

BISON, BACKROADS, AND BADDEST BADLANDS

Grasslands National Park & Wood Mountain Uplands

Grasslands National Park and the surrounding area offers some of the most spectacular drives in the province. Stretched along Saskatchewan's southern border, the park consists of two separate blocks—the West Block near Val Marie and the Frenchman River Valley, and the more remote East Block, famous for its magnificent badlands. With large tracts of undisturbed grassland, bountiful wildlife, and non-stop panoramic views, it's an area that begs to be explored.

The West Block, southeast of Val Marie, encompasses rugged, deeply incised coulees, wild buttes, and the wide Frenchman River Valley. You have an excellent chance of seeing bison, mule deer, pronghorn, and coyotes, or perhaps you might spot rare or endangered species such as ferruginous hawks, burrowing owls, long-billed curlews, sage grouse, or eastern short-horned lizards. Wildflower displays can be fantastic.

Driving routes include a relatively short trip south of Val Marie, and longer trips into the Frenchman River Valley that can be combined into wonderful loop trips. From the eastern end, you can access roads that make a great short-cut route to the park's East Block. Most roads are fairly good gravel, although some stretches in the eastern end of the West Block



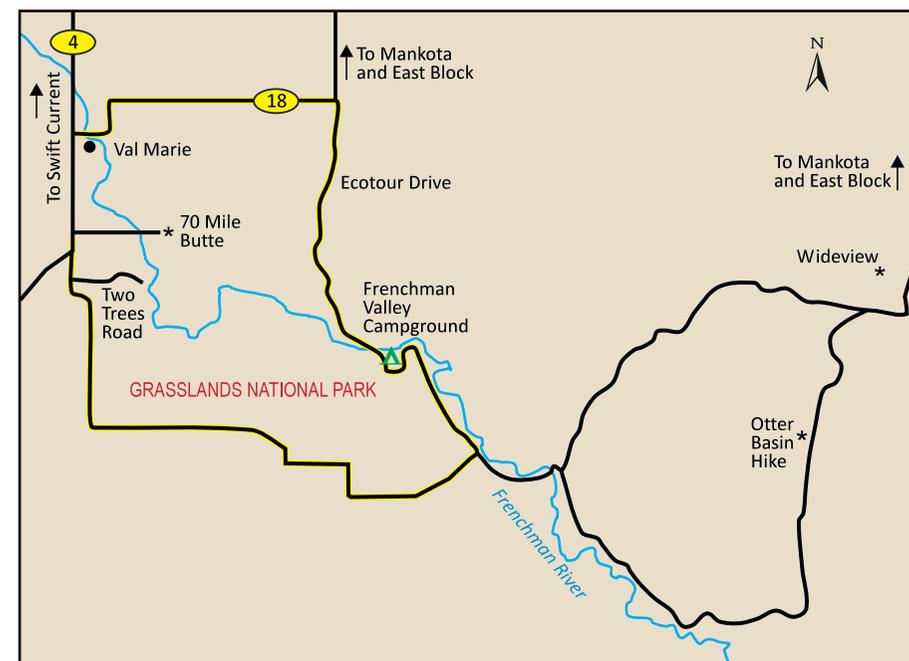
Bison in the West Block.

might be a problem in wet conditions. It's always best to check on road conditions at the park visitor centre, especially if it has been raining. There is a campground in the valley, but nowhere to get food or fuel. Some roads are quite remote with sparse traffic, so be sure to have enough water and food when venturing into the park.

Val Marie

In Val Marie, your first stop should be the park visitor centre. They have information on interpretive programs and activities, brochures, maps, and displays, and keep track of wildlife sightings and road conditions. Pick up a copy of the booklet on the Ecotour Scenic Drive, an 80-km loop trip through part of the West Block with points of interest indicated along the way. If you plan to do some hikes, also pick up brochures to the various hiking routes. Register at the centre for wilderness camping. Right across the street, be sure to stop at Prairie Wind and Silver Sage—The Friends of Grasslands. They have displays, a coffee shop, a gift shop with local artwork, and an excellent collection of books on nature and travel.

Val Marie has a hotel, bed & breakfasts, a well-equipped campground, grocery store, and restaurants. There's a gas station just north of town on Hwy #4. If you're heading into the West Block then taking the short-cut route to the East Block, it's best to top up your gas tank, since gas stations are few and far between in this region.



South of Val Marie

The area just south of Val Marie is dominated by 70 Mile Butte, the highest point of land in the area. The flat-topped butte was named during the early days of the North West Mounted Police patrols, since it was 70 miles east to Wood Mountain post, and 70 miles west to the Eastend post. Drive south of Val Marie on Hwy #4 for about 4.5 km, then turn east where you see a sign indicating Butte Road. It's about a 5-km drive to the trailhead at the end of the road (N 49.20395 W 107.66570). Hiking trails lead to the top of 70 Mile Butte, as well as to closer Eagle Butte, with breathtaking views of the countryside.

Here, as well as almost anywhere in the West Block, you could encounter rattlesnakes. Prairie rattlesnakes are not aggressive, so the main danger is inadvertently stepping on or too close to one of these well-camouflaged reptiles. Be especially careful stepping over rocks or walking through thick grass.

Drive back to Hwy #4 and continue south. Where the paved highway curves west, keep going south on the gravel grid road. At this intersection a sign indicates the road to The Crossing Resort, which has campsites as well as accommodation in suites, all with fantastic views over the rugged landscape. Continue south on the grid road for a short distance until you see a Parks Canada sign pointing east (N 49.18196 W 107.73260). This road offers excellent views over 70 Mile Butte. Anytime we stay in the Val Marie area, we come here for sunset, as the setting sun often gives the west-facing butte a warm red glow.

The road descends into the valley to a former ranch yard that is now a picnic site (N 49.18084 W 107.68737). Tipis here can be rented for the night (make arrangements



70 Mile Butte.



Frenchman River south of Val Marie.

at the visitor centre). This is also the trailhead for the Two Trees Trail running into the hills, and for the easy 2-km loop Riverwalk Trail in the opposite direction that follows the banks of the Frenchman River.

Frenchman River Valley

The drive through the valley takes you into the heart of the West Block. Begin by heading east of Val Marie on Hwy #18 through the low rolling hills, farm land and pasture land dotted with sage. After about 14 km, where the highway curves north, a Parks Canada sign guides you to a gravel road to the south.

Only a couple of kilometres past the park gate, the road passes through a prairie dog colony, the first of many in the area. The distinctive mounds on both sides of the road are entrances to their complex burrows that extend far beneath the ground. Black-tailed prairie dogs are much larger and more social than the ubiquitous Richardson's ground squirrels (more commonly referred to as gophers) that we see throughout the prairies. Usually living in family groups, they are very vocal, often barking and chirping when danger is near. This is the northern end of their range that stretches all the way to Texas and Mexico. In fact, the area in and around this part of the Frenchman River Valley is the only place in Canada where they live. One stop along the way is the trailhead for the Top Dog Town Trail, an easy 0.75-km loop through the prairie dog colony to an impressive viewpoint.