

# Oldman River

## Fort McLeod to Grand Forks

### Why Go

Prairie vistas, easy, leisurely paddling, spectacular bluffs, the opportunity view hawks, eagles and other game are all reasons to paddle the lower Oldman River.

### Duration of Tour(s)

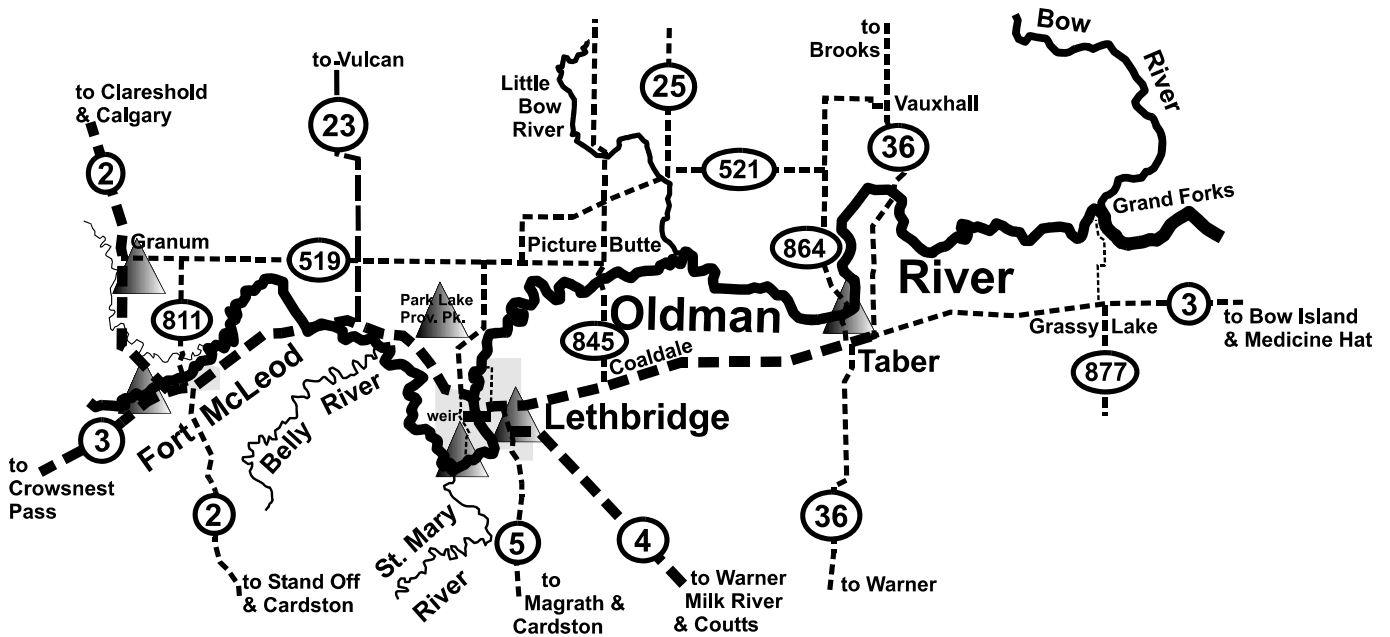
- \* 258 km
- \* ½, 1 Day and up to 7 Day tours are all possible.



Boat launch below the Lethbridge weir, looking downstream to the "High Level" Bridge, Aug. '99

### Classification

1. Rapids: Class I to II+ with at least one working weir, and one former weir
2. Skill of Paddlers: Novice River Paddlers at below average flows; Intermediate River, or Novice River with good leadership at average to above average flows.



### Start

At the former Highway #2 Campground just west of Fort McLeod, river right, just upstream of the highway #2 Bridge.

### Finish

At the "Grand Forks" the confluence of the Oldman and Bow rivers, approximately 14 km north of Grassy Lake on Range Roads 133 and 132 (there is a "correction line along the way, jog east at it).

