

## BLESS June 2021 Newsletter

This is the quarterly newsletter informing BLESS members about ongoing environmental issues, events and achievements around Big Lake. We hope the members find 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](mailto:info@bless.ab.ca).



### Current Board Members

The following members became directors for 2021 at the Annual General Meeting that took place on June 9th: Al Henry, Pat Collins, Linda Brain, Miles Constable, Dave Burkhart, LynDruett, Tony Druett, Jillian Dyck, Teresa Marshall, Meagan Dyck and Nick Parayko.

Executive positions will be determined by the board at the July 2021 board meeting.

### Regular Board Meetings

These are usually held at 7:00pm on the first Wednesday of every month. During the current Covid 19 shut down 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](mailto:info@bless.ab.ca).

### Financial Report

Financially BLESS is in decent shape thanks to a grant from the Edmonton Community Foundation to pay for the summer interpretation program.

BLESS should be getting a casino in the fourth quarter of this year which will allow us to resume stable funding for the ongoing annual Summer Nature/Interpretive Program No date for the casino has been set yet.

### 2021 Annual General Meeting

The 2021 BLESS Annual General Meeting was conducted online using Zoom on June 9th. Several new members attended. BLESS president Al Henry provided an overview of activities since the last AGM and a board of directors for 2021 was proclaimed.

### BLESS Summer Nature Centre Program

In early June the BLESS Hiring Committee (Jillian, Pat, Dave and Miles) selected four potential candidates for the Summer Interpreter position and interviewed them by Zoom. We selected Tiffany Maslyk as she has a biology degree and lots of experience in this area. She will be arranging interpretation tours in the easily accessible areas of the park. The tours will take place throughout July and August. Details for participation are posted on the BLESS Facebook Page.

## **CBC Radio Interview**

Thank you to BLESS member, Tim Osborne Photography for highlighting Big Lake - Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park as a special place to visit right now, on CBC's Edmonton AM radio show on May 28. You can check out the interview on CBC's website at <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-17-edmonton-am/clip/15845792-the-best-birding-city> Thanks also to BLESS director Teresa Marshall for arranging and coordinating the interview.

## **Combined World Migratory Bird Day and BLESS 30th Anniversary Event**

A BLESS committee has been struck to organize an event to celebrate World Migratory Bird Day and the 30th Anniversary of BLESS. Lyn and Tony Druett and Linda Brain offer the following report of planning to date.

We hope to be able to hold this event in September, depending on whether the Covid 19 restrictions have been fully lifted. Tentatively it will be a two-day event on September 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>.

Most of our displays and activities will be located in the shelter at the LHCPP parking lot. Any guided tours or other activities that may occur out on the boardwalk, on the BLESS viewing platform, or elsewhere in LHCPP will be organized starting from the picnic tables in the area just outside the shelter.

The following is our preliminary list of possible display areas inside the shelter:

1. **Migratory bird species that may be seen in the Big Lake area.** Photos of each of the species will be on display. A horizontal map of North and South America can be set up to show migration routes of the various birds as they fly from their over wintering locations to Big Lake for nesting, or as a stop off on route to sites further north. This display can be interactive and will serve to emphasize that Big Lake is an important migratory bird location.
2. **BLESS history.** Founding members (photos and details), major achievements, etc. Photos and records of activities that occurred in the early years.
3. **BLESS viewing platform.** Photos and details of the original construction. Photos and details of the rebuilding, 4 display boards, current usage.
4. **BLESS recent and current stewardship activities.** Monitoring of wildlife and other public activities. Trail maintenance, etc. Clean up of debris, oil and gas site(s), and other pollution. Liaison with the Province and the two cities.
5. **BLESS summer programs.** Outline of the program and how it has evolved over the years, particularly to accommodate COVID restrictions. Highlights and information of general interest.
6. **BLESS current and future lobbying issues.** RGD widening, MDP revisions, other proposed land uses adjacent to Big Lake, ultimate classification of RGD, arterial roads in the vicinity of Big Lake, etc.
7. **Big Lake Communities Community League.** The community league for the Edmonton communities adjacent to the park will be asked if they wish to to set up a display
8. **City of St Albert.** Details of the Red Willow Park West Plan and what is happening in the Grey Nuns / White Spruce area. Future changes and corrections that they are possibly going to make to the new MDP.

