



Doug Leighton

The winter of Wells Gray

■ By Trevor Goward

Of moose and giant ice cones

Giant ice cones and moose. That's one answer to the question: why would anyone go, in the dead of winter, to one of the remotest, biggest, and most forbidding wilderness parks in British Columbia?

The appeal of Wells Gray Provincial Park in more benign seasons, particularly summer, is indisputable. In winter, however, most of its 5180 square kilometres (2,000 sq. mi.) of rugged grandeur becomes inaccessible, leaving only about 260 square kilometres (100 sq. mi.), open to the human explorer. And here, on what is mainly the volcanic Murtle Plateau, or the broad southern end of the Clearwater Valley, the spectacular sights of summer take on a bizarre dimension when the snow falls.

Some call it The Bookmark. Every winter it stands out like a wispy bean stalk above the Murtle Plateau. On cold days I've seen it gather up to a height exceeding 305 metres (1,000ft.). No one who travels the Clearwater Valley at this season can fail to notice its towering shaft, though few seem to know for sure what place it marks. Few, that is, except avid cross-country skiers who, from the Dawson Falls Campground near the park entrance, can step-glide six gentle kilometres (four mi.) to its base. This place can only be reached on skis. But more about the Bookmark later.

On a map, Wells Gray Provincial Park stands out as a blank, green blotch west of the South Yellowhead Highway (No. 5) in east-central British Columbia. It's B.C.'s third largest park — big enough to encompass the province of Prince Edward Island. Much of it, even in summer, remains untraveled, its wildlife never having to wonder at the imprint of a hiking boot.

East and north, Wells Gray bristles with unnamed peaks. These, the Cariboo Mountains, a ragged range, rise to more than 2 750 metres (9,000 ft.). In summer, thunder rum-

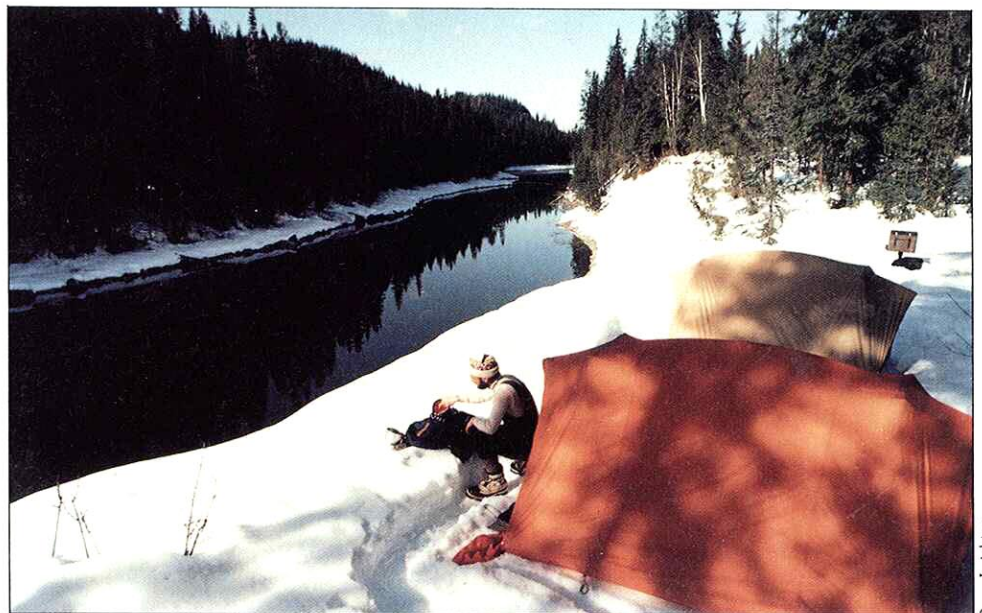
bles over the peaks. In winter, avalanches tumble down the slopes. And in the gaps between the mountains lie the glaciers — colossal remnants of a past ice age. Mountaineers have been slow to take up the challenge of the Cariboo. Not even Garnet Peak, 2 895 metres (9,500 ft.), the most public of Wells Gray's high places, has been scaled by more than a handful of climbers. The southern and western parts encompass much different landscape. Rolling highlands, forests of cedar and hemlock, fir and spruce, and rivers running through the valleys.

The first snows, thick wet flakes, arrive in November. It isn't until December, however, that they really begin to blanket the southern parts of the park reaching a metre's depth (3 ft.) by February.

