

The Beginning and the End – A Summer Holiday Experience

BY TJARDA BARRATT



My husband Rob and I, when watching the Red Deer River flow by our home at the eastern end of Red Deer County, asked ourselves where the water comes from and where it is going. Hence, as a summer project, we decided to search out the beginning and the end of the Red Deer River.

In late July last year we went on a three-day hike in Banff National Park and stayed at Skoki Lodge. On the second day we set out for the five kilometre hike to the headwaters of the Red Deer River. The weather gods ignored the calendar and delivered a heavy dump of wet snow early that morning that made for difficult going. Finally we got to the crystal clear meandering streams and shallow gravel braids and we knew that we had found the headwaters. The actual source of the river is at Oyster Lake, just a short scramble up the hill, but it was too tricky to attempt because of the wet snow and rain. I could not resist cupping the crystal clear water in my hands, let it fall through my fingers and send it on its way with a little piece of advice: “whatever happens, go with the flow.” Seeing this pristine sight, I became aware of the challenges the river faces further downstream.

Eight days later we drove to the village of Empress on the Alberta/

Saskatchewan border and ventured a few miles into Saskatchewan where the Red Deer joins the South Saskatchewan River. From a high lookout we gazed out at the confluence. What a magnificent sight: open rolling land divided by these two great rivers – the brownish shallow waters of the Red Deer meeting and mixing with the blue-green of the wider, deeper South Saskatchewan. There was not a soul to be seen. Our only witnesses were the prairie wind, waving grasses, and some grazing cattle nearby. We decided then and there to come back in late September with canoes and friends in tow.

When the fall colours had just appeared, we dropped our canoes in the river at Empress Bridge and paddled the last 20 km of the Red Deer River. With its wide sweeping bends, oxbows and sandbars, the river seemed reluctant to accept its imminent merger with its big brother the South Saskatchewan. At one of the oxbows, for example, the river has only 40 metres to cut through to form an oxbow lake and rob the riparian landowner of a good chunk of grazing land.

We paddled for several hours in the slow moving river passing cottonwood-lined banks and white sandy beaches, and

then just before the confluence, a moose crossed the river right in front of our canoes. It was a perfect Canadian scene: water, moose, migrating geese overhead and the glorious expanse of nature.

We beached our canoes on a muddy bank at the V-shaped confluence of the rivers for picture taking and then continued for another 10 km on the much deeper, wider and faster moving South Saskatchewan to Estuary Ferry, our end point of the day.

We fully recommend this wonderful summer activity: two wilderness experiences, two rivers and one watershed!▲

Our thanks to Phil French (“Red Deer River Journey”) for his advice, the staff at Skoki Lodge, the invaluable help of Pat and Ross at “Empressive” Restaurant/store, Helen of Forksview Hotel for helping with the logistics, Brad for showing us around his land that is straddled by both rivers, and all the local people who had a story to tell about their Red Deer River.



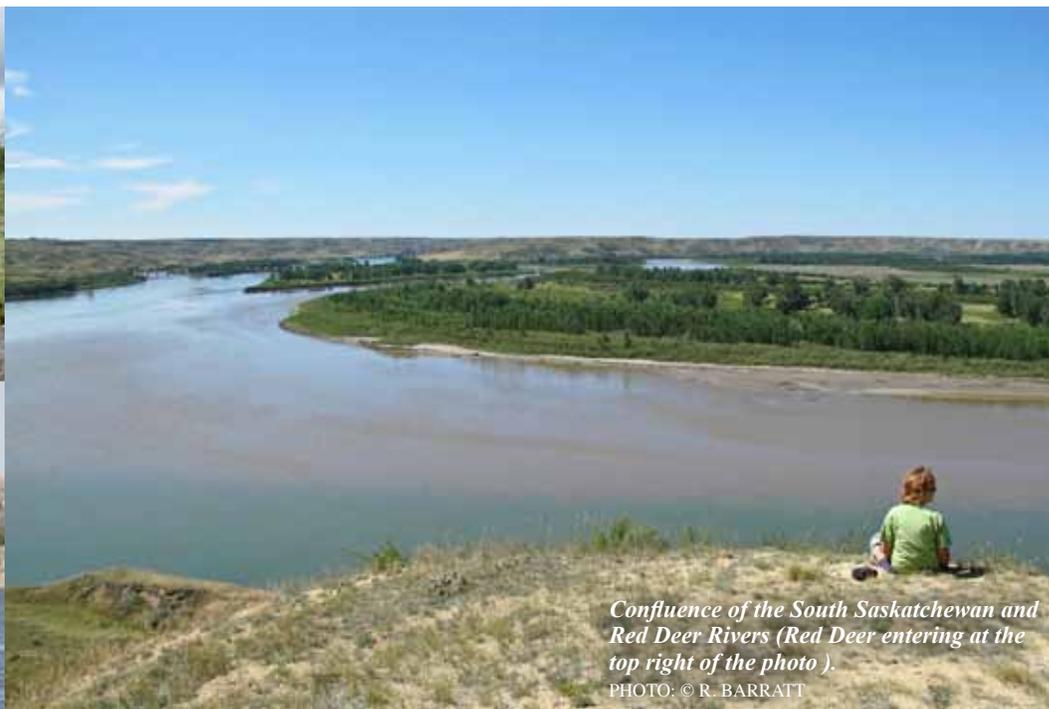
“In” the headwaters of the Red Deer River.

PHOTO: © R. BARRATT



An unexpected delight.

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Confluence of the South Saskatchewan and Red Deer Rivers (Red Deer entering at the top right of the photo).

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