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Alberta
Backyard



Saskatoon Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary



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ALBERTA



Welcome to the Saskatoon Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary

Saskatoon Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary is located 25 km west of the city of Grande Prairie in northwestern Alberta. The sanctuary is made up of two lakes: the larger Saskatoon Lake on the north side of the site, and the smaller, aptly named Little Lake on the south side.



Migratory ("MY-gra-tore-ee"): Describes an animal that lives in different places (habitats) at different times of the year. Travelling between them is called migration.

Sanctuary ("SANK-tchoo-air-ee"): A safe place.



Photos by Nicholas Carter except where otherwise noted.



These two lakes were once joined as one, with an island in the middle of the lake. During the 1920s, water levels dropped and the island became a narrow strip of land separating the two lakes, as we see it today.

The sanctuary was established in 1948 by the federal government as a place to conserve migratory bird species that rely on areas like this during the warmer months. Many different bird species make their summer homes on the lakes and in the woodlands between them. One of the most important to conservationists is the trumpeter swan. This species was once on the brink of extinction, but local and provincial conservation efforts, and the establishment of the Saskatoon Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary, helped in the recovery of this species. It has since become an icon of the Grande Prairie area.

The strip of land between the two lakes in this sanctuary is also shared with Saskatoon Island Provincial Park, a popular recreation, camping, and birding spot. Though some of the sanctuary is visible by vehicle on

the roads that cut through the surrounding farmland, Saskatoon Island Provincial Park offers the most convenient foot access to Saskatoon Lake, Little Lake, and the land in between them.

As we explore the Saskatoon Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary, we acknowledge that it is located on Treaty 8 territory, a traditional gathering place of the Beaver, Cree, Dene and the Métis Nation of Alberta among others. Indigenous people stewarded these lands for thousands of years and we recognize with gratitude that we tread in generations of footsteps.

The Landscape

Saskatoon Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary is part of the Peace River Parkland Natural Subregion. This is one of Alberta's smallest and most threatened natural subregions, a mostly cultivated area of rolling grasslands, wide shallow lakes, and patches of upland forest dominated by aspen trees. Much of the plant and animal biodiversity here is similar to that of the Central Parkland around Edmonton, hundreds of kilometres southeast.



Biodiversity (“BYE-oh-dye-VUR-sih-tee”): The variety of life, including plants, animals, even microscopic organisms, in a particular habitat or ecosystem.

Cultivate (“CULL-tih-vayt”): To prepare and use land for planting or farming.

Saskatoon Lake and Little Lake are classic Alberta parkland lakes, surrounded by reeds and cattail marshes along the shore and aspen groves further inland. They're relatively shallow, with an average water depth of 2.5 metres in Saskatoon Lake. No rivers flow in or out of these water bodies. Instead they stay filled only by precipitation (rain and snow) and runoff from the higher plains surrounding them. As such, the stickleback fish that live in these lakes are quite small.

The narrow land bridge separating Saskatoon Lake from Little Lake is a mixture of aspen forests and open saskatoon shrub lands. The dense undergrowth of this aspen woodland is filled out with shrubs like prickly rose, beaked willow, and wild raspberry.

The most famous shrub, of course, is the saskatoon bush. This plant grows densely in both the understory areas as well as in open meadows, nourished by the rich local soil. Saskatoon bushes are easy to identify by their round, green leaves with toothed edges. The delicate white flowers give way to round, bluish-purple berries that ripen in early to mid-summer. With a sweet yet nutty flavour, these berries are both delicious and nutritious. Historically, saskatoons were a vital food source for Indigenous peoples throughout western Canada. They remain popular with people today, eaten raw, baked in pies, or preserved in jam.



Picking saskatoon berries is a popular summer activity in Alberta, and is permitted in Saskatoon Island Provincial Park. Keep in mind, however, that many wild species — chipmunks, waxwings, even bears to name just a few — also rely on saskatoons for nutrition during the summer, so it's wise to pick no more than you need and always leave some behind.

