

Environment and Terrain

Topography - The Canadian Birkebeiner takes place in an incredibly unique and special environment with perfect terrain for long distance cross country skiing. The primary topography of the Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area (Canada's first forest reserve, established in 1899) and adjacent Elk Island National Park borders the Southern Boreal Plains and Plateaus Natural Region - a transitional zone between the aspen parkland to the south and the boreal forest to the north. The primary topography is knob and kettle, rising thirty to sixty metres above the surrounding plains of Alberta. The higher elevation and resultant slightly cooler temperatures means the area often gets more snow than the surrounding region. Yippee!

The area traversed by the Canadian Birkie trails is a large island, not in the aquatic geographical sense, but in terms of its landscape of small hills (knobs) and depressions (kettles) surrounded by flat plains. When the glaciers retreated from the area, they left mounds and ridges of debris or glacial drift that formed the 'knobs', clustered around chunks of ice, which when they melted made shallow ponds or 'kettles'. The area is known as the Beaverhills Moraine.

Wildlife - The trails roll and wind through a dominant aspen forest parkland that is home to many quintessential Canadian winter wilderness species. Tracks, droppings and bedding sites of ungulates such as moose, elk and Mule and White Tail Deer are not uncommon signs spotted along the trails, and skiers driving to the long start are often treated to sightings of Wood Bison to the south of the highway and/or Plains Bison to the north, arising in the morning mist in the respective fenced areas of Elk Island National Park. In fact, the park has the second highest density of ungulates in the world, next to the Serengeti in Africa, and with less foliage for concealment, winter is a great time to spot them. Carnivores in the area include coyotes, and even very-rarely-seen-but-known-to-be-present wolves, cougar and Canada Lynx. Black bear sign is also occasionally seen. Small mammals such as porcupine and squirrels can be spotted in the trees along the trail and American Varying Hares in their white winter coats blend into the snowy landscape. Domed beaver houses, looking like little Inuit igloos, dot the numerous small lakes and sloughs that lie along the trails. Favourite winter birds that make the area home include: Pileated, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers; Northern Flickers; Black-capped and Boreal Chickadees; Red-Breasted and White-Breasted Nuthatches; and Bohemian Waxwings. And while not often spotted because of their nocturnal lifestyle, signs of Great Horned Owls (Alberta's provincial bird) such as undigested pellets or kill sites of smaller birds or animals are prized discoveries along the trails.

The Perfect Cross Country Ski Terrain - The undulating landscape typical of the Park is absolutely ideal cross country ski terrain. The double-tracked classic trail is constantly rolling and winding, so provides the skier with an enthralling experience from beginning to end. Almost all of the uphill are readily navigable using diagonal stride and snow plowing is only rarely needed on the downhill. This is incredibly fun and inviting ski terrain, with lots to keep it interesting and challenging; the ups provide enough work to keep one warm but are rarely long enough to tire out the skier before a welcome downhill ride allows for recovery and preparation for the next rise. This is terrain that is optimal for long distance skiing. Cooking Lake-Blackfoot is one of the best Nordic ski areas in the world and visitors from Europe, the States and across Canada as well as local skiers rave about it equally. This is a must-ski area!