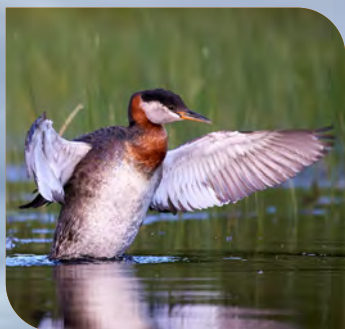


Nature
Kids
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BACKYARD



Gaetz Lakes Migratory Bird Sanctuary





Gaetz Lakes Migratory Bird Sanctuary

Gaetz Lakes Migratory Bird Sanctuary is one of Alberta's four federal migratory bird sanctuaries, and it's located within the city of Red Deer! Although its official name is the Red Deer Migratory Bird Sanctuary, the people who live nearby call it Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary. The water bodies on this land were called the Gaetz Lakes, after the land's original owners, so we use that name for the Sanctuary.

The land's original owners were Catherine Gaetz and her son, John Jost (J.J.) Gaetz. In 1885, Catherine and J.J. Gaetz moved to what is now Red Deer to be closer to their extended family. Catherine applied for a homestead on what is now the north end of the Sanctuary and J.J. applied for a homestead on what is now the south end. The Gaetzes recognised and appreciated the natural beauty of the area, so they decided they wouldn't cut down the forests or drain the wetlands to create farmland.

In the early 1920s, the Alberta Natural History Society (now named the Red Deer River Naturalists) worked with the Gaetzes to have the land designated as a Federal Bird Sanctuary. The Sanctuary was



Photos by Nick Carter except where otherwise noted.



formally established on June 27, 1924. Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary is Alberta's oldest migratory bird sanctuary. Red Deer-area resident Elsie Cassels, a prominent naturalist and early member of the Red Deer River Naturalists, played a big part in planning out the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary continues to be an urban haven for migratory birds and many other animals in central Alberta. It also offers easy access to nature for Red Deer's human residents.

Since 1986, the **Kerry Wood Nature Centre** has been located at the entrance to the Sanctuary. The Nature Centre was named after Kerry Wood, a local naturalist who wrote a lot of books to help people learn about and appreciate nature. This popular facility offers visitors information about the Sanctuary, educational programs, and interpretive exhibits about the local environment and wildlife. It's also home to the **Nature Store** gift shop and the **Marjorie Wood Art Gallery**, where visitors enjoy all kinds of nature-themed artwork. The Kerry Wood Nature Centre is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., seven days a week (except for Christmas Day), all year long. It's a great way to begin your visit to the Sanctuary.



The Landscape

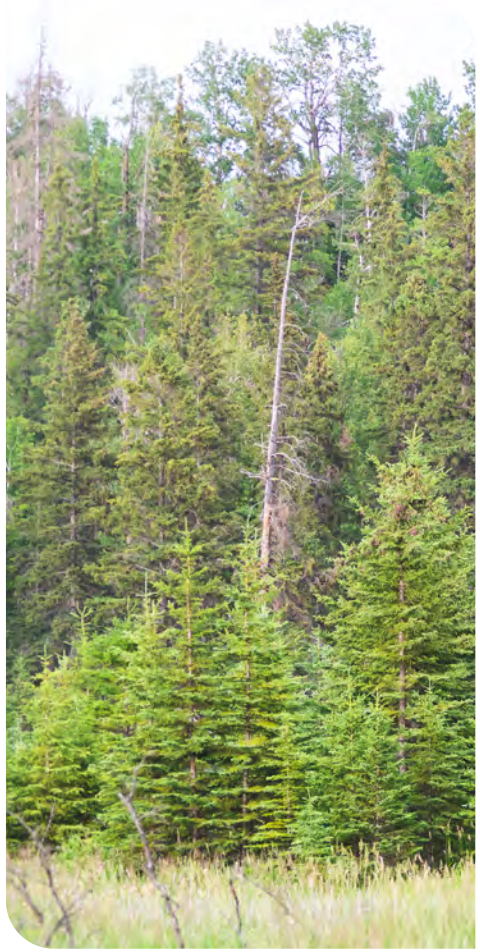
Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary is located in a part of Alberta called the **aspen parkland**. The aspen parkland region has open, grassy fields interrupted by marshy wetlands, groves of trembling aspen, and forested valleys. Most of this area is used for farming, grazing, and harvesting natural resources. Unfortunately, only about 5% of the native vegetation areas remain. This highlights the importance of sites like Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary in preserving the aspen parkland's natural environment.

