

Best
BACKCOUNTRY
ADVENTURES

EXPLORE'S
ULTIMATE
Summer
Guide

CANADA'S *Best* BACKCOUNTRY ADVENTURES

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A REAL WILDERNESS
ADVENTURE? WET YOUR PADDLES OR PUT
BOOTS TO THE GROUND IN ONE OF THESE 16
BACKCOUNTRY AREAS:

By David Webb

YT

Sheep Creek Base Camp Adventure

Ivvavik National Park, Yukon

“They look like the spines on a dragon’s back,” says an enthusiastic Eric Baron, Parks Canada Visitor Experience Manager for the Western Arctic Field Unit. He’s talking about *tors* — the signature landform of 10,000-sq-km Ivvavik National Park and just one of the exclusive experiences found within this remote Arctic preserve.

Occupying the northern reaches of Yukon, Ivvavik was the first national park in Canada to be established by an aboriginal land claim — an event celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2014. For eons, the area has been home to the desolate peaks of the British Mountains and a migration route for the 160,000-strong Porcupine caribou herd. More recently, it has harboured Sheep Creek Base Camp — and today it’s the most affordable vehicle into a true Arctic experience. Parks Canada currently runs four- or five-day trips into Ivvavik throughout June and July. Costs vary, depending on whether visitors choose to go catered or self-catered, but the big savings is that, rather than chartering a plane at great personal expense, Parks Canada handles flight logistics.

“You can fly from Inuvik into the park and only pay for your seat going in,” explains Baron. “That’s the big game-changer for us opening Sheep Creek — we’re coordinating the charter aircrafts.”

To further assist with costs, Parks has partnered with Canadian North Airlines to offer trip participants 30 per cent off airfare to Inuvik.

“It’s not cheap to come up here, but compared to other Arctic experiences, I would certainly wager this is one of the more accessible,” says Baron.

And what can one expect in Ivvavik?

“The big attraction for most of the visitors to Sheep Creek is the day-hiking options. Because that area has so much terrain clustered around nearby, it is a perfect base to explore from,” continues Baron. Sheep Creek Base Camp is in the heart of the British Mountains — day-hikes that see fewer footprints than the summit of Everest are accessible right from the kitchen shed. Baron explains that Ivvavik is similar to Rocky Mountain hiking in that you can be above the tree line in 10 minutes. From there, the taiga opens up into boundless Arctic alpine ridge-walks.

“The signature hike is called Halfway to Heaven, affectionately named by Mervin Joe, a parks guide and local Inuvialuit. . . from the summit, he once exclaimed, ‘We’re halfway to heaven standing here!’ And the name stuck,” laughs Baron.

As part of *Beringia*, Ivvavik was untouched by glaciers during the last Ice Age. (There wasn’t enough precipitation.) This glacial refugium resulted in V-shaped valleys (rather than a traditional U-shape) and the signature tors (which would have otherwise been scrubbed clear by glaciers). Within these landforms, mega-fauna like caribou, muskox, grizzlies, wolves and wolverines as well as raptors such as golden eagles, peregrine falcons and rough-legged hawks make their homes.

“The open sightlines of the park are good for [wildlife viewing],” says Baron, adding there are never any guarantees with animals. Though, recalling an instance in 2011, he describes observing the local Porcupine caribou herd, “Like being at the old Maple Leaf Gardens after a game! Caribou were just pouring out of the coastal plain towards their wintering

grounds. The valley was, as far as you can see, coloured with caribou.”

Beyond the wildlife and scenery, Baron says the really amazing experience is the living cultural story — listening to a guy like Mervin Joe speak about how he experiences the landscape today and how his ancestors did in the past. Every guided trip has a designated “culturist,” from the nearby community of Aklavik, plus “one-third to one-half” of local parks staff is Inuvialuit.

“You’re getting both Parks Canada trained staff and someone who has stories to tell and a connection to the land that’s really profound,” says Baron.