Wells Gray superintendent Pat Rogers has

long recognized the tremendous potential of the Murtle Plateau for winter recreation. "The area is a natural. It combines all the ingredients in the right amounts: moderate temperatures, negligible wind chill, reliable snows, easy terrain, and great scenery." Under Rogers's direction, a graded system of trails, soon to be complete, will offer some 80 kilometres (50 mi.) of cross-country delight. Included is everything from a level, hour-long jaunt into

Top: even in winter, birdwatchers won't be disappointed at Well's Gray Park where that mischievous freebooter, the gray jay, stays year round. Camping is even possible, where, **below,** a wilderness campsite is occupied in February along the Clearwater River. **Opposite:** Helmcken Falls freezes into an ice cone 20 storeys high.

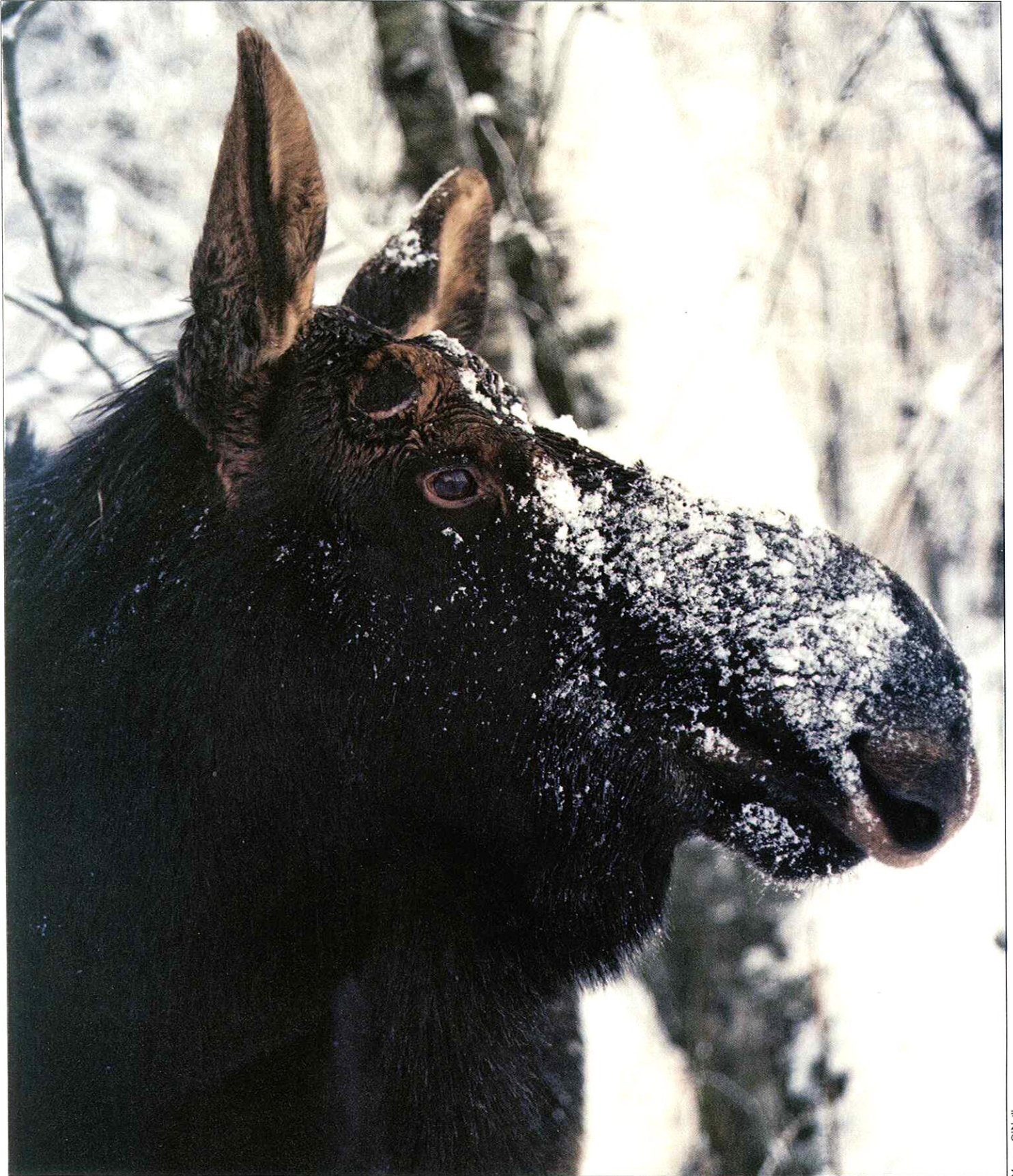


Doug Leighton



Doug Leighton

*In the willow thickets, the peculiar-looking beasts
congregate, eight to the square kilometre.*



