



For Immediate Release
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Prince Albert National Park

New Life is Hatching

Contrary to the abundant snow cover and frozen ground, the tree tops are full of life in Prince Albert National Park. Owls are finding nests to lay eggs in. Fuzzy owlets are expected to hatch in April.

The breeding season for owls in the park's eco-region begins during late winter when they court one another through vocalizations, and is a great time for visitors to listen and watch for them.

"You're more likely to hear than see an owl. The best time to listen is at night, or at dawn and dusk," said David Britton, superintendent of Prince Albert National Park and avian enthusiast. Britton has traveled the globe in search of new bird sightings to check off his list.

Many bird field guides describe how to recognize the species of owls from their hoots.

"The Northern Saw-whet owl has a distinct call that sounds a bit like the warning beep of a delivery truck backing up. The Barred owl's call sounds like someone asking, 'Who cooks for you?'" said Britton.

Owls are a frugal species. Biologists say they are opportunistic nesters and lay three to four eggs on average in a tree hollow or take over empty nests built by other species like American Crows. Females stay with the eggs and owlets while their male, monogamous partners are responsible for feeding the hungry brood until they fledge.

While there are 12 owl species in Saskatchewan, the most common breeding owls to watch for in Prince Albert National Park are the Great Horned, Barred, Great Gray and Northern Saw-whet. Less common are the Long-eared, Short-eared, Boreal, Northern Hawk and Snowy owls that either migrate through or whose habitat marginally extends into the park.

This doesn't mean owls are easy to spot. Britton, raised in southern Ontario, has worked with Parks Canada in several regions including, the Ottawa-Gatineau area, Nahanni National Park Reserve, NWT and Wapusk National Park near Churchill, Manitoba. He said that finding owls in the boreal forest of Prince Albert requires some effort and a bit of luck.

"Hawk owls are hunters by day that visitors might see in the park," said Britton, "Look for them in winter sitting on a high perch like a dead tree."



Great Grey Owl. Photo taken by David Britton near Christopher Lake, SK.



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Owls play an important role in the boreal forest and aspen parkland of Prince Albert National Park said Britton. “Owls are near the top of the food chain and can be indicators of ecosystem health. If the foundations of an ecosystem are working well, it will produce lots of prey for owls.”

Areas that have recently burned and that still have standing trees can be popular for owls who use the space as hunting grounds. The Waskesiu community fuel break is a good example of an area close to town where people can watch for owls. To the south of the park, owls can sometimes be seen sitting on fence posts and power poles as they scan the fields for mice.

Owls are also resilient. “There have been rare cases like in southern Ontario in the winter of 2004 - 05 when an irruption occurred. The rodent population crashed and Great Gray owls moved south out of the boreal forest to hunt. Birders were seeing up to 20 and 30 owls a day when normally you would be lucky to see one or two in a year.” Britton said.

Owls use an adaptive hearing ability to pinpoint the location of prey with incredible accuracy.

“Some owls have asymmetrical ear openings to help them hone in on sounds such as a vole under a blanket of snow,” said Britton. These ear openings are at different heights than one another on the head so that the birds are able to use minute differences in the time it takes sound to reach them to pinpoint the movements of prey making owls fearsomely accurate hunters.

Why not venture out to Prince Albert National Park this March with a thermos and a blanket to view the expansive night sky while you listen for owls. They’ll be listening for you too so don’t say where you hid the extra house key.

DID YOU KNOW?

- According to The Owl Pages: “When a noise is heard, the Owl is able to tell its direction because of the minute time difference in which the sound is perceived in the left and right ear - for example, if the sound was to the left of the Owl, the left ear would hear it before the right ear. The Owl then turns its head so the sound arrives at both ears simultaneously - then it knows the prey is right in front of it. Owls can detect a left/right time difference of about 0.00003 seconds (30 millionths of a second!).” <https://www.owlpages.com/owls/articles.php?a=6>
- The Ontario Great Gray Owl Irruption of 2004-2005: Mortality, sex, moult and age <https://sora.unm.edu/sites/default/files/122137%20OB%20Vol%2023%233%20Dec%202005.pdf>

Collaboration Develops FireSmart Demonstration Area

A four-hectare plot of land in Waskesiu will be the community’s window into how FireSmart activities can protect critical infrastructure while maintaining aesthetics.

Parks Canada is working closely with SaskPower and the Waskesiu Golf Course to reduce the risk of wildfire to Waskesiu. The Parks Canada water treatment plant and surrounding area displays the fuel management strategies of FireSmart, a nationwide program designed to help protect people, infrastructure and surrounding lands from wildfire.



“The golf course is pleased to work with the park on this important project,” said Waskesiu Golf Course General Manager Tyler Baker. “Reducing the risk of wildfire to the Waskesiu townsite is a priority, and this is a great first step.”

In consultation with the Waskesiu Golf Course, the facility on Willow Street was selected for the project. The building represents a home or business located in the wildland-urban interface, where properties are nestled among trees along the edge of a forest or other flammable vegetation. The area that borders it is park property leased by the golf course and has a SaskPower corridor located nearby.



