



BLESS December 2020 Newsletter

This is the quarterly newsletter informing BLESS members about ongoing environmental issues, events and achievements around Big Lake. We hope the membership finds 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.

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

Regular Board Meetings

These are usually held at 7:00pm 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.

The BLESS Annual General Meeting, normally conducted in February, was put on hold this year due to the pandemic. The BLESS board has closely monitored pandemic numbers over the intervening months and now that we are into winter and the end of the year, has decided to hold the 2020 AGM in conjunction with the 2021 AGM next year. All requisite reports for 2019 have been submitted to the provincial government and Canada Revenue Agency to retain the organization's status as a Society under the Provincial Societies Act and as a Charitable Organization under federal legislation. We look forward to holding the next AGM as soon as safely practical in 2021.

New BLESS Logo

This fall the Board discussed a revision to the BLESS logo, as the original logo was looking dated and was not very usable for anything other than letterhead. Grant suggested that a friend of his, Marilyn Carlstad, who was a graphics designer may be available. Not only was she available she offered to do a logo for free. We went through probably four iterations of design until we settled on several. We now have three to choose from depending on the use. The default option is the tall rectangle shown at the top of this page. The other two are square and can be used when that is the more appropriate shape. We can't be happier with these wonderful logos. We have sent Marilyn an honorarium as these are much more than we anticipated.

BLESS Casino

Every few years, BLESS conducts a casino through the Alberta Government (AGLC) which provides a reliable source of funds to support the annual Summer Nature Program. BLESS had been scheduled for a casino in March 2021 but that will be delayed with the latest round of pandemic measures that closed casinos throughout the province. New dates will be announced when they become available.

Financial Report

Financially BLESS is in a good position thanks to generous donations throughout the year in memory of our founder Dr. Fin Fairfield, a grant from Investor's Group for International Migratory Bird Day and a grant from TD Friends of the Environment for the Summer Nature program. We have a significant amount of money from Investor's Group for International Migratory Bird Day next year and, even if our anticipated Casino in March does not happen thanks to Covid-19, we will still have enough to pay for next year's Summer Nature program.

We can now accept donations from our website (www.bless.ab.ca) or through CanadaHelps.org (search for Big Lake Environment Support Society). All donations of \$20 or more will receive a tax receipt.

Ray Gibbon Drive Widening

Phase 1 of the Ray Gibbon Drive roadway widening was completed in early November. There is now a 4-lane divided highway to a point approximately 500 metres north of LeClair Way. Multi-use trails have been installed on both sides of the road, extending St Albert's Red Willow Trail system to the City limits at 137 Avenue. Landscaping of the boulevard areas and the central median will be completed in the summer of 2021.



Benches placed along the new roadway offer a view of traffic, with Big Lake in the background.

BLESS has exchanged correspondence with St Albert's mayor and administration. We recently received an informative update regarding Phase 2 of the widening from Dean Schick who is the City's Transportation Manager. This phase of the construction will extend the 4-lane divided roadway to McKenney Avenue. It is intended that the detailed design of the Phase 2 road widening will be completed by next spring, and that the roadway construction contract will commence in the summer of 2021. Construction of the new bridge structure crossing over the river is scheduled for Feb – Oct 2022.

The future widening of RGD to ultimately be a 4-lane expressway was anticipated in the 2003 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The design for Phase 2 of the widening is in accordance with that document. It will coordinate the design within the roadway right-of-way with the proposed trail systems in the park areas on both sides of the roadway. It will also take steps to mitigate the impact of the roadway on the adjacent natural environment. In particular, the design is looking for ways to minimise conflicts between vehicle traffic and wildlife movements. These will include enhancing the possible routes under the bridge on either side of the river.

BLESS Viewing Platform Enhancements

As an extra to the refurbishment of the BLESS platform the City of St. Albert has agreed to add some interpretive signage. This was suggested and spearheaded by Tony and Lyn Druett and Miles Constable, and we worked closely with our City contact Dean McMullan. BLESS purchased some new photos from local photographers and Miles provided some wording. The new signs should be installed before January. An example is shown at right.

Common Bird Species at Big Lake

Did You Know?



Red Winged Blackbird

Black Birds

Both types of blackbirds create their nests in cattail marshes and compete with each other for food and nesting space. The females are mostly brown coloured and quiet, usually guarding their nests and young.



Bank Swallow

Tree Swallow

Swallows

The four types of swallows at Big Lake eat LOTS of bugs. They can be seen often at the platform swooping around one's head hunting for flying insects or resting on the railings.



Update of Alberta Parks Activities

The natural area between John Poole wetlands and 137th Avenue has been subjected to a proliferation of bird feeders this year. Alberta Parks has advised us that they are obligated by law to remove the feeders. Section 11.3 of Alberta's Provincial Parks (General) Regulation AR 102/85 states "No person shall feed wildlife in a provincial park or recreation area." There are valid reasons for the regulation.

