

It is hard to miss the Kleskun Hills. They rise over 100 metres (300 feet) above the surrounding plains, north of the highway between Grande Prairie and the Smoky River. These eroded hills contain some of Alberta's northernmost badlands as well as the largest parcels of native grassland remaining in the Grande Prairie region.

Kleskun Hill

A Discovery Guide

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Margot Hervieux

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Alberta Ecotrust



Federation of Alberta Naturalists



Alberta Conservation Association



Life was simple and hard in the early days but certainly not primitive. Many people played the piano or fiddle, and families often got together to sing songs, read poetry and put on small drama presentations. Most farms had a horseshoe pitch and neighbours young and old would get together for an occasional game of baseball. During the winter the children would sled, or skate and play hockey on larger sloughs. A bit of chicken wire and some branches made a great net.

Looking Forward

Local residents began working in the 1940s to protect part of the Kleskun Hills and that legacy of conservation continues today in the natural area and on the museum site. Since very little native prairie remains in the Peace region, the Kleskun Hill Natural Area also serves to inspire landowners wishing to do more to maintain pieces of native grassland that may survive on their own land.

Kleskun Hill Natural Area and Kleskun Hill Museum provide many opportunities for residents and visitors to explore a unique piece of our natural and cultural heritage. We hope that you will visit often and experience this beautiful landscape through all the seasons. The eroded hills, the native prairie, the aboriginal burial site and the historic buildings all have fascinating stories to tell. Listen to the stories, and help keep this part of our

Building a Community

Even though homesteads were often isolated, neighbours worked together to build a community. Settlers shared machinery and helped each other break the land and build houses, barns and fences. Anyone heading to town would pick up mail and other supplies or equipment. The nearest sawmill was on the Smoky River.

During the fall and winter, many men had to leave home to work - often harvesting, logging or working on local railway or road projects. The women were left alone to run the farm, helping each other with chores while the men were away. They also regularly got together for sewing and quilting bees, cooking during harvest, sawing wood for winter, and assisting with childbirth.

Once families became established, schools became a high priority. Three schools were built in the area: Kleskun Hill school north of the hills in 1912; Kleskun Lake school to the west in 1916, and East Kleskun school in 1919. Having three schools made attendance easier for students but the schools also shared pupils in years when a teacher couldn't be found. Due to the numbers of immigrants arriving in the region after World War I, only one English speaking child started school at East Kleskun the first fall.

The new schools quickly became the focal point of the community. Residents from the surrounding area would come to the school for box socials, card parties, dances and Christmas concerts. Church services were also held once a month in the East Kleskun school until the early 1920s. By the mid-1950s, these smaller schools began to close and students were moved to larger centres like Clairmont and Bezanson. The East Kleskun school closed in 1957.



Contents:

Kleskun Hills	4
Stories in the Rock	6
Islands of Grass	8
An Ever-changing Tapestry	10
Kleskun Wildlife	15
The Beaver People	16
First Impressions	
18	
Getting Settled	20
Building A Community	
22	

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The Kleskun Hills

It is hard to miss the Kleskun Hills. They rise over 100 metres (300 feet) above the surrounding plains, north of the highway between Grande Prairie and the Smoky River. These eroded hills contain some of Alberta's northernmost badlands as well as the largest parcels of native grassland remaining in the Grande Prairie region.

"Kleskun" is a Beaver Indian word meaning white mud. The name was likely well established prior to European settlement since it appears on the original land survey maps made by George Dawson for the Geological Survey of Canada in 1879. The hills have a long history of aboriginal use for hunting and berry picking. Early settlers also recognized them as an important source of berries, grass and clay as well as a great place for picnics and other community celebrations.

