

# South Saskatchewan River

## Grand Forks to Estuary, Saskatchewan

### Why Go

This is the classic Alberta prairie river paddle. The reach though the Suffield reserve is the closest you can get to wilderness tripping in south-eastern Alberta.

### Duration of Tour

\* 302 km

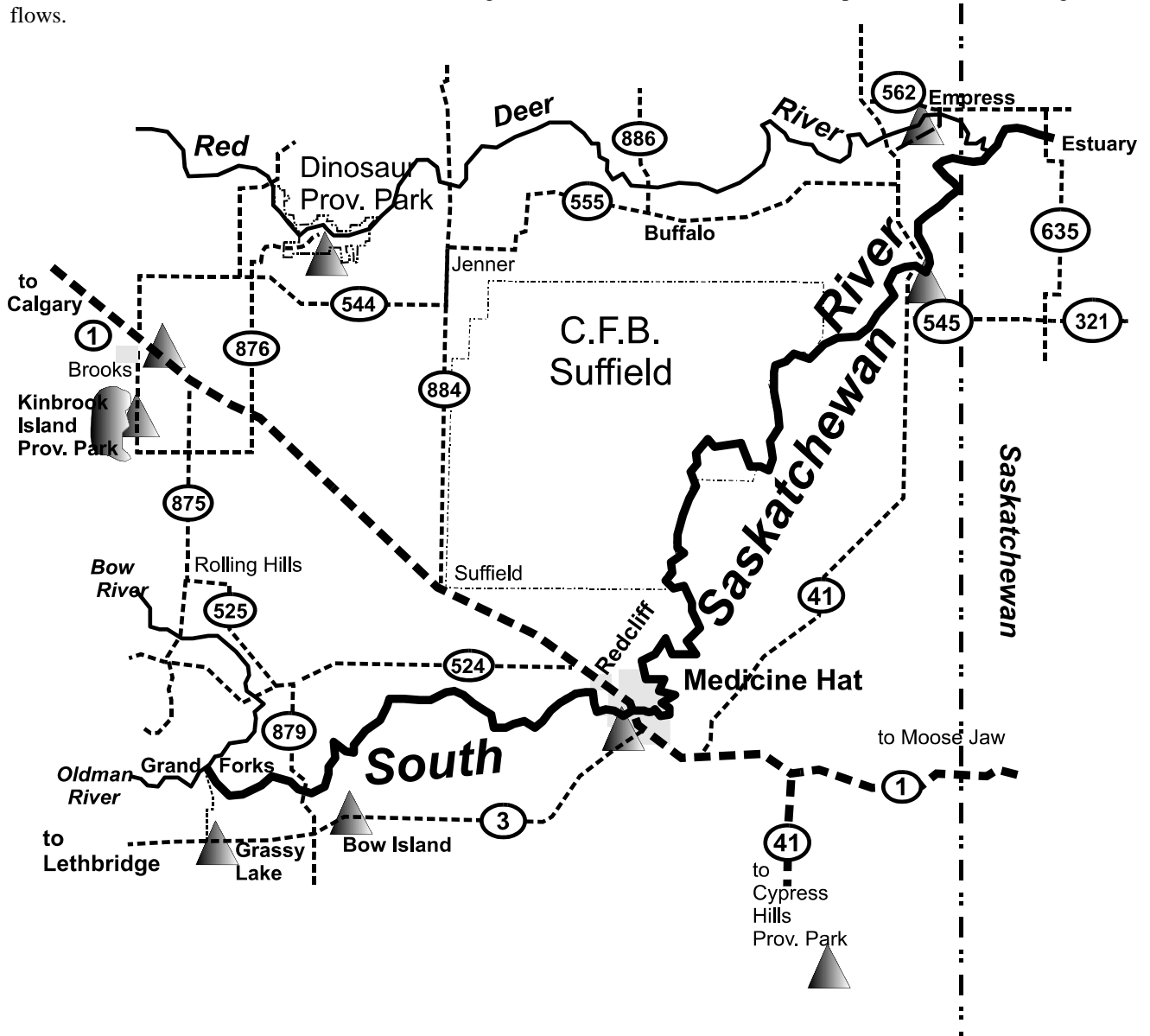
\* 7- 11 days with half, full day, and shorter multi-day trips possible.



On Bow Island, looking north to confluence with Bow River

### Classification

1. Rapids: Class 1 (at some water levels Rapid Narrows on the Suffield Reach may go Class 2)
2. Skill of Paddlers: Novice River Paddlers at average and lower flows, Intermediate river paddlers at above average flows.



