

BIG LAKE ENVIRONMENT
SUPPORT SOCIETY

REPORT BY LOREENA
NIEUWENHOUT

2022

SUMMER NATURE PROGRAM REPORT





Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout

INTRODUCTION

Objective

The BLESS Big Lake Nature Program for 2022 had the goal of fostering positive conservation mindsets in children and adult attendees through positive experiential education out in Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park.

Location

All programming for the 2022 season was held at Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park, particularly in the John E. Poole Wetlands and associated boardwalk, as well as the BLESS Lookout.

Design

The summer nature program ran from Monday thru Friday from June 27th to August 26th, 2022 with two pre-registered sessions offered per day. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday sessions were held from

10-11am and 1-2pm. On Wednesdays sessions were held from 2-3pm and 6-7pm, to accommodate those who could not attend during business hours during the week. Drop-in programming was held between pre-registered sessions which allowed the public and users of the park to stop by.

Registration was done through google forms and was opened on Mondays one week prior to the scheduled programming. Sessions were closed either one day before the scheduled programming or when they reached a capacity of over twenty registered participants. Emails were collected as a part of the registration process to allow for communication of any program changes as well as registration confirmations to participants.

OPERATIONS

Social Media & Advertising

Social media was the primary source of advertising for the nature program using the BLESS Nature Centre Facebook page and @BLESS_biglake on Instagram. Social media posts were made twice a week to encourage frequent follower engagement, as well as to announce the themes and provide registration links. A factor that really helped promote the program was a few individuals sharing our posts to their private homeschooling or mom Facebook groups. Early on in the program we had a lot of registrants from homeschooling parents and their families because of this.

Print material designed on Canva was also used to help advertise and promote the program (see appendix). Posters were stapled to the exterior walls of the downtown nature cabin as well as posted in the hallway outside the Musee Heritage and in the St. Albert Tourism office. Promotional postcards with a brief description of the program were also made to be handed out to individuals to take home with about 130 handed out over the course of the summer.

The St. Albert Gazette published an article about the summer nature program on June 23 providing the nature program with some broader exposure to the public.
<https://www.stalberttoday.ca/local-news/bless-summer-nature-centre-returns-to-big-lake-nieuwenhout-constable-5500045>

Covid-19 Situation

For the duration of the program, there were no government restrictions in place for group programming. Hand sanitizer and non-medical face masks were made available for participants who wished to use them. Participants were also told in the registration forms to not attend if they showed any symptoms of Covid-19 or had a recent positive test result.

Expenses

Expenses for the program primarily consisted of printed promotional material and a few supplies such as magnifying glasses, lamination sheets, bean bag supplies, etc. I utilized a lot of the printed materials that were already in the nature centre cabin and tried to repair items as I could.



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout

THEMES

The weekly themes were as follows:

June 27-30 “Welcome to Big Lake”

July 4-8 “Feathered Friends”

July 11-15 “Plant Kingdom Adventure”

July 18-22 “Hidden Underwater World”

July 25-29 “Mighty Mammals”

August 1-5 “Bug Safari”

August 8-12 “Friends of Big Lake”

August 15-19 “Big Lake at Night”

August 22-26 “Mystery Summer Celebration”



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout

WEEK 1

“Welcome to Big Lake” (June 27-July 1)

The theme for week one was created with the intent to provide a sampling of the types of programming that will happen in the summer for families to attend. I had a great response with many families registering for multiple sessions in the week.

Monday was the plant themed teaser, we played a couple of field games using the bottled specimens and then I provided a small scavenger hunt of plant items for participants to find throughout the park on a self-guided walk.

Tuesday was the bird teaser and involved a brief 15 minute talk about some of the birds of the area using large photos and then a loosely guided bird watching walk down the boardwalk to the BLESS Lookout.

Wednesday was the pond dip teaser, many families signed up for the later afternoon session but only one family out of the four registered showed up for the later evening session. I gave a brief description of some of the critters that can be found in the pond and provided reference photos and cards. Families were then provided materials to collect some pond samples and observe what creatures they contained. There wasn't a hugely diverse amount of

species available at the time, but participants had fun anyway.

Thursday was mammal teaser day. Participants played a true or false based field game after a brief 5 minute talk about mammals. We then played the sensory touch bag game which was a big hit and also focused their attention quite well. Participants were also given the opportunity to see some mammal artifacts and touch some of the furs.