The Sanctuary lies in a 130-hectare area that includes many habitat types. There are open meadows, patches of forest, and wetlands. Vegetation that grows here includes woodlands of trembling aspen and white spruce. In lower, wetter areas, you'll find balsam poplar. Shrubs like red osier dogwood, beaked hazelnut, and Saskatoon fill out the understory (the area between the forest floor and the treetops.) Cattails and rushes surround the wetland areas.

At the heart of the Sanctuary is a pair of shallow **oxbow lakes** known as the East and West Gaetz Lakes. Oxbow lakes are crescent-shaped bodies of water that form when the bend of a meandering river (in this case, the Red Deer River) gets cut off from the main water flow. Seen from above, they almost look like the hoofprint of a giant deer. Thousands of years ago, these lakes were one big lake. An ancient landslide crashed down the middle and divided this one oxbow lake into two. (Isn't the power of geology amazing? It can totally change the landscape!) These lakes provide important habitat for a variety of creatures.

The Ecosystem

Ecosystems go through different phases as they grow and mature in a process called **succession**. While walking through Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary, you can tell at a glance which parts of the ecosystem are younger or older. Sometimes an ecosystem is disturbed by things like fire, windstorms, floods, or human development. If most of the trees and other plants have been burned or removed, it takes around a year for the **pioneer species** to establish themselves again. These first plants to return and grow here are smaller, fast-growing shrubs and wildflowers that only live until winter. Not too many animals live in the recovering ecosystem full-time in this early stage, but hooved animals, such as deer, enjoy feeding on the soft vegetation that grows at this time.





Tony LePrieur



Loreena Nieuwenhout

After about two years, longer-lived grasses and shrubs — species that especially love sunshine — start to appear. Saskatoon bushes are one common example. Tree saplings start to emerge from the soil as well. There is plenty of food for deer to feed on at this point. On an evening walk in Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary, you may see a few of these animals enjoying a sunset meal in the open meadows. Other animals that thrive in these open, shrubby meadows include butterflies and dragonflies. Songbirds, such as clay-coloured sparrows and cedar waxwings that feed on fruit and insects, also benefit from the new growth.

Around five years after the disturbance, trees start to become more established. In Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary, this means mostly trembling aspen. Not only do these trees grow quickly, but the same root system grown out by one tree can start new “clone” trees in the surrounding patch of soil. So, any little grove of trembling aspens may be mostly, or entirely, just one plant! Familiar shrubs like red osier dogwood and wild rose fill in the understory. The increase in shelter and bigger leafy shrubs provides food and habitat for larger animals like moose and snowshoe hares. Seed-eating birds like nuthatches and chickadees are plentiful here. Meanwhile, in the shadows of the growing aspens, young white spruce trees begin to sprout. In lower, wetter areas, balsam poplar and white birch start growing.



The **mature phase** of a forest's growth can take a long time to arrive —up to 100 years or longer. The more shade-tolerant white spruces, balsams, and birches have now grown to maturity. The large, old trees of the mature phase provide habitat for animals like red squirrels, owls, and woodpeckers. Birds like crossbills and other finches that feed on conifer seeds flock to places like this in the winter. In the summertime, warblers and kinglets nab insects from the tall spruce twigs.

This is how ecosystems evolve over time. As you can see, if a mature ecosystem is disturbed, it doesn't just regrow overnight. It takes a long time. That's why it's so important to keep old-growth forests in locations such as this safe and secure. While many sorts of disturbances are natural and have always occurred, we humans must be careful not to do any unnecessary damage.

To protect this sensitive natural area, only walking is allowed in the Sanctuary. Even though jogging, cycling, rollerblading, scootering, and skiing are fun activities, they are best done elsewhere. Pets — aside from service dogs — must be left at home. Even well-behaved pets can accidentally disturb wildlife. Take a walk through the landscape of Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary and see what ecosystem stages you can identify!





