

# Driving Highway 5



## Hay River to Fort Smith, NWT

Welcome to Highway 5 from Hay River to Fort Smith. Your journey is about 267 km, which should take you approximately 3 hours. While there is 114 km of road that is not paved, the highway is adequate in all types of weather and not overly dusty. I hope you find this road as interesting as I do. It isn't just rocks and trees for hours on end. There is something around every corner.

To begin, be sure you have a full tank of gas and a can of bug spray. Something to drink and munch on always adds to travel enjoyment too. This is your last opportunity to get on-the-road supplies before you arrive in Fort Smith.

Kilometer 1 of the 267 km to Fort Smith begins at the junction of Highways 3 and 5 just south of Hay River. Here is where you should reset your odometer or keep track of kilometers travelled by the posts along the road. Each kilometer is marked and every fourth kilometer post shows the distance travelled counting up to 267.

The speed limit along this route, and on all highways in the NWT, is 90 km/h, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, (RCMP) do patrol with radar from time to time. If someone passes you doing 120, they are probably a resident with several demerits on their licence!

## KM Point of Interest

---

- 2 Bridge over the Hay River. The turnoff on your left, just over the bridge leads to one of the few aboriginal reserves in the NWT, but you are continuing straight ahead
- 
- 9 Sandy Creek bridge
- 
- 14 The “S” bend. Stick to the speed limit on this one. More than a few residents have gone off the road on this bend, especially in winter.
- 
- 18-20 Look closely at the telephone poles on the left (north) side of the highway. While the NWT Power Corporation has replaced most of the poles in the last year, there was dramatic evidence of a lightning strike all the way down the line of poles. You can still see some of the splinters at the base of several, and some still have burn marks and pieces missing. It must have been something to see 2 km of poles suddenly spit splinters in all directions.
- 
- 24 Notice the railway bed on the left (north) side of the road. You get glimpses of it frequently along this section. Trains here once carried lead/zinc concentrate from Pine Point, one of the largest mines in the world, to refineries in Trail, British Columbia. Everything disappeared in 1995: rails, trains, ties - everything.
- 
- 27 Birch Creek bridge
- 
- 28 Along this highway you may notice several stages of forest fire burns and the biological succession from one burn year to another. Although a forest appears to be bleak and lifeless just after flames have ripped through it, it is not too long before fresh signs of green life reappear. Forest fires are considered a natural and necessary agent for renewal and forest regeneration in this biome. This section burned in 1983.
- 
- 38 Twin Creek bridge
- Notice the spruce bogs along the way; this is often a sign of an old forest, or one that has not been burned for some time.
- 
- 48 Polar Lake turnoff. This is a small lake developed with a simple campground by some local volunteers from Hay River. There are no services and the sites are rudimentary, but it offers a friendly atmosphere at a nominal fee.
- 
- 54 Bison Management Sign. You might have seen these signs

elsewhere in your travels in the NWT. Bison of Wood Buffalo National Park, (WBNP) are subject to diseases such as brucellosis and tuberculosis, originally imported in 1922 with the plains bison brought here from southern Alberta. Although disease is not common among the Park bison, a disease free herd is maintained in the Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary, north of the Mackenzie River. Bulls have been found to travel up to 450 km from the main herd, so these buffer zones, bison harvest areas for eligible hunters, have been established to keep the herds separate. More information on bison of WBNP can be obtained at the **WBNP Visitor Centre**.

---

56 Buffalo River bridge. There is a pullout on the east end with an outdoor toilet. Next bathroom is another 60 km down the road.

---

60 Buffalo Junction. You will want to turn right and head south to Fort Smith. The road continuing west leads to Fort Resolution. Before Fort “Res”, about 20 minutes west, you would see the abandoned community of Pine Point. In 1965 a new lead/zinc mine was opened in the area, supporting a community of 1500. By 1990 the schools, government buildings, Legion, churches and mine were abandoned leaving nothing but street lamps and blacktop in the middle of the boreal forest.

The small camp at this junction is owned by Nuni, an aboriginal company responsible for road maintenance on these two highways.

Depending on your cell phone provider, you are likely to lose service for the next 200 km.

---

68 The Big Tree. A personal landmark of a Highway 5 veteran, stands proudly to your right. For me it signals the junction is nearing when I am driving away from Fort Smith.

So who was “Smith” of Fort Smith? Fort Smith was named after Donald Alexander Smith or Lord Strathcona who drove the last spike in the great Canadian railway that united this country in the late 1800’s. The traditional Dene name for this area is Thebacha, meaning beside the rapids.

