

Notes on history of Big Hill Springs Provincial Park: by Vivian Pharis

Size:

Rocky View County is the most populous county in Alberta, with around 40,000 residents

It is 3836.33 sqkm in size or 1481.22 sqmi

RVC contains 3 provincial parks and few other protected areas. The parks are Big Hill Springs Provincial Park (est. 1957), Bragg Creek Provincial Park(est. 1960) and Glenbow Ranch Provincial Park (est. 2008).

Big Hill Springs PP is 78 acres or 31.54 ha

Big Hill Springs PP is 0.4 sqkm or 0.15 sqmi

Bragg Creek PP is 316 acres or 128 ha

Bragg Creek PP is 1.28 sqkm or .48 sqmi

Glenbow Ranch PP is 3297 acres or 1334 ha

Glenbow Ranch PP is 13.48 sqkm or 5.2 sqmi

Parks make up 15.16 sqkm of RVC's 3836.33 sqkm, or **0.4% of its landbase.**

Parks Establishment, Alberta:

1930 - Provincial Parks and Protected Areas Act passed under Premier John Edward Brownlee.

1932 - Aspen Beach Provincial Park on Gull Lake became the first Alberta PP.

1930's-1950's - due to WW11 there was little park expansion, only 3 new lake parks were established, including Saskatoon Island PP to protect endangered Trumpeter Swans.

1951 - A new Parks Act was proclaimed, with administration going to the Lands and Forests Dept.

1951-1971 - 46 new parks were established, mainly for outdoor recreation, but in 1955 the parks mandate was broadened to include preserving nature and history, including Dinosaur PP and Writing-on-Stone PP with its petroglyphs and pictographs.

1957 - Big Hill Springs PP was established for the purposes of recreation, nature and historical appreciation. One of first 50 parks established in Alberta.

2021 - Alberta now has 473 provincial parks, including Willmore Wilderness Park under its own act.

Big Hill Springs Provincial Park Mini Master Plan, 1976

Compiled by Park Ranger111 Paul Blogorodow and 5 other park employees

55 page document focuses on specific reclamation needed but also points out the need for this park to be reinvented as a "point of interest" or "nature study" educational park that is "day use" only. Indicates that use census in 1972-73 was over 70,000 annual visitors.

This historical document can be found on the BCPS website and includes a typed, unattributed detailed letter that describes land ownership changes between 1881 and the 1940's.

Ecological Land Classification of Big Hill Springs Provincial Park, June 1998

Compiled by Ian Sutherland for Natural Resources Service, Parks, Alberta Environmental Protection, Bow Region.

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- 35 page report plus Appendices of Plant and Animal species.

BHSPP was established in 1957 to “conserve a unique coulee environment and spring-fed creek system.” “The Park’s landscape features contribute significantly to under-represented Natural History Themes in the Foothills Parkland Natural Subregion.”

Big Hill Springs Provincial Park Management Plan, 1998

Compiled by Derry Armstrong, Rod Gow and Wayne Meikle on behalf of the Area Manager, Natural Resources Services, Alberta Environmental Protection

25 page document including appendices.

This short plan lays out purpose, management issues and objectives, zoning and management guidelines, guidelines for land, including acquisitions and coordination with Rocky View County, for development requirements and public involvement.

The plan can be found on the BCPS website in the history section.

Historical Notes from the Above Three Studies

Plains Indians hunted bison in the area using several jump sites, the main one is probably just east of the park; pictographs and lithic tools and thousands of bison bones have been found in the area. Plains Indians were of Blackfoot Confederacy and Cree. (Later, Stoney, Nakota took over area). Ranchers arrived in 1880’s.

Between 1881 and the 1920’s, the land in the vicinity of the springs and today’s park changed hands 8 or 9 times, beginning as part of the huge Cochrane Ranche owned by Senator Matthew Cochrane and ending with the the P. Burns Company. The land covering the springs was sold to John Boothby in 1944.

Apparently P. Burns gifted the small park area to the Alberta Government where a provincial fish hatchery was established that soon failed due to spring-time siltation killing the eggs.

1891-1910 - site of first creamery in Alberta, supplying local area, Calgary and rail line camps. Established here because of the constant supply of high quality water and power generation from a waterfall. Land was leased from D.M. Radcliffe.

1951-1956 - site of a trout hatchery, also drawn to constant supply of high quality, cold water.

1920’s and onwards, the site of local picnic area and later of camping so that by park establishment in 1957, heavy visitor use had degraded and damaged the area.

1957 - park was established to bring control to recreational use and begin the gathering of biophysical data and management planning. Already recognized that the park needed to be enlarged because the use demand that had reached its “saturation point”.

1972-1973 - use levels recorded as being around 72,000 annual visitors.

1976 - government officials recommended that park designation be upgraded to “Preservation Park” and its use limited to “day use only”.

