Edith Cavell and Whirlpool Peak to the south is Whirlpool Valley, the valley that leads to Athabasca Pass.

215.3 Wabasso Lake Trail. A 2.7-km (1.7-mile) trail rolling through the forest to a small lake near the eastern edge of the Athabasca Valley. The lake is pleasant and open with good views around the valley. Its marshy shoreline is a good place to look for muskrat, and in the spring and fall, waterfowl stop here on their seasonal migrations. The low open meadow that is crossed on the way to the lake is part of Prairie de la Vache (Buffalo Prairie). When fur trader David Thompson passed up the valley in January, 1811, on his way over Athabasca Pass by dog sled and snowshoe, he abandoned his horses to winter on the grass here and noticed sign that buffalo had been feeding in the area.



Athabasca Falls



Horseshoe Lake is a picturesque body of water hidden from the highway by a dense forest.

ICEFIELDS PARKWAY

VALLEY OF THE FIVE LAKES
TO JASPER CAMPGROUNDS

220.7 Valley of the Five Lakes Trail. An easy 2.3-km (1.4-mile) hike to a series of five small lakes on the eastern edge of the valley. The lakes are home to many forms of wildlife including muskrat, moose and the occasional bear. Common loon and Barrow's golden-eye are the most common waterfowl on the lakes in summer, and the wet brushy terrain surrounding the water is the nesting ground for MacGillivray's, yellow-rumped and yellow warblers, northern water-thrushes, and yellowthroats. The pine and aspen forests along the approach trail shelter numerous ruffed grouse.

222.0 Athabasca River Bridge. A small picnic area is tucked in beneath the bridge on the east bank of the river. This is the departure point for commercially-operated rafting trips that end near Old Fort Point.

222.8 Highway 93A Junction. A 24-km (15-mile) side road paralleling the Icefields Parkway on the west side of the Athabasca River and rejoining it further south at Athabasca Falls. The road to Mount Edith Cavell branches from Hwy. 93A, 5.2 km (3.2 miles) south of this junction.

223.3 Icefields Parkway Gate. Southbound travellers are required to show their park pass—or purchase one—at this middle-of-the-road booth.

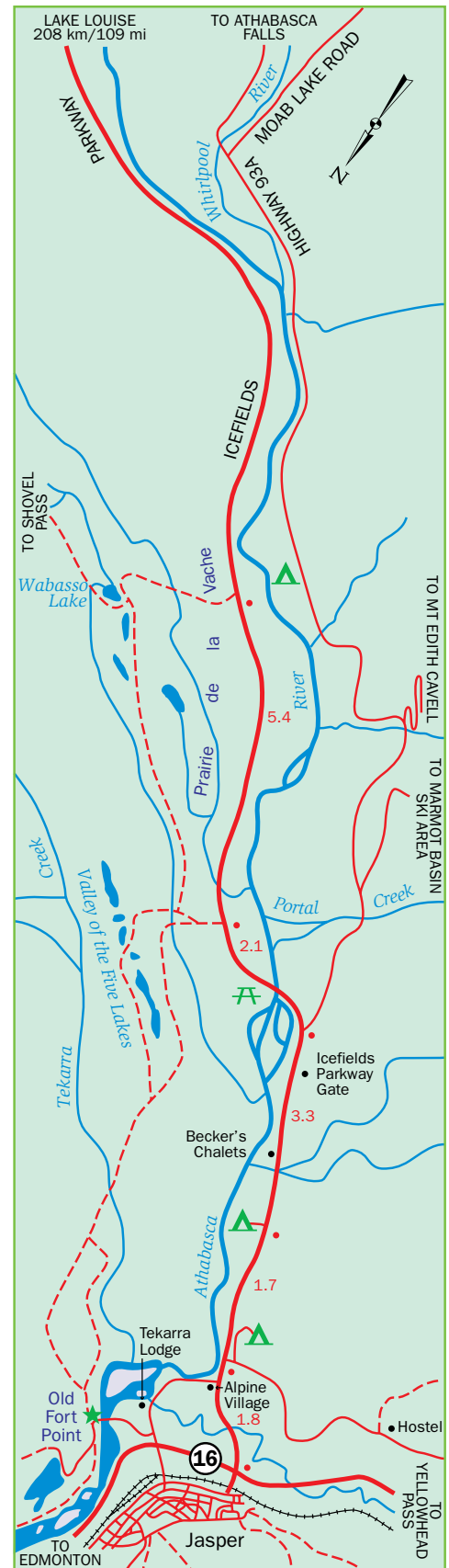
224.6 Becker's Chalets. Established in the 1940s, this sprawling riverside resort complex has accommodations for all budgets, a restaurant, and a gift shop. Open early May to mid-October. For information and reservations, call (780) 852-3779 or visit www.beckerschalets.com.

