



The
Gram

**OF LAKE
ATHABASCA'S
NORTH SHORE**

dewr

Story and Photos by
*Robin and Arlene
Karpan*

*Lake Athabasca in the province's
far north does everything on a grand scale.*



The largest lake in Saskatchewan is also the eighth largest in North America and the fourth largest completely within Canadian borders. It has set records for Canada's largest lake trout and northern pike, and is the deepest lake in the province at a maximum of 124 metres.

While we expect an enormous water body to have varied landscapes, Athabasca's north and south shores are more like two completely different worlds.

Shallow, sandbar-riddled shores and sandy terrain interspersed with pockets of boreal forest typify the low-lying south shore. Here, we also find the famous Athabasca Sand Dunes. By contrast, classic Canadian Shield country dominates the north shore, with endless rocky outcroppings, soaring granite cliffs, forested hills,

myriad islands, and bays so deep they seem like separate lakes.

Our north shore explorations start with a visit to Athabasca Fishing Lodges on the lake's south shore, a bit east of Fond du Lac. The lodge had an outpost on Johnston Island far to the west that was no longer in use. When owner Cliff Blackmur mentioned that he still had a boat there that he wanted to retrieve, we offer to bring it back. So we load Cliff's floatplane with an outboard motor, extra gas, and our camping gear, and we set off to the remote island.

During that one-hour trip, we fly over nearly half of the lake, revealing its vast expanse. After passing the narrows near Fond du Lac, we soar over a seemingly endless sea of blue. We know we're getting close when we start flying over islands. The Crackingstone

Peninsula south of Uranium City juts far into the lake, with a cluster of islands along its south and east shores. One of the largest is Johnston Island, long and narrow with a protected bay and a sandy beach where the floatplane can pull up.

Assuming that this unpredictable lake cooperates, it would be possible to boat the 130 kilometres or so to the lodge in a few hours. However, we plan to take a week exploring the endless coves, bays, and islands along the way.

We find the first scenic gem before even getting into the boat. Walking only a few metres across the narrow ridge separating the bay from the open lake, we come to rockhound heaven. Among the assorted formations are smooth, flat expanses that look like gaudy inlaid tabletops. Talk about being old! They are two-billion-year-



old basal conglomerates, where light-coloured boulders were mixed in a red iron-rich matrix, then glaciated and wave-washed over the years.

Each island we visit serves up new surprises. Nearby Stewart Island is lined with reddish-orange cliffs, caves, stony beaches, and conglomerate formations. Farther northeast lies Anderson Island, almost entirely covered in stones and boulders, sculpted by Mother Nature into a work of art. Higher lichen-encrusted areas reveal ancient beach ridges from periods with higher water levels, while the ridges currently along the shoreline are being sculpted by more recent ice push and wave action. Some areas remind us of purposely arranged Japanese rock gardens.

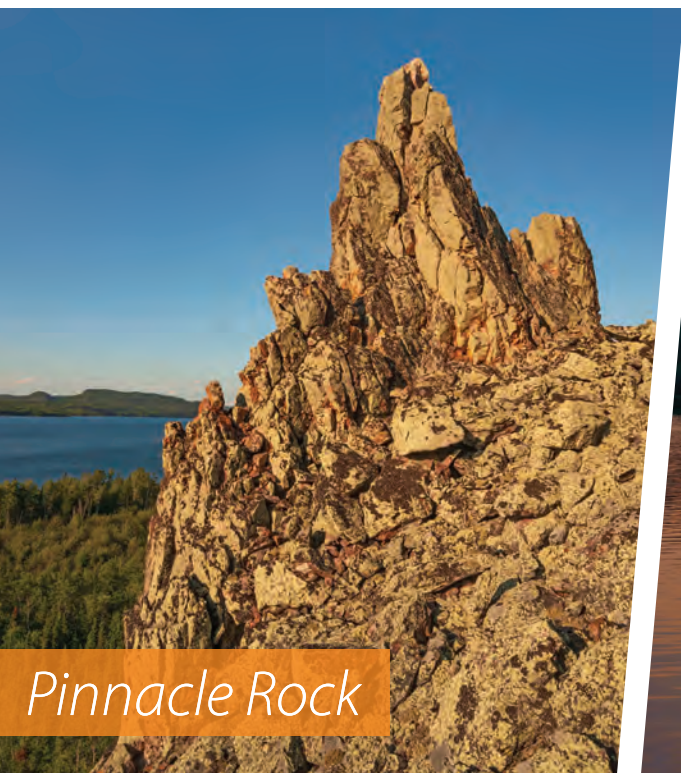
Lodge Bay in the northeast corner of the peninsula holds two natural treasures. Looming over the bay, Beaverlodge Mountain is the highest point of land on the north shore at 334 metres. Dene legends describe how the mountain was home to a giant beaver.

