



BLESS SUMMER NATURE CENTRE



TD Friends of the Environment Foundation

END OF SEASON REPORT



SEPTEMBER 2020
OLIVIA DEBOURCIER



INTRODUCTION

Objective

The objective of the BLESS Nature Centre is to offer a free summer program that provides fun activities for families to do together, teaches guests about nature, and fosters a curiosity and respect for the environment. In addition to this, my objective was to teach kids about the wildlife and environment of Lois Hole Provincial Park and how scientists study nature.

Location Change

All programming occurred in and around Lois Hole Provincial Park. For much of the summer the boardwalk area was a one-way walkway. For this reason it was easier to start programming at the lookout platform and make our way down the boardwalk towards the parking lot on the other side. I received positive feedback on the location change. Many families enjoyed seeing wildlife and plants in person and having the chance to get outside.



Design

Programming occurred Monday-Thursday with two pre-registered programs a day. Monday-Wednesday pre-registered programming was 10-11 am and 2-3 pm. On Thursday our programs were at 2-3 pm and 7-8 pm, in order to offer an evening option for those who were unable to attend programming during the day. Drop-in programming happened between 10-2 Monday-Wednesday and 3-6 Thursday. Each week we had a new theme to focus the tours and drop-in programming on.

Each week I posted the new theme on Instagram and Facebook, as well as the link to register for programming.

I collected emails in the registration form so I could send out confirmation emails to registrants with all the necessary information.

Materials

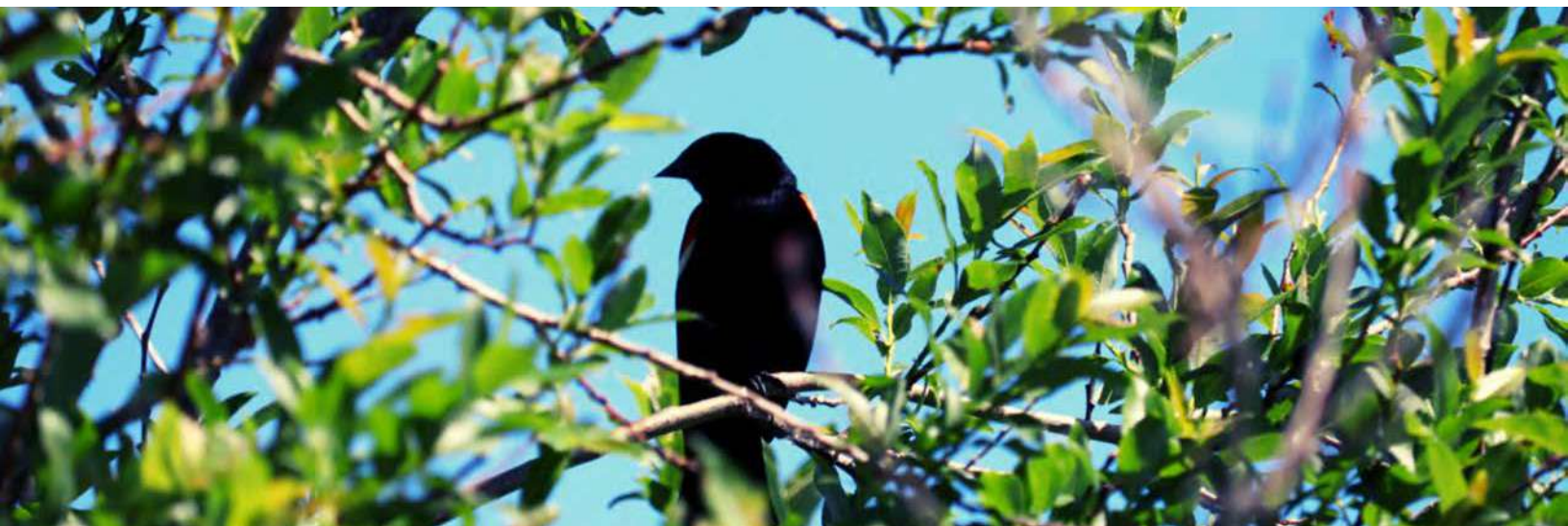
Because we didn't do any crafts this summer our material purchases were minimal and I was able to mainly use what was already in the Nature Centre. I purchased an outdoor wagon to carry around supplies as well as a foldable table to put up around the lake because the one in the nature centre was too large to fit in the wagon. I also purchased some extra pencil prizes and lamination sheets for our demonstration photos.