226.1 Wapiti Campground. A large, well-appointed campground just a few minutes south of the town of Jasper. It offers 322 campsites (some with electrical hook-ups) and showers. Open year-round.

Wapiti, the North American elk, frequent this section of the valley throughout the year. Though you are less likely to see elk in the area during mid-summer, when many move to higher country, many of the aspen trees bear marks of their presence. (Elk strip the bark of young aspen to a height of two metres/six feet above ground as a source of winter food.)

Elk were almost non-existent in the Athabasca Valley when Jasper National Park was formed in 1907. Believing that the species had been decimated by local hunters just prior to the turn of the century, park administrators decided to transplant some of these animals from Yellowstone Park. In March 1920, several railway car-loads of elk were captured near Gardiner, Montana, and shipped to Jasper, where 98 survivors of the trip were released. The animals prospered in a valley where most predators had been eliminated. In the 1940s, park officials worried that there was an overpopulation of elk, and they ordered park wardens to cull a certain percentage of the herd each year. After the annual slaughter was ended in 1969, numbers grew again. From a high of 500 elk in the mid-1990s, numbers have been slowly declining in and around town and this section of the valley.

But, were elk common here prior to the arrival of the white man? Even though this section of the Athabasca Valley is a wintering ground for hundreds of elk today, fur trader David Thompson did not record a single confirmed sighting in his journal when he passed this way in January, 1811. Fur traders living in the valley at Jasper House make



virtually no mention of elk. Likewise, Dr. James Hector did not see elk, or any sign of them, when he visited the valley in January, 1858. So, where were the elk? Undoubtedly, there were a few around, scattered through the forested valleys, but it is not likely that there were nearly as many as we see today.

Dense even-aged stands of lodgepole pine contain the highway on either side. Stands of lodgepole pine like these spring to life in the wake of a forest fire, and it is believed that these rather modest sized trees originated after a great fire that swept this part of the valley in 1889.

227.8 Whistlers Road Junction. A four-km (2.5-mile) side road that branches west to Whistlers Campground, HI-Jasper Hostel, and the Jasper Tramway.
141.6

▲ Whistlers Campground. The entrance to the largest campground in Jasper National Park is just west of this junction. 781 sites, including 100 with power and 77 with full hook-ups (water, sewer, power). Showers. Open from early May into early October.

228.2 Hwy. 93A Junction. A short section of the old Banff-Jasper Highway branches east along the Athabasca River and sneaks into the town of Jasper via the back door, passing the road to Old Fort Point. It also provides access to two appealing lodges—Alpine Village (780/852-3285, www.alpinevillagejasper.com) and Tekarra Lodge (780/852-3058, www.tekarralodge.com).
141.8

228.9 Miette River Bridge. From a roadside pull-out at the south end of the bridge, you can walk along the banks of this historic river. Throughout the 19th century, fur traders, gold seekers and railway surveyors ascended the Miette to Yellowhead Pass en route to the interior of British Columbia. The river is quiet and peaceful here, overshadowed by a forest of white spruce, lodgepole pine, aspen poplar and white birch, and on a warm summer day it can seem almost tropical.
142.2

229.6 Yellowhead Highway (Highway 16) Junction. The Icefields Parkway crosses the Yellowhead Highway at a point that is 21.1 km (13.1 miles) east of the Jasper West Gate and 52.4 km (32.6 miles) west of Jasper East Gate.
142.7

230.3 Town of Jasper. The northern terminus of the Icefields Parkway.
143.1



*looking across the Athabasca River from
Becker's Chalets*

CAMPING AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Along the Icefields Parkway between Lake Louise and the town of Jasper are eight campgrounds, four hostels, and four lodges (each with a restaurant). The only other services are at The Crossing (87 km/54 miles north of Lake Louise) which has gas, groceries, and liquor. The Crossing is open April to late October (closed the rest of the year). Outside of this time, there are no services on the Icefields Parkway, so planning accordingly by gassing up in Lake Louise or Jasper.

