

A Snapshot of Hastings Lake N.A.

By Linda Kershaw

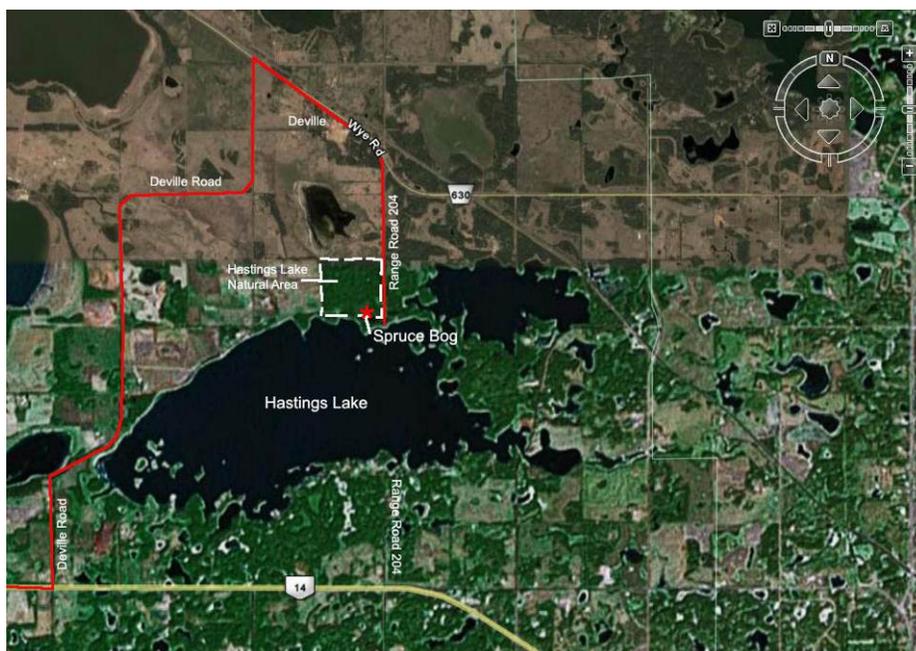
This week, the aspens began flushing green, a full month ahead of last year's schedule. Then the Sandhill Cranes started flying over by the 1000s. It was time for a spring walk in our Natural Area. We had enjoyed a ski across the lake in January, but for me spring is the magical season - the time of hope and wonder.

When we visit our Natural Area in the spring, we always find lots of activity in local residents and wide array of new arrivals to the forest, wetlands and lake.



As long as there are squirrels, you need never be lonely

The Hastings Lake Natural Area (PA Site 472) is a 62 ha (153 acre) Natural Area on the north shore of Hastings Lake, 30 minutes east of Sherwood Park. Its legal land description is Twp 51 Rge 20 W4: SE29 and the latitude/longitude co-ordinates are 53 25.74 N, 112 54.48' W. The site was first reserved for recreation 1962, on the recommendation of the Public Lands Div. inspector. Then, in 1963, the local MLA requested that it be used for a county park. A recreation lease was granted to the County of Strathcona in 1964. In 1970, the site was referred to the provincial Natural Areas Committee, and in 1971 it was made a holding reservation (HLR4) for a possible Natural Area. Finally, in 1974, the area was designated as a Natural Area with Protective Notation (PNT).



Hastings Lake Natural Area map

The Hastings Lake Natural Area (PNT) currently has 3 stewards, of which Pete and I are two. We first became stewards in 1991, as part of our Junior Forest Warden Group, the Hastings Lake Hyper Hikers. Our active, family-based group had about 12 kids and 12 parents. Everyone was interested in natural history and loved hiking, canoeing, bird-watching and other outdoor activities. As stewards of a Natural Area, we learned to appreciate the importance of stewardship, and found ways to protect and preserve some of the natural environment in our rural neighbourhood. Each year we hiked through the site together, learning about the plants and animals, cleaning up garbage and reporting to the Volunteer Stewards Coordinator. Over the years, the kids grew up, families drifted away, and gradually our group hikes ended. Pete and I live a couple of kilometres from the lake, so we continued to canoe/walk/ski there, occasionally submitting reports.



Rolling hills are most easily seen along the gas pipeline corridor

The Hastings Lake Natural Area lies in the Cooking Lake Moraine or Beaver Hills. This area is part of the Dry Mixedwood Subregion of the Boreal Natural Region. Most of the site is covered by mature poplar stands. The moraine has undulating terrain, with rolling hills and numerous depressions, so vegetation varies greatly over short distances, ranging from small marshes in depressions to balsam poplar stands in slightly higher areas and then aspen stands on well-drained uplands. In the southeastern corner of the site, there is a beautiful little spruce bog and Hastings Lake lies along the southern edge of the site.

Most of the marshes are shallow, and have surface water only the spring and early summer. Vegetation is dominated by bluejoint reedgrass and other moisture-loving plants. In some of the larger wetlands, sedges blanket wetter areas and willows and paper birches provide cover for many birds and mammals.

Most of the Hastings Lake Natural Area is wooded. The forest is dominated by balsam poplar in low-lying areas and by trembling aspen on well-drained uplands, with the occasional white spruce. The woodland has a diverse, multi-tiered understorey, with a mix of tall shrubs (beaked hazelnut, chokecherry, saskatoon, red-osier dogwood), low shrubs (wild roses, snowberries, low bush-cranberry) and non-woody plants (wild strawberries, tall lungwort, bunchberry).





Gooseberry & aspen are among the first with green leaves

The black spruce bog near the southeastern corner of the Natural Area, is one of the site's more unusual features. Feathermosses and sphagnum blanket the ground in this small fragment of boreal forest. Bog cranberry/lingonberry, cloudberry, and Labrador-tea are also common.

Because of its diverse habitat and its location on the shore of Hastings Lake, the Natural Area provides excellent wildlife habitat. Moose, deer, coyotes, hares, porcupines, beavers, muskrats, red squirrels, voles and deer mice are all abundant. We've also sighted or seen signs of flying squirrels, skunks, short-tailed weasels and red foxes. Recently, black bears and cougars have been reported from nearby, but we have yet to spot them in the Natural Area.



Water levels may be low, but the pelicans are back!

The bird life is especially diverse. Mature poplars provide nesting habitat for Pileated Woodpeckers, Great-horned Owls, Red-tailed Hawks, Swainson's Hawks and Goshawks. Bald Eagles perch in tall trees near the shore, hunting for ducks during spring and fall migrations. Hastings Lake supports a wide range of waterfowl, and includes Gull, Cormorant, Pelican and Heron colonies. All of these birds can be seen along the shore during the spring and summer, along with lots of ducks, grebes and geese.

Land-use has varied slightly over the years. The area is under a grazing permit to a local farmer, but because of the dense shrubby understorey, cattle rarely venture far into the Natural Area. In the 1990s, a quad trail

along the gas pipeline was used by hunters in the fall, but fallen trees and sprouting aspens and willows have restricted use of the route. When we first became stewards, we often had to clean up garbage in the grassy opening by the lake, but Strathcona County installed a couple of sturdy gates across the access trails, and this put an end to the bush parties. Today, visitors to the Hastings Lake Natural Area often arrive via the lake, in boats during summer and on snowmobiles in winter. We appreciate the way that most visitors respect the land, and leave the local residents to live in peace.



A young moose looks on as we wander along his trail