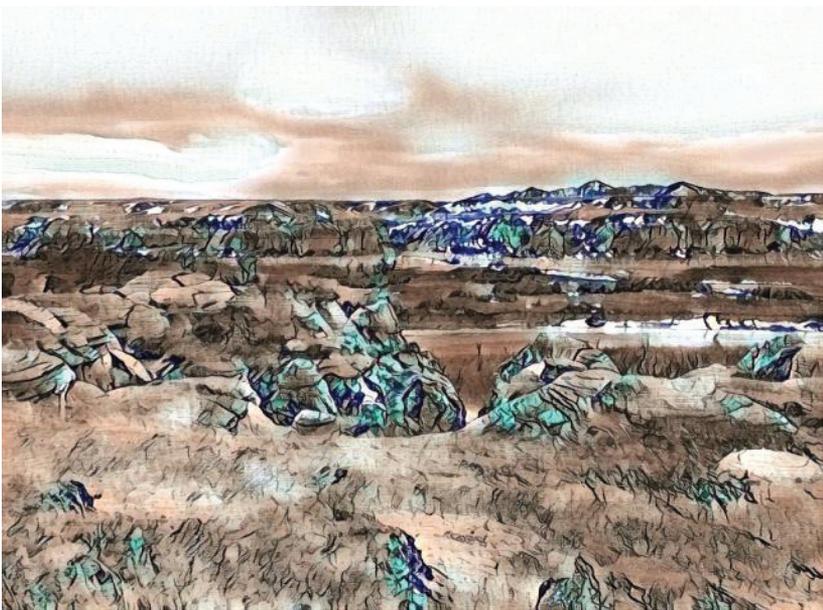


Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai'pi Provincial Park

# Matapiiksi (Hoodoo) Interpretive Trail



Alberta Parks Trail Guide



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



• **Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai'pi**  
• inscribed on the World  
• Heritage List in 2019

Alberta

# Matapiiksi (Hoodoo) Interpretive Trail

**Welcome to the Matapiiksi (Hoodoo) Interpretive Trail!**  
Matapiiksi is the Blackfoot word for “the people”, and refers to the sandstone columns and hoodoo formations around you.

**Use this guide as you explore the cultural landscape of Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi and discover the close relationships people have with this place both in the past, present, and into the future.**

The numbered posts along the trail correspond to the numbered sections in this guide. We recommend starting the trail at the campground, but it can be followed in either direction. Feel free to hike all or just part of the route. The out-and-back trail length is approximately 5.0 km return from the campground to the Police Coulee Viewpoint, including the Battle Scene. The distance from the campground trailhead to the Battle Scene is 3.5 km return. The map in the centre of this guide illustrates the trail route, access points and distances.

For your comfort and safety, wear good walking shoes on this trail. Carry water, wear a hat and use sunscreen. Temperatures exceeding 40°C are often recorded here. Please refrain from smoking on the trail as a spark or ember can quickly start a grass fire.

The environment you are about to walk through is extremely sensitive. Climbing on the landforms can easily damage the fragile rock formations, and the passage of feet will trample delicate vegetation, which leads to soil erosion. To prevent this damage, and to keep our park in a healthy state, *please stay on the trail at all times.*

## **Please Note**

Under the Provincial Historical Resources Act, fines of up to \$50,000 and a one-year jail term can result from altering, marking or damaging any historical resource, including rock art. It is also illegal to deface, disfigure or mark the sandstone landforms and cliffs anywhere in the park. Help protect this area by reporting any acts of graffiti, vandalism or defacement that you observe. *Camera monitoring is in effect.*



# Stop 1

## A Remarkable Landscape



Indigenous people have visited this sacred landscape since time immemorial. The cultural identity of the first people to discover Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi is uncertain, but since the 1700s, this area has been recognized as Blackfoot territory.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site designation of Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi recognizes the continuing traditions still practiced here by Blackfoot and other Indigenous people. The site’s Outstanding Universal Value also recognizes the rock art, archaeological sites, and culturally significant landforms that are closely related to these traditions at this sacred cultural landscape.

