



# Paddling in the Canadian Badlands

Paddle through the many layers of the Canadian Badlands

## Tour Summary

### Day One

Content Bridge to Trenville Park (29 km)

- Paddle through Lousana Canyon and past Backbone Riffle, the site of Anthony Henday's 1754 first crossing of the Red Deer River

### Day Two

Trenville Park to the Tolman Bridge campground (36 km)

- Paddle through the final stages of the transition from the central parklands to badlands and the northern fescue grasslands
- Hike to the "Dry Island" mesa or to the buffalo jump within the provincial park

### Day Three

Tolman Bridge to Morrin Bridge (23 km)

- Be awed by, and explore the ever-changing badlands scenery and wildlife

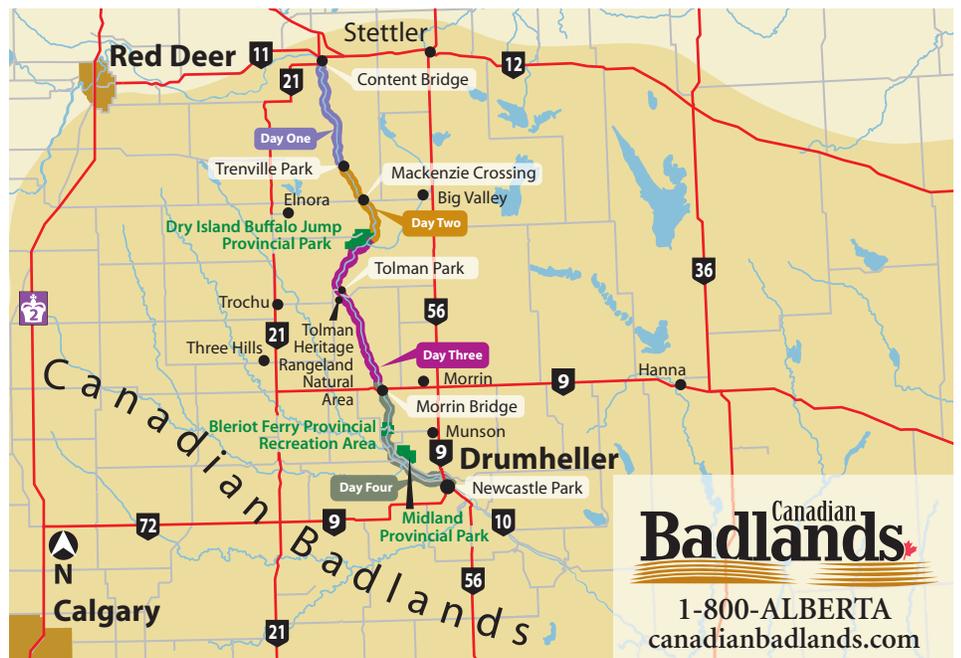
### Day Four

Morrin Bridge to Newcastle Park in Drumheller (31 km)

- Consider the life of Andre Bleriot: rancher, farmer, and ferryman
- Reflect on the early coal mining history of the valley as you paddle into Drumheller

This reach of the Red Deer River is the most popular paddling experience in the Canadian Badlands. The history, scenery, wildlife, camping, good access, central location, and the modest paddling skill requirements all contribute to the allure of this tour. The river can be run safely at most summer flows. This paddling tour, by canoe, kayak, or raft, provides the opportunity to relive a part of the lives of Alberta's many peoples. Our First Nations, early

explorers, fur traders, ranchers, farmers, community builders, and palaeontologists all have used this river for commerce, transportation, spiritual celebrations, and recreation. This tour can take four to six days, or it may be paddled and floated as shorter tours of one-half day, one day or more. Information about equipment rental and shuttles can found at the various visitor information centres in the area and in this tour guide.



