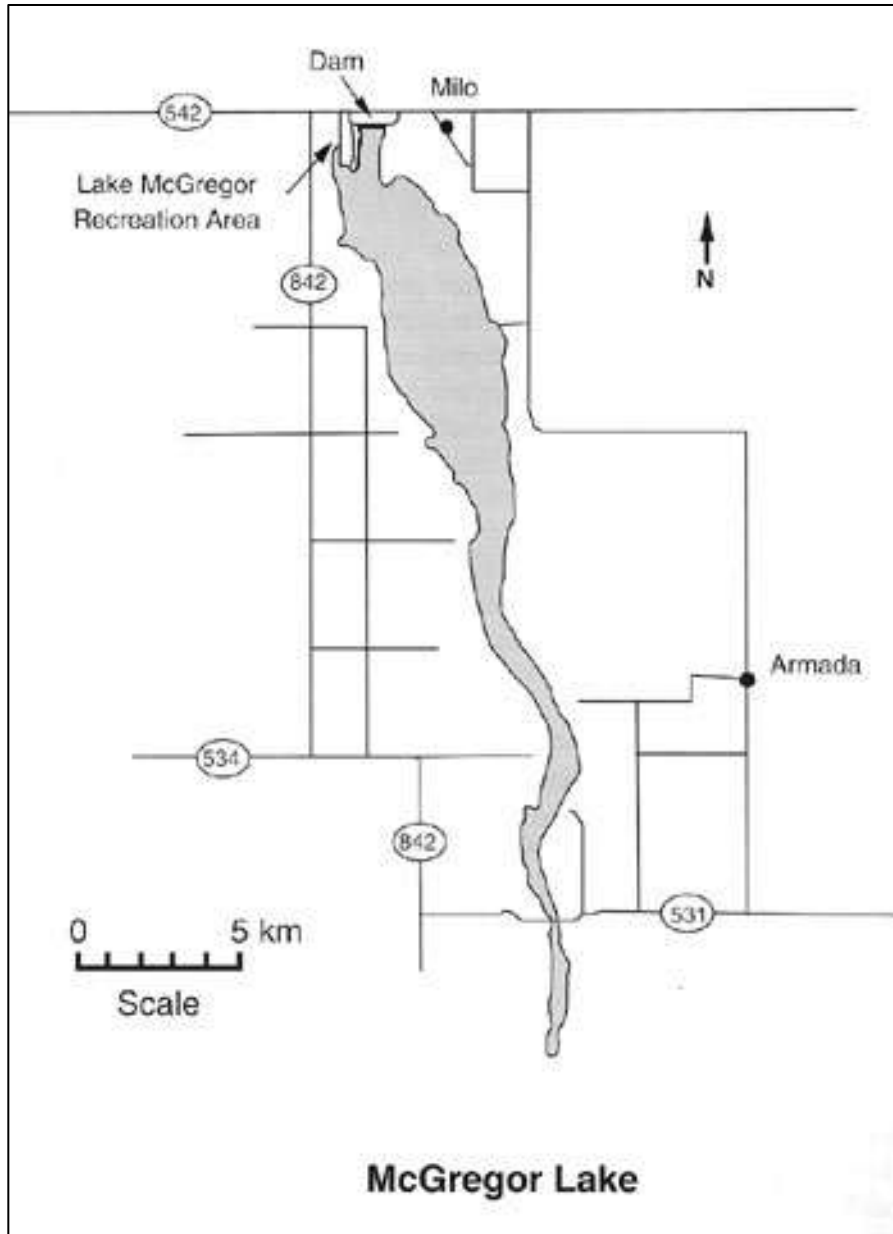


McGregor Lake by Ross Dickson – revised Sep/2012

Surrounded by intensively cultivated grainfields, this 32 km-long reservoir is the largest permanent waterbody between Calgary and the U.S. border. It is an important staging area for waterfowl, the spring and fall migration periods being the best times for birding. By road, McGregor Lake is about 120 km southeast of Calgary. Directions are given from the entrance to Wyndham-Carseland Provincial Park.



