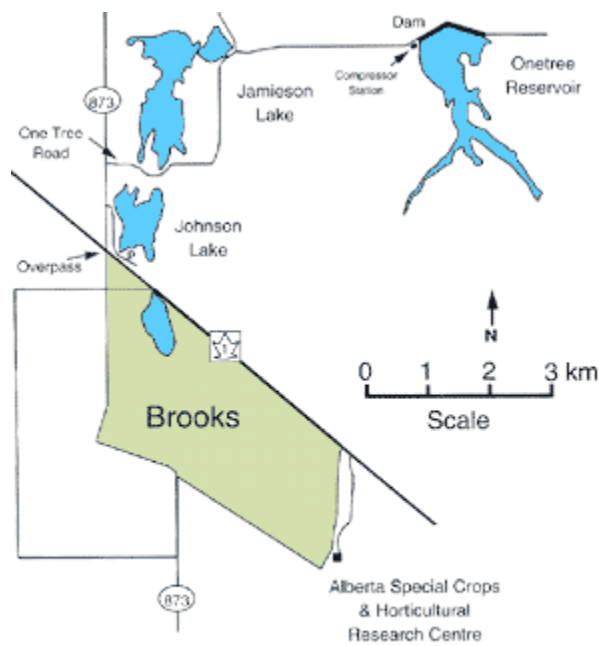


The Brooks Area *by Joan McDonald(1993), revised*

In the Brooks area, large tracts of grassland are privately owned by the Eastern Irrigation District and, unless otherwise posted, can be accessed for the purpose of activities such as birding. The E.I.D. has prepared an excellent brochure, entitled the "Eastern Irrigation District Wildlife Guide". The Wildlife Guide consists of a map showing the major features of the area, including the E.I.D. grasslands and water bodies and their access points. From a birder's point of view it is more comprehensive and up-to-date than the topographic maps and is extremely useful for birding this area thoroughly. Grasslands are a very fragile ecosystem and it is important to use only established roads and trails. Walk as much as possible rather than driving as most access roads are dirt-surfaced and can be extremely slippery and vulnerable to erosion in wet driving conditions. Use caution if range cattle are present as their behaviour can be unpredictable.



The Brooks Area (A and B)

A. Onetree Reservoir Driving Route

This short route is suitable for birders with an hour or two to spare in Brooks and who would like to see some waterbirds and shorebirds, particularly during the migration periods. It can also be useful in early spring when deeper water bodies such as Lake Newell may still be frozen. The route begins at the junction of the Trans-Canada Highway and S.R. 873 (the major exit for downtown Brooks, hereafter called the "Brooks overpass"). Start driving north on S.R. 873 and immediately turn right at Johnson Lake (confusingly marked by a sign which says "Inter-Lake"). This fairly deep, cattail edged lake can be good for Common Loon, grebes, American

White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, diving ducks, terns, Marsh Wren and Yellow-headed Blackbird. There is just enough room to park along the shore at the intersection (km 0.0). For a safer view, continue for 0.7 km and park at the entrance to the pasture on the left.

Return to S.R. 873, turn right and drive north for 0.5 km, then turn right onto One Tree Road. In May, these irrigated fields may have Black-bellied Plover, and in August large flocks of Pine Siskins are attracted by the ripening small grain crops. At 2.8 and 3.3 kms the first bays of Jamieson Lake can be seen on the left. This large lake is edged with cattails, shrubs and natural grassland. Species will be similar to those found at Johnson Lake with the addition of more surface-feeding ducks. Western Kingbird can be common along the roadside in this section. As you continue, check any irrigated fields or muddy patches caused by leaking irrigation equipment for shorebirds. At 4 km a small marshy area on the right can be good in spring for shorebirds. At 5.3 km there is a closer view of Jamieson Lake. Check the shrubs on the far shore for roosting Black-crowned Night-Herons.

