

# Taking a Trip to an Island of Conservation

By Ian Urquhart



Imagine a national park where you can hike for five hours and not encounter another person. Imagine a national park where that hike will give you the opportunity to see a species of animal designated as “special concern” by Canada’s Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). Imagine a national park where your hike is accompanied by the chorus of dozens of songbird species.

Where do you think your imagination has taken you? To Wood Buffalo National Park? Kluane? Aulavik? Perhaps...but that imagined experience came to life for me at the end of May in Elk Island National Park, less than a one-hour drive from my home in southwest Edmonton. When I arrived at the parking lot to start a hike into the park I was the only one there. I was going to have the trail I had picked for my hike all to myself.

## The Park

Elk Island is Canada’s only fenced national park. At only 195 square kilometres, Elk Island is one of Canada’s smallest national parks (Point Pelee National Park, at 15 km<sup>2</sup>, is our smallest national park). It is located in the Cooking Lake moraine, in the northern section of the greater Beaver Hills ecosystem (see Barb Collier’s article in the Feb. 2016 issue of *WLA* for more on the Beaver Hills ecosystem and efforts to see it recognized as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve).

Elk Island’s “knob and kettle” topography resulted from the character of the glacial retreat there. Glacial ice there broke off from the still-flowing ice and started to melt slowly over several hundred years. An undulating landscape emerged as the debris-covered ice

melted. Knolls, hummocks, and mounds are the topography’s knobs; irregular, undrained depressions are its kettles – an appropriate label considering how many of them today contain ponds or swamps.

Elk Island National Park, unlike a national park like Banff, was born out of the desire to protect wildlife. In 1906 a handful of men from the Fort Saskatchewan area convinced the federal government to create a preserve to protect what they believed were the last remaining elk on the prairies. Elk Park was established then and its 42 km<sup>2</sup> territory became the home for a 24-member herd of elk. The following year Elk Park was a waystation for 410 plains bison that were being shipped to Buffalo National Park in Wainwright. Just over ten percent of that population, about 45 plains bison, evaded capture when the time came to move them to Wainwright. Those plains bison became the seed for today’s ge-

netically-pure and disease-free population in the northern section of the Park.

The Park also has played a vital role in a species-at-risk success story – the recovery of the wood bison. Weighing nearly 2,000 pounds as adults, wood bison are the largest mammals in North America. In the late 1950s their population was estimated at only 200 animals. Designated as Endangered in 1978 federal efforts to recover the species have brought it back from the brink. Today there are more than 4,000 disease-free wood bison in nine free-ranging populations plus another 300 that range in the portion of Elk Island National Park south of Highway 16. Its species-at-risk status has been upgraded to “Special Concern” and moving surplus animals from Elk Island to other locations is one key to the brightening prospects for wood bison in Canada. As the Park’s 2005 Management Plan put it: “The recovery of the wood bison



*Moose in the southern, wood bison, area of Elk Island National Park located south of Highway 16 have been designated as “hyperabundant” by Parks Canada. Hunting these moose is one management option being considered by Parks Canada. See the Wilderness Watch – Updates section of this issue for AWA’s views on the options Parks Canada is considering. PHOTO: © I. URQUHART*



Two male blue-winged teals court a female in the reeds of Flyingshot Lake. PHOTO: © I. URQUHART

depends on the park's herd of this threatened species."

## The Hike

Elk Island offers 11 hiking trails ranging in length from just 300 metres (the Living Waters boardwalk at Astotin Lake) to 16.5 km (the Tawayik Lake Trail). Ten of those trails are located in the main section of the park, the section north of Highway 16. The trail I wanted to follow is the only one in the southern section of the park. I wanted to see if the 16 km Wood Bison Trail would let me realize the opportunity to see the free-roaming wood bison advertised on the Park's map of trails. If you start at the eastern trailhead, as I did, you head south until you reach the southeast tip of Flyingshot Lake. Aspen dominates the predominantly deciduous forest that you travel through on this section of the trail. The forest is thick enough that I only got a very brief glimpse of the two elk I spooked during my first 30 to 45 minutes on the trail. They disappeared from sight in a flash as they crashed through the bush. The trail also offered more than a few signs of the fierce windstorm that had swept through the Edmonton area the week before. Windthrow, trees that either had been snapped or uprooted by those winds, crossed the trail at more than a few locations.

The air was thick too at the start of my hike – thick with the calls of songbirds. Listening now to the short recordings I made as I was walking along the trail I'm reminded of the beautiful mosaic those songs created as they reverberated throughout the forest that morning. Their melodies need no accompaniment but, for me, the faint drumming of a grouse and the rustling of leaves in the light, early morning breeze made their tapestry even richer.

When you start to hear the songs of the red-

winged blackbirds you'll know you're getting close to Flyingshot Lake and you can anticipate seeing the cattails and reeds they will nest in. If you use Google Earth's historical imagery viewing tool you can see how much drier this lake area is now compared to at the beginning of this century. The lake as well as ponds in this area were much more extensive in 2002 than they are today.

What I enjoyed most along the southern shoreline of the lake was watching male blue winged teals vigorously pump their heads up and down, as they competed with each other in trying to win a female's attention. I also was grateful for the flights of boreal whiteface dragonflies that escorted me as I walked westward. In my mind they were more effective than insect repellent in keeping the mosquitoes at bay.

When the trail turns north it takes you through terrain that is considerably more open than what I walked through on the east side of Flyingshot Lake. The trail crosses several extensive stretches of treeless, hummocky terrain. The first of these somewhat pasture-like settings offered me what I had hoped most to see on my hike – wood bison. Perhaps two dozen bison, maybe more, were



Boreal whiteface dragonfly (*Leucorrhinia borealis*) PHOTO: © I. URQUHART

scattered across this open expanse carved out of the aspen forest. Even from hundreds of metres away I was convinced that yes, indeed, they must be the largest land mammals in North America. Some grazed on the grasses; others rested – looking like huge boulders on the land. The gentle slopes on the south side of this wood bison pasture were decorated with a handful of wallows, depressions where the bison would give themselves dust baths.

By the time I returned to the parking lot four other vehicles had joined my car there. The human presence on the trail I had taken certainly had increased but...not by much. Although visits to the Park increased sharply in 2016 to 360,000 from 244,000 in 2015 this amount of human traffic in Elk Island National Park is still well below the park's heyday in the mid-1960s when its offerings attracted more than 500,000 visitors. I look forward to returning to the Park in late summer or early fall and hope to once again realize the opportunities the Park offers to see bison, elk, and moose. For information about the park visit Elk Island's website: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/ab/elkisland> 🐾



Twenty-three wood bison were introduced to Elk Island National Park in 1965 as part of efforts to protect and recover genetically-pure populations of the species. Parks Canada estimates that now there are 333 wood bison in the southern portion of the park. Today Elk Island National Park still plays a vital role in the continuing recovery of wood bison. PHOTO: © I. URQUHART