From the park gate, drive south on Hwy 24 for 39 km to the intersection with S.R. 542. This is preceded by a large sign pointing to the Lake McGregor Recreation Area. (Note: you must turn east onto S.R. 542 about 50 m BEFORE the stop sign, which is actually at the junction with Hwy 23.) After driving another 24.1

km, and just after the intersection with S.R. 842, watch for a stone cairn on the right-hand side of the road. This marks the

entrance to the recreation area and access to the reservoir. Along the route Swainson's Hawk and Horned Lark are the common species, but watch also for the occasional Golden Eagle, Long-billed Curlew or Short-eared Owl. An American Badger may scurry across the road.

At McGregor Lake species of note to watch for include: Tundra Swan, Greater White-fronted, Snow, and Ross' Geese, and Sandhill Crane (spring). Large flocks of Western Grebes can also occur. When looking for geese in spring, check both the fields and shoreline at the northern end of the lake. Bald Eagles occur in both spring and fall, attracted by the abundant ground squirrels and waterfowl. Small numbers of such local rarities as Ruddy Turnstone and Red Knot have been recorded at the northern end of the lake in the second half of May. In spring and summer Sprague's Pipit can be heard singing in the northwest corner. In summer, both McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs can be found in the rolling native grassland on the east side of the lake. These patches of grassland are also excellent in winter for Golden Eagle, Prairie Falcon and Snowy Owl.

Shoreline birding is easiest at the recreation area. Here, a well-maintained service road on top of the dam, one kilometre in length, allows an elevated view of the marsh to the north and the reservoir to the south. During the breeding season the marsh features Black-crowned Night-Heron, a dozen species of ducks, American Avocet, Willet, both Common and Black Terns, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Eurasian Wigeon have been observed here in early spring. The short driving loop around the marsh is recommended rather than attempting a turnaround on the dam. Even though the lake is a centre for recreation, dozens of American White Pelicans may be seen in summer, either loafing on the small island or fishing near the boat launch ramp. The unpaved road down to the boat ramp can be very muddy after rain.

More of the water may be viewed by driving the system of gravelled roads surrounding the lake. These can be dusty when dry, slippery when wet. Lighting conditions are best if this is done in a clockwise direction. From the park cairn continue east on S.R. 542, through Milo, and then take the first road south (3.6

km). It can be worthwhile trying each intersecting road for views of the lake. If you are unsure of access, ask at the nearest farm. The dirt road to the lake at the "bend", where the gravel road heads east, gives access to a section of shoreline near which Greater White-fronted and Ross' Geese have been reported in fall. From the bend, continue on the gravel road to the almost derelict hamlet of Armada. The shore can be accessed from here. Head west for about 5 km, past a "No Exit" sign, to an ungated pasture inhabited by pump jacks. If the dirt road in the field is dry, follow it until you can get better looks at the lake, then walk over to the shore. Flocks of Snow Geese can usually be seen from here during the second half of October.

After returning to the "No Exit" sign, turn south at the nearby intersection; S.R. 531 (paved) is reached after 6.4 km. turn right (west) here. Watch for a small parking area located on the south side of the highway and the eastern shore of the reservoir. This is a good vantage point. In fall, the water immediately south of the causeway is the last to freeze; some late migrants may linger here. Continue west along the highway, and then turn north onto S.R. 842 that is also marked by a sign for Milo.

For the return journey to Calgary from the McGregor Lake cairn, an alternative route is to head back along S.R. 542 to the main intersection and to then continue west on Hwy 23 for 43 km to Hwy 2. From the High River interchange it is 35 km to Hwy 22X in south Calgary. Although you are unlikely to see birds other than Gray Partridge or Red-tailed and Swainson's Hawks, the mountain scenery along the western horizon is spectacular at any season. A northward jog in Hwy 23 indicates the presence of Frank Lake.

Gas is available at the intersection of Hwy 23 and S.R. 542. Milo has a cafe (closed Mondays). There are pit toilets at the recreation area. In spring and summer take plenty of bug repellent. During the fall hunting season, watch for hunters any day of the week.