

Trail 15: Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park

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Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park marks the west end of a large tract of unbroken native grasslands. The Milk River runs through the park and the valley is filled with cliffs, hoodoos, cottonwood forests and coulees. This area has special spiritual significance to the Blackfoot people.

The park is 42 km southeast of the town of Milk River. Access to the park from Milk River along Hwy 501 is well signed and the highway from this direction is paved. Writing-On-Stone is located approximately 60 km southwest of Foremost. Follow Hwy 879 south to Hwy 501, then head west following the signs. Access via this route is also paved. Both of these towns have fuel, meals and accommodation available.

The stretch of Hwy 501 between Milk River and the junction with Hwy 500 is mostly large farm fields with very little habitat favourable for birds. However, depending on the time of year, raptors such as Bald and Golden Eagles, Ferruginous, Swainson's, Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawks might be seen. The occasional Prairie Falcon, Merlin or Kestrel may be sighted too. Great Horned Owls often nest along the highway in farm woodlots. Other typical birds along the way include Western Meadowlark, Horned Lark, Mourning Dove and different species of blackbirds. During migration, different species of ducks and shorebirds may be observed in farm dugouts and prairie potholes. **The highway is narrow and traffic can be busy at times. There are very few places to pull off, so EXTREME CAUTION is necessary.** All of the land along this highway is private, so permission to access these properties should be obtained.

The short stretch of Hwy 500 from its junction with Hwy 501 (A) has some farmland but is mostly surrounded by native grasslands. Other than the raptors and other birds previously mentioned, one may observe Western and Eastern Kingbirds, Pronghorn and with luck, a Loggerhead Shrike in late spring to early fall. It is possible to see Northern Shrike during late fall, winter and early spring. Sharp-tailed Grouse and Gray Partridge may also be observed.

Approximately 7.5 km along Hwy 500 south of its junction with Hwy 501, a gravel road provides access to the Milk River (B). Look for a sign that says RGE RD 131 and "Rodeo Grounds and River Access". The road is 3.5 km long and runs along the park boundary. Access beyond the road is restricted, but it is a good place to find Vesper Sparrow and kingbirds. As you drop downhill through hoodoos, be on the lookout for Golden Eagle, Kestrel or Prairie Falcon. The parking area is small, but only 25 m from the river. This is a good place to scan the river, the hoodoos and the valley across the river. It offers spectacular views of the Sweetgrass Hills in Montana and the hoodoos and cliffs along the Milk River valley. Don't forget your camera! One often sees Mule Deer along this stretch of road.

Once you return to Hwy 500, turn right. The access to Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park (C) is only 700 m to the east. Long-billed Curlew are often seen along the short stretch between Hwy 500 and the Park's Interpretive Visitor Centre. Once you cross the Texas gate, turn left to the Visitor Centre. The centre offers another great view of the Sweetgrass Hills and the hoodoo-laden river valley. The Visitor Centre is open from the May long-weekend until mid-September. Hours are 09:00 to 19:00 on Fridays and Saturdays and from 09:30 to 16:30 on Sundays through Thursdays. A copy of the Bird Checklist for the park may be obtained at the front desk. You have to ask for one, but it is free. Of the 160 birds listed, over 40 are considered migrants (spring and/or fall) while 60 are considered to be summer residents. An example of some summer residents are Yellow-breasted Chat, Short-eared Owl, Sprague's Pipit, Rock Wren, Baird's and Brewer's Sparrows, Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs, Lark Bunting and Baltimore Oriole.

First Nation rock art is a feature of this park and no visit would be complete without a guided tour to the restricted area. For information regarding this art, tours, and other information concerning the park go to: www.albertaparks.ca/writing-on-stone.aspx.

A short drive from the Visitor's Centre will take you to the bottom of the river valley and the campground/day use areas. If you have decided to camp, it is best to make reservations ahead of time as this is a very popular destination campground during long-weekends and the summer months of July and August.

The day use parking lot is at the bottom of the hill to your right. After parking take a stroll around the campground loop. Brown Thrashers, Spotted Towhees, Downy Woodpeckers, Northern Flickers, American Robins and Cedar Waxwings are just a few of the birds that are relatively easy to find. A pair of Merlins nests near the outdoor theatre, so if things are quiet, they may be on the hunt. Depending on the time of day and time of year, many other species may be seen; especially migrating warblers and thrushes. You will surely hear cock pheasants crowing in the background; the challenge is to find them!