Less obvious, at least until we approach it, is the pinnacle formation hidden near the bay's southwest end. Eons ago a cliff face collapsed, leaving a chimney-like rock still standing. We scramble over enormous boulders to the base of the pinnacle with exceptional views over the legendary bay. We had already set up camp on a nearby island, so we stay until close to sunset, when the low sun washes a warm golden glow across the imposing formation.

Just east of Lodge Bay we see the remains of Goldfields, a 1930s boomtown built on gold mining. Its heyday was short-lived: the discovery of uranium eventually moved most of the mining action to nearby Uranium City.

Anderson Island





Pinnacle Rock



MacIntosh Bay



Reed Bay

After exploring protected Fish Hook Bay, we find the wind and waves on the exposed lake becoming uncomfortably rough. Better to pull in to shore to wait it out—something we do a lot on this moody lake.

We choose a pebbly beach near Caldwell Bay simply because it has a handy place to land, but once we start wandering around we discover more surprises. We're used to finding wildly-coloured rocks along the north shore, but here the vibrancy seems cranked up a notch. Rocks scattered near shore look like they have been splashed with paint. Beach ridges sculpted by ice and waves also display bright hues, and behind them low cliffs are tinged with red and orange. As often happens on this lake, some of the most amazing spots are ones we happen across accidentally.

MacIntosh Bay ranks as the largest and most scenic of the many protected inlets. We boat through a narrow passage framed by high rocky cliffs, then enter the island-studded bay backed by bulbous, fairy-tale hills. A small island provides perfect camping—an idyllic spot that's hard to leave when it's time to move on.

We take a protected channel east of MacIntosh Bay between the mainland and Cameron Island. Near the eastern end, the rocks have distinct pinkish tones. It makes for stunning scenes against the clear, shallow bluish-green water reminiscent of the Caribbean. However, analogies to southern climes instantly vanish when we step into the water.

The channel opens into expansive

Reed Bay, home to the north shore's most impressive sight: a long stretch of vertical cliffs rising straight from the deep water line the east side, made all the more extraordinary due to multi-coloured rock seams and lichen growing on the surface. Evening is nothing short of magical as the low sun accentuates the west-facing cliffs.

We travel from Reed Bay to the mouth of the Oldman River through ominously-named Dead Man Channel. The story behind the name isn't as sinister as it sounds. The river was named after an old trapper who lived in the area, and Dead Man Channel was where they found his body when he died of old age. The area is protected from the open part of the lake by several partially forested islands with broad, rocky outcroppings.