Before and after view of the east side of the Parks Canada Water Treatment Plant and FireSmart Priority Zones 1 & 2. Photos taken October 3, 2018 and January 24, 2019.

The FireSmart program’s priority zones start from the home and work outwards to help influence fire spread and improve a home’s resilience to wildfire damage.

“The FireSmart program addresses the reality of residing within the fire-dependent ecosystems in the national park,” said Dustin Guedo, Vegetation Ecologist. “Routine yard maintenance like pruning trees, clearing eaves and removing twigs and branches are ways to manage vegetation in priority zone one and help protect your home.”

In Zone 1 (10 metres), a fire-resistant zone is created around the park water treatment plant that is free of materials that could easily ignite from a wildfire.

In Zone 2 (10-30 metres), evergreen trees are thinned and pruned, and deadfall is cleaned up to reduce fire hazards.

The principles of the FireSmart program’s priority zones 1 and 2 were implemented in the area immediately surrounding the water treatment plant in January, 2019 and work continues in Zone 3 (30-100 metres), where space is created between trees and other flammable vegetation. Parks Canada fire personnel is selectively tree thinning in Zone 3 around the 15th hole while taking care to maintain the aesthetic and historic value that the Stanley Thompson designed golf course is known for.

“The FireSmart demonstration area helps to protect the townsite of Waskesiu and illustrates the simple steps that business and home owners can take to protect their properties,” said Baker. “As an added bonus, patrons may find it easier to locate their golf balls this summer.”



The recommended span of the FireSmart priority zones demonstrates the importance of working with neighbours and having the support of the community. The FireSmart demonstration area is the first collaboration to highlight how work can be achieved to the approval of all parties involved. To learn more about the FireSmart Demonstration Area and wildfire risk reduction in Waskesiu visit: https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pnnp/sk/princealbert/nature/feux-fire/feux-fire_6

Parks Canada Campus Club Sets-up at the University of Saskatchewan

Students at the University of Saskatchewan are in the process of forming a Parks Canada Campus Club in accordance with the national Campus Club initiative. The national campus club movement began in 2013, based on a recommendation by the first Parks Canada Youth Ambassadors. Their vision was the creation of a network of Parks Canada student clubs for youth and managed by youth.

“Our vision for the club is to inform students about the parks and Canada's beauty. Since most of our members are doing some type of environmental or science degree we want to focus on sustainability and talk about what students can do on and off campus to help the environment,” said Daisy Houle, Parks Canada Campus Club organizer and student employee.

Members of Campus Clubs across Canada are typically between the ages of 18 and 30 years-old. Currently, the Parks Canada Campus Club Network consists of 40 Campus Clubs in 10 provinces, at post-secondary institutions across Canada.

To date, the University of Saskatchewan Parks Canada Campus Club has attracted 17 members and is the second club operating in Saskatchewan. The majority of the members are female and environmental science majors. There is no fee to join the club this academic year. There will be a minimum of three annual general meetings held per year.



“As long students can commit to attending the meetings and events we are open to accepting anyone as members,” said Houle.

The clubs aim is to mobilize and inspire young adults to enjoy the outdoors and to learn more about Canada's rich history and culture. Club members will be meeting in March to finalize paperwork for the club ratification process at the U of S.

“As young adults, the hope is that you will not only continue to enjoy and appreciate nature and history, but also support and protect them. We very much plan to do this going forward,” said Zoe Kendel, club secretary and Parks Canada Visitor Service attendant.

Members are making plans to host small events to teach others good camping practices. This includes a bonfire to demonstrate different ways to start a fire and promote fire safety.



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Other events like a trip to an indoor rock climbing wall are some of the ways the group plans to increase membership and have fun.

“Our ideas have mainly been small events aimed at teaching something about safety, sustainability, and appreciating our environment,” said Kendel.

The U of S Parks Canada Campus Club will work closely with Prince Albert National Park.

“We are excited that a club has sprung up on campus and look forward to providing club members with information and assistance when planning their events and field trips,” said Brian Gorecki, Learn to Camp Project Manager.

The Youth Engagement Team, within the Outreach and Marketing Branch at Parks Canada, also supports the club and helps students develop these connections with other clubs and Parks Canada sites in the area. The U of S Parks Canada Campus Club plans to host camping and hiking adventures to Parks Canada locations to connect their peers to natural and historic places.

The Parks Canada Campus Club initiative was established in 2013 to create a network of clubs to mobilizing young adults to discover and experience Canada’s nature, history and culture, but to integrate these experiences into their lives and to share their experiences with their peers. The hope is that these young adults will continue to appreciate protect nature and historical treasures for present and future generations.



As the club grows, it will promote club activities to the broader student population, organize activities and conservation efforts in and around campus, have a presence on social media channels, network with other campus social organizations and inform students about volunteer and job opportunities within Parks Canada. Students can join by emailing:

uofsparksclub@gmail.com

More information and a video about the clubs can be found on the national website:

www.pc.gc.ca/en/serapprocher-connect/parcsavie-parkslife/cc



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