### Intermediate Access and Distances

Location	Elevation meters	Km down	Km up	Km between	Access / Bank or Rapid / Class	MGRS datum NAD 1983 Zone 12 U	Gradient m/km
	945		-1				
Fort McLeod #2 Campground		258	0		right bank	UA 231 103	
Highway #2 old weir/concrete slab?		258	0				
		255	3		Class I to II	UA 255 108	
	937	255	3				2.2
Highway # 811 start McLeod Island		254	5			UA 271 115	
		253	5				
	930	247	11				0.8
Willow Creek		246	12		left bank	UA 296 153	
	922	243	15				2.3
	914	232	26				0.7
	907	228	30				1.9
Partial ledge Rnge Rd 250		225	33		Class II to II+	UA 374 244	
		224	34		right bank		
	899	220	38				1.0
CPR RR bridge		218	40				
	892	213	45				1.0
	884	210	48				2.8
Highway #3a Bridge Highway #3 bridge		209	49	49	right bank	UA 472 175	
		208	50				
	876	201	57				0.9
Belly river		200	58		right bank		
	869	197	62				1.6
Highway # 509		194	64	15		UA 559 127	
		860	192	66			1.9
		850	182	76			1.0
		840	174	84			1.3
St. Mary River start Popson Park		169	90		right bank		
		166	92		left bank		
	830	165	93				1.1
Popson Park - boat launch, key may be required		165	93		left bank	UA 659 002	
Weir - portage Boat Launch		158	100		right bank	UA 662 047	
		157	101		right bank		
Whoop Up Drive		157	101				
CPR RR bridge (High Level)		155	103	39		UA 656 077	
Highway #3 Bridge - access		154	104		right bank		
	820	153	105				0.8
Ryan Park - hand boat launch		147	111		right bank	UA 666 128	
	815	142	116				0.5
	808	137	121				1.4
	800	132	126				1.6
	792	125	133				1.1

Location	Elevation meters	Km down	Km up	Km between	Access / Bank or Rapid / Class	MGRS datum NAD 1983 Zone 12 U	Gradient m/km
	785	115	143				0.7
Highway #845		113	145				
Nolan's Bridge site / Rng Rd 201a		112	146	43	right bank	UA 840 243	
	777	109	149				1.3
	770	105	153				1.8
Little Bow River		99	159		left bank	UA 940 271	
Twonshp Rd 104a		91	167		right bank		
	762	91	167				0.6
	754	78	180				0.6
Highway # 864		69	189				
Taber Provincial Park		69	189	43	right bank	VA 159 186	
Woodpeck Island		68	190				
	747	65	193				0.5
	739	58	200				1.1
	732	49	209				0.8
Highway #36		45	213	24		VA 221 348	
	724	32	226				0.5
	716	23	235				0.9
Wolf Island		21	237				
	709	8	250				0.5
	701	2	256				1.3
Grand Forks / Bow Island		0	258	45	right bank	VA 502 313	

### Gradient

From looking at the gradients noted above, one can understand why the paddle into Lethbridge is one of the most popular sub-reaches here – it displays some of the most consistent higher gradients. I calculate a mean gradient over this whole reach of just 1 m/km.

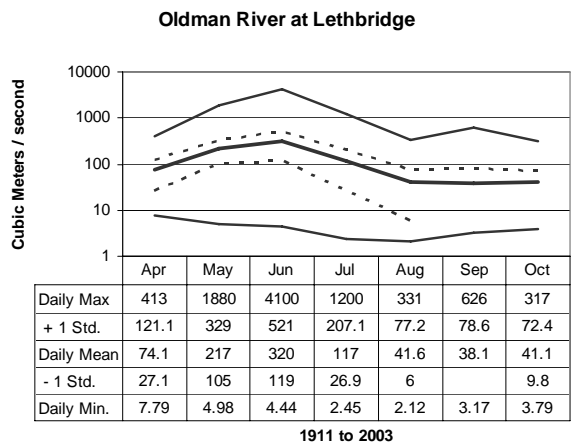
### River Volume and Flow Rate

The Oldman River at Lethbridge is subject to a very wide range of flows. Buhrmann & Young (1980) reported optimal paddling on these reaches with 17 to 170 cms at the Ft. McLeod Station, or 56 to 227 cms at the Lethbridge station. Rood & Tymensen (2001) suggest that a minimal flow for paddling is approximately 25 cms. The Discharge - Velocity relationship for the Lethbridge station reports approximately 2 km/hr at 80 cms and 8 km/hr at 2200 cms.

