

Eastern Parks

Whiteshell Provincial Park

Alf Hole Goose Sanctuary



Alf and Four Goslings

This sanctuary began with four Canada goose goslings—found near Rennie, in the spring of 1939.

The foundlings were taken to Alfred Hole, an independent mink rancher and outdoorsman, who lived nearby.

Alf Hole was not a man to be fazed by the prospects of hand-raising Canada geese. A wire pen was made for the goslings and they were fed handpicked dandelions for most of the summer. Later on they were turned loose with the chickens and lived out the summer in barnyard bliss. Alf Hole meanwhile had obtained a permit from the Canadian Wildlife Service to keep migratory waterfowl in captivity. To restrain the geese from flight they were pinioned that winter and kept indoors with the chickens.

The following year, the four geese were pretty much on their own in the chicken yard. The nearby Rennie River had by then been dammed to form a goose pond. Alf Hole was interested in raising muskrats, but the dam was probably built especially for his new-found geese.



Alf feeding geese

During their third summer Alf Hole obtained an old gander and was successful in getting it to mate with the lone female from the brood. She laid four eggs which eventually hatched. From that time on, the goose sanctuary was a success.

The four goslings were banded and released on the pond. By late summer they were full-grown and when northern-bred geese flew overhead going south, the Alf Hole geese joined the migration leaving their parents behind.

Despite the threat from natural predators, accidents and hunters, all four of the geese returned the next spring and from then on returned to Alf Hole's pond annually.

Hundreds of geese stop at the sanctuary during their spring and fall migrations. Those passing through in spring find nesting sites in boreal forest wetlands east of Lake Winnipeg. The winter destination for some Alf Hole geese is the Rock Prairie refuge in southeast Wisconsin.

Alf Hole died December 23, 1959—twenty years and a few months after he received the four goslings. In 20 years he established—with the help of several private companies and individuals, and Manitoba Natural Resources—a goose sanctuary that has been a popular and successful Whiteshell attraction for half a century.

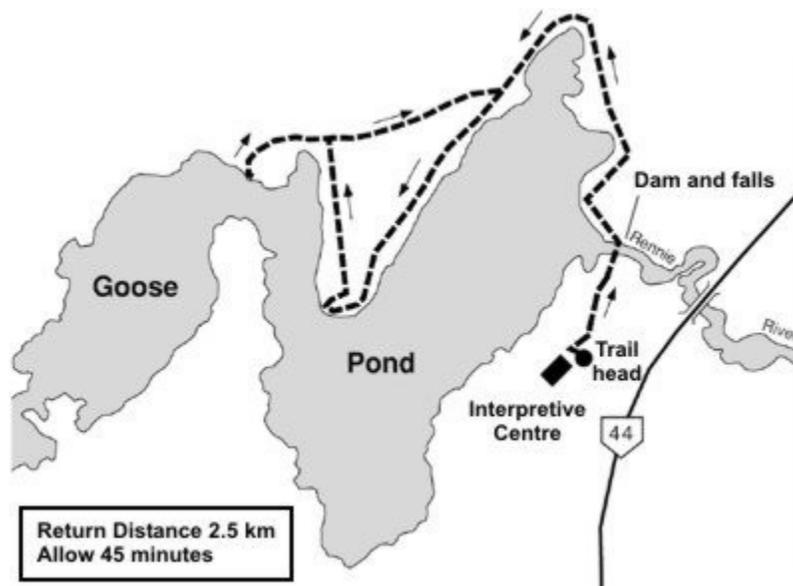


Alfred Hole

The interpretive centre presents attractive displays that tell the story of Alf's accomplishment; relates the natural history of Canada geese; and provides up-close observation opportunities. Interpreters offer scheduled programs, activities and park information, spring to fall.