**Canadian Badlands**  
 1-800-ALBERTA  
 canadianbadlands.com



**Visitor Information Centres**

Travel Alberta  
1-800-ALBERTA, travelalberta.com

**Red Deer**

North of 32 St. overpass on **Highway 2**  
1-800-215-8946, tourismreddeer.net

**Stettler**

6606 - 50 Avenue (**Highway 12** West)  
1-877-742-9499, stettler.net

**Drumheller**

60 – 1st Avenue W  
1-866-823-8100, traveldrumheller.com

**Accommodations**

Visit the Alberta Hotel & Lodging Association online at: travelalberta.com for approved accommodation or contact 1-800-ALBERTA. Reservations are highly recommended.

**Camping**

Public and private campgrounds along this reach include:

**Content Bridge Park** 403.742.0777

**Trenville Park** (Red Deer County)  
403.773.2273

**Buffalo Jump Canyon Ranch**

(adjacent to Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park) 403.442.2277  
buffalojumpcanyon.com

**TL Bar Ranch** (just upstream of the Tolman Bridge, west bank) 403.442.2399  
tlbarranch.com

**Tolman Bridge** (Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park) 403.823.1749

**Morrin Bridge** (Starland Recreation Area & Campground) 403.772.3793

**Bleriot Ferry Provincial Recreation Area Campground** 403.823.1749

**River Grove Campground & Cabins** (Drumheller) 403.823.6655

Wilderness or “random” camping is allowed along the river on the public lands associated with the river. The river bank below the “normal high water mark” may be utilized by paddlers. Virtually all the public lands above the “high water mark,” and in particular those lands designated as the Tolman Badlands Heritage Rangeland Natural Area are presently subject to agricultural leases and access must be arranged with the leaseholder in advance. For further

information about the various leases, and leaseholders please consult the Public Lands web site at: [srd.alberta.ca](http://srd.alberta.ca) .

Paddlers who choose to random camp along the shores should plan their trip for mid to late summer after the high water of June to mid-July. Please note that no camping is allowed within Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park. Paddlers who choose to day-trip and base each day’s paddle from a public or private campground as described in this report have a broader range of river flows, and more of the summer in which you may plan your trip.

**Camping Tip!** Leave No Trace camping is the modern way to camp; great

minimal impact camping information is available at: [leavenotrace.ca](http://leavenotrace.ca)

**Bed & Breakfasts/Guest Ranches/Hotels**

Two Guest Ranches are available along this tour route:

**Buffalo Jump Canyon Ranch**

(adjacent to Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park), camping only  
403.442.2277, buffalojumpcanyon.com

**St. Ann-Ranch** (Trochu)

1-888-442-3924

**TL Bar Ranch** (just above the Tolman

Bridge) 403.442.2207, tlbarranch.com

Location	Approximate Distances			Canoeing or Kayaking	Rafting
	km	km	km		
	up	down	between	Hours	Hours
Content Bridge	0	118			
Trenville Park	29	90	29	4 – 7	6 – 9
McKenzie Crossing	37	82	8	1 – 2	1.5 – 3
Dry Island Buffalo Jump – boat launch	50	68	14	2 – 4	4 – 5
Tolman Bridge - Campground	65	54	14	2 – 4	4 – 5
Morrin Bridge - Campground	87	31	23	3 – 6	6 – 8
Bleriot Ferry - Campground	98	20	11	1.5 – 3	3 – 5
Newcastle Park - Drumheller	118	0	20	3.5 – 6	5 – 8

For more paddling and travel information please consult the ARCA (Alberta Recreational Canoe Association) *A Paddler’s Guide to the Middle Red Deer River: Dickson to Drumheller*. This map is available at most outdoor sports stores and map stores, some Visitor Centres in Central Alberta and directly from ARCA at: [abcanoekayak.org](http://abcanoekayak.org).

**Rentals, Shuttle Services and Outfitting for Paddlers**

TL Bar Ranch at the Tolman Bridge, for Rentals and Shuttle 403.442.2207

Taxi! Taxi! in Drumheller, for shuttle only 1-866.823.8883

Valhalla Pure Outfitters in Red Deer, Alberta, for canoe rental 403.343.3658

Aquabatics in Calgary, canoe rental 403.288.9283

Mountain Equipment Co-op in Calgary, canoe rental 403.269.2420

Undercurrents in Calgary, canoe rental 403.262.4327

U of C Outdoor Program Centre in Calgary, canoe rental 403.220.5038



## Route Map

This map is not intended for navigation. Pick up an official Alberta Road Map (at a Visitor Information Centre or call 1-800-ALBERTA), and a copy of the Alberta Recreational Canoeing Association ARCA Paddler's Guide to the Middle Red Deer River: Dickson to Drumheller.

