

AWA Lakeland Bird and Orchid Trip

By Chip Scialfa & Eileen Ford

American Avocets
PHOTO: © T. MACCAGNO

A photograph of two American Avocets wading in shallow water. The birds have distinctive red heads and necks, black wings with white stripes, and long, thin bills. They are standing in clear, shallow water that reflects their forms. The background is a bright, clear blue sky.

This past June a diverse group of AWA members, united by their curiosity and love of the outdoors, headed north to the boreal forest near Lac La Biche for a weekend get-away. They spent two days meandering through fens looking for unusual orchids, scanning treetops and wetlands for wood warblers and other species, and enjoying time together in the great Albertan outdoors.

More than a dozen people gathered at the campground at Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park on a Friday evening. That night Carolyn Campbell



Left:
Scanning the tranquil waters of Shaw Lake for some of the many bird species that call the boreal forest home.

PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL

Right:
Small Round-leaved orchid in Garner Fen.

PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL



distributed an extremely well-organized itinerary for the weekend. Carolyn, along with Madeline Wilson and Chip Scialfa, had spent Friday scouting the Park for resident birds. They were surprised at the generally low level of activity but were encouraged by the beckoning calls of ovenbirds and Tennessee warblers. They were thrilled to see an osprey family hunting over the lake. On Friday night the group spent a bit of time talking about the birds we might expect to see or hear the next day. They also compared field guides and, just before retiring, enjoyed an impromptu songfest led by Brian, a local resident, environmental activist, and guitarist extraordinaire.

Dawn on Saturday brought a bit of rain but, by 6 a.m. when the birding preparations began, the skies had cleared and a light breeze helped to keep the ravenous mosquitoes at bay. We spent the morning walking a few small trails and the road into the campground and, truth be told, the bird life was rather underwhelming. This was not a complete surprise. Although almost two dozen breeding warblers had been reported in the Park, Alberta's boreal forest is at the very edge of the breeding range for many sought-after species. Because the spring had been cold and wet, it is possible that many of the birds simply could not migrate this far. Or perhaps we were witnessing the cumulative impact of global warming and deforestation in wintering grounds in Central and South America. That being said, we did get wonderful looks at a male Blackburnian warbler (*Dendroica fusca*), along with the more common yellow-rumped warblers (*Dendroica coronata*), brown creeper (*Certhia Americana*), and ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) on the nest.

Toward mid-day, after a nourishing

meal, we drove to the village of Plamondon where we met Aaron Davies, our local orchid guide. At least 16 species of orchids are found in the Lac La Biche/Lakeland area. Aaron led us to the Garner Fen just outside the village. This fen is a little-known area home to some of the most delicate, beautiful orchids in the boreal forest. There, with the help of Eileen Ford, we trod along soggy game trails with our heads down and our eyes vigilantly seeking out the fen's floral treasures. Our efforts were rewarded handsomely. We chanced upon small round-leaved orchid (*Amerorchis rotundifolia*) with its magenta-dotted labella, the tiny-bloomed pale coralroot (*Corallorhiza trifida*), an abundance of blunt-leaved bog orchid (*Habenaria obtusata*) and northern twayblade (*Listera boreale*). The sparrow's egg lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium passerinum*) had yet to show its little white "egg." We were also lucky enough to get a good look at a gigantic white birch that is a runner-up for the largest recorded birch tree in the province.

We spent Sunday morning birding some wetland areas outside of Lac La Biche. While roadside birding is not the most pleasant aesthetically, water always means more birds. The group got good looks at a variety of ducks including the ring-necked duck (*Aythya collaris*). We also saw three tern species, a marsh wren (*Cistothorus palustris*), and, perhaps the biggest treat of the day, a pair of sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) feeding in a farmer's field on the way to Lakeland Provincial Park and Recreation Area.

Lakeland Provincial Park and Recreation Area was created in 1992 and is being proposed as a tourism magnet under the evolving Land-use Framework regional plan. It consists of more than

58,000 hectares of lakes and mixed-woods boreal forest and is a migratory resting point or breeding home to more than 200 species of birds. It is also the site of the only recognized canoeing circuit in Alberta, a multi-day route requiring some route finding and a few lengthy portages; it offers the promise of peaceful paddling in a truly magical land.

Lakeland is a botanist's dream world. Its mixed woods are a haven for a huge variety of plant life and, thus, all other forms of life. Walking the trails on the northern edge of Shaw Lake, we stumbled upon a thick groundcover of the cauliflower head lichen (*Cladina stellaris*), the dried stems of Indian Pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*), and a variety of mushrooms. Oyster mushroom (*Pleurotis ostreatus*) was the subject of innumerable digital shots. The odour of witches broom had us searching the surrounding pines for their sickly yellowish growth.

But plants weren't the only cause for excitement. On our reconnaissance two days earlier, we had seen a black bear sow with her young, feeding near the lakeshore and on Sunday we found plenty of evidence that bears were around. We stopped frequently to catch glimpses of the ovenbirds (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) and a single Connecticut warbler (*Oporornis agilis*) calling from the aspens.

All too soon, our trip came to an end. The six-hour drive back to Calgary was, in contrast to our weekend in the woods, a concrete disappointment. I'm sure that everyone wished they could have stayed another few days to explore this wonderful region. Hopefully, with continued efforts of organizations such as the AWA, we will be able to enjoy such treasures for many years to come. ▲