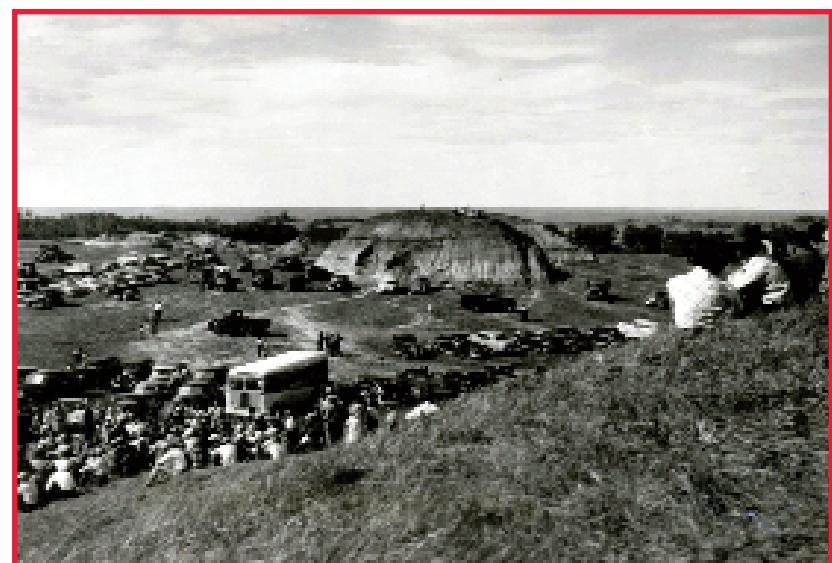
By 1947, part of the Kleskun Hills had been recommended as a provincial geological park but that proposal was never approved. During the 1960s and '70s, the site was under a recreation lease to the County of Grande Prairie and in 1979 a quarter section (64.75 hectares) was designated as a provincial Natural Area in order to protect the unique geological features and native grasslands. An additional 70 acres (28.32 hectares) were added in 1992 and the County of Grande Prairie was granted a recreation lease for the campground and museum site.

The Kleskun Hill Natural Area and the Kleskun Hill Museum continue to preserve the natural and human heritage of this unique area. A number of local buildings have been restored by the Museum Society and newly constructed trails will help ensure the long-term protection of the grasslands and hills. With this guidebook in hand, visitors are invited to explore the many wonders that the Kleskun Hills have to offer.

Enjoy your visit!



Early settlers often got together with neighbours, whether for a Sunday lunch in 1910 or the Kleskun Geology Picnic in the late 1940s.



Getting Settled

Imagine travelling for weeks or months over often difficult terrain, through all kinds of weather, to finally arrive at a quarter section of land marked only by survey stakes. No buildings, no neighbours – nothing. Even after the train began running from Edmonton, settlers still had a full day of travel out to new homesteads around the Kleskun Hills.

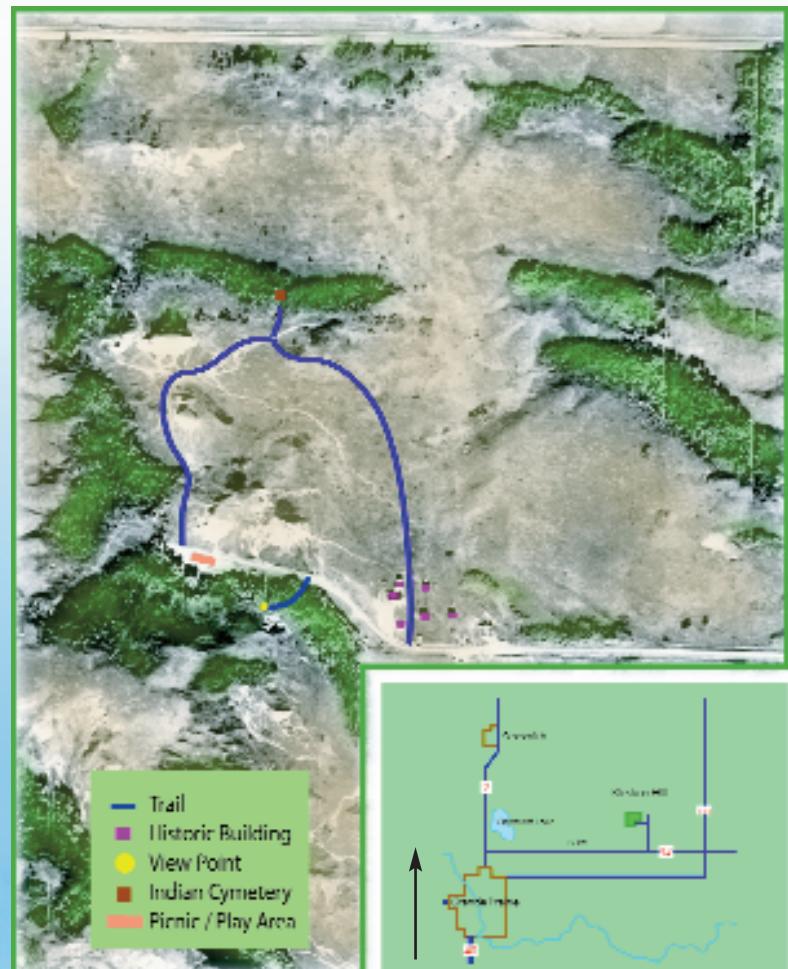
Shelter was the first order of business upon arriving at the homestead. During the first summer, tents were usually home until a log house could be built. Log buildings had roofs of sod, branches or shingles and dirt or plank floors. Even a log house, however, didn't provide complete protection from the elements. The local "Kleskun clay" was used to seal the spaces between the logs but the houses were still cold in winter and hot in summer. Smudge pots were often set up by the front door to fend off mosquitoes.