Once used as a gold mining operation, Sheep Creek Base Camp consists of a handful of hard-sided buildings — kitchen, pit privy, etc. — but accommodation is still in two-person tents, supplied by Parks Canada to keep luggage weight down.

“It feels a bit like front-country camping, but you’re in the remote Arctic back-country,” says Baron. Parks Canada has big plans for the future of Sheep Creek — such as solar-powered potable water systems (showers and flush toilets!) that will actually *decrease* impact on the land when compared to pit-toilets. Wall tents, for an “authentic delta prospector experience,” are on the horizon too.

“Everyone who goes there is blown away by the landscape and the opportunities,” says Baron. “We’re trying to aim high. I don’t think anything less than that will do just because it’s such an amazing environment.”

Difficulty: ♦♦

Cost: \$1,400 to \$2,100 (from Inuvik)

Dates: June & July

For More Info: pc.gc.ca/ivvavik ▶



Valley of 1,000 Devils, Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan.

SK

Valley of 1,000 Devils

Grasslands National Park, SK

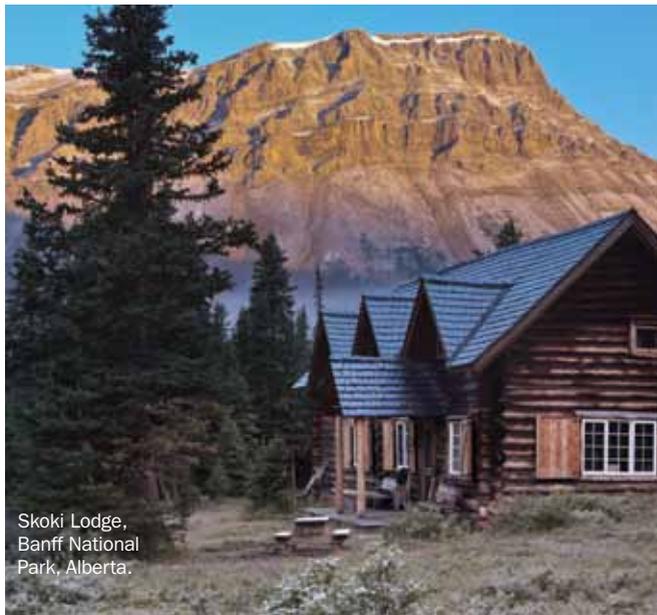
In Saskatchewan, what's very, very old is new again. Enter the Valley of 1,000 Devils — a recently accessible backcountry area in the East Block of Grasslands National Park that's been 66 million years in the making.

Though the 65-hectare valley is characterized by its huge expanses of red-clay hoodoos — harbouring 12-metre-long Hadrosaur fossils, 10-point mule deer, nesting golden eagles and famous paleontological explorations like the Sternberg Dig of 1921 — Brenda Peterson, Interpretation Officer at the park's McGowan Visitor Centre, also finds fascination in the little things.

"What's really neat is if you get to see a short-horned lizard — they live on yellow umbrella plants. If you get to see one, go out and buy a lottery ticket because it's your lucky day... it's like a little dinosaur," she says.

Of course, these hoodoos have been exposed since the Western Interior Seaway dried up at the start of the Paleogene Period, but the visitor centre in the East Block of this already under-visited park is only three years old. Because of that, prairie-bound backpackers are rediscovering 1,000 Devils. And while valley visitors may uncover Aboriginal tepee rings and burial sites or spot prancing deer and scurrying jackrabbits, Peterson maintains geology and palaeontology are the two biggest draws to 1,000 Devils.

"There are dinosaur bones sticking out everywhere," she says,



Skoki Lodge, Banff National Park, Alberta.

adding that one can also see firsthand the passage of geological time. "You'll see a black strip in the hoodoos, that's coal, followed by a white line — that's the K-T Line. Everything above that is the rebuilding of the Earth, everything below that is more than 65.5 million years old."