Friday was Canada Day and the BLESS Big Lake Nature Program did not hold any regularly scheduled programming. Instead we had a booth at Lions Park as a part of the Canada Day celebrations. We had a few artifacts, some bird and plant books for sale, information about BLESS and the Nature Program available, as well as the “Frog to Pond” version of cornhole. Children could play Frog to Pond to win a Big Mammals of Big Lake sticker. It was a very popular event and we had approximately 170 people stop by our booth.

WEEK 2

“Feathered Friends” (July 4-8)

Week two programming consisted of a talk at the beginning of the session to describe some of the bird species that are found in the park as well as those found along the Sturgeon river and in St. Albert. Printed photos were a useful aid to describe the species and where they are typically found. Binoculars and bird scavenger hunt lists were handed out and we then walked along the boardwalk as a group to do some birdwatching. If there was enough time we also walked to the BLESS lookout to see if we could spot any shorebirds, but due to the high water level in the lake the usual showing of gulls and pelicans was not present this year. The bird programming was well timed at the beginning of the program and we saw a decent number of species who were still around from the spring migration including American Coots, Ruddy Ducks, Mallards, Black Terns, Red Necked Grebes and various songbirds. Programming had to be cancelled on one day due to heavy rain.



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout

WEEK 3

“Plant Kingdom Adventure” (July 11-15)

Programming for week 3 was centred around the plant life that could be found in the park. Smaller groups were able to play pollination beanbag after a talk on pollinators and their ecological importance. Larger groups played a race-style specimen identification game using plant seed specimens in plastic spice jars. Participants were then encouraged to look at how many species of plants were present within various placements of a hula-hoop and learned some information about them. Groups were then given small plant scavenger hunts or plant bingo cards (see appendix) depending on their age and were encouraged to walk along the paths near the shelter to complete them. While they were looking for items I was able to float between groups and provide information on species as they were looking at them. Prizes were given out for successful finds. This week of the program saw generally lower attendance and pre-registrations with three of the sessions having no attendees.



WEEK 4

“Hidden Underwater World” (July 18-22)

The theme for week 4 centered around families having the opportunity to participate in a pond dip to examine water creatures. We met as a group on the John E. Poole Wetlands boardwalk and started off with a short discussion of some of the water creatures that might be found in the pond using photos as aids. After the brief introduction of a few species, I performed a demo so families could see how to best collect samples and they were then given equipment to do their own collections. I included a laminated pond dip bingo card from the 2020 program (see 2020 report appendix) and laminated identification stickers for each family to refer to. Participants could cross off items with a dry erase marker as they found them. I was able to float from group to group to provide additional insight as to what they found as the session went on. This week's programming also attracted a lot of drop-in participant interest as I had collected a bucket of critters people could look at as they walked by on the boardwalk.



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout

WEEK 5

“Mighty Mammals” (July 25-29)

Week 5 sessions started with a 15 minute discussion about the traits of a mammal as well as some photos and description of many of the mammals that call the provincial park home. Using the information discussed we then played Owls and Crows, a true or false based tag game described in *Sharing Nature with Children* by Joseph Cornell. After this we played the animal tracks game where multiple illustrated cards featuring animal tracks were hidden along the surrounding trails. Participants were encouraged to find all eleven prints and try to remember what animals they belonged to. This activity had a great response and level of engagement from the kids. After this game participants were usually in need of shade, so we moved to the picnic shelter and used the sensory touch bags and viewed mammal artifacts.



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout

WEEK 6

“Bug Safari” (August 1-5)

With August signalling the beginning of insect season, I deliberately timed this theme to increase our odds of catching a wide variety of insects. The session opened with a brief talk about arthropods and then specifically insects that we might find in the park. Then participants were given insect catching nets and we walked along together on the gravel trails near the picnic shelter to try to catch bugs. It was a great success with various insects caught and examined as well as some boreal chorus frogs. Although this week had fewer registered participants, those who did attend loved the activity so much that I would recommend keeping the insect theme in future years of the program.



WEEK 7

"Friends of Big Lake" (August 8-12)

Friends of Big Lake was designed as an opportunity to collaborate with other like-minded groups and organizations to provide some more perspectives and knowledge on nature based education. Originally the plan was to have North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance and Wagner Natural Area split the week, but unfortunately due to scheduling conflicts NSWA could not attend. Instead Wagner Natural Area's summer student Sydney Cantu was able to commit to attending the Tuesday, Thursday and Friday during the week to help run programming. Together we chose a wetlands theme seeing as both Lois Hole CPP and Wagner Natural Area contain different types of wetlands and designed the programming around that.

