

BLESS Newsletter

December 2019

This is the quarterly newsletter informing the BLESS membership and supporters about ongoing environmental issues, events and achievements around Big Lake. We hope the membership finds this newsletter useful and interesting. Comments, questions and suggestions from anyone reading this newsletter would be much appreciated. Please submit your feedback to the BLESS board of directors at info@bless.ab.ca.

About BLESS

Current Board Members

President – Al Henry

Vice Presidents – Pat Collins, Linda Brain

Treasurer – Miles Constable

Secretary – Dave Burkhart

Directors at Large – Lyn and Tony Druett, Dr Bob Lane, Jillian Dyck, Teresa Marshall

Regular Board Meetings

These are usually held at the VASA boardroom, 25 Sir Winston Churchill Avenue, at 7:00pm on the first Wednesday of every month. In addition to board members, all members of BLESS are welcome to attend to learn more about current initiatives and to express their opinions.

Important 2020 Dates

Next board meeting - January 8th

Annual General Meeting - mid March

World Migratory Bird Day Event - May 16th

Financial Report

BLESS is in reasonably good financial shape at the moment, however, we will have to secure a grant to help us pay for next year's Summer Nature Centre Coordinator as the AGLC has moved the date of our next Casino to after next summer. This presents a significant problem as Casino funds pay for the Coordinator.

BLESS received a STEP grant to help pay for this year's SNC Coordinator, unfortunately the current government of Alberta has cancelled the STEP Grant program so next year we will be short about \$2,400 for programming.

BLESS has submitted an application to the Alberta Real Estate Foundation for a grant to pay for the development of a manual on ways to create neighbourhoods and roads that will reduce human-wildlife interactions in the developing subdivisions around the lake, and for the Ray Gibbon Drive expansion. The BLESS board will keep members informed on how that proceeds.

BLESS has also applied for a grant to help pay for the mammal, amphibians and reptile guide to the Park. This is under development by Linda Brain, Lyn Druett and Miles Constable.

Rachel Notley Visits Big Lake

The following is a report that was featured in the St Albert Gazette:

BLESS worried for platform funding, Lois Hole Park improvements

NDP Leader Rachel Notley paid a visit to the park Tuesday

Nov 1, 2019 2:00 PM By: Jennifer Henderson

Questions are fluttering around funding to Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park after the release of the provincial budget.

On Tuesday, NDP Opposition Leader Rachel Notley paid a visit to St. Albert and stopped at the park to meet some of the members of the Big Lake Environment Support Society (BLESS) to discuss what the provincial budget could mean for the park.

Notley met with St. Albert NDP MLA Marie Renaud, who organized the visit to the city, along with Al Henry, president of BLESS and Linda Brain, vice-president of BLESS.

Lois Hole Park was given \$160,000 by the former NDP government in March to add new trails and accessible washrooms to the park just west of St. Albert.

Notley and Renaud toured the park together with Henry, who said recent cuts to spending from the province makes BLESS unsure if the projects they had planned on will be completed.

“With the budget that was just (released), there ain't nothing that anybody can be 100 per cent positive about, so we will find out,” Henry said.

“It was approved. Whether or not it's going to come from the new government is questionable.”

Renaud decided to bring Notley out to Lois Hole Park because she believes it's a really unique urban feature that a lot of people don't know about and is concerned with the new government's plans to tackle climate change.

“We know that parks funding as a whole has been reduced. We know that money for monitoring and regulating development to ensure that it's done in a sustainable and accountable way – that has been significantly cut, whether you're talking about the AER (Alberta Energy Regulator), whether you're talking about the Ministry of Environment,” Notley said.

Henry noted that with a reduced amount of funding to municipalities, he worries about the rebuild of the park viewing platform that is slated for construction this winter. BLESS raised \$100,000 for the platform and the city is spending another \$340,000 to get the job done.

The president of BLESS said because they are “just little guys,” they are hoping to sneak under the radar and not have the park funding cut.

