

The Slow-Food of Wilderness Adventure:

Canoeing the Red Deer River From Dry Island Buffalo Jump to Dinosaur Provincial Park

By Andrea Johancsik



When the chance to paddle the Red Deer River in sections from Dry Island Buffalo Jump to Dinosaur Provincial Park came up, completing a 174km section of one of southern Alberta's most undeveloped river valley landscapes, I readily agreed. From May to July, my friends and I completed the route in three sections.

You may have scrambled around the unique formations of the Canadian badlands and think you've seen it all, but the river valley is such a uniquely beautiful way to witness this rugged and biodiverse ecoregion. Think of it as the slow-food movement of wilderness adventure. The meanders of the Red Deer force you to exercise patience and your senses are only occupied by the occasional chorus of crickets or chirps of eastern kingbirds; the hot sun is indifferent to the sweat dripping down your back and the soft dip of your paddle

echoes in the steep valley walls. But suddenly, drama interrupts this tranquility. A belted kingfisher may hover dramatically over the river like an oversized hummingbird, before diving into the water, scooping up a fish in its large bill. Or, a surprised coyote the same colour as the sandstone glances back at you before it saunters off into the willows. Maybe your trip will be made by a golden eagle, suddenly taking flight before it soars to catch a thermal and spirals overhead. You could even see a crayfish darting back to safety under the mud as you paddle gently by.

Eagles, while seemingly rare to spot everywhere else, are the most common large animal you'll see. Beaver, mule deer, and cattle (this is agricultural country, of course) also will watch your progress. My group saw so many eagles on our weekend between Drumheller and Emerson Bridge that in seven hours we counted 17 bald

and golden eagles!

History buffs and palaeontology enthusiasts, like wildlife enthusiasts, can expect to be equally excited by the prospect of finding treasures on the Dinosaur Trail. On a quick snack break on the northwest side of Drumheller, my palaeontologist friend found a complete ceratopsian foot bone lying on the riverbank (the ceratopsians were herbivorous, horned dinosaurs that lived during the Cretaceous period – 145 to 66 million years ago). I went over a hillside to use the “facili-trees” and discovered the ground was littered with petrified wood and fossil fragments. Near East Coulee, abandoned stores and homes reminded us of a coal era long gone. A burnt, broken bridge with a cross on top felt so spooky we quickly paddled onwards.

Long moments of peace came between these encounters with history and wildlife. I quickly found myself becoming comfort-



A golden eagle surveys the river valley
PHOTO: © A. JOHANCSIK



Approaching Drumheller and Its Welcoming Committee
PHOTO: © A. JOHANCSIK

able in the easy company of close friends; I felt my creative brain exercise; ...I became increasingly silly! I began introducing beaver lodges as if they were for sale in real estate ads. "A perfect home for a growing family," or "comes complete with a 'green' roof... just don't mind the muskrat taking residence in the living room..." And then there was the one with "a unique architectural design." After all, exercising our brains was the only thing to keep us busy in a world with no cell service to distract us or help answer the many questions we had. "Why is that culvert there?" "What river animals are making the mud billow like that?" "Why is there a ferry when they could just build a bridge?" "How many eagles did we not see?" We invented reasonable theories to answer most of the questions, but I think the time spent wondering matters more.

I would recommend a Red Deer River paddle to people of all ages and abilities. Providing you've checked water levels and advisories, the paddle is not technical and the routes are adaptable. 🐾

Andrea's Pro Tips for Packing for a Red Deer River Paddle

- **Do plan** for weather; what I've made sound like a pleasant trip could turn nightmarish if conditions are different. Expect exposure. Do bring an umbrella for rain, but especially for sun protection! Be cautious if there is thunder in the forecast; shelter is rare.
- **Do check Alberta Rivers** - it's a free app (available for iOS from the Apple App Store or from Google Play at <https://play.google.com/store/apps>) where you can check flow conditions and other advisories.
- **Do practice low-impact camping** by observing fire bans, camping where legal below the high-water mark, and packing out all waste including toilet paper.
- **Don't expect much cell service** except around Drumheller, but **do bring a rechargeable battery** for your phone and download an offline map before you go.
- **Do bring enough water** – fill coolers with frozen water bottles, which you can drink as they thaw. 4L milk containers work well too. Expect to drink twice as much water as you normally would and bring electrolytes to keep yourself hydrated. I always pack a filter and purifying tablets too.
- **Do wear clothing to cover up** like long pants, long sleeves, a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses – you will get burned, even if you put on sunscreen! Covering up also helps against any bugs.
- **Don't forget safety equipment required by provincial laws** including an extra paddle, 1L bailing device, and personal flotation devices.
- **Don't be shy to bring a lot** as canoes and kayaks can hold a lot of gear! **Do pack your gear in dry bags or garbage bags.**



Paddling Near Tolman Bridge PHOTO: © A. JOHANCSEK