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WETLANDS NATURE TRAIL GUIDE

LAST MOUNTAIN LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA



Canada

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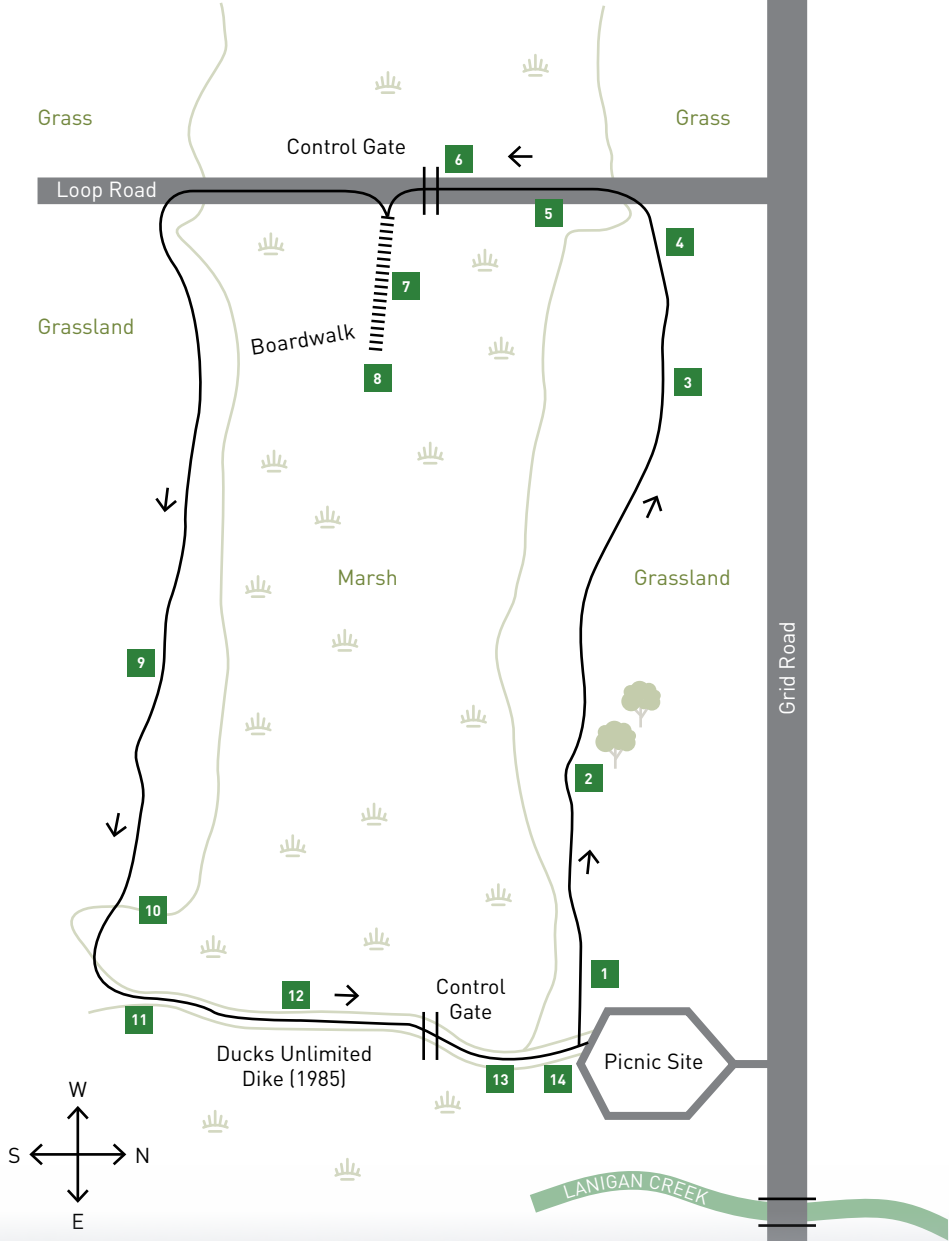
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Environment and Climate Change Canada
Public Inquiries Centre
12th Floor, Fontaine Building
200 Sacré-Coeur Boulevard
Gatineau QC K1A 0H3
Telephone: 819-938-3860
Toll Free: 1-800-668-6767 (in Canada only)
Email: ec.enviroinfo.ec@canada.ca

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1

WELCOME TO THE LAST MOUNTAIN LAKE WETLAND TRAIL

This exploration of natural and human-made wetlands follows a 2.5 km trail, and generally takes about 1.5 to 2 hours to complete. Be sure to wear sturdy shoes, and bring water on a hot day.

