

Introduction

A long time ago a giant went hunting beavers along Lake Athabasca. The beavers had built a dam across the great lake, so the giant broke it open to lower the water and find the beavers. Spotting a beaver, the giant threw a spear at it, and thinking he had killed it, tossed it on the south shore of the lake. But the beaver wasn't dead and it kicked up the soil to such an extent that it was ground into sand. And that, according to a local Dene legend, is how the Athabasca Sand Dunes came to be.

Scientists have a more complex explanation involving retreating glaciers and sandstone sediments. But when we saw this strange and wild landscape for the first time, it wasn't at all difficult to relate to stories of mythical giants.

The Athabasca Sand Dunes are like nowhere else on Earth—the largest active dune fields in Canada, among the most northerly major dunes in the world, a desert-like environment seemingly misplaced in the midst of the northern forest. Athabasca Sand Dunes Provincial Wilderness Park preserves a series of dune fields, as well as rivers, lakes and forest, stretching for about 100 kilometres along the south shore of Lake Athabasca.

It's a special place where we can land our

canoe on an exquisite beach in mid-summer and not find a single human footprint. Instead we find flowering plants that grow only here, tree roots two metres above ground, springs emerging from sand, towering dunes with sinuous knife-edge crests, and ghostly skeletons of ancient forests turning blood red with the glow of twilight. We paddle down the William River with a sense of wonder at how it weaves through forest and sand. Then when we fly over, the river becomes a beautiful abstract painting that only Mother Nature could create. If we had to choose one word to describe the Athabasca Sand Dunes, it would surely be “magical”.

Our love affair with the dunes began in 1990 with a canoe trip down the William River





and along the south shore of Lake Athabasca while on assignment for *Canadian Geographic* magazine. We were immediately hooked, and returned every chance we had. We are fortunate to have visited and photographed spectacular landscapes in many parts of the world, but this was different, not only visually but spiritually, profoundly affecting how we felt about the wilderness. It was not an exotic landscape in some far-flung corner of the globe. It was an exotic landscape right in our own back yard, a unique part of our natural heritage.

We hope that our book will help foster an appreciation of this special place, and that those who travel there will be aware of its fragile nature and the need to tread lightly. Whether or not we visit remote wilderness landscapes such as the Athabasca Sand Dunes, it is reassuring that such places still exist, where nature's mysteries haven't all been solved and where the magic continues.

The William River's complex riverbed as seen from an airplane. Most of the sand visible here is under water; the dark hues are deep channels while the light hues indicate sand covered by only a few centimetres of water. Sand bars above the water appear bright white, such as the one in the lower left part of the picture.