The sessions opened with a brief discussion about the different types of wetlands and the major threats to them using the Ducks Unlimited Teacher's Guide to Wetlands Activities as a reference and guideline. Participants then played pollution knockout where they threw bean bags at images taped to cups that were bad for wetlands while trying to avoid hitting other images that were good for wetlands. After this participants were given a wetlands scavenger hunt and we went on a shorter walk on the boardwalk for them to try to check everything off. Prizes were also given out to participants who filled out most of the scavenger hunt.



Photo: Lucas Nieuwenhaut

WEEK 8

“Big Lake at Night” (August 15-19)

Week 8 sessions centered around nocturnal animals that might be found in the park. Although programming was still run during the day, participants were taught about nocturnal habits of various animals and played games to help reinforce those concepts. If a group was large we were able to play “Owls and Crows”, a true or false tag game as described in *Sharing Nature with Children* by Joseph Cornell, using a set of questions targeted at nocturnal habits of animals. If a group was smaller and had a lot of younger participants we were able to play “Night-time Day-time” which was a variation on the classic children's game “Red-light green-light” with the children behaving like nocturnal animals and only being able to move at night time.

After either of these activities the group was sent on a “Bat Hunt”. I cut out 10 paper silhouettes of bats and hid them in the trees throughout the park for participants to find. Nine were easier to find white bats and one was a harder to find black bat. I would hide the bats with more or less difficulty depending on the average age of the group. If all participants found the black bat they received a prize. To close out the session we looked at some of the bird artifacts, especially the owl wings and talons, which the kids were very interested in.

WEEK 9

“Mystery Summer Celebration” (August 22-26)

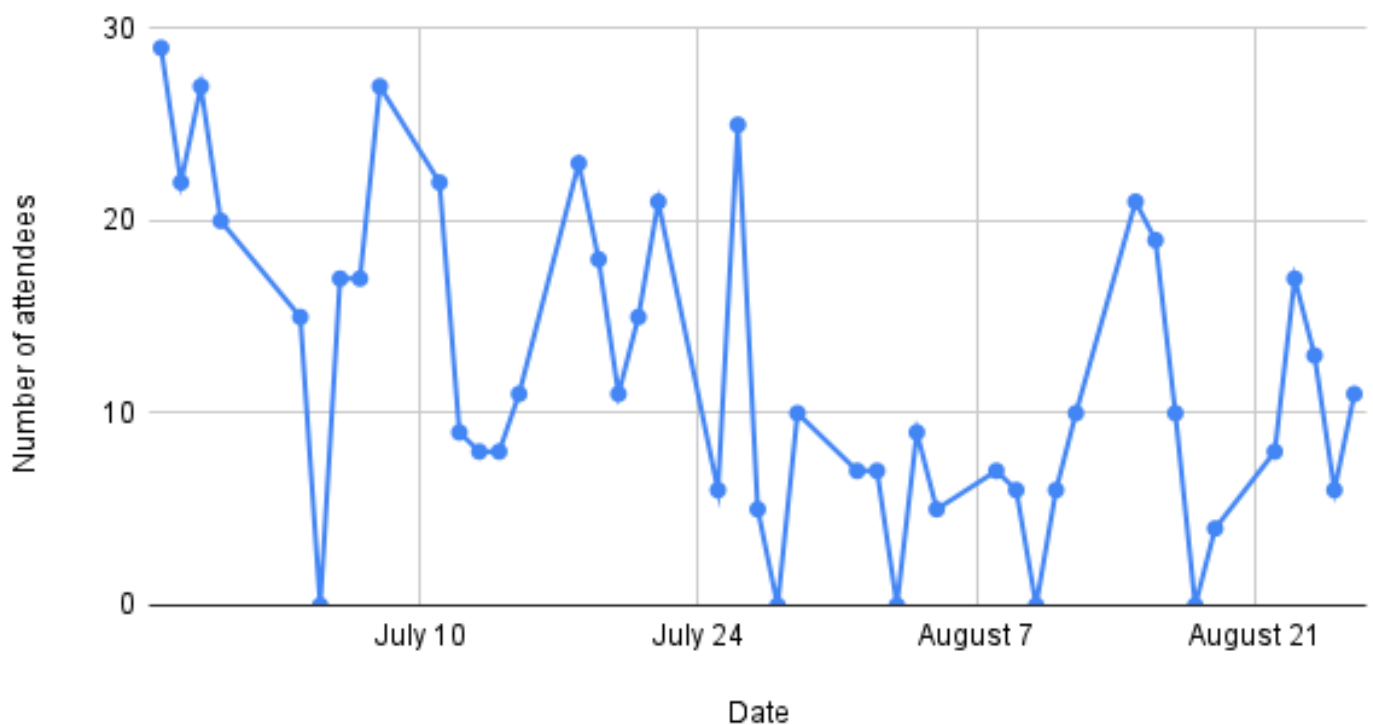
For the final week of the summer I brought back some popular themes from earlier in the program but left the themes a mystery to participants until they arrived for their session. Monday and Tuesday were both bird themed, where we repeated our bird talk and walk. Wednesday was pond dipping day and Thursday and Friday were insect hunting days.