Henry hopes the platform will get built and will be finished before International Migratory Bird Day, which takes place in April. Lois Hole Park is the fifth most important birding area in Alberta and the event brings in hundreds of tourists from across the world.”

- Jennifer Henderson joined the St. Albert Gazette in 2016. She writes about municipal, provincial and federal politics; court and crime; general news and features.



NDP Leader Rachel Notley, third from left, visits St. Albert this week.

BLESS Mammal, Reptile and Amphibian Guide Book

After the success of the BLESS Bird Guide and Plant Guide books for the Big Lake area, a third book is now under production. Mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, are being researched. Text has been written, photos are being assembled and it is now being put together into our book template.

Contributions of photographs of any of these animals that could possibly be incorporated in the book would be welcomed. Please submit them to Linda Brain at lindabrain49@gmail.com . We hope to have this new guide book ready for sale and distribution by the spring of next year.

Big Lake Community League

The Edmonton neighbourhoods in the Big Lake area including Hawks Ridge, Starling, Trumpeter, Kinokamau Plains Area, Kinglet Gardens, and Pintail Landing, recently formed a Community League for their area: Big Lake Community League. The mission of the Big Lake Community League will be to enhance the quality of life for residents that make up the Communities of Big Lake by being a part of the community league movement that: organizes affordable recreation, sports, and social activities within our League; assists in the creation of community assets including play, recreational and gathering spaces

such as a playground, community rink, and community hall; provides a multi-dimensional communication network to share pertinent information on relevant community issues and emerging trends to Members; promotes, facilitates, and celebrates volunteerism within their League. The Big Lake Community League is part of the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues.

If you'd like to learn more, you can send an email at biglakecommunityleague@gmail.com or find them on Facebook: Big Lake Community League.

BLESS looks forward to working with the Big Lake Community League to promote stewardship and education of the Big Lake area. Teresa Marshall is now a Director at Large of both organizations and can ensure that we will work closely to achieve our common goals.

The directors of BLESS were invited to attend the initial AGM of the Community League. BLESS President Al Henry used the opportunity to ask the guest speaker, Councillor Andrew Knack, a probing question regarding the possible construction of the trail system linking the Big Lake Communities to the Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park.

Structural Repair of the BLESS Viewing Platform and Possible Signage



With regard to the structural repair contract here is the latest information that was provided by the City Project Manager:

- There are still no changes to the planned start date of January 12, 2020 for site mobilization but that date is still highly dependent on the weather we get through December and early January. There needs to be sufficient freezing before construction can begin.
- The City now has all the environmental permits that were needed in place.
- The Alta Link Crossing Agreement is in place.

- The City is currently in the process of finalizing the Fortis Crossing Agreement.

In addition to this repair contract, BLESS is now working closely with City of St Albert on the details of possible signage to be installed on the platform once the structural work has been completed. The main theme of this signage will be to provide information regarding bird species that migrate to, from and through Alberta, and are possible visitors to the Big Lake area.

There are more than 100 different species that visit Alberta on an annual basis. The signage around the sides of the platform will show details regarding 30 to 40 of these species. In addition to describing the birds and their behaviour while in Alberta, it will also outline the furthest destinations of the major migrations, including some that extend as far south as the southern end of South America, and as far north as the Arctic. We are looking at ways to display these migration routes and destinations on a horizontal display board mounted in the centre of the platform. The signage will specifically target people of all ages and will be wheelchair accessible.

Ray Gibbon Drive Widening to Four Lanes

City of St. Albert plans to widen Ray Gibbon Drive to four lanes will start in 2020. The first stage will extend from 137 Ave to just north of the intersection with LeClair Way. The second stage, as far as McKenney Avenue, is currently planned to be constructed in 2022, including widening the bridge over the Sturgeon River. The Board of BLESS is particularly concerned that the design of the stretch of the road adjacent to the important natural areas surrounding Big Lake will include measures that mitigate the potential impacts on wildlife.

Since the road's original construction there have been several vehicle/wildlife collisions recorded, including moose, deer, coyotes, and numerous smaller animals. The following is a list of issues and possible suggestions that the BLESS Board is considering in order that future conflicts can be minimized. There are definite pros and cons to all of these suggestions, so we would very much like to have input from the membership regarding each of them.

