



BLESS March 2021 Newsletter

This is the quarterly newsletter informing the BLESS membership 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

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.

Last year's Annual General Meeting for BLESS was placed on hold because of meeting restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The Alberta government is currently working on legislation that will enable societies such as ours to hold Annual General Meetings electronically. It is expected the legislation will be passed shortly. BLESS directors are investigating options for holding the AGM online. Further details and notice to members of this year's AGM will be forthcoming once the provincial legislation is in place.

Financial Report

Financially BLESS is now in a very healthy position as the Edmonton Community Foundation has provided us with a \$10,000 grant to fund the Summer Nature Program this summer. We applied to the Edmonton Community Foundation as our re-scheduled casino for March was cancelled again due to the pandemic. This support takes a considerable weight off of our shoulders as we did not have sufficient funds to support the Summer Nature Program otherwise.

The annual financial report for 2020 has been completed, it now just needs to be reviewed and signed off in the required internal audit.

BLESS Summer Nature Centre Program

The process for undertaking the BLESS Summer Nature Program will be underway shortly beginning with actions to hire a coordinator who will develop this year's program. We typically start in Mid May with a solicitation for interested candidates. A committee reviews the applications received and hiring takes place in mid June. The program opens to the public on July 1st and runs throughout the summer. Stay tuned for more details.

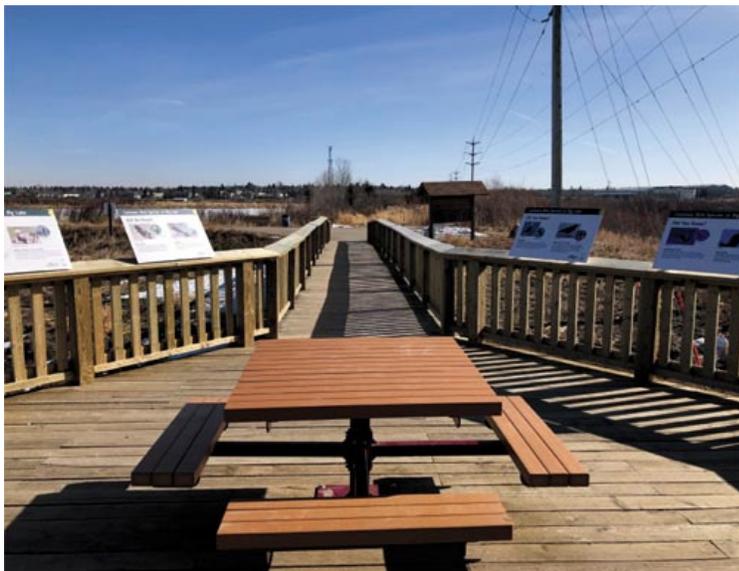
Ray Gibbon Drive Widening Phase 2 – Update

It is planned that in 2021 and 2022 the City of St. Albert will be widening the stretch of Ray Gibbon Drive adjacent to the NE quadrant of Big Lake to be 4 lanes of divided highway. Over the last few months BLESS has been providing suggestions regarding this widening to Dean Schick who is the City's Transportation Manager. In response Dean has been providing us with informative feedback on how the design process has been proceeding. The following are the latest suggestions that we sent to Dean in January 2021:

On the east side of RGD we would prefer that the alignment shown in the RWPW plan be followed. This will mean that the segment of the trail immediately north of the river will follow the existing path down towards the White Spruce Park area, and then rejoin the RGD road right-of-way midway to the Meadowview Drive intersection.

On the west side of RGD we would prefer that no trail at all be installed at this time. The parkland between this stretch of RGD and the Lake shoreline is one of the most environmentally sensitive areas in St Albert. It is an important breeding area for numerous species of waterfowl and other wildlife. We believe that it is essential that public intrusion into this area be kept to an absolute minimum.

BLESS Viewing Platform Enhancements



BLESS has worked with the City of St. Albert to have signage placed on the observation platform at Big Lake to inform about wildlife that can be seen nearby. The City has recently installed the signs on the platform.

