

Central Parks

Grand Beach Provincial Park



Introduction

With an area of 24.9 km², Grand Beach Provincial Park is characterized by Manitoba's most popular beach, active sand dunes, jackpine forest, spruce bog and a large lagoon/marsh complex.

Classified as a Natural Park, its purpose is to preserve areas that are representative of the Lake of the Woods portion of the Manitoba Lowlands Natural Region and accommodate a diversity of recreational opportunities.

The park will:

- Protect unique and outstanding features such as beach, sand dunes and habitat for the endangered piping plover;
- Provide high quality recreation opportunities such as swimming, camping, cottaging, hiking and cross-country skiing; and
- Promote public appreciation and understanding of the unique natural features and recreational history of Grand Beach.

For almost a century, visiting Grand Beach has been the perfect way to spend a hot summer day in Manitoba. It is situated about 80 km northeast of Winnipeg, on the east shore of Lake

Winnipeg-North America's sixth largest freshwater lake. Its 3-km beach of fine white sand, is considered one of the best in the world.

In the first half of the 20th century, the beach attracted throngs of people who came by train. Picnics, like those of Winnipeg's caterers, attracted as many as 10,000 people, on trains that left the city every half-hour. In more recent times, people from Winnipeg have been able to drive there in about an hour, on modern highways. On sunny, hot weekends, more than 20,000 visitors may fill its modern campground, picnic sites and parking lots. Each person will manage to find a perfect patch of white sand by the lakeshore.

While the beach is still the main attraction, it is only a small part of the nearly 2,500-hectare area which became a provincial park in 1961.



A great beach for kids!

Sand Between Your Toes

The park is located just west of the Precambrian Shield and lies above sedimentary rock of Ordovician age, approximately 490-430 million years old. Sedimentary rocks beneath the present surface include Ordovician shale and sandstone, limestone and dolomitic limestone. The latter rock types are fossiliferous, composed of small shelly debris from dead organisms that once lived in an ancient sea which covered this area. The shale and sandstone were derived from eroded Precambrian highlands. While there is no bedrock exposed in the park, it is important because its erosion during, and before, the glacial period provided the materials that cover the surface now.

West of PTH 59 is a conspicuous ridge extending north and south and rising to a height of about 60 metres. The high ground is part of the Belair moraine-an ice age landform-developed 14,000 years ago. Some time before then, two vast ice sheets came together here. One had advanced from the northeast and the other from the northwest. Glacial meltwaters flowing southward between the two ice sheets brought great quantities of white sand, with gravel and boulders, and deposited them into a body of water that later developed into Lake Agassiz.

Lower areas east and west of the moraine are covered by material (till or ground moraine) deposited as the ice moved over the surface or as the ice melted. These deposits were then modified by glacial Lake Agassiz and, in more recent times, by the action of wind and water.

Lake Agassiz's depth and shoreline varied greatly depending on the elevations of the outlets. As the lake found newer and lower outlets, beaches were formed around the higher lands. Beaches reflect the lake's water levels as rings reflect waterlevels in a bathtub. On the Ancient Beach Trail you can walk along an old Lake Agassiz beach that is about 21 metres higher than the present lake level.

Both the east and west beaches consist of fine textured sand derived mainly from sandstone deposited during the Ordovician period. As the lake level rises and falls seasonally, prevailing northwest winds pile the fine white sand into dunes that are more than 12 metres high. Next time you lie on your beach towel after a swim, ponder the long journey of a grain of sand from Precambrian highlands to sand between your toes. It's part of the sand's magic.

Canoe, Rail and Car

In the days when all freight traffic east to west was by water, many visitors stopped at, or near, what is now Grand Beach Provincial Park. These visitors included members of the La Vérendrye expedition, Alexander Henry-the Younger, Daniel Harmon, Henry Youle Hind and Dr. James Hector, Colonel Garnet Wolseley and Captain G. L. Huyshe.

La Vérendrye's canoes brought the first Europeans in the years 1732-34 when they emerged from the mouth of the Winnipeg River, and proceeded along the lakeshore past Elk Island and into the Red River. By 1800 the fur brigades of the North West Company and XY Company were paddling from Montreal to the Red River by this route. Harmon mentioned the profusion of berries he found here. Twenty-one years later, in 1821, the fur trade route to Montreal was abandoned when the North West Company joined the Hudson's Bay Company. Furs were exported through Hudson Bay and traffic decreased on what has been described as the first Trans-Canada Highway. In his journal, Hind mentions the white sands, clumps of birch and spruce, and abundance of wildlife at Grand Beach.

