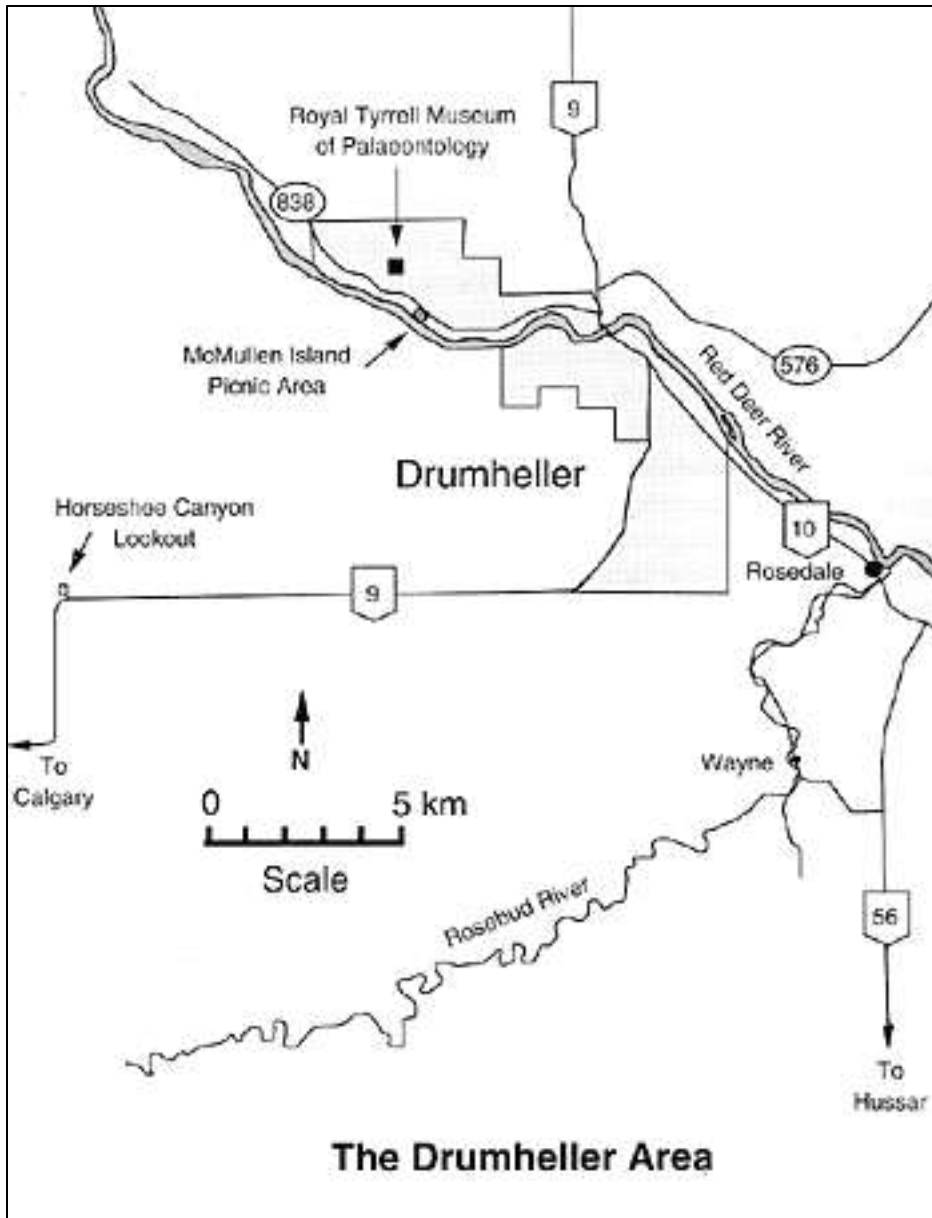


The Drumheller Area *by Ross Dickson – revised Sep/2012*

The badlands topography of the Red Deer Valley forms a dramatic contrast to the gently rolling grain fields to the south and west of Drumheller.

