

The Trout:

An Elk Creek Provincial Recreation Area Tale



By Ian Urquhart

Trailer relocation, not fishing, was the main reason my friend Michael and I found ourselves at the Elk Creek Provincial Recreation Area years ago. I had inherited an old Scamper trailer I needed to pull to the Clearwater Trading Company campground just west of Caroline. Michael, who always was looking for an excuse to spend time in the foothills, thought I really needed a navigator. So we hitched up the trailer onto the Explorer and headed southwest, first to Shunda Creek near Nordegg and then south on the Forestry Trunk Road.

I can't tell you much about the trip before we stopped at the Elk Creek campground or after we left there to drop the trailer off. But, I'll never forget the evening we spent there. As most of you know, there's nothing particularly luxurious about PRA campgrounds. The campsite had a firepit and a suitably engraved picnic table. As for the campground itself, it had pit toilets and a water pump – like then, today I still think it's a bit strange to see a pit toilet described as an amenity. In those days, firewood was provided. But, we didn't need it because I always like to travel with my own.

But the campground's setting – that is Elk Creek's real amenity. The campground sits at one of the broader points in the valley separating the grey, towering Front Ranges of the Rockies to the west from the gentler, fully-forested mountains of the foothills to the east. Elk Creek, like the Clearwater River it feeds just downstream from the campground, carves

a snake-like trail through the valley. It's not a very wide creek – I'm pretty sure my younger self would have been able to jump across it at more than a few places. Its many bends and curves suggest it isn't in much of a rush to join the Clearwater. Willows and other sun-loving shrubs jostle for position along the creek's banks. Like those shrubs, the creek avoids dense forest. Instead, it slaloms through open meadows interspersed with shrubs and patches of white spruce. As the shadows lengthened, we enjoyed our beers, listened to the creek gurgle, and breathed in the aroma of the forest behind us. Yes, it was tranquil.

"The Trout" broke that tranquility. Just below our campsite the creek, no more than five feet wide, made an S. In that first bend in the S, the creek bank was undercut, the water was deeper, the current was slower. It had formed a "lie" for fish. Sheltered by a small spruce on the

edge of the bank, this was a perfect place for a trout to take up residence and let the creek's current deliver its meals.

What happened next was the most extraordinary sight I've ever seen while fishing in the foothills. Either in person or on video you may have seen a whale "spyhop." This is when a cetacean, such as one of the orcas that frequent Robson Bight on Vancouver Island, vertically pokes its head and some of its body straight out of the water. That's what my trout did at Elk Creek. In the soft light just before sunset, a brown trout rose vertically out of the water within inches of the undercut bank and slipped silently back into the lie. In early evening light it was gorgeous, the sun gave it a copper-like hue. In any light, the trout was enormous. I guessed that at least 15 inches of the trout came out of the water. I couldn't believe what I had seen.

Excitement turned fingers into thumbs.

AWA WANTS YOUR MEMORIES!! Yes, we want you to share with us any memories you have of the time you've spent in these threatened elements of our provincial parks system. Please, please send them to us. Get your friends to send their memories. I want to devote much of the June issue of the Advocate to sending a message from all of us to the provincial government that its proposal is anything but "optimizing Alberta Parks." Your thoughts, your stories will make that message powerful. Tell us what sites like Elk Creek have meant to you in your life so we can tell the government how wrong-headed its plans are.



Frozen Over, 8" x 10", watercolour pens with ink, PHOTO: © A. BROWN

While Michael chuckled, I managed to assemble my fly rod and tie on one of my mayfly imitations. I scrambled down to the creek, grateful for the room the open gravel bed on my side of the water gave me. Staying low to keep my profile below the shrubs and trees behind me I tossed the fly into the current and watched it drift down to where the trout had surfaced. Nothing. Maybe my placement was off, maybe my fly was drifting too close to the middle of the creek, too close to the shallow water edge of the lie. My next cast was higher up the creek and deliberately onto the bank on the other side. I gently tugged the fly off the grass and into the water just inches from the bank. It drifted down, under the spruce,

virtually against the bank...

A few minutes later I landed a gorgeous 22-inch brown trout. When it hammered my fly it burrowed deep into the lie under the bank. Given the shallowness of the water both above and below the S in the creek, I guessed it felt the hole offered it the best chance of escape. When I released my trout, it darted back under the bank.

I'll never forget that amazing experience. I thought back on that day when I read the provincial government's inventory of the 164 sites it intends to close or otherwise cut loose as part of its "Optimizing Alberta Parks" initiative. Elk Creek Provincial Recreation Area is targeted as one of the sites to be removed from the parks

system. Its future may be one where it will be "available for partnership opportunities" or something called "alternative management approaches." Maybe it'll be closed altogether. Would I have had my magical moment if the Elk Creek PRA hadn't existed? I don't think so. I wonder how many other magical moments in the outdoors have taken place there, or in any of the other 164 sites the province wants to abandon? 🐟