Wetlands are incredibly rich habitats, supporting dozens of animal and plant species that are unique to the surrounding prairie uplands. Look and listen for various bird species — you may hear them before you see them. Walk on water on the boardwalk to catch a glimpse of the activity going on below the surface.

LOOK FOR: several species of ducks and geese, American bitterns, black-crowned night herons, grebes, coots, sandpipers, avocets and other shorebirds. You may also see muskrats, mink, skunks, voles and badgers.



Muskrat

American bittern

Pelicans

SHELTER MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

This willow and aspen grove can grow here because water is more available near the wetlands.

These trees offer shelter from the constant sun and wind and provide habitat for butterflies, unique plants, and bird species. If you look closely, you will likely see a nest in every tree. Be respectful to the bird families and stay on the trail. Don't disturb the nests!

LOOK FOR: bog orchids, lady slippers, yellow swallowtail butterflies, skipper butterflies, and blue butterflies, as well as red-tailed hawks, least flycatchers, and yellow warblers.

2



Black-crowned night heron



Tiger swallowtail butterfly



Silvery Blue butterfly



Silvery Blue butterflies



Moth



3

LIFE ON
THE EDGE

Where land and water meet, wildlife is most diverse, and most active. From this spot on the trail, you can see three habitats: willow grove, open water, as well as prairie uplands.

Where wetlands shift into Prairie, there is ample cover for hiding and nesting, as well as a variety of food sources available to animals who visit. Grassland and wetland species spend time on the edge, sharing space with other species adapted specifically to these in-between zones.

LOOK FOR: upland sandpipers, clay-coloured sparrows, snowberry shrubs



Wood frog

LISTEN FOR: creaking wood frogs, the many voices of the Sora rail, the buzzing, grasshopper-like call of the Le Conte's sparrow.

4

WET AND
DRY CYCLES

Wetlands expand in wet years and contract during droughts. They hold excess water during snow melt and rain storms, which can prevent flooding in the surrounding areas. In dry years, wetlands can shrink and even dry up completely.

Prairie plants have adapted to these ebbs and flows of moisture. Some plants, such as the Western red lily, can only grow on land that is flooded occasionally. Some marsh plant seeds can only germinate during dry periods.

LOOK FOR:

Wet years: reeds, rushes, cattails.

Dry years: sedges, grasses, asters, red samphire on the salt flats, marsh buttercup.





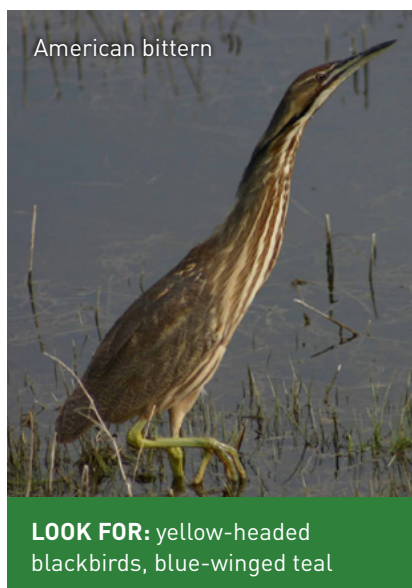
WHAT IS A WETLAND?

Wetlands are areas in a landscape that are covered in water long enough to support aquatic plants and wildlife for at least part of their life cycles. These aquatic plants and animals make up a complex system that includes microscopic creatures and plants, insects, fish, birds and mammals.

