

# BIRDS of a FEATHER

Designated parks, river bank, best places for birding

STORY AND PHOTOS BY AMANDA BROWN

**L**OOK CLOSELY. If you're lucky, you might see the lesser-spotted birdwatcher digging for its field guide and dusting off binoculars. Welcome to a new episode of Okotokian Birdwatcher.

As it starts to warm up outside, many of our feathered friends will be winging their way back to habitats right here in Okotoks. The outskirts of town host some excellent opportunities to spot a variety of wildlife and there are a couple of natural spaces on the outer edges of town that are especially suited to year-round bird watching.

Jim Graham Park is owned by Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) and comprises 29.9 acres of natural habitat bordering the southern banks of the Sheep River north of the Southbank Business Park (Costco, et al). Vice-president

of the Okotoks & District Fish and Game Association (ODFGA), Patrick McKnight is passionate about this particular wetland and wildlife area and offers some history, "Jim Graham was a sportsman, a conservationist and past president of the Okotoks & District Fish and Game club. He was passionate about nature and did his part to provide a home for the birds and animals, and an opportunity for people to enjoy them."

The ODFGA, in partnership with Ducks Unlimited, BURNSWEST, and AESRD, has been steward of Jim Graham Park since 1988. It's been active in the park and in the community. McKnight elaborates, "we have provided two bird houses to schools in Okotoks, one with a camera in it so students can study birds very closely as they build their nest and hatch their young... We are in the process of building a few bat houses to >>



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Beatrice  
Wyndham

decrease the mosquito population in the area. We have wood duck and mallard nests to install in and around Jim Graham Park. We've also been looking at building nest boxes for other species of birds."

The park is accessible from the 32nd Street Bridge via the path on the south bank of the Sheep River. Enthusiasts are asked to observe the birdlife from the sanctuary's boundary fence and to keep dogs leashed at all times.

Okotoks is host to a great variety of birds. Songbirds such as the black-capped chickadee, bohemian waxwing, cedar waxwing, yellow warbler, and common redpoll are all inhabitants. Birds of prey include the spectacular bald eagle along with hawks and owls such as the great horned owl. There is a multitude of waterfowl species, and heron species can also be sighted.

Beatrice Wyndham Park is in the northeast part of town and west of the Air Ranch airstrip. Birds of the fixed wing and feathered varieties coexist to form another of the town's best wildlife viewing spots. The 17-acre park has an elevated viewing deck that overlooks a ten-acre pond with two small islands that serve as oases, particularly for waterfowl. It's accessible by two paved pathways, one of which leads to the viewing platform. Visitors can take in the views from one of a number of picnic tables on the site.

The park was named after Beatrice Wyndham, daughter of pioneer Colonel Alfred Wyndham whose family came and settled in Okotoks in 1910. Christa Michailuck, parks manager at the Town, says, "Council formally adopted the name Beatrice Wyndham for the park on June 9, 2008." Students at Dr. Morris Gibson School chose the park's namesake in a competition to decide its title. The park is

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open from 5 – 11 p.m. year round.

Okotoks doesn't currently have a bird watching club, but that could change at any time. Might we expect to see the lesser-spotted birdwatcher evolve to become a more common variety? Only time will tell. **OL**



Patrick  
McKnight  
talks with  
fellow bird  
watcher  
at Jim  
Graham  
Park

Birdwatchers in  
Jim Graham Park

