

TRAIL 7

→ Elkwater/Cypress Hills

The Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park is unique to Southeastern Alberta as it is an area of relatively high altitude with the top of the hills being similar to Banff townsite (Elkwater is 1,234 metres in elevation). These hills are forested with a mixture of lodgepole pine, white spruce and aspen. The protrusion of these hills from the surrounding prairies can be a migrant trap. The montane vegetation also contains bird species that are typically found in the foothills and mountain areas of Alberta. A large number of vagrants have turned up in this park including such species as Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Clark's Nutcracker and Summer Tanager. This park is also one of the very few locales in Alberta with nesting Common Poorwill. A population of Wild Turkey is resident in the park but their numbers seem to be diminishing, perhaps due to the ban on bird feeders. This ban was imposed due to the presence of cougars within the hills and is meant to discourage this animal from coming into the Elkwater townsite. In the past both Northern Goshawk and Broad-winged Hawk have nested in the hills.

A number of hiking trails and roads wind throughout the park, which should be explored by any avid birder or nature lover. Roads are depicted on Map 7 but this map should be complemented with Alberta Parks trail and area maps. Each year a banding program is conducted in the park with the mist nets located near Site A. A visit to the banding station will give a good idea as to what is present in the park. Drop by the Visitor Centre (open from 9:00AM to 5:00PM daily) for maps, brochures and checklists and to view the exhibits, or call 403-893-3833 for information on current conditions.

For the purposes of this guide the Cypress Hills Birding Trail has been sub-divided into a number of birding sites as described in the following.

A → Southwest End of Elkwater Lake

This site is 1.5 km west of the Elkwater beach, past the Visitor Centre and the turnoff to the campsite registration kiosk. From this parking lot one can walk west along the boardwalk and trail following the shoreline of Elkwater Lake. As well, one can hike east from the parking lot down to, and along, the lake. The bird banding program is in operation here and the banders are very amenable to answering queries as to birds in the area and will willingly demonstrate banding techniques. The banding station is operated from April through June and from August through October. This work has given valuable insight in to the birds of Cypress Hills. For example a Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher has been banded here. This particular bird stayed in the area for several weeks giving many birders the opportunity to view it. In the fall of 2015 a Black-throated Blue Warbler was banded. Elkwater Lake has a good population of breeding White-winged Scoters in spite of the motorized boat activity on the lake. A number of wood warblers are found along this trail as are several species of flycatchers.

B → Soggy Bottom Trail

This trail can be accessed from the picnic area located north of the mini-golf course. A rather lengthy trail extends from here in both directions but proceeding west leads to the beach area with little habitat. The trail east leads into a well treed and brushed wetlands. Follow this trail east and across the Elkwater access road for another kilometre to Hwy 41.

Bird species one is likely to encounter along this trail include Marsh Wren, Red-necked Grebe, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Waterthrush and McGillivray's Warbler. Crossing the causeway gives the opportunity to see American Redstart, Dusky Flycatcher, and Red-naped Sapsucker. The marshy areas can host a variety of species including Wilson's Snipe, Killdeer, and a variety of duck species. In the past Sedge Wrens, Virginia Rail, Sora, LeConte's Sparrow, Lewis's Woodpecker and Bobolink have been seen along this trail.

C → Beaver Creek Loop Trail

This trail can be started right from the Visitor Centre parking lot, hiking south through the Beaver Creek Campground to the trailhead. This is an easily hiked well developed, loop trail that can be completed in about an hour even with frequent stops to view bird life. Because of the busy nature of this trail it is best hiked early in the morning.

The banks of this small creek can house McGillivray's Warbler and Northern Waterthrush. The surrounding trees may be populated with other montane species, such as both species of crossbills, Townsend's Solitaire, Song and White-crowned Sparrows. Broad-winged Hawks have been known to breed in this area, and sometimes Wild Turkeys are encountered.

D → The "Bench"

The top of the Cypress Hills is often referred to as "The Bench" as it is flat and is sparsely forested. The roads and trails along the top of the bench can be birded while driving, being on the lookout for such species as Mountain Bluebird (perhaps Eastern Bluebird), Upland Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Grouse, and a variety of grassland sparrows. Red-tailed Hawks and Northern Harriers can also be seen along these roads. Birding the hillsides at dusk in June might turn up Common Poorwill.

E → Spruce Coulee Reservoir

Spruce Coulee Reservoir is accessed from the top of the Cypress Hills "bench" by going east from Hwy 41. Access to the reservoir is well signed. As one proceeds along the gravel road the fence posts are festooned with birdhouses, which from April to July have large populations of Mountain Bluebirds and Tree Swallows. Observe closely as Eastern Bluebirds have also bred here. As one proceeds down the hill to the reservoir, bird the surrounding aspens and conifers. This is a great area for a variety of flycatchers including Least, Western Wood Pewee and perhaps even Olive-sided. Both Rose-breasted and Black-headed Grosbeaks can be seen along this road. Be cautious while birding this road as it is relatively narrow and is often travelled by campers and fishermen: so pull well over when stopping.

Around the lakeshore and near the campground are good locations for Western Tanager. Hiking across the dam and up the hill leads to one of the best areas to find Dusky Flycatcher. The woods near the campground and downstream from the dam are very mature. Three-toed Woodpeckers have been observed while hiking in these woods. The lake area often has such species as Belted Kingfisher, Black, Common and Caspian Terns, as well as a variety of duck species.

