

BLESS December 2021 Newsletter

This is the quarterly newsletter informing the BLESS membership 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.



Current Board Members

President – Al Henry
Vice Presidents – Pat Collins, Tony Druett
Treasurer – Miles Constable
Secretary – Dave Burkhart
Directors at Large – Lyn Druett, Linda Brain, Jillian Dyck, Teresa Marshall, Meagan Dyck, Nick Parayko

Regular Board Meetings

These are usually held at 7:00pm on the first Wednesday of every month. During the current pandemic the board meetings are being conducted using ZOOM. In addition to board members, all members of BLESS are welcome to “attend” the meetings. Anyone wanting to be added to the list of ZOOM invitees should submit their request to info@bless.ab.ca.

Financial Report

Financially BLESS is in good shape thanks to current sponsors: Investors Group, TD Friends of the Environment and the Edmonton Community Foundation. Donations and grants from sponsors have paid for our summer nature interpretation program and Migratory Bird Day celebrations over the last two years. Nature Alberta paid for part of our printing costs for our fall Migratory Bird Day, and we continue to receive donations through CanadaHelps. As we completed a casino in the fall we should have enough money to cover our summer programs for two years.

The BLESS Year in Review -- 2021 Highlights

Big Lake Surface Level

Throughout 2021 the water level of both the Sturgeon River and Big Lake has been very low. This is due to low rainfall amounts and, possibly, also due to the removal of some beaver dams downstream from St Albert in the fall of 2020. One positive result of this was that there was no seasonal flooding of the Red Willow Trail for the first time in almost a decade.

Bird Sightings

Another positive result of the low lake level was that Big Lake became an ideal fishing ground for numerous bird species. A mudbank was revealed out on the lake quite close to the BLESS viewing platform. That area, and all along the river shoreline, was a favorite haunt for several species of wading birds, including American Avocets, Lesser Yellowlegs, etc. It was not unusual to be able to view as many as 5 Great Blue Herons from the viewing platform at one time. Other regular visitors to the lake included a family of Bald Eagles, Red Tailed Hawks and as many as 200 Pelicans. In the late Fall the lake hosted several hundred Tundra Swans.

Other Wildlife Sightings

The low water surface levels may have also contributed to an apparent increase in beaver activity along the Sturgeon River. A new beaver lodge has been constructed close to Elke's Point on the promontory northeast of the BLESS viewing platform. Muskrats have been abundant and there have been numerous moose sightings around the eastern shoreline of Big Lake.

Numerous Public Visitors

In response to the Covid 19 restrictions many members of the public have taken up outdoors activities, including hiking, biking, canoeing, photography and enjoying nature. The number of visitors to Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park (LHCPP) has increased exponentially. At the beginning of the summer there were almost traffic jams of boaters, canoers and paddle boarders on the river and out on the Lake. Many people using the Park facilities were first time visitors and many of them came from the City of Edmonton and further afield. The RV park adjacent to Riel Park was full for most of the summer.

BLESS Activities

In the summer BLESS operated its normal summer program for kids and in September we were finally able to hold a somewhat downsized World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) event. We recently participated in a fund raising Casino (details given below), and in the spring we were involved in making presentations to the St Albert City Council regarding the revised Municipal Development Plan (MDP). Reports regarding all these activities can found in the previous newsletters.

Youth Group Visits

As a sequel to the BLESS summer program and the WMBD event, three local youth groups organized separate visits to LHCPP in October. In each case the group assembled at the north end of the parking lot just after 6:00pm and then proceeded out to the BLESS viewing platform in time to see the sunset over the lake. Members of BLESS acted as their guides. The first group to visit were approximately 10 Brownies and their 3 leaders. The highlight of their visit was when a large beaver emerged from under the boardwalk they were walking over. The next group to visit were 6 Sparks (aged 5 to 6) with their parents and leaders. In this case, their wildlife welcome was provided by a moose that emerged from the bush just south of the parking lot. The last group to visit was larger – 50 Junior Forest Rangers (including their parents and leaders). They had a brief hike into the bush south of the parking lot prior to taking the boardwalk out to the viewing platform. In their case the highlight was a family of 3 moose that ventured out of the bush briefly on the east shore of the Lake. All three of these groups have said that they will likely be visiting again next spring.