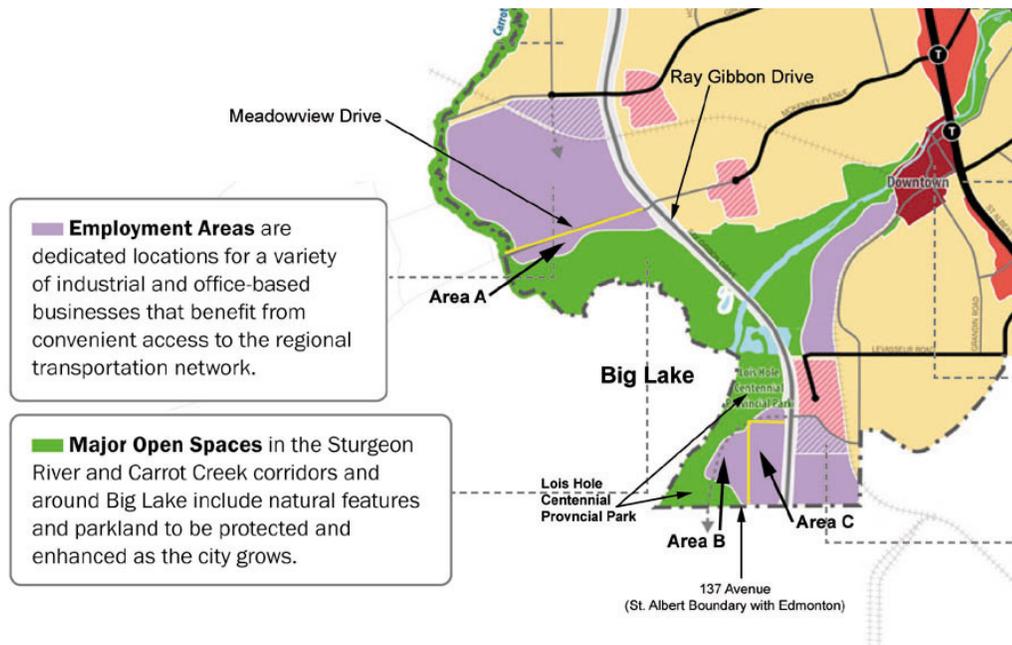
Update Regarding Alberta Parks Activities

Because of safety concerns, it is illegal to fish from the observation platform at Big Lake. Alberta Parks is working with the City of St. Albert to address the issue and advises they have ordered "No Fishing" signs to be placed on the platform. The City will be installing the signs when they are received. The prohibition against fishing from the platform will be enforced going forward.

Just before Christmas BLESS, as part of the organization's stewardship role, passed along a concern to Alberta Parks staff about all the dead paper birch trees in the long standing grove along the trail running through the trees just north of the fiddlehead ferns. There was some concern that the large scale die off might have been caused by bronze birch borers or another disease. Alberta Parks sent their park ecologist out to look at the affected grove and he determined that the birch tree die-off was through natural succession and not disease. Parks staff wrote back that " Paper birch is a pioneer species and one of the first species to colonize areas after disturbance (fire, clearing etc). Also, this is a short living species (normally less than 100 years), an early successional species that will be replaced with balsam poplar and spruce." Good news for the remainder of birch trees in that area.

Draft Municipal Development Plan – Public Hearing

The City of St Albert's revised Municipal Development Plan (MDP) was given first reading by City Council in December 2020. A public hearing was needed prior to the draft plan being given second and third reading. That public hearing was commenced on the evening of March 15th and is now scheduled to be concluded on April 19th. At the hearing BLESS made a presentation to council regarding three revisions that we believe should be made to the draft MDP in order to protect the Big Lake environment. BLESS's written presentation to Council can be found in the Documents section of the BLESS website at http://bless.ab.ca/Documents/MDP_Presentation.pdf.



Taken from new MDP draft dated December 16, 2020, Map 3 - Urban Structure and General Land Use, Page 25.

In summary BLESS believes that it is inappropriate, and unnecessary, for there to be any parcels designated to be future “Employment Lands” (industrial development) adjacent to the northeast corner of Big Lake and Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park (LHCPP). The three specific areas of concern are noted on the above map that has been extracted from the draft MDP.

Two of the parcels, Areas A and B, directly contradict the City’s Red Willow Park West plans that were released to the public in 2019.

Area A – The existing MDP and the Red Willow Park West plans show the south boundary of the Lakeview Industrial area to be Meadowview Drive. The draft MDP now expands the Employment Lands into lands on the south side of Meadowview Drive.

Area B – This parcel of land was purchased by the Province in 2014. The Province’s Park Management Plan, released in 2019, and the Red Willow Park West plans specifically state that this land will be a future addition to LHCPP.

