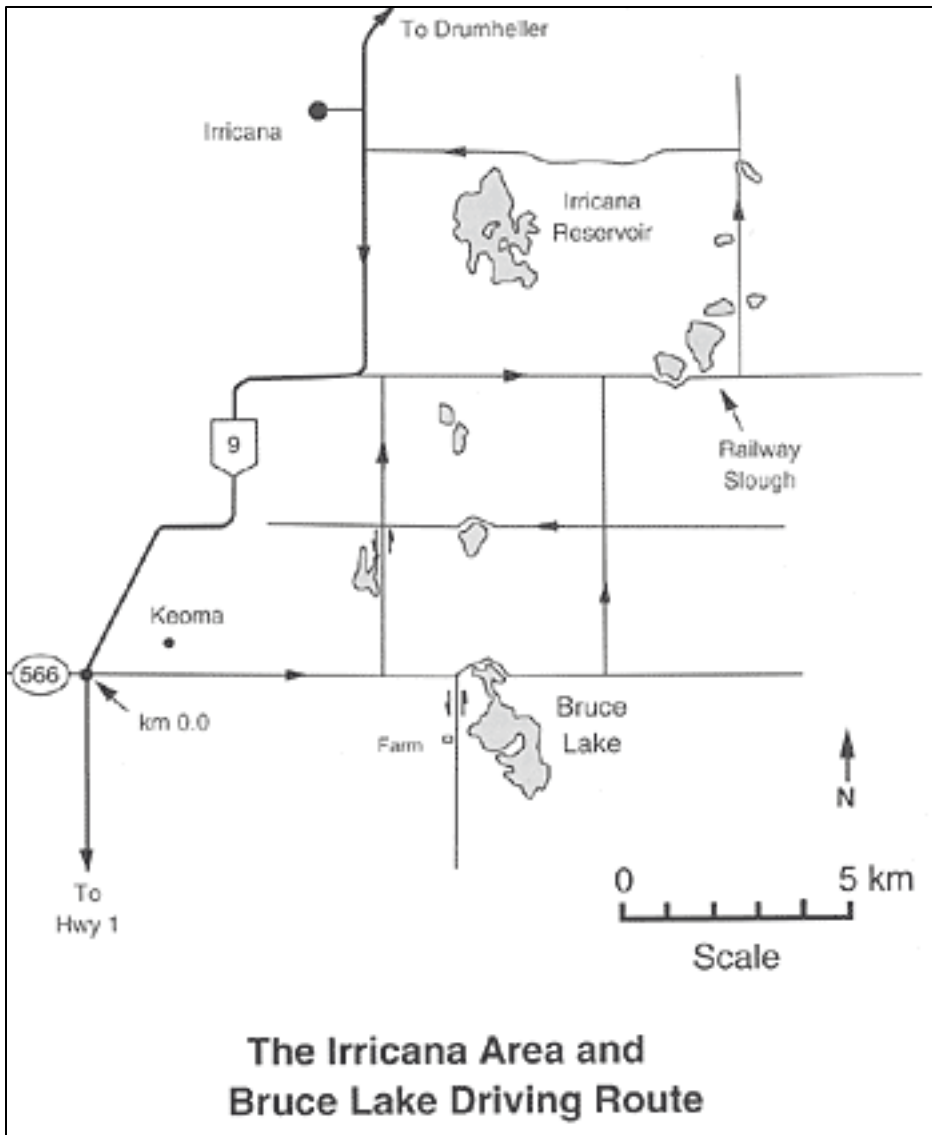


Irricana Area and Bruce Lake Driving Route by William J.F. Wilson – revised
Sep/2014 (Andrew Hart)

The "Irricana circuit" is a driving loop through good waterfowl and shorebird habitat on the prairies northeast of Calgary. It includes two large sloughs, numerous smaller ones and the northern end of Bruce Lake. The larger bodies of water are deep enough to be good for birds even in very dry years. The best time is from late April to the end of May but most species occur in good numbers throughout the summer, and interesting birds can usually be found anytime from spring thaw (early April) to freeze-up (end of October). The loop begins 40 km from Calgary at Keoma and is 70 km long, for a total distance of 150 km round trip from the city limits. 40 km are on good gravel roads

(dusty in dry weather); the other roads are hard-surfaced. Allow 4 to 5 hours for the loop, plus an hour round trip from Calgary, to give lots of time for stops.



There are many birds that can be seen on the Irricana circuit which are not specifically associated with water, and stopping to look and listen at regular intervals along the fields away from the sloughs can often turn up interesting species.

Directions to the start of the driving loop are given from the traffic light at 16 Ave. (Hwy 1) and 68 St NE in Calgary. From here, drive 20.2 km east on Hwy 1 to the junction with Hwy 9.