Finding water was also a serious challenge for homesteaders throughout the Grande Prairie region. Some people had creeks on their land, and everyone could melt snow in winter, but many settlers had to haul water from the neighbour's place. Nearby sloughs were used for watering livestock. If they were lucky, most people were able to get water from a hand-dug well after a year or two.

Once shelter for both people and livestock had been looked after, the next major undertaking was breaking the land for a garden and crops. The open grassland was easier to break than forested areas but it was still bone jarring work. If he could avoid wind, hail, frosts, snow, and the occasional brush fire, a new farmer could usually harvest five or ten acres at the end of his second summer.

Local homesteaders were able to raise most of their own food. Gardens supplied potatoes, cabbage, turnips, carrots, peas and onions for winter use, as well as summer greens. A milk cow and chickens meant milk, butter and eggs. Meat from butchered livestock and game (hares, sharp-tailed grouse, deer and moose) was canned or smoked. Wild berries were used for jam and jelly and bread was made using sourdough. Even vinegar and soap were made at home. Cash from the sale of the wheat or oat crop, as well as surplus eggs and butter, was used to buy other supplies including sugar, flour, coffee, tea, salt, rolled oats, rice, dried fruit and dried spices.

As you explore the restored buildings on the museum site, think about starting a new life in one of these homes. Imagine living with your family year-round in just two rooms. How would you have managed building your own house and barn and growing most of your own food?



Stories in the Rock

The layers of rock exposed on the slopes of the Kleskun Hills reveal a history of river deltas, erupting volcanoes, ice flows and glacial rivers. Between 100 and 70 million years ago, the Peace region often lay at the edge of an inland sea. Rivers, flowing into the sea from the rising Rocky Mountains, left sand and clay in great deltas. As the plants in these deltas died, they became layers of decayed vegetation while volcanoes, erupting to the west, covered the area with bands of ash. Over time, these many layers hardened into sandstone, shale, coal and bentonite to become an assemblage of rock known today as the Wapiti Formation.

During the ice age, additional layers of gravel and till were added to the landscape. As the last glaciers retreated over 12,000 years ago, the Kleskun area remained higher than the surrounding land and an enormous lake filled the Lesser Slave Lake basin. A river draining the lake is thought to have carved the steep eastern edge of the Kleskun Hills. Subsequent rain and wind erosion then sculpted the exposed slopes we see here today.