### Maps & Guides

1 - I think first choice for these runs should be the 1:250,000 sheets, and an up-to-date copy of the *Alberta Road Map*. If one is to paddle in the Lethbridge area often I would acquire the 1:50,000 sheet (82 H/10) as it has been updated.

In 1980 Buhrmann & Young completed *Canoeing Chinook Country Rivers*. Even though this guide is now a quarter of a century old, I find it a most useful reference for any paddling I do in southern Alberta. Check your local library, other paddlers or used book store for copies.



2 -	NTS 1:250,000	82 H Lethbridge (NAD 83)	72 E Foremost (NAD 27)
	NTS 1:50,000	82 H/11 Fort Mcleod (NAD 27)	82 H/14 Monarch (NAD 27)
		82 H/10 Lethbridge (NAD 83)	82 H/15 Picture Butte (NAD 27)
		82 H/16 Taber (NAD 27)	72 E/13 Grassy Lake (NAD 27)

## Camping

Public campgrounds, on the river, and along this reach are a bit thin. The last time I was through Fort McLeod the campground at the Highway #2 bridge still looked like it needed redevelopment since the last flood. Bridgeview RV Resort (403.381.2357 - no tent sites!) in Lethbridge is close to the river, and Taber Municipal Park (403.223.0091) is right on the river. In many ways Henderson Lake Park Campground (403.328.5452) is a good alternative if staying in Lethbridge.

Random or wilderness camping along these reaches is possible on the many islands and beaches, especially after the high waters of early summer. The Oldman flows through parts of the oldest settled portions of Alberta and virtually all the lands along the river are privately held and permission should be sought for camping on the shoreline. In addition the south (right) bank between the Belly and St. Mary river confluences is reserve land held by the Blood tribe and again permission is required to access the banks.

## Wildlife

As noted often in this guide, wildlife tends to concentrate in central and southern Alberta along the rivers and the wildlife viewing of the larger mammals, aquatic birds, and the other birds of the prairies should be good during spring and into mid-summer. For those like me from central Alberta or further north, most of this reach is prime rattlesnake country, be aware and wary. It is territory where one must keep close control on pet dogs and young kids! And do not step or reach into spots where the ground can not be seen. In my experience, and the experience of many of my paddling colleagues you are about as likely to spot a rattlesnake swimming in the river as find one coiled up on land. Rattlesnakes do tend to be shy and given a chance will disappear, often even before you are aware of their presence. They generally rattle only when startled, or when you get too close. Rattlesnakes are a protected species. Moreover, they do far more good in terms of rodent control than any risk they present to us humans.

## Trip Notes

At lower to average water levels these are great reaches for novice paddlers. One caution of course is that this is windy country, if a chinook is not blowing, then on a hot day there is likely to be the classic "local" upstream breeze. These are runs where it is probably best to get your paddling in early, and then find a place to rest during the mid-afternoon heat, which will likely be windiest time most days.

Novice paddlers should scout the "concrete slab" just upstream of Fort McLeod – one result of recent floods is that all such man-made and natural structures have been scoured and the Class I rating may no longer "stand." Given the recent floods the one reported partial ledge, noted above, may no longer be the only ledge that shows. Paddlers must always be wary, rivers do change and change significantly (see my notes on the upper Oldman!).

## Other Reaches

Much of the reach above Fort McLeod runs through the Piegan Reserve (#147) and access requires band permission. The run below Grand Forks is reviewed in the South Saskatchewan report.

## Other Local Activities or Destinations

If you've read much of this guide you know I'm a sucker for museums. I have been to the Fort Whoop-Up restoration and recommend it, my Travel Alberta materials tell me that for 2006 they have just finished a major reconstruction of the Galt Museum and I look forward to that. And Lois will not let us pass through Lethbridge without a visit to the Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden, in Henderson Lake Park.

## Rentals and Shuttles

High Level Canoes & Kayaks 403.327.4506