

SUSTAINABILITY

An enchanted water world

B.C.'s Columbia Wetlands are wildly beautiful, but exploring them calls for responsible travel

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It was a scalding summer day, but with the aid of a small electric motor in our canoe, we glided almost effortlessly through a labyrinthine water world.

My guide, Tom, and I were in the Columbia Wetlands, located in British Columbia's Kootenay Rockies, following an illustrated map provided by Columbia Wetlands Outpost, an outdoor adventure outfitter that rents out watercraft. From our canoe, the grey crags and folds of the Rocky Mountains to the east and the Purcell Mountains to the west appeared to rise straight up from the edges of the water.

It's possible to explore the wetlands on foot year-round by following signposted trails. But in summer, when the snow melts and runs down from the mountains, immersing the 20,000-hectare floodplain wetland with water deep enough to dive in, this already special place transforms into an enchanted aquatic universe.

This was especially true around the Outpost. With its interpretive dock walks, a rope bridge that hangs low over the water, and the birdwatching hides and cabins among the tall grasses, I felt like I was in realm of Peter Pan.

In our explorations, we spotted a tree-perched osprey gazing down at us with his bright yellow eyes; a cedar waxwing high up on a branch, trilling high-pitched bzeeee; a pair of green-winged teals splashing around; and dozens of svelte bank swallows swooping and zig-zagging around us in an aerial ballet. They were just a few of the Columbia Wetlands' abundant birds: 260 migratory and "permanent resident" species call this place home, which is why the wetlands form part of the BC Bird Trail.

Numerous fish and amphibians inhabit the wetlands, too, like the frogs who entertained us with their cacophony. In addition, many mammals, including coyotes, river otters, grizzly bears, elk and beavers, live here or come to hunt or give birth.

All of this makes the Columbia Wetlands a "biodiversity hot spot," says Dr. Suzanne Bayley, an ecologist and wetlands expert. Bayley is also president of the Columbia Wetlands Stewardship Partners (CWSP), an NGO that conducts research and helps the government manage the wetlands and wildlife in the Columbia Valley.

While the Columbia Wetlands are a beautiful place for locals and travellers to appreciate, they are subject to many threats, including logging

and climate change. The effects of the latter "could see water levels drop in the summer, once glaciers in the Purcell Mountains disappear," according to Robyn Duncan, executive director of Wildsight, a non-profit that works to protect biodiversity and encourage sustainable communities in the Columbia and Rocky Mountain regions. Another hazard, says Duncan, is power boating on the main stem of the river. Together, CWSP and Wildsight persuaded the government to limit the horsepower of boats to 20hp, "but that can still disturb sensitive nesting birds," Duncan explains. The same can be said of recreational activities like dirt biking and ATVing.

As a nature and wildlife lover, I was troubled to discover, after my trip, that even paddling — with or without an electric motor — can disturb this precious ecosystem. When we were entering the narrower waterways lined with sedges and hardstem bulrushes, we did take care to cut the motor and pull it into the canoe, so as not to interfere with anything. Still, if I were to return to the Columbia Wetlands in summer, I would paddle on my own steam, sticking only to the main channel.

"We (CWSP) want to help better manage the land," says Bayley. "We want to maintain it as a wilderness, so you don't want lots of people. You don't mind some people. But it's the usual thing: What's too much?"

There are other things that tourists can do to help. Since nesting birds are highly sensitive to being disturbed in any way, it's very important to give them their space, says Duncan. "That means even human-powered boaters should stick to open water and stay out of vegetation in the wetlands in the spring and summer nesting season."

Tom and I canoed for perhaps three kilometres before turning back toward the Outpost. We saw only a handful of people on our journey, which made the experience much more pleasurable. We were fortunate; some stretches of the Columbia River are very busy, says Bayley. Arriving back at the Outpost, I wasn't ready to hand back our canoe. The wetlands are an extraordinary natural gem, and we should keep it that way.

With the Columbia Wetlands in particular, the most important thing, says Duncan, is that "we all cherish this incredible place we are lucky enough to live near or visit."

ELIZABETH WARKENTIN TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF DESTINATION BC, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.



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