CAMPGROUNDS

Each of the eight campgrounds along the Icefields Parkway has drinking water, pit or flush toilets, and a kitchen shelter with an old-fashioned woodstove. If you have a larger trailer or RV (over 25 feet), the campgrounds in Lake Louise and Jasper are the better choice, as the Icefields Parkway campgrounds are rustic (no hookups) and the campsites generally smaller.

Campground fees range from \$16 to \$22 per site. No reservations are taken at campgrounds along the Icefields Parkway; payment on site is by cash or credit card (no debit cards).

Mosquito Creek Campground

24 km (15 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.
206 km (128 miles) south of Jasper
June to September

Don't be perturbed by the name, the bugs here are no worse than anywhere else. The 32 semi-treed campsites are spread around an unpaved parking lot, with a tumbling creek separating the campground from a hostel.

Waterfowl Lake Campground

58 km (36 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.
173 km (107 miles) south of Jasper
late June to mid-September

This large campground features 116 wooded sites between Upper and Lower Waterfowl Lakes, with a few sites in view of the lower lake. It's the only campground along the parkway with flush toilets.

Rampart Creek Campground

89 km (55 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.
141 km (88 miles) south of Jasper
June to mid-September

This 50-site campground is generally the last to fill along the Icefields Parkway. The smallish sites are not suited to RVs, but are far enough from the highway that tent campers can't hear road traffic.



Wilcox Creek Campground

Wilcox Creek Campground

124 km (77 miles) north the Trans-Canada Hwy.
106 km (66 miles) south of Jasper
June to September

If you have an RV or trailer, Wilcox Creek is the campground of choice in the vicinity of the Columbia Icefield as some of the 46 sites are large enough to pull through big rigs. This is also the trailhead for the highly recommended Wilcox Pass Trail.

Columbia Icefield Campground

125 km (78 miles) north the Trans-Canada Hwy.
105 km (65 miles) south of Jasper
Mid-May to mid-October

Just over one kilometer further north, the 33 tent sites here are close enough to the Columbia Icefield that the air is considerably colder than at Wilcox Creek. Set in a stunted subalpine forest of aspen and spruce, views extend across to the Athabasca Glacier.

Jonas Creek Campground

154 km (95 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.
77 km (48 miles) south of Jasper
Mid-May to August

For northbound travelers, Jonas Creek is the first of three campgrounds within a 50-kilometer (31-mile) stretch. It has just 25 sites, and fills up quickly each summer afternoon.



All campgrounds have covered cooking shelters.

Honeymoon Lake Campground

179 km (111 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.

51 km (33 miles) south of Jasper

Late June to August

Although this campground has only 35 sites, they are well-spaced through a montane forest, with easy access for canoeists to the adjacent Honeymoon Lake.

Mount Kerkeslin Campground

195 km (121 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.

35 km (22 miles) south of Jasper

Late June to August

Less than 30 minutes' drive from the town of Jasper, this forested campground has 42 campsites set alongside the Athabasca River.

HOSTELS

Between Lake Louise and the town of Jasper are four rustic hostels. They are operated by Hostelling International Canada. Reservations can be made by calling (778) 328-2220 or (866) 762-4122, or online at www.hihostels.ca. You can also stay without reservations, but as space is limited they are often full. Rates are \$25 per person for members (\$27.50 for non-members). Payment on site is by cash or credit card only (no debit cards).

The hostels have limited facilities. There are no phones, no Internet access, no electricity, and no showers. All hostels do have a communal kitchen and common living area. Check in at all hostels is after 5 pm and check out is 10 am.

HI-Mosquito Creek

24 km (15 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.

206 km (128 miles) south of Jasper

The first hostel north of Lake Louise makes this a popular spot for cyclists. It's open year-round, but is closed for the last two weeks of October, the first two weeks of April, and every Tuesday between October and April.

HI-Rampart Creek

89 km (55 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.

142 km (88 miles) south of Jasper

Popular with climbers, the buildings at Rampart Creek are newer than other Parkway hostels, but facilities remain basic. The surrounding area is excellent for wildlife viewing. It's open year-round, but is closed for the last two weeks of October, the first two weeks of April, and every Thursday between October and April.

