

BLESS March 2022 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

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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 Covid 19 situation 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

BLESS has received an Environmental Initiatives Grant from the City of St Albert to print a new Animals of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park Guide. Lyn Druett, Linda Brain and Miles Constable have written the material and now it will be formatted and photos added.

BLESS received just over \$14,000 from our Casino in October. This is significantly less than previous casinos but that is to be expected with the slow recovery from Covid-19. Most of the money will go towards hiring a Summer Nature Interpreter.

Nature Activities in LHCPP Planned for 2022

The following is a list of events and activities involving BLESS that are currently planned to occur in LHCPP this year:

- WMBD event on May 14th
- DUC - Wetland Centre of Excellence Program
- BLESS - Kid's Summer Nature Program – July and August
- Nature Alberta – Family Nature Night on August 10th

Ducks Unlimited's Wetland Centre of Excellence Program

In mid-January Ducks Unlimited Canada contacted BLESS about an exciting new project they are planning for the John E. Poole wetland site in LHCPP. The DUC program is called the “Wetland Centre for Excellence”. For several years similar programs have been occurring at more than 2 dozen locations in other Provinces across Canada. However, this will be the first time it has operated in Alberta. DUC approached BLESS to see how we could support each other and find opportunities to collaborate. Their program will connect local schools and classrooms with DUC educational resources and with the environment in the local wetland. Funding and support will be offered to the schools as specific projects are created and developed.

Bellerose Composite High was the first local school to sign up to participate after being contacted by DU in late 2021. Their students are planning to be on site once the weather improves and to begin working on their projects in the month of May. DUC are currently looking at the first week of June for the official WCE launch event. It will be a community celebration, where the whole school, parents and local community members are invited to the site to observe the projects the students have installed. BLESS will also participate.

A recent item in the St Albert Gazette has already resulted in other schools contacting DUC to express their interest in the program. The WCE program also has a mentorship aspect, where older students learn about wetlands and then share their knowledge with younger grade classes as they join the program. Ideally, up to nine Edmonton area schools could get out to the wetland three times a year to carry out environmental projects that the students design themselves. The WCE is currently planned to run through the school year only, but DUC and BLESS are also discussing how they can work together to provide year-round environmental education at the site.

This Year's World Migratory Bird Day Event

With Spring just around the corner, BLESS is now planning the annual WMBD event at Big Lake. This year it will occur on the official date of Saturday May 14th. It will run from 10am to 4pm. Each of the previous participants have been contacted and several have already responded with enthusiasm. The theme for 2022 is to consider the negative effects of light pollution on migrating birds. The official slogan chosen is "Dim the Lights for Birds at Night".

Nature Alberta/Nature Kids will again be a big part of the event, putting on a display of information, hand outs and a children's craft. DUC will also be participating this year. They are hoping that they will be able to feature some of the student WCE projects and put up an appropriate nature activity for the public to enjoy. BLESS will be installing displays providing information regarding the routine stewardship activities and this year's theme of avoiding light pollution. The province's Parks Dept. will be providing a display regarding their environmental issues and activities.

Canadian Wildlife Federation's WILD Outside youth program will be running iNaturalist activities. This will be a chance to learn how to use this citizen science app and contribute to nationwide research. There will also be bird watching and pond dipping activities out on the boardwalk and at the BLESS viewing platform. IG Wealth Management, who are a sponsor of the event, are planning to install a pop-up tent outside the shelter to provide information and appropriate "treats" for the visitors.

In addition to participating in the WMBD event, Nature Alberta are planning to hold a Family Nature Night at LHCPP on August 10th from 5:30 to 8:30pm and they have asked BLESS to participate. All the above ideas will be coordinated with the BLESS Kids' Summer Nature Program, which will operate in July and August.

Light Pollution and Birds

Many species of songbirds and waterfowl migrate at night to avoid predators, such as raptors, that are active during the day and to take advantage of calmer night time air. Migrating birds use the stars to navigate at night.

Birds are drawn to lights in urban areas and can become disoriented by them which increases the risk of collision with buildings. Artificial light at night disorients birds, affects their ability to navigate and disrupts circadian rhythms. Artificial lights can also disrupt feeding and other bird behaviour.