The dinosaurs, and three-quarters of life on Earth, went extinct at the same time the K-T Line was formed, probably following an asteroid impact. Since the East Block of Grasslands National Park was at the edge of a prehistoric sea, fossils of fishes and turtles as well as Hadrosaurs and Triceratops have been found below the area's K-T line. (Peterson says scientists have come from around the globe to study in this area, stating, "The jury is still out on what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs.") Having also escaped the ravages of the last Ice Age, the valley is rife with unique geomorphologic opportunities.

"When looking at the hoodoos, you'll see stripes, which represent 'time slices,'" Peterson expounds. "You're looking at so many millions of years — it's an incredible feeling."

There are a few different options for exploring the Valley of 1,000 Devils. Most people tent at the East Block Visitor Centre Campground and make day trips within. Some intrepid hikers stay out in the hoodoos overnight, and, according to Peterson, at least one regular visitor plants water caches around the valley and makes

multi-day trips. But the lack of H₂O within the valley limits most interior trips to an overnight.

"Hiking terrain is rolling prairie," Peterson explains, adding it can hit 40 degrees Celsius in midsummer, making June one of the best times to visit. "Otherwise, you'd better pick a cool day." But don't go too early or late in the season — when wet, the clay hoodoos are as slippery as grease. When dry, though, it's like walking on popcorn.

"When we were kids, we used to slide down them on the seat of our pants," Peterson laughs. "But the coolest thing is the quiet. You don't hear human noises. It's just the wind. I don't know how you can get closer to nature."

Difficulty: ◆

Dates: June to October

For More Info: pc.ca.ca/grasslands

MB

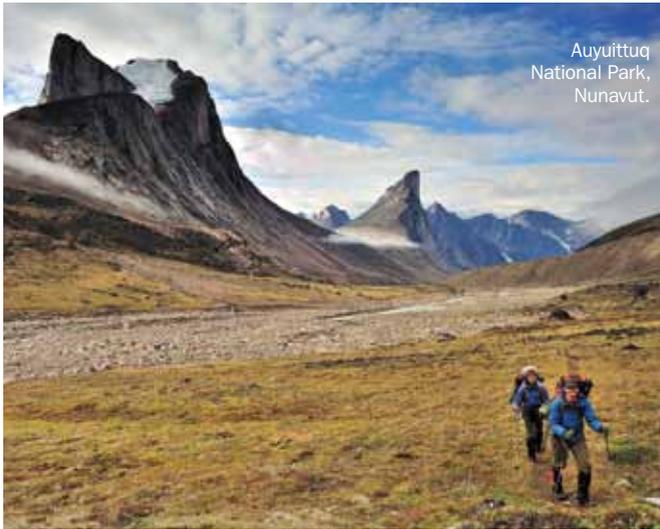
PADDLER'S PARADISE

Atikaki Provincial Park, MB

There are no roads leading into Atikaki Provincial Park. There are no usage fees and no crowds — unless you count woodland caribou. The park is, however, relatively close to Winnipeg; access is either by charter plane or via paddle-and-portage-route through Wallace Lake Provincial Park (about 250 km north of Peg City). Once within, a staggering 4,000-sq-km carved up by 1,000 navigable waterways awaits. Most paddlers head straight for the Bloodvein River, a Canadian Heritage River that snakes for

What's in a Name?

Park Interpretation Officer Brenda Peterson, whose family has owned property near the East Block for decades, explains how the Valley of 1,000 Devils got its name: "In the early '60s, my dad took the new rural municipality administrator and his 81-year-old mother on a tour of [his] ranch. She looked at the area and said, 'That ought to be the valley of a-thousand devils, I have never seen anything like it.' The name stuck."



Auyuittuq
National Park,
Nunavut.



Lady Evelyn-
Smoothwater
Provincial Park,
Ontario.

