

Kate & Jim's Travels with Charles

Episode #18 – From Drumheller to Head Smashed-In Buffalo Jump

After Drumheller, we weren't sure where we were going to stay. So we consulted our handy iOvderlander app (Thanks again Daniel Reid!) and found a "wild camping site" called Severn Dam Park. It said there were free campsites around a lake, so we decided to check it out. What a great find!

It was VERY peaceful and beautiful in its own quiet way. There were a group of trailers on one side of the water, apparently those people live there, year-round presumably. And then there were several spots with picnic tables, very well spaced around the lake, so you felt like you were virtually alone. And the views were serenely spectacular.

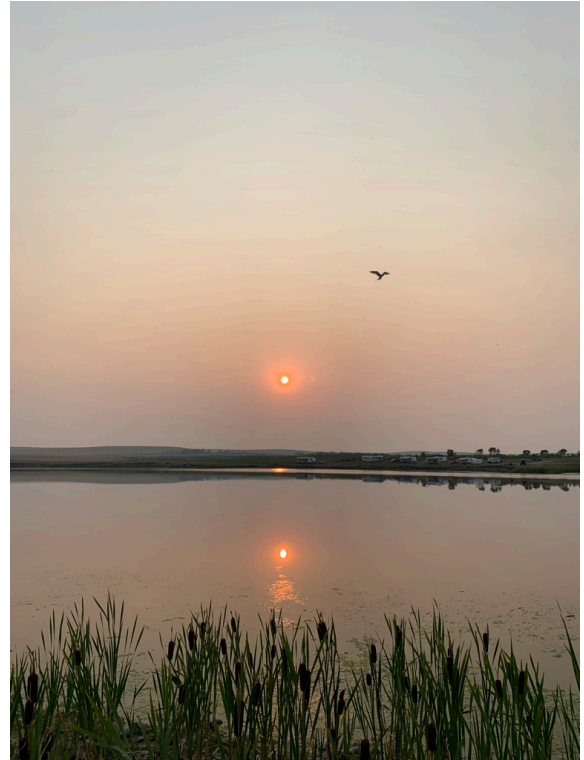




To my surprise, there were pelicans that stopped by to visit. (Actually they were fishing.)



We even got a lovely sunset to eat dinner by.



It was such a lovely, peaceful spot. I loved watching and listening to the birds and the bugs and the water. It really was a haven. When we talked about having an RV and being able to stop in a beautiful spot and just park there, this is the kind of thing I imagined.



The next morning we drove a little ways to the town of Rosebud.

On the way, we stopped to get water in another campsite, which had its own unique charm. Along with having campsites, they had a crammed antique store with all kinds of interesting gems. We also found out that the couple that ran the campsite performed on their little stage on Saturday nights. She said generally other visitors would grab their guitars and join in. It sounded like something we might have to check out on another trip through the area.



Then we went to the nearby tiny town of Rosebud, which had been more prominent in bygone years. However, some motivated and determined people had managed to turn the former high school (which had been closed due to changes in governmental funding) into an arts school, which now produces shows throughout the year (or did before COVID), and has made it a successful operation, with annual audiences of over 30,000!

We weren't able to see any shows, but we saw the theatre and as it happened, while we were driving through town, we saw them setting up for a concert. It's so great to see the arts surviving, against all odds, and raising people up with them.

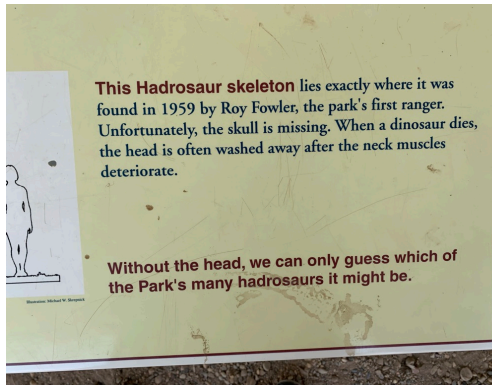


We couldn't stay for the concert, as we had a date with more badlands and dinos.