As our human footprint on the planet continues to grow, so too does the incidence of artificial light at night. A study conducted in 2017 revealed that continuously lit areas worldwide increased by 2.2% per year between 2012 and 2016.

Since 2013, the City of Edmonton has had a community lighting policy in place designed to reduce light pollution by: avoiding over lighting, reducing spill lighting, limiting source brightness and avoiding "light trespass" in natural areas. This policy is reflected in Edmonton's Neighbourhood Structure Plans for the Big Lake communities bordering Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park. The difference the policy makes is notable, especially when comparing the light emitted from these communities and the light pollution coming from the warehouse district across Ray Gibbon Drive from the park in the City of St. Albert, which has no such specific policy.

Edmonton's policy mandates that developers strategically position light fixtures to avoid lighting natural areas, with light projected downward and laterally to reduce impacts on birds and other wildlife. Long wavelength LED bulbs are encouraged as they have less impact on wildlife.

We can act responsibly to reduce light pollution and thereby reduce adverse human impacts on birds. The first step towards that end is to increase public awareness, which World Migratory Bird Day aims to do.

Perspective of a Deaf Hiker

The following perspective was contributed by a BLESS member. We invite others who wish to share their experiences in the park to send in articles for the newsletter.

I am Sonya, a new member of BLESS, and I am completely deaf. Still, without hearing, I deeply enjoy walking within beautiful Lois Hole Park and other parks close to home. I want to share my experience of being in nature without hearing.

Although I am deaf, I still have the heightened strength of other senses. I mainly depend on my sight, touch, and taste.

As I walk, I can see how beautiful the day is and it gives me the sense that a beautiful day means birds are singing, even though I cannot hear them. I can see flowers blooming and feel the sunshine on my face. The sun reflects off Big Lake which is especially beautiful at sunrise or sunset. Ducks float on the lake. I see small animals like squirrels come alive and cross my path as I walk.

If the weather is cold, I know that birds are likely sheltered somewhere. Maybe mother ducks are protecting their ducklings under their wings in the reeds.

I see people with their dogs. I see their happiness. Sometimes I notice the bushes move and think it could be small animals or maybe just the wind. I depend on my eyes to compensate for my deafness.

When I walk on the boardwalk, I sometimes feel the vibration of a bike coming from behind or children running. I might feel someone move the railing behind me if I hold the rail. However, if I walk on a path, it is more difficult to feel vibrations from others who might be approaching..

Where those who can hear listen, I use other senses to appreciate what is around me. I pay attention to my body when walking. I feel my heart beat. I feel bugs when they fly in my hair. I can even feel the nerves in my body when everything around me is calm and undisturbed.

Unfortunately, I also have no sense of smell but this does not mean I miss all the delights of those who do. I still can feel the fresh air and morning or evening breezes. The best example is the natural freshness in the early morning in the mountains.

I have a unique sense of taste. When there is a forest fire afar, I sometimes taste the smoke in the air. Looking around me I see the beauty of greenery in summer and whiteness in winter. If it is raining, I feel the gloom and chill in the air the same as everyone else. Although I cannot hear

thunder, I still feel its vibrations and see the bright flashes of lightening against a dark sky during a thunderstorm.

I am grateful to have opportunities to hike in nature in Lois Hole Provincial Park.

An Environmental Learning Centre for Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park

According to the Alberta government's park management plan, over a million people reside within an hour's drive of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park. Created in 2005 to honour Alberta's 15th Lieutenant Governor and celebrate the province's 100th anniversary, the park of 1,974 hectares largely comprises the wetlands of Big Lake with a relatively small percentage of its total area as uplands to provide visitor access for nature based activities.

For this reason and others, in 2010, the City of St. Albert, Beaverbrook Developments and the Alberta Government entered into a formal agreement through a memorandum of understanding whereby land that would have been allocated to municipal reserve was ceded to the park in exchange for a promise by the province to build an environmental learning facility "when provincial or other funding became available". The city land added to the provincial park in 2010 provides parking and access for what is currently the primary entrance to the park.

