

# Gopher the fun of it

A trio of quirky museums makes for a wild trip through southern Alberta. by Eric Rumble



A Richardson's ground squirrel dressed as a mountie — one of the wacky displays at the Gopher Hole Museum in Torrington, Alberta.

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What do you get when you cross a taxidermist, a creation scientist, and an intrepid paleontologist? No, it's not a morbid, morally agitated egghead in taupe fatigues. You get three cosmically different takes on life in the past that will tickle, test, and widen your mind, all of them exclusive to southern Alberta.

Your first stop on this tour is the Gopher Hole Museum, located about 130 kilometres northeast of Calgary in a small, archetypal prairie town called Torrington. The museum's forty-five dioramas cheekily depict the community's social anchors, such as curling at the rink, a sleepy church sermon, a meal at *Barrie & Bernie's Diner*,

and, fittingly, a divisive PETA protest.

The animal rights demonstration is fitting because the seventy-one inert characters that populate the scenes are all stuffed Richardson's ground squirrels. They're dressed in miniature costumes to match their painted backdrops and are paired with props from locals' toy collections. It's taxidermy turned into homespun, hokey comedy. A word bubble inside the hair salon scene reads, "I'm a beautician, not a magician."

Still, there's a serious side to it all. Gophers have been a menace since prairie settlement, destroying crops with such voracity that their tails won bounties from the late 1800s onward. Torrington's muse-

um was shamelessly created to turn pest control into modest tourism revenue, but not without quarrel. Be sure to check out the scrapbook of press clippings and letters of love and loathing.

About an hour's drive northeast of Torrington, in a town called Big Valley, is another controversial, one-of-a-kind attraction.

The Big Valley Creation Science Museum was conceived as a sort of retort to evolution. It calls into question everything from the geological column, to carbon dating, to genome science. The annotated, glass-encased displays offer a window into an alternative perspective that doesn't usually come with such attention

to detail. For instance, the "Dinosaurs and Humans" display shows "considerable evidence" that dinosaurs existed recently and that they co-existed with people.

"We're not telling anybody what to believe," insists museum founder Harry Nibourg, "we're just presenting the evidence that creationism is true."

Your next destination is located a couple of hundred kilometres to the southeast. Procure a bed and breakfast in Patricia at the Patricia Hotel, a jovial and rough-hewn cowboy saloon with branded tables and plenty of old photos. It features grill-your-own beef and buffalo.

In the morning, head east to where the sparse, endless pastures suddenly transform into an undulating wonderland of hoodoos, rills, and tunnels.

Dinosaur Provincial Park was recognized thirty years ago as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its massive fossil

content, its vibrant river habitat (groves of cottonwoods that support some two hundred species of birds, many endangered), and for being Canada's largest badlands area. The stunning landscape might be crawling with hiking, picnicking, and camping tourists, but you can escape the deluge and delve into the park's inner workings on a Bonebed 30 guided excavation.

Launched in 2009, these exclusive full-day tours lead small groups of amateurs on a real dinosaur dig, where they work hands-on in a research quarry with the same tools and techniques as professionals.

Seventy-five million years ago this landscape was a subtropical plain on the coast of an inland seaway joining the Gulf of Mexico and the Arctic Ocean. All of the park's dinosaur remains are extracted from the eighty-metre mid-

section of sand, silt, clay, and volcanic sedimentary rock. Bonebed 30 groups focus on a specific section that is known to contain juvenile centrosaurus fossils. (Centrosaurus was a horned, beak-jawed herbivore, a considerably smaller relative of the triceratops.)

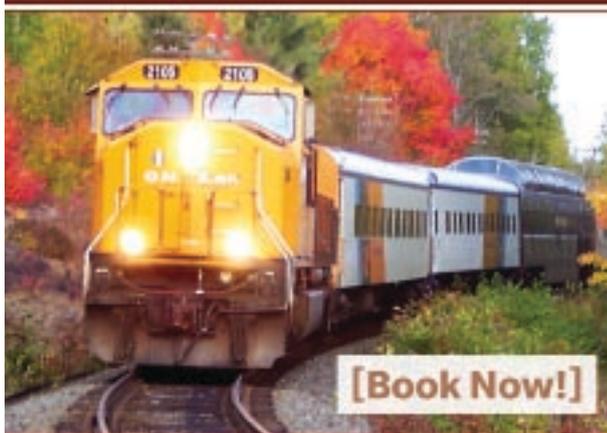
During the summer of 2009, Bonebed 30 field trips unearthed twenty-one specimens, including three teeth, a rib, a nasal horn core, and a large body cavity section. Officials hope to discover larger finds this summer as groups probe deeper into the bedrock.

Whatever the outcome of your dig, these three only-in-Alberta attractions will overturn stones that are worlds apart. ●

Eric Rumble is a contributing editor for *up!* magazine, WestJet's inflight publication. His freelance articles have appeared in *Saturday Night*, the *National Post*, *Adbusters*, *Swerve*, and *THIS Magazine*.

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