

BLACKFOOT SKI TRAILS

The Essentials

Name of Area	Cooking Lake – Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area
Location	40 km east of Edmonton
Km trails	~ 100 km
Km classic	~ 80 km
Km skate	22 km
Trail Rating	Easy to intermediate
Signage	Excellent
Grooming	Very good
Facilities	Unheated shelters & outside washrooms at trail heads & within trail system.
Trail Fees	No
Access Points	Waskehegan, Islet Lake, Central & Blackfoot Staging Areas
Other facts	No dogs are allowed on the trails set for classic skiing
Loppet	Canadian Birkebeiner on 2 nd Saturday in February
Description of trails	<p>The Blackfoot area contains the largest concentration of ski trails in Central Alberta. It is home every February to the famous Canadian Birkebeiner ski race that attracts upwards of 2,000 skiers of all abilities. The trail system can be accessed from four different staging areas all between 40 minutes to one hours drive from Edmonton.</p> <p>The trails undulate through forest passing many small lakes. All classic trails are normally double track set. The skating trails are only accessible from the Blackfoot Staging Area. The trails go out from each of the staging areas in a series of loops, so that if you get tired you can just turn back at the next junction. All junctions are marked with location maps. Excellent free maps are available at the trailheads. Most of the trails are rated easy to intermediate with a few steep hills & sharp corners.</p> <p>Lost Lake trail is the main through route between Waskehegan & Islet Lake, a distance of nearly 15 km. The route out & back can be varied by taking some of the numerous loops that branch off from this main trail. The two main huts, Meadows & Lost Lake are 5.5 & 4 km from Waskehegan & Islet Lake staging areas respectively. These shelters make a nice aiming point for a pleasant couple of hours ski where you can loop back on different trails.</p>
Trail map	Free at trailheads
Website	
Trail conditions & more information	Nthn Alberta ski area report linked to ENSC website
Directions	<p>Waskehegan Staging Area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proceed east on Wye Rd (Hwy 630) past Sherwood Park • After about 15km turn left (north) onto RR 210 (Note there is a white house that looks like an old store opposite this junction). • After 5km turn right into trailhead parking lot <p>Islet Lake Staging Area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instead of turning off to Waskehegan continue east along Wye Rd for another 10 km & the road narrows & becomes TWP Rd 630 • Just after a bend to the right, turn left at the brown sign for Islet Lake & Central staging areas • Go past turn-off to Central Area & proceed for 2 km to the car park <p>Central Staging Area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As for Islet Lake but turn right at sign for Central, then take 1st left & follow road to parking area <p>Blackfoot Staging Area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proceed east out of Edmonton on Hwy 16 to Ukrainian Village • 2 km past the Ukrainian village turn right onto RR195 • Follow road until it ends at the trailhead parking lot <p>Driving time from Edmonton to all areas between 40 - 55 minutes</p>

Mike's Two Skis Worth

The Blackfoot recreational area is easily the most popular out of town trail system for Edmonton area skiers. Most skiers start from the Waskehegan Staging Area. On a good weekend in January the car park here is full to overflowing. Some of these skiers are practising for the Birkebeiner ski race and some of the more energetic head across to the Islet Lake Staging Area & back by various routes.

Personally, I prefer skiing out from the Islet Lake area for several reasons because it is far less crowded, it is prettier & the trails are a little more challenging. One of my favourite options is to head out from Islet Lake taking the trails that hug the lake shore including the Push Lake trail to Elk Push where you cross a fence line. From there I take the hilly Sitsika trail to Meadows hut & then by various routes I ski to Waskehegan. On the return depending on how I feel, I may just take the Lost Lake trail back to Islet Lake.

For more novice skiers I recommend skiing the loops close to Waskehegan. A pleasant couple of hours ski is to head out to the Meadows Shelter a distance of 5.5 km on Lost Lake & then return back via Grouse & Spruce Hollow trails. Note: on all but the warmest days the huts like Meadow and the ones at the trailheads can be very cool, unless someone before you has really stoked the fire up well. Even then, I find them barely warm enough to linger for more than a few minutes to eat a hurried snack.

Many skiers like the Don's Way trail which follows the fence line in the southwest part of the park. I usually avoid this trail on days that have a high wind chill because it is very exposed.

As soon as there is enough snow the groomers make every effort to track-set a trail from Waskehegan to Islet Lake. However, early in the season it may not be track-set much beyond Meadows hut.

A few words of caution, there are a few trails in the middle of the park that are shared with equestrian users that include Round-up, Wapiti & the northern part of Winter. These trails are not usually track-set until a few weeks before the Birkebeiner. Often in the past when I have set out to do a longer ski in this area I have been either forced to retrace my route or trudge along for several kilometres over ungroomed portions of the trail system. For these reasons I do not usually recommend starting from the Central Staging Area because you may be restricted to a few small loops around the trail head with no through routes to the north & west except for the Moose Link trail towards Islet Lake. Those hoping to practice the full Birkebeiner route through from the Ukrainian Village may also be disappointed for similar reasons and also by the fact that the link to the village is only open for a few hours on the day of the race.

If you want to get away from the crowds around Waskehegan and the Meadows hut areas, you can try starting from the Blackfoot Staging Area at the north end of the park. I confess I do not really know the trails in this area all that well. This is also the only area of the park where you can go skate skiing but you may be sharing these trails with dog sledgers. Although this area is pretty, I find for me the skating trails here a bit too narrow with a bit too much of a side camber in places for my style of skate skiing.

The parks staff posts a weekly update on trail conditions that can also be accessed from the Edmonton Nordic website.