Area C – This 60-acre parcel is the high point of the area and is still owned by the Cooke family who were the original farmers of the land. BLESS believes that it is inappropriate for this isolated parcel, which is separated from other industrial lands by Ray Gibbon Drive, to be designated as Employment Lands.

World Migratory Bird Day 2021

World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) occurs throughout the year in over thirty countries in the Americas. It celebrates the migration of hundreds of bird species between their nesting habitats in North America (including Canada) and their over wintering grounds in Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean. Since 2006 it has been organised by the non- profit group, the Environment for the Americas. BLESS joined this group four years ago.

World Migratory Bird Day is the main education program of the Environment for the Americas. It is an annual awareness raising campaign highlighting the need for the conservation of migratory birds and their habitats. It is an effective tool to help raise global awareness regarding the threats faced by migrating birds, their ecological importance and the need for international cooperation to conserve them.

Given that the peak of migrations take place at different times in each country, Bird Day activities can take place at any time during the year. In North America the main celebrations are usually held on the second Saturdays of May and October. Each year a single theme is chosen that highlights a topic of importance to migratory bird conservation. In 2019, the theme was “Be the solution to plastic pollution”. BLESS held a successful event at LHCPP at Big Lake, that encouraged participants to reduce, reuse and recycle.

Last year the theme was “Birds Connect our World”. Unfortunately, our plans for a bird day event were put on hold and then cancelled because of COVID 19.

Sara Wolman, a graphic artist, was selected to create the artwork for the 2021 campaign. The optimistic theme is “Sing, Fly, Soar Like a Bird” and people are encouraged to enjoy bird watching and identification of birds and their songs. Rather than holding an event in the Spring, BLESS is now planning

to have a modified event at Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park in the Fall. Nature Alberta has expressed interest in working with BLESS to hold the event.

Ideas we have come up with so far for a Fall event include:

- Small group guided bird walks along the paths surrounding Big Lake,
- Areas along the Boardwalk and on the Platform for observation of water birds (Both these activities would require interested “birders” to help),
- A children’s story time with bird themed books,
- Bird crafts, possibly including making simple bird feeders,
- Any other suggestions will be gratefully received.

A great resource for facts about all types of birds is Cornell Labs: <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/>

Arterial Road Lobbying Issues

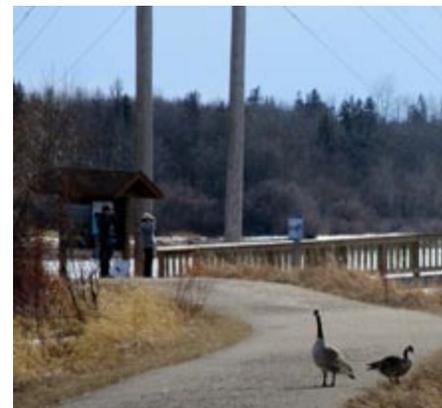
As stewards of Big Lake and Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park, BLESS is in contact with each of the jurisdictions that border on this sensitive environmental area. In particular we are in frequent conversation with the residents of the Big Lake communities in the City of Edmonton, including Starling, Trumpeter and Hawks Ridge. One of our board members, Teresa Marshall, is a resident of Trumpeter and sits on the board of the local Community League.

A key issue that impacts the Big Lake environment, as well as those communities, concerns proposed changes to the local and regional transportation systems. The changes that are being considered will have significant impact on the environment on both sides of the boundary (137 Avenue) between the two cities. BLESS wants to ensure that future roadway expansions are kept to the minimum necessary to service the area, and do not unnecessarily prejudice the environment.

BLESS has recently been in contact with Andrew Knack who is the City of Edmonton Councillor for the area. In January we sent him a report prepared by BLESS which outlines our concerns. He has since provided it to the relevant City of Edmonton committee and suggested that BLESS be involved in the future public involvement process. That report entitled “Major Roadway Planning Adjacent to the SE Quadrant of Big Lake” can be found at <http://bless.ab.ca/Documents/RoadwayPlanning.pdf>

Spring

Spring arrived at Big Lake right on schedule this year and the proof is out there. Canada Geese, always the last to leave in the fall and the first to arrive back are making their cacophonous presence known overhead as well as on the water and paths. It is with great joy and optimism that we embrace the longer days and awakening landscape that together hold promise for warm days and growth ahead. Trails are still a little soggy though and will likely get worse in the days ahead before drying out so tread lightly and stay dry in your treks around the park.



