

Where to go: Quill Lakes
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Spring and fall are magical seasons at Quill Lakes in central Saskatchewan.

In those two seasons, the internationally famous birding area -- comprised of Big Quill, Little Quill and Mud lakes -- jointly conjures up a magnificent and powerful display of waterfowl that draws visitors from around the world.

This natural spectacle never fails to amaze no matter how many times it's witnessed.

"My strongest memory is the sight and sound of thousands of waterfowl lifting off the marsh all at once only a few yards in front of me," says Chuck Deschamps, who has worked in the area as a Ducks Unlimited Canada biologist for 15 years.

"They make so much noise with their wings that it's like thunder."

Locals like to say Quill Lakes boasts more incoming flights than the airports at Los Angeles and Miami combined. That's probably not much of a stretch.

The lakes host more than one million birds -- from 300-plus species -- each year. In spring and fall migrations, the area is a resting stop for more than 200,000 shorebirds, 400,000 ducks, 130,000 snow geese, 80,000 Canada geese and 40,000 sandhill cranes.

Last fall, Quill Lakes received considerable media attention after hunters shot three geese combining the features of both snow and Canada geese.

The lakes are home to breeding colonies of American white pelicans, western grebes, eared grebes, black crowned night herons and endangered species such as the piping plover (25 per cent of Canada's piping plovers nest here), and migrating whooping cranes and peregrine falcons. Year-round wild residents include white-tailed and mule deer, red fox, badger, coyote, muskrat and beaver.

Located halfway between Saskatoon and Yorkton, just north of the Yellowhead Highway, Quill Lakes are internationally recognized for being one of the most important wetlands in Canada.

They were first recognized as a wetland of global importance in 1971 with their designation as a Ramsar site. In 1985, they were given protection as a Saskatchewan Heritage Marsh, followed nine years later with their designation as an international and endangered species Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve. In 1995, Quill Lakes were declared an accredited watchable wildlife area and three years later were named Saskatchewan's first Important Birding Area.

DU has been involved in the area since the 1940's, working to enhance and restore wetlands with water control structures. DU programs have helped ranchers seed cultivated land to hayland and pasture, assisted government to implement grazing systems on large community pastures, helped farmers seed winter cereals and conserved native prairie grasslands through purchase and conservation easements.

DU also initiated a series of self-drive viewing guides through its Nature Watch program, and helped the communities of Wynyard, Wadena and Foam Lake establish the Quill Lakes International Bird Area. It consists of a series of viewing areas, nature centres and a large interpretive centre. (Check out www.quill-lakes-bird-area.com).

Birders and hunters from around the globe flock to the Quill Lakes. The town of Wadena hosts hunter appreciation suppers each fall to welcome non-resident hunters. Each spring, the town of Foam Lake holds a Nature Day while Wadena hosts a Shorebird and Friends Festival. Both events are aimed at educating people about wetlands and waterfowl.

A popular access point to Quill Lakes is at the Wadena Wildlife Wetlands, on the shore of Little Quill Lake. Part of the Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve, the site features trails, boardwalks, canoe launch and observation towers and platforms.

The town of Foam Lake has developed self-guided viewing sites within the Foam Lake Heritage Marsh, a 1,619-hectare prairie wetland managed by DU. The marsh is considered one of the best habitats for nesting waterfowl in Western Canada.

Local resident Shelley Thoen-Chaykoski was instrumental in getting the Quill Lakes International Bird Area established and developing the Heritage Marsh viewing area and nature centre.

“The wetlands in the Quills Birding Area are a passion for me,” notes Thoen-Chaykoski, who works as Foam Lake’s leisure services director.

When they were dating in the early 1980’s, Thoen-Chaykoski and her husband-to-be used to go bird watching and hunting together at the Foam Lake Marsh. Their love for each other and the marsh blossomed.

“You get the feeling that these wetlands really are the main hub of our ecosystem and lives,” she says.

To Thoen-Chaykoski, the area’s success can be attributed to a multi-generational spirit of cooperation, dating back to the Icelandic pioneers who settled the area and the Europeans who followed. That cooperative spirit continued with the three main towns and various key organizations, including DU, working together to showcase this vital area.

“Nothing feels better than achievement through working together,” adds Thoen-Chaykoski.

Who to Contact:

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