

# Whistler Birding Guide 2018



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## Alta Lake – Lorimer Road to Rainbow Park

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### Introduction

Alta Lake is one of Whistler's best birding areas. This description follows the route of the Whistler Naturalists monthly bird walk, which is a 1,500 metre walk along the Valley Trail that starts at the bottom of Lorimer Road and finishes at Rainbow Park. In summer, it's best to go early in the day since Rainbow Park is a popular park and beach. In winter, the trail is groomed for cross-country skiing, so going on skis is another possibility. It is also permitted to walk on the groomed trail in winter.

Once you reach Rainbow Park, you will find the original cabins that were part of the Whistler's first lodge, Rainbow Lodge, built by Myrtle and Alex Philip in 1914. Many people are surprised to hear that fifty years before ski lifts arrived, Whistler was already a resort and known for fantastic fishing and summer fun.

Over time, Rainbow Lodge grew to over 45 buildings, including a general store, post office, stables and cabins. The small community of Alta Lake grew with the lodge, becoming a major summer destination. Rainbow Lodge guests enjoyed swimming, hiking, horseback riding, tennis, boating and fishing. These cabins are all that remain and have been moved from their original location by the lake.

### Directions

By car from Whistler Village: Take Highway 99 north to Lorimer Road and turn west (away from Whistler Village). Lorimer Road dead ends at the Valley trail; park here either at the dead end or along the side of the road. Take the Valley Trail from here to Rainbow Park.

By foot or bike from Whistler Village: Take the Valley Trail that starts at the Whistler Golf Course Club House to the end or Lorimer Road (head north/right from the Club House). Another way is to take the Valley Trail along Lorimer Road to the bottom of the hill. Take the Valley Trail from here to Rainbow Park.

When finished this birding route, from Rainbow Park you can return the same way or continue to Creekside. To get to Creekside, cross the railway tracks to the road, go left along the road (Alta Lake Road) for 1,200 metres until you come to the continuation of the Valley Trail to Creekside that heads towards the lake. Continue south until you reach Creekside/Nita Lake.

If you go back the way you came to Lorimer Road and then continue north on the Valley Trail, crossing the river and railroad tracks, you will end up at Meadow Park and Green Lake.

## **Bird Species**

Before setting out have a look over the bridge at the River of Golden Dreams for **Dippers**, not there in summer but a good find in other seasons. Then back to take the trail to Rainbow Park (direction is signposted). The Valley Trail follows the River of Golden Dreams with a marsh on the other side so the whole route is good for a variety of species. The lack of bird feeders in Whistler (because they are bear attractants) makes winter birding scant, but until the lake freezes over one can expect **ducks, Loons, Grebes, and Trumpeter Swans**. Best seen from the lookout platform about 2/3 of the way there.

Check the trees as well for our smaller birds, **chickadees, Chestnut-backed** mostly, **Kinglets** and **Jay's**. During migration and in summer, **warblers** and **Warbling Vireos**. **Song sparrows** like the marsh and water's edge, as do **Yellow Warblers** and **Common Yellowthroats**. In Spring watch overhead for migrating **swift** and **raptors**. **Spotted Sandpipers** and **Killdeer** can be seen along the beach before it gets busy.

**Yellow** and **Common Yellowthroats** like the marsh. A **Merlin** can frequent the area, the **Osprey** may fish here, and **Bald Eagles** can check out the ducks. **Swallows** fly over the lake and **Red-wing Blackbirds** nest in the cattails below the lookout platform.

