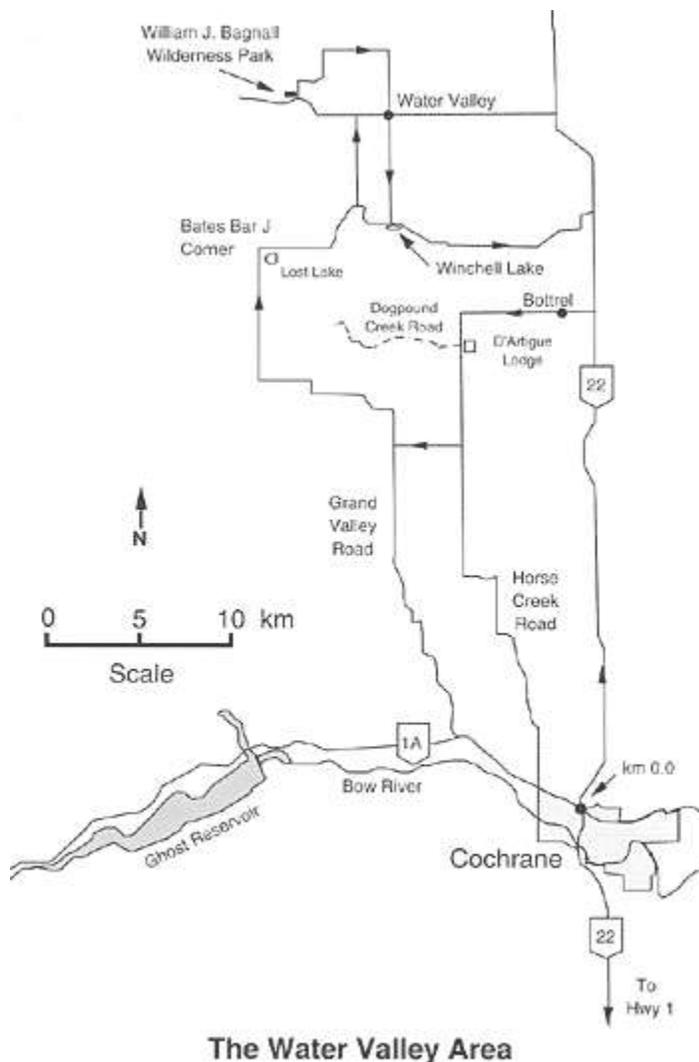


## Water Valley Area by Ross Dickson(1993), revised 2012

UPDATE: There is a new entrance to William Bagnall Wilderness Area.

This area, which is undergoing rapid development, is located about 45 minutes driving time northwest of Calgary. From the east, aspen-covered rolling hills near Hwy 22 give way to the conifers and muskeg of the boreal foothills. In recent years seismic trails and logging roads have criss-crossed the entire area. Cheap grazing leases have lured farmers to exploit and expand the clearings, and many Calgarians have bought acreages to develop as weekend residences. This human influx has had a mixed effect on the local wildlife.



During summer this area hosts a variety of mountain and parkland species. What makes this area of particular interest to local birders however, are the owls in winter. The annual Christmas Bird Count centred on the Cochrane Ecological Institute listed a total of nine species of owl since 1974.

Before heading into the foothills, birders unfamiliar with the area should take certain precautions. Elevations near Water Valley are higher than in Calgary, which means that it is colder and wetter. Many of the roads on this suggested route are gravel-surfaced and can become very slippery or muddy from the frequent snow or rain showers, or rutted from truck traffic. Spring breakup, which can occur anytime from late March to mid-May, may make certain sections impassable for passenger cars, although pickup trucks seldom have a problem with clearance.

Some portions of the area are sparsely populated, but if you have obvious vehicle problems nearly all passersby will offer assistance. Roads are often

narrow with limited visibility, so it is essential to pull well over to the right when making stops for birding. The area has an abundance of "No Trespassing" signs meant to discourage hunters. Birders are seldom refused walking access if permission is requested from landholders, but there are some exceptions - so ASK FIRST.