Getting There

Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary is within the city of Red Deer. The Sanctuary can be accessed from 45 Avenue, which runs along the east bank of the Red Deer River. Along the way, watch and listen for songbirds. Also look for butterflies in the riverside shrubs and waterfowl paddling in the river. If you're lucky, you might even spot ospreys soaring above! Head north on 45 Avenue, turn right at the Kerry Wood Nature Centre / Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary welcome sign, and park in the Nature Centre parking lot. Enter through the front doors of the Nature Centre and, after checking out the displays, exit through the rear doors. Here, a sign welcomes you to the threshold of the Sanctuary. Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary can also be accessed directly by taking the path around the north side of the Nature Centre, through the nature playground. The Sanctuary is open 24 hours a day, all year long. Both the Nature Centre and Sanctuary are free to access.

Getting Around

There are different trails you can take to explore Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary. Looking southeast, under the Sanctuary sign behind the Kerry Wood Nature Centre, you'll see the path splits in three different directions. It's decision time! The left- and right-hand paths mark the beginning and end of one big trail: the **Wishart Trail**. It goes around the entire perimeter of the Sanctuary. This 4-km loop takes about an hour to complete. It runs through woods and open meadows. It also takes you along the wetlands on the outer edges of the two Gaetz Lakes. It includes multiple bridges, boardwalks, and over 100 stairs.

The middle path is the start of a smaller loop that guides you through the inner woods of the Sanctuary: the **Dr. George Trail**. Along the way, this accessible 1-km loop branches off to a path that leads to a boardwalk. At the end of the boardwalk, a bird blind provides a great view from the northern tip of the west lake. From here — especially from atop the bird blind lookout — you can take in the sights and sounds of the lake and the surrounding wetlands and woods. When you get back on the path, it will soon bend north and connect with the Wishart Trail at the edge of a meadow.



Things to See

Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary is rich with living things. The best way to see the animals that live here is through a pair of binoculars. You can enjoy a good look at the animals you encounter without getting too close.

It's good to remember that the Sanctuary is a safe place for the species that live here, so we should all do our best to be respectful to them. Here are four ways you can show that you respect wildlife:

1. Only walk on established trails.
2. Avoid littering.
3. Resist leaving food out for wildlife.
4. Take home lots of photographs and memories, but leave everything in the Sanctuary as you found it.

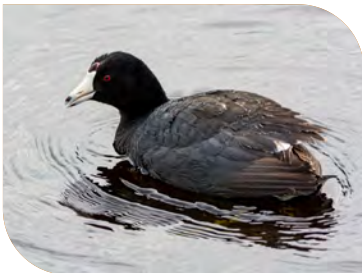
For more information on the species that live here, check out the displays and talk to the knowledgeable staff at the Kerry Wood Nature Centre.



Birds

It's never a bad time to go birdwatching at Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary. Visitors have reported sightings of over 170 species! The types of birds you can see there vary from season to season. Visit Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary at different times of the year — that way, you will see different types of birds and get to know the species that live in and pass through the area.

During the spring, all sorts of migrating birds stop at the Sanctuary. Some stick around until fall, while others just pass through on their way farther north. Water-loving birds like American coots, red-necked grebes, and all sorts of ducks can be seen on the lakes. Trumpeter and tundra swans also make an appearance during migration. Red-winged blackbirds and barn swallows live in the surrounding wetlands, along with harder to find species like the elusive sora. During the warmer months, the woods are full of migratory songbirds like flycatchers, warblers, finches, and robins. You can also watch for tree swallows diving through the air over the open meadows to catch insects.





Scavenger Hunt of Spring & Summer Birds

All sorts of birds migrate to Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary each spring to spend the warmer months here. Check off these species as you find them in the woods, out on the lakes, or overhead in the sky!