Please paddle carefully and respect private property and occupied public lands. Every effort has been made to ensure accurate information at the time of publication. This publication is for information purposes only. We are unable to accept responsibility for any inconvenience, loss or injury sustained as a result of anyone relying upon this information.

**SAFETY TIP**

Transport Canada requires all canoes, kayaks, and rafts to carry a minimum of:

- one appropriately fitting Personal Flotation Device (PFD) for each occupant,
- a bailer,
- a buoyant heaving line of 15 m or more (a “throw bag”)
- a sound signaling device (a whistle or “air horn”)
- a spare paddle or oar (kayak paddlers can share a “break-down” paddle).

For further information contact:  
[www.tc.gc.ca/marinesafety/](http://www.tc.gc.ca/marinesafety/)

**Day One**  
**Content to Trenville Park**  
 (29 km)

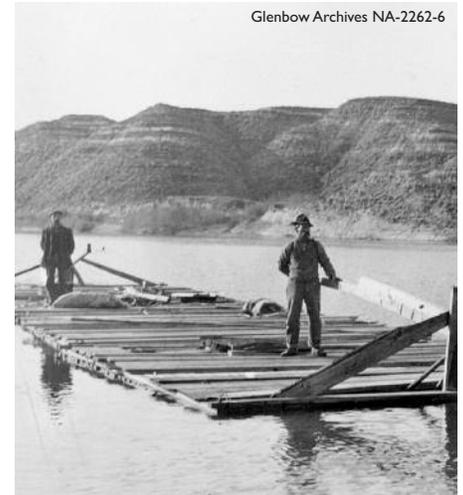
Today’s paddle is through central parklands from the Content Bridge Park and finishes at Trenville Park. Along the way Backbone Riffle (Class I) will be encountered.

**SAFETY TIP**

Potable water can be a problem for random campers on this trip. For most trips rafters and canoeists should count on carrying 4-6 liters of water per person per day for drinking and cooking. River water can be used for clean-up and washing once boiled for more than 2 minutes. Kayak paddlers and others may consider carrying a water filter that filters to at least the 0.2 micron size. Campsites along this run should not be counted on for potable water.

Content Bridge Park on the upstream side of the Content Bridge, and the north side of the river, and just off **Highway 21**, provides a convenient launch site, and an excellent campground for those that choose to journey to the river the day before beginning your trip. It is a straight forward paddle from Content Bridge to Backbone Riffle, some 16 kms downstream.

While still at the Content Bridge Park, take some time and look around. This site is the location of the former communities of Tail Creek and Content. Tail Creek was a buffalo hunting settlement in the latter days of the great buffalo hunts. Métis hunters from Lac Saint Anne and the Edmonton area, and from as far east as Manitoba, gathered here for the last of the buffalo hunts. Tail Creek existed from the late 1860’s through to its demise by prairie fire in 1894. In 1875 Sergeant-Major Sam Steele of the North West Mounted Police established a post here to thwart the whisky traders who preyed on the Aboriginal hunters. At times upwards of one thousand people were involved in the hunt and meat processing. Dried meat and pemmican (a mixture of dried and pounded meat, berries and rendered buffalo fat) were sent from here to all across the north west of Canada to support the fur trade. All that remains of Tail Creek today is the cemetery which is located approximately 1 km



Glenbow Archives NA-2262-6

Timber Raft near Morrin

north of the Content Bridge on **Highway 21**, 1.6 km east on **Highway 11** and 2.4 km south on Range Road 223.