Look around you – the unique sandstone formations are called “matapiiksi” by the Blackfoot and are said to have a spirit, like other earth beings. The result of thousands of years of erosion, matapiiksi began forming after glaciers exposed the sandstone bedrock during the last ice age. Rain has sculpted the rock by wearing away softer sections of the sandstone faster than harder sections. Wind-blown sand has softened the edges of the landforms, while frost has split off large blocks to form cliffs. These processes have created the shapes that make Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi a remarkable place on the prairies.

# Stop 2

## The World Created by Naapi

In Blackfoot tradition, Naapi, or Old Man created the world. The Milk River valley was just one of many features he made in the first days as he travelled across the plains. Everywhere Naapi went, he formed the landscape and placed plants and animals upon the ground. Then Naapi taught the first people how to use the things he created – food, medicine, clothing and tools. Here at Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi, the land remains much as Naapi created it.

The valley before you seems much too large for the small, meandering river that flows through it. Starting about 20,000 years ago, the glaciers of the last ice age began receding to the northeast. Great volumes of meltwater, flowing to the south and east, eroded through the soft glacial till and sandstone, creating the wide glacial spillway we see today. The relatively tiny Milk River, part of the Missouri-Mississippi drainage system, is a “misfit” stream that now follows the path of this huge glacial torrent.

# Stop 3

## The Summits of a Sacred World



Known to the Blackfoot as Katyoississti, the Sweet Pine Hills were another of Naapi’s creations. The Blackfoot often used the tops of the hills to look for bison herds, and much of Blackfoot territory can be seen from their summits. A powerful presence in the centre of their world, the hills have always been sacred to the Blackfoot people. Young men often climbed the hills in order to undertake a vision quest – an important ritual fast resulting in dreams of the spirit world.

These landforms are now known as the Sweetgrass Hills, an English mistranslation from their Blackfoot name. Reaching an elevation of 2128 metres some 12 kilometres to the south of here, the Sweetgrass Hills of Montana tower above the surrounding prairies. About 48 million years ago, magma from inside the earth forced its way upwards, and then cooled into a huge dome of igneous rock just beneath the surface. Millions of years of erosion stripped away the softer overlying sedimentary rocks, leaving the harder rock behind as isolated hills above a flat plain.

## Stop 4

### Land of Sacred Beings

Shelter from the wind, abundant wildlife, lush vegetation – all of these resources drew First Nations people to Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi. While hunting and gathering food, Blackfoot people often camped in the Milk River valley but would avoid this specific area out of respect for the spirits that are present here.

Whenever the river flooded, it buried traces of these campsites beneath layers of mud. Today, remains of campsites, bones and artifacts such as arrowheads and pottery fragments are often found eroding out of the riverbank. Many archaeological sites have been found in the park, dating from 1000 BC to only a century ago.

As the meandering Milk River slowly but steadily shifts its channel, the steep-sided cut banks are eroded and sediments are deposited on sandbars on the inner side of bends. Occasionally, large floods blanket much of the valley bottom, depositing new sediment on the “alluvial flats” visible across the river. A profusion of trees, shrubs and grasses grow in this fertile mud, which provide shelter for plants and animals. From this vantage point, mule deer are often seen browsing upon the riverside vegetation.

#### **Please Note**

If you discover bones, artifacts or other archaeological remains in the park, please help preserve them by leaving them in place. Artifacts provide archaeologists with much more information if they are left undisturbed, and some artifacts are considered sacred. Report any new discoveries to park staff, who will be happy to investigate it further.