200 km through the park. Traveling past Aboriginal petroglyphs, three-billion-year-old Precambrian Shield, scrubby jackpine and prickly black spruce, during the 10-day paddle you'll sleep to the sound of howling wolves each night and wake the scent of blooming water lilies every morning.

Difficulty: ◆◆

Dates: June to September

For More Info: gov.mb.ca/conservation/parks

BC

GOLDEN EARS TRAIL

Golden Ears Provincial Park, BC

Don't let Golden Ears Provincial Park's popularity lull you; this is one of the most underestimated hikes in the Vancouver-area. Starting from the busy parking lot, the 12-km-long Golden Ears Trail climbs more than 100 metres for every one kilometre in length. It will take you about five hours to reach Panorama Ridge Backcountry Campsite — setup a tent in the wooded area. No fires are permitted; there is an emergency shelter here too. After a rest, finish the remaining three kilometres and several hundred metres of elevation to the summit. Lactic acid and lung-heaving rewards the well-prepared hiker with vistas of Pitt Lake, nearby permanent snowfields and just about the entire 62,400 hectares of Golden Ears Park. Return to your tent and stargaze into the night — a perfect summer weekend.

Difficulty: ◆◆

Dates: June to October

For More Info: env.gov.bc.ca

AB

SKOKI LODGE

Banff National Park, AB

Luxury in the backcountry? You'll have to work for it first. Starting from Lake Louise Ski Resort in Banff National Park, the trail to Skoki Lodge is an 11-km trek that gains more than 900 metres in elevation and tops out at 2,500 metres in Banff's spectacular alpine. Follow the well-marked trail past Temple Lodge, alongside Coral Creek, as you make your way to the Halfway Hut. The path steepens here, culminating in the climb to Deception Pass. Catch your breath while you enjoy panoramic views of the Skoki Valley before descending into a conifer forest and arriving at 80-year-old Skoki Lodge. Book accommodation (\$189/night) and use the full-service operation as your hiking hub.

Difficulty: ◆

Dates: June to October

For More Info: skoki.com

NU

AKSHAYUK PASS

Auyuittuq National Park, NU

Though Auyuittuq is Inuktitut for "the land that never melts," during the short summer season there is plenty of snow-free hiking and camping to be found within Auyuittuq National Park's 19,000-sq-km of high Arctic terrain. And, unlike some of the North's other parks, Auyuittuq doesn't require a charter flight: just catch a scheduled First Air or Canadian North flight to Pangnirtung then arrange for boat ride up Pangnirtung Fiord and into the park. Akshayuk Pass is

the most popular route in the park — if the word "popular" can be applied — a 10-day, 97-km trek that carves between imposing peaks and permanent icefields. Rising sharply from the tundra, mountains such as Overlord, Asgard and Thor appear, well, godlike.

Difficulty: ◆◆◆

Dates: July & August

For More Info: pc.gc.ca/auyuittuq

ON

Temagami Wilderness

Ontario's Best Backcountry

Northeastern Ontario's Temagami Wilderness has long been an inspiring place. In the early 1900s, Archie Belaney — a.k.a Grey Owl — learned his bushcraft in the region after spending time with local Ojibwa peoples; part of the Anishinaabe First Nations who have called the area home for 9,000 years and counting. Belaney later took this inspiration to Northern Saskatchewan, and, ever controversial, became known as our country's first conservationist. Of course, he was also an Englishman pretending to be an "Indian."

As Dave Sproule, Natural Heritage Education and Marketing Specialist with Ontario Parks, explains, Temagami is just as wild and inspiring today.

"It's the Land of the Tall Pine... everyone who comes to paddle

here is surprised by the amount of tall pine on the shorelines... there are 10 or 12 protected areas of old-growth, some about 350 to 400 years old," says Sproule. For the most out-of-the-way wilderness in the region, Sproule recommends Obabika River, Makobe-Grays River, Sturgeon River, Solace and Lady Evelyn-Smoothwater Provincial Parks.

