

Wolf Lake and Crawling Valley Reservoir *by Harold W. Pinel (1993)*

UPDATE: Note that water levels have fluctuated greatly in the past few years, some years Wolf Lake is virtually dry. Still a good spot for longspurs - all three in early May: Lapland, McCown's & Chestnut-collared.



Wolf Lake and Crawling Valley Reservoir

Wolf Lake is a large, shallow slough located about 110 km east of Calgary on S.R. 561 while Crawling Valley Reservoir, to the south of Wolf Lake, is one of the Eastern Irrigation District's major water bodies. They can be excellent for waterfowl and shorebirds during the migration periods and for grassland species during the nesting season. The round trip distance from Calgary city limits is about 260 km; a full day will be required.

To reach Wolf Lake from Calgary, drive east on the Trans-Canada Highway (Hwy 1) and turn left onto S.R. 561. This intersection is about 22 km east of the town of Strathmore. Continue east on S.R. 561 for 27 km to Hussar. About 2 km east of Hussar turn right (south) on Hwy 56 for 3.3 km, then left (east) onto S.R. 561 again. From this point the road is gravel-surfaced and can be dusty when dry and very slippery when wet.

Wolf Lake is reached after a further 23 km. Watch for Merlin and Loggerhead Shrike in or near shelterbelts along this section. Wolf Lake stretches on both sides of the road and it is worthwhile scoping the shore and water from here, particularly during May, late July, August and September when the shorebirds are migrating. The eastern shore of the lake can be accessed by continuing 1.6 km east and then turning north on a minor gravel road. There is an old "No Trespassing" sign on the fence at this point but public access is permitted to these E.I.D. grasslands. Caution: this should be attempted only if driving conditions are good.

During the nesting season, common birds on the lake include Eared Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, a variety of waterfowl and American Coot. Great

Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Killdeer, American Avocet, Willet, Marbled Godwit and Wilson's Phalarope can be seen along the shoreline. A walk through the grasslands surrounding the lake can produce Long-billed Curlew, Burrowing Owl, Sprague's Pipit and McCown's Longspur as well as abundant nesting populations of Horned Lark, Chestnut-collared Longspur and Western Meadowlark. Overhead, watch for Northern Harrier, Swainson's Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Golden Eagle and Prairie Falcon.

During spring and fall migration, Wolf Lake can be an excellent area for shorebirds and waterfowl. Tundra Swan, Greater White-fronted Goose, Snow Goose, Black-bellied Plover, Lesser Golden-Plover, yellow legs, Hudsonian Godwit, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, peeps, dowitchers, and Bonaparte's Gull have all been regularly recorded. Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks as well as Peregrine Falcon are occasionally reported during the migration periods.

To visit the northern end of Crawling Valley Reservoir after birding Wolf Lake, start at the junction of the road along the east side of Wolf Lake and S.R. 561. Drive west on S.R. 561 for 11.3 km, then turn left (south) on Range 18 Road 4; this intersection is also marked by a small green sign for Bassano and Hwy 1. Continue south for 9.6 km and then turn left (east). You will recognize this intersection by a large red painted rock and an E.I.D. sign. Drive east for 3.5 km to a minor junction, take the right (southeast) fork and continue until you reach the reservoir, a distance of approximately 4.5 km. The road deteriorates to a single lane track, but it should present no problems if the surface is dry.

The birds in the grasslands adjacent to the reservoir are similar to those discussed earlier for Wolf Lake, but they can be more easily observed here. The reservoir also has birds similar to Wolf Lake, but because it is much larger and deeper, species such as Common Loon, Red-necked Grebe, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant and a variety of diving ducks and gulls are more prevalent. There are nesting colonies of Double-crested Cormorant, Ring-billed Gull, California Gull and Common Tern on islands in the reservoir. The numbers and varieties of shorebirds, however, are not as great as at Wolf Lake.

If you do not wish to return the way you came, when leaving the northern end of Crawling Valley Reservoir, turn left (south) on the major north-south gravel road with the red rock at the intersection. You will reach Hwy 1 near Bassano after about 10 km.

The southern end of the reservoir can be accessed at the Crawling Valley Recreation Area. This is reached from Hwy 1 by turning north just west of

Bassano. The road immediately swings east and this should be followed for 5 km, then go north for 3 km, and finally east again for 2 km. The route is well sign-posted. There is more disturbance at the southern end of the reservoir as it is popular with boaters and fishermen, but it can be worth a visit during the waterfowl and shorebird migration periods.

If you have some time to spare at Bassano, a potentially good but under-birded location is **Bassano Dam on the Bow River**. The impressive setting alone is worth a visit. From the eastern access road, watch for a minor road crossing the railway tracks on the southern edge of town. This is marked by a small white directional sign with black letters. Follow the gravel road for 9 km to the dam. This can be a good location in May, and foraging flocks of American White Pelicans can be seen here during the summer.

There are no facilities at Wolf Lake or the northern end of Crawling Valley Reservoir. Crawling Valley Recreation Area has treated tap water and pit toilets. Gas can be obtained at Hussar. Full tourist facilities are available in Bassano and Strathmore.