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Sulphur mountain trail report

As the temperatures start to warm up in spring the lower valley trails around the town site of Banff are some of the first ones to free up of snow. March is still full on winter with trail options that you can snowshoe or cross country ski on. April is limited for hiking, more options become available in May but the higher sub-alpine and alpine trails remain snow bound into late June or longer. For more information about visiting during the spring see our post on the pros and cons of Banff and Jasper National Parks in the shoulder season of April and May. The trails listed below are some of the ones that start to become snow free as the spring season progresses. However, there’s no way to know what they will be like ahead of time. Conditions can vary from compacted snow to partially snow covered or there can be icy, wet and muddy sections. There’s often recommendations in early spring to wear ice cleats on your footwear to prevent slipping. It’s an important time of year to check trail reports before you hike. Find out the latest conditions, closures and wildlife sightings. There are higher risks for avalanches in late winter and spring, check for current warnings. You can stop in at one of the Parks Canada visitor centers in Lake Louise or Banff to get trail reports when you arrive or check online. Banff And Lake Louise Visitor Center Information Banff Trail Conditions Important Bulletins Options For Banff Area Trails In The Spring Fenland Trail – a flat 2km loop at the edge of town. It goes through an old growth forest and along 40 Mile Creek. Trailhead: from Mt. Norquay Road you can access the trailhead from the bridge near the picnic area. It’s on the opposite side of the road from the Fenlands Recreation Center. Bow River Trail – mostly paved pathway that offers scenic views along the Bow River. Start at Central Park at the corner of Buffalo Street and Bow Avenue. Marsh Loop – an easy 2.3 km walk that starts from the parking lot of the Cave and Basin Historic Site. It offers views of Mount Norquay and the Bow River. Sundance Canyon – 4.3km’s with an elevation gain of 145 meters. Allow approximately 1.5 hours. Starting at the Cave and Basin Parking lot, 200 meters beyond the complex to the trailhead. The trail descends through the forest to the Bow River. For the first while it follows along the river and its side channels with views of Mount Edith. Then it climbs gradually through the forest. The last 2.1 km’s is a loop leading to the canyon and then loops back. Tunnel Mountain Summit – the trail to summit this small mountain sitting in the town of Banff can be done by most reasonably fit individuals. It’s 2.3km’s one way with a 300 meter elevation gain. Allow for approximately 3 hours return trip. Moderately steep switchbacks lead to the summit where you get spectacular views overlooking the town and the surrounding mountains. The lower trailhead can be accessed from St. Julien Road below the Banff Center. The upper trailhead from Tunnel Mountain Drive (closed to vehicles in winter) Be sure to check the conditions, this trail can be very icy in spring requiring ice cleats. For more information see Summit A Mountain Right In The Town Of Banff On The Tunnel Mountain Hike. Stewart Canyon – A wide easy trail that’s 1.5 km one way to the foot bridge that crosses the Cascade River. The walk offers views of Lake Minnewanka and Stewart Canyon. Trailhead: starts at Minnewanka parking lot. follow the paved pathway in the day use area past the picnic tables and the boat docks. Allow one hour, no elevation gain. This trail is accessible year round, but can be icy in spring. Johnson lake – Johnson Lake is accessible off the Lake Minnewanka Scenic Drive, not far from Lake Minnewanka. It’s one of the earlier trails to be snow free. The 2.8 km loop around the lake is an easy trail that sticks close to the shoreline most of the way. Starting from the Johnson Lake parking lot near the picnic area. Johnston Canyon – one of Banff’s most popular hiking trails. The trail to the lower falls is 1.2km’s one way with just 30 meters of elevation gain. Allow 1 hour return. The Upper Falls is 2.4 km’s one way with 120 meters of elevation gain. Allow 2 hours round trip. In the spring this trail quite often requires ice cleats for your footwear to deal with the icy conditions. Johnston Canyon is located 22 km’s west of Banff on the Bow Valley Parkway (Hwy 1A). The trailhead starts from the parking area. See our other posts for more details on this hike. Johnston Canyons Frozen Waterfalls and Tips For Hiking Johnston Canyon In Spring, Summer and Fall. Sight Seeing Options, Attractions And Activities In The Banff Area April and May are a time of transition from winter into spring. Activities can be somewhat limited, other than skiing the winter ones are ending and the warmer weather ones have not quite started yet. As the end of May approaches more activities become available. Below are some options of what is available to do during this time. Cascade Ponds – Near the start of the Lake Minnewanka Scenic Drive this is a large open area with several man-made ponds and views of Cascade Mountain. It’s a nice place to go for a walk anytime of the year. Banff Sulphur Mountain Gondola – the gondola is open year round. Take the ride up to the top of Sulphur Mountain to get spectacular views overlooking the town of Banff and several mountain ranges. Note: The gondola closed for a renovation project and will re-open with limited upper terminal facilities on May 1, 2016. It will officially have it’s grand opening with full access on August 1, 2016. See our post on Tips For Experiencing The Banff Sulphur Mountain Gondola. Upper Banff Hot Springs – conveniently located right near the Banff Gondola the hot springs are also open year round. Enjoy a soak in the warm waters of the outdoor pools while gazing at the beautiful mountain views. Historic Banff Springs Hotel – stop by the historic hotel known as the “Castle of the Rockies.” the first two levels are open to the public. There’s some interesting shops and on the second floor an area showcases old photos and memorabilia. Hoodoo Viewpoint – On Tunnel Mountain