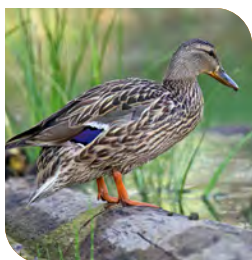
American Goldfinch



Osprey



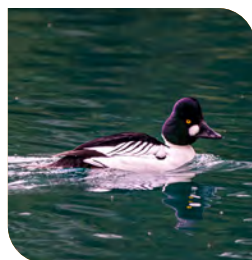
Barn Swallow



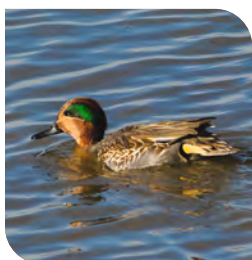
Mallard



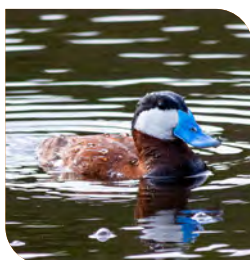
Red-winged Blackbird



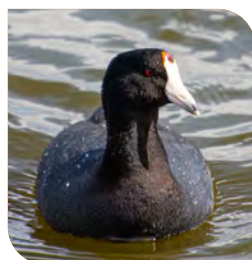
Common Goldeneye



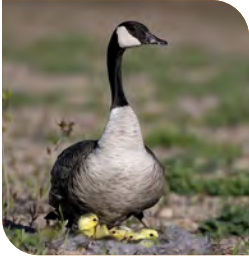
Green-winged Teal



Ruddy Duck



American Coot



Canada Goose



Yellow Warbler



Ring-billed Gull



Cedar Waxwing



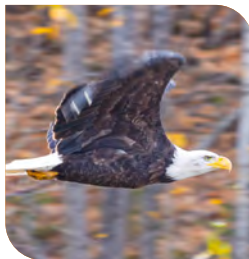
White-throated Sparrow



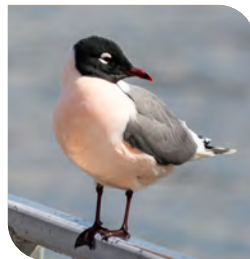
American Robin



Sora



Bald Eagle



Franklin's Gull



Tony LePrieur



Rick Price

By mid to late fall, most of the Sanctuary's birds have migrated south, or are just about to do so. But there's still plenty to see. In October, keep an eye on the willows for American tree sparrows. These arctic-nesting birds winter in the United States and pass through Alberta on their north and south journeys.

As winter takes hold, there are still plenty of year-round residents to spot, like black-capped and boreal chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers. You may even catch a rare glimpse of a great horned owl in the woods. The Sanctuary is also a winter home for species of far northern forests. Bohemian waxwings and pine grosbeaks drift south into city parks to find food and shelter for the winter.

Mammals

Many types of mammals can be found in the Sanctuary throughout the year. A few can be pretty easy to find, like the red squirrel that scampers through the woods and loudly scolds anyone who comes too close to its tree. Watch for their reserves of spruce seeds, known as **middens**, piled up in the woods. You may also spot the nervous dash of a snowshoe hare as it bounds across the paths and through the bushes. This species changes colour with the seasons — they are brown in the summer, and white in the winter — to make them harder for predators to spot. This is a form of **camouflage**. A white hare in the white snow can be hard to see!

For most mammals, the signs they leave behind — like tracks or droppings — are much easier to find than the animals themselves. These animals tend to be shy of humans.

That's why it's handy to learn about the different signs of animals in your area. In the winter, all sorts of mammals leave tracks in the snow that crisscross the Sanctuary. Look for the tiny, scurrying prints of voles and deer mice, and the plodding tracks of porcupines. Coyote prints look like dog prints, and white-tailed deer and moose leave teardrop-shaped hoofprints.

With any luck, you may catch a glimpse of these animals in the woods and fields of the Sanctuary. Mammals tend to be more active early in the morning or in the evening, so these are good times to look for them. It's important to be respectful and give wildlife space. Keep your distance and do not try to approach animals, especially large animals like moose.





Don't forget to keep an eye out for mammals in the water as well. Both muskrats and beavers, our large, water-loving rodents, live in the lakes. They can be tricky to tell apart from a distance, so here are some tips:

- Note the size of the animals. Beavers are larger than muskrats.
- Check out the tail. Beavers have wide tails that are flattened top to bottom. Muskrat tails are long, thin, and flattened side-to-side.
- Look at where they live. Beavers famously make their homes in lodges of sticks and mud. You can see one of these lodges in the middle of the west lake! Muskrats make their homes out of cattails and rushes with an underwater entrance. They can often be found munching away on water plants.