9. **Province of Alberta.** Plans for development within LHCPP, extracts from their Park Management Plan, any other immediate improvements and maintenance activities, etc.
10. **Nature Alberta.** Nature Alberta will participate with a Nature Kids craft table and educational materials.

Out on the Boardwalk, on the BLESS platform or on surrounding pathways, we may have BLESS members past and present engaging with the public. They can point out areas of interest and share their knowledge of the plant and animal species that make Big Lake so special.

We could also have guided tours of the area highlights - for small groups and families, leaving from the shelter every 2 hours, (maybe 11am, 1pm and 3pm each day). Possibly this summer's nature program coordinator could be hired to lead these tours.

Investors Group will again be contacted as possible "sponsors" of the event.

### **Ray Gibbon Drive Widening**

BLESS director Tony Druett has been following City of St. Albert activities with respect to the widening of Ray Gibbon Drive and offers the following report.

Construction of Phase 2 of the Ray Gibbon Drive widening started in early June. The earthmoving for the western carriageway south of the river is now well underway. The City has recently posted details of what is proposed for Phase 2 on their "Ray Gibbon Drive Twinning Project" website. This phase of the widening is the most critical section from the perspective of the environment adjacent to the east end of Big Lake. BLESS has exchanged several communications with Dean Schick at the City over the last few months. We are pleased to say that the concerns that we have raised with Dean appear to have been addressed. In particular, the following three items now show up in the City's website:

1. There will be a multi use trail on the east side of the road north of the Sturgeon River and a connection into the Grey Nuns White Spruce Park (GNWSP) area. There will not be a trail on the west side of the road north of the river. The land between the lake shoreline and this section of RGD is an important wildlife habitat and we want to keep public intrusion into this area to a minimum.
2. The City is currently looking at ways that the Red Willow Trail under RGD on the south side of the river can be modified (maybe raised marginally?) in order to reduce the likelihood, extent and frequency of periodic flooding of the trail.
3. The shoreline on the north side of the river under the RGD bridge will be enhanced to function as a wildlife corridor, which will provide a safe crossing route between LHCPP to the west and GNWSP to the east.

Dean has also confirmed that it is intended that the current stages of the RGD will meet the requirements specified in the 2003 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which was a component of the original approval for the St Albert's western ring road.

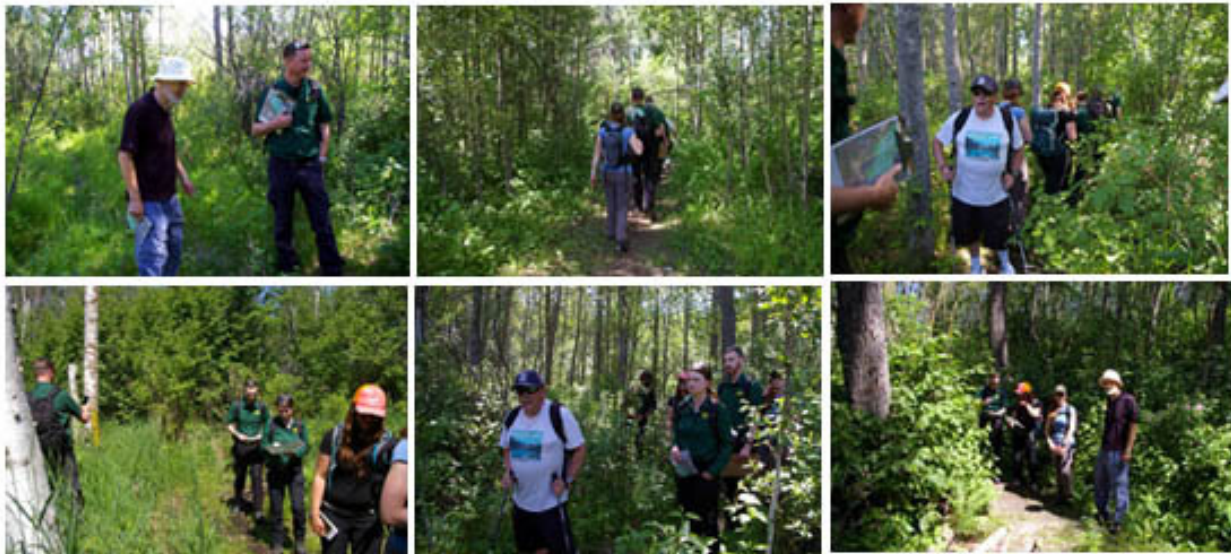
BLESS has also been in contact with the St Albert council and administration regarding the ultimate designation for Ray Gibbon Drive. The 2003 EIA projected that the ultimate requirement would likely be no greater than a 4-lane arterial road with a 70 kph speed limit. However, the City's current Transportation Master Plan outlines that it could ultimately be an 8-lane freeway with a 90 kph speed

