

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 freshwater 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."