"These parks are the most remote part of the Temagami area," says Sproule. As waterway-class parks, he explains, they are home to some of the finest canoeing in Ontario. In fact, Temagami offers more than 2,400 km of canoe routes in a combined 65,000 hectares — compared with 1,600 km in 750,000 hectares in more-well-known Algonquin Provincial Park.

For the hiker, some of the highest points in Ontario — such as Ishpatina Ridge (tallest) and Maple Mountain (sixth tallest) — are found within Lady Evelyn-Smoothwater Provincial Park. Both peaks feature lookouts at the terminuses of old fire rangers' trails — routes that were inherited from First Nations and have been in-use since post-glacial times.

Outside of the designated provincial park borders, there are also several trail networks in Temagami's conservation reserves.

"The White Bear Forest is accessible from the village of ▶



Quetico
Provincial Park,
Ontario.

Temagami and from Finlayson Point Provincial Park — lots of trails in this old growth pine forest and a super lookout over Lake Temagami from Caribou Mountain,” Sproule explains. Cliff Lake Conservation Reserve features wonderful hikes too — a classic route runs along a small rocky plateau between Friday and Rib Lakes.

“[There is an] old growth red pine forest on one side and a rare northerly red maple/yellow birch forest on the other, growing in a sand and gravel deposit scraped off the bottom of the last glacier,” continues Sproule. Art lovers may find the scenery familiar, as members of the Group of Seven spent time in the region during the early 20th century.

For the most accessible adventure, Lake Temagami, in Finlayson Point Provincial Park, is right on the Trans-Canada

Highway. Thousands of kilometres of shoreline, 1,200 islands and multitudes of arms, bays and coves have made the lake popular with paddlers for more than a century.

“The Temagami Canoe Company started in 1928 and is still there in the village of Temagami,” says Sproule. “Lake Temagami is home to six canoe youth camps, the oldest of which is Camp Keewaydin — the oldest in the world. Started in Vermont in 1892, they moved the camp to Temagami in 1898.”

It’s not just the pine forests and portage routes that are inspiring — from the traditional peoples, to canoe camps, to Grey Owl and the Group of Seven and beyond, Temagami’s cultural story proves equally fascinating.

Difficulty: ◆◆
Dates: June to October
Contact: ontarioparks.com

7 Temagami Paddles

- 1 **Marten River Provincial Park:** Marten River Waterway — a paddle-route that snakes through old-growth pine forest, yet is accessible from the Trans-Canada Highway.
- 2 **Lady Evelyn-Smoothwater Provincial Park:** Lady Evelyn River — a wilderness river with some great early-season whitewater; access is fly-in or via portage route.

- 3 **Obabika River Provincial Park:** Maple Mountain Route — a portage route through a chain of small lakes between Maple Mountain and Montréal River.
- 4 **Solace Provincial Park:** Solace Lake — fly-in to “little Lake Temagami,” a route that connects Sturgeon River Provincial Park to Lady Evelyn-Smoothwater Provincial Park.
- 5 **Sturgeon River Provincial Park:** Sturgeon River — an exciting fly-in,

weeklong whitewater canoe route.

- 6 **Makobe-Grays River Provincial Park:** Makobe River — a perfect long-weekend, early season canoe trip; fly-in and paddle out.
- 7 **Finlayson Point Provincial Park:** Lake Temagami — thousands of kilometres of shoreline to explore, along with scenic day-hikes on High Rock Island and Ferguson Mountain.

ON

SUE FALLS LOOP

Quetico Provincial Park, ON

At 460,000 hectares with 2,200 backcountry campsites, whether by paddle or by foot you’ll be able to find some solitude to commune with the loons in Quetico Provincial Park. While the park features nine marked trails, some of which connect to interior backpacking trips, it is best explored via canoe. If you like your portages brief, tackle the 65-km Sue Falls Loop. Usually done over four days, this route starts on Beaverhouse Lake then travels past tumbling Sue Falls and Aboriginal pictographs along the north shore of Quetico Lake before looping back to Beaverhouse. There is only one lengthy portage, other than that the walks are short and the paddles are long.