Inclement Weather

When a program had to be cancelled due to inclement weather I sent out an email letting participants know that the program was cancelled. This happened twice due to thunderstorms.

Instagram

I created an Instagram page in order to further promote the program and post educational Instagram stories. The page has 127 followers and could be utilized for promotion next summer as well.



COVID-19 MITIGATION

This year demanded significant changes to the traditional nature centre programs due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This included changing the location of programs from the Nature Centre on the corner of St. Albert Trail and Sturgeon Road to Big Lake and Lois Hole Provincial Park. In addition to the location change, various measures were implemented to ensure the health and safety of all participating members of the program, as well as myself. To my knowledge, mitigation measures were successful and there were no cases of Covid-19 transmission as a result of programming.

FACE MASKS

All participants in pre-registered tours were required to wear masks. They were alerted of this in the registration form they signed and reminded in the confirmation email. Social distancing during tours (particularly those on the boardwalk) was nearly impossible, particularly with young children. The masks were an excellent backup safety measure to way ensure that I was not needing to constantly remind participants to distance from me and each other. It was also helpful as often I had to be close to individuals for them to hear me.

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Programs had a maximum registration number of 15 people. This limit was in place to ensure that distancing could be achieved if necessary. It was also difficult to speak loud enough for 15 people to hear me outside. Once 15 people had signed up, or it appeared that another sign-up would put us over 15 people (typically individual sign-ups would have 2 or more people) I would remove that option in the sign-up sheet.

SANITIZATION

All program materials that participants had contact with were sanitized with disinfectant spray at the end of the program. For activities like pond dipping and bug catching, I divided supplies among families so each group had their own materials to reduce contact between groups.

ARTIFACT HANDLING

In many cases, I used animal artifacts to engage the group. In these cases I had participants use hand sanitizer directly before and after touching artifacts. Artifacts that could be further sanitized (horns, antlers, skulls, etc.) were wiped down after the program. I avoided allowing groups to touch artifacts with fur or feathers. In some cases, when we saw very little wildlife on the tour I'd allow participants to touch those artifacts so long as their hands were well sanitized before and after. I would then wait a few days to use those artifacts again as per Alberta Health Guidelines on how long the virus was predicted to last on surfaces.

ACTIVITY ALTERATIONS

In past summers, games and crafts have been a big part of programming. Unfortunately this year it was decided that craft supplies would be too difficult to sanitize. So we did not do any crafts this summer (with the exception of some drawing in nature journals). Games were also exceedingly difficult to pull off with social distancing, and often children's masks would fall off with too much physical activity. For this reason, physically active games were also avoided.





WEEKLY OVERVIEW



WEEK 1: POND BUGS

Families learned how to pond dip and about what kinds of invertebrates can be found in and around Big Lake. Emphasis was placed on the ecological services provided by aquatic invertebrates, how they are studied, how to identify them, and how to infer water health from the diversity of species. We started at the lake and talked about what kinds of critters you might find in the water and what their purpose was. Then I instructed families on how pond dipping works. We then went to the boardwalk and did pond dipping at a few different spots and compared our finds and each location. I also handed out a bingo sheet of common critters to be found in the pond and participants were awarded sticker prizes if they could get a bingo! For drop-in, I stationed myself either on the boardwalk or at the end of the boardwalk with a bucket filled with specimens I'd collected. This way folks walking by could look at the critters but I could minimize contact with materials which would then require sanitization.

SEE BINGO SHEET IN APPENDIX



WEEK 2: WATERBIRDS

Families learned how to identify waterbirds around Big Lake by sight and sound. I taught them different families of birds, common behaviours to keep our eye out for, and sounds we were likely to hear so that we could identify them. That week there were a large number of baby birds including coot, sora, ruddy duck, and mallard so there was plenty to see. The ruddy duck males were also displaying dramatically. We discussed the importance of Big Lake as an Important Bird Area and learned how to take field notes and drawings of birds.

For drop-in programming I stationed myself on the boardwalk with a number of birds artifacts, pictures, and field guides and invited people to learn about the birds viewable from the platform.