---

74 Advance notice that in about 3 km you should look back over your left shoulder as you head into the turn, (don’t do this if you are the driver) to see an excellent example of a sinkhole.

---

- 
- 77 Sink hole. Look on the north side of the highway just before the turn. I will explain sinkholes in about 20 minutes.

Depending on the time of year you are travelling this road, there can be quite a display of flowers in the ditches. Watch for Wild Roses, varying from near white to deep magenta in colour during the month of June. And in July look for the shades of purple of the Indian Paint Brush and Fireweed.

- 
- 84 You may notice that power lines suddenly appear out of the forest from the north. Power for Fort Smith is generated by a hydro dam on the Taltson River, 180 km east and 60 km north of this spot. Originally almost 80% of that energy went to the Pine Point mines to power the largest electric drag shovel in the world. Just after work on winter evenings, as we came home and started up our ovens and TV's, we could watch the lights in the kitchen dim each time the shovel dug into the open pit mine!

With the town and mine no longer in use, the electricity generated now powers the four communities of this area. In the near future the hydro dam may become an energy source for the vast oil sands around Fort McMurray to the south and the diamond mines to the north of Yellowknife.

- 
- 87 Sandy Lake turnoff. Some hardy souls from Hay River have cabins down that road. There are no camping facilities, but you may like to stop and enjoy a lazy day of fishing here.

NWT fishing licences can be obtained at the **Environment and Natural Resources Office** or at **Kaeser's Hardware** and remember that it is illegal to use barbed hooks in this territory. Stop by **Fruend's Building Supplies** for fishing and camping gear.

Do you see large nests in the power poles? These are ravens' nests, not eagles'; although around here our ravens are almost the size of eagles!

- 
- 97 The first of many WBNP signs. The first time I drove this road I expected to encounter the standard park gate and the usual national park entrance fee, however, WBNP is unique. No fees and no main entrance. As you continue, the road winds in and out of the park, so you will leave and enter the park many more times yet. These signs may seem a little ridiculous, but they are necessary to warn hunters of changing legislation.
-

- 
- 106 Angus Towers. This stop is a must see. The road may not be open in winter, but from spring to late fall this is a pleasant rest stop. It offers flush toilets, a playground for the kids, a nice picnic location and a marvelous sinkhole. The signs explain the geology of Karst Topography, but if you are interested, the WBNP exhibit in Fort Smith will give you a lot more information. If you have ever visited one of the Mayan ruins in the Yucatan or other parts of the Central America, you will recognize this as a “sinote”. We just don’t have any gold or maidens at the bottom of our sinkholes.
- Angus Tower, built in 1965 and decommissioned in the last few years, has been replaced by Raven’s Nest Tower, 7 km further down the road. During the summer, the park fire towers are staffed creating a fire surveillance system for the park. There are future plans in the works to make old Angus a National Heritage Site for your viewing pleasure.

Here the pavement comes to an end but just for an hour, and the road ahead, while occasionally rough in spots, is solid, and adequate in any weather.

Pavement returns at km 215.

- 
- 111 In a sea of sand it is surprising to find a big rock in the middle of the forest. Most of the geology in this area is sedimentary, sand from an ancient seabed that has been hardened over the centuries. The random boulders you see are glacier erratics left behind by receding glaciers. This rock is often subject to graffiti artists, then covered up periodically by a coat of grey paint.

- 
- 113- As you look south through the trees at several spots you might  
116 notice the hills running north and south. On maps these are listed as “eskers”; although strictly speaking an esker is a ridge of stones left by glaciers. These hills are sand, blown into their configuration by prevailing winds as glaciers receded thousands of years ago. Bison use these ridge crests as transportation routes to migrate down to the Peace-Athabasca Delta some 100 km south.

- 
- 119 Nyarling River? This is a river? Stop and read the signs for another example of the effects of Karst Topography. Poor fishing here because the fish are blind! The next toilet stop is at km 160.

Bison alert. Between April and October you should keep your eyes peeled for free roaming Wood Bison for the next 50 km. They may be elsewhere on the road, but this is the section where you

are most likely to see them. You certainly can see the sandy bowls (wallows) where they roll to scratch their backs and fight the bugs.

All summer you can certainly see the buffalo pies left on the road by the herds. WBNP staff sponsor a picnic at **Pine Lake** each July where they hold a contest to determine the best buffalo pie tosser.

---

Can you see the faint trail in the ditch left by the recent installation of fiber optics cable? We may be in the middle of the boreal forest above the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel, but we have high speed internet and one of the highest rates of e-commerce in North America. If you want to check your email while in town, visit the public access computers at the **Mary Kaeser Library**.