*Written by Heather Baines, 2018*

## Green Lake – including Nicklaus North Golf Course and the Fitzsimmons Delta

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### **Introduction**

The area alongside the shore of Green Lake, north of the Whistler Village, is a great place for birding. It includes the paved paths throughout the Nicklaus North Golf Course (which includes a riparian area), the River of Golden Dreams, Fitzsimmons Creek and Delta and open views of Green Lake. The valley trail runs from the Whistler Village to the shore of Green Lake just past the Nicklaus North Golf Clubhouse, where you have a choice of heading north along the shore of the lake for a few hundred metres to the outlet and delta of the Fitzsimmons Creek, or a paved path and boardwalk heading south along the lake shore and the River of Golden Dreams. The trail along the lake also borders Nicholas North Golf Course and if it is closed to golfing for the season and they are not using the paths for cross country skiing, you can walk the paved golf course trails on the north side of Highway 99 and use the underpass to get to the south section of the course.

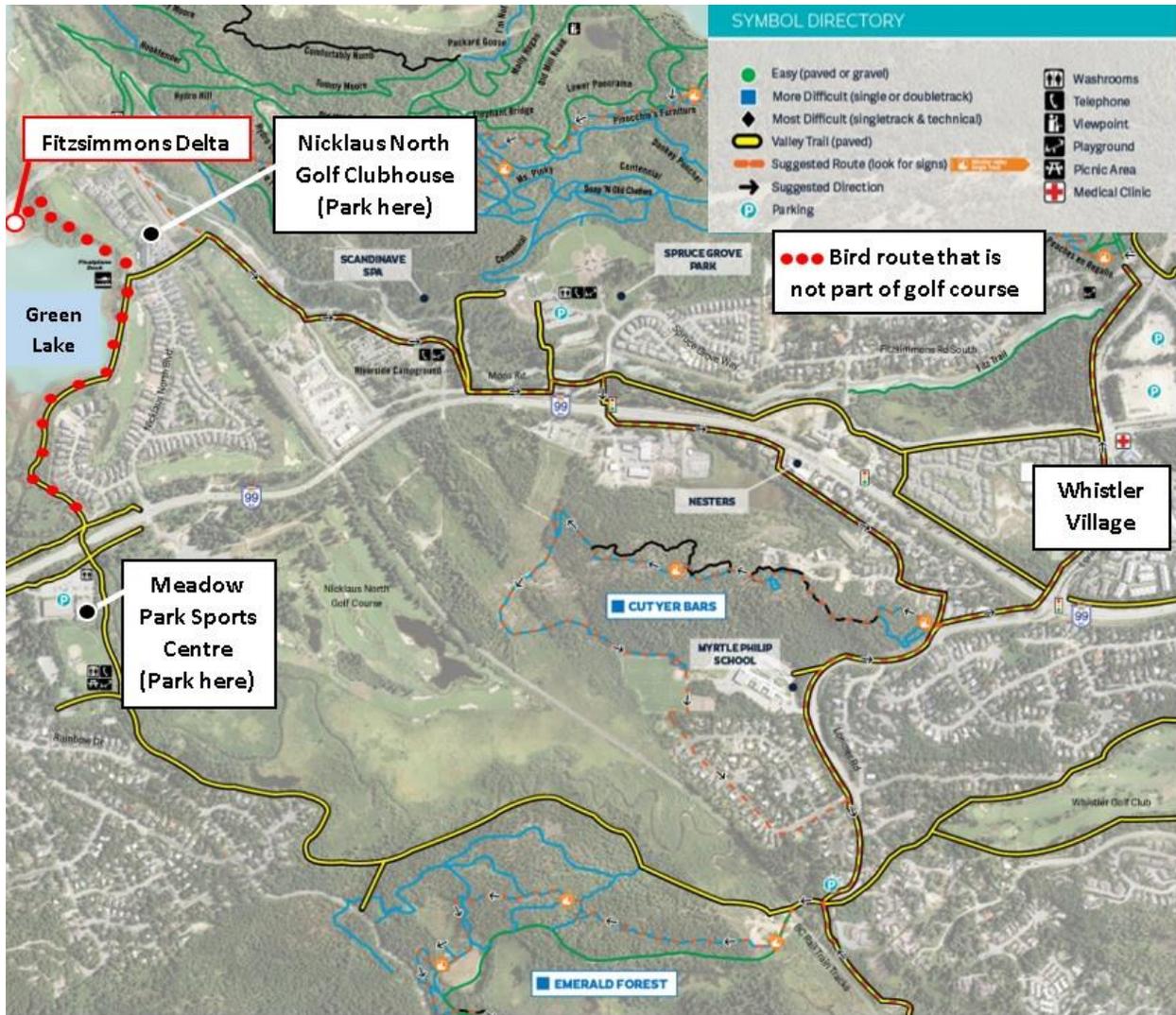
The Valley Trail can also be accessed from the Meadow Park Recreational Facility.