Moose At Big Lake

We are blessed at Big Lake with a variety of wildlife to enhance our natural area experiences. A relatively unusual species, given our proximity to a large metropolitan region, is the genus *Alces*, more commonly known as moose. The largest and heaviest members of the deer family, moose can reach up to 600 kg in weight from eating as much as 30 kilograms of twigs, leaves, bark, shrubs and plants a day. Moose calves grow faster than any other ungulate so abundant food supplies are critical. Water bodies like Big Lake are important habitat for this powerful animal that has been known to swim up to 19 kilometres and can dive up to 5 metres to find food on a lake bottom. Winters are hard on moose in our area though, when they must subsist almost entirely on twigs nipped off the tops of willows. Keep your eyes peeled when walking the trails in Lois Hole Provincial Park and you will see evidence of their passing, particularly on the tips of Red Osier Dogwood or "Red Willow" bushes.



Moose Dung

The province's management plan for Lois Hole Provincial Park speaks to the need for increased upland areas to provide sufficient habitat, refuge and movement corridors for wildlife such as moose, especially in proximity to human altered landscapes, which is one of the reasons why Alberta Parks purchased 36 hectares (89 acres) of upland area adjacent to the park in 2014.

Moose mate in September or October and calves are born in mid May or early June. Cows typically have one or two calves and, although they are usually weaned at 5 months, the mother will rear calves for up to a year. Only bull moose grow antlers, which can span up to six feet. Mature bulls typically shed their antlers in November but younger males sometimes keep their antlers into April.

As with any wildlife species, it is best to keep a respectful distance from moose should you encounter them. Bulls can be aggressive towards humans during the fall rut and cows are protective of their calves at any time of the year. Moose are known to have poor eyesight but compensate with a heightened sense of hearing and smell. They may not see you but will know you are there.

We are not entirely sure how many moose reside in the vicinity of Big Lake. Big Lake and Lois Hole Provincial Park are included in Provincial Wildlife Management Unit 248, an area of 4,414 square kilometres that encompasses all of Parkland and Strathcona counties and extends from Highway 37 near Onoway in the northwest to Hasting and Cooking Lakes in the southeast. The provincial government last surveyed this area for moose in February 2020 with an aerial survey from a helicopter that flew 1-mile (1.6 km) transects and counted individual animals within 200 metres on each side of the flight paths. The survey avoided populated areas though so covered only 22% of the total area of the WMU. In all, 321 moose were counted during the survey, comprising 14% bulls, 40% cows, 35% calves and 11% unclassified. Using the data gathered in that survey, provincial biologists calculated moose density through the WMU at 0.39 individuals per square kilometre, a number relatively consistent with the density determined from a 2012 survey of the same WMU. More details are available from the Aerial

Wildlife Survey Report produced by the Alberta Government in 2020, see:
http://bless.ab.ca/Documents/Aerial_Survey_Report_WMU248_2020.pdf

Urban development has imposed increasing pressure on local moose populations. In March of 2017, a cow moose that wandered into St. Albert was shot after she charged a wildlife officer trying to herd the trio out of town. In October of 2020, a resident of Braeside in St. Albert encountered a moose in his backyard. Earlier in 2020, a pair of moose were reported wandering the streets in Grandin neighbourhood. Moose are regularly seen travelling wildlife corridors through Edmonton's Big Lake communities. Moose are far ranging and can travel a wide area. They follow natural wildlife corridors like the Sturgeon River into urban areas in search of food, especially in winter when food supplies are limited. Road traffic is a particular hazard for moose and roads in or close to natural areas have seen collisions between ungulates and vehicles. Because of their weight and height, such collisions can be deadly to both moose and human occupants of vehicles, one reason why the speed limit on Ray Gibbon Drive is restricted to 70 kph.

Of all the wildlife to be found around Big Lake, moose can perhaps be considered the most magnificent, even iconic of our local landscape. It would be a shame if moose were to be extirpated because of the pressures we place upon them and our grand children were denied the thrill of seeing them in their native habitat. We should respect that moose, even those living close to urban areas, need a home like we do, and provide them with sufficient space to survive safely and securely within their historical territory.



Photos by Tim Osborne, **Tim Osborne Photography** <https://www.timosborne.ca/>

Latest Wildlife Sightings

Beaver, porcupine and grey owl photos by Tim Osborne, Tim Osborne Photography. See more of Tim's fabulous captures at <https://prints.timosborne.ca/> on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/timosbornephotography> and on Youtube at <https://youtube.com/channel/UC77WcjGSEHpO085KSskWwNg>