The Wapiti Formation makes up most of the layers of the Kleskun Hills as well as the Saddle Hills and Birch Hills to the north. These rocks are similar in age to those found in the Drumheller region of southern Alberta leading many to assume that the Kleskun Hills are full of dinosaur bones. While one or two important fossils have been found in Kleskun Park, most of the major dinosaur finds in this area are located along actively eroding rivers like the Wapiti and its tributaries.



Settlement continued during World War I, becoming easier when the railway arrived in 1916. People had speculated on the route of the railway and many hopes were dashed when it entered Grande Prairie from the north instead of from the east through Bezanson. With rail travel as an alternative, use of the Edson trail dwindled but the train still took over 33 hours to get from Edmonton to Grande Prairie on a good run.

The Dominion Lands Act, as amended in 1908, set the terms for those wishing to homestead in the Peace region.

According to the Act, any adult man, and any adult woman who was the head of a household, could apply for a quarter section of their choice. If after five years, they had cleared some land, broken and started cultivating five acres, built a house, and lived on the land for six months a year for three years, they could apply for title to their quarter provided they had become a Canadian citizen. Many settlers added to their homesteads by acquiring adjoining quarters with the use of scrip or by purchasing partial quarters next to lakes, sloughs, rivers or creeks. Those settlers who served in WWI, could gain title more easily through the Soldiers Settlement Board.

First Impressions



Grande Prairie is “rolling prairie, with lakes here and there, rivers scattered somewhat sparsely. The monotony of a simon-pure rolling prairie is relieved by bluffs of poplars and willows, the soil is apparently all black loam with the clay below, and the prairie itself is perhaps an average of 80 miles square, if it could be squared”. Peace River Jim, 1910

The history of European settlement around the Kleskun Hills is reflected in the history of much of the Grande Prairie region. Prior to 1911, explorers, fur-traders and early settlers usually approached the Grande Prairie area from the north or east. Whether coming through the Saddle Hills from the Peace River or across the Smoky River from Sturgeon Lake, it must have been a breathtaking sight to break out of dense forest and muskeg onto a vast stretch of open prairie.

The first wave of settlement in the Grande Prairie area really began in the spring of 1910 when land developers opened up subdivided townships. Settlers took land as homesteads or used scrip acquired from the metis or Boer War veterans.

In 1911, the provincial government agreed to build a trail connecting Grande Prairie to the Grand Trunk Pacific railway at Edson. When carrying all the equipment and supplies needed to homestead, this rugged, 240 kilometre (150 mile) trail could take over a month to traverse. People walked, sometimes with a hand sleigh, or came with a yoke of oxen or team of horses. One East Kleskun family brought six horses, four cows, two dozen chickens and two wagons of furniture and food over the trail on foot. A small section of the Edson trail can still be seen as it cuts past the eastern edge of the Hills.

The Kleskun Hills first became associated with fossil hunting when local resident Robert “Bob” Cochrane took an interest in palaeontology in the 1940s and began finding a wide variety of fossils in the Grande Prairie area. Cochrane became quite well known in the region and many of his specimens are now housed at the Grande Prairie Museum and the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller.

In 1945, Bob Cochrane and County councillor William Garret started work to create Kleskun Hill Park. Because of their common interest in geology, they began holding geology picnics at Kleskun in 1946. Though Garret died in 1949, these popular events continued each summer until 1951 and annually attracted up to 2000 people. Well known scientists from Edmonton and Calgary spoke about geologic and paleontological topics from the hillside and then everyone joined in ball games, horseshoes and refreshments. After a ten year break, the last geology picnic was held at the park in 1961.

Bentonite

When volcanic ash mixes with clay and breaks down, it forms a substance known as bentonite. Dry bentonite forms clumps that look like popped popcorn but when the clay gets wet it absorbs large quantities of water and becomes incredibly slippery. Once saturated, these clay layers shed water and additional rain washing downhill creates distinctive troughs or “rills” at the base of the slope. **Be careful if trying to walk on bentonite slopes. The dry clay shifts under your feet and wet bentonite remains slippery for days after a rain.**

Early settlers used this “Kleskun Clay” to chink between the logs of their homes. Bentonite is also used today to remove oil and grease from wool and cloth, clarify liquids in the food and drink industry, as an ingredient in cat litter, as a barrier for liquids in landfills and as drilling mud.

