



CONSERVATION PARK REFUGE FOR CITY DWELLERS AND WILDLIFE

by Anne Georg

The trails at the park lead visitors through untouched prairie grasslands and along Wascana Creek.

Preserving the family land for future generations

In 1890 Doug McKell's great grandfather homesteaded land in southern Saskatchewan, not far from Regina. It had plenty of room for crops, horses, cattle and pastures with which the family could survive and thrive. Three generations later, the McKell family still farms that land. But the landscape has changed. Over the years, the family has watched as Regina continues its creep closer and closer to the family's land.

"Back when my great grandfather was homesteading, horses were the main source of power, so he had a big grassland area reserved for pasture for the horses and cattle," Doug says. "The Wascana Creek flows through there; it flooded every year, so it wasn't suited for cropland." That area — about 94 acres — is now part of the McKell Wascana Conservation Park.

"We all grew up here — my grandfather, my father, my sisters and I and my two kids," Doug McKell

reminisces. "We all played down there, caught our first fish there. It has a special place in our hearts." As he watched the city limits encroach on the family land, Doug could see the writing on the wall. He knew that eventually the city would swallow up the land to convert it into housing.

To preserve the land, the McKells signed a conservation easement (CE) with Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC). A CE is a written agreement between a private landowner and a conservation organization to conserve, protect, restore or enhance natural lands. By signing this agreement, the McKells retained ownership of their land, while ensuring that a valuable part of their history is kept intact and can provide habitat for several prairie wildlife species.

"I thought our land could create a nice extension of Wascana Park," Doug explains. "It has never been touched by a plough, so it's unique. People can walk around and see what the land has looked

like for millennia." He adds, "We did it for selfish reasons, too, because our family also gets to go there; and we will always be able to remember it as it has always been."

Cooperation key to McKell Wascana Conservation Park

The McKell Wascana Conservation Park is Regina's first park dedicated to conserving and restoring native prairie and wetlands. The park preserves 100 acres of native prairie grassland that has never been broken and 55 acres of restored prairie along Wascana Creek.

Officially dedicated on May 20, 2005, by His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh, the McKell Wascana Conservation Park features four kilometres of walking trails and interpretive stations, a floating dock and an education amphitheatre; and it provides a unique outdoor classroom where people may learn about the diverse natural prairie and wetlands. It was officially opened in 2009.



The park preserves 100 acres of native, unbroken prairie grassland, and 55 acres of restored prairie.

The park was created through the cooperation of the City of Regina, Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) and the McKell family. Since then, several businesses — like Enbridge — and individuals have added their generous support to this important project.

Enbridge contributed \$60,000 to the McKell Wascana Conservation Park, part of its \$215,000 commitment to wetlands conservation in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario. The funds, which are part of Enbridge's Natural Legacy program, have been allotted to habitat conservation programs in Saskatchewan. One of the trails will be called the Enbridge Trail, in recognition of the corporate sponsorship.

"As a company, we cross many properties and operate near many communities," explains Lorna St. Thomas, Enbridge's Senior Community Partnerships and Investment Advisor overseeing the program. "The Natural Legacy program is an opportunity for Enbridge to partner with these communities, showing our commitment to environmental stewardship, habitat remediation and protection."

Through Natural Legacy, Enbridge committed more than \$550,000 in 2009 to support several environmental initiatives in Canada and the U.S. The program operates with the help of environmental

and conservation partners.

"Because it is so close to the city and the public has easy access, the park offers a great way to recognize our partners that allow DUC to protect the environment," says Jason Neufeld, Conservation Program Specialist with DUC. "It's literally right out the back door for some people."

In addition, because of its proximity to the city, McKell Wascana gives DUC opportunities to showcase its work. It is a natural interpretive site for public and school groups, which makes it ideal for education about conservation, habitat restoration and wetlands in general. Schools and community organizations actively participate in DUC's Project Webfoot, an educational program that gives children a hands-on experience in the wetlands through various experiments and other activities.

A dynamic and diverse conservation area

The park is part of a flood plain that continually changes depending on the amount of water flowing in Wascana Creek. Jason explains that in 2011 the creek experienced extreme flooding. It is not uncommon for Wascana Creek to flood beyond its bank during peak runoff in the spring. What made 2011 unusual was the duration of the flood; the banks were still flooded well into July. According to Doug, the last time Wascana Creek flooded to the similar extent was in 1974.