Difficulty: ◆◆
Dates: June to September
For More Info: ontarioparks.com/park/quetico

QC

LES LACS & LES CRETES

Forillon National Park, QC

Tucked away at the edge of Quebec’s Gaspé Peninsula, Forillon National Park offers not only exemplary Maritime scenery, it’s also a gateway to the International Appalachian Trail. Experienced hikers should head to Les Lacs (17 km one-way) or Les Cretes (16 or 18 km, one-way) Trails. Les Lacs follows the Riviere Morris Valley, has a wilderness campsite about six kilometres along and passes Lac au Renard and Penouille and other scenic stillwaters before connecting to the 3,058-km-long Appalachian Trail. As a more mountainous route, Les Cretes offers vistas of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Anse-au-Griffon Valley,

Kejimikujik National Park, New Brunswick.



Canadian Tourism Commission; Ontario Parks

has campsites at five and 10 km along and connects to other trails (such as Les Graves) leading to the easternmost tip of the park, which stabs like a pointed finger into Gaspé Bay.

Difficulty: ◆◆
Dates: June to September
For More Info: pc.gc.ca/forillon

NL

FISHERMAN’S TRAILS

Bay du Nord Wilderness Area, NL

Think of it as Newfoundland the way it once was — Bay du Nord Wilderness Area is a 2,900-sq-km expanse of raw land in the centre of The Rock. There are no visitor’s centres or designated campsites. There are, however, 15,000 caribou, more Canada geese than anywhere else in the province, 400-metre Mount Sylvester and a series of old fisherman’s trails that wind through the wilderness. Some trails even lead to canoe routes — such as the 100-km Kepenkeck Lake Paddle. Camping is allowed anywhere; acquire a permit at a Department of Natural Resource Office. The Trans-Canada Highway, Route 360 and Route 201 all skirt the edges of Bay du Nord — most access off Route 360 and then proceed into the wild.

Difficulty: ◆◆
Dates: June to October
For More Info: env.gov.nl.ca

QC

PINGUALUIT CRATER

Parc national des Pingualuit, QC

About 1.4 million years ago, a meteorite burned through the atmosphere above Arctic Quebec and smashed into the tundra, leaving a circular hole that looks today like it could have been poked by a punch. Filled with cobalt blue glacier water and surrounded by ▶

treeless barren grounds, Pingualuit Crater is the namesake centrepiece of Nunavik's Parc national des Pingualuit. To discover this wonder, join a nine-day guided trek into the park and learn about the land from Inuit guides, discover *Nunammiut* tent rings and perhaps even view elusive wildlife like caribou or muskox along the way. In Inuktitut, this region is dubbed *nunavingmi pikkuminartuq*, which means: "a remarkable location where a person may come to be revitalized." And thanks to the full-service camp from which this trip is based, revitalization doesn't come at the cost of creature comforts.

Difficulty: ◆◆

Dates: July to September

For More Info: nunavikparks.ca

NB

PADDLES & SAND DUNES

Kouchibouguac National Park, NB

With its inshore waters relatively well-protected and abundant salt marshes, lagoons and beaches, Kouchibouguac National Park is the Maritimes' premier sea-kayak destination. The park has three backcountry campsites — but paddlers should head for Pointe-a-Maxime, a water-access-only site on the park's south coast. Putting in at Cape Saint-Louis, it shouldn't take more than an hour to paddle to Pointe-a-Maxime. The partially wooded sites have fire pits, picnic tables, pit toilets and firewood. From this location, day-paddles include South Kouchibouguac Dune, Blacklands Gully and North Richibucto Dune. You may even catch sight of the rare piping plover, an endangered seabird that has recently returned to Kouchibouguac's beaches.