# Stop 5

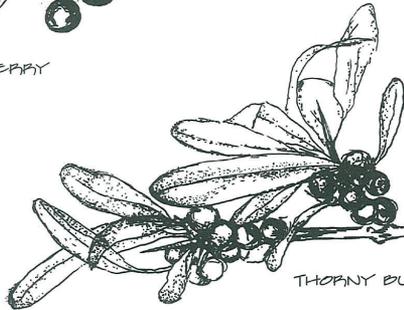
## Where the Berries are Many



CHOKECHERRY



GOLDEN CURRIANT



THORNY BUFFALOBERRY

The Blackfoot often stopped to pick berries at Writing-on-Stone/Áísínai'pi during their seasonal movements. In the early 1900s, Kainaikoan shared that, “the chief would say, ‘We shall move to Áísínai'pi. There are many berries there, especially chokecherries.’ So we camped there and the women did not have to go far to pick berries. The chokecherries were mashed and dried and put away in calfskin bags.” Various plants, mostly gathered by women, provided an important component of the Blackfoot diet.

Along the river, conditions are moist and cool. This riverside environment is known as riparian habitat. Small trees such as river birch and peachleaf willow flourish here, providing nesting sites for many bird species including the rufous-sided towhee and the brown thrasher. Wildlife are attracted here to feed on the abundant fruits of summer – golden currants, saskatoons, chokecherries and buffaloberries.

# Stop 6

## The River Flows Through It



Water beings are sacred to the Blackfoot and appear in creation stories. The river otter, beaver or muskrat are often credited with providing the mud to Naapi from beneath the water's surface so the world could be created. Rivers were a source of life for the Blackfoot people.

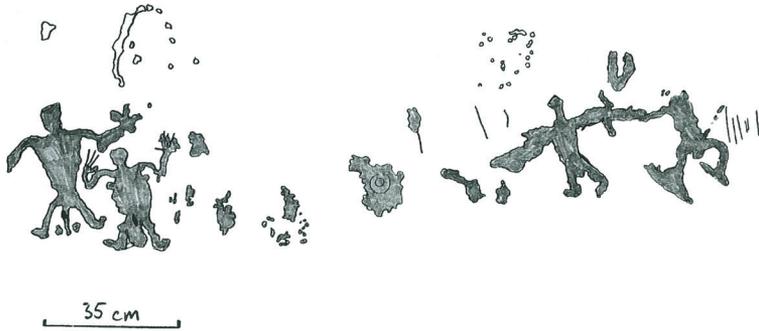
The Milk River is the only river in Canada that both starts and end back in the USA. Being part of the Missouri drainage system, the Milk River provides numerous communities, farmers and ranchers with drinking, irrigation and other water needs. This transboundary watershed is co-managed between the American and Canadian governments to meet the needs of its users.

Due to its path that flows to the Gulf of Mexico, the Milk River watershed provides a home to a number of unique-to-Alberta species and species at risk. Some of these species at risk include the stonecat fish, Weidemeyer's admiral butterfly, short-horned lizard, yucca plant and the yellow-bellied racer snake, some of which are found along the eastern part of the Alberta stretch of the Milk River.

The Milk River was named by explorers Lewis and Clark. Meriwether Lewis recorded in his journal that, "The water of this river possesses a peculiar whiteness, being about the colour of a cup of tea with the admixture of a tablespoonful of milk. We called it Milk River."

# Stop 7

## Messages from the Past



Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi encompasses the greatest concentration of rock art on the Great Plains of North America. Thousands of petroglyphs and pictographs graphically represent the powers of the spirit world that resonate in this sacred landscape. For the Blackfoot, the rock art is understood through traditional knowledge and stories that affirm their deep connections to Áísínai’pi.

