

A photograph of three bison standing in a field of dry grass. The bison are dark brown with thick, shaggy fur and curved horns. They are positioned in the lower half of the frame, looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred landscape of trees and sky.

DISCOVERING ALBERTA

A CALGARY HERALD MAGAZINE SERIES EXPLORING OUR GEOGRAPHY AND SPECIAL PLACES

ISSUE THREE

the north: charging ahead

The majestic birthplace of our province is
poised for growth, but rooted in its rich history



NATURAL RICHES

BY PAULA ARAB, CALGARY HERALD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT BLACK, CALGARY HERALD

northern treasures

Alberta's booms have been fuelled by fur, trees and now bitumen

The incandescent sun sits low in the northern Alberta sky, illuminating the dirty mud flats below on this warm spring morning.

Parks Canada manager Mike Keizer stands in front of a lonely mound of white salt that glistens amid fields of brown. "It's bubbling out of the ground, right here at my feet," says the Wood Buffalo National Park guide. "That's the spring."

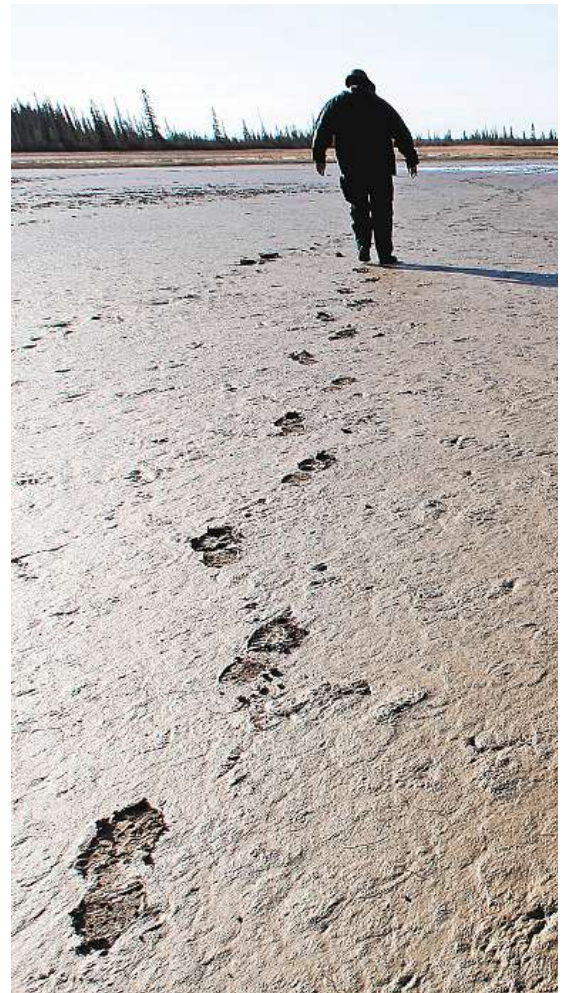
Keizer is referring to the mineral that gushes generously from this ecological splendour hiding deep in the heart of the world's second-largest national park.

Herein lies the salt of the earth, precious to humans and once traded for gold. It symbolizes the geographical story of the North, exemplifying how the land bubbles its riches to the surface and freely gives that which man taketh away.

Agriculture, fur and oil are among the resources that have contributed to the economic prosperity of northern Alberta. Explorer Alexander Mackenzie first noted what has become today's bounty — bitumen — seeping from the sandy banks of the Peace River in the 1790s, although he didn't recognize its value at the time. In his journals, he described how the natives used the tar-like goo: "The bitumen is in a fluid state, and when mixed . . . serves to gum the canoes."

Oil was again found oozing out of the gravel in 1912 along the Pouce Coupe River — in the western portion of Peace River Country — where gas was also detected lingering between the stones. Similar reports followed from other locations along the Peace River, which begins in BC and winds its way through northern Alberta.

But petro-riches would come later. The early gifts of the land were beaver pelts and grain. In the 1870s, surveyor Charles Horetzky and botanist John Macoun were sent on a quest to explore the agricultural potential of Peace River Country. They described a "veritable garden of Eden," leading the Canadian government to encourage large-scale farm settlements.



Today, the salt sparkles like diamonds, casually reminding observers this is one of Alberta's oldest industries. For hundreds of years, aboriginal people used the mineral to cure fish and meat, and to tan hides. In later years, missionaries and the Hudson's Bay Company harvested salt and shipped it for export.

In 1920, it was sold for the gainful sum of 10 cents per pound (22 cents per kilogram), the equivalent of 99 cents (\$2.18 per kilogram) in today's dollars.

When outsiders think of the geography of the North, it's usually the image of lush boreal forests that comes to mind, not an ancient sea that washed over the land thousands of years ago. All that remains of that today are the salt plains, whose whisperings remind us of water's infinite importance to the region.

"Water is life, water is sacred," says Francois Paulette, who lives in Alberta's northernmost community, Fort Fitzgerald, situated just outside the park and down a gravel road from the Northwest Territories. His ancestors, the Dene Suline, have been here since "time immemorial," according to the band's mission statement framed on the walls of the new community centre.

The extensive rivers and pristine lakes have always defined the North. They were the highways before the age of the blacktop, opening up the West to early explorers, trappers, missionaries and settlers. Long before that, aboriginals had used these same land and water routes for thousands of years.

The Athabasca and Peace river systems are the largest waterways in the area. Hundreds of tributaries flow into the rivers, which eventually join the mighty Slave that pours into the Arctic Ocean. Fertile prairie, ranchland and farmland surround the Peace. The Athabasca oilsands, one of the world's largest deposits of oil, dominate the surrounding area of the Athabasca River and Fort McMurray.