Difficulty: ◆

Dates: May to October

For More Info: pc.gc.ca/kouchibouguac

NS

LIBERTY LAKE TRAIL

Kejimikujik National Park, NS

More than 80 per cent of Nova Scotia's Kejimikujik National Park is classified as "backcountry" and



Pingualuit Crater,
Parc national
des Pingualuit,
Nunavik.



Cape Chignecto
Provincial Park,
Nova Scotia.

there are 46 designated campsites that can only be accessed via canoe or bootleather. At each, expect tent pads, fire pits, pit privy and cables to hoist your food cache clear of bears. So, when exploring the traditional home of the Mi'kmaq, where does one start? For the quintessential Keji experience, tackle the 64-km Liberty Lake Trail. There are 11 options for backcountry camping along the route; though three or four nights out is a good rule of thumb. Lakes, babbling brooks, loons and moose will be your companions as you loop your way through mixed softwoods en route to Campsite 42 — the most remote in the park's entire 404-sq-km. Bonus: Kejimikujik is a Dark Sky Preserve, so the night-time scenery rivals the daytime.

Difficulty: ◆◆

Dates: May to October

For More Info: pc.gc.ca/kejimikujik

NS

COASTAL LOOP

Cape Chignecto Provincial Park, NS
Accented by the famous Bay of

Fundy tides ebbing-and-flowing below, views from atop Cape Chignecto Provincial Park's 180-metre-tall sea cliffs reduce one to mumbling superlatives. And the best way to fully experience this scenic Atlantic preserve is via the 52-km-long Coastal Loop. Starting off as an easy front-country trek, be prepared to get serious after 12 km — watch your footing between Mill Brook and Refugee Cove, where the trail becomes a series of switchbacks, and onward to Big Bald Rock, where it runs along the steepest sea cliffs in the province. There are seven backcountry campsites along the Loop; most trekkers take three nights to complete the route. Kayakers also flock to the park to paddle through the 35-metre-tall sea stacks along the coast.

Difficulty: ◆◆

Dates: May to October

For More Info: novascotiaparks.ca

NT/AB

RAINBOW & SWEETGRASS

Wood Buffalo National Park, NT/AB
Since Wood Buffalo National Park

is larger than Switzerland, backcountry adventure is easy to find. Once away from the parking lot, you have a better chance of seeing one of the 5,000 bison than a fellow hiker. You might even spot North America's largest bird, the endangered whooping crane. It's unlikely you'll wander your way to the world's biggest beaver dam — but since it be seen from space, an aerial view would be better anyway. First-time visitors usually hike Rainbow Lakes or Sweetgrass Station Trails. Rainbow Lakes is an easy day-trod, though there is a wilderness campground along the six-kilometre route. Sweetgrass is twice as long, and wanders past the ruins of old bison corrals and across deltaic sedge meadows. Before you depart, check out the otherworldly Salt Plains, where an underground river has deposited saline crystals atop red samphire.

Difficulty: ◆

Dates: July to September

For More Info: pc.gc.ca/woodbuffalo

NT

BE ONE OF THE FEW

Aulavik National Park, NT

Looking to disconnect? Rest assured, there are no Wi-Fi zones in Aulavik National Park. In fact, other than a dirt airstrip, there is no development at all. True adventurers make the trip to Banks Island to experience 12,000-sq-km of tundra, badlands and polar desert — retracing travel routes used by Pre-Dorset, Eastern Arctic Dorset, Thule and Inuit nomads over the past 3,500 years. Aulavik is also home to the country's most northerly navigable river; the remote Thomsen River is a bucket list item for serious canoeists. And you might not be totally alone — since the park holds the world's highest concentration of muskox, a herd is probably lurking over the next ridge. The word Aulavik means, "place where people travel," which begs the question: how do you get there? Your charter flight beings in Inuvik, 750 km southwest; savvy travellers share costs with other groups flying into the park. It's not easy, but the best things never are.

Difficulty: ◆◆◆

Dates: Late-June to mid-August

For More Info: pc.gc.ca/aulavik