---

132- Here is another example of growth after a forest fire. Notice the  
136 characteristics of this burn area, which occurred in 2002.

---

140- This region is definitely boreal forest, but you can see the Trembling  
144 Aspens, or white poplar, that have crept in from the Parklands biome of Alberta.

---

142- This section burned in 2004 with smoke visible in wisps well  
148 into December of that year. New vegetation was readily visible the following summer. Research has shown that one woodpecker species can be found on the darkened trunks within days; mice return within a month and the forest floor sprouts new growth in weeks. Notice how the fire skips sections and burns in sporadic clumps. As harmless and green as it looks now, this burn was severe enough to close the road to tourists and locals for several of our precious summer days.

---

160 Grader Station. The last bathroom before Fort Smith! You are  
about 1 hour from town and 40 minutes from the return of the pavement.

---

164 More buffalo wallows in the sand. Technically these animals are  
named bison. The first settlers from across the ocean named these beasts buffalo for their similarities to the water buffalo.

---

178 Sass River

---

187 Prebble Creek

---

200 Whooping Crane lookout. There is a turnout at the top of the hill.  
Stop to stretch your legs and follow the self guided tour. This is

one of the most famous biological sites in the world, the breeding grounds of the Whoopers. Here you can see the marshy area that was the secret summer nesting ground for one of the most private and largest birds in the world, until a bush pilot doing smoke patrols discovered them in 1945. The flock of majestic white birds was conveniently nesting in an already existing National Park and has been nurtured by Parks Canada and other organizations from near extinction of only 16 birds to a population of over four hundred birds in wild and captive flocks. Be certain to visit the Whooper exhibit at the **Northern Life Museum**.

In late fall you may notice that some of the ‘evergreens’ are red, and by October they have lost their needles. These are larch, known locally as Tamarack, the official tree of the NWT.

---

200- This marsh is one of my favourite sections of the road with lots of  
204 waterfowl in the summer.

---

211 Little Buffalo bridge.

---

215 Little Buffalo Falls turnoff. Another must-see. These falls are small, but pretty. This Territorial Park offers picnic and toilet facilities and overnight camping spots with tent platforms.

You may want to hold out and stay in town at the **Queen Elizabeth Territorial Campground** with showers, flush toilets, pull through sites and hookups for trailers.

The pavement returns.

---

220 Another WBNP park entry sign. There are several more through here.

---

231 Salt Plains turnoff. This is one of WBNP’s best sites, considered significant enough to be declared a World Heritage Site. You will need to travel about 13 km along a narrow gravel road but your reward is a marvelous view of the Salt Plains and a good picnic site with interpretive signage. More info at the Park office in town.

---

234 You are dropping down the side of an ancient riverbank into the Slave River Lowlands. An older version of the Slave formed this escarpment.

---

239 Salt River bridge. This is one of the suburbs of Fort Smith.

---

By this time you are probably dying for a coffee. Visit **Joan's Health and Fitness** for a specialized coffee, fresh juice or fruit smoothie. **Little Shop of Flowers** is also a coffee bar that offers candy and hard ice cream in the summer.

CBC radio is 860 AM

If you plan on doing any hiking in the Fort Smith area it is highly recommended that you purchase a copy of Thebacha Trails by Libby Gunn. You can find this and other books by northern authors and on local topics at **North of 60° Books**.

If you are in the mood for shopping after that long drive, drop into **Nothing to Wear** for young and modern brand names or to **Kaesar's** for more mature fashions.

- 
- 244 Thebacha Campsite turnoff. This small summer settlement for Fort Smith residents also offers tiny log cabins for rent through the **Métis Band Office** in town.

---

For souvenirs of this vacation, stop at **Wally's Drugs** for tee shirts, pins, and beautiful pottery made locally from red Slave River clay.

- 
- 253 Bell Rock. Originally the western terminus for the portage, now a small suburb community. The Northern Life Museum will satisfy all your historical needs on the topic of the Slave River portage between **Fort Fitzgerald** and Bellrock.

- 
- 255 Town dump. Not exactly the wild, but bears have been known to gather here.

- 
- 264 Welcome to the Garden Capital of the North.

Take our Scenic Route past the Slave River and through downtown to the Visitor Information Centre for more information on locations mentioned here and many more services and worthy sights.

Take a second to re-read the bolded names for local services and interesting attractions of the area.

Have a wonderful vacation and enjoy your stay!