The benefits of environmental learning are widely known and accepted. With learning, people become aware of and appreciate the value of nature and become willing stewards in helping to conserve parks for the future. BLESS has provided free annual summer nature programs for 20 years to foster appreciation of nature and encourage a conservation ethic among the public.

Fish Creek Provincial Park in Calgary has, for decades, had an Environmental Learning Centre to support park conservation through education. The provincial government renovated the 9,000 square foot Fish Creek facility in 2005 at a cost of \$4 million. It currently has five classrooms, an orientation area, washrooms, staff offices, large glass doors opening to the outdoors with an amphitheatre and fire pits just outside to facilitate the kind of enjoyable learning experiences that leave behind lasting memories and bonds between people and our natural environment. Calgary students from kindergarten to grade 12 have access to almost 20 different educational programs at the Fish Creek learning centre, programs that are in line with school science, biology and environmental and outdoor education curricula.

Late last year BLESS wrote to Alberta Environment and Parks Minister Jason Nixon to request that the province invest in the future of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park with funding to follow through on the agreement entered into in 2010 to build an Environmental Learning Centre. Although the minister responded saying the Alberta government remains committed to honouring the agreement, the capital budget for parks that was released last month contained nothing for infrastructure improvements to Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park over the next three years. This despite a substantial increase in resource revenues projected for the province in the same budget.

We at BLESS feel an Environmental Learning Centre at Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park is long overdue and the public is being underserved by the absence of such a facility at this, the largest provincial park in the capital region. What do you think, should the provincial government honour its commitment sooner rather than later? We would love to hear your opinion.

Proposed Additional Stewardship Activities

The Big Lake Environment Support Society has a small group of dedicated volunteers. Over the past few months, there has been an increase in requests to volunteer. In order to increase impact, BLESS would like volunteers to become stewards of Lois Hole Provincial Park. Stewards would engage with park visitors about key issues in the park along with monitoring species. At the end of each shift, volunteers

would submit a report about their experience in the park. This would include the number of meaningful conversations, feedback from users, and species observed.

Having volunteers in the park on a regular basis will assist BLESS and Alberta Parks with mitigating issues in a more effective manner as problems can be identified more quickly. Overall, the goal of the program would be to cultivate positive relationships with park users, promote stewardship of the area, and monitor the landscape. In order to get this program up and running as soon as possible, BLESS is considering extending the summer program coordinator contract. This would provide much needed support to complete administrative tasks before we accept volunteers for the program. More information on how to volunteer will be available as the program unfolds over the summer.

Ray Gibbon Drive Widening

Construction of the bridge structure for the west carriageway of RGD is now underway. In February BLESS received two very helpful emails from Dean Schick, the City's Transportation Manager, giving updates regarding the work that will be carried out in 2022. He has confirmed the following:

- Closures of the Red Willow Trail and the river under the bridge will be kept to the minimum necessary to protect the safety of the public. The Trail was closed at the beginning of March, and it is hoped that it will be opened to the public again sometime in April.
- The trail on the south side of the river will be raised to the provincial minimums to reduce seasonal flooding of the trail.
- An improved metal handrail will be installed under the bridge on the river side of the trail.
- A multiuse trail will not be constructed at this time on the west side of the road from the river to McKenney Avenue.
- A study is underway to analyse the need for fencing on either side of Ray Gibbon Drive. This study will recommend if, and where, fencing can be installed to minimize wildlife crossings of the road.
- The wildlife corridor under the bridge on the north side of the river is being significantly upgraded to support and encourage wildlife usage.

Recent Presentation to the St Albert Council Standing Committee

On February 14th BLESS made a presentation to the City's Community Living Standing Committee. The presentation provided an update on two items that are covered elsewhere in this newsletter – Ducks Unlimited's proposed Wetland Centre of Excellence and Phase 2 of the Ray Gibbon Drive widening. It also outlined BLESS's position on the three other longer-term issues noted below.