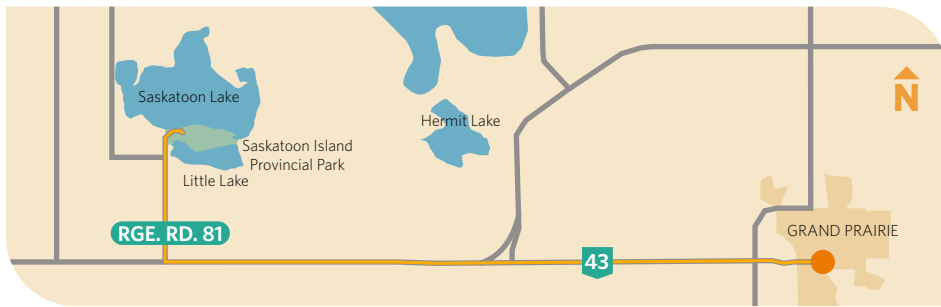




How to Get There

Saskatoon Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary is located just north of Highway 43. The following directions will take you to the access point at Saskatoon Island Provincial Park.

If you're coming from Grande Prairie, head west along Highway 43 for about 25 km, then turn right northbound onto Range Road 81. Range Road 81 will bend to the right into the gates of Saskatoon Island Provincial Park.



The sanctuary is east of nearby towns Wembley and Beaverlodge, making it an easy day trip for families in the area. Enjoy views of the open farmland along the highway, and if it's a clear enough day, from the hilltops you'll get a nice look at the distant Rocky Mountains on the horizon to the southwest.

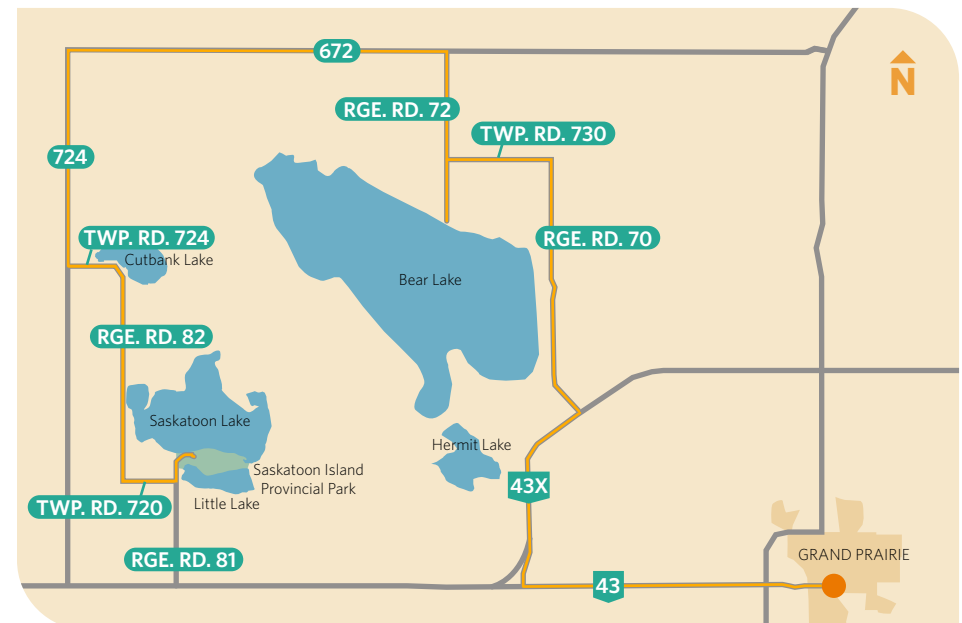
The park provides several viewpoints of both Saskatoon Lake and Little Lake, as well as the aspen forest in the land between them.



Getting There — The Scenic Route

If you're up for some backroads driving, there are some places along the way to the sanctuary from Grande Prairie that are worthwhile for nature lovers at different times of the year.

To check out the scenic route, make your way north on Range Road 70 via the Highway 43X bypass. This gravel road will take you through open farmland where waterfowl, songbirds, hawks, and deer can often be seen during the warmer months. In winter, you may spot the occasional snowy owl perched on a telephone pole.





Range Road 70 northbound will take you along the east shore of Bear Lake. During spring and summer, this shoreline is a great place to see a variety of migratory shorebirds and waterfowl, including terns, gulls, and pelicans. North of the Bear Creek crossing, the rows of bird boxes on the fence line are often home to tree swallows during the summer.

Make your way up to Township Road 730, turn west, and then south on Range Road 72 to visit Bear Lake Campground, a popular recreation area that also provides good birdwatching opportunities for the species listed above.

