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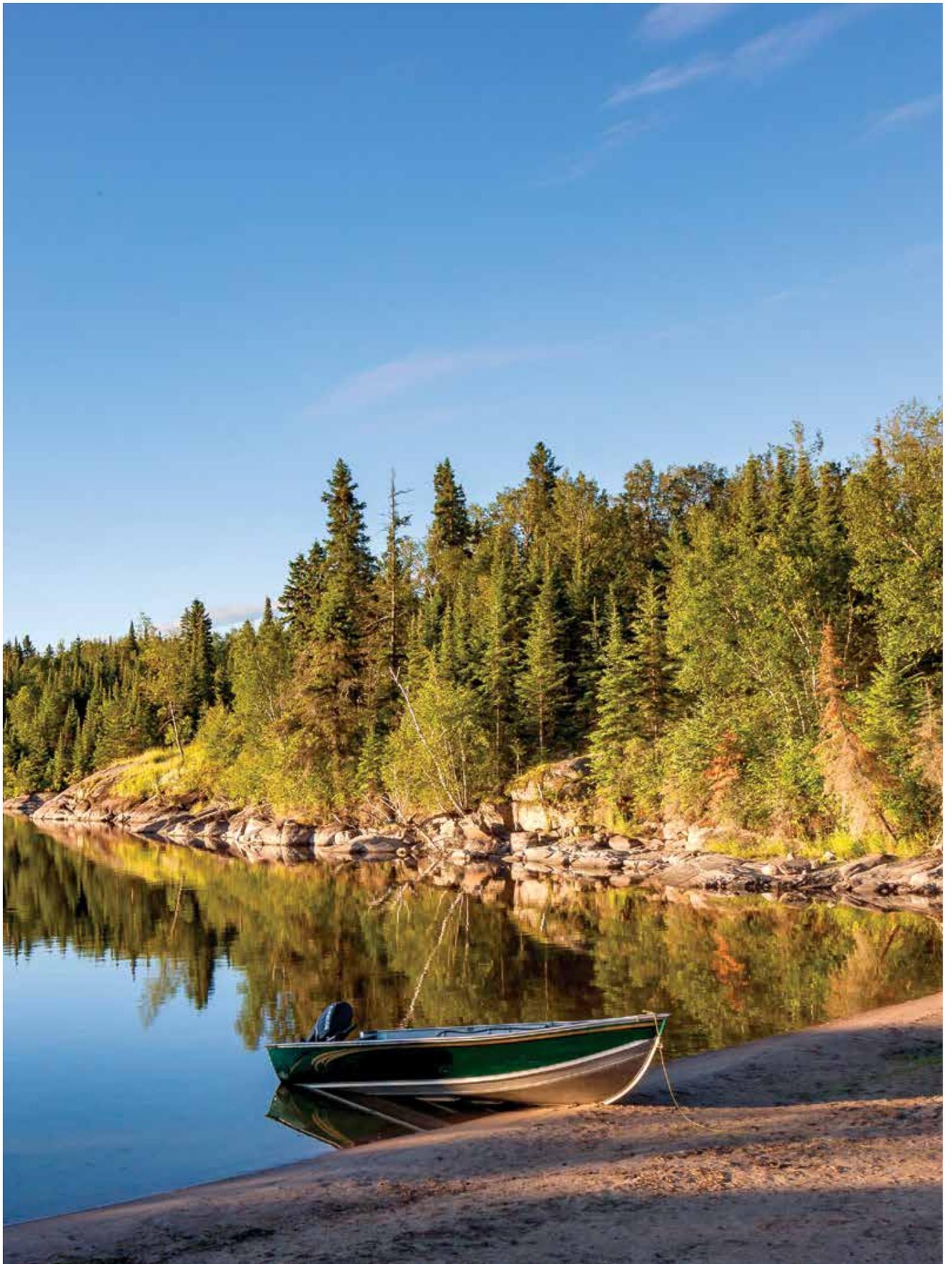
ADVENTURE

# WILDS OF THE WHITESHELL

Manitoba's Whiteshell Provincial Park is filled with folklore, family histories and sacred spiritual stories spanning centuries. Our writer travels the region to meet the people working to share them.

BY **BRITNEY HOPE**





I'M STANDING ON A SODDEN SLAB OF Precambrian crust in the thick of Whiteshell Provincial Park, Manitoba. It's drizzling here, but everything is so quiet. There's a feeling in the air; a solemn sort of energy – which seems fitting, considering where we are. This particular chunk of our continent's core, also known as the Canadian Shield, is the site of the Bannock Point Petroforms, a collection of stone formations that are sacred to Indigenous peoples – and widely believed to have been left there centuries ago.

"Our creation story begins here," my host, Diane Maytwayashing, tells me.

A born Manitoban and proud Anishinaabe-kwe guide, Diane has dedicated her life to raising awareness in the community about the importance of the petroforms to Indigenous culture. As the site is officially maintained by government park officials, Indigenous representation is not routinely available – although Diane and her interpretive services are easily found by way of Google.

