

Central Parks

Birds Hill Provincial Park



A Birthday Park for Canada

Birds Hill Provincial Park was officially opened on July 15, 1967 to celebrate Canada's 100th birthday. Located along PTH 59 approximately 24 km (15 mi.) north of Winnipeg, the park is 35.1 km² or 13.6 mi.². It is a mosaic of landscapes not commonly found in such close association, such as esker ridges, dry prairie, wet meadows, bogs, and aspen-oak and mixed boreal forest communities.

Classified as a Natural Park, its purpose is to preserve areas that are representative of the Aspen/Oak Parklands Natural Region, and accommodate a diversity of recreational opportunities.

The park will:

- Provide nature-orientated recreational opportunities such as hiking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, mountain biking and wildlife viewing in a largely undisturbed environment;
- Provide opportunities for a wide range of high-quality intensive recreational activities and permit associated developments such as campgrounds, trails and day-use areas; and
- Promote public appreciation and understanding of the park's natural features and cultural heritage, serving as a key year-round natural setting for introducing visitors to the provincial park system.

Given the trend for urban expansion and the desire of many people to live outside the city limits, this piece of public land has become, over the last few decades, a valuable natural environment that is within easy reach of most city dwellers.



Aven prairie in bloom.
Circle Tour site 3.

Park History

Birds Hill Provincial Park was named after the Bird family who owned land in the vicinity. Their family history is representative of those who settled along the Red River in the early 19th century.

James Curtis Bird came to Rupert's Land in 1788 to work as a writer with the Hudson's Bay Company. During his 36 years in service, he moved up in rank to become Chief Factor of the Red River District and by 1819 it was said that he had more knowledge of the country than all its [the Hudson's Bay Company] officers put together.

When James retired in 1824 he received a land grant from the company of 1,215 hectares (3,000 acres) on the east side of the Red River. Registered as River Lot 95, the property extended east from the river for about 6.4 km (4 mi.), taking in the hill area now known as the town of Birds Hill. On the banks of the Red, James built his home which came to be called "the White Cottage." The Red River served as the main transportation route at that time.

James Bird married several times, fathering 15 children. His youngest son, Curtis James, who was born in 1838, became a prominent member of the settlement. Besides practising medicine locally and operating a drug store in Winnipeg,

Dr. Bird was politically active. In 1870 he became the first Speaker of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. He died of pneumonia in 1876, at the age of 38, while on a trip to England.

The park area was referred to as "the Pines" or "Pine Ridge" by the Bird family, as well as other settlers along the Red River. The river lots north of the Bird property extended into what is now the western edge of the park and provided settlers with abundant game and a wealth of natural materials. Roof trusses and fences were built from the oak, ash, spruce, cedar and tamarack trees. It was here, too, that settlers, fur traders and wildlife found refuge from spring flooding in the Red River valley. During the great floods of 1826 and 1852, which threatened the very survival of the Red River settlement, entire families camped on high ground with their livestock and possessions.

Land within the present park area was settled by European homesteaders in the late 1800s. One of the first groups was German Lutherans who built a church opposite the east park gate. A small cemetery still remains at this spot. A large number of Polish and Ukrainian settlers also farmed this land. When first broken, the soil was very productive for rye and potatoes. The soil's fertility decreased in the early 1900s, and many people left to find work in more lucrative trades in Winnipeg, Beausejour and Selkirk. Some, however, continued to farm until the park was established. The community of Pine Ridge with about 150 residents, had its own post office, churches, school, store and gas station along South Drive and in the campground area. Pine Ridge Cemetery is still being used.

Trees were one of the first natural resources harvested on the hill. In the 1890s, harvested timber was hauled to Winnipeg where it was used as fuel and building material. Later, three tree nurseries were established and provided many of the park's planted trees. One, along the northeast edge of the park, is still operated by Manitoba Conservation.

In the early 1900s, the hill's massive gravel and sand deposits were developed. This material was transported by train to the expanding city of Winnipeg where it was used for building and road construction. An estimated 137 million tonnes of material had been removed by 1975. Along Garven Road, many of Manitoba's largest operators continue to quarry sand and gravel for the production of concrete and asphalt.

