

# **BLESS Newsletter**

**March 2020**

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](mailto:info@bless.ab.ca).

## **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, 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 - April 1<sup>st</sup>

Completion of the platform structural repair contract - March 31<sup>st</sup>

Formal opening ceremony for the repaired BLESS platform - 1<sup>st</sup> week of May

World Migratory Bird Day Event - Saturday May 16<sup>th</sup>

BLESS Summer Nature Centre Program starts - 1<sup>st</sup> week of July

## **Financial Report**

BLESS is in reasonably good financial shape at the moment, as we have found a corporate sponsor (Investor's Group) for International Migratory Bird Day, we have received a significant amount of donations in memory of Dr. Fin Fairfield and we have received a small grant from the St Albert Community Foundation to pay for supplies.

BLESS and the Land Stewardship Centre have submitted an application to the Alberta Real Estate Foundation for a grant to revise the LSC's Green Communities Guide. If successful it will be produced in an electronic format by this time next year and marketed to land developers around Big Lake in the hopes of producing urban development with wildlife in mind.

Our application for a grant to publish our mammal guide to LHCPP was not successful, so we are still searching for a contributor for this initiative.

BLESS now has a presence on the [CanadaHelps.org](https://CanadaHelps.org) website for automatic donations.

## Alberta Parks – “Nature Nuts” Program

The following feature article was provided to BLESS by Sharina Kennedy at Alberta Parks:

### Rediscovering our Nature: Alberta Parks as Gateways to Nature Play

“Nature Deficit Disorder” was first coined by Richard Louv to describe the human costs of alienation from nature. An expanding body of scientific

evidence suggests that nature-deficit disorder contributes to a diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, conditions of obesity, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses. Research also suggests that the nature-deficit weakens ecological literacy and stewardship of the natural world. These problems are linked more broadly to what health care experts call the “epidemic of inactivity,” and to a devaluing of independent play.<sup>1</sup>

Connecting children and nature has become a global imperative across many sectors. There is recognition of the vital importance of providing opportunities for humans to connect with nearby nature early on in life, and as often as possible. Alberta Parks has a key role to play in this domain.

In 2019, a small working group set out to explore how Alberta Parks could support Nature Play both within parks, and within other “nearby nature” and green spaces in Albertans’ neighbourhoods.

Several pilot projects are now underway, in partnership with St. Albert Nature School, Waskasoo Environmental Education Society, and an organization called Get Outside and Play. Alberta Parks Nature Play initiative is guided by a Nature Play strategy, currently being developed with guidance from leading experts in this field. The strategy includes the following vision statement:

***Albertans of all backgrounds are connected to nature for the many benefits it provides. Alberta Parks creates “gateways to nature” for children and families through landscape design, programming, and partnerships.***



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.childrenandnature.org/about/nature-deficit-disorder/>

One pilot project involves working with St. Albert Nature School to deliver a series of six parented programs at Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park (LHCPP) that focus on outdoor play in nature. More information and registration details on this “Nature Nuts” program can be found here: <https://stalbertnatureschool.ca/nature-nuts/>

*“We are very excited about this partnership” said Lori-Waters Sim of St. Albert Nature School. “This will be a great opportunity to connect families and children with the abundant nature to be found at Lois Hole Provincial Park”.*

## SO GLAD I GREW UP



**DOING THIS**

**NOT THIS**

Other pilot projects as part of this project include:

- Development of nature playground designs and operations at Alberta Parks sites
- Development of staff training tools and resources
- A new “Nature Play” themed Discovery backpack program that can be borrowed for use by families at select campgrounds across Central region
- Marketing and communications tools and resources to raise awareness among parents and families of the importance of Nature Play

Nature play is consistently defined as “play that is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, and personally directed that occurs in natural environments.”

*“If you think back to your childhood, chances are your memories include experiences of playing in creeks, maybe riding bikes until the streetlights came on, building outdoor forts and basically just unstructured free play”* said Sharina Kennedy, Alberta Parks Nature Play project lead. *“Kids these days are so structured and so scheduled and a big part of this project is about making sure that families have more opportunities to connect with nature and engage in play because of the many benefits it provides to families, communities and society as a whole”.*

Research shows that the physical environment influences children’s behaviours, play experiences, and their overall development. The literature is replete with wisdom from landscape architects, educators, and behavioural psychologists about how outdoor play opportunities can support and foster children’s problem solving, creativity, and learning, and how to best address the symptoms of Nature Deficit Disorder through the design of natural play spaces and experiences. While Alberta Parks has a robust and long history of education and interpretive programming, this is the first exploration of how it can support nature play through programming, partnerships, and environmental design. Alberta Parks looks forward to further exploring how it can position parks and green spaces as nature playgrounds in the minds and hearts of a diversity of Albertans.

## Fin Fairfield

We were all very sad to hear of the passing of Dr. Finlay Munroe Fairfield, who was a key founder of BLESS. The following are some excerpts from an article that appeared in the St Albert Gazette on January 22, 2020, and from Dr. Fairfield's obituary:

*He brought thousands of people into the world, and opened the eyes of many to the beauty of Big Lake. Fairfield was the creator of the Big Lake Environment Support Society. His name is etched on St Albert's community recognition monument, and a plaque at the BLESS viewing platform bears his name.*

*His daughter JP Fairfield-Carter told the Gazette that he loved the outdoors. He hunted birds for many years, but eventually – perhaps due to her nature-loving influence – turned from hunting to bird watching and painting. "He just loved beauty" she said, and would spend hours watching the birds and the sunset.*