### **Directions**

By car from Whistler Village: Follow Highway 99 north to Meadow Park (west side of the highway) to access the Valley Trail. Another option is to Follow Highway 99 north to Nicklaus North Boulevard (east side of highway) and follow to park at the Nicklaus North Golf Clubhouse. The Clubhouse is a great place for breakfast or lunch at their 'Table 19 Lakeside Eatery' but only open seasonally so check website.

By foot or bike from Whistler Village: Follow the Valley Trail north to Meadow Park or Green Lake.

From Meadow Park follow the Valley Trail south to Nicholas North Boulevard—cross Highway 99 at the traffic lights—and follow Valley Trail along River of Golden Dreams to Green Lake.



## **Bird Species** (depending upon the season)

The path along the shore of Green Lake is excellent for looking for such species as **swans, geese, diving ducks, loons** and **grebes**. During the summer there are four species of **swallows** flying over the lake and the brush along the lake shore is good for **Blackbirds** and **warblers**. The Fitzsimmons Delta also has good views of the lake and is one of the best places in Whistler to view shore birds such as **Spotted Sandpiper** and **Killdeer** during the summer. The deciduous forest along the path to the delta is good for **warblers** and other **forest birds**. The golf course has good forest, open grassy areas and large ponds which are also good for **ducks**.

### Green Lake

**Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, Scaup, Trumpeter Swan, American Coot, Common Loon, Western Grebe, Horned and Red-necked Grebe, Swallows**



Trumpeter Swans



American Coots

### Fitzsimmons Delta

**Killdeer, American Pipit, Least and Western Sandpipers, American Dipper, Spotted Sandpiper**



Killdeer



American Dipper

Nicklaus North Golf Course

**Ring-neck Duck, Hooded Merganser, Red-winged Blackbird, Killdeer, Wilson Snipe, Swallows, American Robin, Osprey, Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatch**



Ring-neck Ducks



Red-winged Blackbird

*Photos and writing by Chris Dale, 2018.*

## Whistler Blackcomb Alpine and Sub-alpine

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### Introduction

The lift systems on Whistler-Blackcomb provide an easy opportunity to marvel at the alpine landscape, that is the biota and unusual physical features at and above treeline. The elevation of treeline is variable, dependent on slope direction, soil conditions for tree growth, and the longevity of the spring snowpack. At lift termini trees “featherout” at 1,800 metres elevation but in some areas the “line” drops to 1,600–1,700 metres elevation. Above treeline there are small stunted clumps of conifers, known as “krumholz” which provide needed refuges for several animals including alpine birds.

The geology of the two mountains are different. Whistler is underlain by an uplift of marine sediments interlayered with volcanic rocks ejected into the marine environment. Some of the volcanics are very ‘rusty’ (i.e. oxidized) and host sub-economic mineral deposits, and thus the massif has been extensively searched for metallic ores, beginning in the early 1900s and finally terminated with extensive drilling and underground tunneling in the 1960s. A major fault underlies the Fitzsimmons Creek Valley, and on its north side an intrusion of granitic rock has been uplifted to the earth’s surface. The contrast between the two massifs is obvious. However, both were reshaped by the onset of several glaciations beginning about two million years ago. The ice sheets overrode the summit of Whistler Mountain, whereas the ice level did not quite reach the Horstman Hut on Blackcomb. So the ragged summits of Blackcomb and adjacent peaks lie in contrast to the more smoothly eroded appearance of Whistler and the adjacent “Musical Bumps”. However, the glacier carved out huge bowl-like depressions (cirques) on both mountains. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century small glaciers occupied nearly all of the cirques, pushing up arcuate moraines near their bottom lips. A few of these glaciers still exist but are rapidly downwasting. The largest glaciers are on the northeast side of Blackcomb Mountain. As the small glaciers recede and disappear small tarns are left in the cirques, especially so on Whistler.

