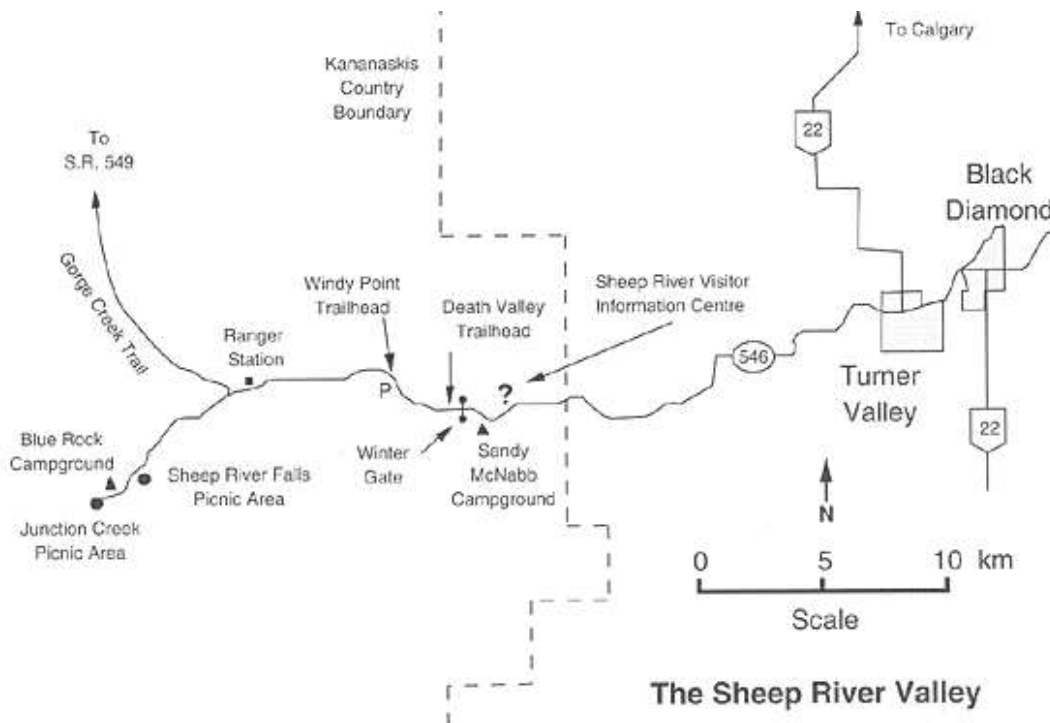


Sheep River Valley by Wayne W. Smith(1993), revised 2012

This route begins in flat farmlands on the south side of Calgary and ends 85 km southwest of the city, just inside the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. The route travelled includes flat farmland, gently rolling grassland, aspen parkland, river bottoms, mixed woods of the foothills and coniferous forest of the mountains. The round trip of 170 km takes about three hours (1.5 hours one way) if one doesn't stop. However, the main focus of this trip is a full day that can be spent in the Sheep River Provincial Park (formerly Sheep River Wildlife Sanctuary), approximately one hour from Calgary. During spring (March-April) and fall (September-October) this particular area can produce raptor migrations that are the best known for Alberta. Data generated since 1983 has shown that daily totals of over 600 raptors of 17 species are possible, but numbers are more likely to be in the 50-150 range.



From Calgary to the Provincial Park many species typical of southern Alberta can be seen during summer.

The starting point (km 0.0) is the southern edge of Calgary where Hwy 2 intersects with Hwy 22X (the Marquis of Lorne Trail). At this intersection turn right (west) onto Hwy 22X. For the next 18 km the highway passes

through an area of farmland interspersed with some aspen clumps and seasonal ponds. During spring and fall many migrant raptors can be observed in this area. Wherever seasonal ponds occur watch for swans.

After driving for 18 km the intersection of roads to Bragg Creek (Hwy 22 West) and Turner Valley (Hwy 22 South) is reached. Turn left and continue south to the town of Turner Valley. For the next 27 km the highway winds back and forth through ranchland/farmland with more extensive clumps of aspen and willow. Again, during spring and fall, watch for migrant raptors and swans. If you stop along this section of highway take care as the road is narrow, undivided and has a lot of traffic.

After reaching the northern edge of the town of Turner Valley, drive a further kilometre to a four way stop in the downtown area (46 km).

Turn right (west) onto S.R. 546. Five blocks further on the road takes a turn to the north at the western edge of town. Follow the signs directing you to the Sandy McNabb and

Bluerock Recreation Areas. For the next 15 km the road winds mainly west through ranchland with increasingly extensive areas of aspen and mixed woods. During migration, raptors of all species are frequently seen.

The Kananaskis Country boundary is reached at 61 km. For the next 2 km the road parallels a creek valley with numerous beaver ponds.

The mixed woods in this area can be very good for late spring/ early summer birding.

The Sandy McNabb Campground is reached at 66 km. An easy hiking trail north through Death Valley starts here. Death Valley can be productive in early summer because of its extensive beaver ponds and areas of mixed woods. For those with time to spare, several hours can be profitably used hiking up this valley. For the main trip however, continue west past the Sandy McNabb Campground.

From this point on the road is closed to vehicles between December 1 and May 15 each year. Anywhere along this section of road (particularly south to the river valley) can be productive for birding.

After passing the eastern boundary (with large sign) of the Sheep River Wildlife Sanctuary, the Windy Point parking lot is reached at 69.1 km, on the west side of the road. From this spot one can observe an extensive raptor migration in the spring and fall. Every species of diurnal raptor that occurs in Alberta has been recorded here. The last week of March and the first week of April, and the last two weeks of September and the first week of October can be particularly rewarding. However, even at the height of migration there can be days with almost zero raptor movement. A hiking trail leads north from the parking area through a valley between two high ridges. About 1.5 km north on this steeper trail is a junction marked by a large trail sign. The trail to the east climbs to the top of the ridge (another 0.5 km).

Continuing the drive the Sheep River Ranger Station is reached at 75.2 km. Many Bighorn Sheep spend the entire year here and, particularly in late fall (rutting season), the sheep are very tame and can be observed easily. This area of open grassland, bordered on the north by cliffs, also produces an excellent raptor migration. The Gorge Creek Trail heads north at 75.4 km; for this trip continue west along the main road. The highway crosses Gorge Creek at 76 km; from here to the end of the road (another 8 km) the terrain becomes increasingly more mountainous, with mainly a coniferous forest cover.

The western boundary of the Sheep River Provincial Park is reached at 81.5 km. At the Sheep River Falls Picnic Area (or wherever the river comes close to the road) one can stop in summer and search.

The Bluerock Campground is reached at 82.6 km. Of the two campgrounds, this is probably the best one for a birder to stay at. The Sheep River Trail ends at the Junction Creek Picnic Area after a further 1.4 km. During the summer, many breeding montane birds can be seen in this general area.

Those birders unfamiliar with the area should stop at the Sheep River Visitor Information Centre, on the right-hand side of the road, just prior to the Sandy McNabb Campground. An excellent topographic map of the area, showing the hiking trails, can be obtained here.

Gas, food and accommodation are available in Turner Valley.