In the early 1900’s A.A. Content opened a stopping house at the old river crossing for Tail Creek, and in time he added a general store, creamery, and post office. Another of Content’s business activities was to float lumber in large rafts down from the Red Deer mills for sale to the settlers of this region. The post office operated from 1904 through to 1913. Like many early towns, the demise of Content was the locating of the railway to the west and north. Eventually portions of the town were moved, and the town’s folk moved to Alix to the north, or Delbourne to the south-west.

**INFO TIP**

Alberta Environment provides hourly river flow reports on-line at:  
[www3.gov.ab.ca/env/water/basins/BasinForm.cfm](http://www3.gov.ab.ca/env/water/basins/BasinForm.cfm)



Glenbow Archives NA-2925-17

A 1906 celebration in Content

Backbone riffle presents greater challenges at flows below 75 cubic metres per second (cms) when far more boulders are exposed or just below the surface waiting for the unwary paddler. The worst of the riffle can be avoided by taking the channel on the left of the island. At most flows on the main channel, keep your craft straight, in line with the current and you should have little difficulty. At higher flows this riffle washes out, and may go by completely unnoticed.



**From Anthony Henday's Journal  
1754 October 11, Friday**

*"Travelled 7 Miles S.W.bW [south west by west] then came to Waskesew River, and crossed it on a Fall about two feet high, and much the same depth, & 20 poles wide. On both sides there are stones of different sizes & weight: quite round, and of an iron color: and a little distance from the River, are veins of iron-ore running along the surface of the ground. No woods to be seen. Indians killed several Beaver and 2 Moose."*

Backbone Riffle is thought to be the site of Anthony Henday's 1754 crossing of the Red Deer River (then known as the Waskesew River). Anthony Henday is believed to be the first European to travel within present day Alberta.

From Backbone you still have some 13 km to paddle or float if Trenville Park is your destination for the evening. If looking for an on-river campsite for the evening, Backbone marks a good place to start the search.

If you are car-camping at Trenville Park, the park is best found by taking Range Road 223 north off of **Highway 590**. From this direction the park is well signed and your travel on gravel roads is minimized.



Watch for this sign, no camping for the next 5 km



Rise early for the mist and spectacular sunrises

**Day Two  
Trenville Park to Dry Island  
Buffalo Jump Provincial Park  
and Tolman Bridge (31 km)**

Today you paddle down to Tolman Bridge. You will want to maximize the time you have to explore Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park so start early. Here the valley walls take on more of the eroded characteristics of the badlands.

The river flats are covered in the short grasses of the western prairies, and the driest locations in the valley host prickly pear cactus.

 **See a fossil? Let it be!** Fossils uncover stories of past times when left on the ground with other fossils and rocks. Mark the spot and report it to the Tyrrell Museum so a palaeontologist can check it out. Collecting fossils in Alberta is illegal without a permit.

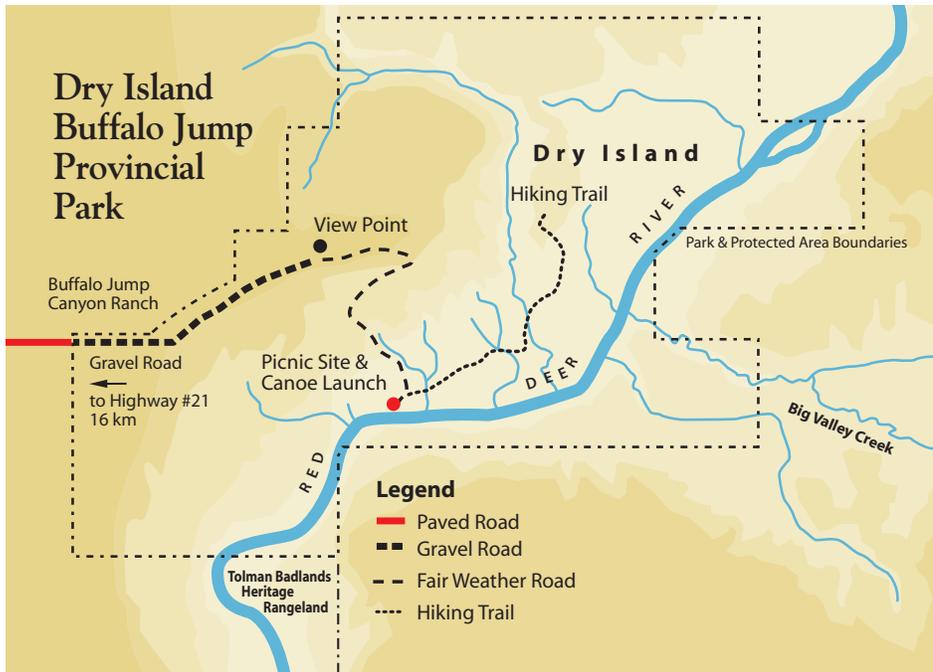
Your paddle to Dry Island Buffalo Jump may take less than one-half of a day (from MacKenzie Crossing) to most of a day if you have camped much above Trenville Park. You will know that you have arrived at Dry Island Buffalo Jump

