

# The Hungry Bend Sandhills

By Joy Friesen



If you were to turn off Highway 88, onto a country road, just north of the last bridge crossing the “Mighty Peace” River, in its powerful rush towards the Arctic, you would soon find yourself in an area that has come to be known as the Hungry Bend Sandhills. This is a very small piece of the continent-wide, boreal forest of North America; Canada’s boreal, in turn, is only a part of the vast boreal region that sits on the top of our globe, encircling the North Pole.

The boreal forest is a land without the dramatic features one comes to expect of impressive scenery. It is a land of miles of aspen, spruce, pine and poplar, of fens and beaver haunted marshes. Its rivers are slow and winding, its land gently undulating with an almost impenetrable and tangled undergrowth of wild rose, willow, and cranberry.

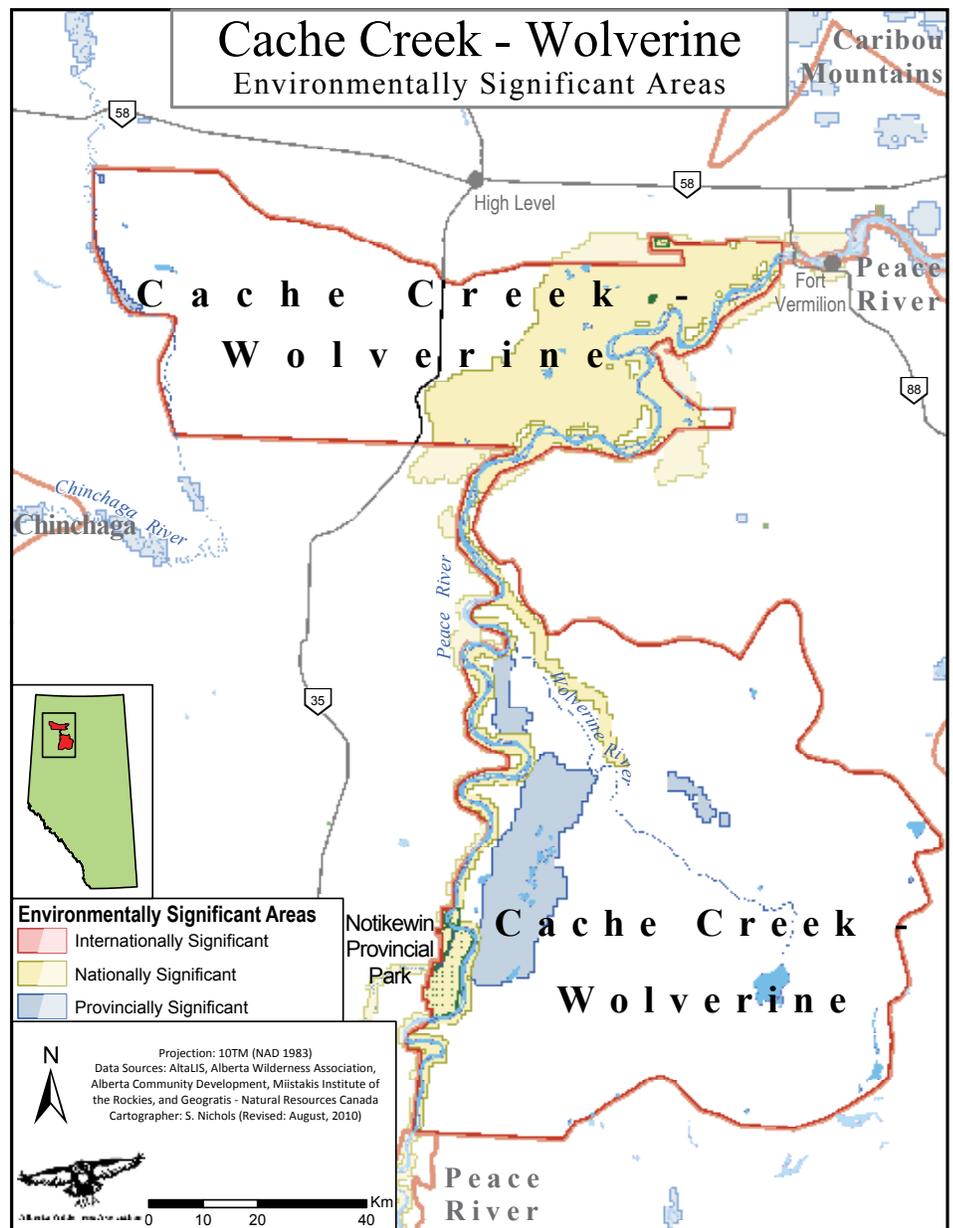
But, the boreal’s more simple, less dramatic, beauty is addictive. Its rivers cut deep and banks loom high; ancient volcanic hills rise out of its sameness and from their summits one looks north – out, far out into infinity. There seems to be nothing between you and the end of the earth. Consequently, the boreal forest is one of the few places left where the wilderness may be experienced on a truly vast scale.