Murray O'Neill



Murray O'Neill

Majestic in stature and soulful in looks is the moose, which, weighing more than half a ton, is the largest deer species. **Left:** a bull moose lazes in a Wells Gray willow thicket during early winter just before it loses its heavy load of antlers as shown **opposite**. The best and most common way of getting around the accessible parts of Wells Gray in the winter is via cross-country skis (**below**).

the old Majerus farm, to an afternoon's grunt up the Green Mountain switchbacks (great views, and a five-kilometre [three-mi.] return glide). Last winter saw the opening of one major ski route: a 25-kilometre (15-mi.) loop, site of the first annual Wells Gray Wilderness Marathon. Where else on earth does a race course pass beneath the summits of not one, but two volcanoes?

January is the month of the moose. All summer they have kept aloof, ruminating in highland thickets. Now the deepening snows drive them down into the bottomlands of the southern park. In the best ranges, where the willow thickets are dense, they crowd in at seven or eight per square kilometre.

Moose-watching is one of my favorite winter pastimes. I'm fascinated by their peculiar looks and sheer size — a mature male exceeds half a ton. Though moose do not look their most imposing in January, because, by then, the males have lost their antlers and the coats of both sexes are on the shaggy side, they are nonetheless awesome creatures. And where there are moose, there are other critters: grey jays, black-capped chickadees, maybe even a lone, hungry wolf looking for a meal of moose.

Without the moose there would have been no Wells Gray Provincial Park. In 1926, a fire swept up the Clearwater Valley, reducing about 520 square kilometres (200 sq. mi.) of forest to char. From the ashes rose an overstory of willows, millions of them — a moose's smorgasbord. Before long the small resident herd started multiplying: a dozen animals, a hundred, a thousand. Soon the Clearwater valley became noted as one of the finest hunting areas in North America. In 1939, the government established the park, setting aside

this valley "of excellent fishing and hunting potential coupled with extremely attractive lake and river scenery" as one of the great wilderness preserves of the day.

Times have changed. Though moose hunters are still allowed into Wells Gray in season, by far the greater number of visitors these days are moose watchers and their kind. Green Mountain — a low but prominent ridge dividing the Clearwater valley — is the moose capital of Wells Gray. It's a moose lover's haven. The east face of Green Mountain rises opposite the park road. A pair of binoculars can take you from the roadside into the world of the moose.

By February, winter is in full force in the Clearwater valley. Although the air is already starting to lose its edge, the snow now lies at its deepest. It is during February, too, that Wells Gray's waterfalls are most likely to amaze. At Dawson Falls the sprays have congealed into an ice mask 15 metres (50 ft.) high by 90 metres (300 ft.) wide. It's an odd experience to behold these falls at this time — like studying the face of a master ventriloquist, lips sealed, yet the voice still booming.

Now, what is it that is so astounding under the Bookmark? The winter face of Helmcken Falls, at 140 metres (465 ft.) high, the grandest of Wells Gray's cataracts and, as some contend, the most handsome on the continent. In summer the base of Helmcken Falls is endlessly enshrouded in exploding mist. By February, however, the mists have gone one better: they have solidified into a cone of ice. Although dwarfed by the falls itself, the ice cone stands taller than a 20-storey building and is broader at its base than a football field. Its resemblance to a cinder cone is remarkable. And appropriate, because, first, the roar of the falls sounds like a volcano erupting; second, the 305-metre (1,000-ft.) column of

spray (the Bookmark) towering above it looks like a volcano cloud; and, third, the canyon walls that cradle the cone are themselves volcanic in origin.

The ski to Helmcken Falls, B.C.'s third highest, is an easy one across plateau. Give yourself plenty of time — at least three hours for the round trip. There is no need to rush with the idea of photographing the falls under this or that particular light of day, because the falls remain shaded through winter.

All winter the white snowshoe hare, and the coyote that hunts the hare, have traveled little. The snow is so soft that travel is often more painful than hunger. But when March



Doug Leighton

arrives at Wells Gray the sun's rays strengthen the snow's crust: the hare, the coyote and all other residents begin to move. Suddenly there are tracks everywhere. The round foot-fall of the lynx, the scribbles of a pine marten, and yes, the marks of the timber wolf.