Provincial Park by noting the good sized island in the river at the start of the park or the sign to the right hand shore. If you are random camping you must camp outside of the park boundaries.

The canoe launch and the picnic area in Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park are about two-thirds of the way through the park, and well past the confluence with Big Valley Creek. Keep a sharp eye out for the canoe launch; it is on river right, and it can be hidden by the willows and sandbars.

As you approach the canoe launch, you paddle directly towards the site of the former buffalo jump. This buffalo jump was one of the largest and tallest sites used on the Canadian prairies. This site is also the most northerly jump used in Alberta, and was used for at least four periods between 700 and 2800 years ago.

If you are driving to Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park the paved and best signed route is in from **Highway 21**. From **Highway 21** head east on Township Road 344. If you are driving down from Trenville Park, Range Road 223 will bring you directly south to Township Road 344. If coming north from the Tolman Bridge, use Range Road 225 north from **Highway 585** to



Hike up to the “Dry Island”

Range Road 344 and then east to the park. The park access road first follows the valley edge and provides a number of good viewpoints of the park, the buffalo jump, the surrounding badlands, and the river valley. It is only a fair weather road down to the picnic site and canoe launch – avoid this road when it is wet. The picnic site and canoe launch are adjacent to each other in the day use area at the end of the road.

The canoe launch and picnic site are a good base for your explorations of the

park. This site provides tables in the shade and outhouses. The 2.5 km (one way!) hike from the river’s edge up to the mesa (Dry Island) takes a little over an hour on a good day, and it is best hiked in dry weather. The Red Deer River Valley is famous for its “gumbo” (mud)!

The hiking trail noted on the map above to the “Dry Island” is approximate. You will find a number of rough game and horse trails that all lead in the appropriate direction. There are no maintained trails in Dry Island Buffalo

Jump Provincial Park. To reach the mesa, you must hike north-east from the picnic area. When you reach the big stream, you then work your way upstream, and then onto the bench to the right (east). From the bench the trails should take you up through a series of gullies, and spurs to the SW corner of the mesa. This is a spectacular hike that takes you through a strangely eroded landscape. You will pass hoodoos and runnels at all stages of development, and the ever changing vista will provide plenty of excuses to “catch your breath.”



Barnum Brown’s raft from a 1910 fossil collecting float of the river from Red Deer to Drumheller



Keep a look out for eagles, osprey and prairie falcons

After a long day of exploring Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park you may return by vehicle to your car-camp at Trenville or the Tolman Bridge. If you are looking to random camp on the river, a popular spot is approximately 1 to 2 km downstream of the park, around the first bend, on the left bank. If you are following the schedule as outlined in this report, be sure to leave yourself adequate time for the paddle down to the Tolman Bridge campground.

Tolman Bridge Campground is a part of Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park, and is the official campground for the park. This campground is located beyond the bridge on both sides of the river.

### Day Three Tolman Bridge to Morrin Bridge (Starland Recreation Area & Campground) (23 km)

Today you have a short paddle from the Tolman Bridge and on to Morrin Bridge and the Starland Recreation Area & Campground.

This could be your lazy day, sleep in a bit, and float the river. On this reach it is common to see eagles, osprey, turkey vultures, pelicans, prairie falcons, red tail hawks, eastern king birds, white tailed deer, coyotes, and beaver. On this day you complete the transition from the Parklands to the Grasslands region of Alberta.