Try This

Find a piece of bentonite near the base of one of the hills, wet it and rub it between your fingers. You can feel how slippery the clay becomes in just a few seconds.

The Alberta Historical Resources Act does not allow the excavating of fossils without a permit. If you should happen to find a fossil or other item of interest, please report your find to the Royal Tyrrell Museum (403) 823-7707.

Islands of Grass

Over half of the flowering plants that live in our northern grasslands also grow in the prairies of southern Alberta. Many more can be found in the central parkland. Parkland habitats - a mosaic of open grassland, aspen forest and shrubland - are found across Canada at the northern edge of the prairie but the mixture of prairie, parkland and mountain plants found in the Peace region makes this area truly unique.

The parkland of the Peace Country has a long and unusual history. The large areas of prairie are thought to be remnants of an ancient grassland that covered Alberta over 15 million years ago. After the last ice age, grassland plants moved back into the region from either unglaciated areas in the mountains or from the prairies to the south. Over time, forests began to move in but the grasslands remained on dry, south facing river slopes and in areas with solonetzic soils.

Solonetzic soils can be recognized by an impermeable layer of clay beneath the topsoil and high concentrations of salts. The clay layer slows root growth (especially by trees) and makes plants more sensitive to moisture extremes. The clay also holds more water during wet periods than most trees can tolerate and the high amount of salts affects nutrient uptake. It is likely that other factors, including fire, insect infestations, and grazing, played a important role in maintaining the Peace region grasslands but soil conditions seem to have had the most profound effect.



During the early 1820s, the Cree began to move into the area. As the Cree put pressure on the Beaver from the south, the Beaver in turn came into conflict with the Sikanni who lived to the north and west. A gravesite, nestled in the trees north of the Kleskun Museum, is thought to contain the remains of at least four Beaver men that were killed during a battle with either the Cree or the Sikanni. The hills would have been a good place to take a stand against an approaching enemy.

As settlers began to expand into the Grande Prairie region in the early 1900s, the remaining Beaver were pushed further west. Their footpaths had become wagon trails and their place names were put on maps, but the traditional land base was soon reduced to a few small reserves.

Using Native Plants

A variety of prairie plants were used by aboriginal people and early settlers. Berries and a few bulbs and greens were used for food but most other plants were used for teas and medicines.

Wood lily -	the bulbs were eaten and the plant was used for medicines.
Wild onion -	the bulbs were used for food.
Rose -	the hips were eaten and used in medicines.
Cow parsnip -	the roots were eaten and also crushed for relief of pain and swelling.
Wild mint -	the plant was used for tea and to treat many ailments including colds and congestion.
Bedstraw -	the roots were used to make a red dye.
Fireweed -	the stems, leaves and flower tops were eaten and the plant was used for medicines.
Pasture sage -	the leaves were burned in incense and used in medicines.
Yarrow -	the plant had many medicinal uses.
Gumweed -	a flower tea was used to sooth migraines.

The Beaver People

The Kleskun Hills were recognized as an important natural resource long before Europeans began visiting the area. The Beaver Indians regularly camped in the hills and along the shores of nearby Kleskun Lake. The hills supported ample wildlife including deer, moose and hare, while fish and muskrats were harvested from the lake. Herds of bison roamed the surrounding prairie and were easily spotted from the hills. Saskatoons, chokecherries, raspberries, strawberries, cranberries, currents and bearberries (kinnikinnik) were also plentiful. Meat and fruit were eaten fresh or dried for later use, particularly mixed with lard to make pemmican.

The 1800s proved to be a difficult era for the local Beaver people. Contact with early fur traders had given them access to firearms and the buffalo herds were soon diminished. The last buffalo disappeared from the Grande Prairie area by about 1830. The loss of the buffalo meant competing with a growing European population for a reduced supply of game, and starvation became more prevalent. Changing from bison to moose hunting also appears to have weakened the social structure of the community and made the people more dependent on the fur trade. Introduced diseases took an even greater toll, and by 1900 only about five hundred Beaver survived in the Grande Prairie and Sturgeon Lake areas to sign Treaty 8.