HI-Beauty Creek

144 km (90 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.

88 km (55 miles) south of Jasper

Beautifully located above a wide valley through which the Sunwapta River flows, this is an excellent place to view wildlife, and nearby is the hidden gem of Beauty Creek Falls. In addition to a kitchen, communal facilities include a barbeque and a fire pit. Beauty Creek Hostel is open mid-May to mid-October (closed the rest of the year).

HI-Athabasca Falls

198 km (123 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.

32 km (20 miles) south of Jasper

Close to the popular attraction of Athabasca Falls, this hostel comprises five wooden cabins set in the forest, as well as a communal fire pit. HI-Athabasca Falls is open December through October, with the exception. It is also closed every Tuesday October through April.



All four lodges along the parkway have restaurants, including Sunwapta Falls (pictured)

LODGES

Lodge at Bow Lake

36 km (22 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.
194 km (121 miles) south of Jasper
(403) 522-2167;
lodgeatbowlake.com

Built in the 1920s this iconic red-roofed lodge has 25 basic guest rooms (no TVs or phones), but there's a memorable mountain ambience throughout. Amenities include a library filled with historic mountain literature, a dining room filled with historic memorabilia, a simple café, and a well-stocked gift shop.



Lodge at Bow Lake

The Crossing

77 km (48 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.
153 km (95 miles) south of Jasper
403/761-7000; thecrossingresort.com
April to late October

This large complex overlooks the Saskatchewan River Valley just over an hour's drive north of Lake Louise. The 66 standard motel rooms are spacious and have mountain views from private patios. The Crossing also has the only gas between Lake Louise and Jasper, a self-serve cafeteria, a restaurant, a pub, and a supersized gift shop.



The Crossing has rooms, a restaurant, and gas.



Glacier View Lodge is on the top floor of the Columbia Icefield Centre.

Glacier View Lodge

127 km (79 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.
103 km (64 miles) south of Jasper
780/852-6550; banffjaspercollection.com

May to September

Filling the top story of the Columbia Icefield Centre and overlooking the Athabasca Glacier, this lodging lies in a stunning yet remote location high above the tree line. It holds just 29 standard rooms (17 with glacier views), and three larger, more luxurious corner rooms. All units have satellite TV and phones.

Sunwapta Falls Rocky Mountain Lodge

176 km (109 miles) north of the Trans-Canada Hwy.
55 km (34 miles) south of Jasper
780/852-4852; sunwapta.com

May to mid-October

This historic lodging is within walking distance of the picturesque waterfall for which it is named. It features 52 comfortable motel-like units, with either two queen beds or one queen bed and a fireplace; some have balconies and all have TVs. Also onsite is a gift shop and restaurant.

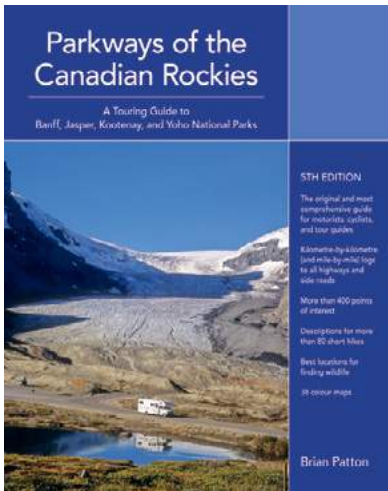


Sunwapta Falls Rocky Mountain Lodge

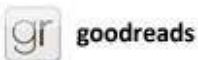
ABOUT THIS EBOOK

The Icefields Parkway Driving Guide is from *Parkways of the Canadian Rockies*.

In print since 1975, this book is the region's original and most comprehensive driving guide.



MORE INFORMATION



BUY THIS BOOK

Parkways of the Canadian Rockies is sold by retailers throughout the Canadian Rockies, and is available through these online retailers:



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For the past 50 years, BRIAN PATTON has interpreted the natural and human history of the Canadian Rockies in books, on film and through presentations. His other books include the *Canadian Rockies Trail Guide*, *50 Walks and Hikes in Banff National Park*, *Tales from the Canadian Rockies*, *Mountain Chronicles: Jon Whyte* and *Bear Tales from the Canadian Rockies*. He continues to work on a variety projects from his home in Invermere, British Columbia.

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