
NOTES AND LETTERS

SASKATCHEWAN MUNICIPAL AWARDS PROFILES - CITY OF REGINA AND TOWN OF MOSSBANK

The City of Regina was recently recognized for the leadership role it has taken in environmental conservation. This May, the Queen City was presented with the 2009 Saskatchewan Municipal Award in Environmental Stewardship for its partnership work in the development of McKell Wascana Conservation Park, a native prairie reserve on the city's southeast edge.

Designed to celebrate the achievements of the province's municipal governments, the Saskatchewan Municipal Awards Program annually presents a total of five awards in five categories – regional partnerships, economic development, community development, environmental conservation, and leadership. At the 2009 awards ceremony, the City of Regina was named the recipient of the Environmental Stewardship award, while the Town of Mossbank earned the title of runner-up for the Old Wives Lake Nature Area.

Regina's Only Conservation Park Receives Provincial Accolades

The award-winning McKell Wascana Conservation Park is providing a place for naturalists of all ages to experience and learn about the ecology of the Regina floodplain. Covering about 170 acres within the city limits and beyond, the park is Regina's only remaining native prairie ecosystem. It includes a natural stream, prairie upland, grassland, and a small wetland habitat, all of which has been carefully managed and preserved through a partnership between the City, Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), and the McKells, a local family that has owned the land next to the city limits since the late 1800s. DUC and Robert McKell

spearheaded the conservation project, with the City of Regina eagerly coming on board when the park was first proposed.

"The park is a great place for residents and visitors to experience nature, to go birdwatching, and to go for a walk on the trails," says Dominique Clincke, Coordinator of Landscape Design with the City of Regina. "School groups can come out and take advantage of the outdoor classroom where they can learn about the prairie ecosystems. At the dock, they can go pond dipping, discover water creatures and learn about the prairie environment firsthand."

For the City of Regina, McKell Wascana Conservation Park not only provides an educational area, it also fits in well with the city's ongoing efforts to increase environmental sustainability through the use of native grasses. Clincke explains that the native grasses in the park are better for the surrounding creek environment. They help to prevent erosion, require little maintenance, can withstand drought, and are non-invasive to the neighbouring farms and urban spaces.

The conservation area is certainly worth a visit. In the summer, the park is a vibrant landscape of green grassland. The vivid colour of the prairie plants is complemented by the expanse of sky overhead and the sounds of the abundant bird life in the area – mallards, Canada Geese, swallows, sparrows, meadowlarks, Red-winged Blackbirds, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and more. Foxes, coyotes, Leopard Frogs, garter snakes, and White-tailed Deer also inhabit the park.

The park's entrance begins at the newly constructed amphitheatre, a beautiful concrete platform that will provide an outdoor classroom for school tours and children's programs. Walking through the amphitheatre and down along the trodden pathway leads to a wide timber bridge. The bridge crosses over the park's slow moving stream – Wascana Creek – and is a good place to take in a panoramic view of the park.

A farther walk through the grass trail, with a slight turn to the west, leads to McHattie Dock. The grasses along this portion of the mowed trail, as well as in several other sections of the park, have been reintroduced by DUC over the past two years. The careful sowing of the grasses has ensured that the park contains native flora, including Western Porcupine Grass, Green Needlegrass, various kinds of wheatgrass, Canada Wildrye, June Grass, and Blue Gramma Grass.

The grass trail to the dock turns into a somewhat narrow wooden walkway, which then enters a high growth of cattails and eventually opens onto the dock itself. A secure wooden platform, McHattie Dock rests just on the surface of the water on a wide part of the river. It's the perfect place to go pond dipping to discover river creatures.

Walking back to the main path from the dock and heading south leads to more trails. This area of the park, which is still under development, includes walkways that run both east and west alongside the meandering stream and also venture farther into the plains. The park's 3-km trail network is for the most part mowed grass, with a proposed pathway between the amphitheatre and the dock to be covered in crusher dust. Interpretive signs and benches will be up for visitors by the end of the summer of 2009.

To reach the park, travel south on Prince of Wales Drive to the Wascana View community and follow Wascana Circle loop east. Found on the south side of Wascana Circle, the park is unmistakable as a large clearing between two residential areas.

Old Wives Lake Nature Area Named Provincial Award Finalist

The Old Wives Lake Nature Area is receiving well-earned attention for its effective work in eco-tourism and habitat conservation. At the Saskatchewan Municipal Awards ceremony held in May, the Town of Mossbank was recognized for its development of the Old Wives Lake Nature Area when it was named a runner-up in the awards category of Environmental Stewardship.