The parkland that first attracted settlers into the Grande Prairie area originally covered as much as 9300 sq. km. (3600 square miles) and over 85% of that land was open prairie. Similar areas also existed around Spirit River (1500-2300 sq.km.) and Fairview/Peace River (1600-2000 sq.km.). Not surprisingly, however, the open grassland areas were the first to be cultivated and in less than 100 years, only tiny fragments of the original prairie remain. Recent studies have found that less than half of one percent of the original native grassland survives in the Grande Prairie area and most of that lies in the Kleskun Hills.

Kleskun Hill Natural Area, like much of the remaining native grassland in the Grande Prairie area, is home to over 30 grasses and sedges, 30 different trees and shrubs and over 100 species of flowering plants. One of the primary reasons for this variety is the effect of slope and exposure on plant communities. Steep, south facing hillsides and eroded gullies are home to dry-land adapted species such as prickly pear cactus, sedum and gumweed. In stark contrast, ravines and north facing slopes support lodgepole pine, white spruce and an abundance of parkland flowers. The greatest diversity of prairie species is found in the open meadows and along the edges of the aspen groves.



Saskatoon Berries



An Ever-changing Tapestry

"What struck me first about this country was the flowers"
Myrtle Campbell, 1919

One of the most dramatic features of native grasslands in general, and the Kleskun Hills in particular, is the amazing variety of wildflowers. Every few weeks the colour palette changes as one group of flowers fades and others take their place. Many of these plants, like crocus, penstemon and wood lily, are perennials - dying back after flowering and reappearing the following season. Others, like northern gentian, hemp nettle and some of the grasses, are annuals. They leave only their seeds to start new plants the next year.

The photos on the following pages offer a sampling of the many wildflowers you can find as you explore Kleskun Hill Natural Area. Each season is highlighted by a photo of the landscape followed by flowers expected at that time. If you want more information about local wildflowers, be sure to check "Find Out More" at the end of this guide .

Adapting to the Prairie

Many of the plants found in the Kleskun Hills are especially adapted to dry, prairie conditions. As you explore, try to find examples of plants that use these strategies to survive without much water.

The **fleshy leaves** of succulents store water within the plant. **Spines** shade the leaves and prevent animals from taking a bite.

Fuzz and/or **silver colour** serves as a built in sunscreen protecting the leaves from the sun's rays.

Plants also go to great lengths to make sure that their seeds will be spread far and wide. Can you find any of these examples ?

The seeds of crocus, anemone and dandelion **parachute** on the wind. The seeds of yellow avens, blue bur and some grasses **hitchhike** on the fur of passing animals (or on your pant leg).

The pods of violets and legumes such as locoweed **explode** open when they dry, flinging the seeds away from the parent plant.

The long tail (awn) on the porcupine grass twists as it dries, **digging** the seed into the ground.

Kleskun Wildlife

The wildlife of the Kleskun Hills also shares a similarity with the prairies of the south but it is the mixture of grassland and forest species that, once again, makes the region unique.

At least 50 different birds can be found in the Kleskun Hills, including a number of grassland species that only nest here and at other native prairie sites in the Peace region. Vesper sparrows and eastern kingbirds are regularly seen, while the upland plover, sharp-tailed grouse, Say's phoebe and western meadowlark are less common. The hills are also a great place to look for parkland forest species such as the American kestrel, hermit thrush, warbling vireo, orange-crowned warbler, clay-coloured sparrow, white-throated sparrow and northern oriole.

The most common large mammals in the Kleskun area are mule deer. Herds are most visible during the winter when they move out into the open to browse on juniper exposed by blowing snow. Moose can also be spotted moving through the area and coyotes and snowshoe hares are regular visitors. Red squirrels can be found in the groves of white-spruce and lodgepole pine that dot the hills. Various mice, voles and shrews are active year-round in both the grasslands and forest but they are rarely spotted by visitors.

