



Winter camping is a completely different experience from camping at other times of the year. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS



Foxes are especially photogenic with their thick lustrous coats against the white snow.

## This is a great year to discover joys of winter camping

### TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

COVID-19, the park recommends that only one camping group use the shelter at a time. This wasn't an issue during our mid-week visit since we were the only ones camping there.

Some of the top winter activities in the park include snowshoeing and cross-country skiing on the many trails. Depending on the snow depth, it's also possible to walk some trails. Photography possibilities are excellent, especially with the park's ample snow cover this winter.

The park is known for its wildlife, and winter doesn't disappoint. Common critters such as white-tailed deer and gray jays, also known as whiskey jacks, abound. The jays are so gregarious that you have to keep a close eye on your grub at picnic sites. Watch out for their strategic side attack where they fly at your sandwich just before you take a bite.

Foxes are especially photogenic with their thick lustrous coats against the white snow. We found bull elk with magnificent antlers browsing on bushes and relaxing in



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**W**ant to take an exotic winter holiday while still observing pandemic protocols and travel advisories? Winter camping fits the bill.

It's a completely different experience from camping at other times of the year, with a lot of advantages. For starters, you don't need ice for your cooler. Many parks are almost deserted, making social distancing easy. The best of all? There's not a mosquito in sight.

We recently packed up our tent and headed to Prince Albert National Park. While we have camped there often, this was the first time in winter. Since the campgrounds are closed for winter, the park has designated two picnic sites on the shore of Waskesiu Lake as drive-in campsites. One is Paignton Beach along the Narrows Road. The other, where we stayed, is on the opposite side of the lake at Birch Bay along Kingsmere Road.

Camping fees are a bargain at \$5.01 per person. That's right, not five bucks, but an additional one cent on top of that. It seems that every penny counts these days, even when we no longer have pennies.

Birch Bay was the perfect vantage point to see the sunrise and sunset over the lake, and they put on great shows. This time of year has definite advantages for photographers. We can sleep in, have breakfast, and be sipping our second coffee while photographing the sunrise.

What really made our stay comfortable was the closed-in picnic shelter at Birch Bay, complete with a large wood-burning stove and plenty of firewood. Because of



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Waskesiu River takes on a different vibe in the winter.



Birch Bay is the perfect vantage point to see the sunrise over Waskesiu Lake.

the sun. Wolves are definitely around but are more elusive, plus we heard reports of people seeing lynx close to where we camped.

A wildlife highlight for us was finally photographing a pileated woodpecker. Sporting an elaborate flaming red hair-do, this is North America's largest woodpecker — almost the size of a crow. This time we found one that not only cooperated for a photo but was considerate enough to pose in nice light.

Of course, winter camping has a few challenges. The main one is that it can get a tad chilly, especially if temperatures plummet and a strong wind howls across the frozen lake. But anyone from the Prairies should be used to dressing appropriately for the weather. Always err on the side of taking too many sleeping bags and blankets rather than not enough.

Keeping food from freezing is another concern. We put perishables in an insulated cooler in our car and wrapped extra coats and blankets around it. Another option is to choose foods that won't be affected by freezing, such as frozen or dried vegetables rather than fresh. On the positive side, keeping those T-bone steaks cool until next evening's barbecue is no problem.

To stay local in your travels, most national parks plus some provincial parks throughout the West offer winter camping.

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Photographing a pileated woodpecker was a wildlife highlight.


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