



Banff National Park of Canada

Where's the Fire? A Roadside Guide



*Fairholme Prescribed Burn from Trans Canada Highway, June 2003
Randy Komar*

The summer of 2003 was a fiery one across western Canada, including in Banff National Park. As you drive and hike in the park you will see signs of past and very recent fires, as well as a burst of life as burned areas “green up”. Some fires were lit intentionally, or “prescribed” by park staff to renew the forest for wildlife habitat or to create fuel breaks to protect facilities and communities. Others were wildfires, started by lightning strikes or careless people.

Here is a roadside guide to where to look for signs of past fire activity. Sometimes it is obvious where the fire was, as the timber and soil are still black. Subtler clues, such as a rim of silver snags on the skyline or a faint change in the fabric of trees along a slope are all that tell you that fire has touched these valleys.

Fairholme Range

Location: north side of Trans-Canada Highway, west of the park’s East Gate

Date of fire: April 1 – August 16, 2003

Source: prescribed burn

Area burned: 5319 ha

Best places to view: Tunnel Mountain Drive, summits of Sulphur and Tunnel Mountains, Lake Minnewanka Loop Road and Johnson Lake.

Trail: Johnson Lake

The summer of 2003 was the third driest in Banff since 1890. Only 79 mm of precipitation fell during the months of June, July, and August. This was well below the 167 mm average.

Date of fire: May 4 – 15, 1998

Source: wildfire from illegal campfire at edge of meadow

Area burned: 620 ha

Best places to view: Bow Valley Parkway, Castle Mountain viewpoint – Trans-Canada Highway

★ *Look for new exhibits along the Bow Valley Parkway, which tell of fire in the landscape as well as other parkway highlights.*



Bow Valley Parkway

1. Location: Sawback Range

Date of fire: May 13, 1993

Source: prescribed burn

Area burned: 200 ha

Best places to view: Bow Valley Parkway, Castle Mountain viewpoint – Trans-Canada Highway

Trail: Muleshoe

2. Location: Hillsdale Meadows, Sawback Range

Lake Minnewanka Area

Locations: Lake Minnewanka shoreline & Stewart Canyon

Date of fire: 7 burns total, beginning in Sept. 1987, up to including a unit of the Fairholme Range prescribed burn in 2003.

Source: prescribed burns

Area burned: Stewart Canyon area: 200 ha, Lakeshore total: 1700 ha

Best places to view: Lake Minnewanka causeway

Trail: Minnewanka Lakeshore beyond Stewart Canyon.

Mount Norquay Road

Location: southern flanks of Mount Norquay
Date: April 1, 1992 & May 6, 1993
Source: prescribed burn, guard burning for fuel break west of Banff townsite
Area(s) burned: 200 ha
Best place to view: Norquay Road, Vermilion Lakes Overlook on Trans-Canada Highway (eastbound traffic only)

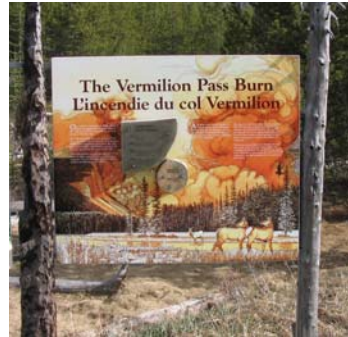
Date: July 3, 1940
Source: unknown, but presumed human caused.
Area burned: 4000 ha
Best place to view: Saskatchewan River
Crossing area
Trail: Glacier Lake trail
This fire included the Crossing area on the valley floor; the last fire in the area prior to this was in 1904.

Sulphur Mountain

Location: northwestern ridge
Date: June 8, 2000
Cause: thinning and guard burning for fuel break 3 km west of town
Area burned: 22 ha
Best place to view: Vermilion Lakes Drive

Vermilion Pass

Location: Storm Mountain
Date: July 9 – 15, 1968
Source: wildfire, lightning
Area burned: 2000 ha
Best place to view: Highway 93 S
Trails: Twin Lakes/Arnica Lake trail, Fireweed Self-Guiding & Stanley Glacier Trails (Kootenay National Park)
This fire was the first major fire in over 60 years to threaten park facilities, and the park's biggest fire since 1940.



★ As you drive farther south into Kootenay National Park, you will see the effects of the Tokumm-Verendrye fire, which burned 12.6% of Kootenay National Park in 2003.

Icefields Parkway

Location: Survey Peak, Saskatchewan River Crossing

What About Old-growth Forests?

Approximately 25% of the forests stands in Banff National Park are more than 300 years old, and considered to be old growth. These forests primarily occur in upper subalpine basins and have been subject to very little disturbance in the last few centuries. These old forests, like those in the Lake Louise area, include stands of subalpine larch, Engelmann spruce/subalpine fir and whitebark pine.

Although not common, old forest stands also exist in the montane ecoregion. In particular, there is a stand of Douglas-fir trees in a dry area of the Bow Valley near Johnson Lake that are more than 500 years old. One tree in this stand is the oldest known Douglas-fir tree in Alberta and is approximately 700 years old. Periodic low intensity fires have contributed to the maintenance of this old-growth stand by removing competing shade-tolerant conifers and other vegetation from the understory.

The aspen stands of the montane regions such as found along the Bow Valley Parkway are also considered by some to be old-growth stands. Although the stems of aspen rarely exceed 200 years, there is evidence to suggest that the clonal root systems of aspen may be ancient, persistent organisms. These forests are also maintained by frequent low-intensity fires that remove competing conifers and destroy the above-ground aspen stems. Fire stimulates the root system to produce new suckers.

HJD29/06/2004