WEEK 3: MAMMALS

Unlike the previous two programs, this program required a stronger dependence on artifacts as there were few visible mammals around the boardwalk that week (largely muskrats and the occasional squirrel). Participants did an activity to consider how different Big Lake mammals might be related to each other. During the tour we visited different ecotypes (lake, river, wetland, forest, field) to consider what animals utilize these habitats and how humans interact with them. Participants were able to look and touch a variety of skulls, furs, horns, antlers, and teeth. We discussed how to look for signs of mammals when mammals may not be around, and looked for signs like burrows and rodent nests in the field and forest.

For drop-in programming I stationed myself at the picnic tables by the park shelter with a number of mammal related artifacts and invited people to look at the artifacts and learn about mammals.



WEEK 4: BUGS OF THE AIR AND GROUND

The activity this week was a bug hunt, in which we scoured the forest, field, and trail for bugs to catch and put in the critter keeper for participants to examine with magnifying glasses. All critters were released shortly after capture. Similar to the pond dipping week we discussed the various ecosystems services bugs provide and encouraged the kids to gently hold bugs and look at them closely in order to encourage a positive relationship with insects that were safe to touch. Each family was given a net and containers to help capture bugs and everything was sanitized at the end of the program. This week we had more engagement from drop-in families than pre-registrants.

For drop-in we did virtually the same activity but just for so long as the kids were interested and I was stationed near the picnic shelter where there were plenty of bugs to be caught.