Connect the Animal to the Tracks They Make in the Snow

Wild animals of Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary make different kinds of tracks depending on what species they are. Connect the right dots to match each track below with the animal that made it. Then go for a walk on a snowy day in Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary and look for each of these tracks yourself!



Snowshoe Hare



Coyote



Moose





Butterfly Bingo

On warm summer days, Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary comes alive with butterflies. (Some can also be seen at different points from mid-spring to early autumn.) Some types prefer to live in wooded areas, while others like open fields. Check off these butterfly species as you find them during your visits to the Sanctuary.



Mourning Cloak



Northern Crescent



Milbert's Tortoiseshell



Great Spangled Fritillary



Canadian Tiger Swallowtail



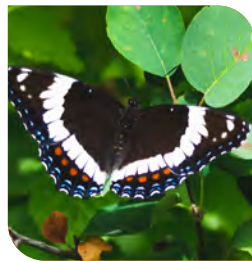
Common Wood-nymph



Mustard White



Silvery Blue



White Admiral

Invertebrates

Invertebrates are animals with no backbone. Some, like insects, spiders, and other creepy-crawlies, have many legs and a hard outer shell called an exoskeleton. Invertebrates are super cool, even though some people find them icky. During warmer months, the Sanctuary is full of these interesting critters. They are fun to look for and identify.

From spring through early fall, you can spot many different types of butterflies. Swallowtails, sulphurs, and brushfoots are big and beautiful. Just as pretty are the tiny blues and skippers. All can be seen fluttering around the meadows and woods, feeding on flower nectar alongside bumblebees. Dragonflies and damselflies buzz through the air chasing smaller insect prey, and all manner of beetles can be found just about anywhere.

Spiders tuck into any nook or cranny they can find, waiting for prey to come blundering into their webs. Some, like the goldenrod crab spider, make their home inside flowers where they ambush unwary pollinators. Now that's sneaky!

Some invertebrates, like mosquitoes and ticks, are best avoided. Putting on bug spray before a walk in the woods is a good idea. Some spiders and beetles can bite you. Even though they're little, their bites hurt! It's best not to go picking up insects or spiders unless you know exactly what they are.



Plants and Fungi

If plants are your thing, you'll find plenty at Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary. Everything from fragile little mosses to great big aspen trees grow here. Everything from fragile little mosses to great big coniferous trees grow here. The variety of ecosystems — meadows, dense woods, and marshy wetlands — supports all sorts of different plant communities. Since this place is a sanctuary for **all** living things, picking plants and fungi is not allowed. Instead, take a picture or make a drawing! This is a great way to bring home a memory from your visit to the Sanctuary.

Fungi are different from plants — they can't make their own food, and they don't need sunlight to grow — but they're no less interesting. Instead of making their own food like plants do, fungi absorb nutrients from outside their bodies. This is done in three ways:

- by breaking down dead things
- by taking nutrients from other living things
- by pairing up with another organism like algae that will produce nutrients for the fungi!

Fungi and lichens found in the Sanctuary come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and colours. Mushrooms grow up from the soil, and shelf fungi stick out from the side of tree trunks. Lichens grow like a crust on tree bark or like hair dangling from branches. There are many different species out there, so see how many you can find!



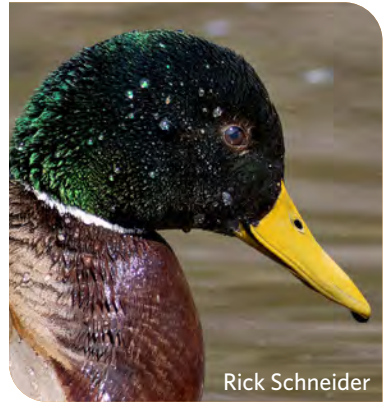
Jennifer de Graaf



Citizen Science at the Sanctuary

Enjoy your visit to Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary and the Kerry Wood Nature Centre! If you take photos that you'd like to share with other nature-lovers, check out the iNaturalist app. Apps like Seek by iNaturalist will also help you identify plants, birds, animals and other living things you find in nature from the photos you've taken.

Check out Nature Alberta's *Nature Heroes* book at naturealberta.ca/nature-kids for more information on how to use Seek!



Rick Schneider



Cover Photos by Nick Carter and Archie Richardson.

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Draw What You See!



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