

Dances with Thorns: Elk Island National Park
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As you drive across the prairies, it's hard not to think of a time free from borders and the complications of present day life. You're swept back into the realms of imagination by the wide open spaces and the expansive flow of rolling hills.

I was driving through that hypnotic beauty when my husband begged for a slight detour from our path. Actually, a two hundred kilometer detour. But who's counting when you've just decided to drive from Calgary to Newfoundland? He wanted to go to Elk Island National Park, 45 kilometers east of Edmonton.

"You're kidding." I said, as I tried to imagine an island in the middle of Alberta. "No!" he replied, practically leaping out of his seat. "It's 194 square kilometers of land for the protection of elk and two kinds of buffalo. And has one of the highest concentrations of big game animals in the world!"

I stare at my husband for the length of time that safety allows. After ten years of marriage, it never ceases to amaze me how much trivia he can retain. But he said the right word: buffalo. That magical noun starts the projection of a hundred Wild West movies in my mind. You have to understand that as a writer with a burgeoning career in the film industry, movies have a strong hold on my imagination.

So off we went, traveling back in time to a land ruled by beasts. And Parks Canada. We did the routine drive through the park to see buffalo from far enough away to get us as excited as two six year olds at Disneyland. Who wants to stay in a car when you can hike the very fields where the buffalo roam?

We quickly parked the car and jumped out, sprinting over to a trail specially picked for maximum buffalo-viewing potential. Trotting along, we peeked around every corner for a sign of horns. No luck. After about ten kilometers of no luck, we decided the movie gods were against us. We were left with the only form of entertainment to be found deep in the middle of nowhere where talking wards off wild animals: a game of six degrees to Kevin Bacon.

We worked our way through most of the hike and the majority of Kevin Bacon's co-stars, when the magical moment happened. A buffalo far in the distance. We were struck with awe and, I have to admit, not a small measure of fear. These beasts are much bigger than you think. No meager cow with fur, buffalo take up a lot of room.

We crept our way along the trail, whispering with excitement. The rush of adrenaline eventually subsided and we were ready to head home. We'd accomplished our mission. This was top-notch story material and bragging rights. Distracted by our victory, we turned a corner and came face-to-face with another buffalo.

Now I was scared. This fella was huge and he was parked right across the trail. We backed away slowly in full view of his big brown eyes. Trouble was, we'd already hiked 16 out of 18 kilometers. Going back was a long and not very attractive option. My heart was pounding. One charge from a buffalo and I'd be a football flying across the wild fields of yesteryear.

"Come on," my husband declared. "We'll go around him." I neglected to mention that the trail was surrounded by the famous Alberta wild roses. Thigh-deep wild roses. And we were in shorts. Teeth locked and determined to get back to the car before sundown, we pushed our way through the thorns. We were shedding blood for those bragging rights.

“I think I see the trail,” my husband calls from the thick depths of the bushes. We plough forward, excited to be released from our trap. Suddenly, he stops and holds his hand up, pupils as big as saucers. I see an enormous head slowly loom above the roses. He had almost stepped on the largest animal I’ve ever seen.

Bolting back, we both lose any sense of pain caused by the thorns. I’m in full fight-or-flight mode as we navigate away from certain death. Luckily, we break out of the bushes onto the trail and make record time back to the car.

I’m sure it was a standard afternoon of amusement for the buffalo. As for me, it was a healthy reminder that the romantic stories of the Wild West are sometimes best enjoyed from the comfort of a movie seat.