

Fenland Trail and Vermilion Lakes Drive by Richard Thomas (1993)

Located within the otherwise heavily-forested Bow River valley, the Fenland forms the eastern end of the Vermilion Lakes wetlands complex. A flat, 1.5 km loop trail along the banks of Forty Mile Creek allows visitors to observe a variety of woodland and wetland habitats. Sedges, rushes and grasses attract Elk and Moose to a series of shallow ponds which, together with the creeks and lakes of this area support populations of Beaver and Muskrat. The greatest abundance and diversity of birds occurs during the peak migration periods (mid- to late May, mid- to late August) and during June when the breeding species are singing. For best results, and to avoid most of the joggers and cyclists who frequent this popular trail, an early morning

start is recommended.



To access Fenland Trail from the Trans-Canada Highway, take the Banff/Mt. Norquay exit and start driving towards Banff Townsite. Almost immediately, on the right, is the start of Vermilion Lakes

Drive. For now pass this and watch for the entrance to the Fenland parking lot, also on the right. For access from downtown Banff, start at the Wolf/Banff Avenue stop light. Go west on Wolf for 0.2 km to a stop sign. Turn right and follow this main road (signed "To the TransCanada Highway"); this becomes Mt. Norquay Road. After crossing the railway tracks and Forty Mile Creek, watch for the Fenland sign and turn left into the parking lot. Pedestrians can enter the trail system on the west side of Mt. Norquay Road, just beyond the railway tracks. At the main trailhead pick up the well-illustrated "Fenland Self-Guiding Trail" brochure.

Spruce stands are home year-round to Three-toed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper and Golden-crowned Kinglet. Evidence for the bark-flaking activities of Three-toed Woodpeckers (red patches on spruce trunks) is common but the birds

themselves can be elusive. Pileated Woodpecker has been seen in the aspens and dead conifers between Forty Mile Creek and first Vermilion Lake. Look for American Dippers floating "phalarope-like" down the creek. On late winter / early spring evenings, listen for Northern Pygmy-, Barred and Boreal Owls. During spring and summer, migrant and breeding species to watch and listen for include: Alder and Willow Flycatchers; both kinglets; Swainson's and Varied Thrushes; Orange-crowned, Yellow-rumped, Townsend's and Wilson's Warblers; American Redstart; Common Yellowthroat; and Song, Lincoln's and White-crowned Sparrows. During winter, with luck, one may encounter Pine Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill, Common Redpoll, Pine Siskin (rare) and Evening Grosbeak.

Caution: The fen is a calving area for Elk in late May and early June. The Elk may be in the vicinity of the trail, and may be dangerous. Do not approach these animals at this time or come between mother Elk and their young.

Vermilion Lakes Drive: At the Fenland parking lot exit, turn left (north) onto Mt. Norquay Road and drive about 0.2 km to the turnoff for Vermilion Lakes Drive (km 0.0). After 4.3 km this winding road deadends at a turnaround area. Points of note along the route are: at 0.5 km, a footbridge connecting the Drive to the Fenland Trail; 0.8 and 1.8 km, small pullouts for the first and second Vermilion Lakes, respectively; and 3.9 km, the sign for the third Vermilion Lake. Be cautious when driving this route as it is narrow in places and extremely popular with joggers and cyclists.

The Bow Valley is a significant migration corridor and the three shallow Vermilion Lakes, together with their interconnecting network of channels and marshes, constitute one of the most important stopover points for migrant waterfowl within Banff National Park. Of ecological importance, in addition to the lakes and marshes, are stands of mature spruce, birch and young aspens and extensive willow thickets. For migrant and breeding passerines the areas from the Drive entrance to the first lake, and between the second and third lakes are best. Large mammals seen regularly in the Vermilion Lakes vicinity include Elk, Moose and Bighorn Sheep.

Peak periods for migrant waterfowl are late April and May, and mid-August to late September. All of Banff's regularly-occurring grebes, herons and ducks have been seen in this general area. Interesting duck species to watch for include Cinnamon Teal, Surf Scoter, Barrow's Goldeneye and Hooded Merganser. Any Tundra or Trumpeter Swans will be migrants but Red-necked Grebe has bred at the third lake. First Vermilion Lake usually hosts a pair of Ospreys and a pair of Bald Eagles - both locally rare as breeding species. Look for their massive nests in the tall, dead conifers. Cooper's Hawk has nested at third Vermilion Lake. In summer, dawn-chorus

contributors from lakeside thickets may include: Alder Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, MacGillivray's Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Wilson's Warbler, and Song and Lincoln's Sparrows. During August, these species together with Tennessee and Orange-crowned Warblers and a variety of sparrows sometimes "fill" the aspen and willow scrub along the Drive. The birds may stop near the network of beaver dams and canals for a drink and a bath. Fall migration often brings Common Terns to feed and rest at the second lake. In winter, Snow Bunting and Common Redpoll have been recorded along the Drive and American Dippers are sometimes found at warm spring-related, ice-free patches of the third lake. Listen overhead for Clark's Nutcracker and Common Raven year-round.

It is also worthwhile stopping at the Vermilion Lakes Overlook, accessible only from the eastbound lane of the Trans-Canada Highway. If westbound on the Trans-Canada, use the Hwy 1A (Bow Valley Parkway) exit, 5.5 km west of the Banff Townsite/Mt. Norquay interchange, to reverse course. In addition to a panorama of the lakes (use your scope here), this overlook affords a superb view of highly photogenic Mt. Rundle.