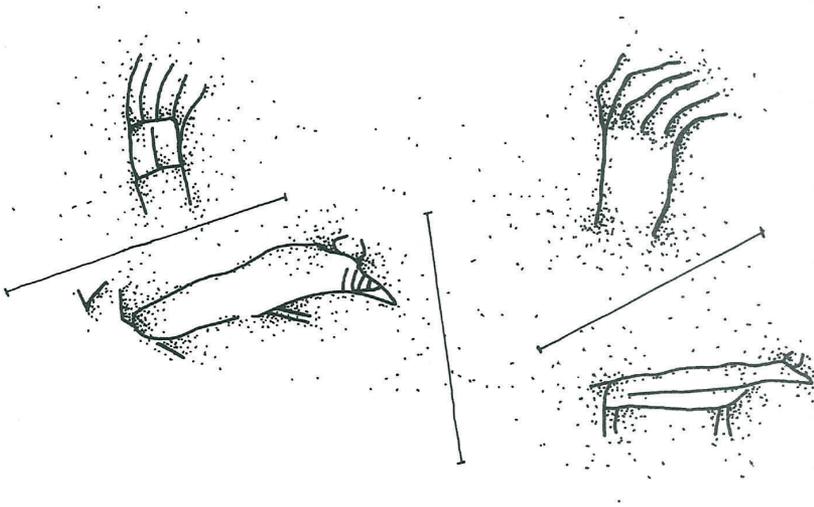
It is difficult to determine how old the rock art is, but the images and methods used to make it can give us clues. Older rock art depicts Indigenous life before the arrival of Europeans to North America, whereas newer rock art often depicts items and interactions that arrived after European contact, such as horses, guns, and settler people. The “En Toto tradition” petroglyphs displayed on the cliff in front of you are among the oldest images in the park, made 1000-2000 years ago by pecking the sandstone with a hard tool. According to Blackfoot Elders, this panel may represent a group of men and women partaking in ceremony.

### Please Note

The rock art and sandstone landforms are extremely fragile and should not be touched. Please stay on the trail and do not approach the cliffs. *Camera monitoring is in effect.*

