

CHAPLIN, SASK. | BIRDS

Everything's coming up birds on Chaplin Lake shores

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Amesmerizing blur of wings descends on brilliant white banks as visitors from as far away as South America drop in for a bite to eat. The tasty buffet served up on the shores of Chaplin Lake makes this the ideal stopover for hundreds of thousands of shorebirds making epic journeys from southern wintering grounds to as far as the high Arctic where many nest.

Enterprising folks in the adjoining town of Chaplin, Sask., have successfully capitalized on this phenomenon, turning it into a must stop for human travellers as well.

Chaplin Lake sprawls along the Trans-Canada Highway, roughly halfway between Moose Jaw and Swift Current, Sask.

The second largest saline lake in Canada, its shallow water and mudflats hold the ideal smorgasbord of aquatic insects and crustaceans that shorebirds need to fuel up for their long travels.

The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, which recognizes important wetlands throughout the Americas, named Chaplin Lake of hemispheric significance.

This is one of only three places in Canada with that high a designation, the other two being the Bay of Fundy and the Fraser River Estuary.

International recognition of not only Chaplin Lake but also of the larger wetland complex, including nearby Reed Lake and Old Wives Lake, provided the impetus for tourism development.

The town built the Chaplin Nature Centre beside the highway. And to



An American avocet and piping plover welcome visitors to the Chaplin Nature Centre, where tourists learn about the area wildlife. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

make sure that no one misses it, they installed huge larger-than-life sculptures of two resident shorebirds, the American avocet and piping plover.

The centre tells the story of these wildlife-rich wetlands, along with

other uses of the lake such as the brine shrimp industry and mining for sodium sulfate. Staff can tell you what bird species are around and where you might find them.

Potential hot spots include south of town where Highway 58 cuts through wetlands or the viewing tower overlooking Reed Lake, a short drive west along the Trans-Canada Highway.

The best option is to take the guided tour run by the nature centre. You travel along dikes crossing Chaplin Lake that are not open to the general public, getting close to wildlife.

Bird numbers can be astounding, with as many as 73,000 counted in one day. More than 30 migrating shorebird species include dowitchers, ruddy turnstones, red-necked phalaropes, red knots, black-bellied plovers and various sandpipers.

Feeding dowitchers are like a bunch of tiny sewing machines, jabbing their needle-sharp bills into the shallow water so rapidly that their heads become a blur.

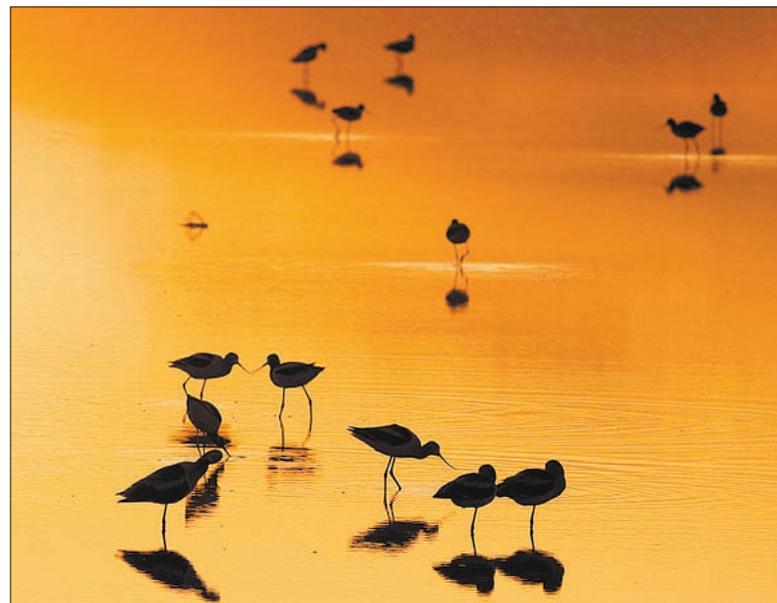
The highlight is undoubtedly the



ABOVE LEFT: A flock of sanderlings takes flight after feeding in the marsh.

ABOVE: A flying dowitcher looks for food.

LEFT AND BELOW: Beaks look dangerous on American avocets.



huge flocks of sanderlings, with one-day estimates topping 55,000. It is thought that up to half the world's sanderlings stop here to refuel on their way to the Arctic.

Seeing them in flight is like watching an aerial ballet as large flocks dart around in unison, abruptly changing direction with choreographed precision. They are so densely grouped that you wonder why they don't run into each other.

Spring is prime time to visit. Different shorebirds arrive at different times between late April and early June.

Sanderling numbers usually peak around the end of May, although this could vary with weather conditions and water levels.

Besides migrants, this is also prime territory for resident shorebirds such as willets, Wilson's phalaropes and elegant, colourful American avocets.

Chaplin is the best place we know of to get close to endangered piping plovers. Resident birds stay throughout the spring and summer, so there's always something to see.

The nature centre opens around mid-May, with tours running until late August. The annual Chaplin Shorebird Festival takes place during the second weekend in June. For more information, contact www.chaplintonline.com.

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