LOOK FOR: red-winged blackbirds, yellow rails, Sora rails, American bitterns, ruddy ducks



Ruddy duck



American bittern

LOOK FOR: yellow-headed blackbirds, blue-winged teal

6 DUCKS UNLIMITED CANAL

If you look closely at the marsh to the west of the road, you will see an open area of water through the reeds. This is a machine-made channel that was built in cooperation with Ducks Unlimited Canada to create habitat for ducks and geese.

You may hear the distinctive 'pumping' noise of the American bittern, which also makes use of the canal. Bitterns are sometimes known as 'slough pumps' for their distinctive call. Check out the view from the platform facing east. How many species of waterfowl can you see?

DIVERS AND DABLERS (ON THE BOARDWALK)

Have you ever seen a duck flip upside-down, so that its head is underwater and its tail is sticking up in the air? They are stirring up the mud on the bottom with their bills, probing for worms and other creepy-crawlies to eat — a feeding method known as ‘dabbling’.

Mallards, gadwalls, teals, pintails and shovelers are dabbling ducks.

Other ducks are divers, disappearing under the water’s surface and feeding in deeper water. Instead of digging up worms, they pursue swimming prey. Divers include ruddy ducks, canvasbacks, redheads, lesser scaup and ring-necked ducks.

7



Pintail mallard and Swans

CAN YOU SPOT DIVERS OR DABLERS?

They will not use the same wetland at the same time. In wet years, you will see more divers because the water is deeper. In dry years, before the area becomes a mud flat, dabblers will feed in the shallows.

8



Children playing with leech from the murky bottom

LOOK FOR: Phalaropes – they swim in circles to produce a “tornado” of water that sucks up worms and other invertebrates from the bottom, so they can snatch them up for lunch.

HIDDEN WORLD (ALSO ON THE BOARDWALK)

Peek over the edge of the boardwalk at the life underwater. Besides the swimming insects that are easy to see, there are even more hidden in the mud at the bottom of the wetland, and millions that are too small to see without a microscope.

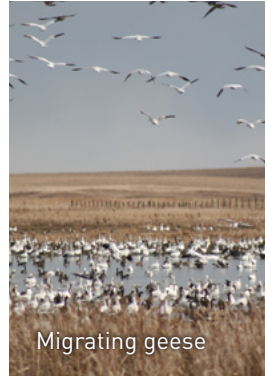
Shorebirds wade through shallow water and along the muddy edges, using their long, sensitive beaks to dig up morsels from the muddy bottom. The plants and animals in the water, under the mud, and at the water’s edge are a smorgasbord for waterfowl.

9

WELCOME TO “NORTH AMERICA’S DUCK FACTORY”

The Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area (NWA) and Migratory Bird Sanctuary (MBS) are located on the central flyway from South America to the Arctic. Millions of birds pass through here on their annual spring and fall migrations. Thousands of birds from 120 species also stop to nest here.

DID YOU KNOW? Prairie wetlands are the nursery for 70% of North America’s waterfowl.



Migrating geese

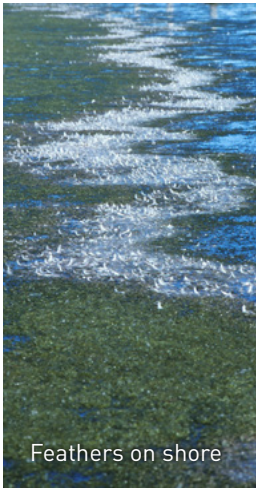
10

FEATHERS, FEATHERS, EVERYWHERE

Sometimes a pile of feathers is a sign that a fox or coyote caught a bird for its lunch. But most of the time, especially in the spring or fall, a large pile of feathers means that several birds are going through their spring or fall moult.

Shortly after nesting season, in late summer or early fall, most ducks will lose their flight feathers, including males’ bright breeding plumage, and replace them with basic plumage. In late winter or early spring, some ducks moult again, replacing their body feathers. This is the time when males grow back their bright breeding plumage.

DID YOU KNOW? Ducks can’t fly when they moult their flight feathers. The dense grasses at the water’s edge are the perfect hiding spot for flightless, molting ducks.