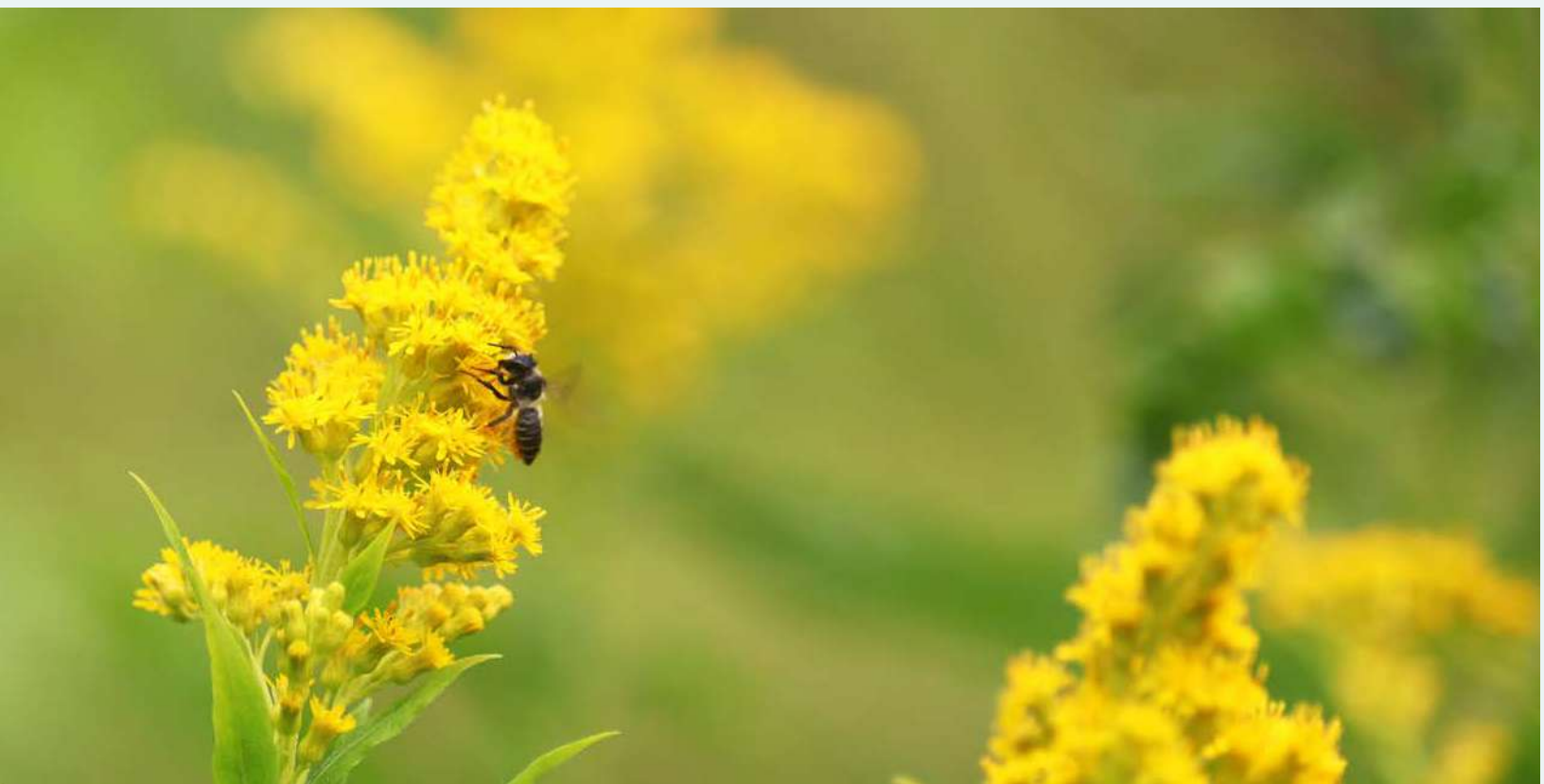


WEEK 5: PLANTS

This week I made another bingo sheet activity, this time with space for participants to draw or do rubbings of the plants they saw. We toured around the forest edge and learned about common Albertan plants. We also talked about traditional indigenous knowledge and the importance of certain plants medicinally and ecologically. Once the bingo sheet was filled the participants got prizes!

For drop-in I invited people to take one of the bingo sheets and tour around the trails themselves to find all the plants. If they came back they got a prize. I gave them a brief rundown on what the plants looked like before they left.

SEE BINGO SHEET IN APPENDIX



WEEK 6: SONGBIRDS

We followed a similar format as when we did the waterbirds week. We learned about different songbirds in the area, their calls, and talked about migration. At this point in the summer the variety of birds was actually quite different and we'd begun to see some birds leaving for the winter. We toured the area looking out for nests and birds, and talked about ways that humans can contribute to bird conservation through making their homes and gardens more bird friendly.

For drop-in I set up a table similar to the waterbirds activity but this time with songbird specific artifacts like wings, nests, and pictures.



WEEK 7: POND BUGS (AGAIN)

I had many people who had missed the first week of the summer request to do pond dipping again so we did a second week of this activity.

WEEK 8: PHOTO SCAVENGER HUNT

To summarize what participants had learned over the summer I arranged three photo scavenger hunts. The three themes were bugs, birds, and plants. Participants could choose which scavenger hunt to do. I allowed the kids to explore and when they needed help or had questions I assisted with nature guides or artifacts to help them find what they needed.