And there are the pine lands. Dry and relatively barren, these areas are one of the few terrains within the boreal forest that can be accessed in ‘the raw’ without the need to follow trails. In them comes a freedom of movement, an excitement peculiar to the pine lands that is absent in the rest of the boreal forest.

The Hungry Bend Sandhills is a complex of tree-stabilized dunes; pine stretch

up over the ridges and down the slip faces, while spruce, marshes, and small ponds are cupped between.

Peter David, in his classic study of sand dune occurrences in Canada, notes there are



The Hungry Bend Sandhills are located north and west of the Peace River in the Cache Creek – Wolverine Environmentally Significant Area. PHOTO: © ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION



Hikers enjoying a fall day in the Hungry Bend Sandhills. PHOTO: © M. TOEWS

three distinct types of dunes within this area; transverse, parabola and lacadena. Most unusual are the transverse dunes which have been formed by prevailing southeast winds, then modified by northeast winds (which also lay down dunes of that orientation.) Then, yet a third time, the whole complex was warped and modified by east winds. These differing winds have created unusual dune formations where many of the dunes have two slip-faces and some are double dunes; dunes on top of dunes. David designates the region “a very important area from every point of view.” He also noted that: “It remains the only area (in Canada) with such complex (dune) orientations.”

A slip face is “the steepest face of a sand dune, down which sand slips”

– Oxford English Dictionary

Because of low soil fertility, this area has remained an “island” of wilderness between three communities, High Level to the northwest, Fort Vermilion to the east

and LaCrete to the southeast. It also adjoins the Beaver First Nation reserve, Child Lake reserve, Paddle Prairie and North Vermilion (Buttertown) settlements.

Because the dunes are easily traversed, there have always been trails through the area. Wild horses, early settlers and the native populations have shaped and used these trails. Some of the old pack trails and horse trails are still visible and are still able to be used today.

The marshes, when dried, were cut for hay; they were called hay grounds and identified by a user’s name, such as Arthur’s Hay Ground, etc. though the land has always been Crown Land, and so open to all.

In addition to wild cherries and one species of nut, the beaked hazelnut, there are wild berries that are still picked and preserved. Dwarf blueberries await, tart, yet sweet and silvery with bloom; cranberries too that burst sharp on the tongue and so closely resemble kinnikinnick that the uninitiated are easily fooled.

Dwarf dogwood or bunchberry present carpets of white in early summer, only to be-

come scarlet puddles on the autumn forest floor. The Beaver First Nation names these “itchy chin berries.” When I asked my friend Dominic Habitant why they were called that he told me: “Because when you eat them, you can feel your beard growing.”

The Beaver have some interesting, culturally special places scattered throughout these dunes. An elder told me of an island on one of the lakes, where two-year old children, chosen to be powerful medicine men in the future, were left alone, tied to a tree overnight. There is the story of a white moose that saved the people from starvation and the memory of the two magic stones. There’s the legend of the Tiko-cheechoke, a reptile unknown to science. There are active trap-lines and the Canadian Rangers make use of the area in their survival training.

Horses have always had a presence in the sandhills. For many years there were wild horses in the area. Today one can still occasionally meet teams and wagons out for a Sunday drive. Three years ago a local pony club’s dream was realized when part of the Machesis Lake Recreational Area was developed for access for horse trailers, along with corrals and other facilities needed for horses. This reduced the pressure on the land that horse trailers that were taken randomly into the area generated, destroying in turn some very sensitive habitats. From this staging area, riders are able to access a network of trails, many of which have been in use since the earliest use of horses in the area.