Colonel Wolseley used the Winnipeg River system to transport his military expedition to the Red River settlement to suppress Louis Riel's provisional government. They camped on Elk Island in August, 1870. Captain Huyshe, a member of the expedition, predicted in his book that this area, with its pure sands, would be the "Brighton [England] of Winnipeg Belles."



Grand Beach showing the Boardwalk and Dancing Pavilion
Western Canada Pictorial Index

Permanent settlements evolved gradually in the region, during and after the fur trade. The largest is near the mouth of the Winnipeg River where Aboriginal people traded with Europeans from the time of La Vérendrye to the decline of the Winnipeg River transportation route. In treaties between Canada and local First Nations, reserves were established at Fort Alexander and Brokenhead in 1871. Before the century ended, the small communities of Balsam Bay and Grand Marais were established along the lakeshore.

Although agricultural settlement nearby was slow and scattered, mainly because of the poor quality of the soil, lumbering became important due to the proximity of the timber area to Lake Winnipeg. Logs and lumber were taken by steamship to the rapidly developing city of Winnipeg. Commercial fishing also provided economic opportunities.

The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway to Winnipeg in the early 1880s finally replaced the water-based trading routes. In 1914-15, the Canadian Northern Railway opened up Grand Beach for recreation. The track went north from Winnipeg to the villages of Balsam Bay and Grand Marais, and the adjoining district of Victoria Beach.

Until the opening of PTH 59, rail travel was the main means of access to the area. By the mid-1940s, about 600 people had established camps in the area. The Canadian National Railway (CNR) had a twice-daily train service and the popularity of the beaches grew. Various facilities were built, including a dance hall, hotel, boardwalk, bath house, refreshment stands and a carousel. Grand Beach, and its rival, Winnipeg Beach, on the west shore of the lake, were the two most popular resorts for Winnipeggers during the twenties, thirties and forties.

The province acquired the CNR's property in 1961 and railway traffic to the resort ended in September, 1961, after nearly half a century of service.



Grand Beach train station, during the Grand Old Days
From a postcard, n.d.

Things to Do

Berry Picking

Openings in Grand Beach's mixed forest nurture an abundant growth of berry producing shrubs. Saskatoons ripen towards the end of June. Chokecherries and blueberries are ready in August. In the early part of the century, there was an effort to establish a berry export business in Grand Marais. It was intended to market seasonal wild fruit in Winnipeg and Minneapolis.

Hiking

Grand Beach offers a wide variety of walking or hiking opportunities. These include informal "trails" like The Boardwalk and the 3-km beach; almost 30 km of backcountry trail networks let you stroll connecting routes to your heart's content. Self-guiding trails offer interpretive information on the area you are exploring.

There are several ways hikers can make their outing more enjoyable: wear shoes or runners; wear long pants to help prevent contact with poison ivy; in summer, bring insect repellent; on the beach, wear sunglasses and protect yourself from intense sunshine with appropriate sunscreen lotion and clothing.

To make your outing more rewarding, include in your day pack such optional things as bird and flower guides, camera, binoculars, drinks and snacks. Please pack out whatever you bring into the forest with you and dispose of litter in the provided garbage bins. Open fires are not permitted.

Wild Wings Self-guiding Trail

1 km, allow 1 hour

Grand Beach marsh is one of the park's undiscovered treasures. Also known as the lagoon, it has a great diversity of bird life. The trail winds through cattails, willows and deciduous trees to viewing platforms. Interpretive signs provide insights into special adaptations of the residents, which enable them to live in the marsh.

The best times to visit are early mornings or evenings when birds are most active. April/May and September/October are the best seasons for observing birds in migration. Be sure to take along binoculars and a camera.



Wild Wings Trail

Spirit Rock Walking Trail

1.1 km, allow 45 minutes

Highlights of this short trail are views of the lake, majestic oak and ash trees and immense glacial erratics (boulders). An interpretive sign is situated about half-way around.

Interpretation Program

Summer programs have been offered to park visitors since the early seventies. Park interpreters lead guided tours, stage special events and provide children's activities. They also present slide shows, films and special guests in the amphitheatre.