Trail Information

- Trail between here and the far side of the dam is easy to walk on.
- Beyond the dam, trail surface varies from level to rugged. Some stairs and boardwalk are provided.
- Rock surfaces are slippery when wet; proper footwear is recommended.
- Dogs are not permitted on the sanctuary grounds.
- Camping and open fires are not permitted.
- Please do your share to protect our park resources. Take only pictures, leave only footprints.



1. Alf's Pond

In human terms, creating Alf's pond was akin to building a new "city" and laying out welcome mats for new residents. The pond has become a key wetland for resident and migrating geese but also for a diverse group of plant and animal residents that live here during all or part of the year. With time, this has become a dynamic, thriving "metropolis" of interconnected individuals and communities.

Along the self-guiding trail, visitors can explore Alf's pond and its shoreline, outcrops of cambrian rock and its boreal forest covering. Bring binoculars; they'll help you look closely at wildlife residents, permanent and seasonal, without being too close to disturb them.



Waterwheel

2. Prairie to Forest

The Whiteshell was covered by prairie vegetation before its present boreal forest became established. Remnant prairie plants grow in a clearing nearby where a thin layer of soil was left on the rock at the end of the Ice Age. Look for prairie crocus in spring and big bluestem grass at the end of July.

The irregular border between the vast boreal forest and the aspen parkland lies just west of here, between Rennie and Whitemouth.

Whiteshell Choruses

Whiteshell's amphibian choruses, in some years, announce spring's arrival before or at the same time as when the birds return.... Frogs are creatures of two worlds. The egg and tadpole (larval) stages of their development are spent in water, but the adult lives of some are spent on land.

Three of Manitoba's amphibian species can only be heard in this corner of the province. In spring, listen for the northern spring peeper with its bird-like "peep," the green frog, with its banjo-like "clung," and the mink frog with its call of "chuck-chuck."

Other, more widely distributed frogs that you may hear at or near the pond include wood frogs, boreal chorus frogs, gray tree frogs and northern leopard frogs. You can find out more about them by asking an interpreter or by checking the centre's reference library.

Wild Voices

Two waterfowl that you've likely heard but may not have seen are the common loon and the red-necked grebe, familiar voices of Whiteshell nights. Both have voices that are most prominent from their spring return to the end of their courtship period. They are also heard during the summer though less frequently.

The haunting call of the loon is inspiring, but it is the laughing call that gave rise to the expression "crazy as a loon." The loon usually builds its nest in a secluded, shoreline place from where it can slip silently into the water. The male shares equal responsibility in raising the young.

Loons are divers that feed exclusively on fish; they have large webbed feet to help them dive and swim under water.

Red-necked grebes are also divers which feed on fish, aquatic insects and crustaceans. They have lobed toes rather than webbed feet to help them swim and catch dinner. Their call during the breeding period is as loud as the loon's but definitely different. The sound of several calling at once has been described as a "cacophony of wails, brays and cackles."



Red-necked Grebe

Dive, Dabble, Perch

Ducks are the second most noticeable birds at the sanctuary; some are frequent visitors at the feeding area. If the task of learning your ducks seems too daunting, begin by learning to recognize the three groups that ducks have been divided into.

Diving ducks feed on aquatic plants and animals by diving in deep water. Several from this group are the ring-necked duck, lesser scaup, common goldeneye, bufflehead, hooded merganser, and the common merganser.

Dabbling ducks are easy to spot on the water; as they feed, their tails remain above the surface. They "tip up" to reach aquatic plants and invertebrates in shallow water. "Tip-up" ducks at the sanctuary include mallard, green-winged teal, American widgeon, blue-winged teal and rarely, the American black duck.

Perching ducks are the group that most novices master first, as the wood duck is the only one of this group found in Manitoba. They're also regulars at the goose feeding area. On the water they are dabblers but they're able to perch in trees with the aid of sharp claws.



Common merganser

These colourful birds have been described as North America's most beautiful duck and were adopted as the mascot for Manitoba's 1999 Pan American Games.