I've travelled two hours east of Winnipeg to the 2,729-square-kilometre Whiteshell region in search of stories and silence. Despite a decidedly unromantic reputation fostered by many an unknowing Canadian, there is more to this still-wild province beyond polar bears and placid parkland.

Whiteshell's portion of the Canadian Shield is at least one billion years old. The presence of Indigenous peoples in the area has been traced back 8,000 years, and though it blends easily into the Whiteshell's coniferous camouflage (it's easily missed from the Trans-Canada Highway), the tourist town of Falcon Lake – itself named after 19th century Métis balladeer Pierre Falcon – has been a cottage country archetype since the 1920s. So, it's no stretch of the imagination to assume this place has a few stories to tell. After all, a lot can happen in one billion years.

"We call this place 'Manitouabee' – where the Spirit sits," Diane says as we negotiate the slippery rock face. The petroforms before us are boulders delicately arranged atop a sprawling bedrock into figures resembling turtles, serpents, and fish – shapes significant to Indigenous spiritualities. According to Diane, they're instructions to the earliest peoples for living on the earth, and remain a ceremonial site of teaching and healing to this day. Years ago, during a challenging time in her life, she was brought to the site by a friend. Though she had never heard of it before, Diane found it so profoundly spiritual that she was drawn back again and again, each time building a fire and fasting overnight, with only the occasional chorus of Whiteshell wolves for company. She now lives nearby,

offering interpretive tours and fasting retreats, which she says attracts women from all backgrounds seeking ways to "look within themselves."

"I never get sick of coming here," she says, explaining she feels driven to protect, preserve and restore the site, in the hopes others might understand and respect its importance, too. "It always feels like coming home."

Everything here, even the green of the surrounding spruce, seems unsaturated against a striking swathe of fabrics – prayer ties, I later learn – affixed to the trees. Before we continue, Diane places our own offering of tobacco at the base of a pine, meant as a sacred expression of good intentions, and a way to give thanks. To experience Manitouabee is a gift, after all.

We step gingerly across the rock face and around the stone shapes, some sheltered in an overgrowth of moss, some more pronounced against a boulder surface. They are laid bare to us, without any physical barrier or boardwalk to protect them. Diane points out each figure to me: a woman giving birth; a turtle representing the teaching of truth; a bison-shaped boulder, respect. As we go forth, talk builds from the petroforms to the effects of fasting, to stories of giants who live in the forest and legends of Thunderbirds, to that of the rising awareness within the local community of Bannock Point's importance to Diane's people, which is achieved, slowly, through tours, ceremony and storytelling. When I reflect that some of the legends she's described might seem rather supernatural to the status quo, Diane gives me a look I take to mean: "Of course they would."

"We're a spiritual people," she tells me. "For us, the paranormal is normal."

Her words follow me into another part of the Whiteshell later that day, as I attempt a hair-raising horseback scramble up a slick, rocky ridge toward a UFO site. I'm following bona fide Manitoban cowboy, Devin Imrie of Falcon Beach Ranch, one of several family-run establishments in the area.

A working farm and cozy chalet-style cabin getaway, the ranch is owned and operated by Devin and his wife, Kendra. Devin's parents, Murray and Marg, ran the ranch for more than three decades and after finishing university, marrying and spending a few years working and travelling abroad, the prodigal young Imries returned about two years ago to continue the family tradition of hosting trail rides, backcountry overnights and cowboy-style cookouts.

Then, there's this "UFO ride," as they've named it, which takes guests like me into the farm's untamed outskirts, to the site of the notorious "Falcon Lake Incident." As the story goes, some 50 years ago, Highway



Top: Diane Maytaywayshing in Bannock Point  
 Middle row: Petroforms and prayer ties at Bannock Point,  
 Devin Imrie describes the Falcon Lake Incident  
 Bottom: Sunset on High Lake



Patrol had found Winnipegger Stefan Michalak staggering along the side of the road, eyes bloodshot, burned black, and according to his own evaluation, possibly radioactive. Michalak was later hospitalized and treated for strange, circular burns all over his body.

Two weeks later, helicopters appeared in the skies of Falcon Lake, along with the RCMP, the Canadian military, and U.S. officials. Word of their purpose spread quickly through the town: Michalak had seen a UFO.

"This is where it happened," Devin says after we've tied our horses and moved to a moss-covered boulder overlooking a peaceful, remote expanse of marshland – a sort of paradoxical setting for the strange events that allegedly took place here not so long ago.

Still, the air is damp and the overcast surroundings give it a rather dramatic quality, but Devin doesn't rely on theatrics; he knows he's got a good story. Apparently, Michalak had a real passion for geology, and was prospecting for minerals when he saw "two glowing, cigar-shaped objects," in the sky. One landed nearby – close enough that Michalak could hear voices.

"He said, 'Come on over, Yankees,'" Devin says, telling how Michalak thought it was the U.S. military testing new technology. He ventured over to investigate further, but what he apparently found instead was a UFO. The fingertips of his gloves were melted off after he touched the ship and he was struck in the chest by "a blast of fiery air" that made him smell like burnt electrical wire. The strange pattern of burns on his torso and the presence of silver and uranium melted into the site – an area officials would later declare radioactive – served as bewildering souvenirs from an event government and scientists alike have never been unable to confirm or deny.