Located north of Mossbank, Old Wives Lake is the fourth largest saline lake in North America and is a designated migratory bird sanctuary. A staging area for 500,000 waterfowl each year, such as Canada Geese, Snow Geese, and Tundra Swans, the lake is also a nesting habitat for American White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants.

The Town of Mossbank has for many years worked to conserve the Old Wives Lake region, recognizing it as a vital habitat for many bird species and as a place where Saskatchewan's native prairie remains untouched and protected.

Melanie Baker, the town's Economic Development Officer, explains that the development of the Old Wives Lake Nature Area was a community effort. "The people who live in the area have always been strong believers in environmental sustainability. This project has helped to preserve and promote the area, along with the community, and is a result of community members working together."

The Town of Mossbank has ensured that the area is as eco-friendly as possible, using flax straw along the trail, installing a composting toilet, and leaving the site otherwise untouched. At the Old Wives Lake Nature Area, visitors can step into the prairie wilderness and experience the smells, sights and sounds of the flatlands. Although some distance from Old Wives Lake, the area is a good spot for bird watching and discovering native flowers, grasses and shrubs.

Visitors can tour the area on a 2.4-km trail loop, with a walking time of about 1 hour. The trail winds through mixed prairie grasslands, with the pathway itself switching between gravel, flax straw and dirt roadway.

On the first half of the trail loop, a gentle slope clothed in sagebrush rises on the south, while on the north, Old Wives Lake can be made out in the distance across the flatland, banded by a white salt coat and backed by the blue hills behind. The prairie sky stretches above in a dramatic display.

A few rest stops along this half of the trail provide a scenic view of the distant lake and a place to spot the many upland birds and waterfowl in the area. At these stops and along the pathway, interpretive signs tell of the Piping Plover, the American Avocet, the Killdeer, and native vegetation.

A sheltered viewing tower on top of the small rise marks the trail's halfway point. The tower houses a picnic table as well as signs about the lake's staging area, the Isle of the Bays, and prairie birds and waterfowl. Behind the tower, a large tree – one of the few in the area – provides shade for a picnic table underneath, another perfect resting spot.

From the tower, the trail curves back to the west. On this portion of the route, the focus turns from Old Wives Lake to the countryside opposite. Although at first sight the landscape seems only to be marked by distant trees and farm yards, it soon becomes clear that there is much life here. Many prairie birds nest in the native grasses, and although not always seen, their presence is revealed by their songs, such as the distinct call of the Lark Bunting. Other birds to watch for are the Western Meadowlark as well as Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Yellow Warblers, Barn Swallows, sparrows, and Saskatchewan's provincial bird, the Sharp-tailed Grouse. Hawks also make their home here, including the Red-tailed Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, and North America's largest, the Ferruginous Hawk.

The importance of the conservation area is reinforced by several interpretive signs about native species, including a sign about endangered birds of prey living in the area – the Burrowing Owl and the Loggerhead Shrike. The last interpretive sign on the route describes the other wildlife that visit here: rabbits, Pronghorn, coyotes, White-tailed and Mule Deer, and foxes.

Besides animals, the area has also been a home to the peoples of the prairies. Old Wives Lake has been so named because of the inspiring history of the First Nations peoples who once lived there, the account of which is told on the entrance sign to the area. The site was also used during World War II for military training, an era described on one interpretive sign, and which will be commemorated in the next years with the creation of the area's Interpretive Centre.

To reach the Old Wives Lake Nature Area (OWLNA) from Moose Jaw, travel southwest on Highway #2 to Mossbank.

Drive north through the town following the OWLNA signs, which have a symbol of birds in flight with the OWLNA initials underneath. After passing through the town, travel west on a paved road for 2 km, then turn north onto a sand road. The road leads on for 7 km, after which the nature area can be seen on the right. There is little shelter on the route, except at the rest stops, so protect yourself from the sun with a hat and long sleeves.

The 2009 Saskatchewan Municipal Awards runner-up is a site worth experiencing. The grand opening of the area was held on 8 August 2009, in conjunction with the Old Wives Lake Festival.

- *Katie Boyce*, Communications Consultant, Benchmark Public Relations, 2368 Rae St., Regina, SK, S4T 2G2; E-mail: <kboyce@benchmarkpr.ca>



Picnic site at Old Wives Lake Nature Area, near Mossbank, SK.