#### SAFETY TIP

It can be hot in the park. Do take water with you on any hike. This is rugged country, light hiking boots should be the minimum worn.

There is no backcountry maintenance in this park, so please “leave no trace” of your visit. Try to hike on what established trails there are, pack out your garbage, and “take only pictures!”

The hike to the west, to the base of the buffalo jump and the “earth flow,” is even more of a cross-country excursion than the hike to the “Dry Island.” But the land is open and you rarely lose contact with the river, or your return route. Along the base of the jump you may see bison bones exposed by erosion, and on the hike up and down you will be threading your way through “rotational slump blocks.” When the blocks of the river bank slide, the leading edge tends to rotate upwards, and these blocks create the terraces and ridges you find on the hill side. Behind many of the slump blocks, water is trapped and ponds have formed. Thus the hillside has a variety of habitats and the opportunities for birding are very good in the spring and early summer.

Palaeontologists have been floating the Red Deer River since J.B. Tyrrell came down the river by canoe in 1884 for the Canadian Geological Survey. During the “Great Canadian Dinosaur Rush,” which started in 1909, floating the river was the preferred method for traveling through the region. Dinosaur bone collecting occurs not only in the Drumheller through to Dinosaur Provincial Park reaches, but well upstream of Drumheller too. Some of the first fossil discoveries were in the area of Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park.



A perfect morning in Camp - an island site downstream of the Bleriot Ferry



Cattle drive near Morrin in 1908

The river valley broadens out and the badlands tend to be a bit more distant than they were upstream. These broad valley bottoms attracted early ranchers and some of the last big Alberta cattle drives occurred in this area. Cattle were not only driven to Calgary, but at times up to Stettler when it was the “head of steel” and the closest railway station. The big blizzards of 1906, the coming of the railroads and the homesteaders, brought to an end the large cattle drives in Alberta.

The County of Starland Recreation Area, often referred to as the Morrin Bridge Campground, is upstream of the bridge on the east or left bank of the river. The boat launch for the campground is nearly 2 km

upstream of the bridge, and paddlers should be prepared to look for it well before the bridge comes into view.

#### SAFETY TIP

There are at least three important considerations for “random camping” on this trip. Will there be adequate beach front for camping? Choose a month with normally lower water flows like May or after mid-July. Can you find shelter from the likely winds? Tuck your tents in close to the willows. Will you be sharing your site with grazing cattle? Check the beach for recent hoof prints and cow “deposits,” and take a look over the immediate river bank to see if there are cattle grazing on the river flats above; maybe you will want to move on!

## Day Four Morrin Bridge to Newcastle Park in Drumheller (31 km)

Over the course of today’s paddle you leave the near wilderness environment to gradually paddle into the urban setting of Drumheller; your final destination.

Morrin Bridge to Bleriot Ferry is a short paddle of approximately 10 km. Bleriot Ferry does take foot passengers and you are welcome to land below the ferry and have a ride over and back. The east bank has a large area for boat landing and launching, just downstream of the ferry landing.



Take a ride on the Bleriot Ferry

#### SAFETY TIP

Ferries can be dangerous for paddlers. Above the ferry you may be directed to stop and wait for further directions from the ferry operator. It is best to wait upstream of the ferry until the ferry is more than half way across the river and then head for the shore the ferry has just left. This will give you time to paddle past the ferry landing before the ferry returns. You must NOT try to land on the upstream side of the ferry, your boat WILL BE washed under the ferry by the river current.