The sandhills are easy to get into, a pleasure to hike, and a favorite camping place. But the area’s close proximity to the local communities has been of concern to many of us who wish to preserve, at least some part of it, from intensive OHV activity. It was because of this concern that the Hungry Bend Sandhills Wilderness Society was formed in 1998; this year marks the twentieth anniversary of our society. Without official status, the society has, of necessity, remained relatively low-key. As we are unable to actively police the area, instead we have focused on efforts to teach the public of the area’s geological and historical importance; one important method we have used is to offer the occasional guid-



Signs of fall's approach greet this rider in late August in the Hungry Bend Sandhills. PHOTO: © G. HAYDAY

ed school excursion through the area. Our members, like the students, have enjoyed those trips a great deal.

An intensive effort was also made to create a Special Places 2000 nomination, for an approximately ten township block of the area. This project drew together society members with widely varying skills. We were very disappointed that our nomination wasn't accepted. The society's name was suggested by Dominic Habitant, a Beaver elder. There is a big double loop on the Peace River in the dune area. Dominic told us it took so long to navigate the loops that a river traveler had long finished his lunch and gotten hungry before completing it. This also seemed a good name choice for the society and it was by this association that the area, earlier known simply as 'the sandhills', have become known as the Hungry Bend Sandhills.

Like elsewhere, the government has given a high priority to resource development on public lands. Trap-lines, oil and gas concessions, diamond and timber allocations – they are all present here and are impediments to any sort of protection. A real challenge is to find an ideal type of protection for an area that it is subject to so many traditional uses. Mandated protection too often seems to be an effort to make "one size fit all"; that approach simply wouldn't work here. What the HBSWS would like to see implemented is a mosaic approach where differing areas with

differing needs could be accommodated. Perhaps this is an impossible dream, but one can always dream!

If you continue west along the country road north of the bridge, through the farming community, the gravel road you're on will become a sand trail winding through cool spruce bottoms and up over piney dune ridges. Wiry Kinnikinnick sprawls down over the sand cut-banks alongside the road. Here, only about an inch of duff – it would be a misnomer to call it "soil" – is on top of the dunes. Trails remain etched into the land for many, many years and the sudden upsurge of OHV traffic is of special concern to our group. Society's urge to get somewhere fast seems to affect even the ideas of how people choose to get away from the rat race. Too few want to take time to enjoy the journey; the destination is the goal. But to value the dunes, a walk-in is the only way to really enjoy them. It's the squishy marshes, steep slip-faces, and cool spruce bogs that make the magic of the dunes.

Here on the dunes, aspen and pine show the peculiar twisted growth resulting from being rooted in sand; pin cherries and choke cherries, very small shrubs, also are found here. The tracks of moose and bear show plainly in the sand of the trails and one can look deep into the open forest.

Autumn is probably the best time to hike or camp in the sandhills. The weather is

good, mosquitoes are gone, most marshes have dried over the summer and the golden leaves of aspen are glorious against pure blue sky. Mushrooms have sprung up all over to flaunt their oddities and musky scents. Silvery reindeer lichen crunches like corn flakes underfoot.

At night wolves howl and a lynx snarls and spits. There's the wild laugh of loons and a startled duck bursts noisily from the lake below camp. Small critters rustle in leaf litter on the other side of the canvas that separates us.

A morning camp is all enchantment. I love to creep out into the quiet pre-dawn and build my tiny breakfast fire. Its smoke drifts overhead into the branches of a jack pine; mist drifts in gauzy wisps over the pale lake and a gray, whisky-jack drifts into camp on silent wings. My battered tea pail is tucked over the fire for that first wonderful, glorious mug of tea. Breakfast is bannock and bacon and the whisky jacks and chipmunks make sure they get their share.

Then the rising sun tops the ridge, stretching its golden fingers through twisty pines; a gentle wing of air brushes over the lake, making it quiver. Leaves stir as the forest exhales a fragrant breath and that breath is the sweetest air on God's good earth. ♡

*Joy Friesen is a longstanding member of the Hungry Bend Sandhills Wilderness Society.*