



The aerial view of different levels of sand in the braided section of the William River. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN | WILDERNESS CAMPING

Athabasca Sand Dunes breathtaking

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

The east bank of the William River is clothed in dark green jack pine forest typical of the north. But the west side seems like a totally different world, with massive banks of golden sand rising 30 metres straight out of the water.

We pull our canoe into shore and struggle up the steep slopes to the top. Sand stretches to the western horizon, as we gaze over the largest sand dunes in Canada, the largest this far north anywhere in the world.

Last summer, we returned to our favourite place on Earth, the Athabasca Sand Dunes of northern Saskatchewan.

It had been a few years since our last trip, and we were delighted to find that little had changed, other than some evidence of forest fires.

Isolation and protection in a provincial park are preserving this enchanting landscape so far.

Extending for 100 kilometres along the south shore of Lake Athabasca, these dunes are unique. It's as if a chunk of desert had been plopped in the middle of northern forest and lake lands. And if that isn't weird enough, rivers slice through the dunes, making a canoe the best way to get around.

We start with a float plane trip to the mouth of the William River. Many years ago, we canoed down the river as it raced over frothing rapids and cut through forest and sand.

This time we're paddling upstream. The last 18 kilometres is rapid free, but rocks are replaced with the

sand-choked river spreading into a shallow braided stream, a half kilometre wide in places.

Paddling against the current is always a struggle, but in shallow water it's difficult to get our paddles deep enough for powerful strokes. We constantly zigzag across the wide river searching for deeper channels.

The next day, we reach the end of the rapids, a stunning landscape where the William makes its dramatic transformation from stone-filled torrent to watery sandbox.

Back of the banks are endemic plants that grow nowhere else in the world, along with dozens of rare plants for which these dunes are famous.

We find fuzzy felt-leaved willow, delicate strands of sand chickweed that seem to thrive in pure sand, and Athabasca thrift resembling tiny pink candy apples.

A two-hour hike west brings us to the giant dunes. About 40 monsters lie in the centre of the dune field, many rising over 30 metres high and stretching a kilometre long, their knife-edge crests flowing in sinuous curves.

Climbing to the top, we keep reminding ourselves that we're still in Saskatchewan, not the Sahara.

On Lake Athabasca's south shore, we explore even more gems, endless beaches, dunes swallowing entire bushes and exhumed forests where ancient desiccated tree trunks stand like ghostly sentinels guarding the bay.

When our pilot, Cliff, picks us up, we load the canoe and gear, then swoop over the William River. Looking down over the braided section and expansive delta, the William magically becomes a giant abstract painting.

Multi-hued shades of gold, beige and copper reveal varying depths of underwater sandbars, while above-water sand appears white, and deep channels a chocolate brown.



CENTRE: Canoe is the best way to take in the unique scenery. ABOVE: Spruce tree roots stand atop a sand dune near Thomson Bay.

Swirling colours remind us of butterscotch pudding marbled with whipped cream. The William is full of surprises, but saves its grand finale for those who fly over.

This certainly isn't the easiest place to visit. There are no facilities. Options include chartering a float plane to drop you off or arranging boat trans-

port from a Lake Athabasca community. We like to travel by canoe, but some visitors get around by hiking.

Either way, you have to be fully prepared for self-sufficient wilderness camping.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.



SHIRLEY MCCLELLAN

ADVANCING WOMEN | MCCLELLAN

Early leaders inspired former ag minister

BY BARBARA DUCKWORTH
CALGARY BUREAU

Crowds always rose to give Shirley McClellan a round of applause when she entered the room, whether she was delivering a government speech or opening a bull sale.

The accolades were often a surprise to the former Alberta agriculture minister, who served during the height of the BSE crisis in 2003.

"Something like that might be a shock to me, but at that time... people thought, 'she is our leader,'" she said after speaking at the Advancing Women conference held in Calgary April 28-29.

More than 350 women heard the former deputy premier describe her journey from growing up near Hanna, Alta., to becoming a rural politician. Most recently, she has been chancellor of the University of Lethbridge and the scholar in residence with the University of Alberta's agriculture and rural economy faculties.

She and her husband, Lloyd, farmed near New Brigid. Their son, Mitchell, works with them now, and daughter Tami is a teacher.

McClellan was first elected to the provincial legislature in 1987 and won her seat six times. She held key cabinet posts first under premier Don Getty and then Ralph Klein.

McClellan looks back at people like her grandmother, who possessed a strong spirit and work ethic. She praised pioneers who fought for women's legal rights in Canada, paved the way for women today to take on the world.

"These journeys that these young women will embark on, the world is wide open to them," she said.

McClellan admired how the Famous Five fought in court to have women recognized as persons in 1929.

Life was difficult for those early pathfinders, but McClellan never felt gender was an issue as she travelled the world on trade missions.

As deputy premier, she had a specific task.

"My job was to ensure that rural issues, rural concerns, rural interests were at our table. I took that to heart and was very proud to carry that role."

She said she worked hard to remind her city-based cabinet colleagues that the wealth seen in downtown Edmonton, Red Deer and Calgary came from the oil and gas, mines, forests and farms in rural Alberta.

McClellan appreciates the legacy of the past, but she said she has encountered other women over the years who also had a profound influence on her life, including Lois Hole, Anne McLellan and Indira Samarasekera.

"I never felt being a woman mattered. They were always respectful. People out in my area take you for what you are."