



# BLESS Nature Center

ECF

Edmonton Community Foundation

# END OF SEASON REPORT 2021

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# INTRODUCTION



## Objective

The BLESS nature center provides free summer programming for families during the summer months.

The program encourages participants to explore natural history and science topics and fosters an appreciation for the world around us. My objective for this summer was to integrate as much field knowledge into the program as possible while still being engaging for the participants.

## Location

As was the case in the previous year, the program took place at Lois Hole Provincial Park to mitigate safety concerns surrounding the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic. All programs were run either on the boardwalk at Lois Hole Provincial Park as well as the surrounding trails.

# Design

Registered programming took place Monday - Friday for two hours a day. Monday - Tuesday and Thursday - Friday programming times were 10-11am and 2-3 pm. On Wednesday we had programs from 2-3 pm and 7-8 pm to facilitate those who had prior commitments during the day. Drop in programming occurred from 11am - 2pm on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday and from 3pm -6pm on Wednesdays.

Each week a new theme was posted on Instagram and Facebook and I used google forms to allow people to register in the programming times.

Through google I was able to contact program participants about program confirmations and any preparations or supplies they would need for the program.

# Materials

To keep things COVID safe, minimal crafts and sheets were handed out and the majority of the information presented in the programming used materials that were already in the Nature Center. I only purchased a few program supplies (extra nets for pond dipping and bug catching) as not much more was needed.

# Weather and Air Quality

When a program had to be cancelled due to inclement weather or smoke advisory I sent out a email letting participants know. This happened a few times this summer (mostly due to smoke ).

# COVID 19 Mitigation

Like last year, COVID 19 was a large concern for public programming and artifact handling. This summer there was not a mask mandate for the duration of the programming so I gave people the option to wear a mask to the program, but also let them know that at times where social distancing could not occur wearing a mask would be required in the program.

All artifacts used in programs were sanitized immediately after the program, or if they could not be sanitized they would be quarantined in the cabin for 72 hours before they could be used again.

All participants were offered hand sanitizer throughout the program and games and activities were developed so that social distancing could be maintained.



# **Weekly Programing Overview**

# Week 1: Summer Start up!

Program participants discovered some of the different themes and activities that we would be exploring throughout the summer. For this week, each day was a different theme.

Monday: Critters in our backyard

Tuesday: Water birds of BLESS

Wednesday: Plants and Mammals

Thursday: Water Insects

Friday: Song Birds and birds of prey

Activities from these week included: self guided insect scavenger hunt, how to use binoculars demonstration and binocular guided interpretation, mammal artifacts interpretation, wide games (with no contact), pond dipping and bird song discovery activities.

# Week 2: The Importance of Wetlands

Program participants discovered why wetlands are important and how we can care for them. Using the Lois Hole Provincial and the John E. Poole wetland as a backdrop we learned a different wetland concept each day and applied it to the surrounding area. This week featured many science demonstrations and talks about pollution and how best we can save and protect our wetlands and the organisms living there.



# Week 3: Mammals

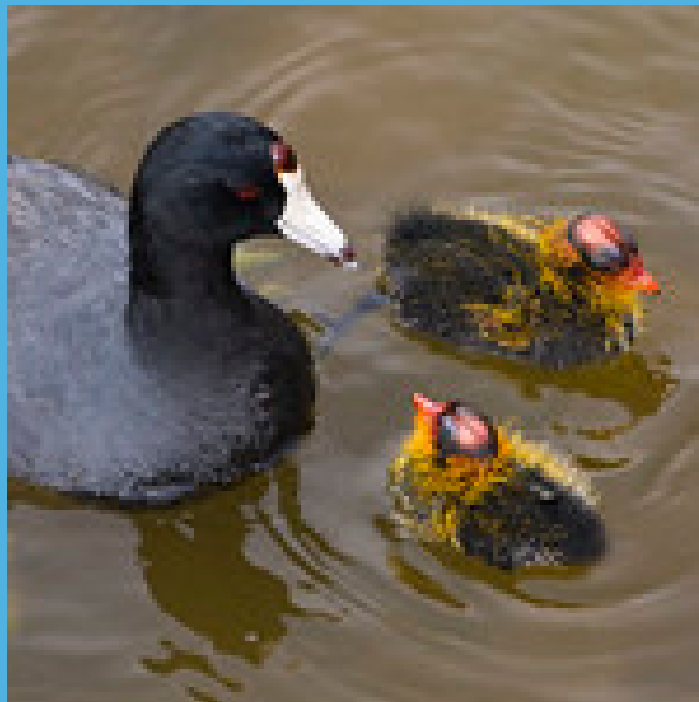
The BLESS nature center had many mammal artifacts that were of great use to this program. This was very helpful as it was more difficult to point out to participants certain mammals because they may not be there during the time the program was taking place. We were lucky to have a family of muskrats and fishers quite visible at this point in the summer on the wetland so I would make a point to go to the boardwalk and point these out. Also, the trails around the park had a lot of evidence of mammals (mammals tracks, beaver and porcupine activity) so I created many tracks and animal activities programs. Participants had the opportunity to see antlers, horns, quills, and different furs up close.