## Starts

To paddle the whole reach covered by this report one starts at Grand Forks. Grand Forks is 11 km north of Grassy Lake. Head straight north out of Grassy Lake, jog right at the correction line and follow the road down into the river valley. In 1999 it was quite possible to drive right onto Bow Island at the confluence of the Bow and Oldman rivers – The Grand Forks. Milage measurements were taken from the downstream end of Bow Island.

Other access points provide a variety of single and multi-day tours. Possibly the most popular reach is the run from Medicine Hat through the Suffield Military Reserve to Highway #41 at Sandy Point.

## Finish

The wrap-up for this whole reach is at the Estuary Ferry, in Saskatchewan, just north of the town of Estuary and on secondary highway #635. This ferry can be reached from Alberta Highway #41 from both the north (#562) and south (#545) sides of the South Saskatchewan.

## Intermediate Access and Distances

Location	km	km	km	Access/Bank or Rapid Class	MGRS
	down	up	between		Datum
					NAD 1983 Zone12 U
Grand Forks	302	0		right bank	VA 500 314
#879 Bridge north of Bow Island	283	19	19	either side	VA 658 279
River Valley Park, South of Redwater	217	85		left bank	WA 142 444
Echo Dale Park West of Medicine Hat	215	87	68	right bank	WA 159 444
Kiwanis River Park	209	93		right bank	WA 203 434
Police Point Park, in East Medicine Hat	204	98	11	left bank	WA 251 430
entering Suffield Base	151	151		left bank	WA 281 637
entering Suffield Base (sentry post)	122	180		right bank	WA291 830
leaving Suffield Base	102	200		right bank	WA 397 856
Rapid Narrows	99	203			WA 423 853
Leaving Suffield Base	69	233		left bank	WB 507 071
Sandy Point / Highway #41	44	258	160	right bank, upstream of bridge	WB 654 202
Confluence with Red Deer River	8	294		left bank	WB 776 417
Estuary Ferry, Saskatchewan	0	302	44	either shore, beware of ferry cables	WB 840 443

## Gradient

This whole reach is of relatively low gradient, approximately 0.6 m per km.

## River Volume and Flow Rate

Normal summer flows from approximately 150 cms to 600 cms should provide good paddling. Floods on the South Saskatchewan have exceeded 4000 cms! Current speed varies from 2 km per hr at 100 cms, to 6 km per hr at 2000 cms (at the Medicine Hat station).

## Maps & Guide Books

1 - N.T.S. 1:250,000

72E Foremost, 72L Medicine Hat, & 72K Prelate

2 - N.T.S. 1:50,000

72E/13 Grassy Lake, 72E/14 Bow Island, 72L/3 Suffield, 72L/2 Medicine Hat, 72L/7 Watching Hill, 72L/8 Hilda, 72L/9 Middle Sand Hills, 72L/16 Bindloss, 72K/13 Leader

County or M.D. maps

M.D. of Cypress, County of 40 Mile, Special Areas Map

3 - **Guide Book**

Dickinson, D & Baresco, D (2003) *Prairie River*. Society of Grasslands Naturalists, Medicine Hat

- when I go back to this river, I will MOST certainly have a copy of this guide along (I own three!). This book includes 1:50,000 strip maps, and a wonderful wealth of interpretative material on the natural and cultural history along the river.

I would suggest that the above guidebook, the 1:250,000 sheets and an up-to-date *Alberta Road Map* should be all you need, unless you are planning on using some of the more obscure access trails not reported here.

## Camping

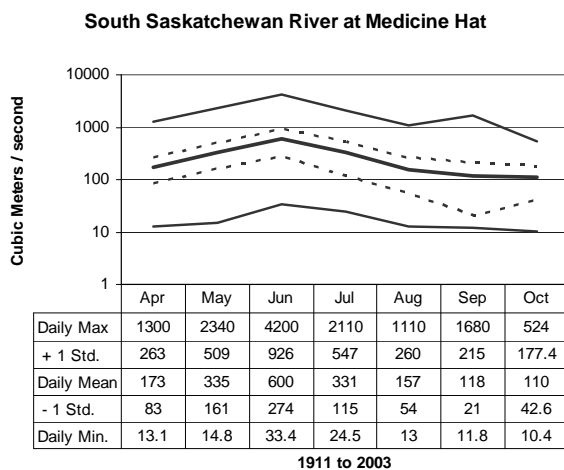
The only public campgrounds on the river are at Echo Dale Park, upstream of Medicine Hat, and Sandy Point at the Highway #41 bridge, otherwise one is wilderness camping – or trespassing. Off river campgrounds are available in Medicine (Gas City), Empress and at Bow Island. In the Red Cliff / Medicine Hat urban area the land owners are likely to be fairly protective of their property and one should only camp with permission. On other parts of this river the banks above the high water mark are the property of farmers and ranchers, grazing associations, and for much of the middle reach, the Canadian Military! This run of the river does have a good many islands for wilderness camping, and after the big flows of the early summer, the banks below the high water mark are available to wilderness travellers.