Local gravel was used by the more recent settlers. Beside the Lime Kiln Trail, you can see an old kiln which was used until the 1930s by John Donald, a ferry operator. Limestone gravel was burned in the kiln to make quicklime, a building material used for whitewash, plaster, mortar and sewage treatment. The use of quicklime can be seen at the Kudlowich homestead. The house walls are made of logs and diagonally lathed shrub branches to hold plaster. Whitewash was applied over the plaster on the interior walls for the finishing touch. The Kudlowich family built this house in 1936 and the barn and granary were constructed the following year with planks from an old railway car.

In the early 1960s, the City of Winnipeg recognized the beauty of Birds Hill and contemplated a small regional park. The provincial government examined the idea further and as part of a major centennial program, established Birds Hill Provincial Park in 1964. Roadways, the artificial lake and the campground were developed over the next three years.

Today, the park continues to be a refuge as it was for Red River settlers more than 150 years ago. People escaping the hustle and bustle of modern living can find a peaceful retreat in Birds Hill Provincial Park.



Kudlowich barn, c 1940
Courtesy of Stan Kudlowich

Birds Hill's Glacial Heritage

The Birds Hill landscape is a legacy of the ice age, a story told in gravel, boulders and grains of sand. As the massive ice sheet was receding, its front halted here for a while. Clay, sand and gravel that were picked up by the ice during its southward journey, were dropped as the ice melted. The most noticeable of these glacial hitch-hikers are the boulders, or erratics, scattered throughout the park. These erratics are mainly granite which originated from the Precambrian Shield, northeast of here.

As the edge of the ice continued to stand nearby, the meltwater carved steep channels in the glacier. Rivers of water poured through these ice tunnels, leaving large amounts of gravel and sand behind while carrying finer materials into Lake Agassiz-the extensive lake formed from the melted glacial ice. About 7,500 years ago when the ice and meltwater were gone, the gravel and sand remained as snake-like ridges called eskers. It's believed that several eskers met to form Birds Hill.

Take a drive along Garven Road (PR 213), and find the two large gravel ridges which intersect the road. These are the two eskers which converge in the park. Notice also the large sand and gravel beds. Drill results indicate the deposits are 40 to 50 m (131 to 164 ft.) thick.

Birds Hill was also sculpted by Lake Agassiz, as it drained. About 10,000 years ago, the lake was 350,000 km² (135,100 mi.²) in size and covered the hill to a depth of 120 m (394 ft.).

Additional boulders were dropped here by melting icebergs which dumped their contents on the lake bottom. As the lake level lowered, Birds Hill became an island. Whenever the lake's level remained constant for several decades, gravelly beaches two to three metres in height were formed on the island's shore.

Today you can see evidence of these beach ridges along the [Cedar Bog Self-guiding Trail](#) or along the Chickadee Trail, (just north of the group use area) where the elevation is about 265 m (or 870 ft.) above sea level. Winnipeg, built on the "bottom" of Lake Agassiz, is 232 m (760 ft.) above sea level. Standing on one of these beaches 8,500 years ago, you would have been sprayed by the surf as the waves of Lake Agassiz hammered the shore.



Three-flowered avens

Plants and Wildlife

One of the first things people notice in the park is that its scenery is a mixture of forest and open prairie. Stands of trembling aspen are separated by patches of grassland and in the higher, well-drained areas, gnarled bur oaks thrive. This combination of grasslands and forest is known as Aspen/Oak Parkland. Because fire has been controlled in the park, aspen and oak are slowly encroaching on the grasslands.



Bur oak acorns

The patches of prairie that remain are reminders of the large grasslands that once covered much of southern Manitoba and were converted to farmland during settlement. Parkland is a transition zone and its plant communities are a blend of those found on the prairie and in the boreal forest. Wetlands are found in low-lying areas. Some of them are prairie potholes while others are like the black spruce/tamarack bogs found in the Whiteshell. One anomaly, the cedar bog, is more common to the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence forest region of Ontario and Quebec.

