

## BLESS September 2020 Newsletter

This is the quarterly newsletter informing the BLESS membership about ongoing environmental issues, events and achievements around Big Lake. We hope you find 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, Grant Pearsell

### Board Meetings

These are usually held at 7:00 pm on the first Wednesday of every month. During the current Covid 19 shut down 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](mailto:info@bless.ab.ca).

At the June board meeting it was decided to postpone the World Migratory Bird Day event until spring of 2021. We are hoping that by the beginning of next year Covid 19 restrictions will have been lifted to the extent that we can start planning for an event that will be similar to the successful one that occurred in May 2019.

### Financial Report

Financially BLESS is in good condition largely due to a grant from TD Friends of the Environment that paid the hired coordinator wages for the summer nature program. A final report for the provincial Community Facility Improvement Grant was submitted for the platform reconstruction. A total of \$127,796.23 (the grant plus interest from a GIC) was provided to the City totalling almost 50% of the reconstruction cost. We also saved nearly \$1,000 as we have not had an AGM yet this year due to Covid-19 restrictions, and one this fall will likely not be as expensive. We are reserving \$3,000 for International Migratory Bird Day next year as we received a grant from Investors Group to do that.

Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Commission have slotted BLESS into the first quarter of 2021 for a casino. The exact date has not yet been set, but we will certainly let you know when they do as we can use all the volunteers we can get in staffing for a Casino.

### BLESS Summer Nature Centre Program

The summer program had to move outdoors this year due to the City’s response to Covid-19. We hired an excellent candidate, Olivia deBourcier, as she had considerable experience with conducting nature Interpretation programs. We gave her a big task, to come up with a series of nature interpretation talks along the John E Poole Boardwalk and at the BLESS Platform. She held two guided talks by reservation only each day and put up a table with materials on varying topics for several hours each day. Due to Covid 19



restrictions there was a lot of time spent on cleaning tools, staging equipment and organizing talks. Olivia did a wonderful job. We would also like to thank TD Friends of the Environment for granting us the money to hire Olivia.

### **Ray Gibbon Drive Widening**

Phase 1 of the Ray Gibbon Drive (RGD) widening has proceeded well throughout the summer. The new 2 lane carriageway on the west side is now open for southbound traffic. RGD is now a divided roadway to north of the intersection with LeClair Way. The contract includes the installation of somewhat meandering multi-use trails on both sides of the road. These trails connect to the Red Willow Trail system at locations that line up with an extension of the alignment of Levasseur Road. The trails extend all the way to the south boundary of St Albert at 137 Avenue. BLESS has been pleased to note that access to the Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park opposite LeClair Way has been maintained throughout the summer.

The City of St Albert has invited feedback regarding the Phase 1 construction project. Members of the public can provide their opinions, suggestions and questions to the City by going to the following link: <https://stalbert.ca/dev/construction/transportation/ray-gibbon-drive-twinning-project/>

### **BLESS Viewing Platform Enhancements**

The second pair of binoculars have now been installed on the BLESS viewing platform. As can be seen in the following photos these binoculars are at a height that enables them to be used by smaller children and by people in wheelchairs. The viewing platform has become a popular spot that has been used by numerous visitors throughout the summer. BLESS has contacted the City of St Albert to request that a “No Fishing” sign be installed at the entrance to the platform. The public is asked to refrain from any activities that detract from the main purpose of the platform, which is viewing wildlife with a minimum of disturbance.



### **Red Willow Trail Flooding**

In our June newsletter we reported that the trail under the Ray Gibbon Drive bridge had been reopened earlier than last year as a result of the City staff pumping floodwater away from the back of the temporary dam. Our optimism turned out to be unfounded. By June 19<sup>th</sup> the river level had risen again and the City’s pumping was unable to keep up with the inflow. By the end of June sections of the dam had started to collapse. The City continued with their attempts at pumping until the first week of July,

but discontinued that process after July 7<sup>th</sup>. The trail remained officially closed until the last week of August, which was more than a month later than occurred last year.

The collapse of the dam compounded the problems, as can be seen in the following photos. By August 14<sup>th</sup> the dam had pushed the railings along the river side of the trail out towards the river. Bicyclists and pedestrians had started to use the collapsed dam as a very insecure “footpath”. By August 24<sup>th</sup> it was once again possible to use the trail by wading through an obstacle course of mud and debris.

BLESS will be continuing to liaise with City to see if a more functional solution to the problem can be instituted by next spring. In any event it is hoped that a permanent solution will be implemented as part of Phase 2 of the Ray Gibbon Drive widening, which is scheduled to occur in 2022. At that time the second portion of the bridge will be constructed. That construction should include improving and permanently raising the trail on the south side of the river. It will also be an opportunity to reconstruct and optimize the wildlife corridor on the north side of the river.



### **Update of Alberta Parks Dept Activities**

The new wheelchair accessible trail on the east side of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park is complete and operational. The trail ties in to the existing trail system at the picnic area near the boardwalk and runs parallel to the informal trail in the trees to the border of the park. It is hoped that a future project will eventually take the trail to 137th avenue. At 668 metres in length and made of granular limestone to facilitate natural drainage, the trail also ties in to the parking lot for easier access.

Staff from Alberta Parks are currently mapping the informal trails within the park as the first step in developing a strategy for a trail network. It is encouraging to finally see some movement in developing a formal trail system. The current pandemic as well as the new housing developments in Edmonton have resulted in an influx of people using the natural area and many trails that were once faint game trails through the bush are rapidly



developing into well worn paths. Formal trails should help to focus foot traffic and preserve the natural area.

Trekkers may note signs along the paths on the east of the park that delineate areas closed due to ecologically sensitive vegetation. Kayla Campbell, area manager for the Yellowhead Central Region at Alberta Parks advises the measure is designed to protect what locals know as the "fern forest", in accordance with the park management plan which describes the area as a "...balsam poplar/ highbush cranberry/ ostrich fern forest located at the east end of the park." The management plan states the fern forest is ranked S1S2 by the Alberta Conservation Information Management System and is thus considered to be of conservation concern. BLESS asks that folks respect the closure to preserve this very unique piece of biodiversity in the park.



### Environmental DNA Water Sampling Project

Miles Constable is conducting a BLESS project this fall to collect water samples from Big Lake in support of a University of Guelph environmental DNA initiative. Environmental DNA analysis is an emerging tool for measuring and monitoring biodiversity. According to the University of Guelph:

The aim of the proposed DNA sampling project is to find out if water samples provide sufficient information on the present bird community to add information to the global bird databases like ebird. To answer this question, samples from locations with an active birding community and a high number of birds are ideal.

Volunteers at Important Bird Areas (IBAs) all across Canada will filter water samples during the upcoming fall migration at these hot spots. One of them will be Big Lake (IBA number AB068). At the end of the season, the filters will be analyzed for bird DNA at the University of Guelph and the obtained data will be directly compared to the visual datasets of the respective area.



Sampling began on September 14th and will continue until the end of November. Samples taken once a week are filtered then frozen and will be shipped to the University of Guelph where a DNA analysis will be done on them. Shown at right is the sampling kit ready for use.



## Seasonal Flora and Fauna

A night heron looking for its supper in the lagoon just northeast of the viewing platform.



Muskrat basking in the sun at Riel Lagoon.



The following two photos were taken by Mart and Steph Sachsse from their canoe on the far south west side of Big Lake. Mart and Steph are in the process of moving to Ottawa. BLESS would like to wish them all the best for their future.



Fall colours emerging in the forest on the east side of the park.





