

## **SUMMER NATURE CENTRE 2008**

### **Location**

The Nature Centre is located in the log cabin along St. Albert Trail and Sturgeon Road. As mentioned in previous reports this location seems to be a great spot since it is located near the Red Willow Park trail. The cabin is in a high traffic area where many families walk, bike, jog, and drive by the log cabin. The log cabin is also visible from St. Albert trail where many visitors said they passed by and saw the cabin and wanted to drop in to see what we were all about.

### **Dates and Hours of Operation**

The Nature Centre's dates and hours for the summer of 2008 were June 30 – August 13, Tuesday to Saturday (there was the odd Monday when the Centre was open), 10:00 am – 4:00 pm. These hours stayed consistent for each day, which made the times easily remembered by visitors. These hours are similar to last year's hours; the only difference is that this year the centre was open one hour earlier than last year. Many visitors seemed to come in between 10:00 am and 11:00 am. Having the centre open at 10:00 am worked well for visitors, especially on hot days, many people tried to beat the heat by coming early to the centre. Some days this time would be the busiest part of the day. Tuesday to Saturday seems to be best days to have the centre open with most families having the ability to attend the centre at least one day a week. Therefore, making the centre available on the weekend is of significant value to many families.

### **Staffing**

Similar to last year, I was the only staff member working the summer nature Centre. Pat Collins and Dave Burkhart would attend periodically to ensure that things were running smoothly.

### **Advertising and Signage**

Advertising included dropping off flyers to all the elementary schools in St. Albert. Once again, Pat Collins assisted me with printing and dropping off the flyers. This year we were able to provide the flyers to the schools earlier to ensure that all of the children would receive them and be aware. Many Parents indicated that they had never heard of this place until they received the flyers from their children who had brought them home from school. An example of the flyer is in Appendix B. Similar to last year, I prepared write-ups for each themed week, then sent them to the Gazette to be added to their "What's On" section. The

Gazette also included a few articles featuring the Nature Centre, which was one of the main ways that people were educated about location, times and purpose of the centre.

Two "open" signs and two "Big Lake Environmental Support Society" signs were hung on the front and the back of the log cabin everyday. There was a, "Nature Centre Open" sign with an advertisement for free water inside, placed out along the Red Willow Trail. Another sign was placed along Sturgeon Road at the entrance to the parking lot. These signs were helpful for grabbing people's attention.

### **Material, Supplies, and Specimen**

At the beginning of the summer program this year I was given \$200.00 for supplies and prizes. This money was used towards construction paper, pencil crayons, tape, glue, markers, craft supplies, and prizes. This year we were lucky to come upon a dollar store which was closing down, this gave us an extra discount on prizes and some of the supplies. Unfortunately, the Nature Centre was broken into after all the prizes were bought, and the prizes were stolen. More prizes were required to replace the stolen prizes that were to be given out at the conclusion of the summer program. I found the best place to find prizes were at dollar stores such as the Dollar Giant (the dollar store where there was an extra 30% - 40% discount due to the store closing down), and the Canadian Dollar store. They always seem to have good little prizes for the kids that are not expensive. Appendix A has a Supplies Breakdown of where and what the money was spent on.

Borrowed supplies were the same as last year. Dan Stoker had supplied many of the specimens for this year as he did last year; the nets for catching aquatic bugs and wildlife specimen were left here over the winter and remained here for the summer. Again, I had some of my own specimens that were displayed for the kids to look at and touch. I also brought in my identification books for kids to look through.

Live specimen consisted of Crayfish, aquatic life, bugs, and a frog. The Crayfish were collected from Lacombe Lake, and aquatic life was collected from Sturgeon River, Lacombe Lake, and the pond/swamp area between the St. Albert Alliance Church and Wal-mart. The frog (small Chorus frog) was collected from Pigeon Lake. I tried to catch bugs for the kids to look at in jars as well. I was able to catch a few caterpillars that eventually turned into Mourning Cloak butterflies. Live Specimens were the most attractive aspects of the Nature Centre, as they were last year.

My cell phone was once again an important item to have at the cabin. It was used for emergencies, contacting groups who planned visits, and for parents to

contact me about the program. This year we included my cell phone number on all of the flyers dropped of at the Elementary Schools. This was included so that parents would be able to get a hold of me to ask any questions that they might have about the program. This was important because many parents thought the program had a fee. I would suggest that next years flyers might want to clearly state that the programming is free! Appendix B has a layout of the cell phone charges.

