



Ever wonder where the highest point in Canada is, between the Rocky Mountains and Labrador? It's Cypress Hills, some of which are situated in Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park. The park straddles the Alberta-Saskatchewan border just 75 km north of the USA, is the only interprovincial park in Canada and is a great place to ride. There are over 8,000 years of human history in the Hills, including the Cypress Hills Massacre. This awful event occurred in 1873 when American hunters from Montana massacred Assiniboine First Nations camped in the Battle Creek area. The incident threatened Canadian sovereignty and led to the creation of the North-West Mounted Police (which later became the RCMP).

The Cypress Hills are ecologically and geographical unique as they weren't glaciated in the last ice age, unlike most parts of Canada. At 1,470 m – a similar elevation to Banff and about 600 m higher than the surrounding plains – the Hills create their own weather

and provide extensive views for riders. With flat tops and steep sides (a haven for rare orchids!), the southern slopes of the Hills tend to be grassy while the northern sides host pine forests. They also form a drainage divide, splitting water flowing north to Hudson Bay from water flowing south into the Gulf of Mexico.

The interprovincial park is divided into three areas. The Centre Block is located 30 km south of Maple Creek on Highway 21 and is farthest east in Saskatchewan. It contains a Visitor Centre, year-round tourist facilities, campsites, interpretive trails and is not really horse-friendly.

The West Block in Saskatchewan is totally horse accessible and considered a wilderness area. It contains an equestrian campsite on Battle Creek, a multitude of horse-friendly trails including a portion of the Trans-Canada Trail, and provides access to Fort Walsh National Historic Site of Canada (former home of the North-West Mounted Police). To access Battle Creek equestrian campsite drive 27 km

southwest of Maple Creek on Highway 271, then 7 km on a gravel road that is steep in places and can be slick after rain. Amenities at this well-developed campsite include 52 tie stalls, turnout paddocks and a grazing area with direct access to Battle Creek for watering horses. For riders, there are outhouses, picnic tables, barbecues, garbage cans and a large fire ring for group gatherings. Drinking water is available. Maps, which illustrate the trails from the campsite, may be obtained at the nearby West Block Ranger Station.

The 4 km (one way) ride from the campsite to Fort Walsh is definitely recommended. Riding through the gates of a historic fort steeped in Canadian history isn't something you do every day! Follow the Battle Creek Road southeast to a gate then continue southeast along a little-used trail to the Fort. You'll need to show a National Parks pass to enter the fort so either purchase one before your trip or ride north up the road to the Visitor Reception Centre (complete with hitching rails!) to buy



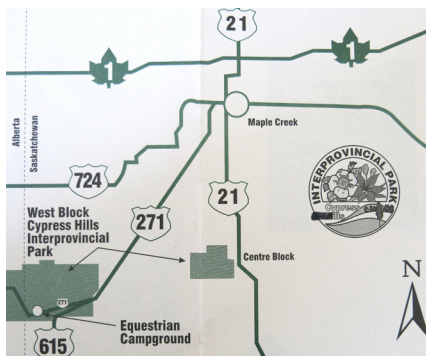
Above: Putting hoof prints on the highest land between the Atlantic Ocean and Rocky Mountains is what makes riding in Cypress Hills so special. **Far left:** Former RCMP quarters at Fort Walsh, complete with buffalo-hide blanket and pot-bellied stove. **Left:** Lots of camping, paddocks and tie stalls at Battle Creek Horse Camp. **Opposite page:** Cypress Hills Provincial Park is known as a prairie oasis and serves as headquarters for trail riders.

one. Fort Walsh was a breeding and training facility for RCMP and musical ride horses, so horses are welcome and there are hitching rails along the back wall of the fort specifically for horseback visitors. Well-behaved horses may enter the Fort, and photos with period-costume Mounties are encouraged.

Another ride from the campsite follows the Battle Creek Road west along Battle Creek to the Trans-Canada Trail and up to the Hidden Conglomerate Cliffs. This 7 km (one way) ride has several water-crossings while passing historical sites. The trail up to the tops is steep in places and best in dry footing. Viewpoints provide extensive vistas south and east over the Hills and having lunch on the tops is a treat.