The Land on the South Side of Meadowview Drive West of Ray Gibbon Drive (RGD)

The Municipal Development Plan (MDP), that was given 3rd reading in the spring of 2021, changed the designation for the lands south of Meadowview Drive, along the northeast shoreline of Big Lake, to be "Employment Area". Subsequently, on May 31st, the City Council voted unanimously to change this designation to be Major Open Spaces. BLESS reiterated that we strongly support this change and are expecting that it will be implemented in the summer of 2022. We feel that if a comprehensive approach is taken there will be a solution that works well for all the parties and interests involved.

The 90 Acre Parcel of Land in the Southwest Corner of St Albert that is Owned by the Province

This parcel was acquired by the Province specifically so that it could be added to LHCPP. Both the Province's Park Management Plan and the City's RWPW plans show this parcel to be part of the Provincial Park and to be Major Open Space. However, the current MDP still designates this parcel to be

Employment Lands. BLESS believes that the City's MDP designation for this parcel should be changed to be Major Open Space. This revision to the MDP can be made when a similar change is made to the designation for the land south of Meadowview Drive.

Future Arterial Roads Currently Planned for the Southeast corner of St Albert

BLESS will be making presentations to all three branches of government on the following long term planning issues:

- Within Edmonton we are questioning the need for an arterial road running along the north boundary of the Trumpeter Neighbourhood (and the probable south boundary of LHCPP). This arterial road was originally specified in the 1990's to be the western extension of 137 Avenue, providing a connection west to Winterburn Road. The subsequent construction of RGD and the Anthony Henday Freeway now provides this connection and renders the possible arterial road unnecessary.
- Similarly, within St Albert we are questioning whether the proposed extension of LeClair Way down to 137 Avenue needs to be an arterial road. We feel that this stretch of road should be kept to the absolute minimum necessary to service the adjacent properties.
- We are also questioning the ultimate designation for Ray Gibbon Drive. The 2003 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is still the main environmental document regarding RGD, provided statistics showing that a freeway **will not be needed** in the ultimate situation. However, the City's current transportation documents specify the ultimate road classification to be an **8-lane freeway**. BLESS believes that, at minimum, a new study should be carried out.
- BLESS also feels that Council, and the general population of St Albert, should be asked whether they want to have a major freeway running through the western side of their city. A freeway will not just accommodate local traffic. It will attract traffic into the city, including northbound truck traffic that would otherwise be using highways 44 and 43.
- Planning for RGD to ultimately be a freeway has been used as a reason why the junction of 137 Avenue and RGD may have to be closed at some point of time in the future. If that happens the **only east side route** in or out of Edmonton's Big Lake communities will be an arterial road running more than 1 Km, up the eastern boundary of LHCPP, **within the City of St Albert**.

NSWA Update

The North Saskatchewan Watershed Association Watershed online webinar series is available again this year. The next presentation on April 13th is entitled "Updates on Invasive Species". Nicole Kimmel (Government of Alberta) and Bernie Poulin (Summer Village of Lac Ste Anne) will provide updates on invasive species in Alberta and Flowering rush at Lake Isle and Lac Ste Anne.

Past webinars from NSWA are available here: <https://www.nswa.ab.ca/2022/01/31/watershed-wednesdays-2022/>

Register for upcoming webinars here: <https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/nswas-watershed-wednesdays-2022-tickets-240280695027>

Latest Wildlife Sightings

We've had reports of significant wildlife sightings this winter. BLESS member Deb Smith reports seeing a little white weasel, a porcupine, moose, coyotes and deer aplenty while out skiing on Big Lake. Deb also spotted a bald eagle earlier this month near the nest on the south shore of Big Lake. Whether the eagle stayed the winter or returned early from its migratory journeys is unknown. The most significant

sighting Deb made though was a lone wolf whose presence was confirmed by others, including a biologist.

On March 12th, BLESS directors Tony and Lyn Druett reported seeing a porcupine snoozing in the bush just next to the entrance to the boardwalk. Then, on the morning of March 17th, Deb Smith spotted another in the park.



Porcupine spotted by Lyn and Tony Druett near the boardwalk



Porcupine spotted by Deb Smith



Len and Deb Smith Snowshoeing on Big Lake



Wolf Footprint on Big Lake, Photo from Deb Smith



Moose on the shoreline of Big Lake, photo from Deb Smith



Skier on Big Lake, photo from Deb Smith