The concentration of so many, different plant communities in a relatively small area is one of Birds Hill's distinctive features. In the same park, on the same day you can stroll through tall grass (big bluestem), pick chokecherries at the edge of an aspen stand, feel the coolness in a cedar bog's shade and admire colourful wildflowers in a mixed-grass prairie.



Trembling aspen, named after its leaf which trembles with the slightest breeze, is common in the park.

The park's plant communities provide habitats for a variety of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians. When spring arrives, listen for the songs of frogs as they serenade their mates. A

rustle in the underbrush may prove to be a garter snake or toad searching for its dinner. A high-pitched scream overhead from a circling hawk indicates that someone else is on the hunt for a meal. The loud chattering from a tall spruce tells another story. A nervous red squirrel protects her young as they sleep in a nearby leaf nest. Whether it is spring, summer, fall or winter, endless opportunities to view wildlife are available. Be alert to the sights and sounds around you as you explore the park. The rewards are varied and they may consist of a glimpse of an animal or the signs it leaves behind.

Birds Hill Provincial Park is a birder's paradise. Since the park opened in 1967, over 200 species of birds have been sighted here. In early March, the arrival of migrants such as the horned lark is a sure sign that spring is just around the corner. During summer you will hear the clear whistle of the indigo bunting or the low, insect-like, buzzing call of the clay-coloured sparrow along many of the park trails. Fall is announced by the large number of birds that stop over on their southward journey. Small flocks of juncos and warblers are a common sight along park roadways.



Monarch butterfly caterpillar (larva) on milkweed

In the winter you may see a brilliant yellow, evening grosbeak perched on the snow-covered branch of a Manitoba maple. The winged seed of the maple is a favourite food for grosbeaks. Black-capped chickadees and redpolls, common winter birds, visit the many bird feeders in the park. These feeders are set up and filled regularly by park visitors. All year round, the woods and prairies of Birds Hill are alive with the colour and music of birds.



Poison ivy! Contact with any part of this shrub, in any season, can cause a severe rash. The plants, less than 60 cm in height, usually grow at the edge of trails and clearings. Their leaves appear in threes and may turn to bright orange or red at the end of summer. In spring, it has clusters of tiny white blossoms and its white berries may stay on the plant over winter.

White-tailed Deer

Birds Hill Provincial Park is home to a white-tailed deer population that fluctuates between 150 and 250 animals. You may have the good fortune to spot one of these secretive, elusive creatures feeding along the edge of a clearing just after sunset or early in the day. If alarmed, the deer will snort and bound away with its white tail raised and waving side to side, warning other deer of your presence.

White-tailed deer are relative newcomers to Manitoba. It wasn't until about 1900 that they were regularly seen by settlers in the southern part of the province. Before then, mule deer and elk were more common. The control of prairie fires, allowing trees and shrubs to grow on former grassland, and the removal of bush in forested areas produced ideal conditions for white-tailed deer.

The park's deer population is managed to ensure a healthy, viable and highly viewable herd. Further information is available on interpretive signs that you'll find while hiking along the White-tailed Deer Self-guiding Trail.



White-tailed deer fawns

Camping

During the spring, summer or fall, camping gives visitors more time to explore and experience the park. Facilities range from fully-serviced sites which are ideal for recreation vehicles, to primitive campsites with special areas designated for group tenting.

The campground is open from the beginning of May to the middle of October, and is located along South Drive. There are plenty of sites to choose from. The campground has 254 unserviced sites, 171 electrically-serviced sites and 45 fully-serviced sites. All sites are available on a first-come, first served basis either by reservation through the Parks Reservation System or by registration at the campground office.

Situated near a beach, the campground offers showers, a paved bicycle trail, modern washrooms that are wheelchair accessible, a trailer sanitation station, drinking water, playgrounds, public telephones and an amphitheatre. The campground store and adjacent launderette are open from spring to fall. At the store you can purchase convenience items, firewood and souvenir hats or t-shirts. Hours of operation are posted at the store.

Group camping is available by reservation in two group use areas. Group Use 1 is located along North Drive and is open from May to September. Seven spacious fully-serviced sites are available for tenting or picnics for groups of over 50 people.

