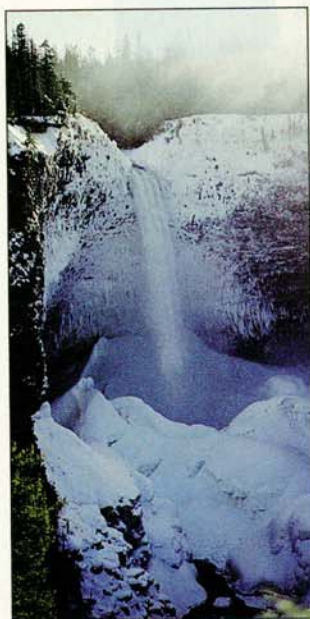


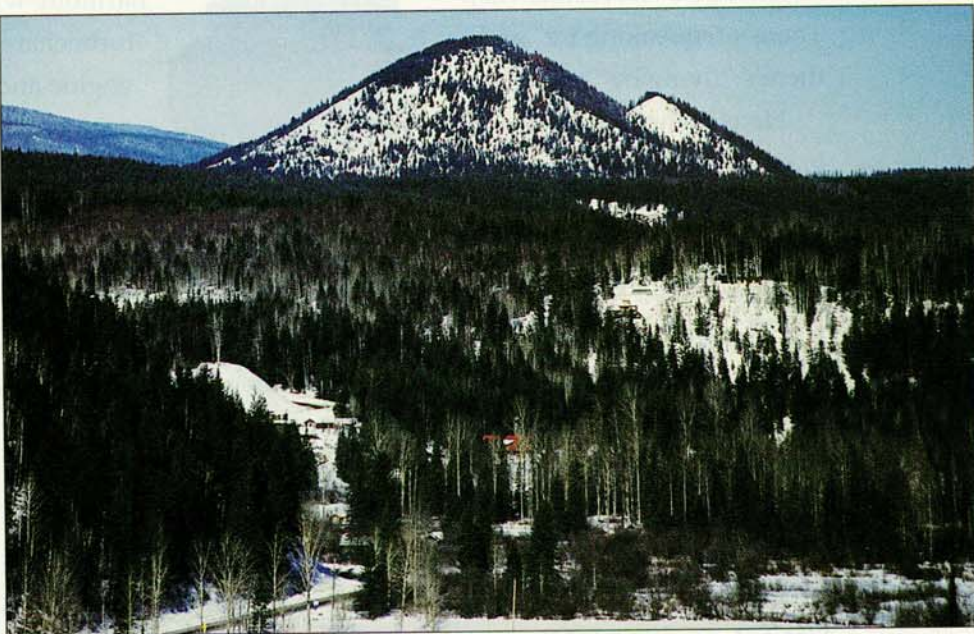
Wells Gray is one of the largest and most diverse parks in British Columbia

ROBERT H. BUSCH

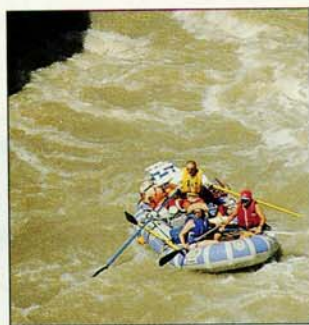


In winter, the spray at the base of 432-foot Helmcken Falls freezes into an ice cone that can be 200 feet high.

**W**hat strikes you most about the entrance



Pyramid Mountain, a 359-foot-high cinder-cone volcano, stands guard on the horizon. Its peak overlooks the Murtle River, Pyramid Rapids and the mist rising over Helmcken Falls.



Adventurers raft down the rollicking Clearwater River.



Moose are frequently spotted feeding in the shallows of the park lakes. Bears and eagles can also be seen at Wells Gray.

to Wells Gray Provincial Park is the volcano standing guard on the horizon. This is not your average park.

British Columbia's largest park sprawls over one million square miles in

the center of the province, too large for an afternoon visit and too huge to be completely covered in this article. Most of the park is virgin wilderness, an exotic mix of extinct vol-

canoes, lava flows, mineral springs, pristine lakes, glistening glaciers and snow-frosted mountains. Even place names within the park are exotic: Pillpill Mountain and Lickskillet

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Creek are examples. Four waterfalls plunge over 100-foot-high cliffs, and one leaps more than 400 feet. The highest mountain in the park scrapes the 9,000-foot level.

The park is often thought of as Canada's answer to Yosemite, but without the crowds. The valley floors are not covered with asphalt and there are no lines to endure. Tourist facilities are offered on the main access road north from the town of Clearwater, and that is the route I took on a recent visit.

I began my day at the information center located at the junction of Provincial Highway 5 and the park road. Hidden off the right side of the park road, the center is easily missed. I loaded up with maps, topographic sheets and an excellent guidebook before heading off.

Six miles north of the information center, I found Spahats Creek Falls, a 200-foot-high waterfall that has carved a deep gorge lined with moss and mist. The trail to the falls winds through feathery hemlocks and soaring cedars, and it is a photographer's dream.

Sixteen miles farther, I entered the park. The entrance is marked only by a sign, with no ticket taker and no entrance booth, a refreshing change from the numerous parks that seem more interested in grabbing your wallet than your attention.

The first major waterfall along the park road is Dawson Falls, a wide curtain of white water formed where the Murtle River plunges over a 65-foot-high bank. In the summer, rangers lead small groups of lucky tourists on a short hike behind the falls, where you can stand open-mouthed, gasping at the tons of water crashing down in front of you.

A few miles farther along the road is the very symbol of Wells Gray: Helmcken Falls, which at 432 feet is the fourth-highest waterfall in Canada. There are two viewpoints: an upper one with easy access, and one at the base of the falls for gung-ho hikers who don't mind an hourlong trek. At the falls' base, centuries of crashing water have created a Dali-like dreamscape of thick fog, through which

cliff swallows swoop and glide like tiny black ghosts. In the winter, an ice cone 200 feet high is built up at the base of the falls.

The summit of Pyramid Mountain, the 359-foot-high cinder cone visible at the park's entrance, is attained after a 1½-hour hike that starts from the main road just a couple miles north of the Helmcken Falls turnoff. From its peak, you share a panoramic vista with a few scrubby lodgepole pines. To the east, the Murtle River scrambles through Pyramid Rapids. To the north loom high ridges dusted with snow, even in July. And to the south, a small puff of mist hovers over the site of Helmcken

### BEFORE YOU GO

**T**he town of Clearwater is the main kick-off point for Wells Gray Provincial Park, which is located 250 miles northeast of Vancouver, British Columbia. The park's visitor center is open daily during the summer. For more park information, contact Wells Gray Information Center, Box 1988, R.R. 1, Clearwater, British Columbia VOE 1N0, Canada; (250) 674-2646. Park permits are not required.

A great guidebook, *Exploring Wells Gray Park*, by Roland Neave, is available from the visitor center, or from the Friends of Wells Gray Park, Box 1386, Kamloops, British Columbia V2C 6L7, Canada.

RV campsites are available at Clearwater Lake and Falls Creek campgrounds within the park and in nearby commercial campgrounds. Consult the 2000 *Trailer Life Directory* for current campground listings. For more provincial parks information, contact British Columbia Parks, 1210 McGill Road, Kamloops, British Columbia V2C 6N6, Canada; (250) 851-3000. Web site: [www.elp.gov.bc.ca/bcparks](http://www.elp.gov.bc.ca/bcparks).

For additional travel information, call British Columbia Tourism, (800) 663-6000. Or visit the Web site: [www.snb-res.com](http://www.snb-res.com). **CIRCLE 218 ON READER SERVICE CARD.**