

THE LOW DOWN



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GRASSLANDS NATIONAL PARK, SASKATCHEWAN

Southern Saskatchewan is home to rich wildlife, paleontological finds and star-gazing galore

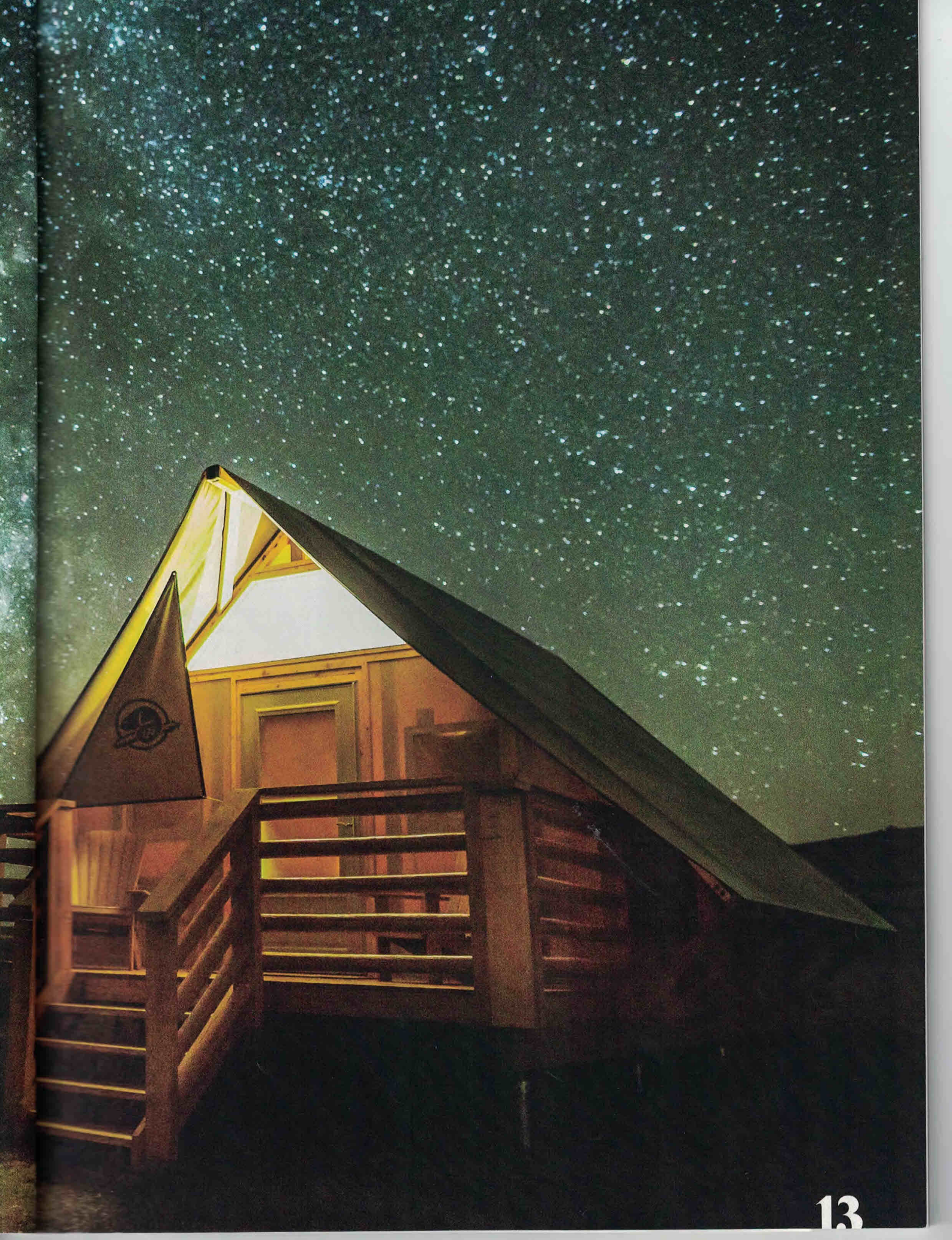
BY JAMIE ROSS

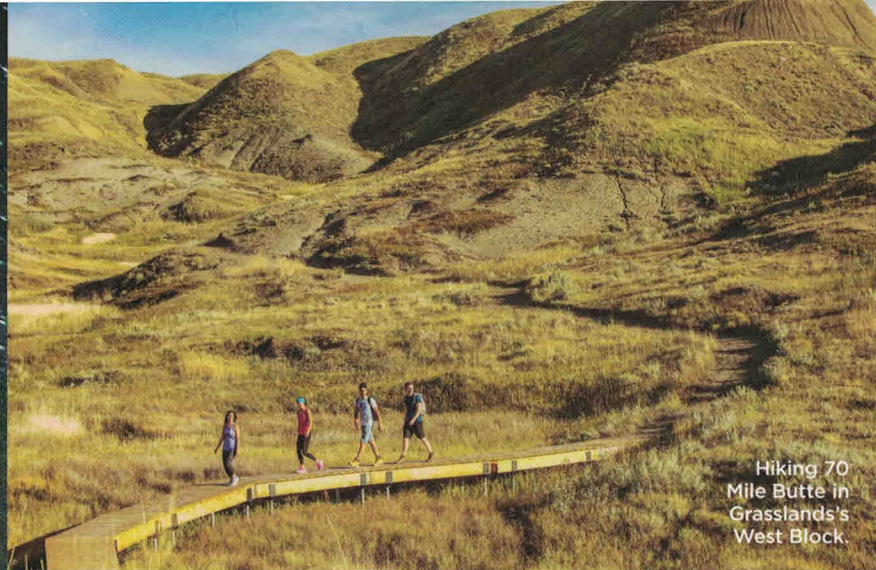
“Who said Saskatchewan was flat?” I whisper to my horse, Gus, as he gamely hauls me up another steep incline. The question was meant to be rhetorical, but with a sharp expulsion of air, from both ends of his body, the horse gives me his answer.

I am out for a ride with a local outfitter in the East Block of Grasslands National Park. My palomino and I pick our way through silver sagebrush, prairie grass, prickly pear cactus, primrose and cottonwood, down through wet coulees and up the side of sandy ravines, trotting until we reach a viewpoint over a vast valley carved by ancient glaciers. We are looking across the Valley of 1,000 Devils. Far from being flat, here an undulating landscape of hoodoos, dry cliffs and rocky buttes spreads out to the horizon.

Established in 1981, Grasslands National Park is one of Saskatchewan's two national parks. It protects one of the largest remnants of undisturbed dry mixed-grass prairie grasslands. Four-and-a-half hours southwest of Regina and a stone's throw from Montana, the park not only protects unique flora, it's also home to countless species of rare birds (including sage-grouse, burrowing owls and ferruginous hawks), as well as wild bison, prairie rattlesnakes, pronghorn antelope, short-horned lizards, black-footed ferrets, prairie dogs, bears, coyotes, swift foxes, elk and badgers. The unique landscape and harsh, semi-arid climate provide niches for several specially-adapted plants and animals.

Grassland National Park is made up of two distinct and separate blocks. The East Block of the park, where I have done my day's riding, is more of a wilderness area. While working the International Boundary Survey in 1874, Sir George Mercer Dawson discovered Western Canada's first dinosaur remains here, evidence of the Tyrannosaurus, Triceratops and other dinosaurs that once roamed these lands. Later in 1877, Sitting Bull took refuge in the area after





Hiking 70 Mile Butte in Grasslands's West Block.

the defeat of General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn. Teepee rings and stone tools of the First Nations people have been found throughout these hills.

I feel a little like Sitting Bull settling into my teepee accommodations at the Rock Creek Campground.

I stumble back to my overnight abode in the pitch dark after spending time staring up at one of the starriest night skies I have

experienced. In Grasslands National Park, it's not just the land that's protected, but also the sky. The park is so far from cities and other sources of artificial light that in 2009 the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada declared the park a Dark Sky Preserve, which was not only good for attracting star-gazers, but also beneficial for the habitat of nocturnal species, such as the black-footed ferret, which was recently re-introduced into the area.