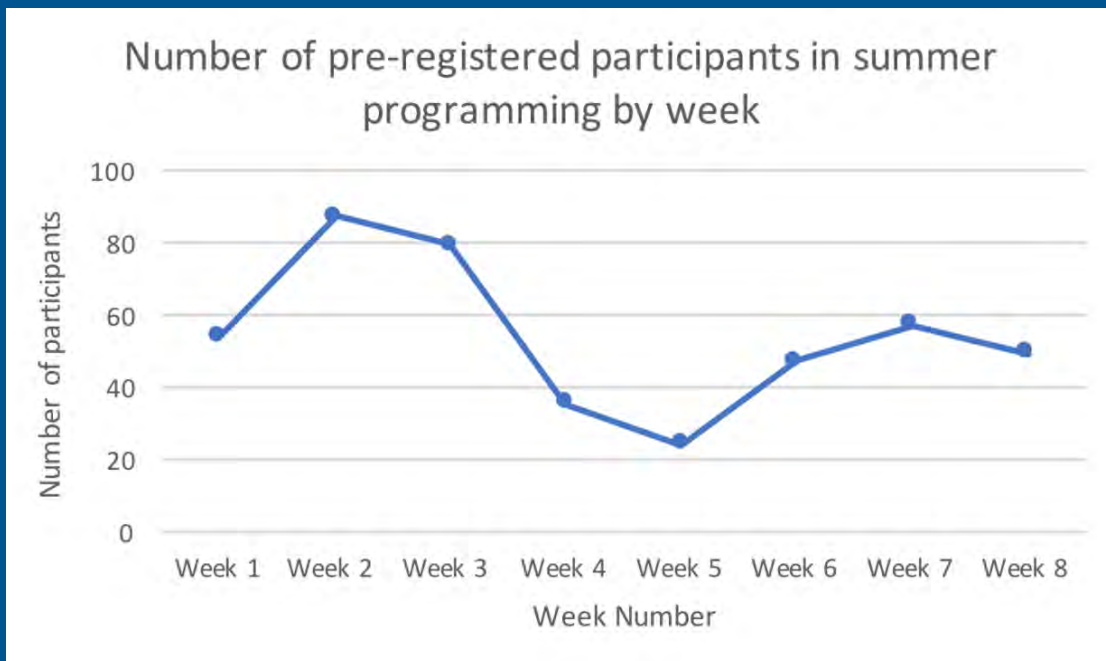
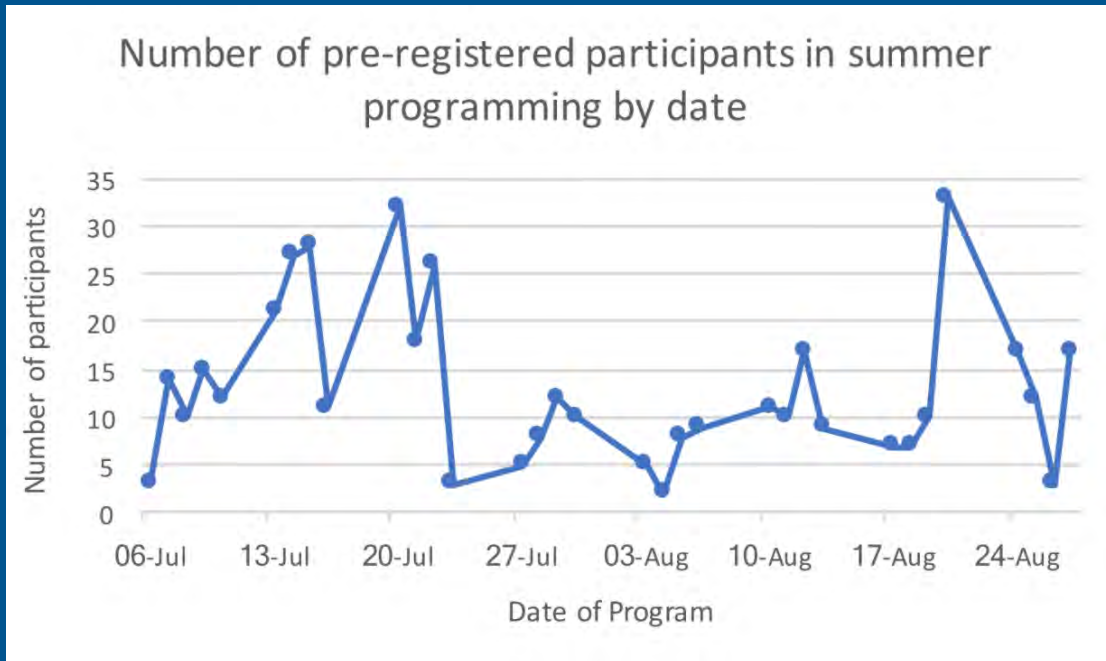
SEE SCAVENGER HUNTS IN APPENDIX