The alpine landscape is sporadically underlain by permafrost, that is subsurface soil that is permanently frozen year-round. On the exposed surface this is manifest by unusual geometric configurations of stones or mounds of sod. These are called “periglacial” features, and the best, largest, and most striking example is a tongue of rock debris descending the upper flank of the southeast side of Blackcomb. It is literally a glacier of rock debris slowly moving down slope, easily seen from the alpine trail which goes to the basin between Blackcomb and Decker Mountains. It is known as ‘Body Bag Bowl Rock Glacier’, so named after a ski run which descends from the saddle separating Blackcomb Summit and Disease Ridge.

The growing season is short on both mountains. Snow arrives in mid-autumn, persist as a 2 to 3-metre-thick continuous blanket to mid-spring, when bare islands free of snow develops at the base of trees thereafter. Total disappearance of snow on south facing slopes usually occurs in early summer, whereas on north facing slopes it is delayed to late July or a few weeks later. So, the alpine-subalpine regime is rather hostile to most species of birds, and many species in the valley bottom locations only move up to the alpine when there is luxurious growth of flowers and other ground cover.

### **Directions**

With the one exception of a trail that begins at the base of Blackcomb, or at its upper parking lot #6 (Base 2) access to the alpine-subalpine is rigidly controlled to forbid any other hiking routes. Collision with descending mountain bikers is a huge concern. Despite the plethora of bikes at the main village centre. The mountain operations cannot stop hikers from using the trail to Singing Pass; be careful several bike trails cross the trail (road). Once on the trail, one is committed to stay on it until the Oboe Creek crossing is reached but you are better off to stay on the trail for as far as Singing Pass. At the pass there are two options: take the trail to Russet Lake or the trail going over the Musical Bumps to Whistler. Both are open alpine hikes.

By far the easiest, quickest and most expensive way is to buy a lift ticket. Do so after parking your vehicle in pay lots #1 to #4 or in the no charge lot #6 at Base 2 on Blackcomb. Because lift construction is slated for Blackcomb in the summer of 2018, one is committed to the gondola which departs from the main Whistler Village. Once on it, keep an eye out for bears among the mountain bike trails below you. Stay on the lift until the upper terminus is reached; there is little birding at the mid station among the confusion of bicycles. Once at the top, quickly shift to the Peak to Peak gondola and begin birding on the trails at Blackcomb. Summer trail maps for both mountains are available.



## Bird Species

The total number of alpine/subalpine species is about 80. In winter it is about six: ubiquitous **Gray Jays**, few much shyer **Clarks' Nutcrackers**, the usual 2 or 3 **Ravens**, a few **Mountain Chickadees** and **Juncos** and if you luck out, one to three or four **White-tailed Ptarmigan**. In late winter **Gray-crowned Rosy-finches** will show up at the Horstman Hut. The best place for birds, however, is the Crystal Hut on Blackcomb. Note: in winter skis or snowboards must be used to leave the main top terminus of either mountain.

In winter there are always surprise occurrences; a flock of **crossbills**, a posse of **Pine Grosbeaks**, or any one of the **owl** species, which usually happens on a Christmas Bird Count.