limit. BLESS's position is that the ultimate designation for this section of Ray Gibbon Drive should not be greater than an arterial road with a 70 kph speed limit.

### Alberta Parks Activities

On June 24th, six staff from Alberta Parks visited Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park to survey trail conditions and advance the initiative underway to map trails in the park. Parks staff walked the trails around the east bay, with a few BLESS directors, from the parking lot to the narrows. The intent was to identify those trails that should be the focus of mapping and investigate areas that might require measures to protect sensitive vegetation. We appreciate the time and attention these busy folks dedicated to our park over the four hours of walking, especially considering the huge area and large number of provincial parks for which staff in the Central Region are responsible.

The folks from Alberta Parks plan on finishing their mapping program for Lois Hole PP and will name the trails after animal and plants found in the vicinity of the trails. BLESS will be given another opportunity for input before the trail maps are finalized.



Alberta Parks staff have installed new signs on the platform at Big Lake to advise anglers that fishing from the platform is prohibited for safety reasons. We note that the toilets at the parking lot have now been reopened for public use with the lifting of pandemic public health restrictions.



### Stewardship Activities

On May 14, 2021, BLESS member Deb Smith discovered and reported to the BLESS board the presence of a derelict building and associated trash, including a mattress and old refrigerator, situated outside near the building.

Subsequent investigation revealed there was also a considerable amount of trash along the foot trail running east from the shack through the trees as well as along the shoreline of Big Lake. The trash included old vehicles, tires, scrap metal and what was once a floating platform.

The shack is well hidden by trees, appears long disused and may have been a hunting camp at one time. City of Edmonton Natural Area staff were notified and responded within days with a crew who cleaned up the trash in the immediate vicinity of the shack and boarded up the building.

There remains significant additional trash along the path skirting the lake at this point. At least three partial vehicles, numerous tires and metal parts as well as an old float platform, overgrown by trees, are located off the foot path leading east along the shoreline. Some vehicles and parts may



have found their way to the lake over the years by being pushed from the top of the hill down the cut line put in place for the gas pipeline, which signs indicate is within the area.

Some of the trash, primarily old tires, appears to be within the confines of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park. The majority of trash in the area is however located on land under the jurisdiction of the City of Edmonton. A stewardship report was submitted to Alberta Parks on May 17th and city staff have investigated. The BLESS board will be following up with City of Edmonton to determine the long term disposition of the derelict building and trash that remains in this area.

On June 11th, Al, Pat, Linda, Tony and Dave walked the trails in the trees south from the parking lot to 137th Avenue. Linda and Dave also walked the south shore near the narrows on June 19th to survey conditions. Trails were generally in good shape but there were wet areas and several items of concern were noted to bring to the attention of Alberta Parks.

A stewardship report had been submitted to Alberta Parks in May concerning the state of trail crossings for Horseshoe Creek south of 137th Avenue. There are no foot bridges here and trail users have been crossing the creek in three separate locations which has resulted in riparian damage.

Horseshoe Creek feeds the patch of orchid ferns in the area, a species rated S1S2 in the Alberta Conservation Information Management system. BLESS recommended that foot bridges be installed to avoid further riparian damage. Alberta Parks staff have been out to investigate.