In the morning I awake to an enchanting prairie soundscape; serenaded by birdsong, crickets, chirping prairie dogs and the distant call of a lone coyote. Pleasant as it is, I move on to Grasslands' West Block.

At the Frenchman Valley Campground I set up for the night in one of Parks Canada's unique and comfortable oTENTiks, and then, as the sun drops lower

in a pink sky, I drive up to the surrounding plateau in search of evening wildlife. I come across two large bison grazing lazily on the wide plain, so close that I can hear them pawing the dusty ground and tearing at the tender grass. These are truly majestic creatures, and I find it hard to imagine a time when millions of bison roamed freely over these same plains. Here in Grasslands, 71 bison were re-introduced back to the park in 2005 after being gone for 120 years. Now there are more than 300 bison and 40 calves.

While I am watching the bison, I can't help but get the sense that I am, in turn,

chirping shrilly in alarm.

To fully experience the subtle beauty of Grasslands National Park, you have to get out for a hike. The most accessible front-country hiking is found in the West Block, with the five-kilometre 70 Mile Butte loop being one of the more popular. The butte was a landmark for First Nations peoples, but its name comes from when the Northwest Mounted Police patrolled the area on horseback. Unfortunately, my horse Gus retired, so I am the one doing the work today.

I meander upwards on the well-maintained trail, surrounded by crocuses, blue

harebell and pin-cushion cactus in full bloom, to the highest peak in the area, a 932-metre hilltop with a beautiful view over the Frenchman River Valley. I had kayaked the river earlier in the day, paddling through the wolf willow, buffalo berry and aspen that grow along its banks. The slow-moving stream was fragrant with the sweet smell of juniper and sage. We had spooked a mule deer that had been enjoying the shade of the willow, it bounded up the ridge and disappeared into another coulee.

I find solace in this wild and windy landscape, in this land of the living skies and vast prairie. This national park is not as grand as our mountain parks, which in some ways adds to its appeal—only 12,000 visitors make it to Grasslands annually compared to nearly four million in Banff. What's protected here is a deceptively complex and dynamic ecosystem. From my perch on 70 Mile Butte, I look off over the endless prairie, the grasslands move like an inland sea, shimmering in waves, green and golden in the sun. X

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TRIP PLANNER

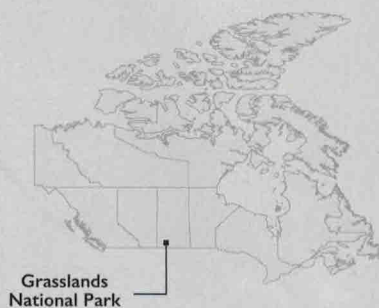
Getting There

Grasslands National Park's remote location in southern Saskatchewan makes it a bit harder to access; a vehicle is a necessity. Reach the West Block via the village of Val Marie, at the crossroads of highways 4 and 18, and the East Block via Highway 18. Regina has the nearest international airport (YQR).

Where to Stay/Camp

The park is open year-round. Camping in the West Block is at the Frenchman Valley Campground, with both oTENTiks and teepees available, and in the East Block at the Rock Creek Campground, where I spent a wonderful night in my teepee. pc.gc.ca/grasslands

The prairie grasses can get very dry in summer, wildfires are always a threat. Be prepared to camp without fires and possibly even without stoves during fire bans. The main visitor reception centre is located just beyond West Block at Val Marie—the town also offers up The



Convent (convent.ca) and The Crossing at Grasslands (thecrossingatgrasslands.com) as accommodation options outside the Park.

Other Activities

Guided day hikes and two- to three-day treks are available in both blocks. Book a ride with Golden Willow Ranches (gwranch.info) or kayak the Frenchman River with Carefree Adventures (carefreeadventures.ca). Weekly stargazing and astronomy programs run from May to September.