THE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT IN CANADA

The Christmas Bird Count has been a holiday tradition for over a century in North America. In many families—certainly in mine—it is at least as important as turkey and cranberry sauce in the observation of the season. Although it began as a statement of early environmental action, it remained largely a social and sporting pastime until the mid-1900s, when the numbers of participating counts rose exponentially and began to provide valuable data on the distribution and population trends of birds wintering on the continent.

The Christmas Bird Count was founded in 1900 by American biologist and early environmentalist Frank Chapman, who

was concerned about the practice of the Christmas Side Hunt—an event in which men formed teams and tried to shoot everything they saw. I presume prizes were awarded for the teams with the most species and/or individuals in the bag. Chapman put a notice in the Audubon journal *Bird Lore* asking interested parties to go out on Christmas Day and count birds instead of shooting them. Twenty-five counts were submitted to *Bird Lore* that first year, including two from Canada: Toronto, ON, and Scotch Lake, NB.

Interest in the Christmas Bird Count built slowly in the early 1900s. According to my records, the earliest Saskatchewan count took place in Lashburn in 1913, followed

by Eastend in 1919 and Saskatoon in 1935 and 1936 (the latter sent in by a young Farley Mowat). Audubon continued to publish the results in *Bird Lore* and its successor, *American Birds*. The *Canadian Field-Naturalist* began to publish some Canadian counts in 1924 and continued that practice until 1960.

In 1942, the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS) began its own Christmas Bird Count, publishing the results in *Blue Jay*. Eight counts were submitted in that first year, but the only count that sent its results to Audubon in those early years was Yorkton. These counts published by *Blue Jay* followed the Audubon rules in that they were conducted on one day in the Christmas period within a 24-km (15-mi) circle, but some did not meet the Audubon guidelines of a minimum of 8 party-hours of field observation. The number of SNHS Christmas Bird Counts increased steadily, and by the 1980s there were 80 to 90 counts taking place each year, peaking at 103 in 1997 and 2001.

In 2000, Bird Studies Canada (BSC) took over the coordination of Christmas Bird Counts in Canada from the National Audubon Society, although the data collected still go into the continental database at Audubon. At that time there were 257 counts sent in to the Audubon Society from Canada each year; that number rose quickly after 2000 and has now leveled off at about 370 counts—about 20 of them from Saskatchewan. At about the same time, Audubon stopped publishing the full results of each count in *American Birds*, instead publishing only summary reports for each region and articles on bird biology that use Christmas Bird Count data. BSC publishes the Canadian summary reports in its *BirdWatch Canada* magazine. The full data of all counts ever sent in to Audubon and/or BSC are now available

online at www.audubon.org/bird/cbc. The database can be searched by count, i.e. you can produce a table of all birds seen on any count for any period of time, or by species, e.g. you can produce a graph or table of numbers of Sharp-tailed Grouse seen in Saskatoon, or in Saskatchewan as a whole, for any period of time.

The Audubon database is used continuously by biologists and naturalists around the globe. CBC results are used to produce winter distribution maps for all species in the United States and southern Canada. In 2007, Audubon conducted an in-depth analysis of population trends of birds using CBC data; one of the results of this was *Common Birds in Decline*, a report available at <http://stateofthebirds.audubon.org/cbid/>. This data analysis is also used regularly by agencies such as the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) in their assessments of species at risk. Two species—the Rusty Blackbird and the Newfoundland subspecies of the Red Crossbill—have recently been listed by COSEWIC largely on the basis of CBC data.

I would encourage anyone interested in birds to visit the CBC website and explore the huge database. To maintain this database, Audubon requires that counts submitting data pay a participation fee amounting to \$5 for each field observer. Feeder-watchers, count compilers, BSC members, and participants 18 years of age and under are exempt. This fee is not a fundraiser for BSC or Audubon, but does help to defray part of the costs in running this large and valuable program. Most participants happily pay the fee, knowing that it means their hard work in the cold and snow will be put to valuable use in bird conservation. In many counts, local clubs pay the fees for their members, or find local businesses to sponsor the count.

We now have the ability to add data into the database from historical counts that were not submitted to Audubon, and will be working in the years to come to make sure that all participating counts have their full complement of data available online. BSC would like to see all eligible Saskatchewan counts in this database.

As someone from a slightly milder winter climate, I greatly admire the enthusiasm of Saskatchewan birders

for this mid-winter event. Birders and biologists from all over the continent thank you for your commitment to enjoying birds in all seasons and contributing to an invaluable source of information on the birdlife of North America.