Wood ducks usually nest near water in cavities hollowed out by large woodpeckers in decaying, but standing trees. Where there aren't many such trees, nesting boxes are useful in encouraging wood ducks to take up residence. Sometimes however, other ducks like bufflehead, merganser and common goldeneye become nest box tenants.

6. Dragonfly Point

Dragonfly eggs are laid below the water's surface on the stem of an emergent plant such as sedge. Within a month a robust, aquatic nymph emerges and starts to feed (on small crustaceans, mollusks, worms, insects and their larvae). The nymphs reach up to 45 mm in length. Four years may pass before the nymph climbs out of the water and emerges into an adult. Within an hour the adult can fly.

If you're hiking the trail at the right time, late May to early June, you may observe the nymphs coming ashore and undergoing this transformation.

In the time it takes to eat and enjoy a lunch, you'll see a fearsome underwater predator emerge from its armour (shell), becoming an elegant insect with graceful wings. They do not shed their fierceness as they devour their favoured food, mosquitoes. It's been estimated that adults of some dragonfly species can eat up to 300 per day.

Beaver Activity

There are several beaver homes or lodges on the pond, on the open water and up against the shoreline. Lodges are constructed of mud and sticks where water is deep enough or where they have excavated underwater channels for entry and exit.

In evening or early morning, beaver can be seen swimming on the surface. When they're surprised or sense danger, they slap the water with their tail and dive. In late fall look for feed piles of green tree branches and shrubs—often with leaves on them—near active lodges.

On shore, used beaver trails or runs may be noticeable, crossing the hiking trail. Beaver must come ashore to cut shrubs and mature trees. They prefer young, juicy shrubs and saplings, and eat only the inner bark of trees. Trembling aspens are a favourite.



Beaver

Wetland Plants

Moose used to visit the sanctuary, attracted by shelter in winter and lush vegetation in summer. They needed shelter from cold winds to conserve energy and found it in thick stands of shrubs or trees, including black spruce bogs.

Aquatic plants (underwater, floating and emergent) such as pondweeds and young waterlilies are only available for a few short months and were vital to moose because of their mineral content. These minerals (sodium, iron, potassium, calcium, magnesium and manganese) helped cows to produce milk and enabled bulls to grow their antlers.

Not Just Friends

Some of the animals attracted to the pond include geese on their menus. Northern pike and snapping turtles that lurk in the water enjoy goslings.

If you come across turtles on shore or land around the end of May, they are likely females seeking suitable nesting sites and should not be disturbed. Common snapping turtles on land can be dangerous to those who approach too closely. Because they cannot hide in their shell like their smaller relatives (painted turtles), snapping is their defence when they leave the safety of water. A lightning-quick snap or bite may seriously injure a person's finger or hand.

Western painted turtles are often seen as they bask in the sun on floating logs or rocks that poke up, above the water, from spring to fall.

For most of the year, fox and coyotes feed on mice and voles which are at home in tall grasses. Geese become somewhat vulnerable to these species when a nest is too close to land and later in summer during the moulting period when the birds are flightless. Most adult birds are capable of defending themselves and their nest. Alert parents are constantly on guard for danger.

Predators are nature's regulators and are integral parts of nature's web of life. They ensure that only the strong and alert survive.

Conclusion

Mr. Hole never had visions of grandeur about his project. It started as a hobby with him although it demanded and received an increasing amount of his time and money in later years.

He was an avid hunter and outdoorsman who knew the nearby woods and streams. Alf Hole also understood the story of conservation and from this understanding came a worthwhile wildlife monument in eastern Manitoba.

Today, people can follow Alf's example and it's not necessary to find four goslings to raise. By walking this trail and becoming familiar with some of the Whiteshell's wildlife species you've taken a big step. Once you know who they are, it's easier to appreciate and to be concerned about wildlife and their homes. Knowledge, appreciation and concern are what Alf Hole had when he began to care for four goslings.

For more information about the Alfred Hole Goose Sanctuary, or interpretive events contact: Whiteshell Park Interpreters, phone: 204-369-3157.