Head back north up to Highway 672, locally known as the Emerson Trail, and head west until you intersect with Highway 724. Go south on this highway until you reach Township Road 724. Turn east here, and it will take you along the south side of Cutbank Lake, a popular spot for waterfowl like trumpeter swans and snow geese.

Admire the old Monkman family farm buildings, remnants of the first European settlers in the area, as Township Road 724 turns south to become Range Road 82. This will bring you past the site of the long-abandoned town of Lake Saskatoon and the western shore of Saskatoon Lake itself. During summer you'll likely see a variety of waterfowl out on the lake, as well as sparrows perching on the fence by the road. You'll see why parkland lakes like these are often referred to as an important part of North America's "duck factory."

Swing east onto Township Road 720 and then north onto Range Road 81 and into Saskatoon Island Provincial Park.



Saskatoon Island Provincial Park

Visiting Saskatoon Island Provincial Park is the easiest way to explore much of Saskatoon Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary on foot. The park has an extensive campground for tents and RVs, day use areas, summer interpretive programs, and a good network of walking trails. The small boat launch on the south shore of Saskatoon Lake allows canoes and kayaks access to the open water. In addition to summer hiking and canoeing, you can snowshoe and cross-country ski here during the winter.

Founded in 1932, Saskatoon Island Provincial Park is one of Alberta's first provincial parks, and is still beloved by locals and visitors to the area today. Interpretive signs around the park offer information about the history, ecology, and other facts about the site.



Before You Go: Visit albertaparks.ca/saskatoon-island for updates on park activities, conditions, and events. You can also call 780-538-5350 for more information.

Entry to Saskatoon Island Provincial Park is free. Campsites should be booked in advance at reserve.albertaparks.ca.



Things To Do

Warm-Weather Activities:

Camping
Hiking
Trail Cycling
Paddling (Canoe/
Kayak)
Playgrounds
Wildlife Watching
The lakes are
not suitable for
swimming.

Winter Activities:

Snowshoeing
Cross-Country Skiing
Bird and Wildlife Watching

Be Wildlife-Wise

While exploring this shared provincial park and bird sanctuary on foot, it's always wise to be aware of the other creatures that share this space. Moose are year-round residents, and it's best to give them a respectful distance. Male moose (bulls) become more aggressive during the fall rutting season (when they're competing for mates), as do females (cows) during the spring calving season (when they're caring for newborn calves).



To keep a safe distance, use the "rule of thumb." Hold your fist straight in front of you with your thumb up. Cover the animal in your view with your thumb. If it's completely covered (when standing sideways), you're probably about 100 metres away. If your thumb doesn't completely cover the animal, you should slowly move further away.



Although bears are uncommon wanderers through the park, it still lies within bear country. Travelling in groups, making noise, and not littering are all good practices to help ensure your safety.

Pets are allowed in the provincial park, but must be on a leash at all times, and you have to clean up after them.

Walking Trails

Saskatoon Island Provincial Park offers a variety of trails suitable for warm-weather and winter activities. The Lakeshore Trail and Little Lake Trail are both easy walks and are wheelchair accessible.

LAKESHORE TRAIL

This walking trail starts at the Little Lake parking lot and connects to the Saskatoon Lake boat launch. It runs along part of the south side of Saskatoon Lake, passing by the tenting campsites near the lake shore.

The boat launch (where you can also park and start the hike from if you prefer) offers a good lookout point to survey the water. Birds commonly visible here between spring and fall include blue-winged teals, lesser scaups, mallards, buffleheads, common goldeneyes, and eared grebes. Black terns can be seen flying overhead, and Franklin's gulls often soar over the lake in large flocks when they're not looking



for food near the water's surface. During the autumn migration, trumpeter swans gather in groups and move between the lake and the surrounding pastures to feed. Less common species occasionally seen on the lake include common loons and Barrow's goldeneyes, so keep an eye out for these!

Along the water's edge, shorebirds such as killdeer and lesser yellowlegs can be seen pecking for food in the shallows among the reeds. You may spot muskrats or beavers by the lakeside too, as well as a variety of dragonflies and damselflies.