- *Richard J. Cannings*, Bird Studies Canada, 705 Sunglo Drive, Penticton, BC, V2A 8X7; E-mail: <dickcannings@shaw.ca>



To me a lush carpet of pine needles or spongy grass is more welcome than the most luxurious Persian rug.

- *Helen Keller*

PHOTO NOTE

This photo (see back cover) of a Loggerhead Shrike feeding its young was taken on 10 July 2009 on Highway 663 south of Saskatoon, SK. The day we first saw these birds was on an outing with the Golden Eagles, a senior group of birders from the Saskatoon Nature Society. We go out most Thursdays from April through October. We first saw these birds on the Thursday, and my husband and I went back again on the Friday and spent some time watching them. They were in bushes on the side of the road, near a slough just before a railway crossing. We have seen shrikes in the same area on previous occasions. There were four young and two adults in this nest, and we also saw two other adults a bit farther down the road. The young shrike in this photo is getting a meal consisting of part of another small bird that I saw being plucked and taken apart. Other items seen being fed to the young ones were grasshoppers. The two adults were very busy finding food for their brood of four.

Alison Baudru, 70 Lindsay Drive, Saskatoon, SK, S7H 4B4; E-mail: <ali-loub@shaw.ca>

THE STURDY RIVER LIMPET – RANGE EXTENSION IN SASKATCHEWAN

The Swift Current Creek Watershed Stewards (SCCWS) is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting ecological sustainability within the Swift Current Creek Watershed. To understand the health of the watershed, a 4-year program of field studies and review was undertaken in 2004. The Environmental Effects Monitoring (EEM) document developed by Environment Canada was chosen by the SCCWS to ascertain the impacts that humans in Swift Current and the surrounding area may have on Swift Current Creek. Using the EEM document as a guide, the SCCWS developed a 4-year plan to sample the health of the watershed using three indicators: water quality, macroinvertebrates, and fish. This report details the particularly interesting finding of a number of specimens of *Ferrissia rivularis*, the Sturdy River Limpet (SRL; Fig. 1), during macroinvertebrate sampling in Swift Current Creek throughout the summer of 2004.



Figure 1. Photo of the Sturdy River Limpet collected from Swift Current Creek, SK, in 2004.

The distribution of freshwater limpets in Canada is not well understood. Clarke suggested that the range of the SRL in Saskatchewan was restricted to the southeast region.¹ Recently, the SRL has been found in Candle Lake in central Saskatchewan during lake surveys conducted in 2001 and 2002.² Similarly, the SRL was discovered in the North Saskatchewan and Red Deer Rivers by staff of the Alberta Research Council.³ In addition to these recent findings, the SCCWS discovered 14 SRL specimens (mean length = 4.5 mm; range 3.5–5.0 mm) at two sample sites during macroinvertebrate sampling in Swift Current Creek in 2004. A subsample (nine specimens) of the limpets collected was sent to the University of Winnipeg for confirmation of identification.

The SRL was found at two sites in Swift Current Creek (Fig. 2). One of the two sites was an area of fast-flowing water, whereas the other was an area of fairly slow-flowing water. The majority of SRL specimens (12 of 14, or 86%) were found at the site with fast-flowing water, an indication of habitat preference that has also been found in other studies.³ Flowing water may therefore be very important to the SRL. Little is known about the range of habitat conditions that the SRL will tolerate; however, the following water quality data were collected in Swift Current Creek at the sites where the SRL specimens were found. Temperature varied from 18 to 22°C, pH ranged from 8.5 to 8.7, and resistivity (inverse of conductivity) was 510 to 525 μohms .

Given that there is little information about the SRL, more focused sampling is needed to better understand the physiological requirements and distribution of this

