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LIFESTYLE



Celebrate winter in the scenic Qu'Appelle Valley

Winter can be long, so here's one spot you can get out and enjoy it



BY ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN
GFM CONTRIBUTORS

Most of us are familiar with visiting parks in summer, but Saskatchewan's Echo Valley Provincial Park wants to make sure that we don't forget about winter.

"Saskatchewan winters are long, and if you're not doing anything outdoors, you're missing half the year," says park manager Shelley MacLean.

Echo Valley has a prime location between Echo and Pasqua Lakes in the beautiful Qu'Appelle Valley, just eight kilometres west of Fort Qu'Appelle and less than an hour's drive from Regina.

Winter in the park offers several kilometres of cross-country ski trails, everything from easy level loops to hillier routes for more of a workout.

Snowshoe trails wind through the trees and to scenic lookout points; one trail is even illuminated at night. If you don't have snowshoes, you can rent them inexpensively at the park visitor centre. Depending on snow cover, snowshoe trails can also be used for hiking.

This winter's activities also include Croki-curl, a unique game on ice that combines aspects of curling and crokinole. There's a Ninja Warrior course for kids with a zipline and climbing wall. Both lakes are popular for ice fishing walleye, perch and pike.

Echo Valley's biggest draw is Skate the Park, Saskatchewan's longest skating rink, which snakes along a one-kilometre route through the Aspen Campground. The entire loop is maintained with a Zamboni and illuminated for evening skating. A wood-burning fireplace in a teepee serves as a warming hut. If you don't have skates, the park visitor cen-

tre has a few that you can borrow for free, as well as kick sleds if you need more stability.

How good is the ice? MacLean remembers the time that Tyler McGregor, captain of Canada's paralympic hockey team, heard about the rink and wanted to give it a try. He skated a marathon on his sledge and commented that it was some of the best outdoor ice he had ever skated.

"He was able to set a speed record on his sledge, which was pretty fantastic to watch," she says.

The park tries to keep the skating loop open as long as possible; however, each year varies depending on weather conditions.

Since this is an Olympic year, the park has embraced Olympic themes and there's a podium where you can have your photo taken with winning medals. Even though the medals aren't real gold and silver, the park has crafted medals out of cookies, which taste better anyway.

The visitor centre is the hub of the park. In addition to nature displays and a place to gather information, a comfy seating area is a great place to linger with a hot drink and snack from the concession stand.

Camping is an important part of a park experience for many people. It's hard to beat sitting around a campfire at your site and enjoying a barbecue. A few provincial parks feature Camp-Easy yurts for visitors who don't have camping gear, or who just want to camp in more comfort. Echo Valley is the only park to have winterized yurts. We camped in one in January and had no trouble staying warm with the propane and electric heaters provided.

See QU'APPELLE on pg. B6 ▶

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■ QU'APPELLE from pg. B5

The yurts can accommodate up to six people and have beds with mattresses, but visitors must bring their own bedding. Since waterworks in the campground are shut off for the winter, you must also bring water. Pit toilets are nearby.

Yurt campsites provide shelters equipped with a gas-powered camp stove and a wood-burning barbecue. Wood is supplied, along with an axe, folding camp chairs and lanterns.

If you prefer more traditional camping, other sites are available for those who want to pitch a tent or bring a camper. For a more adventurous winter experience, some campers even build quinzhees (snow shelters) to sleep in.

While most winter visitors are from southern Saskatchewan, a surprising number have come from farther afield, including Hawaii, California and Germany.

"We had a family from Dubai," recalls MacLean. "They were visiting folks in Regina and came out skating for the first time. It was minus 40, but they absolutely loved it and had a wonderful day."

The park always comes up with new and creative ideas to keep people coming back. As MacLean put it, "You have to take fun seriously when you work at a park."



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