Group Use 2 is near the east park entrance with six large unserviced sites for group tenting, picnics. For further information or to place a booking, call the Parks Reservation Service.



Circle Drive Tour Guide

In a park where there is so much to see and do, six key features have been identified as part of a circle drive tour. All sites are accessible from the park's main thoroughfare, North Drive and South Drive, which forms a circular route inside the park. Each location is marked on the park map (see reverse side) and at the roadside with a sign-a circle that includes the appropriate number.

Circle Tour Site # 1 [Cedar Bog Self-guiding Trail](#) descends gently from parkland into a unique cedar bog. Here the tall eastern white cedars create a canopy which blocks the sunlight and creates mysterious shadows. [During winter, a path is packed for winter walking](#). Brochures are available at the trailhead. Return distance 3.5 km (2.2 mi.). Allow 1 hour 30 minutes.

Circle Tour # 2 To get a true feeling that the hill is a hill, hike the Chickadee Trail, or cross-country ski it in winter. A viewing tower situated on an old Lake Agassiz beach ridge provides a westward view, beyond the park's treed boundary. Return distance 4 km (2.5 mi.). Allow 2 hours. (Just to the tower and back, allow one hour.)



Showy lady's slippers

Circle Tour # 3 In season, May to June, stop to view the Avens Prairie along South Drive. It's a site that would have stopped an 18th-century explorer in his tracks, and merited a description in his journal. Such a large field of three-flowered avens, also called prairie smoke, is uncommon these days. There is no designated trail.

Circle Tour # 4 White-tailed Deer Self-guiding Trail meanders through aspen groves and across large meadows. Here you will have the opportunity to see deer in their natural habitat. Interpretive signs explain the biology, behaviour, habitat requirements and management of white-tailed deer in the park. A viewing tower is located midway along the trail. The opportunity for you to see deer is best at dawn and dusk. Return distance 1.5 km (0.9 mi.). Allow 1 hour.

Circle Tour # 5 This is Pine Ridge Trail's west entrance. Spend some time exploring the Kudlowich homestead, just a few minutes' walk from here. You'll find several of the original buildings, interpretive signs and rest benches.

Circle Tour # 6 Black spruce/tamarack bogs are usually found in the boreal forest (proper), east and north of Birds Hill. The bog's presence is an excellent example of the diverse plant communities that meet in the park. Tamarack add a touch of colour when their needles turn a brilliant, tawny orange in the fall. Manitoba's provincial bird, the great gray owl, is occasionally seen here. There is no designated trail.



Tamarack/black spruce bog, Circle Tour Site # 6

Circle Tour # 7 Bur Oak Self-guiding Trail loops through a stand of gnarled bur oaks. Summer and winter interpretive signs along the trail describe the animals and plants that thrive in this area. A braille version of interpretive sign texts is available at the park office. Designed to accommodate all visitors, the path is asphalt covered, and the adjacent picnic tables and washrooms provide barrier-free access. The loop is 1 km (0.6 mi.); allow 45 minutes. A mountain bike trail system is also accessible from the Bur Oak parking lot.

Things to See and Do

Check this list of additional suggestions as you plan your outing for the day.

Sample Birds Hill's wild fruit. Some of the common edible ones are chokecherry, pincherry, saskatoon, wild plum, high bush-cranberry, nannyberry and rosehips.

Pedal along the Pine Ridge Bicycle Trail. This 7.2-km (4.5-mi.) paved trail winds through the woods and around the lake. Enter the trail from the riding stable, beach parking lots or the campground. Cyclists can also enjoy the unpaved Bluestem Mountain Bike Trail, 14.0 km (8.4 mi.).



Bicycle Trail

Nimowin Self-guiding Trail, open year-round, is a peace education facility developed in co-operation with Manitoba Educators for Social Responsibility. Winding through a number of disturbed areas and natural communities, it is a place to think about peace in our world and peace with our environment. Return distance 1.8 km (1.1 mi.). Allow 45 minutes.

