

Avifauna (Birds)

Birding, one of the fastest growing hobbies in North America, can easily be enjoyed in the 88 kilometers of Edmonton's River Valley Park. Here there are countless opportunities to view wildlife from the river, trails, ravines, or embankments.

Many birds are year round residents. The friendly black capped chickadees, the acrobatic nuthatches and all of the native woodpeckers, from the smallest downy to the largest pileated are present in the mixed- wood forests of the valleys slopes and ravines. The woodpecker's drill holes are evidence of their feeding and nesting in the forests. Large chunks of bark mark the spots where woodpeckers, such as the black-backed, northern three-toed or pileated species have been feeding. The largest rectangular holes are the work of the pileated woodpecker. Chickadees, nuthatches and downy woodpeckers can also be seen at backyard feeders which allow closer observation of these feathered friends.

Other year round residents belong to the crow family. The blue jays, whose apt scientific name means blue chattering crested bird, and the magpies help to brighten the cold dreary days of winter with their raucous calls and colorful plumage. Magpies nest along the river bank throughout the park. Their large stick nests are found in old poplars and snags. The large stick nests are distinctive, with roof built over an inner collection of mud and grass.

The owl family is another group present in this area. The Alberta owls are often more visible in the winter when the leaves are absent but can be heard in early spring as they begin their calling. The great horned owl, one of the larger in the species, takes over collapsed magpie nests or old hawk nests. The great horned owl begins its calling and breeding in February and March. This magnificent bird is our designated provincial bird and can be seen and heard throughout the capital region. Other owls in the valley reaches are the barred, long eared and the smaller saw-whet and boreal owls.

As winter approaches bird life changes. The year round residents settle in for the winter, but an interesting variety of other birds move into the area frequenting feeders and the river valley parks. The boreal owl, northern hawk owl, gyrfalcon and great grey owl are winter visitors to this area. These four birds of prey are listed in the '10 most wanted to see list of birds', noted by the American Birding Association. We are truly fortunate that each of these birds has been seen along the river and up the banks of the valley. Some years these birds of prey are numerous and easy to sight, but other years prove more challenging to birders.



THE RIVER VALLEY ALLIANCE

Alberta's Capital Region River Valley Park

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The most numerous birds by far during Edmonton's winter are the bohemian waxwings. These smallish birds, with their mysterious chorus of high pitched lispy whistles fly in large flocks and descend on neighborhoods, stripping the berries off fruit trees. The white-winged and red crossbills can also be seen in winter, especially when the evergreen cone crops are healthy, as these birds are specialized at retrieving the cone seeds with their crossed bills. The pine grosbeaks, redpolls and pine siskins are also present for winter viewing. Redpolls enjoy the birch seeds in the mixed wood areas of the river valley. Their presence results in large numbers of seed scales on the ground under birch trees. Both the redpoll and the pine siskins will come to feeders. The raven, another crow family member, is often seen flying in the park.

Spring and summer are the most active time for birds in the valley. Both spring and fall migration bring unusual birds to the area. Early spring hosts the arrival of Canada, white-fronted and snow geese which can be seen flying in large flocks. With keen observation and acute hearing one can often recognize flocks of sandhill cranes and occasionally, bald eagles. The eagles stay near the valley edges, hunting ducks in the river. Spring also sees the return of white pelicans to colonies in the area and during the summer their feeding flocks are visible on the North Saskatchewan River. As spring progresses more waterfowl return to the river and nearby marshes. Sea gulls and song birds, most commonly the robins, orioles, sparrows, flycatchers and warblers can all be seen and heard.

Whether walking, hiking or skiing in the Capital Region River Valley Park one is treated to a wonderful festival of birdlife.

References

The Birds of Alberta

By Salt and Salt

Birds of Alberta

By Chris Fisher and John Acorn

National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America

Ed by John Dunn and J Alderfer

A Winter Birding Guide for the Edmonton Region

Compiled by Harry Stelfox and Chris Fisher.