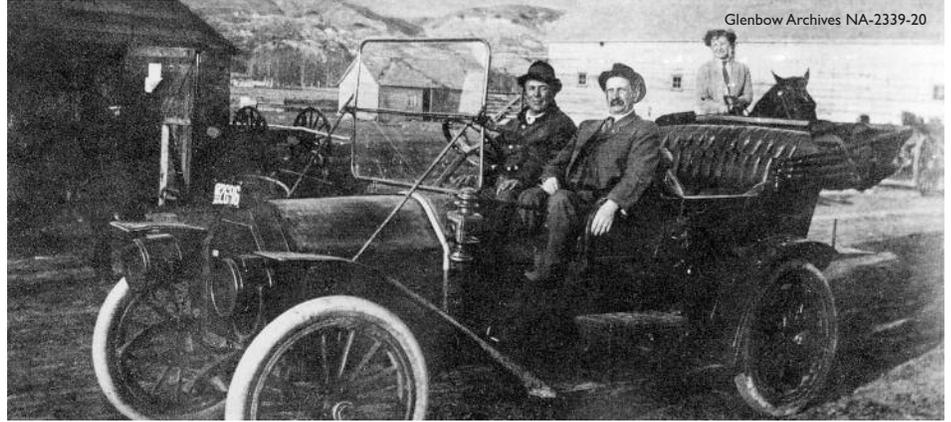
A Bleriot Family picnic

Bleriot Ferry is named for the Bleriot family, the first settlers in this portion of the valley. Andre Bleriot started as a rancher closer to Calgary. With the coming of the first homesteaders he moved to this area. In 1902 he “filed” for his own homestead on the west side of the river, near where the ferry is now. Andre was responsible for the commencement of this ferry in 1913.

If you are looking to camp at the Bleriot Ferry Provincial Recreation Area campground, it is about 400 m downstream of the ferry on river right, the west bank. You will have to look hard for the path up through the willows to the camp site. This campsite is one of the best opportunities on the river for



CNR Railway Bridge in Drumheller



Sam Drumheller and his Oldsmobile – Bought in Red Deer and driven on the winter ice to Drumheller – circa 1912

camping in a mature cottonwood grove. And with a cottonwood grove such as this, you may find piliated woodpeckers and many other song birds. This campground is well worth a stop and tour especially on a hot day; it can be ten degrees or more cooler under the canopy of the cottonwoods!

The river gradient decreases approaching Drumheller and thus the current slows – enjoy the slower pace and look for the features of the badlands, and the remains of the early coal mining along this reach.

There are a number of islands on the approach to Drumheller, the head of each may provide a potential camping spot for those who have pushed on past the Bleriot Ferry Campground.

You will be able to see some of the remains from the coal mining communities of Kirkpatrick, Nacmine, and Midland as you make the final approach into Drumheller. These coal mines were made practical by, and provided the fuel for the railroads which were developed into this region between 1909 and 1913. Approximately 130 coal mines were registered in the Drumheller area, and at least 34 of these

mines had a long and productive history. In 1947 over 2 million tons of coal were shipped from this area. The Atlas Mine was the last to close in 1979. The Atlas Mine is now a National Historic Site and may be visited in East Coulee.

At the railway bridge be aware that the right side bridge pier has some old protective skirting in the water that can be a navigational hazard at low water. Stay to the left of the centre channel. From the railway bridge it is just over two kilometres to Newcastle Beach and park. Newcastle Beach is on river right, and just below the first island past the railway bridge.

If you are ending your trip in Drumheller, be sure to leave time to visit the attractions in and around the town, in particular the Royal Tyrrell Museum. And you may well want to check out one of those “modern campsites,” the kind with flush toilets, hot showers, a king sized bed, and hot food and cold drinks just down the hall! You have earned it!

Come back to paddle the next reach of the Red Deer River, or explore another Alberta river!

The Canadian Badlands is like no other place on earth. Home to the world’s most extensive dinosaur bonebeds, badlands and hoodoos and a world-class dinosaur museum, our natural heritage is more than 75 million years old. Our culture is literally layered in the land. National historic sites and provincial parks reveal First Nations rock art, farming and ranching history and a rich industrial heritage. Communities large and small boast festivals, rodeos, live theatre, local art and tea houses. Whether you prospect for fossils, canoe a meandering river or horseback ride in glacier-carved coulees, the Canadian Badlands experience is as vast and remarkable as the landscape. Call **1-800-ALBERTA** or visit [canadianbadlands.com](http://canadianbadlands.com) for more Canadian Badlands Touring Routes.