## **Visitor Information**

### Age

The Nature Centre attracted both children and adults. During the beginning of the week we seemed to have a larger volume of children with their parents, while towards the end of the week, Saturday, there were more visits from adults. Refer to table and chart in Appendix A.

### Days of the Week

The busiest day of the week was Tuesday, as it was the year before. This is due to new activities for the new themed week. Saturday was the slowest day of the week like it was last year. One of the main reasons was because of the Farmers Market customers taking up the parking. Many parents indicated that they could not find a parking spot so they decided to not come on Saturdays. If children were to show up on Saturday it would only be for the last couple hours of the day, once the market was shutdown. During the day the only visitors would be adults who were quickly passing by and checking the centre out or needing to use the bathroom or asking for water.

### Time of Day

The time of day did not seem to have much effect on the number of visitors, this year. Some days it seemed to be busy in mornings and some days it seemed to be busy in the afternoon. Other days it would be steady throughout the entire day.

### Weather

Last year weather was a significant factor on the number of visitors, as it was again this season. Most of the days were a reasonable temperature, around 22°C, however there were the odd days that were very hot, around 32°C, or cool around 15°C. The hot days were slow because people wanted to keep their children out of the heat and on cooler days people were at home or went out to do indoor activities. Rainy days were extremely slow as well, with very few people attending. On the rainy days I would move the activities indoors so they

would not get wet, this would sometimes eliminate some activities because they would need a bigger area and could not fit inside.

## **Program**

### Description

This year we ran the Young Naturalist Program at the Summer Nature Centre just like in previous years. Children would attend within the first four weeks to sign up; the children would have to finish twelve activities over a period of at least three different themed weeks. This would ensure that the children would gain information over more than just one category. Children would sign up by writing their name on one of the posters prepared for keeping records. The posters had a column for names and each week, children would complete the activities and for each completed activity they would receive a sticker to be put in the corresponding week column. Activities focused on grades two to five but any age could attend to the Centre and participate.

The program ran over six weeks this year, each with a different theme. The first week was called its "Easy Being Green", which started the program. In this first week I wanted the children to recognize that they could help save our plant, as well as understanding what we would learn in the weeks to come. The following week's themes were Birds and Wildlife Around Us, Trees n' Plants, In the Deep Blue, Creepy Crawlers, and Wild Kingdom. Each themed week had corresponding activities.

Children who signed up for the Young Naturalist Program were quite regularly missing only one or two weeks throughout the summer. This was usually due to family vacations. There were drop-in visitors as well, who only came a couple times throughout the summer.

The Weekly Winner draw was introduced again this year. On each occasion that the children would visit the centre, they would enter their names into the draw. I would draw three names at the end of each week and would post their names on the wall for the kids to see, so that they could pick their prize once they came back. As noted last year, I believe the prizes are a major attraction for the children. This definitely keeps the number of visitor up, and encourages the children to come back.

During the last two weeks of the program, I handed out Young Naturalist Certificates and a prize to each child who finished the program. Some children who did not sign up for the program but showed up quite often received prizes for being frequent visitors.

## Outcome

This year the program was open to the public for six and a half weeks. There were a total of 975 visitors; 543 children and 432 adults. There were 123 kids who signed up for the Young Naturalist Program and 43 graduated this year (Refer to tables and charts in Appendix A). This number is just short of last year's totals, however considering that the centre was open fewer days this year, the numbers are still impressive, for the Nature Centre. An additional factor for the lower number of attendees may have been due to the fact that the last three days of the centre being open, were not advertised.

Again, like last year the program was a success. Every one of all ages enjoyed the Nature Centre. Parents noted how the centre is a great place for children to come and learn about nature, as well as the fact that others benefit from the program. Parents indicated that they too learned about nature with each visit as well as learning new things about their children. Many of the parents commented about being impressed that the centre was free as well as their pleasure to have such an awesome Centre.

## Activities

The list of activities for each theme week is listed in Appendix A. Over the program there were some activities kids enjoyed more than others, the popular ones were:

- Aquatic Life Observe
- Frog Observe
- Big Hunt
- Specimen Games (as well as specimen around in the Centre)
- Crafts (all crafts were a hit, such as the Paper Bag Penguin)

These activities really got the children excited; I would recommend repeating them throughout the future years at the Nature Centre. The kids love seeing real specimens, dead or alive and particularly like to see them up close.