*Dr Bob Lane, a cofounder of BLESS, said that Fairfield came up with the name and concept for the group in 1991. BLESS went on to become St Albert's pre-eminent environmental organization and took a lead role in getting Big Lake recognized as a provincial park. It received an Emerald Award in 1996 and was appointed as the lake's official steward in 2002.*

*While he was frustrated that officials decided to build Ray Gibbon Drive so close to Big Lake, Fairfield-Carter said her father was grateful so many people rallied behind the lake over the years. "He was so happy the community was able to see what was there".*

*Dr Fairfield's obituary states that in lieu of flowers, donations may be sent to: Big Lake Environment Support Society, PO Box 65053, St Albert, AB, T8N5Y3*

## Measures to Mitigate the Environmental Impact of the Proposed Ray Gibbon Drive Widening

The natural areas along the north and south shorelines of the Sturgeon River provide important routes for movements of both small and large animals, including coyotes, deer and moose. An item on the agenda for this year's AGM is a presentation regarding accidents involving animals crossing Ray Gibbon Drive. BLESS believes that this is an important issue that should be taken into account when planning the development of the Grey Nuns White Spruce Park. It is also an issue that must be addressed at the time of the proposed widening of Ray Gibbon Drive to be a 4-lane expressway. The following are BLESS's suggestions for measures that will minimize possible conflicts between vehicular traffic and east-west animal movements and migrations.

- Implement all of the provisions of the 2003 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) that was a major document that justified the road's original design and location
- Install appropriate fencing on both sides of all critical sections of the road
- Provide alternative routes for both large and small animal movements
  - Culverts allowing the passage of small animals

- A route for larger animals on the north side of the river under the Ray Gibbon Drive Bridge
- Fencing designed to direct the animals towards these routes
- Signage warning motorists of possible animal crossings at either end of the fencing
- Lower speed limits at those particularly high risk zones.

### Measures to Prevent Flooding of the Red Willow Trail Under the Ray Gibbon Drive Bridge

For most of the summer of 2019 the Red Willow Trail was closed at several locations by flooding of the Sturgeon River. In particular, access to the Big Lake area from the rest of St Albert was closed because the trail under Ray Gibbon Drive was flooded. Pedestrian and bicycle users of the trail were directed to “use other route”, which meant a diversion of more than a kilometre through the Riel Industrial Park.



In previous years a temporary raised structure had been installed under the bridge at the time of spring runoff in order to permit continued access along the Trail. In 2019 the City tried an alternative approach by installing a temporary inflatable dam along the edge of the pathway. That approach turned out to be unsuccessful and was abandoned in mid-summer. The flooding and closure of the trail persisted into July.

BLESS has the following suggestions in order to avoid a repeat of the 2019 situation:

- Install the previous, or a new, temporary structure this spring in time to provide a higher path under the bridge during times of high river level
- Remove any new, or unusually high, beaver dams within the City that are contributing to the flooding
- Work with the municipalities downstream in order to manage the beaver activities, and, where necessary, to remove any critical beaver dams that are obstructing the normal flow of the River and causing abnormal amounts of flooding
- Review the possibility of permanently raising the level of the Red Willow Trail under the Ray Gibbon Drive bridge at the time of the widening of the bridge to accommodate 4 lanes of traffic.

## Structural Repair of the BLESS Viewing Platform

The contractor carrying out the structural repair of the BLESS has made excellent progress. It now seems likely that the work will be completed ahead of schedule and the platform may be reopened to the public by the end of March. Here is a very positive update that BLESS has received from Dean McMullan at the City of St Albert:

### *Construction Progress as of Feb 27<sup>th</sup> Site Meeting*

- *New helical piles installed (Completes the need for the heaviest equipment on site and alleviates major concerns with ice thickness and weather impacts)*
- *Octagon timber piles removed to lake bottom (this was a smooth cut at lake bottom)*
- *Octagon beams installation started*
- *Once beams and joists are installed for the octagon platform, little, if any remaining work will be done from the ice area.*

### *Schedule for the Coming Week*

- *Complete octagon beam installation*
- *Begin octagon joist installation*
- *Install blocking at beam locations (straight section)*
- *Complete railing along straight section*
- *Remove lumber used to create barrier for building ice thickness*

### *Formula Alberta Updated Completion Schedule*

- *The Contractor (Formula Alberta) submitted an updated schedule with a revised completion date of March 18 (site cleanup and demobilization)*

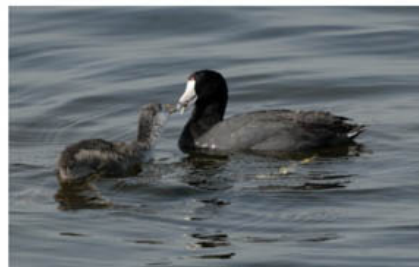
*If all goes according to plan the refurbishment work should be completed within the next couple of weeks.*

In addition to the structural repair contract, BLESS has been working with the City administration to have some signs installed giving information about the many varieties of birds that may be observed in the Big Lake area. Miles Constable has designed 8 signs depicting 24 different species and outlining facts that will be of interest to viewers of all ages. It is hoped that these signs will be ready for installation on the repaired platform by May. Here is an example of one of the signs that BLESS is hoping will be installed under the railings around the BLESS viewing platform.

**When is a duck not a duck?**



**When it's a Coot!**



Did you know?

A very commonly seen "duck" off of this platform isn't a duck? It is the American Coot! They look much like ducks, behave like ducks, build nests and raise their chicks like ducks, but they are closely related to the marsh bird the Sora and to Sandhill cranes. They are only distantly related to ducks.



Photo of the platform construction site taken by Miles Constable on March 3<sup>rd</sup>