

coverstory

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by Judy Way



*Lace up the boots and hit the trail –
at least one more time before the snow flies.*

Manitoba Fall Hikes

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Manitoba hikers need never worry about altitude sickness. But that's not to say the province's broad, sweeping canvas is bland. Ma Nature painted in tall wild grass prairie, rolling, forested hills, undulating river valleys, vast wetlands and the occasional view-encompassing escarpment. For even more variety, she sketched in innumerable lakes and rivers dotted with granite and limestone outcroppings, set among deep deciduous and evergreen forests. Best of all, most of the hiking trails tracing this landscape are leisurely day rambles – many within close driving range of city centres. So, before stowing those hiking boots in the basement, consider at least one walk on Manitoba's wild side this fall. Here, in no particular order, are our eight prime picks – rated by degree of difficulty, from easy  to most challenging .



Mantario – wilderness shield country (top left);
the Carberry Desert, Spirit Sands (below left);
Disappearing Lakes' prairie oasis (below and bottom).



1 Mantario Trail

The longest Canadian Shield trail in Western Canada, the Mantario runs 63 kilometres south to north along the Manitoba-Ontario border in Whiteshell Provincial Park, some 230 km east-northeast of Winnipeg. It's a tough go, one that takes experienced backpackers three to five days, but the trail's wild beauty is well worth experiencing even if it's just a day hike along the first leg. From the south trailhead on Provincial Road 312 near Caddy Lake, day trippers cross rugged aspen, Jack pine and spruce-forested valleys, the Whiteshell River (by footbridge) and two sets of railway tracks – carefully, as both are still in use. The Caribou Lake west campsite marks the turnaround point for day hikers.

Mantario is wilderness shield country, site of the oldest exposed stone on earth, where the granite ridges fringe deep, still water. Moose, deer, coyotes, wolves and black bears are found here, but are seldom seen. Easier to spot are bald eagles, turkey vultures and spruce and ruffed grouse. To nibble on: saskatoons, chokecherries, pin cherries and wild plum berries.

DISTANCE: 7.2 km

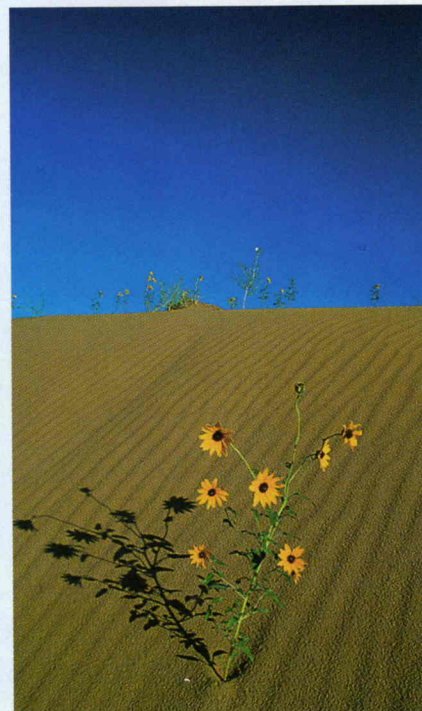
ESTIMATED TRAVEL TIME: 3 hours

2 Spirit Sands & the Devil's Punchbowl

Two hours west of Winnipeg on the Trans-Canada Highway, Spruce Woods Provincial Park's pine forest and boreal woods blend with grassy hills and the meandering Assiniboine River. Perfect for families, the main trail affords hilltop views of the Devil's Punch Bowl, a unique crater-shaped lake near the Assiniboine. On the return leg, accessible via easy trails along the edge of the Carberry Desert and through white spruce, oak and aspen forest and mixed grass prairie, is a geological surprise: towering, 30-metre sand dunes. Once a sacred Cree site known as the Spirit Sands, this desert area has been gradually reduced by the encroaching forest, from 6,000-plus square kilometres to less than 25 square kilometres.

DISTANCE: 4 to 11 km

ESTIMATED TRAVEL TIME: 1.5 to 4.5 hours



3 Disappearing Lakes Interpretive Trail

Tucked against the American border in southwestern Manitoba, Turtle Mountain Provincial Park's little-travelled day trails make for delightful, scenic strolls through a prairie oasis of aspen forests and shallow lakes suspended 200 metres above the surrounding prairie.

The Disappearing Lakes Interpretive Trail, like all of the park's short, easy day trails, is a meticulously groomed, leisurely walk – ideal for beginner hikers. Interpretive signposts detail the life cycles of the park's "pothole" lakes – hollows in which water collected thousands of years ago. With no land-based water source, the lakes are replenished only by snow, rain and spring thaws, and are slowly disappearing. Although you probably won't see any beavers, evidence of their enterprising activity is everywhere here – gnawed aspen logs, lodges and dams are scattered around the pothole lakes. Grassy pathways, frequented by moose, wind through the woods and meadows; boardwalks zigzag across still bogs and marshes where double-crested cormorants, grebes and loons are common. Keep an eye out for the majestic great blue heron stalking shallow lakes.

DISTANCE: 1.5 km

ESTIMATED TRAVEL TIME: 1 hour



Photographs: Dave Reede; (map) Gayleen Whiting