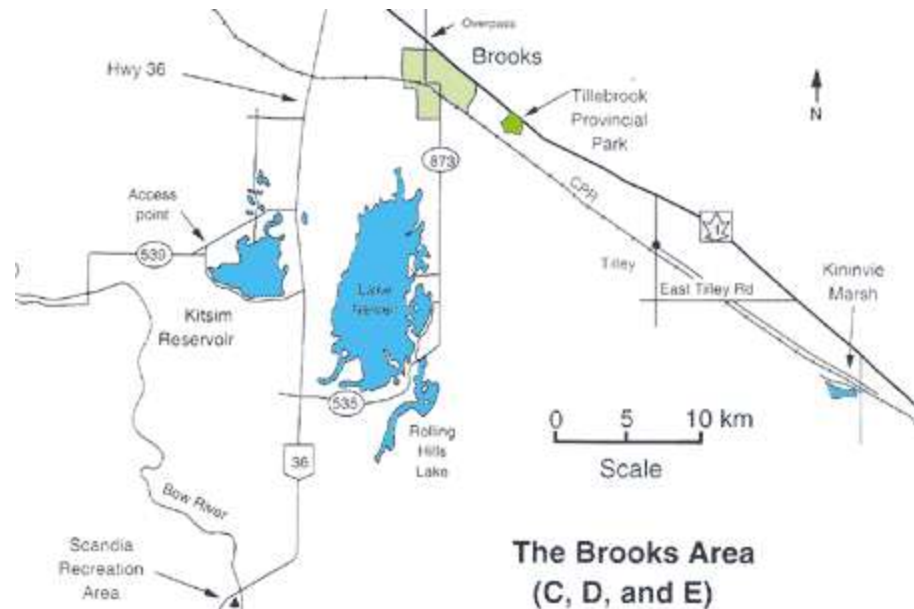
At the Y-junction turn left for a short distance to check out the lake from this angle. The cattail marsh on the right has Marsh Wren and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Turn round at the pullout by the outlet canal and return to the Y-junction. Turn left and continue. The small slough on the right at 5.9 km is worth checking in spring. Continue past the "Dead End" sign at 7 km until Onetree Reservoir is reached, parking near the compressor station. In dry conditions, it is possible to drive the single lane track across the dam, turning your vehicle just beyond the second headworks. Large concentrations of waterbirds can occur on the reservoir during spring and fall. Check also the marshy area and exit canals on the other side of the dam for Black-crowned Night-Heron. Retrace the route for the return to Brooks.

B. Alberta Special Crops and Horticultural Research Centre

This research facility is situated on the south side of the Trans-Canada Highway, about 4.4 km east of the overpass in Brooks. The landscaped grounds are open to the public at any time of day and, during the growing season, can be a welcome stop for anyone driving this part of the highway. It can be excellent for Blackpoll Warbler in May. In summer, check the formal flower beds for Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Common Grackle is easily seen here. The best time to visit, however, is in August when exceptional concentrations of migrating warblers and other small passerines can occur in the mature trees and shrubs around the buildings. These "fallouts" usually occur in the early morning following a late afternoon or evening thunderstorm. Have your insect repellent handy as the rise in humidity brings out the mosquitoes in full force.

C. Tillebrook Provincial Park

This campground is situated on the southern side of the Trans-Canada Highway, 8.6 km east of the overpass in Brooks. It makes an excellent centre for birders spending some days in the Brooks area as it has showers and electrical hookups. Its well-watered grounds can be



surprisingly birdy, particularly in May. Check the trees and shrubs for migrating flycatchers, thrushes, warblers and sparrows. A noisy nesting pair of Merlins is hard to miss. Towards dusk check the marshy grasslands to the south for Short-eared Owl. Burrowing Owl has nested in the small patch of grassland between the park and the highway.

D. Hwy 36 South of the Trans-Canada Highway

This highway, 8 km west of Brooks, can be excellent for waterfowl and shorebirds during the migration periods, especially in May. It can also be very good for Snowy Owl in early and late winter. Distances are given from the Trans-Canada Highway to access points and do not include side trips.

Drive south on Hwy 36 for 17 km to the junction with S.R. 539. An area of shallow sloughs can be accessed by driving west on S.R. 539 for 3 km and then turning north on a minor gravel road. This may be soft and rutted when wet. A series of variously sized sloughs stretches on either side of the road for the next 3.8 km. A male Garganey was photographed in the first slough beneath the power line on May 18, 1991. The large slough on the right at 1.9 km has a well-developed cattail bed close to the road - check here for American Bittern. The northern-most slough on the right at about 3 km is the deepest and has more grebes and diving ducks. This slough may be viewed from a service road along the dam at the southern end. Check for Burrowing Owl whenever you have a good view of the grasslands.