# Week 4: Water Birds and Shore Birds

Participants learned about the most common water birds and shorebirds that could be seen at Big Lake and how to identify them by both sign and sound. We spoke about the difference between shorebirds and water or wading birds and how they differ from perching birds and birds of prey. There were always large numbers of swans, coots, multiple types of ducks, and pelicans at both the boardwalk and the viewing platform which allowed for a great immersive experience for the participants. Big Lake is an Important Bird Area (IBA) and we discussed how we can protect the birds that come there. We did scavenger hunts based on different bird characteristics, created field drawings and notes based on birds we spoke about, and learned about the nesting behaviors of the birds as well.



# Week 5: Insects

This week participated in both bug hunts and pond dips.

We discovered the differences between insects that live on the land and those that live in the water and how some insects live in both. Bug catching was a main theme of this week. We caught arial and ground insects on the trails and discovered the best places to find them. We put our insects in large jars to get a closer look. We also caught pond insects and used ice cube trays to sort all the insects that we found. Pond dipping was found to be the most requested program of the summer so I also added pond dips to weeks with other themes.



# Week 6: Native Plant of Alberta

Participants this week were able to get a more in depth understanding of the native alberta plants that grow in Lois Hole Provincial park. We went on native plant walks and I pointed out the difference between native and invasive plants. Participants made plant presses, plant fossils and played multiple games that explained the life cycle of plants. Longer nature walks were done this week so that participants could identify as many plants as possible in one session.



# Week 7: Perching and Song Birds

This week was set up similar to the previous bird week except for the focus of the birds was slightly different. Participants learned how to identify by sight and sound common perching and songbirds. There were many waxwings, barn swallows, and birds of prey around the park at this time. We utilized the boardwalk and the platform to facilitate bird-watching, information sessions, and activities. We talked a lot about feathers and how they differ between different types of birds.



# Week 8: Summer Wrap Up

Before the start of this week, I sent out a poll to previous participants of the program to discover what their favorite activities were from the summer and did these activities again for the program participants. Like the first week of the summer each day was a different theme:

Monday: Mammals

Tuesday: Pond Dip

Wednesday: Plants

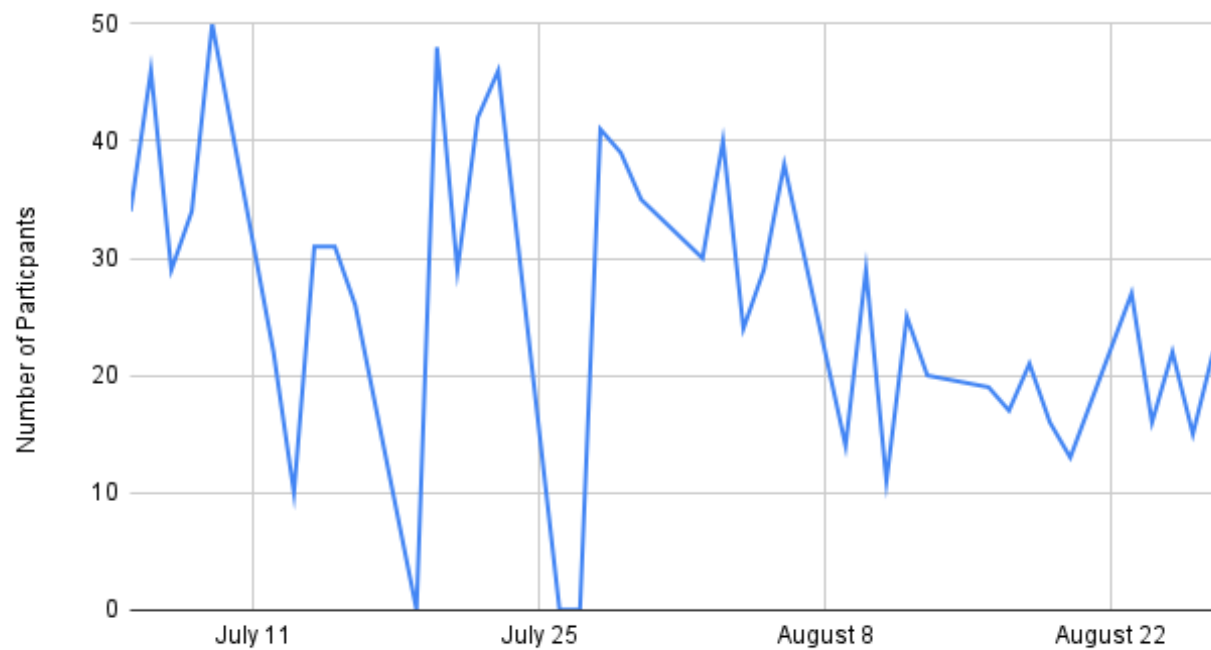
Thursday: Birds

Friday: Insects

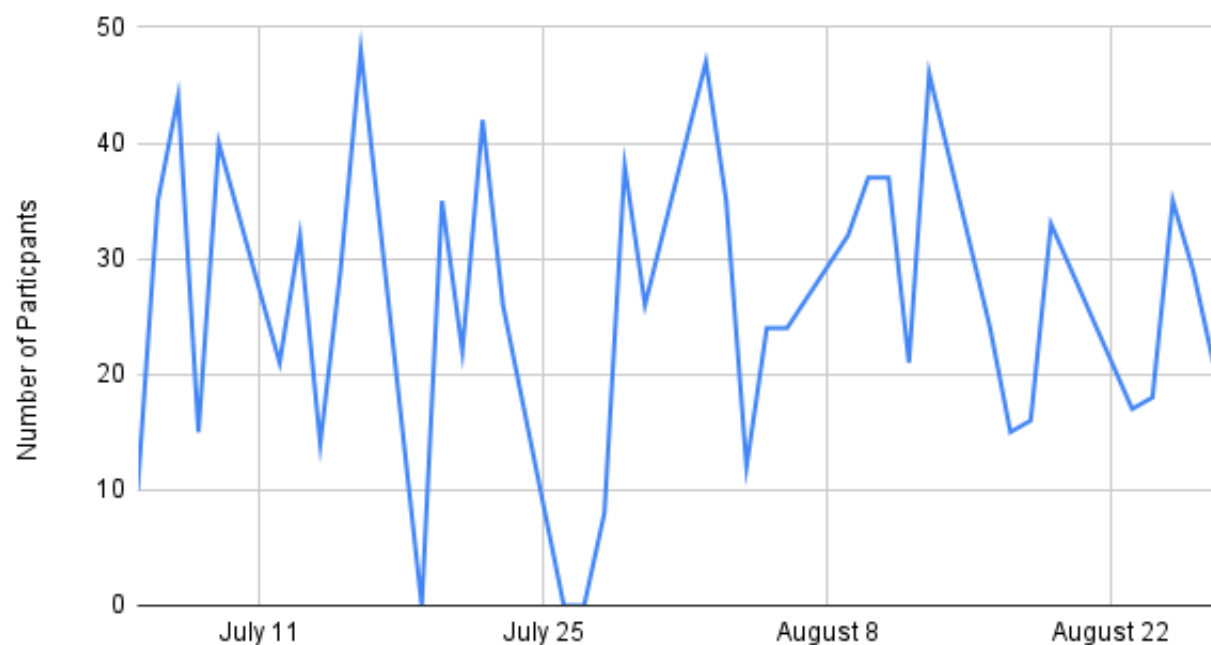
Each day the program would feature an interpretive session based on the theme of the day, an overview of what we had learned that summer, and then voted on activity from previous program participants.

# Attendance

Number of pre-registered participants by date



Number of Drop In participants by date



# Recommendations

Though the COVID 19 pandemic was an ongoing concern again this summer, I feel that the program itself was still very successful. We had very high attendance in July, with the exception of the days that the smoke was too bad to do programming. The social media audience on facebook was very helpful in getting people informed about the program. One of the frequent program participants posted our summer poster in a facebook mom group on facebook and after that point (Week 1) my attendance was quite high. A lot of program participants were returners and would even participate in both the registered and drop in programming. Throughout the summer, I also answered nature questions via email and this was very successful. I sometimes had 10 - 20 emails asking about nature questions alone. Attendance dropped off in August, but still stayed around 20 participants per day.



# Conclusion

Overall, I feel that the program this summer was very successful. There were multiple days over the summer where I would see and interact with almost 50 people per day between the two types of programming. From conversations over the summer, I understood that there is an absence of this type of programming within St. Albert and many wondered if we would be out at Big Lake again next year. I feel it would be within the best interests of the program to use the Lois Hole Provincial park in conjunction with the nature cabin in St. Albert to create more opportunities for nature programming in the summer. Big Lake was a valuable and engaging resource and it was wonderful getting to know and learn with all the program participants this summer.

For the future, volunteers may be a great thing to add to the programming. On days where the groups were bigger or for times when I received many emails in one day it was sometimes hard to manage the many tasks required.

Having the opportunity to teach, explore and connect with residents of St. Albert and area was one of the highlights of my summer and I hope to see more success with the program in the future.