Essential requirements for successful owling:

- A reliable vehicle with good tire tread.
- A favourable weather forecast (wind, cloudy nights or precipitation are generally poor conditions for owling).
- Topographic map 82/O with a scale of 1:250,000 from Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife (easier to read and more recently updated than federal maps).
- Ability to toot like a local Northern Pygmy-Owl. Unlike most available recordings these local birds utter a single, not a double, note. Tapes are generally ineffective in this area-it is preferable to listen for spontaneous calls.
- Ability to be at the route before sunrise or in late afternoon for peak owl activity.
- Patience and a sense of humour. At best, for example, one trip in five in the likeliest habitat and at the most favourable time of day actually produces Great Gray Owl.

The following suggested main route covers a wide variety of habitats. It is designed to make use of the best maintained roads in the Water Valley area and to minimize travel on roads with only one exit. Any public road may lead to good owl habitat, but for safety reasons consult your map frequently when venturing off main routes. Logging or well access roads should not be considered public roads if they are posted with company signs. The map incorporates optional sections and short cuts for greater flexibility. For best results do not try the whole route at once. Owls tend to remain in the same general area, so check [Albertabird](#) or phone the RBA hotline 403-221-4519 for up-to-date information on sightings.

Head north on Hwy 22 from the 4-way intersection with Hwy 1A at Cochrane (km 0.0). In winter, watch fenceposts and power lines in this agricultural area for raptors. Turn left (west) at the well-marked intersection for Bottrel (24.8 km) and drive 6.5 km to the stop sign at Horse Creek Road. Turn left again and head south 1.7 km to an intersection, marked on the east side of the road by the D'Artigue Community Hall (33 km in total).

**OPTIONAL SECTION:** It can be worthwhile turning west here onto the winding road along **Dogpound Creek**, taking the left fork after about 3 km

and continuing for another 2 km. This is a very narrow gravel road with many small hills and it will be necessary to retrace your steps to D'Artigue. Any type of forest owl is possible in the Dogpound Creek watershed, and they are just as likely to be perched on fenceposts as on trees. In summer the brushy area along the creek is good habitat for warblers.

From D'Artigue continue south for 4.8 km to a paved intersection, then turn right (west) past the fenced Cochrane Ecological Institute. This is a non-profit organization which raises Swift Foxes for release into the wild - it is not open to the public. Accipiters may occasionally be seen along this section. At the next stop sign (41.1 km), turn right (north) onto a paved road. This is the northern extension of Grand Valley Road. (By using this approach to the area, the afternoon could be spent watching for diurnal raptors and the evening looking for owls). A series of west and north turns through thick coniferous forest results in a northwesterly direction over a distance of 9.5 km. Eventually you will emerge briefly from the trees into a large pastured area. Back into the trees, the road continues north. The edges of large clearcut openings in the forest here, together with the scattered poplar trees within them, are good places to look for owls at dawn and dusk. Crossbills may also be present if there is an abundant cone crop.

At the corner marked by signs for the Bates Bar J Ranch, turn right (east), through a Texas gate (60 km). The road now trends in a northeasterly direction. Both large and small owls have been recorded in this section, so many stops are advisable. At the intersection with Winchell Lake Road (63.2 km) turn left and head north for 4.3 km to a paved road (S.R. 579). Turn left (west) for 3.2 km, then turn right (north), immediately after crossing the Little Red Deer River (70.9 km).

**OPTIONAL SECTION: William J. Bagnall Wilderness Park** (Formerly Silver Creek Park) This municipal campground (fee charged in summer for day-use) is located 1.5 km to the west of the main route. It can be good for warblers in late May and June. In winter, if the access road has been snowplowed, it may be worth a brief visit.

Continuing on the main route the road follows the Little Red Deer River northeast, then along a straight north portion through some more good owl habitat to a stop sign at a paved road, known locally as Big Prairie Road (77.2 km). Turn right and continue for 1.3 km to a large marshy area. This type of habitat can be found between many of the treed ridges throughout the area. About 2 km beyond the marsh turn right (south); the hamlet of Water Valley will be reached after about 3 km (87 km).

From Water Valley continue south for a further 5.2 km to a T-intersection. Turn left (east) for the return to Hwy 22. In this section Northern Pygmy-Owl has been reported from the Winchell Lake area. In winter, watch for both Barred and Great Gray Owls near the intersection with Horse Creek Road, 2.6 km from the Winchell Lake corner.

Gas and meals can be obtained in Water Valley.