

# Alberta Parks

## Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park

*...a wetland of international importance*



Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park preserves a huge wetland that is visited by thousands of waterfowl each year. The park is 486 square kilometres in size.

The Hay-Zama Lakes area has long been recognized by Aboriginal Peoples for its natural values, and conservation groups have worked to protect the area's waterfowl habitat since the 1930s. In 1982, Hay-Zama Lakes was designated a "wetland of international significance" under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The Ramsar Convention promotes wise use of wetlands at 1675 Ramsar sites throughout the world. Hay-Zama was designated a wildland park in 1999.

Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park is "twinned" with Dalai Lake Biosphere Reserve in northeast China. Dalai Lake Biosphere Reserve contains grassland ecosystems and protects wetlands that are also considered internationally important for migratory birds under the Ramsar Convention.

### Location and Access

The park is located in a remote wilderness setting approximately 120 kilometres west of High Level. There are no public roads in the park and the nearest road access is at Habay, an abandoned Dene Tha' settlement along the Hay River on the eastern edge of the park.

### Natural History

#### Aquatic Systems

Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park consists of numerous lakes and ponds separated by the banks of rivers that flow into and through the complex. The Hay River is the only stable water channel and the major outlet. Water levels fluctuate both seasonally and from year to year. During high-water years, the entire wetland is under water; during years when water levels are low, several shallow lakes are distinguishable, separated by extensive areas of emergent vegetation.



*Dalai Lake Biosphere Reserve,  
Photo by Cliff Wallis*

## When Visiting...

### Vegetation

Vegetation in the park is related to the hydrology of the wetland and to survive must be tolerant of flooding. Cattail and bulrush beds grow where the water table is high. Areas of frequent flooding support sedges and grasses; areas with less flooding support willows and other shrubs. The park's rivers are lined with balsam poplar; aspen grows on the higher levees that flood only rarely. Seen from an airplane, the rivers are "ribbons of blue and green" that wind through the wetlands.



### Birds

Hay-Zama is located on three of the four major North American migration flyways. Thousands of ducks, geese and shorebirds rest and feed here during spring and fall migrations. For this reason, Hay-Zama has also been designated an Important Bird Area.

Migrants include the trumpeter swan which is considered an "at risk" species in Alberta. Waterfowl stay to nest in the park's expanses of sedge and bulrush; raptors and Neotropical songbirds nest in the poplars and willows.

### Mammals & Fish

The Hay-Zama area is the only site in Alberta selected for re-introduction of wood bison, listed as an "at risk" species in Alberta. The new herd has thrived, particularly because the wetland sedges and grasses provide critical winter forage. Aquatic furbearers (beaver, otter and muskrat), as well as black bear, deer, fox, coyotes and wolves are frequently seen in the area. Northern pike and walleye are found in the rivers that flow through the wetland. **Cultural**

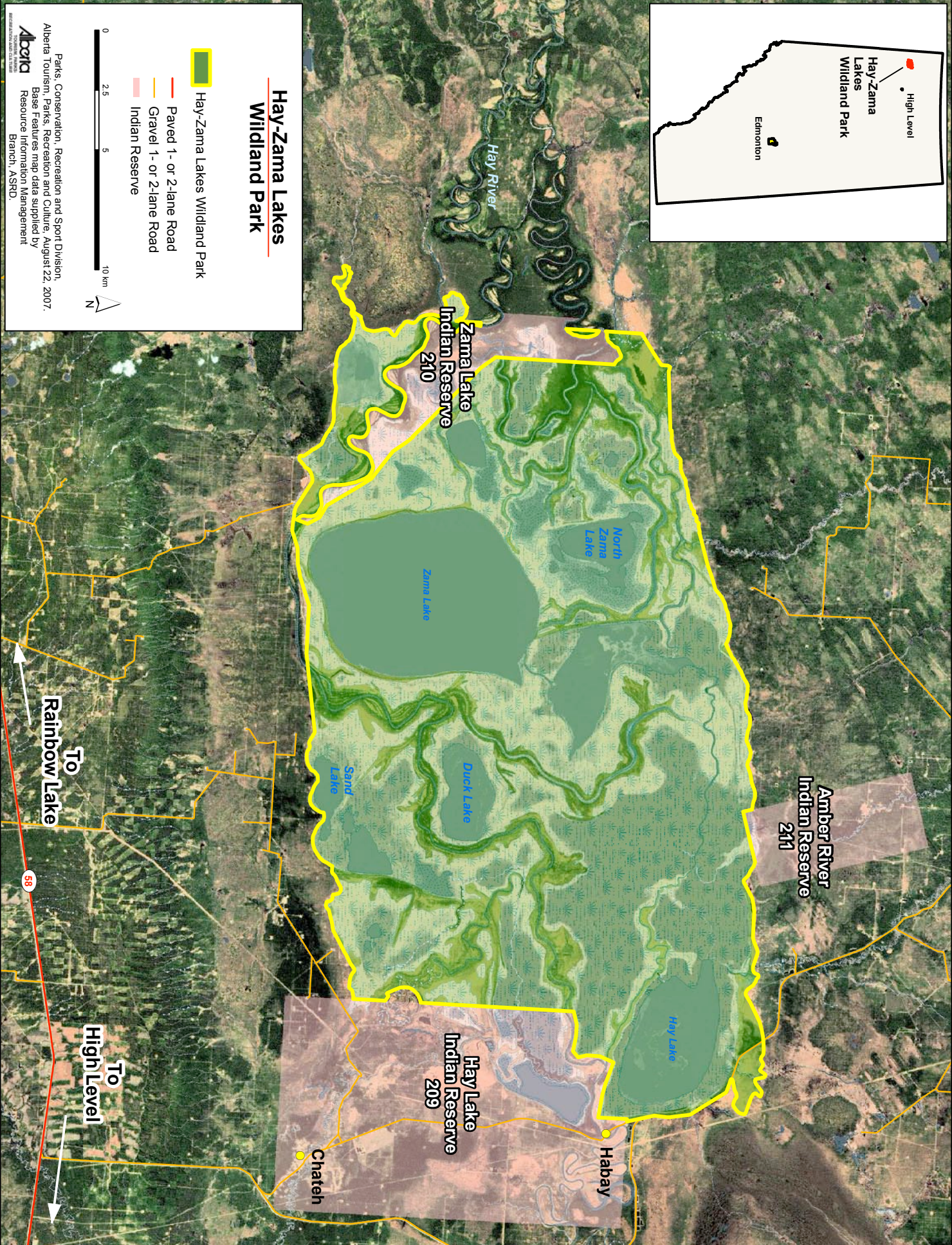
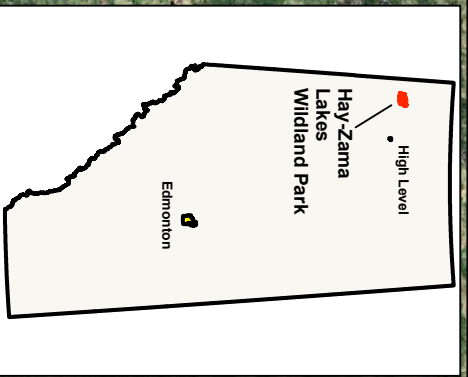
### History