City of St Albert Activities

In the spring City personnel installed four new signs on the BLESS viewing platform providing information regarding various bird species that visit Big Lake. The City staff also provided tables, chairs and garbage receptacles for our WMBD event. BLESS continues to have an excellent relationship with the City planning and engineering departments. Our ongoing liaison with the City's transportation department regarding the Ray Gibbon Drive widening is outlined below.

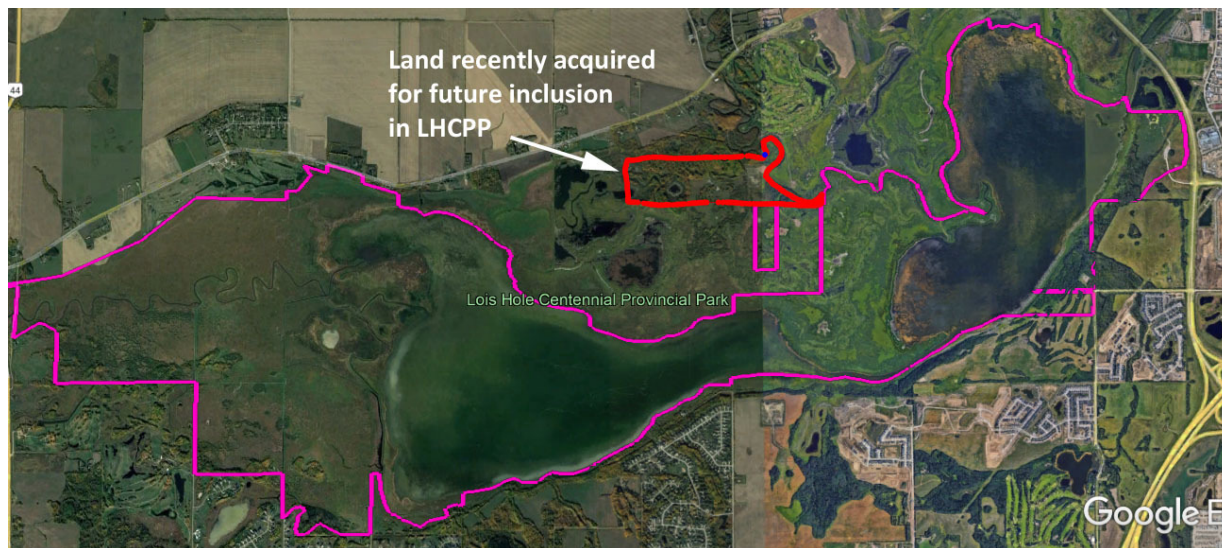
BLESS Engagement with the Province of Alberta

BLESS had a very productive relationship with the Province's Parks Department in 2021. Early in June, six Alberta Parks staff visited and toured LHCPP with BLESS directors to observe and discuss issues affecting

the park. This visit was the genesis of a trail mapping initiative and cleanup efforts by Parks staff on the south shore. Throughout the summer we provided input to a new trail map that they prepared, including several meetings on site. Alberta Parks staff have finalized the new trail map which is now on the LHCPP website at <https://www.albertaparks.ca/media/6493777/lois-hole-tear-sheet.pdf>. Parks staff will be erecting signs showing the map with "you are here" locators at all major entrances to LHCPP in the spring of 2022.

BLESS also filed several stewardship reports throughout the year in fulfillment of our mandate as designated stewards of Lois Hole Provincial Park. The reports identified conditions within the park requiring review or action. In addition, individual BLESS members played a significant role in 2021 in reporting on issues that affected the park, including an illegal haying operation, theft of plaques and a derelict building. This form of "boots on the ground" monitoring and reporting is crucial to effective stewardship given the large area of the park and potential impacts to the natural area resulting from increased use and development around the park.