Late spring sees a few more birds, especially in the subalpine where birders must be on skis or snowboards. Look for the **Three-toed Woodpecker** and listen for the drumming of the "**Blue**" **Grouse** (always, so far, a **Sooty Grouse** on Whistler but Blackcomb also has a **Dusky** as well). The drumming begins in March, becoming intense in April and fades out in May. In June, the bus route from the top terminus at Blackcomb (the Rendezvous) to the 7<sup>th</sup> heaven chairlift frequently encounters grouse on the road.

Early summer yields the best birding returns and no longer are skis required to move about. Listen for **Olive-sided Flycatchers** and the sweet music of the **Hermit Thrush**. There are several small song bird species flitting about the trees; **Yellow-rumped Warblers** will be an easy spot. Once the alpine flowers are in bloom there will be the migration of **Rufous Hummingbirds** upslope from the valley floor to take in the nectar. At the ponds and tarns an **American Pipit** will be an easy find but don't forget to look for a **Spotted Sandpiper**.

Skyward there are raptors: **Bald** and **Golden Eagles**, several **hawk** species and **American Kestrel**. If you walk the Musical Bumps to Singing Pass a flock of **Horned Larks**, a covey of **Grouse** or **Ptarmigan**, a single **Fox Sparrow**, or **American Pipits** and **Gray-crowned Rosy-finches**, and **Savannah** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows** should be on the radar. If you opt to go to Russet Lake the only alpine waterfowl are sure to be there, the **Barrow's Goldeneye** and if you are really lucky, **Harlequin Ducks** in its outlet stream.

In late summer – early autumn the birds quickly disappear. **Pipits** and the **Goldeneye** are the last to go. **Raptors** and **Ravens** will be around, and the **Gray Jays** re-emerge. A hooting **Northern Pygmy-Owl** may watch your progress descending the Singing Pass trail.

It takes many visits to grasp the diversity of birds in the alpine and subalpine. A single visit of ten species seen is typical. Good Luck!

*Written by Karl Ricker and Jim Wharin, 2018.*

## Shadow Lake and the adjacent Soo River

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### Introduction

Shadow Lake lies in a shallow topographic depression, undergoing succession botanical change. The north half of the basin is now marsh-fen land while open deeper water is to the south and the home of at least two active beaver lodges. The basin lies just north of the railway crossing by Highway 99 but not visible from the road because of a narrow coniferous forest belt hugging the lake shore. The railway crossing is about 15 kilometres north of Whistler and a marked trail to the lake begins at the crossing. However, most visitors to the lake opt for trail access about one kilometer north of the crossing where an obvious heavy iron gate bars vehicle access on a crude road which leads past two Boy Scout cabins (on the left) to the old Squamish-Pemberton packhorse trail. Go left on the trail for about 0.5 kilometres to reach a loop trail which encircles the Shadow Lake basin.

Historically the entire area was logged with the trees being taken to the nearby Thompson Sawmill (no longer exists). The only vets left standing are barren snags towering above the northwest corner of the basin. The area was in a forest fire zone as explained by Forest Service placards on the highway side of the lake. Other disturbance is associated with the construction of the Pacific Great Eastern railway in the 1910-1920 era, located above the western shore of the lake, with a narrow intervening zone of more or less second growth timber. The railway crosses the Soo River, nearby, on a high trestle bridge.

The B.C. Forest Service has been very active in the lake basin with restocking the trees, following up with thinning and brushing procedures as explained on the fore noted placards. They have also carried out some trail maintenance and directional sign posting, with the obvious intention of making a recreation site. On their heels the Boy Scout movement has arrived, initially erecting a small cabin but recently superseded by a voluminous two-story A-frame structure. Outhouse facilities, always unlocked, are there for any visitor to the lake basin to use.

The basin has also been used by trappers, so noted by notched trees for traps and a still standing low rustic cabin on the trail connecting the lake basin to the currently active channel of the Soo River. One other connecting trail to the river bypasses the cabin site, hugging a now abandoned ox-bow channel of the river. The trail which now encircles the lake basin is maintained by the Boy Scouts, although three wood causeways over wet ground are in need of repair. Be careful using each, especially the rickety railings for the structure on the west side of the lake!