The traditional territory of the Dene Tha', an Athapaskan speaking Aboriginal People, extends from northwest Alberta to northeast British Columbia and into the Northwest Territories, including the Hay-Zama region. As their nomadic way of life began to change in the 1900s, the Dene Tha' established small settlements, then gradually moved to Habay in the 1950s. After a devastating flood at Habay in 1962, Chateh became the main settlement of the Dene Tha' First Nation. The Dene Tha' people have long recognized the value of the Hay-Zama wetlands and support its protection.

### Industrial Use

The wetland sits above a productive oil and gas reserve that has been tapped since the 1960s and several oil and gas companies have developments there. Before the park was established, the Hay-Zama Committee negotiated an agreement that guides accelerated depletion of oil and gas reserves in the Hay-Zama wetlands within a fixed timeframe. Once all existing oil and gas commitments have been honoured and the resource depleted, oil and gas activity will no longer occur in Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park.





Parks, Conservation, Recreation and Sport Division,  
 Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture, August 22, 2007.  
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### **Park Management**

Hay-Zama Wildland Park contains a unique mix of natural, social and economic values. Prior to park designation in 1999, the area was successfully managed by the Hay-Zama Committee, a multi-stakeholder group with representatives from government, the Dene Tha' First Nation, the oil and gas industry and conservation groups. Since 1999 this committee, along with Alberta Parks, has continued to manage the area and the Dene Tha' First Nation and Alberta Parks are developing a cooperative working relationship for management of the park.

The Hay-Zama Committee addresses oil and gas activity, environmental issues, concerns of the Dene Tha' and park management through consultation and consensus-based decision making. The committee is a model for successful management of Crown lands where a mix of seemingly incompatible values exists.

### **Outdoor Recreation**

Hay-Zama Wildland Park is difficult terrain to travel through and park visitors need to be self reliant and familiar with wilderness travel, particularly in the park's wetlands. Local people such as the Dene Tha' are familiar with the area, and may be willing to help visitors navigate through the park.

Fishing, hunting, and bird watching are permitted activities. Motorized watercraft and off-highway vehicle use are also permitted, but visitors are encouraged to keep disturbance to nesting waterfowl and other wildlife to a minimum. Although random camping is normally permitted in wildland parks, the wet terrain of Hay-Zama is not suitable for camping. As of yet, there are no developed camping facilities adjacent to or in the vicinity of the park.

It is recommended that backcountry travelers use camp stoves. Camp stoves are lightweight, compact and efficient, and they leave no scars in the backcountry. In the event a wood fire becomes necessary, learn how to properly construct a wood fire in the backcountry. Never leave a campfire unattended.

### **Did you know....**

- Waterfowl have been monitored at Hay-Zama, by the Alberta Conservation Association, every spring and fall migration since 1995. In spring 2003, over 53,000 ducks and 10,000 geese were counted. and in the fall, about 382,000 ducks and 8500 geese were counted.
- Gulls, sandpipers, and the American avocet also use the wetlands for staging and nesting.
- Wood bison were re-introduced to the Hay-Zama area in 1984. The herd has expanded since then from 29 to around 500.

### **For more information:**

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For information about other parks & protected areas in Alberta, visit [www.albertaparks.ca](http://www.albertaparks.ca).

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