

Elizabeth Hall wetland
The Conservator
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Mayor Bob Tarleck has a favorite escape from the rigors of running the bustling city of Lethbridge in southern Alberta.

His Worship is a regular visitor to the Elizabeth Hall wetland, a peaceful 36-acre nature reserve tucked away in an old river channel of the Oldman River beside busy Highway 3, southern Alberta's main east-west thoroughfare linking the southern prairies, foothills and Rocky Mountains.

"It is one of the treasures of our urban parks system," says Tarleck.

At this park on the west side of the city of 73,000 people, he and thousands of other visitors can enjoy a natural oasis bristling with beavers, muskrats, waterfowl, shore birds, turtles and many other species.

"As we become more involved in the rhythm of city life, we sometimes lose a connection with nature and with ourselves," Tarleck notes.

"The parks system in Lethbridge in general serves the purpose of reconnecting people with the environment, and the (Elizabeth Hall) wetland does this particularly well."

Named after an ardent local naturalist and alderman who died in 1987 at age 63, the floodplain wetland offers a diverse mix of habitat in its marsh, pond, grassy slopes, cottonwood trees and the meandering Oldman River.

Elizabeth Carol Hall loved sharing her passion and knowledge of nature with Brownies, Girl Guides and school children. It's fitting that the wetland named in her honor is a first-rate natural classroom.

In spring and summer, red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds flit among the cattails while serenading visitors with their distinctive songs. Look closely and you might spot orioles in the nearby trees.

Killdeer and other shorebirds haunt the pond edges, searching for food and offering photo ops for bird watchers armed with binoculars and spotting scopes. In spring, large white tundra swans stop here on their northerly migration.

Mallards and other duck species are common visitors. Canada geese stay year-round on the river and oxbow pond.

In summer, especially on hot and sunny days, western painted turtles are commonly seen sunning on logs in the pond. This is one of the few places in Alberta where these turtles are found.

The pond is home to a host of insects, including caddisflies, mayflies, dragonflies, water boatmen, diving beetles, fisher spiders and water striders.

Visitors can stroll around a two-kilometre trail. It normally takes about 40 minutes, depending on how often they stop to savor the natural delights. A viewing blind is a perfect spot to watch the birds and other wildlife.

True to its namesake's interest in nature education, visitors can attend scheduled nature walks organized by the nearby Helen Schuler Coulee Centre. About 500 local Grade 5 students study pond life as part of their curriculum. It's also a popular area for birdwatchers and people to just enjoy a nature walk.

"The park is easy to access and user friendly, so everyone can have an opportunity to get out and appreciate nature," says the centre's Shawna Cook.

An integral link in the city's river valley parks system, Elizabeth Hall is in an area free of housing or other developments. Its closest neighbor is a small eight-hole golf course.

The wetland is a natural fit for Ducks Unlimited, which has assisted with the park's infrastructure, educational components and redesign.

"From a wildlife and conservation perspective, the intrinsic value of the wetlands is important locally, supplying quiet water areas for waterfowl, waterbirds and other wildlife," says Don Watson, DU's head of habitat retention in Alberta.

Although most visitors are locals, the wetland makes a perfect stopping-off point for Highway 3 travelers seeking to stretch their legs, have a picnic lunch and savor a natural interlude.

To reach it, exit off Highway 3 onto Highway 3A on Lethbridge's west side, and follow the signs.

For More Information Contact:

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