## RECOMMENTATIONS

This year at the Nature Centre I worked alone as I did last year, this was fine however as mentioned last year this sometimes makes it difficult to assist all of the children that show up at the Centre. This year was more successful than it was last year, mainly because more parents attended the centre and assisted their children during the activities. This makes it much easier to move around and assist all of the children who need it; I was not required to spend long periods of time with one child while others waited for my assistance. I believe that another major improvement this year was that my name and cell phone number was on the flyer that went out to all of the Elementary schools in St. Albert. Parents called me with questions about the program including their belief that they could drop their kids off in the morning and pick them up at the end of the day. I made sure to tell the parents that the Centre is more of a family event and tried to encourage them to attend with their children and take part in the activities. I wanted to make it clear that I was the only one working at the Centre and that if all of the parents dropped their children off, things could get out of hand. It was important to impress upon them the need for me to remain flexible in the event that I was required to attend to an emergency. Some parents had older children and I informed them that it was fine if these children attended as long as they could care for themselves. I don't have any difficulty helping out all of the kids in the event that they attended on their own, however my main goal was to maintain efficiency and safety and therefore I asked parents to join their kids at the Nature Centre. Bearing this in mind, I recommend that it be made clear, through advertisements that the centre is also a family event. For this reason a phone number should be available for parents to contact the Coordinator with any questions.

If the Nature Centre were able to solicit volunteers to provide additional assistance to the coordinator, the children that are dropped off would receive closer attention. I recommend that this request for assistance be advertised prior to the beginning of the summer program. I don't believe that this would be an easy task however it is worth the try. I don't believe that many people are willing to volunteer, due to the job market.

One of my recommendations is that I believe that it would be beneficial for the Nature Centre to change the days of operation. This year several parents indicated that they had shown up on Mondays and realized that it was not open. They also indicated that they didn't know it was open Saturdays. Saturdays were slower mainly due to the Farmers Market customers occupying the parking lot. Parents told me that they would drive by hoping to attend the centre however because the parking lot was full, they would drive by. I asked some of the parents which days work best for them to attend the Centre and most indicated that during the week was best. They said they used their weekends for camping, vacations, or bigger family events. It is my opinion that our number of visitors would be higher if we were open Monday to Friday. This may have been done in

the past and may not have worked, however I believe that it is worth a try for next year.

As I noted earlier, one recommendation last year was to introduce more dead and alive specimens. I feel that more of these exhibits would be of great interest and value. The Nature Centre's biggest attractions are the live specimen and if there were more different types, children would visit even more. I tried to get chick eggs to have in an incubator for this year but it just did not work out for me. I recommend trying this for next year. I also went out to collect tadpoles and had a hard time finding many, I caught a couple frogs but kids would probably like to see the tadpoles morph into the frogs. I also tried looking into getting a small mammal for the kids to see, the only problem with this was that I needed a place for the mammal to go at the end of the program, and I was unable to keep it myself. I think having the live specimen would be a huge asset for the Nature Centre and if there were any possible way to have more of them, at the Centre it would be very successful.

## **CONCLUSION**

Finally, the B.L.E.S.S. Summer Nature Centre had another successful summer. We had many visitors of all ages come to see what we were all about. Kids and adults played games, made crafts, and had the chance to learn about our environment, not only in our area but around the world as well. There were drop-in visitors who wanted information about Big Lake and the Big Lake Environmental Support Society.

Overall the program was a success. Again all the visitors learned something and I feel the Centre made people aware of the beautiful areas we have right here and how we need to do our best to protect it for others to enjoy.



## RESOURCES FOR ACTIVITES, GAMES, AND CRAFTS

Barwise J. 1997. Aqualta's Water Education Activity Guide

Bernhard A. 2000. Freshwater Pond Coloring Book.

Ducks Unlimited. Wetland Wild Activity Book. Green Wing Ducks Unlimited.

Herridge D, Moore N. 1992. Explorations of Science.

Soffer R. 1996. North American Ducks, Geese, and Swans.

Wishart P, Hayley D. 1994. Knee High Nature: Fall A Guide to Nature, Activities,  
and Fun.

## Summer Nature Centres Total Visitors per Week for