Feathers on shore

LOOK FOR: a white farmhouse and red barn with a green roof in the distance — the refurbished remnant of a homestead that was purchased by Last Mountain Lake NWA during the purchase of the NWA in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Barn at LML NWA





Dry marsh

LOOK FOR: clues to the type of year and season the wetland is experiencing. Is the grass green or brown? Are there mudflats or deep ponds?

THE WINDS (AND RAINS) OF CHANGE

From this location on the trail, you can see the variety of habitats available along the wetland trail. There are grassy uplands, areas of open water, as well as rushes and cattails by the river.

In any given year, fluctuations in snow-melt and rainfall will shift the edges of these habitats. Heavy snow years and late spring storms can cause flooding. Summer rains keep the creeks flowing, but in dry years, they may stop flowing as early as May. By late summer, the shallow marshes can dry up and waterfowl will move to the lake.

Many of the plants along the water's edge are adapted to wet and dry cycles. Cattails, rushes, reeds and sedges need to dry out occasionally in order to stay healthy.

IT'S ALL HABITAT!

Are you looking out from the trail at all the habitat 'out there'? Habitat is everywhere — even the mown grass on the trails beneath your feet is its own ecosystem, and encourages different plants to grow.

Many plants on the mown trail are native grassland plants, such as the pygmyflower, wheatgrasses, and other rare plants such as Grape Ferns. You may also see holes dug into the sides of the trail. Badgers dig these holes to get at ground squirrels and pocket gophers that live underground. Almost every location is habitat for someone!



Ruddy turnstones on rocks

13

WETLAND
NURSERY

North America's Duck Factory creates thousands and thousands of goslings and ducklings. If you visit in the spring, chances are good that you will see chains of ducklings following their parents on an outing.

This area on the trail offers especially good cover for nesting areas, as well as open water for young ducks to try out their swimming skills. The tall grasses and reeds protect them from land predators, but there is still the risk of being ambushed from below by a large Northern pike.

LOOK FOR: Goslings in a large group, called a crèche. One parent of a group of two or three families will watch all the youngsters, essentially babysitting while the other adults are feeding.

14

130 YEARS OF
CONSERVATION

2017 marked the 130th year of the Last Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary (MBS). It is the oldest bird sanctuary in North America.

As you sit and rest and take in the views of the wetlands, think about how badly waterfowl and other birds need to rest and recover from their migration up from South and Central America. Wetlands are crucial resting and feeding sites on long migrations. The lesser golden plover, for example, nests in the high Arctic islands and winters in Argentina — an annual flight of 30,000km.



Raft of snow geese and American coots.

MIGRATION STATISTICS

During the peak of migration you may see as many as:

40,000 sandhill cranes

500,000 geese

100s of thousands of ducks

Flocks of shorebirds wheeling together like schools of fish in the sky

Sandhill crane



15

NATURE'S WATER FILTER

This wetland may look quiet and peaceful, but there's more going on than meets the eye. This system of plants, water and sediments is hard at work filtering pollutants and toxins that flow into the wetland from the surrounding area. Undisturbed wetlands can transform polluted water into life-sustaining clean water with no other inputs than the sun's energy.

Saskatchewan loses 2% of our natural wetlands every year. They are a critical part of the natural system, and provide invaluable services, such as filtering water and preventing floods and erosion.



Vegetation water filter



DU water control



Control berm

16

DUCKS UNLIMITED BERMS ALONG LANIGAN CREEK

The berms that you have been walking along are water control structures that were built by Ducks Unlimited 40 years ago. At that time, conservation practices included giving nature 'a helping hand' to promote diversity and keep wetland water levels at ideal heights for waterfowl.

Since then, we have learned more about the effects of manipulating the landscape. We know now that natural fluctuations in water levels from year to year are important for the biodiversity of plants and animals that waterfowl eat and use for nesting. It is possible that in future years, the berms will be removed, and water levels will be allowed to return to their natural ebb and flow.

Floodwater dyke

