

Bird Sensitive Habitat

Within Medicine Hat City Limits

- 1. Strathcona Island Park** – The undeveloped areas of this park are host to several species of birds, some of which are uncommon or rare in Medicine Hat. The park area between the pavilion and Hwy 41A along the two creeks is especially sensitive. This is one of only 3 known areas within the city that Yellow-Breasted Chats nest. Also nesting along the creek are uncommon Lazuli Buntings. These can be found all along Seven Persons Creek as far as Kin Coulee Park, though not in Kin Coulee Park itself which has too much intensive human use. The river cliffs that rise above Strathcona Island Park also host nests for Prairie Falcons and Turkey Vultures as well as a colony of Violet-Green Swallows. This is the only known nesting site for these swallows within Medicine Hat city limits. There is another colony of this swallow species that nest in the vicinity of Echo Dale Park. Otherwise they are uncommon in our area. Say's Phoebe also nest on these cliffs, the only known place in Medicine Hat area besides the cliffs below Redcliff. The cottonwood forest of Strathcona Park is important nesting habitat for Baltimore Orioles, Least Flycatchers, Western Wood Peewees, Tree Swallows, several woodpecker species, Brown Thrashers (not common in Alberta), House Wrens, Yellow Warblers, both species of Nuthatches and occasionally some owl species. Red-Tailed Hawks and American Kestrels also breed in this park most years. The cottonwood forest of this park also has been used as an overnight roosting area for large flocks of Turkey Vultures and migrating Broad-Winged Hawks.

- 2. Police Point Park** – This park is the crown jewel for birding in Medicine Hat and all of Southeastern Alberta. This is one of only 3 nesting sites for the Yellow-Breasted Chat in Medicine Hat. Also, for the past several years this park and adjacent appropriate habitat has been home to Southeastern Alberta's only known family of Pileated Woodpeckers, the largest woodpecker in North America. They need large mature cottonwood trees for their nesting needs. Besides being a breeding site for close to a hundred species of birds, Police Point Park is an important staging area for migrating birds in spring and fall. The Saskatoon and chokecherry shrubs of this park are an important food source for migrating birds in the fall. This park is one of the most reliable places for birders to find Brown Thrashers, Spotted Towhees and several other species of birds that are often not found in other parts of Alberta. Our location at the eastern edge of the province accounts for this situation. In the past two decades this park has been under a lot of pressure because of sewage line construction which has impacted sensitive habitat. The cottonwood forest of Police Point Park is one of the largest along the South Saskatchewan River and needs to be preserved at all costs. Space does not permit identifying all the species of birds that rely on this habitat. Suffice it to say it is critically important and more information can be provided if necessary.

- 3. Riparian Habitat Within City Limits** – This includes all natural habitat along the South Saskatchewan River, and all our creeks. The tangles below the private property homes of the South Saskatchewan River are important for both local breeding species of birds and important for bird migration. Many species of birds follow river edges because the habitat along river edges contain necessary food for successful migration in spring and fall. Some of this riparian habitat has been lost due to creation of rip-rap for flood control. While this may be necessary in some limited situations, we need to be aware that this is also loss of important wildlife habitat. Also, some river-side home owners have cleared their cottonwood forest in order to gain a view of the river. This should be discouraged as it destroy important riparian habitat. It should be noted that our river habitat is important for such species as Bald Eagles (who nest in city limits), Osprey who stage here during migration, and Great Blue Herons who have the only large rookery in Southeastern Alberta across from the Ranchlands area. This rookery is extremely sensitive and should be protected at all costs. Close to a hundred herons live in this rookery every summer. Our river is also an important feeding area for White Pelicans, Common Mergansers and various duck species. At one time Medicine Hat hosted southeastern Alberta's only population of Wood Ducks but in recent years they have disappeared, possibly because of the loss of some of the biggest and oldest cottonwood trees in Police Point Park.
- 4. Various city ponds** – Medicine Hat has numerous ponds some of which are man-made. These can be important habitat for birds if natural vegetation is permitted to grow around the edges. For example the small pond in Kin Coulee Park and at the foot of Ajax Coulee has hosted breeding Canvasback Ducks, Mallards, Common Yellowthroat Warblers, Red-Winged Blackbirds, Song Sparrows and Marsh Wrens. The same is true of the pond at Medicine Hat College. The pond in Strathcona Island Park has limited suitable water's edge habitat but last year it hosted a Common Goldeneye Duck which successfully raised at least 9 ducklings. This was likely the only Goldeneye Duck breeding in southeastern Alberta. This species typically breeds in northern forests.
- 5. Echo Dale Park** – Though this park is an intensive use park and has much human activity, as the park has matured it has become increasingly important for birdlife. The strip of cottonwood and willow forest along the river has been important for Kingbirds, Orioles, Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, Song Sparrows, and occasional Lazuli Buntings. The cliffs opposite the park are also home to uncommon species such as Rock Wrens, Say's Phoebe and Violet-Green Swallows. The river often hosts the uncommon Caspian Tern at this location, along with Common Terns and White Pelicans. Echo Dale Park is also probably the best place in Southeastern Alberta to observe the uncommon Lark Sparrow. It should also be noted that the less used part of Echo Dale behind the hills is a hidden gem and hosts a significant population of Common Nighthawks during the months of June, July and August. Echo Dale has now become the only reliable place near Medicine Hat to find this declining species. Police Point Park formerly hosted at least one pair but no longer seems to.

- 6. Medicine Hat's Coulee Slopes** – Our city is blessed with much natural habitat within city limits and much of this habitat is contained in our coulees. The slopes of these hillsides are important bird habitat. They provide cover for a large population of Ring-Necked Pheasants that live within the city. The rare Indigo Bunting has frequented these slopes in some years. The slope above Seven Persons Creek and Saratoga Park is home to only the third known location of nesting Yellow-Breasted Chats in our city. The only known nesting location of Rock Wrens in our city has been on the slope below the South-West Hill as well as on the cliffs opposite Police Point Park.
- 7. Natural Wetlands Should Be Preserved** – The loss of natural wetlands due to development and agricultural activities is an increasing concern in our world. These natural marshy wetlands act as a purifying agent to our water resources as well as habitat for wildlife. It seems that Medicine Hat may have missed an opportunity to preserve a lovely small wetland on 13th Ave. S.E. at the southern edge of the city. I believe it was being fed water from nearby irrigation ditches which for years created a small marsh that acted as a breeding ground for ducks, coots, rails, marsh wrens, Red-Winged and Yellow-Headed Blackbirds, herons, and several other species. I believe a developer has taken over this property and allowed the wetland to dry up. In Winnipeg I have seen this city preserve such wetlands and turn them into nature preserves surrounded by residential development. The nature preserve has walking trails, park benches and viewing stands to observe wildlife. They become desirable and popular places to live close to. We have other wetlands just south of the city that could provide opportunities to create lovely public areas. I hope somebody has an eye on these. They should be protected in some way. In our dry corner of the province we have too few such wet areas and they are very important for wildlife to live and for people to enjoy.

Submitted by Phil Horch