The oilsands have brought billions of dollars of investment to the region — and another \$100 billion is on the way. The impact has been huge. Entire towns are employed, through direct and spinoff jobs, while the surrounding landscape is being transformed.

Logging, mining, and oil and gas operations are using up chunks of land and of the northern boreal forest. The trend has seen the international scientific community pressure Canada to adopt tougher conservation efforts, while corporations develop stronger, and more innovative, environmental plans.

In a study released last year, scientists David Schindler and Bill Donahue noted the flow of the Athabasca River has decreased by one-third since 1970, a result of human and industrial activity, and climate change. Other research is still trying to determine how much water the river can afford to lose before its health is threatened.

The geography of the North, though, is more than water and minerals. Heavily forested, the massive

expanse of land north of Edmonton to the N.W.T. is relatively flat. Imagine Alberta's southern open skies, but add a carpet of trees.

"This country is so level that, at some seasons, it is entirely overflowed, which accounts for the periodical influx and reflux of waters between the Lake of the Hills and the Peace River," wrote Mackenzie.

The Lakeland region northeast of Edmonton is where many early fur-trading posts were established. Elevated plateaus include Swan Hills at 1,200 metres, and the Birch and Caribou mountains, the latter providing a core habitat for the endangered woodland caribou. Aspen parkland makes up the southern area, while boreal forest and the low-lying bogs and marshes of muskeg are found to the north.

The importance of the boreal forest, a massive carbon storehouse, can't be overstated. It's been called the second lung of the Earth after the Amazon, providing animals and plants with a natural habitat large enough to act as a buffer for any climate change affecting northern species.

Enter Wood Buffalo National Park — a World Heritage Site slightly bigger than Switzerland that protects a significant chunk of Canada's boreal forest. It provides a refuge for the largest free-roaming, self-regulating herd of bison in the world. In many ways, it is a microcosm for much of the geography of the North, a magical canopy of only those trees hearty enough to



Muskeg and boreal forest dominate Wood Buffalo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site slightly larger than Switzerland.



The red-sided garter snake, seen here in a mating ball, is the only species of i

adapt to the long, cold winters and short summers. The most common species are the coniferous white and black spruces, jack pines, firs and larches.

The park is a crucial breeding ground for more than 30 per cent of North America's birds. It houses the only remaining nesting ground for the rare whooping crane, and contains the biologically rich Peace-Athabasca Delta, one of the world's largest fresh-water deltas. The park is also home to beavers, muskrats, moose, lynx, wolves and black bears.

The easiest way into the remote park is by air. Northwestern Air offers regular flights out of Edmonton and Fort McMurray. Otherwise, there are but two roads through the North. The overland route is west of Edmonton, through Peace River Country to High Level and north of the provincial border, looping back south to Fort Smith, N.W.T. A winter road from Fort McMurray is driveable from December to March, when the lake and rivers freeze. The breathtaking journey winds through oilsands and the Athabasca sand dunes, across the Peace River and over Lake Athabasca, into Fort Chipewyan, Alberta's oldest, permanently occupied community. The route goes through marshland, a gorgeous red-willow stand and into a dense, magical area of trees known to the locals as the "enchanted forest," says Parks Canada's Keizer.

"You really do expect to see the seven dwarfs come marching around the corner."

THE SPIRIT OF THE NORTH

Aritha van Herk, University of Calgary professor and author of *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*, believes the northern way constitutes an important part of the province's adventurous and entrepreneurial spirit. The landscape most important to her is the Methye Portage, the 20-kilometre route fur traders used to enter the province from Saskatchewan, east of Fort McMurray, in search of more lucrative beaver pelts.

"It's just the most circuitous, horrible back-and-forth route, and yet, along the way, they're encountering what is the natural wealth of that place," says van Herk. "And it is still wealthy in trees, in beaver — at that time it would have had wood buffalo — and just sheer unexpurgated beauty; it's beautiful."

The route to Athabasca country was arduous and harsh. Explorers, thirsty for richer pelts, dragged their canoes over incredible heights of land, through inhospitable forests and heavy muskeg infested with mosquitoes.

"When you think about the confluence of the Europeans coming out here looking for wealth, the beauty of the landscape, the incredible harshness of the landscape and the real struggle they had to get into Alberta, you begin to understand there's something else that happens here. It's infected our spirit in ways that we don't even know 200 and some odd years later."

While Europeans saw the land for its economic potential, natives such as Paulette say it represents spiritual freedom in a way not possible by religion or prayer alone. Paulette spent 25 years negotiating a treaty settlement with the federal and provincial governments on behalf of his band, Smith's Landing First Nation. In the end, the band took less money so it could keep all nine strategic and sacred parcels of land members identified as important.

One of Paulette's favourite spots is Mountain Rapids on the Slave River, just eight kilometres from Fort Fitzgerald, a town of about 30 people.

The treacherous Class 6 white waters of Pelican Rapids rush nearby. There are four rapids in the Slave River series, representing one of the finest examples in North America.

A colony of pelicans sits off in the distance on the pink granite of the Canadian Shield. A raven glides above, and the air smells fresh and thick of thawing earth and wet leaves. The thundering roar of water drowns out all thoughts.

Paulette's black eyes run as deep as the treasures below the ground — and he knows the lure of bringing the riches out must be delicately balanced with preserving what nature has gifted Alberta.

"I love the land," he says.

"Everything belongs. And you belong, and there's balance in this life." ■



ies of reptile found in Wood Buffalo National Park.



"I love the land," says Francois Paulette of the boreal forest near his home in Fort Fitzgerald. "Everything belongs."