

Brack Country

by Jeff Gailus » photograph by Daryl Benson

In Canada, saltwater is generally associated with the shining seas that define the east and west coasts. But in a remote stretch of northeast Alberta, a mysterious source of landlocked brine has created a landform found nowhere else in the country. • Located in Wood Buffalo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Salt Creek and its surrounding salt plains have been sculpted by saline water percolating up from underground salt deposits left 390 million years ago by a receding sea. Its briny water rises to the surface and evaporates in the hot summer sun, leaving

behind a blanket of ancient salt. In the dry season, these water springs leave salt mounds up to two metres tall. • From the air, Alberta's solitary salt plains appear like a lifeless desert surrounded by an ocean of boreal forest. But on the ground, evidence of a unique, brackish ecosystem found only in coastal environments is everywhere. Salt-tolerant grasses and shrubs, including the anemone-like sea blight, have adapted to the salinity, and wolves, bears and moose leave their footprints in the primordial crystals. In the air, impossibly, is the smell of the sea. **w**