Vigorous erosion has created a series of deeply incised, winding gullies

(locally known as coulees) leading from the deep clay sediments of the surrounding area into the main river valley. Barren slopes and hot dry summers would at first glance seem to preclude productive birding but where canyon or coulee walls give protection from the sun and the drying effects of winter Chinook winds, thicker vegetation does grow, providing cover for birds and nesting sites. A variety of dry land species can be found here, with few nesting away from the river valleys and coulees. Birding is most rewarding during June and early July, in the



morning before the daily heat buildup. A full day will be required.

The quickest route to Drumheller from Calgary takes about 90 minutes (130 km). Head north on Deerfoot Trail (Hwy 2) from the 64 Ave NE interchange (km 0.0) in NE Calgary, and take the Hwy 72 exit (31.3 km). This exit is easy to miss - watch for large Tyrrell Museum road signs of white letters on

a brown background. Follow Hwy 72 east through Beiseker to the junction with Hwy 9 (65.5 km). Continue east through this junction. This puts you on Hwy 9, which you should continue to follow east towards Drumheller. Carefully examine each flying raptor since there is the possibility of seeing Turkey Vulture; Ferruginous Hawks may also stray into the area from the Hanna region to the east. Gray Partridge, Ring-necked Pheasant and Sharp-tailed Grouse (occasionally) may be seen along the roadsides.

Your first opportunity to view the spectacular badlands scenery is at the Horseshoe Canyon lookout (113.2 km and immediately east of a curve in the road). Extreme erosion of the soft clay valley walls by the occasional heavy shower has carved rounded mounds of layered sediments. Few birds are evident along the edge of the canyon in summer, except for Black-capped Chickadee. From the parking lot many "unofficial" trails lead down to the canyon bottom. These trails should not be used, however, as the soft sediment is too easily eroded - there are other places where hiking is less damaging to the scenery.

In deep coulees where there are stands of spruce, birding is often more productive in winter. The local Christmas Bird Count, centred on Horseshoe Canyon, regularly lists Downy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Pine Grosbeak, Bohemian Waxwing and Great Horned Owl.

Continuing on Hwy 9, at the south end of Drumheller (129 km) is a Tourist Information booth, open daily during summer from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. It can provide an excellent brochure on the attractions of the Drumheller Valley, including the 48 km Dinosaur Trail driving loop, which passes several areas of badlands and riparian woodland of interest to birders. Visitors to the Calgary area are encouraged to plan an outing to the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology (entrance fee). Opened in 1985, this facility is designed not only to showcase the abundant Cretaceous fossils recovered from southern Alberta but also to give an understanding of the broad sweep of evolution. There is much to interest a birder; incurable listers will enjoy the cast of *Archaeopteryx*. The museum is situated on the Dinosaur Trail driving loop leading west from Drumheller, on the north side of the Red Deer River. Visits to this facility should be planned for the afternoon birding doldrums period when air-conditioning will be most appreciated. Expect to spend a minimum of 2 hours at the museum if you are interested in this subject. To reach the museum turn north-west at the intersection of Highways 9, 10 and 56 (129.9 km), then turn north at the traffic light on 2 St. W, cross the river, then turn west at North Dinosaur Trail (S.R. 838). Make note of the McMullen Island Day Use Picnic Area (136 km) and continue to the museum entrance (137.2 km).

There is spectacular badland terrain immediately outside the museum, where short hiking trails allow the visitor to explore the habitat. Say's Phoebe and Brewer's Blackbird nest here while American Kestrels often roost on the mounds. The best morning birding in the area however, is at the McMullen Island Picnic Area in Midland Provincial Park (banks of the Red Deer River on the south side of North Dinosaur Trail - Secondary Road #838). Massive cottonwood trees dominate the site with extensive thick Red-osier Dogwood shrub undergrowth providing ideal habitat for White-tailed Deer, birds and mosquitoes. A network of short winding trails provides opportunities to closely approach park birds. Nesting species include American Kestrel, Western Kingbird, Swainson's Thrush, Brown Thrasher and Yellow-breasted Chat (rare). A pair of Pileated Woodpeckers used a utility pole in which to raise a brood in 1989. This location is also good during migration periods. A Fork-tailed Flycatcher was observed here on June 1, 1988.