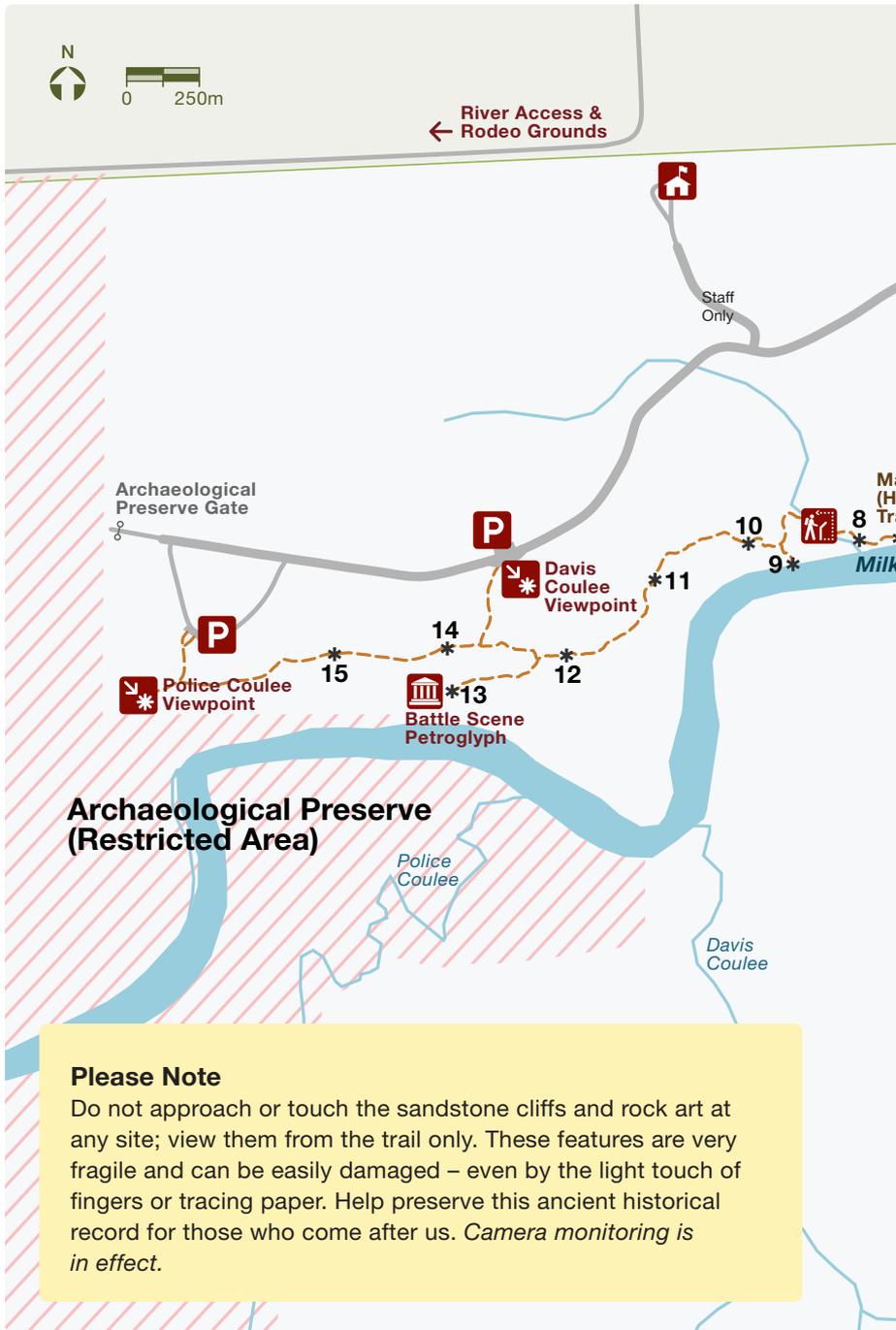
# Stop 8

## The Work of the Spirit World



Indigenous people came here for more than food and shelter. On the cliffs above you, petroglyphs (rock carvings) tell of the spiritual lives of the First Nations people who once camped here. If you look carefully, you will see several animals, including two bison, and several grizzly bear paws or tracks incised in the sandstone. The bison and bear are both sacred animals. These petroglyphs were perhaps carved as part of a ceremony.

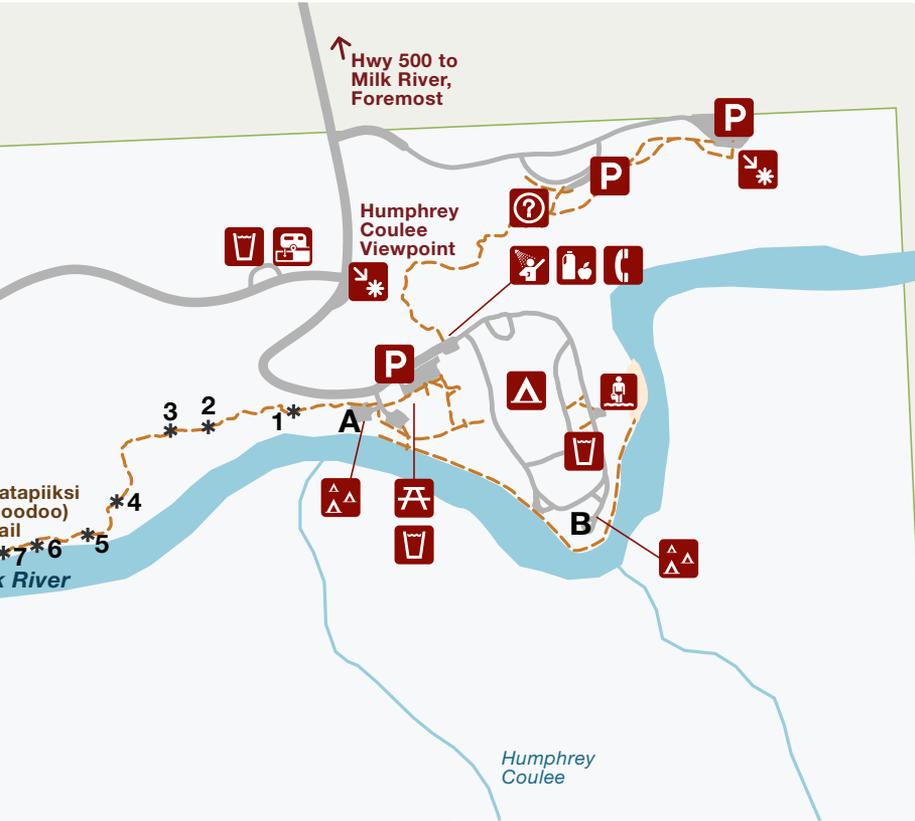
Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai'pi is an important place for the Blackfoot people, who view the rock art as the work of the spirit world. The matapiiksi (hoodoos) and carvings fill people with reverence, and even fear. Blackfoot people came here to seek spiritual guidance, and to determine their fate by interpreting the rock art.



