

Eau Claire Trail

Welcome to the Eau Claire Trail in Kananaskis Country. When you reach the numbered stops along the trail, this guide will reveal the story of this part of the Kananaskis valley. It will take you about an hour to walk this 1.5-kilometre trail.

The First Campers

(Stop 1) Five thousand years ago, small family bands of prehistoric hunters lived in the Kananaskis valley. The glaciers had long abandoned this area and the climate was much warmer and dryer than it is today. The winters were mild and buffered by frequent chinooks.

Groups of hunters camped here along the river after spending the summer months higher in the valley in search of wood bison, caribou and elk. The large animals were used for winter food supplies, their hides were made into clothing and shelter. The bones were worked into tools and fish hooks.

Each winter the hunters joined other groups in a base camp at Wasootch Creek. With the return of spring the family bands headed back up the valley to summer hunting grounds.

These prehistoric hunters made sharp-edged tools and weapons out of rock by chipping away pieces called flakes. In order to make stronger tools, the early valley inhabitants traded with tribes living west of the mountains for harder types of stone. Many rock flakes have been found at this spot. These flakes, left here 5,000 years ago, are reminders of the first people who camped at Eau Claire.

Visitors to the Valley

(Stop 2) Over the last 1,000 years, Kootenay, Blackfoot and Stoney Indians have each controlled the Kananaskis valley for varying periods of time. The Stoneys gained control in the mid-1800s, about the time the first European explorers entered the valley.

Captain John Palliser recorded in his journal the sighting of many tipi "skeletons" along his route, marking the temporary campsites of Indians hunting in the valley. Since game animals were not numerous enough to support permanent hunting settlements, Indians frequently moved to fresh hunting grounds. These temporary campsites were chosen for the availability of water and game animals. The Indians' diet of meat was supplemented by plants such as wild rose, gooseberry, strawberry and cow parsnip.

For thousands of years, only small groups of hunters travelled the Kananaskis valley, but it took only a short time after the explorers arrived for the first industries to begin. As you walk to the next stop, look along the sides of the trail and perhaps you'll discover evidence of the valley's first industry.

The Logging Era Begins

(Stop 3) Less than 100 years ago, the thud of axes and shouts of loggers filled these forests. In 1882, Isaac Kerr, timber baron of Eau Claire Lumber Company in Wisconsin, heard about timber resources west of Calgary and the lucrative markets for timber opened by the Canadian Pacific Railway. Kerr organized the Eau Claire and Bow River Lumber Company in 1884. Two years later he opened a sawmill in Calgary and built a major logging camp here on the Kananaskis River.

Each December the men would leave their homes and head out to the logging camps. Here at the main Eau Claire camp, they lived in huge log buildings. The loggers worked long hours using axes and crosscut saws to fell and limb the trees. Logs were loaded onto horsedrawn sleds, hauled to the river, and piled on the edge of the ice.

In spring, the loggers received their winters' pay and headed into Calgary to celebrate the end of their long isolation. When the warmer weather arrived, the log drivers would move into the valley to guide the logs on the next stage of their journey to the mill.

Down the River

(Stop 4) By spring there was silence in the Eau Claire camp. When the log drivers arrived in May, the focus of activity moved to the shores of the river. Masses of logs, 15 kilometres long, choked the Kananaskis River. The drivers used long poles with a hook at one end to keep the logs moving on their way downriver.

The drivers' job was difficult and dangerous. Often men worked waist deep in icy mountain waters for hours at a time. When the logs jammed, they were freed by brute force; if this failed, dynamite was used.

There was no bunkhouse or mess hall for the drivers. They moved downriver with the logs at the rate of three to five kilometres a day. The men bunked on spruce boughs and lived on a steady diet of beans and salt pork cooked at temporary camps along the route.

The log drives took about two months to reach the Eau Claire mill in Calgary, where the timber was cut and sold to builders across the prairies. Many of Calgary's early homes and shops were built of lumber from trees cut in the Kananaskis valley.

Logging has been abandoned in this area for many years. Follow the trail into the forest and discover why.

Surveying the Kananaskis Valley

(Stop 5) Imagine you are a surveyor looking for the marketable timber in the Kananaskis valley. Would you consider this forest to be commercially valuable?

You would probably not recommend that these trees be logged until they are more mature. However, timber ranging in size from 20 to 40 centimetres - not much larger than some of the spruce growing here now - was cut in the Kananaskis valley during the late 1800s. At that time it was economical to cut all such accessible stands to meet the demands of settlement in the prairies and in the growing town of Calgary.

Louis Stewart, a timber surveyor, reported in 1883 that while much of the valley had been burned, this area still contained a large mature stand of spruce. At the next stop you can see some of the reasons why this forest was protected from fires.

Rivers of the Past

(Stop 6) It is not surprising that the early timber surveyors reported that the most valuable timber in the valley was confined to a belt 300 metres wide along the riverbeds.