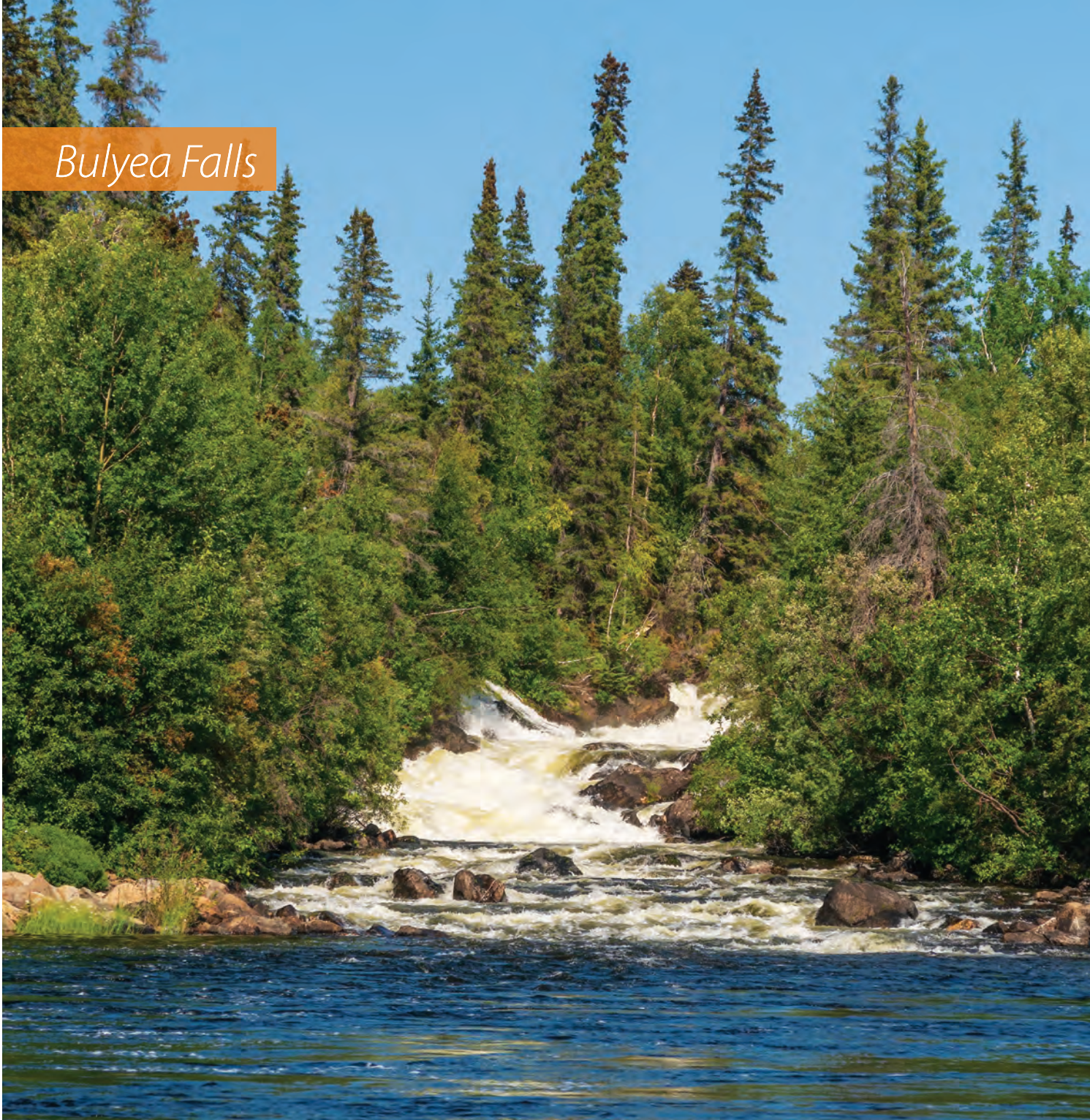
The Grandeur of Lake Athabasca's North Shore

Lodge Bay



Cameron Channel

Bulyea Falls



Twenty kilometres farther east we approach the town of Fond du Lac, where the lake narrows to less than two kilometres, then gradually widens. It is a short run to the lodge nestled in the bay of the Otherside River on the south shore. Since we find uncharacteristically dead calm conditions, we decide to stick to the north shore to take in one more scenic gem directly across the lake from Otherside Bay.

Stretching far into the north shore, Grease Bay is the outlet for the mighty Grease River, a wild waterway most famous as home to Saskatchewan's largest waterfall—Hunt Falls—farther upstream. The inlet is unusual in that it has a bay within a bay. Off to one side, a narrow passage leads to the mouth of the smaller Bulyea River, which empties into the bay through a picture-perfect waterfall.

Fond du Lac was the only settlement we came across during our travels. We saw or heard the occasional boat, but not often and usually at a distance. This remains a remote and lightly-travelled part of the province. But those who do make the effort to venture here are treated to some of the grandest, larger-than-life landscapes anywhere in Saskatchewan.

