

**Cave and Basin Marsh** by Richard Thomas and Ross Dickson(1993);  
revised 2012

Any first-time birding trip to Banff National Park should begin with a visit to the main Information Centre (224 Banff Avenue, Banff, phone 403-762-1550) to pick up a bird checklist, brochures about walks in the area, and to enquire about trail conditions and potential wildlife hazards. Getting around in Banff Townsite is easier on foot than by car.



To reach the Information Centre, westbound travellers on the Trans-Canada Highway (Hwy 1) should take the first Banff exit (approx. 12.5 km west of the park gate). Turn left at the stop sign, pass

beneath Hwy 1 to a map of Banff Townsite (0.6 km) and continue southwest along this road which becomes Banff Avenue. At the second traffic light (4.4 km), the Wolf Avenue junction, turn left and then take the first right (behind the church) to the parking lot for the Information Centre (4.5 km). If eastbound on the Trans-Canada, watch for the overpass above the east end of Hwy 1A (Bow Valley Parkway). At 4.2 km is the Vermilion Lakes overlook. Take the Banff/Mt. Norquay exit (5.5 km), turn right and follow Mt. Norquay Road into Banff. At 7 km turn left onto Wolf Avenue. Proceed to the Wolf/Banff Avenue stop light (7.2 km), carry straight on and (as above) take the first right (7.3 km) for the Information Centre parking lot. If you should miss your first Banff exit from the Trans-Canada, it is only 3.6 km to the second.

**The Cave and Basin facilities will be under construction until May 2013 and parking there may not be possible.** Directions to the Cave and Basin Marsh are given from downtown Banff. From the Banff Avenue/Wolf intersection head south on Banff Avenue across the Bow River bridge to the T-intersection in front of the Park Administration Building. The grounds of the Administration Building (the Cascade Gardens) are worth

birding at any time of year. Turn right at the T-intersection onto Cave Avenue and continue to the Cave and Basin parking lot. Pedestrians can take the trail which starts on the right some 300 m along Cave Avenue, beyond the Luxton Museum. At the far (southwest) end of the parking lot look for a small hiking trail sign. Follow this trail (which joins the above-mentioned pathway) for about 75 m and then turn right onto the 0.5 km-long Marsh Trail boardwalk system. For wheelchair access, and to visit the Cave and Basin Hot Springs Centennial Centre (where exhibits commemorate the birthplace of Banff National Park) and swimming pool, take the paved pathway which starts just to the left of the hiking trail sign. This site plus Fenland Trail and Vermilion Lakes Drive can be covered in half a day.

In good cone-crop years, noisy flocks of crossbills may decorate the spruces around the parking lot. Key habitat elements at Cave and Basin are the mixed spruce-pine forest, and a medium-sized lake with its expanse of reed beds, waterside willow thickets and marshy borders. En route to the marsh check the spruce-pine forest for year-round inhabitants such as Black-capped and Boreal Chickadees, Brown Creeper and Golden-crowned Kinglet. Noteworthy summer residents include Ruby-crowned Kinglet; a variety of warblers: Orange-crowned, Townsend's, and Wilson's; White-crowned Sparrow; and Dark-eyed Junco. Dawn is usually the most rewarding time of day to bird here in the summer.

The lake and marsh can be scanned (take your scope) from several points along the boardwalk, at the end of which are fish and bird-viewing platforms. (At present, these platforms are not wheelchair accessible.) Three introduced tropical fish species can be observed but the Banff Long-nosed Dace, known only from this lake, may now be extinct. Garter snakes also occur hereabouts. Summer residents to watch for around the marsh and its environs include Belted Kingfisher; Olive-sided, Alder and Willow Flycatchers; American Redstart; Common Yellowthroat; Savannah and Song Sparrows; and Red-winged Blackbird. American Bittern also occurs but seeing one requires patience and luck. Watch for six swallow species hawking insects over the lake. Most waterfowl species common in the park, including all three teal, have been seen here. In fall, the lake is regularly frequented by Hooded Merganser; Rusty Blackbird can be found along the water's edge.

As a result of the hot springs' outflow, small portions of the lake (especially around the fish viewing platform) remain ice-free through the winter. It is an excellent spot to check for a variety of overwintering species such as Green-winged Teal, Mallard, American Wigeon, Killdeer, Common Snipe, American Dipper, Song Sparrow and Rusty Blackbird. Dress very warmly. Caution:

During winter, the boardwalk and steps to the platforms can be extremely slippery.

The River Swamp Trail, a 2 km loop around the Cave and Basin Marsh, begins about halfway along the parking lot. If you have the time, it is well worth walking part or all of this. It is much quieter than the boardwalk but watch out for horse traffic and muddy patches. The trail passes through good wetland habitat and allows views of the Bow River. Have your insect repellent handy.