- Wildlife connectivity between the White Spruce Park to the east, Red Willow Park West and Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park.
- Fencing on one, or both, sides of the road.
- Multi-use trails inside or outside the fencing.
- Wildlife corridors, including on the north side of the river under the Ray Gibbon bridge.
- Uninterrupted Red Willow Trail access under the bridge on the south side of the river.
- Reduced speed limit on critical sections of the road.
- Full implementation of provisions noted in the 2003 Environmental Impact Assessment.
- Ultimate design for Ray Gibbon - 8 lane freeway with grade separated intersections and closure of 137 Ave.

The City of Edmonton has taken steps to mitigate collisions with wildlife in the vicinity of big Lake. Following is a photo of a wildlife corridor under Winterburn Road between the Hawks Ridge and Trumpeter neighbourhoods and another photo showing where a wildlife corridor might potentially be built under the Ray Gibbon Drive Bridge:



Grey Nuns White Spruce Park

The City of St Albert held an open house on October 8th regarding the proposed White Spruce Park which will be located on the east side of Ray Gibbon Drive north of the River. Following is an update regarding this project that was recently sent out by Margot Brenneis at the City:

Over 140 surveys were completed through the open house at the Kinsmen Banquet Centre on October 8th, 2019 and the on-line survey that was available from October 8-22, 2019. ISL Engineering and the City are currently reviewing the survey results and will be using this feedback to improve the plans and ensure a strong vision for the park. A summary of the information collected from the engagement as well as a revised park plan will be posted on the City website in 2020.

The construction of this project is currently unfunded however is on the 10-year capital plan.

Bird Count Events

Two bird counts are taking place this winter, one this week and the other in February. A Christmas Bird Count for Kids takes place Saturday, December 14 in Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park. Sponsored by Nature Canada, Nature Alberta and BLESS, the count is intended to collect data for the Big Lake area while providing an opportunity for children to explore nature in our back yard. Volunteers from BLESS will be participating and the public is welcome to attend. See the poster for more details.

Birds Canada is also conducting the “Great Backyard Bird Count”, a four day annual event taking place February 14-17, 2020. The event provides a snap shot of where birds are around the world. Last year 6,699 species were recorded from 204,921 checklists submitted. Birds Canada advises that we’ve lost 1 in 4 birds in North America since the 1970s – but people can help by participating in bird counts like the Great Backyard Bird to monitor birds. They ask

BIRDS CANADA
OISEAUX CANADA

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT FOR KIDS 2019

Join us at this free family-oriented event!

Saturday, December 14, 2019
9:00 am - 11:00 am
Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park
St. Albert

Meet at the shelter near the John E. Poole boardwalk
There is no charge to attend but please pre-register by emailing naturekids@naturealberta.ca

You'll help collect bird data for the Big Lake area while exploring nature in your backyard.

This event is part of the NatureHood program and is brought to you by Nature Alberta's Nature Kids program, Nature Canada and BLESS (Big Lake Environment Support Society).

Learn more at <https://naturecanada.ca/enjoy-nature/your-naturehood/>

Canada

U.S. Program Partner: **SonomaBirding** Supported in Canada by: **ARMSTRONG** **THE W. GARFIELD WESTON FOUNDATION**

people to count birds for at least 15 minutes on one or more days of the count and enter their sightings at BirdCount.org. The information gathered by tens of thousands of volunteers helps track changes in bird populations on a massive scale. Birds Canada is a partner in the Great Backyard Bird Count, a joint project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society.

Instructions on how to participate can be found at http://gbbc.birdcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2016Updates_English_DownloadableInstructions.pdf.

Last year's results can be found at <https://gbbc.birdcount.org/all-summaries/2019-gbbc-summary/>.

Photos From Around Big Lake

We leave you in this issue with a few photos, by BLESS director and photographer Bob Lane, of wildlife that make their home in our area this time of year and encourage all to get out and experience the beauty of nature regardless of the season.