These are ideal opportunities for you and your family to appreciate the park's natural and cultural resources. For up-to-date program information, check events posters or inquire at park offices.

Boating

Boating on Lake Winnipeg is permitted beyond the swimming area but is often adversely affected by strong winds and large waves. The lagoon, which is sheltered and relatively calm, is

recommended for boating, waterskiing, boardsailing and other water-oriented sports. For safety, part of the lagoon has been designated for non-motorized watercraft. Please observe the markers. Swimming in the lagoon is not recommended.

Fishing

The most popular fishing spot in the park is by the causeway bridge. Catches include perch, walleye, northern pike, silver bass, carp and the occasional catfish.

Swimming

Swimming is permitted along the east and west beaches within the marked area. Swimming is at your own risk so please ensure that children in your company are constantly supervised. Lifeguards are not provided. Beach safety officers are on duty during peak beach use periods. Swimming or wading are strictly prohibited in the channel area between the two beaches due to dangerous currents.



Hikers on Elk Island's shoreline

Tennis

Tennis courts are provided for public use on a first-come, first-served basis. They are open daily, 8:00 a.m. to sunset. Players are asked to practise courtesy and to observe the posted rules and suggestions.

Cross-country Skiing

In winter, Grand Beach offers some of southern Manitoba's finest cross-country ski trails. All five designated routes begin and end at the same staging area. Each is rated for different skill levels: the Jack Pine (2.6 km) and Blueberry (3.2 km) trails are recommended for novices;

intermediate skiers will enjoy the Boulder Hill (6.1 km) and Beaver Pond (13.3 km) trails; and expert skiers will find the Squirrel Run (2.6 km) challenging.

Snowmobiling

Snowmobile trails skirt the park boundaries and loop through the forested eastern section. They connect with other regional trails that lead snowmobilers to Belair Provincial Forest, Pine Falls, Lac du Bonnet and the Can-Am International Trail. Winter recreation maps are available from the park office.

Points of Interest

The Boardwalk

From the Locomotive Kiosk, stroll along The Boardwalk and relive memories of a bygone era. Interpretive signs with archival photos help you look into the twenties, thirties and forties-the Grand Old Days-at this railway resort. Savour the past and present.

Piping Plovers

Manitoba's most popular beach is ideal habitat for this rare and endangered bird species. To provide some measure of protection, piping plover sites are fenced during the June nesting period. Interpreters and volunteer plover guardians provide opportunities for visitors to safely view the birds, without disturbing them. For more information on plovers and the guardian program contact the park office.



Plover viewing

The Channel

At this site, which separates the east and west beaches, water flows back and forth between the lake and the lagoon. This creates extremely dangerous currents in the water. Wading and swimming are prohibited. Please use the footbridge to cross the channel.

Places to Visit

Elk Island

Elk Island Provincial Park, located 32 km north of Grand Beach, is about 900 hectares in size. Situated 1.2 km from the mainland, it is only accessible by boat. The island is virtually free of development and offers visitors an attractive wilderness setting. Parts of its shoreline where many, large, different coloured boulders are surrounded by smooth, white sand, are reminiscent of a stone garden.

Camping and open fires are not permitted on the island. Visitors are asked to help maintain the beauty of this wilderness, by packing out whatever they brought to the island.

Patricia Beach

Patricia Beach Provincial Recreation Park is about a 20-minute drive, south of Grand Beach. It also has a beautiful, long, white-sand beach and picnic sites.



Grand Beach aerial view: east (bottom) and west (top) beaches

Information

Mailing Address:

Manitoba Conservation
Box 220
Grand Beach, Manitoba
R0E 0T0

Park Telephone Numbers:

Grand Beach District Office	(204) 754-5040
Doctor's Office (May-September)	(204) 754-2525
Park Patrol (May-September)	(204) 754-2000
Manitoba Parks Reservation Service	(toll-free) 1-888-4U-2CAMP or, 1-888-482-2267 or, in Winnipeg, 948-3333
Manitoba Conservation Public Information	1-800-214-6497 or, in Winnipeg 945-6784

Emergency Telephone Numbers

Ambulance, Fire or Police	911
Coast Guard	1-800-267-7270
T.I.P. Line (Turn in Poachers, Report Forest Fires)	1-800-782-0076

Visit us at our Web site: <http://www.manitobaparks.com>



Piping plover