ATTENDANCE OVERVIEW

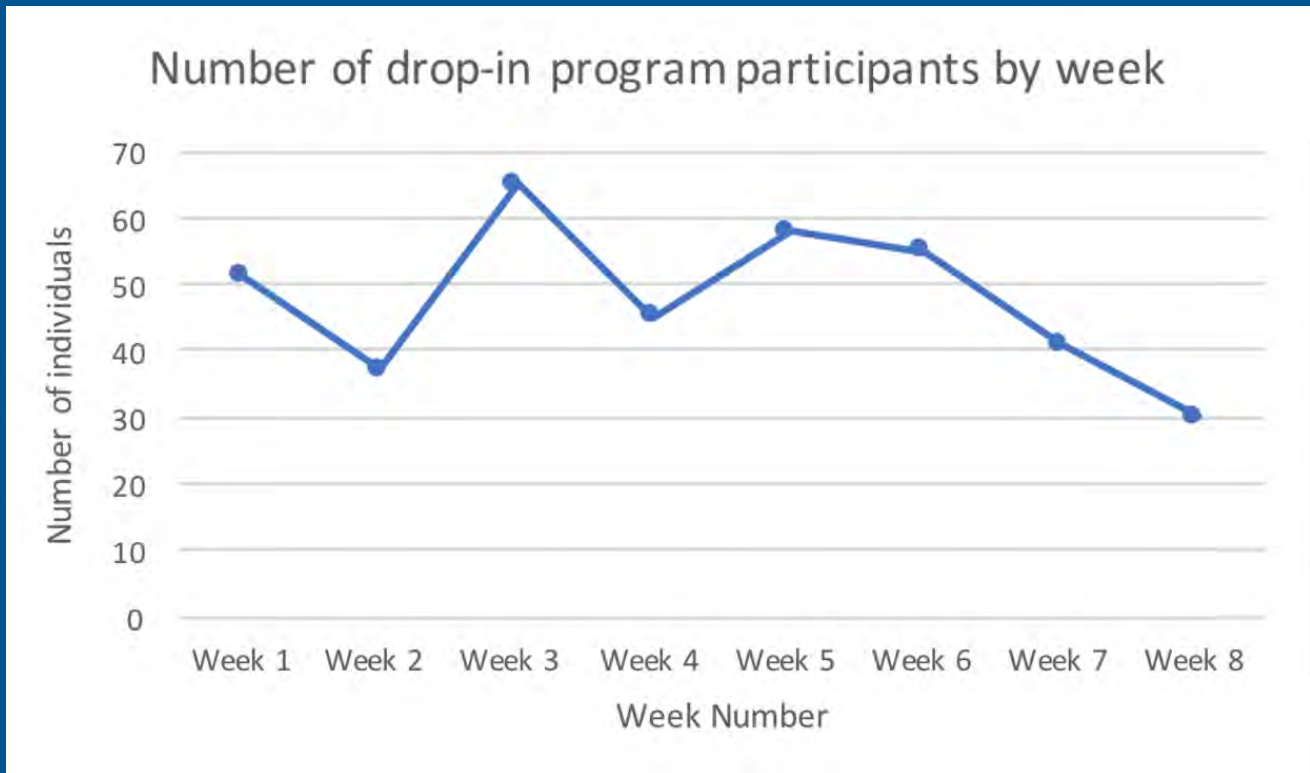
Summary of approximate pre-registered and drop-in participation

PRE-REGISTERED PROGRAMMING



ATTENDANCE OVERVIEW CONT.

DROP-IN PROGRAMMING



RECOMMENDATIONS

While something might be said for the pandemic affecting people's willingness to participate in a public program, I do have some ideas of ways attendance could be improved in future summers. We already have a strong base on social media, so perhaps more consistent posting to attract people to program would be a good idea. Overall, we saw a drop in participation numbers in the middle of the summer. I'm not sure whether this was due to a lack of interest in the topics of bugs and plants, but in the case that it was a lack of knowledge of the program, it may be helpful to have another posting in the Gazette or more posters around town promoting the program. For the most part, the families that came the first and second weeks came each week. We had a large group which came every week and were friends from school. So I know that word of mouth was important to the promotion of the program.



CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges this summer offered I felt that the overall programming was a success. I feel that offering programming at Big Lake is a big opportunity for future summers as it allowed a deeper engagement with nature and taught kids and adults about critters that they see often, but don't always know much about.

We also had assistance this summer from Logan Farr who volunteered throughout July. I think having volunteers or other staff could be helpful during programming outside as it can at times be hard to manage larger groups.

Overall, I greatly enjoyed spending time outdoors everyday engaging with locals and visitors who were interested in learning more about Big Lake. I learned a lot myself from birders who frequented the lake, and from those who have lived here a long time and know the area well.

In future years I think engagement with Alberta Parks may become useful in order to utilize some of their facilities like the picnic shelter for crafts and other activities.