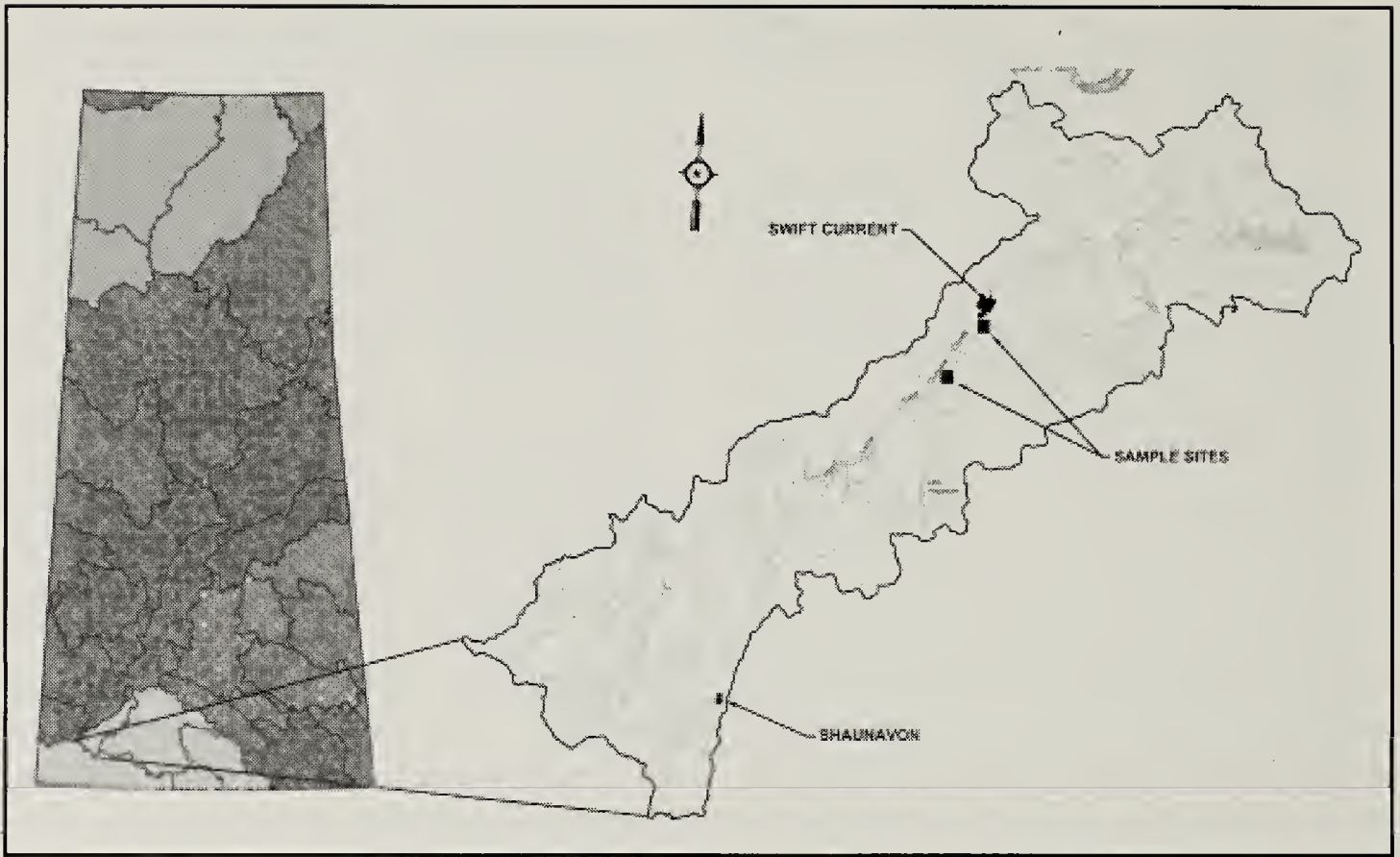


Figure 2. View of Swift Current Creek Watershed showing the two sites where the Sturdy River Limpet was discovered and its spatial relation within Saskatchewan. (Map: Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, available at: <www.swa.ca/Maps/default.asp>)

limpet in both the Swift Current Creek and in Saskatchewan.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Swift Current Creek Watershed Stewards for the Swift Current Creek Monitoring Project; Cher King for the planning of the project; the landowners who permitted access to the sampling sites; Dr. Eva Pip (University of Winnipeg) for identifying *F. rivularis*; Keith Hanson (SPARC) for the loan of a dissecting stereoscope for species identification; Dr. Yantai Gan (SPARC) for the use of a dissecting stereoscope

with digital photography capabilities to photograph the limpet; and Ron Jensen for input into this article.

1. CLARKE, A.H. 1981. The Freshwater Molluscs of Canada. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa, ON.
2. PARKER, D. 2002. Candle Lake Aquatic Macroinvertebrate Survey (2001 – 2002). Available via the Internet at <<http://www.usask.ca/biology/skabugs/CandleL.html>>.
3. PRESCOTT, D. and CURTEANU, M.M. 2004. Alberta Sustainable Research Development. Survey of Aquatic Gastropods in the Central Parkland Subregion of Alberta (Alberta Species at Risk Report No. 92). Edmonton, AB.



Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life.

- Rachel Carson