The waters of the Kananaskis river once surged through this channel. Gradually the rushing water carved out a new course. All that remains of the old channel is a moist, lush depression in the forest. Abandoned river channels such as this one and a high water table near the river, acted as natural firebreaks. Only during severe drought years were trees here threatened by fires.

But early logging operations in the valley changed these forests. Loggers took the available timber and left behind logging debris which was fuel for the fires that could destroy their livelihood. Signs of these fires lie on the forest floor along the trail to the next stop.

Fire!

(Stop 7) When the loggers finished cutting an area they left the ground littered with branches. Such logging methods had continued in the Kananaskis valley for more than 20 years when the severe drought of 1910 created favourable conditions for fires in the Rocky Mountains and foothills. South of the Eau Claire camp a large fire swept through the foothills and eastern slopes of the mountains of Alberta and Montana. The piles of slash left by the logging operations helped to feed the fire.

Even before the 1910 fire, the market for Alberta timber was declining. In fact, it had become cheaper to bring in lumber from British Columbia. When the Depression hit, the bottom dropped out of the lumber market. In 1936, another drought year, a fire started by campers at the Kananaskis Lakes burned through the Kananaskis valley and north up the Ribbon Creek valley. After this fire, the Eau Claire and Bow River Lumber Company, once Calgary's chief supplier of lumber, was reduced to salvaging burned timber to be used for mine props, posts and rails.

The logging era in the Kananaskis valley was over and the forests began a slow recovery.

However, signs of forest fires remain for many years. As you continue along the trail you'll pass the charred remnants of trees burned in the 1936 fire.

The New Forest

(Stop 8) The scorched stumps and blackened logs scattered through this forest are evidence of the 1936 fire. The first trees to grow over the fire scars were the poplar and willow you see along this old river channel. Since the fire did not burn into the ground, the root systems of the trees were left untouched. Poplar and willow are able to send up new growth from their old roots. This gives them an advantage over the spruce, which must grow from seed.

In the campground, you may have noticed some stands of large trees with longer needles. These trees are lodgepole pines. Their cones are sealed shut by a resin. Extreme heat, such as that produced by a forest fire, is required to open them and release the seeds. Lodgepole pine is a fast-growing tree with seeds that quickly germinate and their initial growth is much faster than that of spruce. Thus, most lodgepole pine in the Eau Claire area are larger than the spruce.

In time, spruce will replace poplar, willow and pine. Spruce grows well in the shade and has a longer life span. Eventually, the spruce will become larger and shade out the other trees. Unless there is a fire or some other disturbance, this area will once again become a spruce forest.

Trails to Cart Tracks to Road

(Stop 9) Today the drive from the Bow Valley up the Kananaskis River to Eau Claire takes less than an hour. Before 1936 there was only a trail up the valley and it was overgrown and frequently blocked by deadfall. For many years the trail was used in spring, summer and fall by outfitters guiding parties of fishermen and hunters into the valley to fish for trout and to hunt elk, moose, deer, sheep and bears. Prospectors also travelled the valley trail in search of coal and other minerals.

Gradually, as the trail was used by more travellers, it was improved to allow the passage of horsedrawn wagons. In 1936, the initial forestry road was constructed. The road was improved in 1947 when coal mining began on Mt. Allan to the north of here. This road brought the first car loads of picnickers and campers to continue the Eau Claire camping tradition.

As you continue along the trail, consider why you came to Eau Claire. How are your reasons different from those of the other campers who have stayed here in the past 5,000 years?

Eau Claire Today

(Stop 10) Each year thousands of campers drive through the Kananaskis valley to camp at Eau Claire. All of these campers come for recreation. They do not depend upon the river and forest for their livelihood as did earlier prehistoric hunters, Indians, loggers, prospectors and trappers. Today's campers bring their food and shelter with them. They have time to relax and enjoy the mountain scenery. The Eau Claire campground has been changed to accommodate these new campers. If you have been camping at Eau Claire for many seasons, you are already aware of the improvements. When you reach the next stop, you can see some of the reasons for the changes.

The Tradition Continues

(Stop 11) Although the campers who have been here before you were few in number, they left many obvious signs of their visits. The prehistoric hunters left "flakes" of rock and remains of their tools. Indians left trails, fire pits and the skeletons of tipis. Stumps and charred remains of trees are evidence of logging and the fires which burned through the slash left behind. Tin cans and other articles are the partly buried remains of garbage left by hunters and fishermen who came during the mid-1900s. These early campers also left many fire pits scattered through the forest.

Today, thousands of people use the Eau Claire campground every year. Imagine what the forest would look like if all these people cut their own firewood, built their own fire pits and left their garbage behind.

To keep the camping tradition alive, Eau Claire campground now has designated campsites with fire pits and centralized firewood and garbage facilities. By using these facilities properly, you can help to continue the 5,000-year-old camping tradition at Eau Claire.

The Eau Claire trail is one of many interpretive trails in Kananaskis Country. There are also many trails you can explore on your own in the mountains, foothills and valleys. If you would like more information on the locations of these trails, please contact Bow Valley Provincial Park at 673-3663.