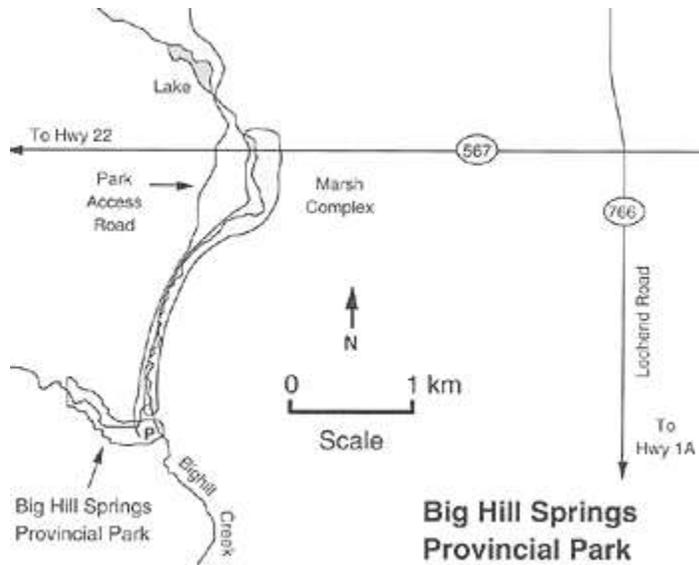


## **Big Hill Springs Provincial Park** by Joan McDonald(1993)

Big Hill Springs Provincial Park is located at the lower end of Big Spring Coulee, approximately 25 km northwest of Calgary. The park is quite small, covering only 26 hectares, but the close proximity of an extensive marsh complex and a lake formed by the damming of Bighill Creek add to the birding possibilities. The most rewarding months for birding are May through August; the area can be covered in half a day or an evening.



From the intersection of Crowchild Trail (Hwy 1A) and Nosehill Drive in northwest Calgary head west on Hwy 1A for 10.5 km. Turn right on Lochend Road (S.R. 766) and drive north for 11 km to the junction with SR 567. Turn left (west) on SR 567 and continue for 3.3 km to the park access road. Turn left (south) on the access road and continue to the end, parking in the parking lot beyond the Texas gate.

An interpretive trail, 1.6 km in length, begins at the stone fire pit.

Good use has been made of the varied terrain, the trail first paralleling the moist and shady streambed, then rising through grassland and sheltered mixed woodland on the coulee wall before dropping back down to the parking lot. A respectable spring migration can usually be observed here. Listen in early spring for Northern Saw-whet Owl. Ruffed Grouse is more likely to be heard than seen. In August, check the flower-filled meadow just before the tufa deposit for Rufous Hummingbird. Prairie Falcon breeds in the area and is most likely to be seen from the access road. In late March and early April concentrations of Bald Eagles regularly occur near the park. The soils are extremely thin in the park and are easily eroded - it is important that you stay on the established trail. The park is a popular family recreation area; it is best to bird here early in the morning.

The marsh complex, which has been formed by the action of beavers on Bighill Creek, parallels the access road from the highway to the Texas gate. In May, this is an excellent location for really close observation of most surface-feeding ducks. A major interest at the Big Hill Springs marsh complex is a small colony of Sharptailed Sparrows. They can be heard and

seen from the park access road, but the most favourable viewing location is from SR 567. Go east from the intersection and watch for the culvert carrying Bighill Creek beneath the highway. To the east of the culvert is "the" best viewing area. The shoulder is almost non-existent but it is possible to pull far enough off the highway to use a small vehicle as a blind. If traffic is heavy, it would be safer to park on the access road and walk. The sparrows arrive at the end of May. Listen for a strange hissing sound reminiscent of hot metal being plunged into water. The sound doesn't carry very far - so if you can hear a Sharptailed Sparrow, you should also be able to see it. Check the middle strand of fencewire beside the shrub and the scattered low bushes in the wet meadow.

To reach the lake, take the gravel road heading north opposite the park access road. It can be worthwhile checking out the marsh on this side of the highway too. The gravel road first curves uphill and then skirts around the lake. A good location for scoping the lake is from halfway up the hill, where the gravel road widens sufficiently to park safely. This is also a good vantage point to watch for raptors.

Big Hill Springs Provincial Park has pit toilets. Gas and food can be obtained in Cochrane.