The habitat is basically shore edge to marsh-fen land surrounded by second growth coniferous forest. There are shrub lands between the north edge of the basin and the Soo River, that is

between the ox-bow channel and the present floodplain of the river. Thus, there are no broad varieties of habitats for a broad array of birds but none the less, about 75 species are routinely seen at Shadow Lake. A birding day in good spring conditions will net 20 to 30 species, and if there is a birder with good ears and knows the melodies and calls of the song birds, 40 to 50 species is a good day. Unfortunately, many birders visit the basin around noon and will come away saying there is nothing there!! So come early at day break, or late afternoon/early evening.

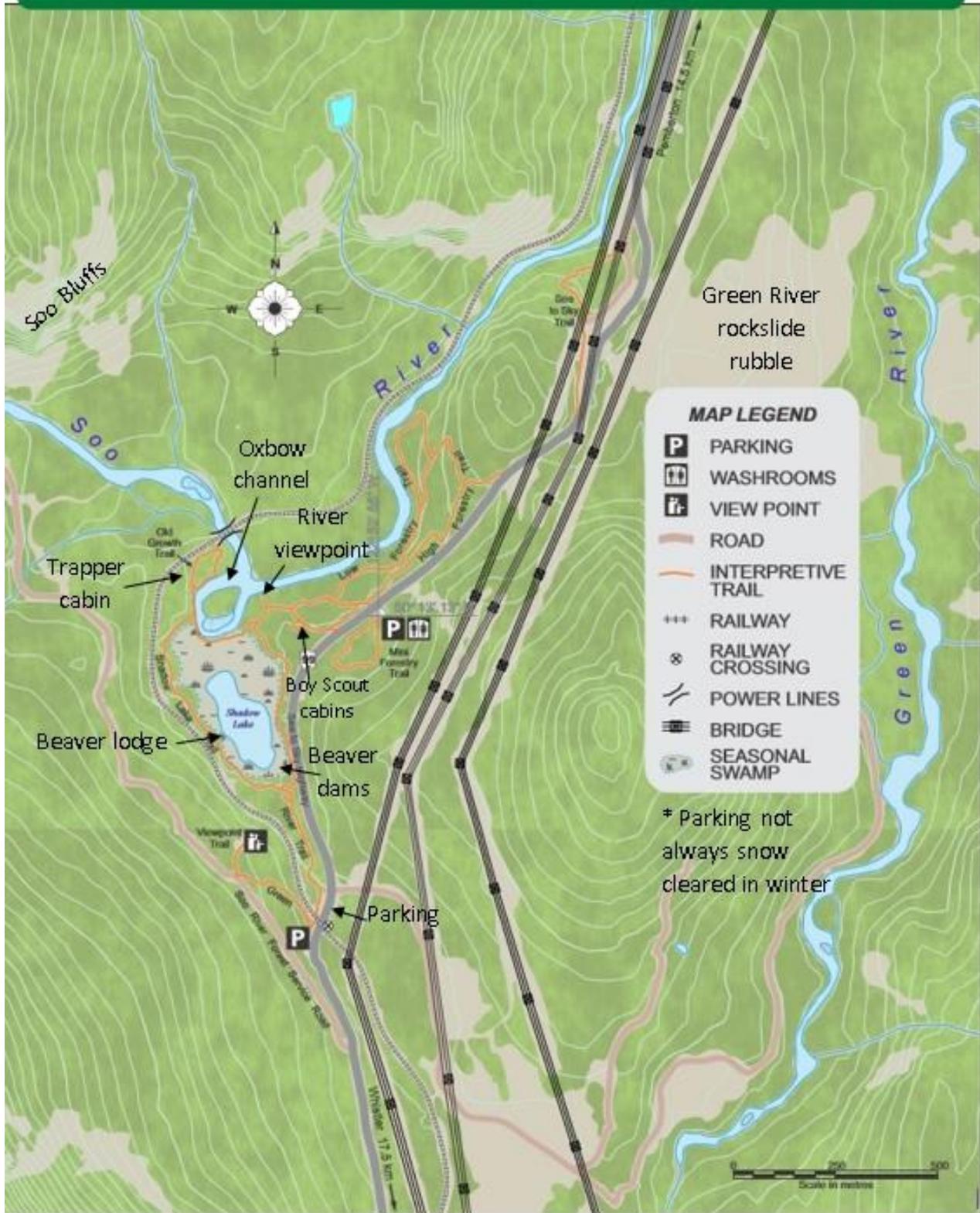
### **Directions**

The car parks for Shadow Lake are located at the CNR rail crossing and on both sides of the highway and others are about one kilometre farther north. At the rail crossing both sides of the highway have space, but the preferable spot is on the right (east side) of the highway, outside of all possible traffic interference. The trail to the lake is on the left side at a split rail fence, partially obscured by new coniferous growth.

For the two parking areas farther north, the one on the right side (an official recreation site parking area with placards) is the safe site, but it means crossing three lanes of highway to pick up the trail that leads to the Settler's Trail. For the site at the big iron gate on the left side, it means turning left on the highway's passing lane which can be nerve racking! There is room for about 10 cars near the gate, but blockage to the gate is forbidden! The trails therefrom have been noted but refer to the sketch maps if you are confused!



# Shadow Lake Interpretive Forest



## **Bird Species**

Season of visit dictates what will be seen. If in winter, a visit to the south unfrozen end of the lake will likely reveal **Buffleheads** and **American Dippers**. The trail to there will likely be packed by the Boy Scouts who favour weekly visits to their cabins. A **Raven** might also fly by but anything else will be a treat! But there is always a **Song Sparrow** and perhaps a **woodpecker**.