ATTENDANCE

Pre-registered Programming

The summer started off very strong with the multi-themed intro week, but we saw only a handful of those same families return later in the program. The end of July saw the typical slow down in registrants most likely due to families getting vacation time and going elsewhere. Overall there were around 15 families who attended on a fairly regular basis.

Pre-registered Programming Attendance



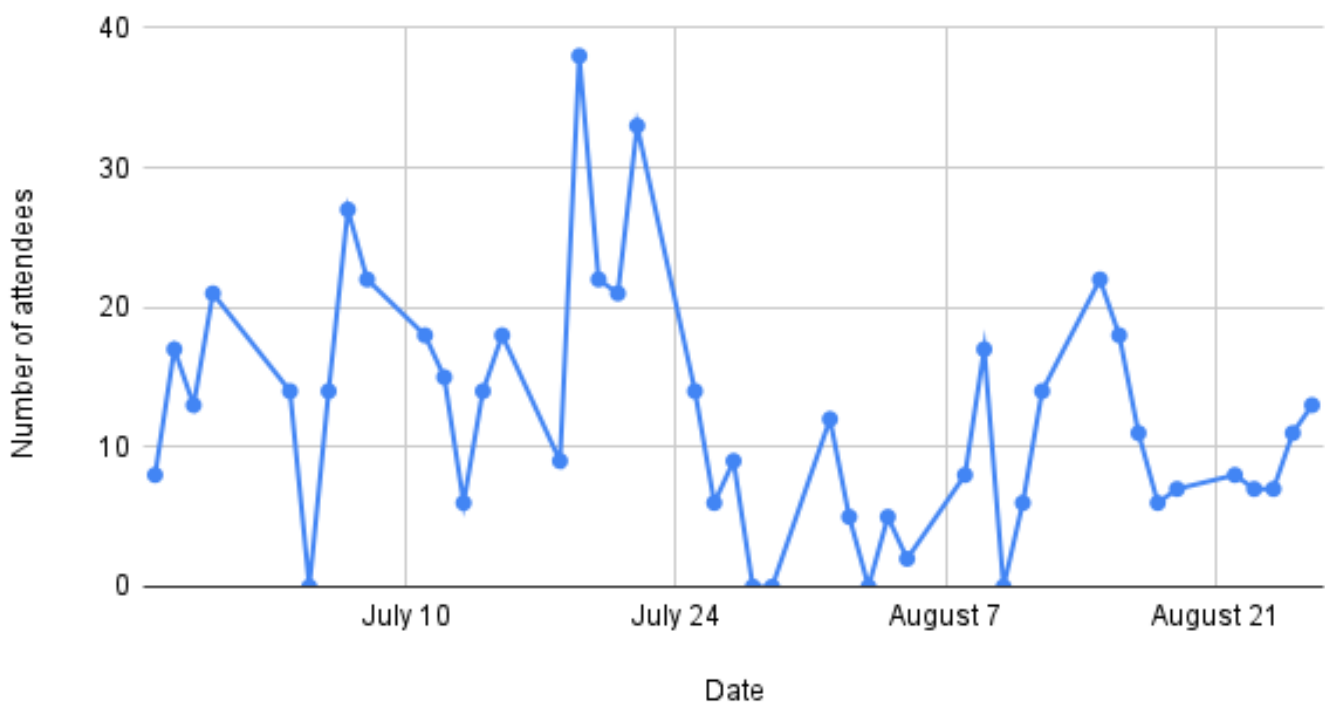
ATTENDANCE

Drop-in Programming

For most of the drop-in hours between registered sessions I typically had a display table in the picnic shelter of artifacts, puzzles, games, and reference books relevant to that week's theme as well as some BLESS promotional material available. Most of the drop-in individuals were adults with a much smaller portion consisting of children. A huge draw was the permanent signage of the many species of birds that can be found in the park. Many people asked me questions about birds they saw or what they might see on their walk. It was an excellent resource to have to teach people about the species that can be found on any given day.