Pine Ridge Self-guiding Trail is dedicated to the former residents of Pine Ridge. Experience their lives during the '30s and 40s as you walk the Old School Road and visit the sites of their homesteads, store and school. Enjoy your walk through the community. Get to know its people. You can start anywhere along this 2.4-km trail. Use the map to match the name at the site to that in the brochure, and read about the people of Pine Ridge.

Explore the 30-km (18.6-mi.) cross-country ski/hiking/horseback riding trail system. Groomed for skiing in the winter and marked for hiking and riding in the summer, this system of trails criss-crosses Birds Hill's backcountry. The six trails vary from 4 to 14 km (2.5 to 8.8 mi.) in length and are designed for novice to intermediate skiers. Shelters with wood stoves and firewood have been provided along several of the trails. Trailheads are at the riding stable restaurant and at the Chickadee Trail parking lot.



Cross-country ski trail

Explore Birds Hill on horseback. Several trails in the northern part of the park are accessible from the riding stable. Trail rides leave on the hour all summer long. Pony rides for young adventurers, hay rides for large groups, breakfast or steak rides and winter sleigh rides are also available. For further information, call the riding stable at 204-222-1137. Restaurant services are provided adjacent to the stable. The 16-km (10-mi.) Bridal Path can be used throughout the year for horseback riding and horse-drawn vehicle driving.



Horseback riding

Watch horse activities such as polo, jumping, driving and cutting which are held spring to fall, at the Manitoba Horse Council's Equestrian Centre, near the riding stable. Jumping events are also held at the cross-country equestrian course in the southeast corner of the park.

Travel along the 21-km (13.1-mi.) network of groomed snowmobile trails, accessible from the riding stable, PTH 59 (3 km [1.9 mi.] north of the east park gate) and PR 206 (1.5 km [0.9 mi.] north of the east park gate). There are several warming huts with woodstoves along the trails.

Enjoy an outdoor meal. Picnic areas are located adjacent to the Pine Ridge Cemetery and at the trailheads for the self-guiding trails along North Drive and South Drive. Picnic shelters are available north of the beach parking lots or on either side of the scenic overlook. If you are planning a large group picnic, reservations are available for sites in the group use area. Place reservations well in advance at the park office. Well water, privies, and stand-up barbecues or fire pits are found at all picnic sites. Bring along your own briquettes or purchase firewood at the campground store.

Enjoy the scenic view of the lake and surrounding parkland from the overlook. A lovely rock garden, picnic shelters, interpretive signs and the view make this stop a must. The overlook parking lot is located off North Drive, 1 km (0.6 mi.) east of the group use area.

Visit a historic monument at the Pine Ridge Cemetery. It commemorates the Polish contingent of the de Meuron Regiment which arrived in 1817 to help Lord Selkirk establish peace and order in the Red River colony.

Explore the site where Pope John Paul II conducted a multi-cultural celebration of faith on Sunday, September 16, 1984. Parking, a picnic shelter and a short, asphalt walkway to the Papal Site are accessible from Festival Drive. Barrier-free access; return distance 1 km (0.6 mi.); allow 45 minutes. In winter, the hill is used for tobogganing.

Winnipeg Folk Festival. This annual July event features musical workshops, afternoon and evening concerts, children's events, an international food village and a hand-made craft village. Day or weekend passes are available at the entrance to the festival site. Other park operations continue as usual during festival weekend.

Interpretation Program

Park interpreters conduct programs designed for all ages throughout the year. These events will help you discover the park's natural and cultural history. Activities are relaxed, informative and fun. Everyone is welcome to attend, whether you are visiting for the day or camping for the week. Interpretive events are free of charge.



Interpretive programs are offered year-round.

During the summer months, pick up a program schedule at the campground office or check the program event posters on bulletin boards. Campfires, amphitheatre shows, children's programs and special events are presented weekly from mid-June to early September. Special events are also held during the winter months.



Quinzhee building, winter school program

School programs are provided during spring, fall and winter, free of charge. Interpreters can provide programs tailored to a school curriculum or teachers can use park facilities to lead their own classes. Either way, endless opportunities for education on a variety of topics, at all grade levels, are available in this natural classroom.

Birds Hill is a birder's paradise in every season.



Yellow-bellied sapsucker.



Male pine grosbeak.
