

The Moose Mountain Uplands

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Introduction

The Moose Mountain Uplands are found in the Aspen Parkland Ecoregion of the Prairies. If you live in or visit this Ecoregion you would see that the landscape is mainly broad plains. However there are deep, scenic valleys and hilly uplands in the area as well. The Moose Mountain Uplands are an example of this. While the majority of the Aspen Parkland is level at approximately 600 m above sea level (asl) the Uplands range from 600 m to 730 m asl. Moose Mountain, one of the highest hills in the Uplands, sits at approximately 800 m asl.

The ground in this Ecoregion is often covered by gravels and larger rocks. Have you ever noticed that many of Saskatchewan's lakes are pebbly or stony or have you ever seen stone piles on the edges of fields? Perhaps you have helped a farmer remove rocks from his or her field. All of these are just different sizes of stones (silt, clay, sand, gravel/pebbles, rocks, boulders, etc.) All of them could have been left in the ground by major events in history such as the movement of the glaciers or fast moving water (some of the lighter materials could also have been brought by wind). Much of Saskatchewan is covered in large rocks that the glaciers left behind.

There are many species of vegetation that make up the native prairie of the Aspen Parkland. As the name suggests, the most common tree is the trembling aspen. Other plant life includes shrubs like western snowberry, prairie rose, beaked hazelnut, saskatoon, and choke cherry. There are also several herbs (wild sarsaparilla, asters, pea vine, violet) and grasses (bluegrasses, sedges, rice grassed, etc.) that make up the undergrowth of the environment. In the Moose Mountain Uplands specifically, the environment is less cultivated than the rest of the Ecoregion, which means that there is more native prairie – ideal for animal grazing. The forests contain trembling aspen and balsam poplar and are more comparable to the environment of the Boreal Forest rather than the surrounding lower plains.

The high elevation of the Moose Mountain Uplands means that it has a unique variety of animals and plants than the rest of the Aspen Parkland. Typically found in the Aspen Parkland are white-tailed deer, snowshoe hare, white-tailed jack rabbit, eastern cottontail, coyote, red fox, skunk, weasel, bobcat, lynx, cougar, raccoon, black bear, beaver, muskrat, as well as many more species of rodents. Also found but in lower quantity are moose and mule deer. Mule deer and elk were much more common in the past but after European settlement, their numbers declined. There are 320 species of birds found in the Ecoregion, including sparrows, swallows, wrens, warblers, crows, robins, finches, great horned owls, red-tailed hawks. Most of these birds tend to migrate in the winter. Chickadees, woodpeckers, grouse, jays, magpies and some other bird species stay in the winter however. Forty-seven types of fish can be found in the area, including most often walleye, northern pike, yellow perch, and burbot. As well there are 11 species of reptiles and amphibians, which is very high for Saskatchewan. Because of the forested nature of the Moose Mountain Uplands, moose and elk can often be found as well as other species of birds and rodents that are not found in the rest of the Ecoregion.

Today, the region is used by humans most often as agricultural land, rangeland, urban development (towns and cities), potash and coal mining, fishing, and other forms of recreation. This area of the province would have been free of glaciers approximately 15,000 years ago. This does not mean that the environment was immediately welcoming for animals, humans, and plant life to live in. Most likely the environment would still have been very cold and covered by water (including Glacial Lake Regina). It is not until later that archaeologists have found the first evidence of humans living in the Moose Mountain Uplands.

Precontact Period

As mentioned, there is less cultivation in the Moose Mountain Uplands which means that many *in situ* (undisturbed, still in place) sites have been found that confirm this area has been used for many thousands of years. It is believed that the hills served significant purposes for early peoples, including navigation and ceremonial sites. People still use these uplands today for the same purposes.

An example of this is the Moose Mountain Medicine Wheel which is found on Moose Mountain. This is a sacred site believed to be approximately 2650 years old. Today, First Nations people continue to hold ceremonies at this and other sites in the area.

In addition to ceremonial and other sacred sites in this region, there are many early hunting and camping sites located along the waterways and other strategic locations in the Moose Mountain uplands. Due in great part to the topography of this region, the landscape has been left undisturbed by exploration and other forms of development. This has led to sites remaining intact. This could change in the future however, which is why it is important to ensure that these and other sites are documented and being protected.

Contact Period

There are not a lot of well-documented contact sites in the Moose Mountain Uplands. As no major waterways course through them fur trade posts were not established in them. The two known fur trade posts recorded from this area are called Moose Mountain I (1859) and Moose Mountain II (1860s/70s). Both of these posts were built by the Hudson's Bay Company. They were established near the Moose Mountain Creek which lies west and south of the uplands. There are many more fur trade posts identified in the Qu'Appelle Valley and further north. Does anyone have a suggestion as to why this region has less fur trade activity?

According to historical records, at least two explorers would have travelled in the vicinity of the Moose Mountain Uplands. The John Palliser (a Captain with the British military) expedition was held from 1857 to 1860 (do you know what "The Palliser Triangle" is?). His mission was to explore the land between the Assiniboine River and Rocky Mountains. Starting in the east, his group collected a variety of information on the environment including its geology, geography, and natural resources as well as astronomical and meteorological information. Between 1857 and 1859 he was near this region and may have had knowledge of the uplands. Two decades later (1880), John Macoun also went on an expedition in the region. It would be

interesting as a class assignment to read these expedition journals to learn about the possible contact these groups had in the uplands.

By the late 1880s, there was a strong North West Mounted Police (NWMP) presence throughout the province, including the Moose Mountain region. There were NWMP posts in Arcola, Carlyle, Cannington, Sunnymeade, Moosomin, and Fairmede to name a few in the region. The NWMP came to Saskatchewan in order to keep law and order. One of the NWMP patrol lines went between the Moose Mountain to Fort Ellice trail. This is also the era when Europeans began to homestead the region in great numbers. Many of these farmhouses and outbuildings can still be seen today.

References

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