When compared to the previous two years, drop-in attendance was lower this year. This was most likely due to the Ray Gibbon Drive bridge construction forcing the closure of the connector trail between the park and St. Albert which resulted in an extremely long and poorly indicated detour to get into the park.

Drop-in Programming Attendance



SPECIAL EVENTS

Celebrating River Valley Relationships (August 3)

During the summer BLESS was also invited to two community events hosted by other nature organizations. On August 3rd, the Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition and Swim Drink Fish hosted a “Celebrating River Valley Relationships” event. The BLESS Nature Program had a booth there with information about both BLESS and the summer kids program. I also included the frog to pond game for any visitors and children to play to win a sticker if they were interested. We had about 45 people visit the booth over the course of the evening and it was a great opportunity to connect with like minded organizations.



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout

SPECIAL EVENTS



Family Nature Night: Wetland Champions (August 10)

On August 10th Nature Alberta hosted one of their family nature nights at Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park themed “Wetland Champions”. BLESS along with Wagner Natural Area, Alberta Lake Management Society, North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance, Alberta Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, and Edmonton Native Plant Society all hosted booths along the boardwalk and through the park for families to visit and learn through games. The event was a great success with 165 people who attended. The BLESS booth was set up on the BLESS Lookout and included a bird silhouette matching game. Participants were also encouraged to look through the binoculars mounted to the platform to observe some of the many birds that were on the lake that evening.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The program was a great success this year and we were fortunate that the Covid-19 situation did not impact the programming with any restrictions. For future years I would encourage the continued regular posting on Facebook and Instagram to engage our followers. During the middle of the summer there was a lot of difficulty with many groups being no-shows despite them having pre-registered and received a confirmation/reminder email. A huge benefit to the program, if registration continues in future years, would be to upgrade to some automated registration and email reminder service. That way the nature interpreter would not have to spend time monitoring the forms and sending confirmation emails.

My biggest recommendation would be to eliminate the Wednesday evening sessions next year. We had a consistently poor turnout throughout the whole summer where families would register for the 6-7pm sessions and then not show up. Only one family was able to consistently register and attend those evening sessions. I also found that the drop-in time from 4:30-6:00pm was extremely slow with very few visitors to the park.



Photo: Loreena Nieuwenhout

CONCLUSION

The 2022 BLESS Big Lake Nature Program was a huge success with many families attending to a grand total of 1443 participant interactions through pre-registered programming, drop-in programming and special events. Families were able to get out into nature at the park and really experience all the area has to offer.

Over the summer I had the joy of seeing many families learn something new for the first time or have a new immersive nature experience. A couple of my favourite quotes from children who attended the program were "I had fun at the nature!" and "I know, because I do SCIENCE!". It was also wonderful to meet many of the frequent users of the park, many of whom were very experienced birders, and I learned lots from them. Getting to see all the life in the park change over the course of the summer was an excellent experience. It truly was an honour to create and operate the program this summer and to build relationships with those who attended and I hope to see the program continue to succeed in the future.



LOREENA NIEUWENHOUT
Summer Nature Interpreter 2022



APPENDIX

2022 Program Poster

BLESS
Big Lake
Environment
Support
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BIG LAKE NATURE PROGRAM

Weekdays from June 27th-
August 26th

Join us for **FREE** pre-
registered nature
activities in Lois Hole
Provincial Park

Follow us on our Facebook or
Instagram for more info and
online registration

 **BLESS Nature Centre**

 **@BLESS_biglake**

APPENDIX

2022 Program Postcard Handouts



Front



Back























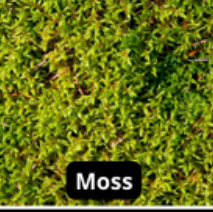


APPENDIX

Plant Bingo



Plant B i n g o



 Red Osier Dogwood	 Broadleaf Plantain	 Trembling Aspen	 Currant	 Clover
 Wild Vetch	 Common Yarrow	 Buffaloberry	 Wild Raspberry	 Canadian Anemone
 Manitoba Maple	 Smooth Brome	 Free Space	 Balsam Poplar	 Dandelion
 Meadow Willow	 Horsetail	 Spruce Tree	 Cattail	 Canada Thistle
 Duckweed	 Pineappleweed	 Moss	 Paper Birch	 Mushroom