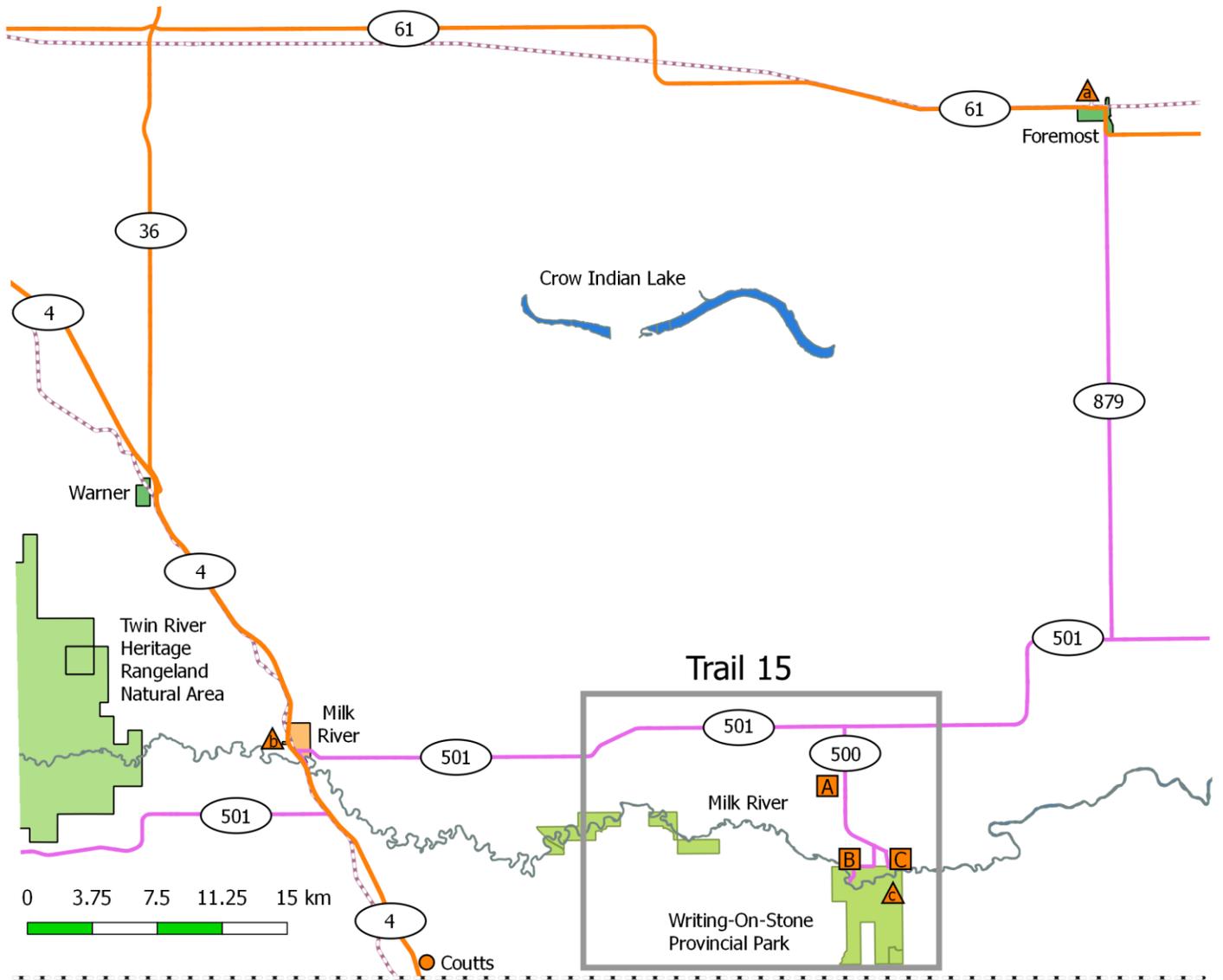
One thing to note is, if the Group Camps are occupied, ask for permission to bird in those sites or pass them by. If they are vacant, some interesting birds may be found as they are adjacent to the Milk River and have a good mix of shrubs, trees and dense cover. Make it a point to scan across the river: you might be surprised at what you see. Don't worry if the group sites are occupied the campground has lots of other good access points.

The Hoodoo Trail starts at the entrance to the day use parking lot. It is approximately 2 km one way and will take a minimum of 90 minutes return, depending on what you find and how often you stop. Take plenty of water, sunscreen, bug repellent and don't forget your camera and binoculars. Adequate footwear is recommended: not sandals or flip-flops. The trail is narrow, uneven and steep in places. Uneven stairs are chiseled into the sandstone and cribbed stairways have eroded, so caution is necessary. Trail conditions will vary with weather, so during wet weather they will be slippery. Since it is a 4 km round-trip and often done in very hot weather, a person must consider their fitness level. There are benches to rest on along the way, but no toilet facilities. The trail takes you through hoodoos, then along the Milk River for a few hundred meters and back into hoodoos. You must stay on the trail, as the entire area is extremely sensitive to disturbance. It is recommended to make the hike in the evening or early morning to avoid the heat of the day. More bird activity will be happening then anyhow.

Rock Wren, American Pipit (in the fall), different sparrows and perhaps even a Yellow-breasted Chat may be seen along the trail. Butterflies, wild flowers and fantastic scenery make the hike worthwhile even if you don't find many new birds. The river reach is very thickly brushed and if you "bird by ear", this is the place to test your knowledge.

The Writing-On-Stone area is noted for turning up some very unusual and rare species for Alberta. Some of the species seen in the area include: Bullock's Oriole, Sage Thrasher, Mountain Plover, Eastern Screech-Owl, White-throated Swift, Lewis's Woodpecker, Cassin's Kingbird, Pinyon Jay, and Orchard Oriole. Keep your eyes and ears open for potential surprises. If the river is low, consider wading across. This area is much less visited and has the potential for interesting species. Be sure to obey the signs indicating areas with restricted access.

Remember that Prairie Rattlesnakes are protected by law in Alberta, so if you encounter one, it has the right-of-way. It is as afraid of you as you might be of it and all it wants to do is get away!



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Montana

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| Observation Points | Amenities |
| Highway 500; Native Grasslands | Foremost: fuel, meals, lodgings and camping |
| Range Road 13-1; Rodeo Grounds, River Access | Milk River: all amenities |
| Visitor Centre; Access to Park | Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park: camping and restrooms |

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