If you have time a stop at the Langdon Slough, located on the right (south) side of Highway 1 by the intersection with Hwy 9 can be

worthwhile. It is accessed from a slip road off Hwy 9 just south of the intersection with Hwy 1. It is easily viewed from the car and usually has numerous ducks. It can also be very good for migrating shorebirds if the water level is right. In very dry years, however, it can almost disappear.

The junction is marked by signs for Drumheller and the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology. Turn left onto Hwy 9 and go north to the intersection at the first bend, 19.5 km from Hwy 1 Township Road 262). Turn right, towards Keoma (this point will be called "the Keoma turnoff" for the rest of this description). There is a directional sign on Hwy 9 for Keoma. The driving loop begins at the Keoma turnoff, so take an odometer reading or reset your tripmeter here.

Starting from the Keoma turnoff at Hwy 9 (km 0.0), drive east towards Bruce Lake. Keoma Slough is 2.4 km from the Keoma turnoff, but it is difficult to stop safely. All species there are likely to be seen again later in the loop.

When Bruce Lake can be seen ahead on the right (8.1 km from the Keoma turnoff), turn right on the small gravel road and drive south for 1 km. Stop, listen and watch for sparrows in this area. Check the lake on the left side. Turn at the first farmhouse, return to the road junction (now 11 km from the Keoma turnoff), and turn right. Bruce Lake comes close to the road in two bays, which are separated from each other along the road by a short bit of land.

Follow the road along the north shore of Bruce Lake to the point where the road leaves the lake (12 km from the Keoma turnoff). The route from this point is on good gravel roads. Stay on this road a further 2.4 km straight east, then turn left (north – RR261) and drive 3.2 km to a stop sign.

Turn left at the crossroads (Township Road 264) and drive west for 2.8 km to a large pond on the left side of the road. This is good for grebes and ducks. On the right side is a cattail marsh, which is alive with blackbirds. This is one of the few places in the region where the Common Grackle is frequently seen. Beyond the pond and marsh is a wooded area, which is on private land, but birding from the road may turn up migrating warblers and other woodland species.

5 km from the last junction (22.6 km), turn left (RR 264) and drive south for about 1 km to a large slough on the west side of the road. At the north end of this slough there is a foot access point marked by a small sign.

Turn around and drive 1.9 km north, cross the east-west road (TR 264) you were on previously and continue 2.3 km further north. Stop here and listen for Sprague's Pipit and Baird's Sparrow. 0.9 km further north (3.2 km from the last crossroads and 29.6 km from the Keoma turnoff) you come to a T-junction, where you should turn right (TR 270 and Hwy 9 is to the left - West). Continue east for 4 km.

5.2 km from the last turn is the first of several sloughs. It is close to the road and easily viewed from the car. Also check the small sloughs on the south side of the road along this stretch. As the road rounds the edge of this slough, watch for a small shallow slough on the right (south side), close to the road. This can be good for migrating shorebirds.

Another large slough (often called Railway Slough before RR 254) comes into view suddenly, on the left as you top the crest of a small rise (36.7 km). This is the old railway right-of-way, but the tracks are long since gone. Probably the best view is obtained from here, but be careful to park safely to avoid danger from cars coming up the rise from either side. The main part of Railway Slough is not so easily viewed as the

previous slough, but can still be scoped. A shallow extension does come close to the road however; this can be good for wading birds.

From the crest of the rise at Railway Slough, continue 1 km east to a road junction (RR 254). At the time of writing there is a sign nailed to a fencepost on the far left corner of the junction saying "Bull Test Station". Turn left (north) here. There are two or three small sloughs on the left shortly after the junction (before the farmhouse), and the larger of these may add birds missed on the previous sloughs. 4.1 km north of the "Bull Test" junction, the road passes an alkaline slough. This is good for ducks and shorebirds.

Continue north to a red natural gas pipeline valve on your right (42.6 km TR 273). Turn left (west) and drive about 6.3 km back to Hwy 9. Here there is a large slough (the last on the route) which straddles the road. There are small turn-offs at either end of the slough. Drive the remaining km to Highway 9. Turn left (south); 16 km takes you back to the Keoma junction, and a further 19.5 km back to Hwy 1. Just before the intersection with Hwy 1 there is a northern extension of Langdon Slough accessed by a slip road on your right. This can be good for shorebirds, but traffic on the highway can be bothersome.

Alternatively, you may prefer to turn right from Hwy 9 onto Inverlake Road 16.4 km south of the Keoma turnoff (see the McElroy Slough Driving Route).

Gas, food and washrooms are available in the town of Irricana. Hunters could be out any day of the week, including Sunday, during hunting season.