**Please Note**

Do not approach or touch the sandstone cliffs and rock art at any site; view them from the trail only. These features are very fragile and can be easily damaged – even by the light touch of fingers or tracing paper. Help preserve this ancient historical record for those who come after us. *Camera monitoring is in effect.*

# Matapiiksi (Hoodoo) Interpretive Trail Map



## Backcountry Hiking Area

	Beach		Interpretive Trails
	Camping Area		Park Office
	Day Use Area		Parking
	Drinking Water		Information
	Dump Station		Shower
	Grocery Store		Telephone
	Group Camping		Viewpoint
	Historic Site		

1. A Remarkable Landscape
2. The World Created by Naapi
3. The Summits of a Sacred World
4. Land of Sacred Beings
5. Where the Berries are Many
6. The River Flows Through It
7. Messages from the Past
8. The Work of the Spirit World
9. Cottonwoods and Cliffs
10. Places of Shelter
11. Of Pack Rats and Artifacts
12. Horses: A Symbol of Change
13. The Battle Scene
14. Home on the Range
15. Preserving the Past & Present

# Stop 9

## Cottonwoods and Cliffs



From this location, two majestic Plains cottonwood trees are visible. Cottonwoods are threatened along many prairie rivers due to the reduction of river flows and fewer spring floods. Cottonwood trees and the rocky and rugged landscape provide shelter for paayottaiksi (flying beings), including prairie falcons, golden eagles and ferruginous hawks that use the steep cliffs as nesting sites. Thousands of cliffs swallows also build mud nests beneath overhangs on these cliffs. Watch for soaring raptors and swooping swallows above the cottonwoods and cliffs.

These cliffs were also useful to the First Nations people. Accumulations of bison bones beneath some of the cliffs suggest they were occasionally used as small “buffalo jumps”. Some of these bones were broken open to obtain the marrow, while others show evidence of being used as tools. Almost every part of the bison had a use for the First Nations people. Only when too many bison were killed during a jump were any parts of the animal unused and returned to the land.

# Stop 10

## Places of Shelter



Across the river, Davis Coulee joins the Milk River valley. The term “coulee” comes from the French *couler* – to flow. On the prairies, it generally refers to a narrow, steep-walled ravine that joins a river valley. Davis Coulee, like most coulees, is usually dry except in spring. Some coulees with small springs may stay wet year round. Coulees support biological diversity by providing an ecological overlap between different habitats and are a welcome relief from the flat and dry plains.

Coulees were beneficial to First Nations people. These dry valleys made excellent travel routes, where hunters and war parties could remain concealed for long distances. The mouths of deep coulees – where shelter, wood and water were available – were favoured camping spots. Occasionally, the Blackfoot wintered in this area. In the fall of 1866, according to a Piikani story, “all the coulees between the Sweetgrass Hills and the Milk River were full of lodges. Wherever there was a spring, there was a camp of lodges.”

