

Elk Island National Park of Canada

Climate

The park has continental climate conditions. The mountains to the west tend to block the Pacific air. Air that does cross the mountains has been largely drained of moisture during its passage through the mountains. The resulting dry air makes the area prone to extremes in temperature. Southern air masses from the United States and arctic air masses from the north produce hot summers and cold winters.

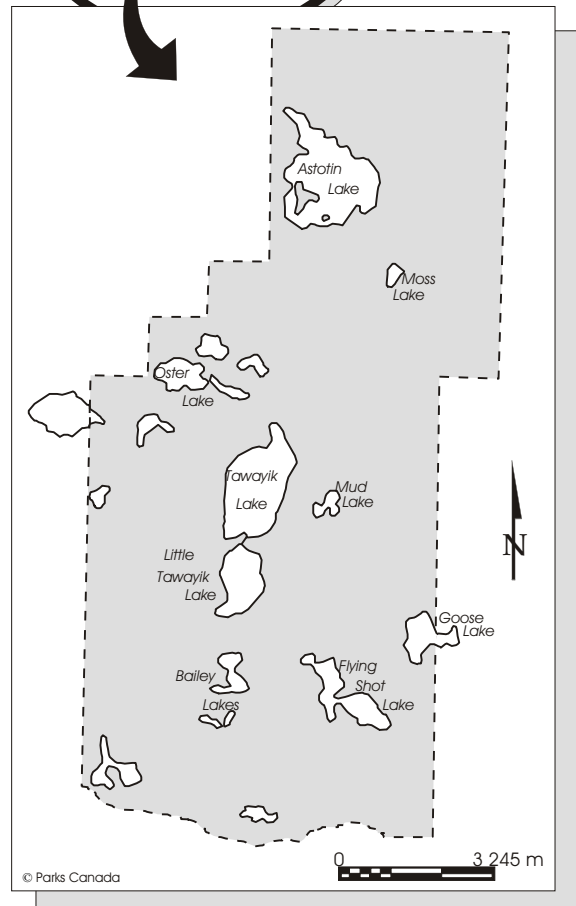
Geology

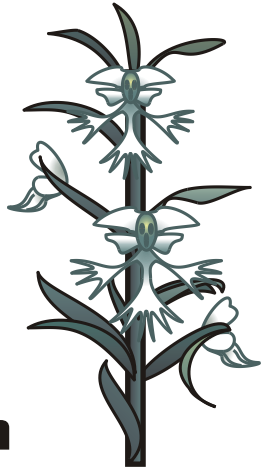
Elk Island has hilly terrain with elevation changes of 30-60 m. The landscape is known as a dead-ice moraine, an area where glacial ice melted in place rather than retreat as part of the main ice sheet. The deposits of glacial debris that were left behind produced a terrain of rolling hills and hollows.



Location

Elk Island National Park is located in central Alberta, a mere 45 km east of Edmonton. Elk Island became Canada's sixth national park in 1913. It represents a 194 km² part of Canada's Southern Boreal Plains and Plateaux Natural Region. This Region is also represented by three other national parks: Prince Albert, Riding Mountain, and Wood Buffalo. The only completely fenced-in park in the system, it is literally an "island" of nature surrounded by grain fields, pastureland, industries, and towns. Elk Island is located in the Prairie Ecozone.





Vegetation

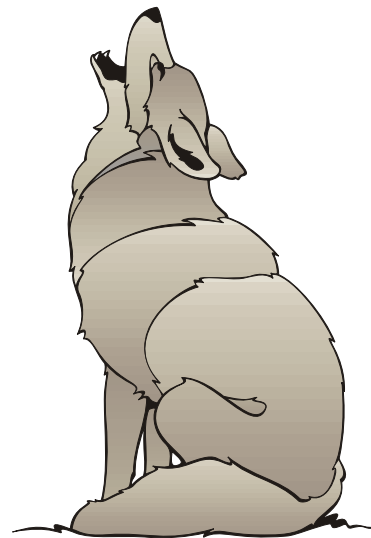
The park's main tree species in this transition zone is trembling aspen, but one can also find balsam poplar, black spruce, white spruce, tamarack, and white birch. The grass and sedge meadows contain many prairie species. Some 450 species of plants are found in the park, including horsetails, marigolds, willows, currants, orchids, and asters. The world's smallest flowering plant, the wolffia, may also be seen in the park.

Wildlife

Wildlife played a role in the establishment of the park as early as 1906 when a 41 km² elk sanctuary was set aside. In 1907, 400 plains bison were re-introduced to what was then called Elk Park. Today 44 mammal species are known to occur in the park, including moose, elk, white-tailed deer, beaver, coyote, muskrats, porcupines, Canada's largest herd of plains bison, and a small herd of wood bison. Overhunting has extirpated all large predators (except coyote), including black bears, grizzly bears, lynx, and wolf. Trumpeter swans can be found in Elk Island, as well as some 230 other woodland, meadow, and wetland birds, including ducks, gulls, terns, grebes, loons, owls, flycatchers, woodpeckers, warblers, and swallows. Most of these species nest in the park.

Activities

Visitors to Elk Island can enjoy bird watching, kayaking, canoeing and sailing on Astotin Lake, or walking. The park has a beach for sunbathing, but prime swimming is not recommended here as the lakes contain swimming itch. A semi-serviced campground offers 80 sites. Fishing is not offered in the park as there are only minnows in the lakes and ponds. The park does offer a small golf course and playground near the picnic area and campground, as well as interpretive events. In the winter, the park maintains several well-marked ski trails. Winter is a wonderful time for wildlife viewing.



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