"I believe Michalak saw something here, and had some sort of encounter," Devin admits as we get back in our saddles. "It's never been disproved."

I'm inclined to believe him, too. The details of the encounter, the international government attention and the resulting – unwelcome – infamy Michalak would endure for the rest of his life are hard to dismiss out of hand. After all, he had no reason to lie.

We make our way back, passing swampland, crumbling pieces of graphite, and a birch tree scarred by bear claws. Back at the ranch, we warm ourselves by the fire and enjoy a cookout with all the fixings. While we tuck into roasted smokies, corn from the garden and homemade cookies, Kendra tells me about the Falcon Lake tourism community, whereby many young entrepreneurs are following in family footsteps. Whether hosting "Meteor Fest" and a popular adventure race called "Swamp Donkey," there's always something happening, which she claims has resulted in a renewed interest in a region that built its foundation on hiking, skiing and fishing.

The next day, I find myself surrounded – as intended – by silence. After hiking three kilometres along a heavily dimpled service trail to the lonesome and loon-filled

High Lake, I arrive at Kingfisher, one of only five outlying eco-cabins conceived and constructed by the folks of Falcon Trails Resort.

Another family-run, multi-generational cabin-and-adventure hideaway in the Whiteshell area, Falcon Trails was established in 1996 by lifelong residents Barb Christie and Craig Hamilton, in an effort to preserve the dwindling local ski hill. Seventeen cabins, two lakes, 12 alpine ski runs and a labyrinth of backwoods trails later, the resort has become a rather impressive community pillar of sporting events and music festivals, thanks in part to the innovative efforts of their three daughters, Emily, Caleigh, and Brooke.

My cabin is deliciously off the grid, relying on solar panels, a woodstove and a composting toilet. It's also staggeringly beautiful, with exposed oak accents, antique furniture, and gleaming picture windows framing the dark water and trees beyond.

I spend my first morning in a state of Canadiana bliss, watching the sun come up from my loft bed, sipping tea by the lake and hiking the surrounding trails. There's no cell service here, leaving me to take up one single activity at a time, and like the sun making slow progress across the sky, I feel my own outlook shifting from its typical, baseless sense of urgency to something more serene. It's no wonder the locals are working to share this place with others.

"We're a family business. That's the story of almost all Falcon Lake," Emily Christie, the resort's marketing director, tells me that afternoon when she, Caleigh and Barb pay me a visit. "But it's always been more than a business. It's been an integral part of our identities."

Although encouraged by their parents to do whatever they wanted in life, the Christie sisters chose to use their individual strengths and interests in hospitality, athletics and the arts to help the resort evolve. With yoga retreats, artist residency programs, live music and newly-built mountain biking boardwalks, their resort is always bustling and, often, fully booked.

"They bring a new level of innovation and dynamics to the company," Barb says of her daughters' knack for progression. "A beautiful community has blossomed from these efforts."

On my final evening, I canoe across High Lake before sunset, toward its uninhabited opposite shore. I glide along the shallows, negotiating lily pads and fallen trees, scanning the tree line for signs of wildlife. Suddenly, I hear a ragged growl and see an otter glaring at me from a rock; I've gotten too close. Despite her suggestion, my canoe is slow to stop, and she escapes into the water. Then, she breaches beside me with a startling splash, making me jump and disturbing the peace. Heart in my throat – yet at the same time, incredibly full – I plunge my paddle down and give the otter some space, having been reminded whose home this really is.

After all, if I've learned one thing in Whiteshell, it's that nature is powerful – and she's been here much longer than I. **BT**



## When You Go

**WHERE TO STAY:** For some quality family time, the log cabins at **Falcon Beach Ranch** are cozy and complete with a communal sauna and hot tub. The Imries are at their best when entertaining, so take advantage of their ranch activities, from horseback rides to wiener roasts and birthday parties. Those yearning for a slice of solitude will find it at **Falcon Trails Resort**, where their High Lake eco-cabins are hand-crafted using alternative materials such as artisan-cut timber. You make your own fun here, whether canoeing and swimming or hiking and biking, but the cabins are well-equipped with vintage Canadian literature for rainy day diversions.

**WHAT TO DO:** Take several days to enjoy **Whiteshell Provincial Park**, which has no shortage of trails, waterfalls, lakeside picnic sites and of course, the **Bannock Point Petroforms**. Tours can be arranged through the park, but for a truly unique and reflective experience, request Diane Maytwayashing be your guide. Be sure to visit **The Laughing Loon** in Falcon Lake, to browse its exceptional variety of gifts and cabin trappings.

**WHAT TO EAT:** Being cottage country, restaurants in the Whiteshell typically take a backseat to the beloved barbecue, in which case you can find provisions at **Falcon Lake Meat and Grocery** (which operates seasonally). However, you'd be remiss not to stop at **The Nite Hawk Café** in West Hawk Lake for one of their famous homemade burgers. For a lunch made easy, **Falcon Lake Bistro & Bakery** offers soups, sandwiches, and pre-made meals to go.

Britney Hope