# Stop 11

## Of Pack Rats and Artifacts

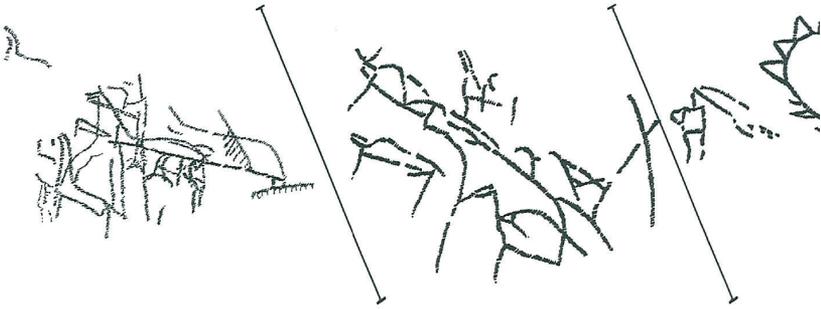


The Milk River valley links this area with the Great Plains to the south and the Rocky Mountains to the west, creating overlapping habitats with similarities to both areas. Two kaawa'pomaahkaiksi (animals that run on the ground) more typical of the mountains are found here. The yellow-bellied marmot can often be seen basking on sun-warmed rocks, while the bushy-tailed wood rat (pictured above) lives in holes or crevices within the sandstone. These nocturnal wood rats, also known as pack rats, build “middens” or rubbish heaps of dung, bones, wood, and any bright or shiny objects they find. The dark accumulation within the crevice before you is the remains of a very old wood rat midden.

Occasionally, wood rats hide artifacts in their middens, including some taken from Indigenous burial sites. Because Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai'pi was sacred, Indigenous people often brought and placed the bodies of important Elders here after they died. Their remains and ceremonial items were wrapped in hides and placed in crevices and caves. This allowed their spirits easy access to the afterlife. More than twenty such burials have been discovered in this area. Sadly, all but one were looted prior to the establishment of Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park in 1957.

# Stop 12

## Horses: A Symbol of Change



On the cliffs before you are a number of faint pictographs, or rock paintings. Using a red ochre pigment made from crushed iron ore mixed with animal fat and water, an Indigenous artist painted what appears to be a hunting scene. Several horses, bison and human figures are shown. Rock art in cases like this may have been used to record important biographical events such as successful hunts or raids.

The depiction of horses in this scene dates it to some time after their arrival on the northern plains. The first horses arrived in southern Alberta in approximately 1730, and were obtained by trading with First Nations groups who had contact with Europeans. By the mid-1700s, the Blackfoot were well-equipped with horses and guns, and these belongings dramatically changed their way of life. Travel and hunting became easier, and warfare more common.

### **Please Note**

This rock art is very fragile and we ask that you do not touch or approach the pictographs. *Camera monitoring is in effect.*

After leaving this stop, you will arrive at an intersection with another trail. To access the Battle Scene petroglyph, veer left and follow the trail for 150 m. To continue along the Matapiiksi (Hoodoo) Trail, turn right and follow the trail upslope and to the northwest.

# Stop 13

## The Battle Scene



The Battle Scene is one of the most elaborate petroglyphs found at Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai'pi. It depicts a large force of warriors attacking an encampment of tipis, defended by a line of guns. Most of the attacking figures are on foot, but eleven horses are also shown, some dragging travois. On the left, a circle of tipis surrounds several groups of human figures. Note the small figures found inside the central tipi and the two figures in the centre of the carving, one striking the other with a hatchet.

Both the horse and gun were introduced to the Northwestern Plains in approximately 1730. The large number of guns and horses in this scene indicate that it was carved some time after this date. The scene may represent an actual battle described by Amskapi Piikani (Blackfeet) Elder Bird Rattle. He directly linked this rock art to the “Retreat up the Hill” battle, fought somewhere along the Milk River in 1866. It was one of the most decisive of Amskapi Piikani victories over a combined war party of Gros Ventre, Crow and Plains Cree who lost more than 300 warriors. The petroglyph was likely carved in the late 1800's, and Bird Rattle described the battle during a visit he made to Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai'pi in 1924.