Additional trails extend southwest and northwest from the equestrian campsite, offering various options for multi-day visitors. There are fees for entering the West Block and camping at the equestrian campsite plus a separate National Parks permit to enter Fort Walsh National Historic Site. More information about facilities, fees and permits is available from Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park (www.cypresshills.com), Saskatchewan Parks and Parks Canada. Equestrian-specific brochures are available from both Saskatchewan Parks and Alberta Parks.

The Alberta portion of the West Block – located 32 km east of Medicine Hat on Highway



1 then 30 km south on Highway 41 - has a new equestrian campsite at the Spring Creek Trails System (5 km south of Elkwater Lake). The campsite is small and rustic, with room for several trailers, a group fire pit, picnic tables and corrals. Depending on the season, water may be available for horses approximately 200 m east of the campsite. Campers must bring potable water (water is available for horses from the creek). There are also no outhouses, so campers should bring their own campers with a toilet in them. Certified weed-free hay is encouraged, while hobbling and highlining are not permitted. Panels may be used.

Recommended rides include Spring Creek Ski Trail (6 km loop with views from Head of the Mountain), Spruce Coulee Trail (up to 16 km), and off-trail riding in the Nine Mile Area (choose your own route). Day riders not camping in the Alberta portion of the West

Block must obtain a free Equestrian Trail Use Permit and Parking Pass. Overnight riders need a combined Equestrian Camping and Trail Use Permit.

For those who prefer bed and bale options, want more amenities than the Alberta West Block campsite offers, or are concerned about road conditions accessing the Saskatchewan Battle Creek equestrian campsite, Historic Reesor Ranch is a good option (www.reesor-ranch.com). The ranch is located just east of the Alberta/Saskatchewan border and abuts the north side of Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park. Riders are welcome to bring their own horses to this 100-year-old cattle ranch, and ride into the park at their leisure. It is 30 km return from the ranch to Fort Walsh through the Saskatchewan portion of the West Block.

Cypress Hills provides many options for trail riders, and its unique geography and history is different from anywhere else in Canada. So if you're looking for new trails – go ride the tops.



PRODUCT REVIEW

EASycARE EASYBOOT EPIC

Every trail horse will lose a shoe at some point. Carrying a hoof boot in your saddle bag – such as the EasyCare Easyboot Epic – is a simple solution and will save your horse's hoof. My horse lost a front shoe on a two-week pack trip in the Rockies and he travelled six days in an Easyboot, with no ill effects.

There are lots of boots on the market but for trail riders, utility and toughness are what count. The Epic is easy to put on, has a gaiter to keep debris out of the boot, can be tightened to fit and worn in all terrain.

Boots are not one-size-fits-all, so you'll need to measure your horse's feet and buy the correct size. If your horse has different size feet, buy a boot that fits larger hooves and plan to wrap the smaller hooves with vetwrap or whatever you've got in your emergency kit.

Epics are \$87.50 US each online from EasyCare. Alberta, BC and Ontario dealers sell Epics for about \$95 CDN each. If you want to buy only one hoof boot, check out the Epic – it's a great choice for trail horses.



CREATE A SAFETY KIT

If a trail ride goes sideways, you'll appreciate having some emergency gear in your saddle bags. So create a safety kit in a tough-sided, waterproof bag, which includes: a fix-it kit (multi-tool, cord, binder twine, duct tape, zip ties), first aid kit, communication devices (SPOT beacon or similar, a whistle, cell phone if service is available), trail re-finding tools (compass, flagging tape), fire starter kit in a Ziploc bag (fire starter sticks, candle, lighter) and gear to survive an unintentional night out (head lamp, space blanket, food bar, toilet paper).

I also highly recommend carrying a knife and

a lighter on your person at all times in case your saddle horse decides to head down the trail without you.

In addition to your safety kit, carry the following on your horse: food and water, GPS and map, sunscreen, bug dope for you and your horse, halter and lead shank, hobbles, spare hoof boot, axe in a scabbard, handsaw, rain jacket and pants, an extra sweater and a camera. Optional extras include spare gloves, binoculars and bear spray.

With this gear, a safety kit in your saddle bags and a safe, sane sound horse – you're ready to ride.