### **Municipal Development Plan**

In April 2021 St Albert City Council gave second and third reading to a new Municipal Development Plan (MDP). That Plan has changed the designation on several parcels of land on the south side of Meadowview Drive to be future “Employment Lands”, which would be industrial and commercial developments. At a public hearing BLESS presented arguments opposed to this designation.

Council reconsidered this issue at a meeting at the end of May and voted unanimously in favour of re-designating the land south of Meadowview Drive to be future Public Open Space. BLESS has sent a letter of thanks to Councillor Jacquie Hansen who brought this motion to Council and made a clear argument in support of the environment at the meeting.

We understand that the revision will be reviewed by the new council in 2022 and will require a further public hearing at that time. We hope that this revision will be subjected to full public and Council scrutiny prior to being submitted to the Regional Board. We were particularly pleased with the comprehensive and cooperative approach that was expressed by all members of Council. The Council members instructed the administration to coordinate the MDP revisions with the Lakeview Area Structure Plan (ASP) that will likely be prepared next year. They suggested that the administration should now take a comprehensive approach that provides a “win-win” compromise solution for all interested parties, including the existing landowners, the citizens of St Albert and, most of all, the Big Lake environment. The Lakeview ASP can minimize any possible land acquisition costs by specifying

appropriate locations and areas for Municipal Reserve (MR) and Environmental Reserve (ER). It could also modify the alignment of Meadowview Drive, if that is what is needed to create an equitable solution.

The MDP can now be revised to be compatible with other City documents such as the Red Willow Park West Plan. We are hoping that it will also be revised to be compatible with the province's plan for development of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park as expressed in their 2019 Parks Management Plan. The designation on the parcel of land that was purchased by the province to be included in the Provincial Park should also be revised from "Employment Lands" to "Public Open Space".

## **NSWA Update**

BLESS director Linda Brain has been attending the North Saskatchewan Watershed Association series of online presentations and provides the following report on the most recent in the series.

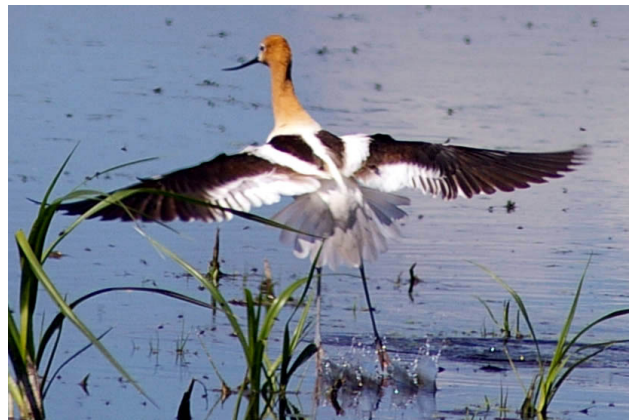
The April NSWA zoom presentation highlighted the Riparian Health Action Plan and the new and innovative Riparian Web Portal. Riparian intactness was measured using a GIS approach to supplement other methods in use. This allows decisions on where to focus efforts to improve riparian areas. I did note that Big Lake has high intactness!

I would encourage anyone interested, to listen to the podcast by going to NSWA-YouTube (the earlier podcasts are also available). The Watershed Wednesday Speaker Series will continue in the fall and I'm excited to learn more about what volunteers and organizations are accomplishing throughout the province.

**Interesting Question:** How much riparian habitat do we have in Alberta? The best guess, based on provincial hydrography data: lake shoreline 236,500 kilometres, stream shoreline (L & R banks) 1.2 million kilometres. 38,300 kilometres has been assessed so far

## **Latest Wildlife Sightings**

We have been seeing a significant number of American avocets around Big Lake this year. This elegant wading bird winters in the southern United States and Mexico and migrates here in the spring to reproduce. Adult plumage turns orange on the head, neck and upper breast when the birds are breeding, otherwise the avocet is black and white. Incubation takes 23 to 25 days and chicks are able to walk and swim within a day of hatching. Good places to observe American avocets are in the ponds along the Ducks Unlimited interpretive trail off Meadowview Drive and along the south shore of Big Lake near the narrows.



There have also been recent sightings of pelicans and blue herons off the viewing platform and bald eagles along the south shore near the narrows. It is prime time to be out bird watching as summer gets fully underway.