Native grasslands are also home to a wide variety of butterflies and other insects. In fact, of the 31 species of butterfly found at Kleskun, four have populations that are known only from the native grasslands of the Peace region.



Mule Deer



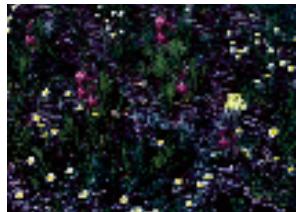
American Kestrel



Upland Sandpiper



Sharp-tailed Grouse



May



Prairie Crocus
Anemone patens



Mouse-eared Chickweed
Cerastium arvense



Say's Phoebe



Eastern Kingbird



Eastern Phoebe



Prairie Parsley
Lomatium foeniculaceum



Wild Strawberry
Fragaria virginiana



Three-flowered Avens
Geum triflorum



Tree Swallow



Hermit Thrush



Warbling Vireo



Early Blue Violet
Viola adunca



Smooth Fleabane
Erigeron glabellus



Early Yellow Locoweed
Oxytropis sericea



Orange-crowned Warbler



Western Meadowlark



Vesper Sparrow



Pale Comandra
Comandra umbellata



June



Wild Chives
Allium schoenoprasum



Clay-coloured Sparrow



White-throated Sparrow



Northern Oriole



Star-flowered Solomon's Seal
Smilacina stellata



Prairie Buttercup
Ranunculus rhomboideus



Saskatoon
Amelanchier alnifolia



Slender Blue Beard-tongue
Penstemon procerus



Shining Arnica
Arnica fulgens



Wild Flax
Linum lewisii



July



Harebell
Campanula rotundifolia



Western Wood Lily
Lilium philadelphicum



Lance-leaved Stonecrop
Sedum lanceolatum



Nodding Onion
Allium cernuum



Small-leaved Pussy-toes
Antennaria microphylla



Northern Bedstraw
Galium boreale



Prairie Rose
Rosa arkansana



Common Yarrow
Achillea millefolium



Common Bearberry
Arctostaphylos uva-ursi



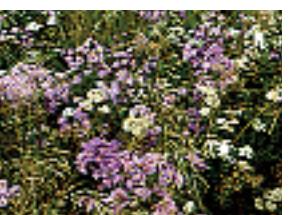
White Cinquefoil
Potentilla arguta



Showy Loco-weed
Oxytropis splendens



Alpine Hedysarum
Hedysarum alpinum



August



Bergamot
Monarda fistulosa



Heart-leaved Alexanders
Zizia aptera



Blue-eyed Grass
Sisyrinchium septentrionale



Groundsel
Senecio sp.



Tufted White Prairie Aster
Aster ericoides



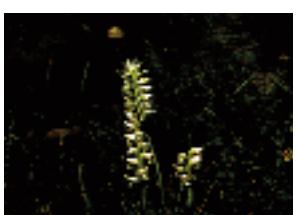
Smooth Blue Aster
Aster laevis



Low Goldenrod
Solidago missouriensis



Choke Cherry
Prunus virginiana



Hooded ladies'-tresses
Spiranthes romanzoffiana



Prickly Pear Cactus
Opuntia fragilis



Gumweed
Grindelia squarrosa



Sage
Artemisia spp



Northern Gentian
Gentianella amarella

Find Out More

For more information on Kleskun Hill Natural Area contact:

County of Grande Prairie - 780-532-9722

Public Lands - 780-538-5260

Alberta Parks and Protected Areas - 780-538-5265

If you are interested in learning more about the natural and human history of the Kleskun area, check out some of these resources.

Peace Parkland Naturalists Box 1451, Grande Prairie, AB, T8V 4Z7

Kleskun Museum Society Box 421 Grande Prairie, AB, T8V 3A7

Peace Native Grasslands Program Alberta Conservation Association, Bag 900-26, Provincial Building, Peace River, AB, T8S 1T4

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Kleskun Hill A Discovery Guide



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