1976 - a Park Management Plan laid out specific renovation works needed and stressed the need for designation as a “point of interest” or “nature study” park and, based on use levels of this “unique entity”, recommended more land be acquired, including the jump area to the east.

1978-1979 -an array of visitor services, facilities and buildings was removed and some reclamation was done.

At some later point, the spring area was acquired from the Boothby family, protected separately from the main park.

1998 - a new Management Plan was released, that described the uniqueness of the springs and park in that the springs were labelled amongst the “top four mineral springs found in Canada”. For this reason, the tufa formations and year-around flow levels, the springs were considered of NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE. This plan committed to acquiring more land to protect the springs and considered protection of the entire coulee area down to the town of Cochrane.

2020 - park and springs area listed by Department of Fisheries and Oceans as habitat for threatened bull trout under the Species At Risk Act.

2020 - park closed due to need for boundary and some trail realignment and due to heavy land damage from around 250,000 visitors/year.

RVC Parks and Open Space Master Plan, 2011

Page 69 of Plan:

“Identify and protect Bighill Springs Creek and the creek valley north of Big Hill Springs Provincial Park as a conservation area; and
Secure the road allowance to Big Hill Springs Provincial Park for public access.”

Descriptive Summary, BHSP

Big Hill Springs Provincial Park is a tiny gem, a dot adrift in a sea of development that is most of Rocky View County. With vision, this park and its surrounding treasure of beauty and archaeology could become an attraction of great and lasting value. In fact, RVC's 2011 Parks and Open Space Master Plan calls to *“Identify and protect Bighill Springs Creek and the creek valley north of Big Hill Springs Provincial Parks as a conservation area.”* Today, BHSP comprises only 0.01% of RVC, yet attracts up to 250,000 visitors each year. Enough to close the park in 2020-2021 due to its need for repair. Within the 3836.33 sqkm of RVC, there are 3 provincial parks, making up 0.4% of the land base. BHSP is the smallest at 78 acres.

People have been attracted to Big Hill's springs, creek and coulee for thousands of years, with the Blackfoot Plains Indians and Cree camping in the protection of the coulee and hunting bison using jumps on both sides. Likely the main jump was the one immediately east of today's park, that exists today with no protection. Thousands of bison bones as well as lithic tools and pictographs have been found nearby. The 1880's brought ranchers, and again the springs were an attraction, with the first creamery in Alberta locating in 1891 on their reliable waters and lasting 30 years. Later, from 1951-1956 a fish hatchery was attracted for the same reason. The springs and water tumbling over ancient tufa formations attracted picnickers from the 1920's onward. Recreational use began to overwhelm the site as early as the 1950's.

By 1957, locals and government officials formally recognized the unique recreational, historical, archaeological and geological features of Big Hill's springs, creek and coulee and designated them among the first 50 of what would eventually be 473 provincial parks. After designation as a recreational park, visitor use increased even more until permanent damage became evident, necessitating a new designation in 1976 as a “preservation park”. By then biophysical data was being gathered and management planning begun. As use climbed to over 70,000 yearly visitors, in order to regain control, an array of facilities and roads was removed and some reclamation was carried out. Use was limited to “day only” and all camping was halted. A Management Plan was released in 1976, addressing the need for more reclamation and refocusing use to “point of interest” and “nature study” and recommending that more land be added to this “unique entity”, including the jump area to the east. A second Management Plan was released in 1998 that includes information from a Parks Canada study that ranked Big Hill Springs as one of the “top four mineral springs in Canada” and rated them as Nationally Significant. Management guidelines include acquiring expansion lands to protect the springs, to increase the size of the park and to consider protecting the coulee downstream to Cochrane.

With today's use climbing to a quarter of a million annual visitors, protection of the entire coulee north of Cochrane to the provincial park and extending further north to Highway 567 and beyond to include Nature Conservancy lands, is an obvious necessity that could become a major RVC asset.

Main Features:

Nationally Significant Springs with steady year-around flows and temperature, ranked by Parks Canada as "one of the top four mineral springs found in Canada".
Rare tufa rock formed over thousands of years of calcium depositing out of the spring's water onto vegetation and building up into walls and dams
Attractive series of waterfalls over tufa formations
Long Indigenous history including several bison jumps, bison bones, ancient tools and pictograph
One of the few existing protected areas representing the Foothills Parkland Subregion
Broad range of bird, mammal and plant life representing the Foothills Parkland Subregion
Creek historically known as a trout fishery, especially for brown trout
Identified by Department of Fisheries and Oceans as habitat for threatened bull trout.
Proximity to Cochrane, Airdrie and Calgary brings up to 250,000 visitors per year
One of only three provincial parks in all of Rocky View County
Ecologically intact, attractive lands stretch between Cochrane and the provincial park, as well as east, west and north of the park that have all the attributes of an extensive park with attendant values for the broader area.