Feeding birds is a generally well-meant human intervention into the natural world that carries potential liabilities for the birds, the natural area and even the people doing the feeding. Diseases such as salmonella, aspergillosis, avian pox and trichomoniasis can be transmitted at bird feeders. Trichomonosis is a parasite that affects the digestive tract, liver and lungs making it difficult for a bird to eat and breathe.

Birds can become dependant upon feeders for an easy meal and experience difficulty returning to natural foraging when food at the feeder becomes depleted. Birds can lose their natural wariness and become habituated to humans, particularly when hand fed, which can cause problems should they come into contact with humans at other times, for example when pets such as cats are nearby. Predators, natural and domesticated, find bird feeders just as rapidly as the birds that feed from them. Hand fed birds can also become aggressive, dive bombing people when food is not forthcoming.

Seed spilled from bird feeders in natural areas comes with other complications. It can attract rodents which then attract fox, coyotes and on up the food chain, disrupting the natural balance of species. Attracting predators to trails and humans could lead eventually to more serious human-wildlife conflicts in the area. Spilled seed that sprouts in the spring can introduce non-native species that alter the ecology of natural areas.

The stated vision for Alberta's Parks is to inspire people to discover, value, protect and enjoy the natural world and the benefits it provides for current and future generations. There are sufficient natural sources of food available within parks in Alberta to maintain viable populations of native bird species.

Folks can still interact on a more personal level with our avian friends in back yards and other public spaces but the purpose of parks is to preserve the natural world. Alberta Parks has advised they will remove the bird feeders shortly from Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park.

BLESS Display at Kingsway

On behalf of BLESS, president Al Henry and his company, View Office Technology, constructed and entered a display in the Drive-by Santa Parade that took place on Kingsway Ave in late November. BLESS brochures, bird books and colouring books along with 1,000 toques were given out to participants who took in the displays from the warmth and safety of their vehicles. The event was incredibly successful with more than 400 vehicles containing an estimated 1,000 people attending. Proceeds from the event, roughly \$5,000 and 680 kilograms of food, went to the Edmonton Food Bank.

Everyone loved the geese and the snowman. BLESS, Big Lake, Lois Hole Provincial Park and the Viewing Platform got great coverage. Many thanks to Al and View Office Technology and staff for this innovative outreach in these difficult times.



North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance (NSWA) Update

The NSWA presented an excellent one hour zoom “Knowledge in Know-ember” speaker series every Tuesday in November to its member organizations and to any persons interested in the conservation of our watershed resources. To listen to the zoom recordings, use their new You Tube channel or access the series on their website under Resources/NSWA Educational Forums:

<https://www.nswa.ab.ca/resource/presentations/> It was inspiring to listen to so many dedicated volunteers describe the endless hours they put in to protect and improve their natural area. As an example the Wizard Lake Watershed & Lake Stewardship Association are installing floating islands to provide habitat, remove sediment and take up excess nutrients in the water.

Meeting/Presentation with the Big Lake Community League

In October, BLESS was invited to the Big Lake Community League monthly virtual board meeting, to make a presentation to the League's board of directors. The presentation outlined BLESS's position regarding the environmental implications of possible developments and improvements within, and adjacent to, the portions of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park (LHCPP) north of the Trumpeter and Starling neighbourhoods. It included details of trails that have been installed in 2020 and trails that BLESS hopes will be installed in the next few years. The presentation also touched upon the possibility that the eastern end of 137 Avenue north of the Starling neighbourhood may be closed in the ultimate situation. This possibility would necessitate the construction of a new arterial road running along the eastern boundary of LHCPP and diverting all traffic from the east side of the Big Lake communities to LeClair Way, which is 1 km into the City of St Albert.

The presentation was well received by the board members of the Big Lake Community League, who want to continue to be updated on issues and developments from BLESS that impact LHPP, Big Lake and the surrounding neighbourhood communities.

The Great Backyard Bird Count

The Great Backyard Bird Count, an annual 4-day event, will take place from February 12-15 in 2021. The event provides a snapshot of where birds are around the world. Participants count birds in their backyard or favourite birding location and enter the numbers at BirdCount.org. Birds Canada is partnering

with Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society in the event that last year recorded 6,942 species and aims to track bird population changes on a large scale. Results from previous years can be found at <https://www.birdcount.org/learn/annual-results/> Those who wish to participate in the event in February can find instructions at <https://www.birdcount.org/participate/>

Provincial Park Stewardship Reports

As the provincially designated steward of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park, it falls upon BLESS to conduct regular inspections of the park and natural area and report changes in conditions to Alberta Parks. Encompassing almost 1,800 hectares and situated in close proximity to over a million people from the central region, with attendant use and development pressures, means keeping tabs on changing conditions can be a daunting task. You can help in our mandate by keeping an eye out for unusual conditions and potential threats to park infrastructure, flora and fauna or wildlife, while out enjoying the park and natural areas. The BLESS board invites your participation in reporting conditions that might be of concern to info@bless.ab.ca and we will pass along your observations in our regular reports to Alberta Parks.

Latest Wildlife Sightings