"From a vegetation standpoint, McKell Wascana Conservation Park has a dynamic ecosystem," Jason explains. "Based on the flood activity, the plant community is evolving. Last year the plants were drowned out and when the water receded a new community of plants grew. I suspect it will eventually revert back to what was there before the flood."

Jason admits to being "a bird guy." He points out that portions of all four of North America's four major migratory bird flyways — the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central and Pacific — pass through Saskatchewan.

"I like the wetland birds; and with the boardwalk in the park, there are fantastic bird watching opportunities." Jason says abundant waterfowl, including mallards, northern pintails, American widgeons and canvasbacks, like shallow wetlands like those in McKell Wascana Conservation Park.

WETLANDS EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN

→ Educating youth about wetlands and waterfowl are key parts of Ducks Unlimited Canada's (DUC) conservation mission. Project Webfoot is an award-winning program that provides children with an in-class wetland resources kit and a field trip to a wetland in their local community.

Project Webfoot helps student understand and play an important role in taking action to protect the environment now and in the future. During special events, interpreters from DUC and their conservation partners explore the park with children engaging them in activities like critter dipping, using dip nets and magnifying glasses to learn about the aquatic insects that live in Wascana Creek and other DUC wetlands projects. Park naturalists also teach kids about bird migration and help them identify birdcalls; and about the natural history of Wascana Creek, its floodplain and grasslands.

"McKell Wascana is an outdoor lab," says Jason Neufeld, conservation program specialist with DUC. "Kids can go on a nature walk and do some critter dipping, look at the plants and creatures in water and read the interpretive signs to find out about the waterfowl, their migratory paths and the North American flyways."

Teachers can download a number of activities from the DUC website to use as classroom resources when they visit the park. (www.ducks.ca) Enbridge's major sponsorship of DUC's Project Webfoot has resulted in the delivery of this program to more than 50 elementary schools throughout Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba since 2009.

"This project gets kids into the wetlands so they can get their hands dirty while learning how important wetlands are to the quality of our environment," says Lorna St. Thomas Enbridge's Senior Community Partnerships and Investment Advisor.



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PARTNERSHIPS FOR CONSERVATION

→ Landowners play an important role in environmental conservation when they partner with DUC. They help preserve Canada's natural heritage by placing a conservation easement on their land.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between a landowner and a government or qualified conservation organization, such as DUC. These agreements are tailored to each individual landowner and conserve the property's natural values and features. This is done by restricting the amount and type of development that can take place on the land.

Conservation easements are purchased by the government or a conservation organization and benefit both landowners and the landscape. Individuals can donate a conservation easement to the qualified organization of their choice. Under these agreements:

- Landowners retain ownership and use of the land for activities like haying and grazing (and its earning capacity).
- Landowners can receive tax benefits if the conservation easement is donated.
- Landowners succeed in conserving their property's valuable natural resources and ensure that these natural features are enjoyed by future generations.

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McKell Wascana is in what is known as the Prairie Pothole region, which describes the numerous small shallow wetlands that freckle the prairie landscape. Jason explains that these are critical habitat for waterfowl because they provide opportunities for nesting, pairing and breeding; and because they are so shallow, they warm up quickly in the spring and provide a necessary food source for wildlife.

"From a DUC perspective the most important thing is early breeding habitat and that's why we focus on small, shallow wetlands," Jason explains. He adds that other bird species found in the park include Hungarian partridges and other upland birds.

area include mink, weasels, muskrats and foxes, among others.

For humans, McKell Wascana offers an alternative to the manicured lawns of city parks. People can enjoy similar recreational opportunities, like biking, running or walking their dogs. What makes this park so unique is that the trails they use lead through untouched prairie grasslands and along Wascana Creek. And there's the thrill of the added bonus —being among the diverse wildlife that calls the McKell Wascana Conservation Park home. ■



Humans interact with nature

"Sometimes I take a walk in there with binoculars for leisure or when I'm doing work at the park," Jason says. "It's so relaxing. I love seeing the wildlife there. Besides the birds and the flora it's full of jackrabbits and coyotes hunting for mice." Other mammals that inhabit the

**For more information
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