## Trip Notes

I have fond memories of my paddle on the reach from Medicine Hat to Estuary with the Canoe Alberta crew in 1972. Our crew had been separated for the week before, paddling on the Red Deer, the Bow, and the Oldman rivers, and we then reunited for the run down the South Saskatchewan. The week prior had been wet, but we “lucked out” for the Saskatchewan run and had modestly high, fast water, and lots of sun for our run down to Estuary. We were all paddling marathon racing canoes and made the run through to Sandy Point with just one overnight (I would NOT recommend this pace now!), and then one more day for the run to Estuary.

After all the flat water and afternoon upstream breezes, we were primed for “Rapid Narrows.” It turned out to be just a “splash in the face!” Rapid Narrows would appear to be caused by a very broken ledge or boulder bar, and with the very low gradient proved to be no more than a few modest pressure waves. These waves can reach 1m or more in height. As I remember, and as others report (Dickinson & Baresco, 1996), the whole rapid can be avoided on the far right side, and it may be portaged on the right bank if necessary.

For us, the highlight of the trip was the wildlife. Collectively we paddled over 1600 miles in the summer of ‘72, but no other run stands out like the South Saskatchewan for wildlife. We decided that year that on the prairie rivers, ALL the wildlife must live along the river. We were blessed with multiple sightings of deer, antelope, hawks of all sort, fox, coyotes, herons and eagles.



Suffield Military base can throw a “wrench” in your trip plans. They do CLOSE the river at times for military exercises and you must call the base Operations Office (403-544-4310) to confirm accessibility. A year or two ago, I heard of a group of paddlers who failed to do so, and they were flown out by helicopter from Drowning Ford by the military police - and given a stern reprimand! This military reserve extends from approximately km 151 to km 233 on the left bank, and for much less on the right bank. I understand that at present it is well signed, and a sentry is posted at the point where the river enters the reserve on both banks if the river is closed.

Most of my friends who have paddled the South Saskatchewan report rattlesnake sightings, either during coulee walks (most often) or frequently swimming in the river! Rattlesnakes in Alberta are not particularly big, or particularly poisonous, though they can seriously harm pet dogs and small children. One must be careful where they reach with their hands and one should not put one's hands where one cannot see. Rattlesnakes prefer to avoid confrontation, thus the rattle. Give 'em berth, and you should not have a problem. Most adults are bitten when either trying to pick-up or kill rattlers. Avoid both! If bitten, victims should be immobilized, kept calm, cool, and evacuated as quickly as possible to a hospital. A restrictive bandage may be applied on the heart side of the bite to slow lymph drainage – but not so constrictive as to reduce blood flow to the extremity! Tourniquets and incisions are NOT required.

This is a deeply incised prairie river in places and the afternoon upstream breeze on some days can require “strong” paddling. Also due to the deep valley walls, summer thunderstorms can sweep in very quickly and surprise paddlers.

This can be a hot, dry run! Most recent reports on this river suggest that drinking water should be taken from home or from reliable sources. The South Saskatchewan river is subject to pollution from agricultural, industrial, and urban sources.

In '72 I remember that on our last day it was particularly hot and as often the case amongst young paddlers, a water fight broke out. After inflicting great soaking on our friends my partner and I took refuge in a side channel. Little did we realize that Allan Island (at the confluence with the Red Deer) is almost 3 km long. At one point we thought we might have wandered into an irrigation ditch and were going to end our trip in the middle of an alfalfa field! A water fight can cool paddlers, but in this modern age, lots of fluids, sun-screen and sun-protective hats and clothing are required.

### **Other Local Activities or Destinations**

Medicine Hat is the major urban centre close to these reaches and provides all the modern amenities. Of particular interest to paddlers may be the nature centre in Police Point Park. And if you are in this area for long, one should spend some time in the Cypress Hills to the SE of Medicine Hat. This “glacial refuge” is well worth a visit of two or three days, including a trip into the Saskatchewan side and Fort Walsh.