We were on our way to Dinosaur Provincial Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Centre. It's set in another badlands area, with trails and information kiosks about dinosaur finds. Fortunately, the trail we found was drivable, which was a relief to us, because at that point, the temperature was well over 30C and the sun was blazing. But, again, the terrain was incredibly interesting and looked like something from another planet.







The actual campground was quite pleasant, and the fact that it was on Red Deer River was a welcome relief from the heat.



There was also a nightly show for families, each night focusing on a different aspect of the park. The night we were there, it was about mammals.



As we continued on the next day, we were intrigued by the different sights we saw and towns we drove through.

Towns with proud names like Enchant...



And Picture Butte...



We never found out the significance of this scene, set in front of someone's home, but it was ... interesting.



As were some of the other signs we saw that I found amusing ...



Pincher Creek – like so many towns in Alberta – had some lovely murals. It seemed to be a very pretty and well maintained town.





We eventually made our way to Fort Macleod, which we weren't able to fully appreciate, unfortunately, because the fort wasn't open on the days we were there.

But there were signs indicating that people had the right attitude...



And we had a nice spot in the Fort Macleod campground. We were fortunate to get an interesting, ever evolving sunset, from many different directions.





But, by far, the most amazing thing about being in Fort MacLeod was its proximity to Head Smashed-In Buffalo Jump.



Like a typical ignorant white Ontarian, I really had no idea what this place was or why it was significant. This is another UNESCO World Heritage Site, and it's a fascinating experience.


For those of you, like us, who knew nothing about this place, the story is that the First Nations people (in this area, it was the Blackfoot) used to rely on buffalo for their survival. They not only ate the meat but used every part of the animal for clothing, shelter, tools, fuel and more.

But this was a time before horses were domesticated and hunting buffalo was difficult and dangerous. So they devised a way of navigating a herd of buffalo toward a cliff and causing them to plunge to their death, at which point the Blackfoot would carve up every morsel and provide for their tribe.

It was an incredible feat which involved a keen understanding of the buffalo and huge bravery on the part of the Blackfoot, who would spend many days strategizing and preparing for the event.

When you enter the site, they tell you that the best way to experience it is to go up to the very top of the building first and then make your way down.

When you climb up (or take the elevator) to the top floor, you find yourself on the cliff, so you can walk out and see where the actual event would happen, along with explanations of the strategy.



Preparation began days before the hunt as the cairns (small piles of rock) were made larger with brush, earth, and dung.

The cairns, spaced 5 to 10 metres apart, stretched many kilometres west into the gathering basin and formed the drive lanes. Like a funnel, the lanes converged to a narrow exit at the cliff.

Several young men – the buffalo runners – located a herd and slowly directed them into the lanes. Buffalo saw the cairns as solid walls and moved deeper into the funnel towards the cliff. At the last moment the buffalo were startled into a stampede. Unable to stop, they fell from the cliff.

A successful hunt probably killed several hundred buffalo, although not all hunts succeeded. Occasionally, hunters even lost their lives.





After seeing the actual site and getting a sense of the magnitude of this feat, you make your way down through the building and learn more about the people, their traditions, and their way of life.





The exhibits were displayed in a way that used natural elements from the land.





And there was this dramatic viewpoint...



As cruel as it may seem to force animals to plunge to their death, a key part of the story is that the Blackfoot killed as many as they needed and used every single part of all the animals to support their community. Nothing was wasted, and part of the ritual was to honour the animals that had died to help them survive.



Then, of course the settlers arrived and saw the buffalo as a never-ending resource, there for pleasure of white people, to hunt for sport. We know how that ended.

“We now regretted having destroyed these noble beasts for no earthly reason...”