In March, the wolves move down from the park's rugged northern territory, loping easy over the crusted snow. Freed at last from a hungry winter, these elusive animals have come to hunt the moose. Chances are you will never see a wolf. But perhaps to hear one is enough. When the moon is full in March, a pack may gather on a distant knoll and howl into the stillness of the night.

The wolves and wildlife, the Bookmark, the soft, fresh snows and ski trails, the silence and the solitude are a simple answer to the question: why would anyone go, in the dead of winter, to one of the remotest, biggest, and most forbidding wilderness parks in British Columbia? ❁

Trevor Goward, currently naturalist at Manning Provincial Park, was naturalist at Wells Gray Park for 10 years.

Wells Gray Provincial Park, 160 kilometres (100 mi.) north of Kamloops on the South Yellowhead Highway (5), is within a day's drive of major centres such as Vancouver, Prince George, Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta, and Seattle, Washington.

In winter, there are two accesses to the park, the main one is at Hemp Creek 40 kilometres (25 mi.) from the community of Clearwater. The gravel road is ploughed only 6.4 kilometres (four mi.) within the park gate to Dawson Falls, with 10 campsites, the only campground open in winter. The other access is at Mahood Lake, in the park's southwest corner, which can be reached year-round from 100 Mile House on Highway 97 via a 90-kilometre (55-mi.) gravel road.

Wilderness camping is good at some places within the park, particularly along the Clearwater River and Mahood Lake.

Motel accommodation and other services are available at Blue River, Clearwater, and 100 Mile House.

An annual Wells Gray Wilderness Ski Marathon is held in the park every February.

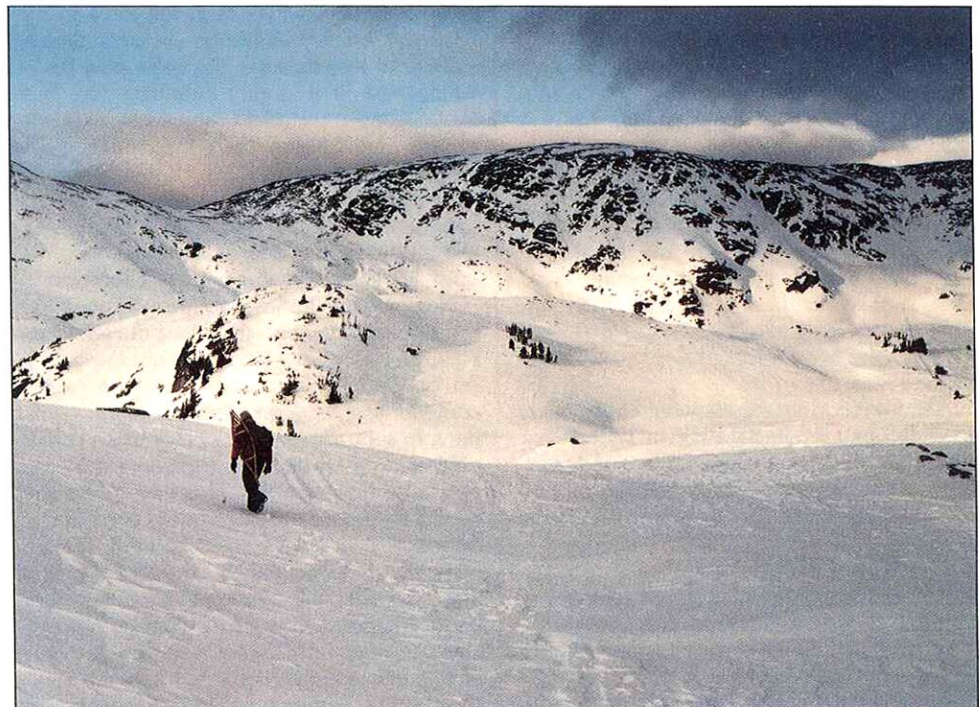
For more information, contact Wells Gray Park Superintendent, Parks and Outdoor Recreation Branch, Box 70, Clearwater, B.C., V0E 1N0.

Top: well camouflaged in its winter coat, a longtailed weasel peeks out of the snow. **Bottom:** the Trophy Mountains near the main entrance to Wells Gray. **Opposite:** Osprey Falls and Clearwater River, which drain Clearwater Lake.



Doug Leighton
Thomas W. Kitchin

*'It's an odd experience
to behold these falls
at this time — like studying
the face of a master ventriloquist,
lips sealed, yet
the voice still booming.'*



Trevor Goward