On the political front, the BLESS board sent letters this year to Alberta Environment and Parks Minister Jason Nixon requesting an Order in Council (OIC) to formally include provincial lands acquired in 2014 within Lois Hole Provincial Park. A second letter requested the provincial government to follow through on a long standing commitment to build an Environmental Learning Centre for the park. In response to the request for an OIC, we were referred to the senior park planner at Alberta Parks who advised us that there was a further initiative underway to include more lands on the north shore of Big Lake within the park.



We look forward in 2022 to continuing our dialogue with Alberta Parks staff as well as the provincial government, including local MLA's, regarding future development of LHCPP. Overall, we are pleased with the way that various aspects of Park development and protection are progressing.

BLESS AGM

The 2021 BLESS Annual General Meeting took place on June 9th. Because of the pandemic, the AGM was conducted online through the Zoom platform. Audited financials necessary to retain status as a

federally incorporated charity were presented and accepted by members present. A board of 11 directors was elected to conduct BLESS affairs until the next AGM.

Casino

BLESS is licensed by Alberta Gaming Liquor and Cannabis (AGLC) to conduct casinos which is a significant part of our fund raising efforts. No casinos occurred in 2020 because of the Covid 19 restrictions, but we are pleased to report that we did participate in a casino that was held in October of 2021. Funds raised by that event will be used to hire a university student who will run our 2022 summer educational programme for children. BLESS's participation in this year's event was organized by Linda Brain. The following is her description of how BLESS participated in this year's casino.

The organization of a group of people to fulfill our responsibilities to the casino was an interesting experience for me. Our volunteers put in two relatively long days and nights in October. This was my first experience working at a casino and I was surprised that the night shifts ended at 2:30 and 3:30am! The BLESS member volunteers were aided by a group, self-named "the Angels", who filled in where our volunteers were not available. The Angels freely donated their time and some of them had not even heard the name of our organization. With their help the BLESS volunteers were able to successfully complete all aspects of this important fundraiser. (Based on the results of previous years, the proceeds could well amount to as much as \$20,000.)

Ray Gibbon Drive Widening – Proposed Tree Replacement Process and Location

The widening of Ray Gibbon Drive (RGD) to a 4-lane divided highway has proceeded as planned in the latter half of 2021. The stretch of the western carriageway south of the river has now been completed. A multi-use trail has been installed on the west side of the road providing a direct connection between the Red Willow Trail and the northeast corner of LHCPP. That trail was opened to the public in October. The landscaping alongside this trail will be installed next summer. Work on the west side bridge structure over the river is scheduled to start early in 2022.

In order to permit the installation of the new carriageway and the adjacent trail the City of St. Albert found it necessary to remove an existing stand of trees. Dean Schick from the City contacted BLESS to see if we had any suggestions regarding where some replacement trees could be located. After considering several options BLESS has advised Dean that our preferred alternative is for the replacement trees to be planted on the west side of RGD adjacent to the extreme northeast corner of LHCPP. The City is now considering that option and we hope that the new trees will be installed in the summer of 2022. Eventually these trees will provide some screening between the road and the north end of the Park.

Dean has also kept us informed on several other items of environmental concern, including the following:

- The City is considering raising the Red Willow Trail under the bridge on the south side of the river in order to minimise seasonal flooding. The amount that the trail can be raised is limited by the need to retain a minimum clearance between the trail and the underside of the bridge.
- The City is also considering the possibility of installing fencing on one, or both, sides of the widened RGD north of the river in order to reduce wildlife crossings of the roadway. We hope that this fencing can be installed to direct wildlife movements towards a naturalized trail under the bridge on the north side of the river.

We are concluding this edition of the Newsletter with some photos taken with basic cameras from a distance (by “amateurs”) that illustrate the wide diversity of wildlife that could be viewed by 2021 visitors to Big Lake.



Tundra swans and several other species in October



Pelicans on the mudbank at the same location in July



A family of 3 moose with numerous swans in the background



Swans, geese and others frolicking just off the new sidewalk on the west side of Ray Gibbon Drive