# Stop 14

## Home on the Range



Not long ago, the prairies in this area supported great herds of bison, and in turn, bison sustained the Blackfoot people. These people survived the extremes of the summer and winter climate by making comfortable tipis out of hides and by wrapping themselves in thick bison robes. Dozens of other animals and plants provided food, medicines and tools. After the arrival of Europeans, the bison herds were decimated. With the loss of their major food source, the traditional way of life of the Blackfoot soon ended.

The prairie grasses and plants around you are adapted to survive in this harsh semi-arid environment, with temperatures ranging from  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  in winter to  $+40^{\circ}\text{C}$  in summer, and annual precipitation averaging just over 300 mm. Despite these extremes, the grasslands are home to many species of birds, animals and plants. In spring, wildflowers splash colour across these slopes, while sharp-tailed grouse and western meadowlarks nest among the grasses. Today, Writing-on-Stone / Áísinaí'pi protects a small but important part of the original prairie.

# Stop 15

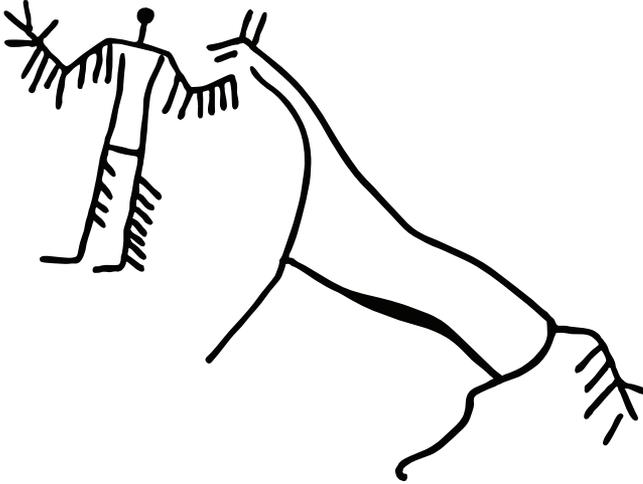
## Preserving the Past & Present



Across the valley lies Police Coulee, where the past and present meet. Nearly 70 m deep in places, this long coulee crosses the Montana-Alberta border 9 km south of this point. The habitats within the coulee provide shelter for northern leopard frogs, Weidemeyer's admiral butterflies, and diverse songbirds such as the yellow-breasted chat – all uncommon in Alberta. Police Coulee also contains rock art, archaeological sites and historical sites, making this protected coulee a significant feature of the park.

By the 1870s, European traders had established themselves throughout Blackfoot territory, and Indigenous people exchanged furs for knives, pots and other useful items. Some traders also sold the First Nations people a deadly product – rotgut whisky. Police Coulee became known as a cross-border route for whisky smugglers. The North West Mounted Police marched west in 1874 to stop the whisky trade and establish Canadian sovereignty in the west, eventually establishing an outpost here in 1887. A new era in the history of Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai'pi had begun.

On the Matapiiksi (Hoodoo) Trail, you have encountered many aspects of the cultural and natural heritage of Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi, which are both significant and vulnerable. With careful stewardship and wise management, this place will remain an important part of our shared heritage. Please help us protect this area for the benefit of all who come after us.



If you have questions about Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai’pi, ask any park staff or contact us at:

Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park  
Box 297  
Milk River, Alberta T0K 1M0  
403-647-2364

Web: [albertaparks.ca/writing-on-stone](http://albertaparks.ca/writing-on-stone)  
Email: [WritingonStone@gov.ab.ca](mailto:WritingonStone@gov.ab.ca)

**If you no longer require this booklet, please return it to one of the boxes found at the trailheads. Thank you.**



Updated December 2022



[albertaparks.ca](http://albertaparks.ca)

Alberta