Deep ravines or coulees, which join the main valley, are the other reliable source of bird sightings. Due to heat and rapid evaporation, shrubbery such as willows and poplar trees are often present only on north-facing slopes. The dense understory is invariably a combination of Buckbrush and wild rose. These small groves attract nesting Swainson's Hawks, House Wrens, Yellow Warblers and Rufous-sided Towhees. Prickly pear cactus grows on the generally barren south-facing slopes; it flowers at the end of June. If there are sandstone ledges one may see Prairie Falcon, Say's Phoebe, Cliff Swallow, Rock Wren and Mountain Bluebird. Gravel pits cut into these slopes are prime locations for Bank Swallows. Elevation change is rapid but hikers are usually able to follow well-worn paths created by Mule Deer. Most of the coulees are on private land, so permission to enter should be obtained from the landowner.

A nearby birding location offering close proximity to steep coulee banks which can be birded from the roadside, is the Rosebud River valley. During the breeding season Spotted Sandpiper, Mourning Dove, Least Flycatcher, Cliff Swallow, Mountain Bluebird, Gray Catbird, Cedar Waxwing and Yellow Warbler can be found here. Bullock's Oriole, the rare subspecies for southern Alberta, has been seen here. Starting in Drumheller at the intersection of Highways 9, 10 & 56 (km 0.0), head southeast on Hwy 10/56 to the community of Rosedale. Turn right (south Hwy 10X) at the outdoor skating rink (6.7 km) and head for Wayne. Follow the meandering road, crossing over nine bridges. At the tenth bridge (12.9 km), and just after the "Last Chance Saloon" in Wayne, a deep coulee intersects the valley from the east. Turn east on the gravel road (Hwy. 569) and begin a fairly steep climb out of the main valley. The sparse shrubbery and sage along the steep slopes may produce Lark Sparrow. At Hwy 56 (paved, 15.4 km) turn right (south) and

continue to the intersection with S.R. 561 (53.4 km), near Hussar. (Caution: THE GRAVEL ROAD UP FROM WAYNE IS HAZARDOUS WHEN WET; it would be better in this case to turn around at Wayne, drive back to Rosedale, turn right (southeast) on Hwy 10/56 to Cambria, and then right again on Hwy 56, rejoining the route out of Wayne after a few kilometres.) Follow S.R. 561 (paved) west until it connects with the Trans-Canada Highway (83.9 km), 20 km east of Strathmore.

Watch fence posts in the Hussar area for Short-eared Owl. Roadmaps show a large waterbody at the intersection of Hwys 56 and 561 known as Deadhorse Lake. It was an important migration stopover for shorebirds a decade ago, but several years of low rainfall have caused it to dry up completely. Hwy 56 itself offers few birding opportunities, except in April, when seasonal sloughs formed by spring runoff attract migrating Tundra Swans and other waterfowl.

There are some precautions which visitors to the Drumheller area should consider. The soft clay in the Red Deer River valley and its tributaries is pleasant to walk on when dry, but is both slippery and sticky when wet. All gravel or dirt roads with steep gradients should be avoided during and after a rain. Hiking is hazardous when slopes are wet - remember the cacti! Ticks are possible in May and June; rattlesnakes are extremely unlikely.

Full tourist facilities are available in Drumheller. It is best to pack a lunch, however, and enjoy a picnic at McMullen Island or along the Dinosaur Trail. For those approaching the Drumheller area from the east, an alternative route from the Trans-Canada Highway will save some time. About 19 km west of Bassano, turn right onto Hwy 56 and drive 37 km north to the Wayne turnoff (marked by a green and white sign), passing the junction with S.R. 561 on the way. If the weather is poor (i.e. raining or it has rained recently) it is recommended you continue north on Hwy 56 to Cambria, rather than attempting the steep access road down to Wayne.