The aspen woods along the path are home to a variety of songbirds including black-capped chickadees, yellow warblers, clay-coloured sparrows, common grackles, and downy woodpeckers. Sharp-eyed visitors may even spot a great horned owl high in the trees!

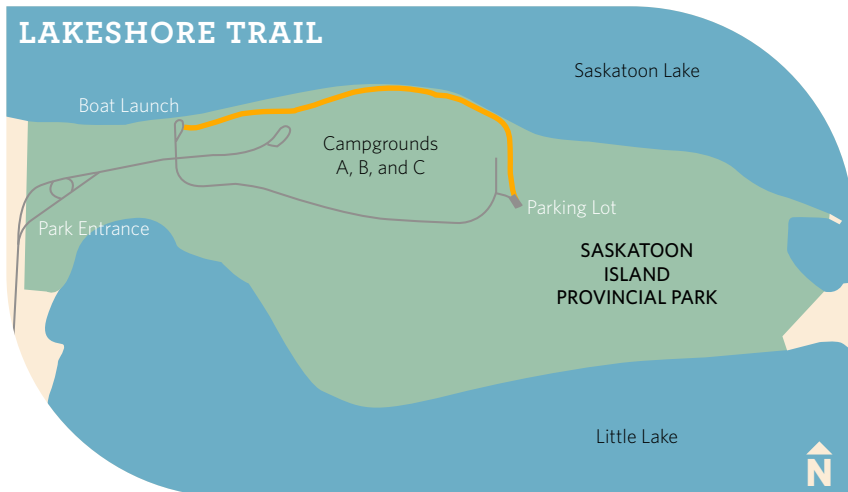
LITTLE LAKE TRAIL

The main path of this trail is paved, and goes in a loop from the Little Lake parking lot down to the lookout point at the north side of Little Lake and back. Interpretive signs along the way have lots of information on the natural history of this site.

Heading right at the fork in the path (you can go in either direction), you'll walk through patches of aspen woods and open meadows rich in saskatoon bushes. Berries can be found throughout the park, but Little Lake Trail offers easy access to an abundance of saskatoons. The berries here are some of the biggest and tastiest you'll find in all of Alberta!

In the aspen woods and saskatoon thickets, there are many different migratory birds to see. Eastern kingbirds aggressively defend their patches of territory from other species, surveying their domain from a perch and chasing off any intruder. Clay-coloured sparrows are common among the saskatoon bushes, feeding on the juicy berries. Yellow warblers, American robins, red-eyed vireos, and house finches can be seen here too. Grey catbirds occasionally emerge from the woods to wander along the trail.

The path will take you down to the viewpoint at Little Lake. Red-winged blackbirds are common in the trees and cattails along the water's edge. Keep an eye out for occasional Baltimore orioles high in the trees near the shore. The lake itself is normally populated by



species like eared grebes, American coots, redhead ducks, white-winged scoters, canvasbacks, and blue-winged teals. Keep an eye out for trumpeter swans cruising along the south shore, as well as bald eagles circling above.

Other side trails (unpaved) branch off from the main Little Lake Trail, which will lead you through the maze of saskatoon bushes and aspen groves before reconnecting at the Little Lake trail parking lot.



Sweet sweet
I'm so sweet



Bird Watching Tips

With so many different migratory birds that make Saskatoon Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary their summer home, it's good to know how and where to look for different species. Some birds can be trickier to spot than others, especially if they're small or really far away.



The best thing you can do is bring a pair of binoculars when you're travelling in and around the sanctuary. Water birds like ducks, grebes, and loons can often be hard to tell apart when they're far out on the lakes, especially in cloudy weather. Small songbirds up in the trees or off in the thick saskatoon meadows can also be hard to see clearly from such a distance. A decent pair of binoculars will get you close-ups of the natural world without disturbing the wildlife or their habitat.

Binoculars are great for more than just bird watching! They can help you get a good look at interesting insects resting on a flower or buzzing through the grass. Beautiful insects like butterflies and damselflies look all the more spectacular when seen up close. Binoculars also allow nature lovers to view larger wildlife from a safe distance, which prevents scaring the animals off or risking a dangerous encounter. When you spot a moose across a field, it's much better — and safer — to view it from a distance through binoculars. Do not approach wildlife on foot. (Remember the 100-metre rule of thumb described on page 10.)



