

FARMLIVING

CARE HOME RESIDENTS CARE FOR CHICKENS

Residents and staff of an assisted living facility in Islay, Alta., welcomed four additional but unorthodox arrivals this summer. | Page 20



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The badlands in Grasslands National Park's East Block provide spectacularly wild vistas. | ROBIN & ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS



A black-tailed prairie dog does a Jump-yip as a way of communicating with others in the colony.

Grasslands park features three stunning scenic drives

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Few places in southern Saskatchewan can match Grasslands National Park for scenic driving routes. Fall can be a great time to go, with fewer visitors and less busy campgrounds. We have also had some of our best wildlife sightings in the fall.

The park has two blocks — the West Block dominated by the Frenchman River Valley south-east of Val Marie, and the East Block south of Wood Mountain, home to wild badlands. Ideally, you should visit both since each offers different landscapes and experiences.

The jumping-off point for the West Block is the village of Val Marie, home to the park visitor centre and other services such as accommodation, gas and groceries. A relatively recent development is that the village restored its classic grain elevator dating to 1927 and opened it for public tours and special events.

The most popular route is the Ecotour Scenic Drive through the Frenchman River Valley. It stretches for 20 kilometres one way, with the option of connecting to the grid road system to make a loop trip back to Val Marie.

It's a grand landscape of rugged



The Frenchman River is a highlight of the park's West Block.

hills, weathered buttes and wooded coulees. You can pick up a booklet at the visitor centre outlining stops along the way where you can see ancient tipi rings and various landforms and learn about native grasses, wildlife and the early days of ranching. The road also passes trailheads for a variety of hiking trails.

This is the best part of the park for wildlife. One critter you can't miss is the black-tailed prairie dog — the only place in Canada to find them in their native habitat. Looking somewhat similar to the gophers (Richardson's ground squirrels) that are found throughout the Prai-

ries, they are considerably larger, have that tell-tale black tip on their tails and live in massive colonies that can stretch for more than a kilometre.

The road passes right beside the colonies, providing close views of their antics such as family members "kissing" each other or jumping up and yipping as a warning call. This is also the best place to watch for rare burrowing owls, which sometimes take over old prairie dog burrows.

The valley is home to mule deer, pronghorn, moose, bison and a variety of rarer creatures such as short-horned lizards, and grass-

land birds such as loggerhead shrikes that are listed as threatened. You may even find prairie rattlesnakes.

About halfway through the valley is the immensely popular Frenchman Valley Campground, which is often full in summer. It's the ideal spot to experience natural prairie wilderness.

Venturing farther east into the West Block we can drive the remote Back Country Loop, covering about 80 kilometres starting from and returning to the campground. It follows the Frenchman River Valley to just short of the U.S. border and then climbs onto the

higher table lands through wild hills and slopes with sweeping views. Along the way we pass the trailhead for the 15-kilometre Otter Basin Route, considered the most challenging hike in the park.

The road eventually leaves the park, but you can complete the loop by taking another road that runs through a community pasture back to the park. The route has a back-of-beyond feel to it, with roads only suitable for dry weather.

The East Block has just one driving route but it's the best of all. The only facilities in this part of the park are in Rock Creek Campground and day use area, located in a former ranch yard in a valley next to the creek.

The Badlands Parkway, built only a few years ago, starts near the campground and runs for 11 km along the rim of the Rock Creek Valley, where we look over spectacular badlands. Several free-standing buttes dot the valley, hillside slopes resemble melted chocolate and strange formations seem like from another planet.

The single-lane paved road has several pull-offs and parking areas with vantage points over the valley and starting points for walks through the other-worldly landscape. Some spots have interpretive signs about geology, wildlife, Indigenous history, the early days of ranching and dinosaur discoveries. Best of all are the Parks Canada red chairs where you can relax and enjoy the view or watch the sunset.

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