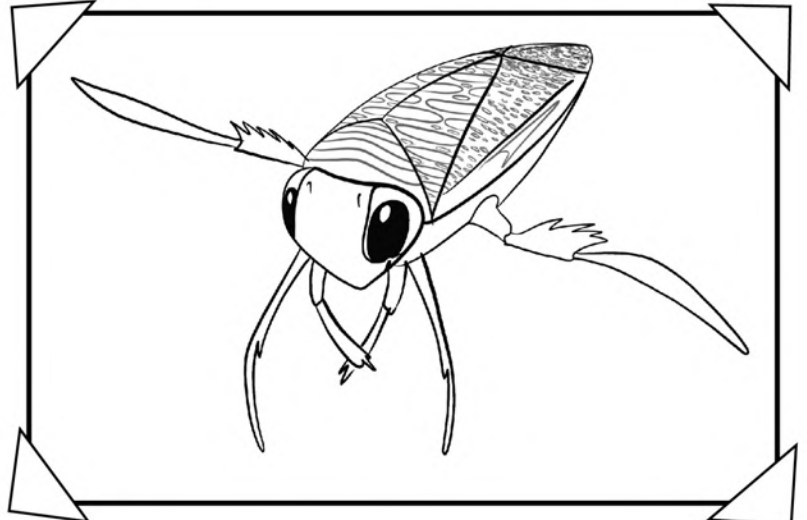
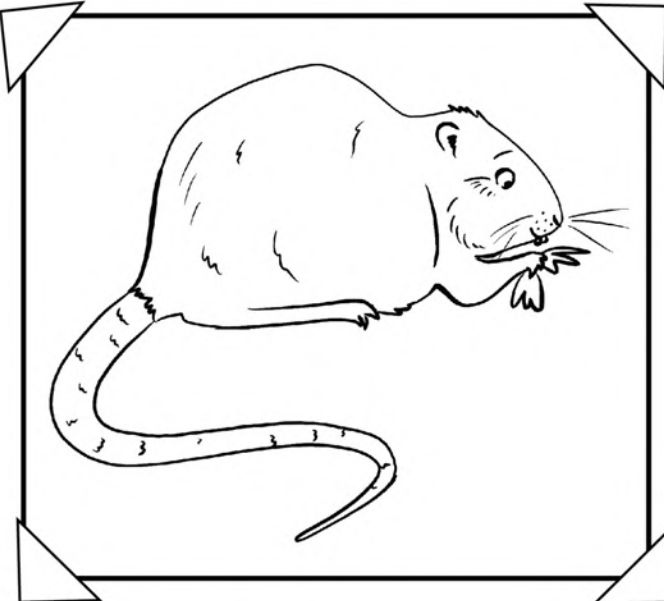
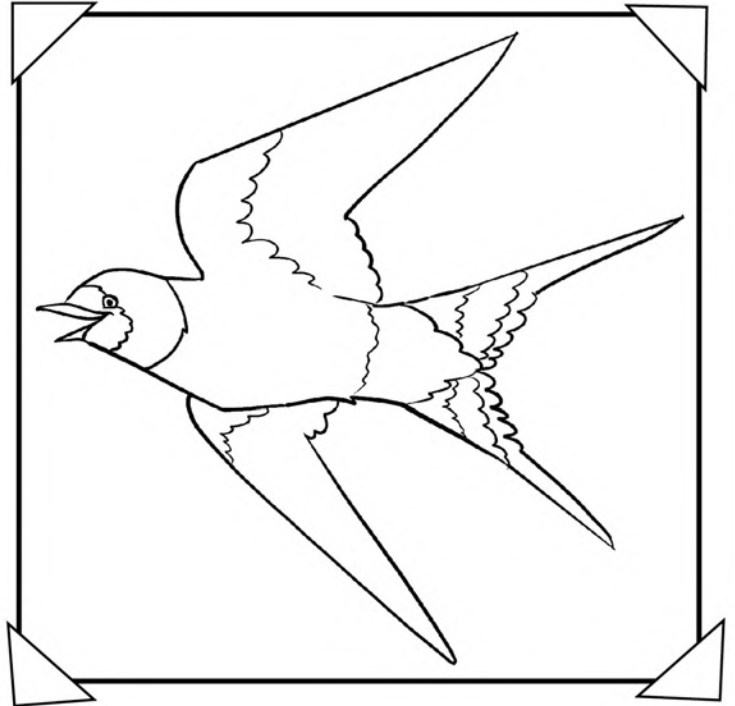
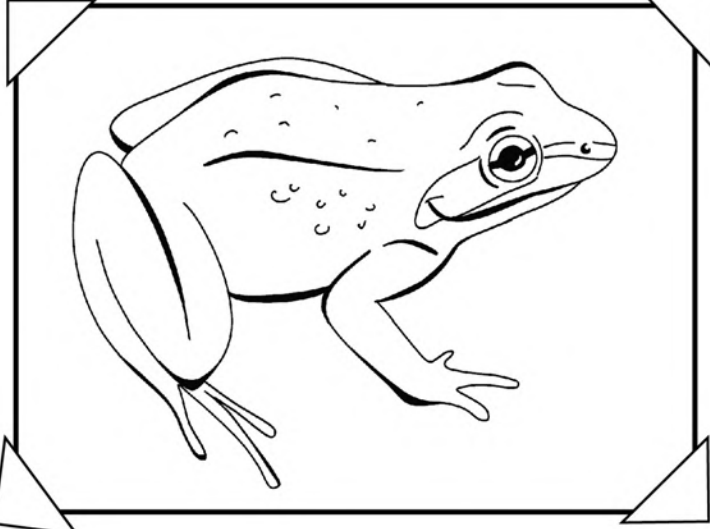
I hope to see this outdoor program grow further and look forward to hearing how next summer goes!