In spring, the scene changes rapidly once the lake is ice-free and the snow has disappeared from the wetlands. Up to 10 species of **Canada Goose**, **ducks** and **Pied-billed Grebe** will be there, some hiding in shoreline reeds and others paddling on the wetlands. By May-June listen carefully for the mournful wailing of the **Wilson's Snipe** and **Sora** as well as the frog-like croaks of the **Virginia Rail**. On these wetlands are a few breeding pairs of **Red-winged Blackbirds** and the "fitz-brew" of the **Willow Flycatcher**. Look for **Common Yellowthroat** as you walk around the lake, and on the shrublands north of the basin there are up to 10 species of **warblers** to find! **Yellow** and **Yellow-rumped Warblers** are easy to spot, but the others will require utmost attention. The trail from lake to river can cough up three species of **vireos**, and a **Spotted Sandpiper** is usually on the sand bars and derelict logs in the active Soo River channel. A retreat to the carpark on the trail between wetlands and oxbow channel is usually rewarding.

**Thrushes** and **sparrows** should be there. While circling the lake listen for the "**Blue**" **Grouse** on the hillsides and near the trapper's cabin a **Ruffed Grouse** might be flushed.

Species numbers diminish in autumn although waterfowl numbers will increase – **especially Ring-necked Ducks** and **Buffleheads**.

**Owls** and **raptors** are sometimes seen in or near the basin. A cruising **Turkey Vulture** sometimes is seen high above, and **Peregrine Falcons** inhabit the Soo Bluffs. A spotting scope will be needed to make sure that it's not a **Northern Goshawk** or other **falcon** species. Those bluffs also harbor **Black Swifts**. Keep your ears tuned for hooting **owls** including the **Northern Hawk** and **Boreal** species.

Check eBird site ([www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org)) for Shadow Lake to get a full picture of what has been seen there and when. Good Luck!

*Written by Karl Ricker, 2018*