

# Introduction

**S**askatchewan *Scenic Secrets* is a visual journey across Saskatchewan, from the deep south to the far north, through all of the province's diverse ecoregions, to where the beauty of nature takes centre stage. Saskatchewan's special places are everywhere, from popular parks to little-known and little-visited gems that truly are "secrets". While some are hidden in remote wilderness, a surprising number are practically in our back yards, accessible to anyone with the motivation to venture off the beaten path.

Saskatchewan is best known as a "prairie province", perhaps not surprising when we consider the history of settlement. While prairie is certainly a defining characteristic, it is only one part of the fascinating story of Saskatchewan's natural landscapes.

Saskatchewan is rolling grasslands disappearing into a distant horizon, with not a tree in sight, but it is also thick forest with 20-metre tall trees. Saskatchewan is arid

badlands with eroded buttes and silvery sage, but it is also lush green valleys and secluded sanctuaries where carpets of ferns thrive under a forest canopy. The Saskatchewan landscape is rife with superlatives: some of the largest tracts of uncultivated grasslands left on the Great Plains, the largest sand dunes in Canada, wetlands of international significance, and wild pristine rivers rushing through deep canyons and over magnificent waterfalls. No one landscape typifies Saskatchewan. Indeed, the Saskatchewan landscape is best defined by its incredible diversity.

Looking at the big picture, Saskatchewan has four major Ecozones – broad divisions of major physical features, further divided into eleven Ecoregions (see map on page 124). Just over a third of the province lies within the Prairie Ecozone, including the vast grasslands of the southwest, most of Saskatchewan's agricultural land, and aspen parkland where aspen groves mix with fescue grasslands. An oddity in the Prairie

Ecozone is the Cypress Hills Uplands where elements of forest and alpine landscapes meld with prairie.

Moving north, the Boreal Plain Ecozone is a wide band across the middle of Saskatchewan, covering just over a quarter of its land mass. Here we find the northern reaches of agriculture and the beginning of the great boreal forest, dominated by coniferous trees such as pine, spruce and tamarack.

Further north, we enter the Boreal Shield Ecozone, covering close to a third of the province. As the name suggests, boreal forest is associated with the Canadian Shield, characterized in many places by massive outcroppings of Precambrian rock, some of the oldest on earth.

The most northerly and smallest Ecozone is the Taiga Shield. Sometimes called the "Land of Little Sticks", this is a transition area where stunted widely-spaced trees are scattered amongst innumerable bogs and wetlands as we approach the tundra further north.

*Saskatchewan Scenic Secrets* is a celebration of the beauty of nature, but we also hope that the book will help to raise awareness of Saskatchewan's special natural places and the need to conserve them. The story of Saskatchewan landscapes is both good news and bad news – the good news is that we have such a rich variety of beautiful



*Elm trees and ostrich ferns along the Red Deer River in northeastern Saskatchewan.*

natural areas; the bad news is that many are endangered spaces that are disappearing at an alarming rate.

We cannot imagine a Saskatchewan without natural prairie, where lavender crocus

blossoms announce the arrival of spring, and sage grouse perform their age-old mating rituals. Nor can we imagine a Saskatchewan without canoe trips down clear northern rivers running wild and free, where no signs of "civilization" intrude on a

wilderness experience lost to most of the world. When deciding how land is used, we hope that some day governments will not only look at what land does for the economy, but also at what the beauty of nature does for our souls.