Edward Harris, 1843

As the American Railroads pushed west through the 1870s, shooting bison from the train became a common sport. The carcasses were simply left where they fell. Across the Plains, hunters shot buffalo to supply meat to trading and military posts, and to railway construction crews. Eastern demands for bison hides to produce industrial drive belts led to an unprecedented slaughter.

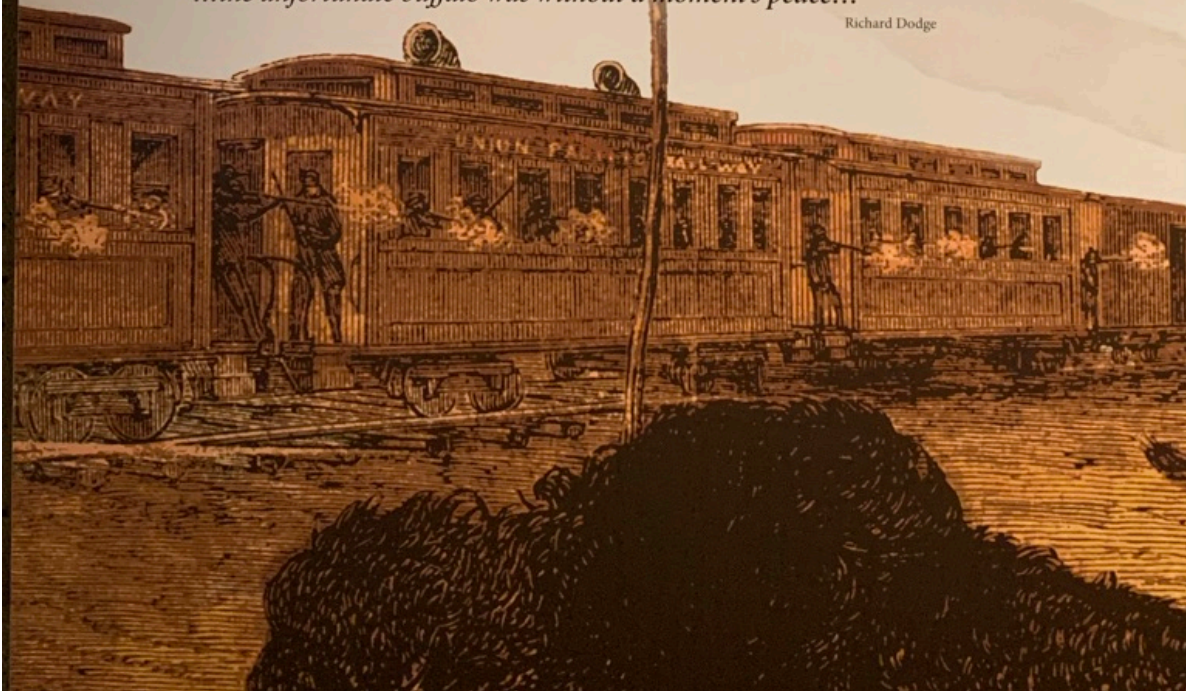
Even those on travel adventures and research expeditions were guilty of waste. Edward Harris, who accompanied the naturalist John Audubon up the Missouri River in 1843, recounted: “I am

almost ashamed to tell you that we left our Bulls, and fine fat ones they were, on the ground for the Wolves, carrying away nothing but the tongues.”

Both Native people and non-Natives alike were well aware of this wanton killing and the decreasing numbers of buffalo. Audubon noted that “before many years the Buffalo, like the Great Auk, will have disappeared...” An old chief said: “I fear we shall soon be de-prived of the buffalo... As the White man advances, our game and our means of life grow less; and before many years, they will all be gone.”

...the unfortunate buffalo was without a moment's peace...

Richard Dodge



The last story you read about is the near extinction of the buffalo at the hands of white people, and the resulting efforts to try to bring them back.

So the question you leave with is: Who really pushed the buffalos over the edge?



It was a remarkable experience.