

Sibbald Creek Trail *by Ross Dickson(1993)*

This 37 kilometre route within the foothills ecological region offers year-round birding, highlighted by the opportunity to hear (and occasionally see) five species of locally uncommon owls on late winter evenings. During spring and summer, about fifty species of birds may be found by stopping at marshes and hiking near picnic areas.



This route is frequently exposed to strong winds - 60 to 100 km/h gusts are common during Chinooks - so it is essential to know the weather forecast for the foothills before setting out, as birds here are usually silent and invisible during windy weather. Sibbald Creek Trail is mostly gravel-surfaced, and can be rough in places. In winter, the parking lots are usually closed to vehicles by barricades or deep snow. Please note:

neither gasoline nor food are available along Sibbald Creek Trail.

Heading west on the Trans-Canada Highway, 35 km from Canada Olympic Park, watch for the Sibbald Creek Trail exit (Hwy 68) marked by a large green-and-white sign. Decelerate fairly rapidly as there is a stop sign and Texas gate at the end of the ramp. Turn right and park close to the fencewire gate overlooking the small pond (Trans-Canada/Sibbald Creek Trail pond) fringed with cattails and poplars. You may also wish to check the small slough 0.7 km to the east along the gravel road.

Distances are given from the Trans-Canada Highway to access points and do not include side trips. From the overpass (km 0.0) head south on Sibbald Creek Trail past the entrance to a natural gas processing plant. In this area, there are post-mounted signs warning of potential Hydrogen Sulphide (H₂S) emissions from nearby wells and pumping stations. Although the hazard is small, do not enter private roadways off Sibbald Creek Trail without permission.

After 3.5 km mixed woods cover a diagonal series of small ridges which have in past years been home to owls. For traffic safety reasons, stop to listen for bird calls only in clearly visible areas, such as near the T-intersection (4.1

km). You may hear only the chatter of Red Squirrels, but other mammals such as Mule Deer, Moose, Coyote, Black Bear and Cougar also wander throughout these ridges and the small marshes between them.

Another Texas gate (12 km) marks the eastern boundary of Kananaskis Country. Conifers dominate from the Ranger Station (12.5 km) westward to the mountains.

At the Pine Grove Group Camp (15.7 km) small meadows, willows and aspens attract flycatchers, migrant warblers and sparrows.

The first 2 km south on Homestead Road (16.5 km; also marked by a sign for the provincial Rifle Association firing range) have been considered fairly reliable for the locally uncommon Boreal Owl and Red Crossbill, although logging activity further south in this mature coniferous forest may change this status. Continue on Sibbald Creek Trail to the Powderface Trail. The Sibbald Viewpoint (20.8 km) offers a spectacular view of the foothills.

Powderface Trail (23.2 km), a logging road which runs for 34 km in a southerly direction between Sibbald Creek Trail and Elbow Falls Trail, first crosses a large marshy meadow area known as Sibbald Flats. 3 km south of the Sibbald/Powderface intersection on Powderface Trail is the Dawson Equestrian Campground.

The Dawson Hiking Trail has deciduous trees on south-facing slopes and conifers on the northern sides and ridgetops. Note: Powderface Trail is closed beyond this point from December 1st to May 15th each year.

Continuing along Sibbald Creek Trail the valley now narrows so that the road closely parallels Sibbald Creek, impeded at this point by a series of beaver dams. In summer, the Sibbald Meadows Pond (29.7 km) is extremely popular with picnickers and fishermen, but has few birds.

The first view of a mountain also marks the beginning of the Kananaskis River watershed (32.1 km). The route now descends gradually to Hwy 40 (37.3 km). Along the way are Stony Creek and Lusk Creek parking areas and hiking trails. The thick tree cover here is almost completely coniferous. At the intersection with Hwy 40, a left turn will take you into the [Kananaskis Valley](#), while a right turn (north) will take you to the Trans-Canada Highway in about 7 km.

The Barrier Lake Information Centre, 1 km north of the intersection, is open from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. year-round except on Mondays and Tuesdays

during winter. Maps and information on Kananaskis Country are available here, as well as heated washrooms and a pay telephone.

Owling success on this route is entirely weather-dependent during the peak season from mid-March to late April. It is essential to pick a clear, near-calm night since cloud cover inhibits the owls' inclination to call, and wind affects both human and owl ability to hear. It may not be essential to have a full moon to encourage the owls to call, but it certainly helps human visual orientation. The moonlit landscape takes on an eerie beauty, while the Milky Way and orbiting satellites can be seen clearly. Dress warmly since it is amazing how cold you can become after getting out of your vehicle a few times.

The area between the Ranger Station and Sibbald Meadows Pond typically produces the largest number of calling owls. If the owls do not call spontaneously within a few minutes of stopping your vehicle and getting out, go on to the next stop. Cassette recordings seldom seem to stimulate owl vocalizations in our area. In the Calgary Region, Northern Pygmy-Owls give single toots and do not respond to the double toots featured on most commercial tapes. The vocal range of the small owls on calm nights appears to be less than 1 km. By mid-April, snow cover is melting rapidly and Common Snipe arrive at the small roadside sloughs. Their late-night courtship flights produce a sound, "winnowing", which can be vaguely similar to the rapid hoots of the Boreal Owl - inexperienced birders can be fooled by this.

On the return trip (eastbound) along the Trans-Canada Highway, 3 km east of the Sibbald Creek Trail intersection, watch for a small rocky ridge topped by a few short conifers on the left (north) side of the highway. On the south side of the highway a long, narrow pond parallels the road. This is the first prairie-type slough east of the foothills along the Trans-Canada and features most of the common prairie ducks throughout the summer. Pull well off the highway beyond the guardrails to scope the slough.