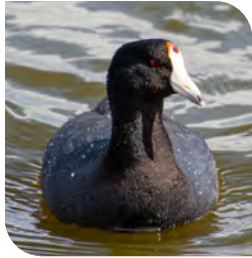
When bird watching, your ears are just as important as your eyes! Many songbirds are tricky to spot, but you can track them down by following their calls. The insect-like buzzing sounds droning from the saskatoon bushes can lead you to a clay-coloured sparrow.

High-pitched trills and sighing whistles announce the arrival of cedar waxwings. Yellow warblers sing "Sweet sweet I'm so sweet" from their perches in the trees. Learning different bird calls will make finding the birds themselves easier — listen, then look!



Saskatoon Lake Bird Watching Scavenger Hunt

Check off these birds when you see them. Note that some species are here year-round, but others migrate through at different times of year, so they may not all be here at the same time. Keep your "eagle eyes" open!



American Coot
(Check out their neat feet!)



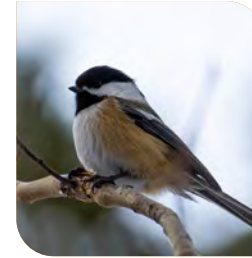
American Robin



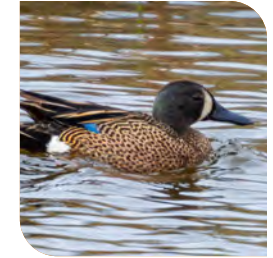
Bald Eagle



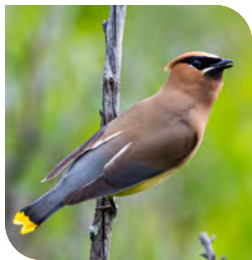
Baltimore Oriole



Black-capped Chickadee



Blue-winged Teal



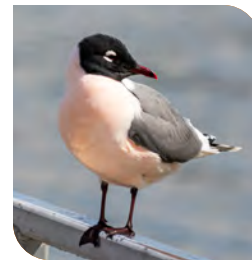
Cedar Waxwing



Clay-coloured Sparrow



Eastern Kingbird



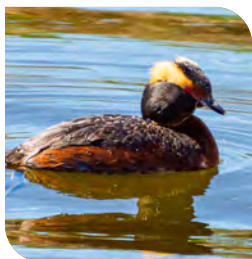
Franklin's Gull



Great Horned Owl



Greater Yellowlegs



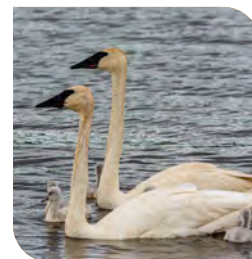
Horned Grebe



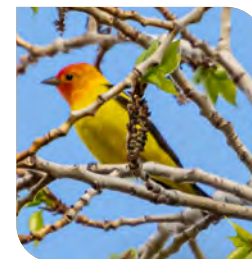
Red-winged Blackbird



Ring-billed Gull



Trumpeter Swan



Western Tanager

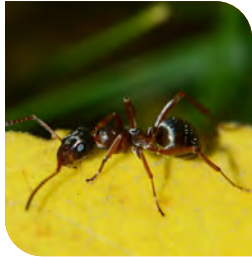


Yellow Warbler



Saskatoon Lake Bug Bingo

Insects play important roles in natural ecosystems, from pollinating plants to predated on (eating) pest insects. Check off these small but significant — and beautiful! — insects when you see them.



Ant



Bee



Beetle



Butterfly



Damsselfly



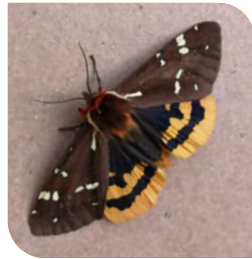
Dragonfly



Grasshopper



Ladybug



Moth



About the Author and Photographer

Nicholas Carter holds a degree in biology from the University of Alberta, and studied a diverse array of natural history topics including vertebrate zoology, ecology, and palaeontology. For almost a decade now he has been a dedicated naturalist, writer, and communicator, working in natural history interpretation at a variety of places in Alberta. He has been the Coordinator of Education at the Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum in Wembley, and an active member of the Peace Parkland Naturalists, a proud Nature Alberta member club.



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