Road near the campground there’s a paved trail that goes past several viewpoints, you can look down at the Hoodoos from above and views of the river and mountains. The Hoodoos are geological rock formations created by years of erosion. Bow Falls – walk along the Bow River to where it meets with the spray river below the Banff Springs Hotel. The falls may be frozen or partially frozen during the spring months. Surprise Corner – take a beautiful photo of the Banff Springs Hotel from this iconic spot on Tunnel Mountain Drive. For more information see our post on What’s The Surprise At Surprise Corner. Vermilion Lakes – accessible in every season the Vermilion Lakes Road goes past a series of wetland lakes. It doesn’t matter if the lakes are frozen, partially frozen or thawed it’s a beautiful area to come to and enjoy the pretty scenery and views of Mount Rundle. A beautiful spot to try and catch the sun setting or see the sunrise. From the Norquay Road access into the town of Banff, Vermilion Lakes Road is your first right. It runs parallel to the Trans Canada Highway for 4.6km coming to a dead end. Cascade Gardens– located at the south end of Banff Avenue across the bridge. The gardens share 12 acres of land with the parks historic administration office. Although you won’t see any flowers in bloom until closer to June it’s still a nice place to go for a walk, even if there might be some snow hanging around still. See our post on Escape The Crowds Of Banff Avenue In Cascade Gardens. Historic Cave and Basin Site – this is the birthplace of Banff National Park, built around two hot springs. You can walk through a tunnel to the hot springs in a cave and see the Basin hot springs and bathhouse. Buffalo Nations Luxton Museum – a museum and gift shop. Offers chances to see native artwork, ornate costumes, quilt work and hunting equipment. Banff Park Museum – a natural history museum built in 1903. It has collections of animals, birds and fish found in the park. Whyte Museum Of The Canadian Rockies – features art, culture and history of the Canadian Rockies. Galleries, archives, museum shop and changing exhibitions. Banff Center – a variety of excellent entertainment from jazz, opera, classic music, mountain based movies and speaking events. Check their schedule to see what’s on during your visit. Popular events sell out fast. In mid-May they host a children’s festival that includes face painting and all kinds of activities. Horseback Riding – starting in May horseback trail rides start operating in Banff. Banff Trail Riders has trail rides along the Bow River and other rides through scenic areas of the park. Bike Riding – more likely in the month of May you can begin to bike ride around the town site area of Banff. There’s several places in town that offer rentals. Lake Minnewanka Boat Cruise – the boat cruise on Lake Minnewanka usually starts up in early May. You can enjoy the scenery of the lake and mountains. The cruise takes you to a spot called Devil’s Gap, a passage in the Cascade Mountains that’s otherwise only accessible by backpacking. Spring Skiing – the Canadian Rocky Mountain ski resorts boast one of the longest ski seasons. There’s 3 ski resorts to choose from in Banff National Park, the Lake Louise Ski Resort and Mount Norquay and Sunshine Village near the Banff town site. The hills offer runs right through April and well into the month of May with Sunshine Mountain staying open the longest through the Victoria Day long weekend in May. Ski Resort Activities For Non-Skiers – in addition to spring time skiing some of the other snow/winter activities at the ski resorts are still available during April and May such as tubing, snowshoeing tours and scenic chairlifts. For more details see our post on Winter activities in Banff and Lake Louise for non-skiers. Take note that other winter activities such as ice skating, dogsledding and horse drawn sleigh rides are coming to an end in April. They may still be available during the early part of the month depending on the conditions. Spring Time Hiking Trails In Lake Louise The hiking in the Lake Louise area in the spring is very limited. Most of the trails are at a high elevation and covered in snow into the month of June or later. There’s also several areas with a high avalanche risk. Always check the conditions beforehand, you’ll see a lot of the trails have a recommendation for ice cleats in April to prevent slipping on icy sections. Lake Louise Shoreline Trail – easy 2km’s one way, allow one hour round trip. The trail starts at the front of the lake. The conditions can vary from compacted snow to having icy or slushy sections as it begins to thaw. Varying amounts of snow usually remain on the trail into the month of May. When standing where the Chateau Hotel faces the lake follow the trail along the right hand side of the lake. You can walk as far as you like towards the back of the lake, returning the same way. There is a bit of a steep hill towards the end that you may want to avoid if the conditions are slippery. The Fairview Lookout trail – only gains 100 meters in elevation so it may be accessible in the later spring. It can be a combination of compact snow and icy sections better suited to ice cleats until more thawing occurs. It’s 2km round trip, allow 45 minutes to one hour. When facing the lake from the Chateau hotel follow the shoreline trail left to the boathouse. The trail starts there, it climbs for about 1/2 km until you reach a trail junction. Keep left and follow it until you reach the platform that offers incredible views of the lake and the Chateau hotel in the background. Scenic Drives Many of the scenic drives that can be done in the summer months are accessible in the spring, the conditions can vary with possibly more winter like conditions in the early spring. There are some seasonal road closures and restrictions, but still many options to see beautiful scenery and chances to spot wildlife. Check out our post on Scenic Drives In Banff National Park. for more details on some the roads that might be good spring time options such as the Bow Valley Parkway, Minnewanka Scenic Drive, Vermilion Lakes Road, and Mount Norquay Drive.

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