OLIVIA DEBOURCIER

Nature Program Interpreter



EXPLORER FIELD NOTES



Week 1: Water Bugs

Pond dipping

Draw what you find in the pond water!

Pond Dipping Bingo



Dragonfly Nymph



Whirligig Beetle



Diving Beetle



Mayfly Nymph



Water Strider



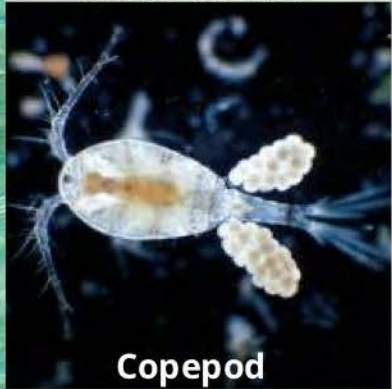
Daphnia (Water Flea)



Damselfly Nymph



Backswimmer



Copepod



Scud



Caddisfly Larvae



Mosquito Larvae



Snail



Horsehair Worm

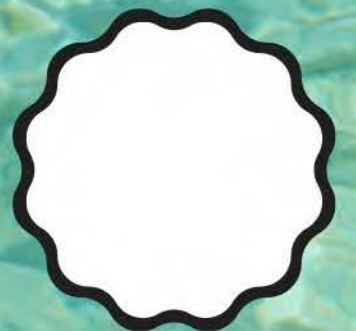


Leech



Water Boatman

**Congrats! You've completed this week's
Water Bug Explorer mission!**





Plant Scavenger Hunt



Red-Osier Dogwood	Spruce	Aster
Canada GoldenRod	Smooth Brome	Buffuloberry
Poplar	Meadow Willow	Raspberry
Tamarack	Duckweed	Trembling Aspen

Photo Scavenger Hunt

PLANT EDITION

Cone	Thorn	Dandelion	Clover	Aspen
Sap	Willow	Flower	Berry	Bark
Light through Leaves	Red-Osier Dogwood	BuffaloBerry	Raspberry	A Diseased Plant
Duckweed	Cattails	Seeds	Fungi (not a plant, but still cool)	Moss
Canada Goldenrod	Aster	Conifer	Something hidden in the plants	Smooth Brome

Photo Scavenger Hunt BUG EDITION

Web	Flight	Pollinator	Bee	Decomposer
Beetle	Fly	Ant	Bark Beetle Markings	Dragonfly
A Bug's Perspective	Bug Home	How many bugs fit in one picture?	The tiniest bug you can find	The biggest bug you can find
Under a leaf	Camouflaged critter	Under a rock	Butterfly	Holding a bug (gently)
Pond bug	Caterpillar	Something colourful!	Mosquito	Bug food!

Photo Scavenger Hunt

BIRD EDITION

Mallard	Nest	Gull	A Woodpecker hole in a tree	Perched bird
Feather	A baby bird (Don't forget ducklings!)	Bird Song	Grebe	Sora
Looking for food	Bird Poop!	Swallow	In Flight	A Bird's Favourite Snack
A Great Blue Heron	A bird swimming	A Sparrow	A Flock of Birds	Hawk
A bird walking along the ground	A Coot	A Magpie	A Crow or Raven	A picture taken from the perspective of a bird



TD Friends of the Environment Foundation

NATURE PROGRAMS

Join us at Lois Hole Provincial Park for **FREE** pre-registered nature tours



Learn how scientists study wildlife, bugs, and more with new themes and activities weekdays from July 6th-August 28th!

BLESS



Follow us on Instagram or Facebook to learn more and for registration info



@BLESS_BigLake



BLESS Nature Centre