Kitsim Reservoir is also accessed from S.R. 539. Opposite the road to the sloughs is a single lane track heading south across the grasslands. If this is ungated and in dry driving conditions, it can be followed for 2 km to the

northern shore of the reservoir. The muddy shoreline at the northern end can be very good for shorebirds in May but the quantities of bugs stirred up as you walk the grassland can be a problem. The main access point for the reservoir is reached by continuing west on S.R. 539 for a further 4.2 km to the inlet canal. Turn left here onto the WEST bank of the canal. If the first section through the Texas gate is in poor condition, it may be advisable to continue west on S.R. 539 for a kilometre and make a sharp turn to the left onto a good gravel road. This joins the service road along the canal. The service road may be slowly driven for about 7 km around the western and southern shores of the reservoir. To access the grasslands, park by the dam and walk the gravel track beside the exit canal in the southwest corner. The reservoir is a good location for shorebirds in May and August; Ruddy Turnstone has been reported from rocky sections of the shoreline. The islands host breeding colonies of Double-crested Cormorant, Ring-billed and California Gulls, and Common Tern. Summer residents of the grasslands include Burrowing Owl and McCown's Longspur. Prairie Falcon and Ferruginous Hawk may be seen overhead. Large numbers of Black-crowned Night-Herons have been observed feeding in the canal in the southwest corner in June and July. Watch for geese in September.

Continuing south of S.R. 539 on Hwy 36, the slough on the east side of the road at 18 km can be worth checking. Alberta's first Little Blue Heron was discovered here on May 19, 1991. The southern end of Lake Newell can be accessed by driving east on S.R. 535 (24 km). Large flocks of Black-bellied Plovers can occur along the shoreline during mid- to late May, together with the occasional Lesser Golden-Plover or Red Knot. Check here for geese in the fall.

Scandia Recreation Area is reached at 55 km. This small campground (no longer operating but open for birding) on the Bow River can be an excellent location for shorebirds during spring migration if water levels are correct; it has regularly produced Red Knot during the last three weeks of May. As you cross the river, slow down and watch for an inconspicuous gravel road on the left-hand side, marked by a small brown sign. The park provides access to about 150 m of shoreline east of the bridge. If no livestock are present, it is also possible to walk beneath the bridge to bird the western side, but please note that this is private property. In spring, a large part of the Bow River's flow is diverted into the E.I.D. irrigation system at Bassano, leaving the river downstream of the dam very shallow and exposing the muddy shoreline and many gravel bars. Good sized flocks of peeps can occur and Black-necked Stilt has been observed here. Large flocks of Black-bellied Plovers use the gravel bar west of the bridge as a resting area, and these should be methodically scoped for small numbers of Red Knots and the occasional Ruddy Turnstone. If there has been a particularly high spring

runoff more water will be released from the dam, in which case Scandia will not be a good shorebird location at the critical time. To save yourself a wasted journey, check with the Bassano Dam Operator (phone: 641-2111) for information on the river's flow.

Gas and meals can be obtained at the junction of Hwy 36 and S.R. 535.

E. Finding McCown's Longspur

In Alberta, McCown's Longspur reaches its greatest abundance in the southeast corner of the province near Wildhorse. It is a moderately common, but local, breeder in the Brooks area. A reliable way to find this sought-after species is to drive the minor gravel roads off the TransCanada Highway through the arid grasslands east of Tilley. The most rewarding time to look for longspurs is when the males are performing their territorial song flights in late May and June. The song flights can also be an excellent way of separating McCown's from Chestnut-collared at a distance. The males of both species rise up into the air singing with rapidly beating wings. The McCown's male then immediately floats back down with his wings held stiffly above his back. The Chestnut-collared male prolongs his song flight in undulating circles, finally returning to his perch with still rapidly beating wings.

A good location where the quest for McCown's Longspur can be combined with a search for spring vagrants is Kininvie Marsh. This is reached by driving east on the Trans-Canada Highway from the Brooks overpass for 37.4 km and turning right (south) on a minor gravel road. There is no highway sign at this intersection but it can be recognized by a small power line paralleling the road. (For westbound travellers, the Kininvie road is 27.9 km west of the intersection with S.R. 884 at Suffield.) After driving south for 2 km an unmarked railway crossing is reached. Cross this single track with caution as it is the main line and quite busy. Immediately after crossing the railway, turn right onto a small gravel track. This lush wetland forms a startling contrast to the arid grassland surrounding it. During spring migration and the nesting season it can be teeming with birdlife. At the time of writing, the cattail beds host a large breeding colony of Franklin's Gulls and it can be a good location for American Bittern. Recently, White-faced Ibis and Black-necked Stilt have been seen in reasonable numbers and on a regular basis. McCown's Longspur can be abundant along the roadsides in this general area and Burrowing Owl is a possibility.

There are no facilities at Kininvie. Gas, meals and washrooms are available in Tilley.