F → Reesor Lake

Reesor Lake is also accessed from the "bench" and is well signed: instead of turning off to Spruce Coulee Reservoir just continue east along the paved road down to the reservoir and along it to the campground. Similar species to those mentioned for Spruce Coulee Reservoir can be found here. The mature forest at the bottom of the Reesor Road should be birded as significant numbers of species have been seen here. The campsite is also a good place to wander through for a variety of forest birds. Painted Turtles have been seen along the shoreline and along Battle Creek.

Peripheral Roads Surrounding the Hills

The roads paralleling the hills on the south, north and west can be extremely productive for a wide variety of birds.

G → Highway 514 (Jackpot Road)

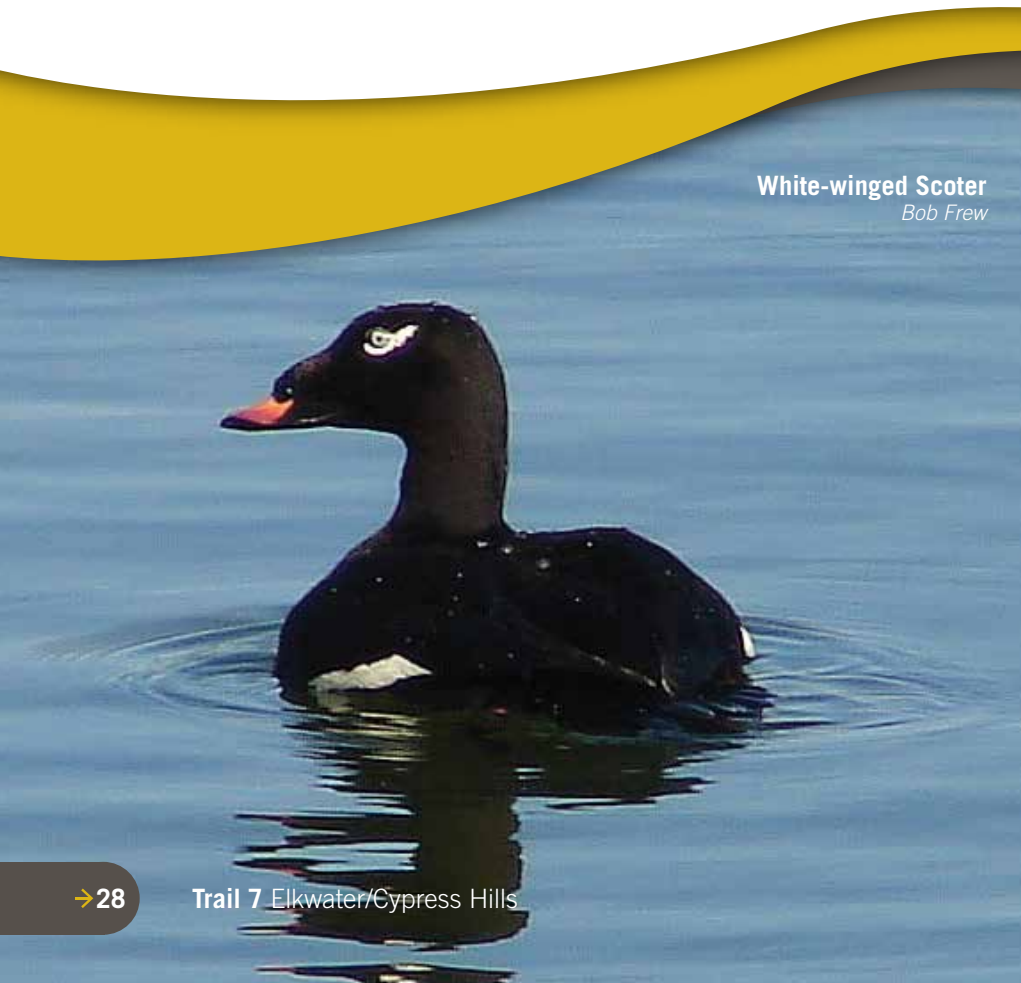
This road connects Eagle Butte Road and Hwy 41 paralleling the north side of the Cypress Hills and Elkwater Lake. A number of sloughs along this road contain a variety of waterfowl and the roadside has good populations of bluebirds and swallows. Bobolink occasionally have been seen.

H → Eagle Butte Road from Highway 514 south to Highway 41

This road follows a broad valley marking the west side of the Cypress Hills. The road goes southward eventually veering to the east to join up with Hwy 41. This very interesting road has good populations of bluebirds, swallows, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Loggerhead Shrike (in the winter Northern Shrike) and several raptor species. RGE RD 32B where Eagle Butte Road turns to the east is marked as a dead end but makes an interesting side trip. It follows Lodge Creek, on the east, which is heavily willowed while the area to the west is open prairie. The willows may house good populations of Yellow-breasted Chats while the sagebrush and prairie have produced Brewer's Sparrow and breeding Long-billed Curlews.

Summary of Birding in the Hills

With such a wide variety of trails, roads and habitat within the Cypress Hills area, several days could be devoted to birding here. Elkwater has excellent tourist facilities including lodgings, restaurants, small grocery stores and a service station. Other attractions include: exploring the Visitor Centre, relaxing on the beach, boating, golfing, both regular and mini, and just laying back to enjoy the surroundings.



White-winged Scoter
Bob Frew



Mountain Bluebirds
Dwayne Myers

Western Tanager
Milt Spitzer



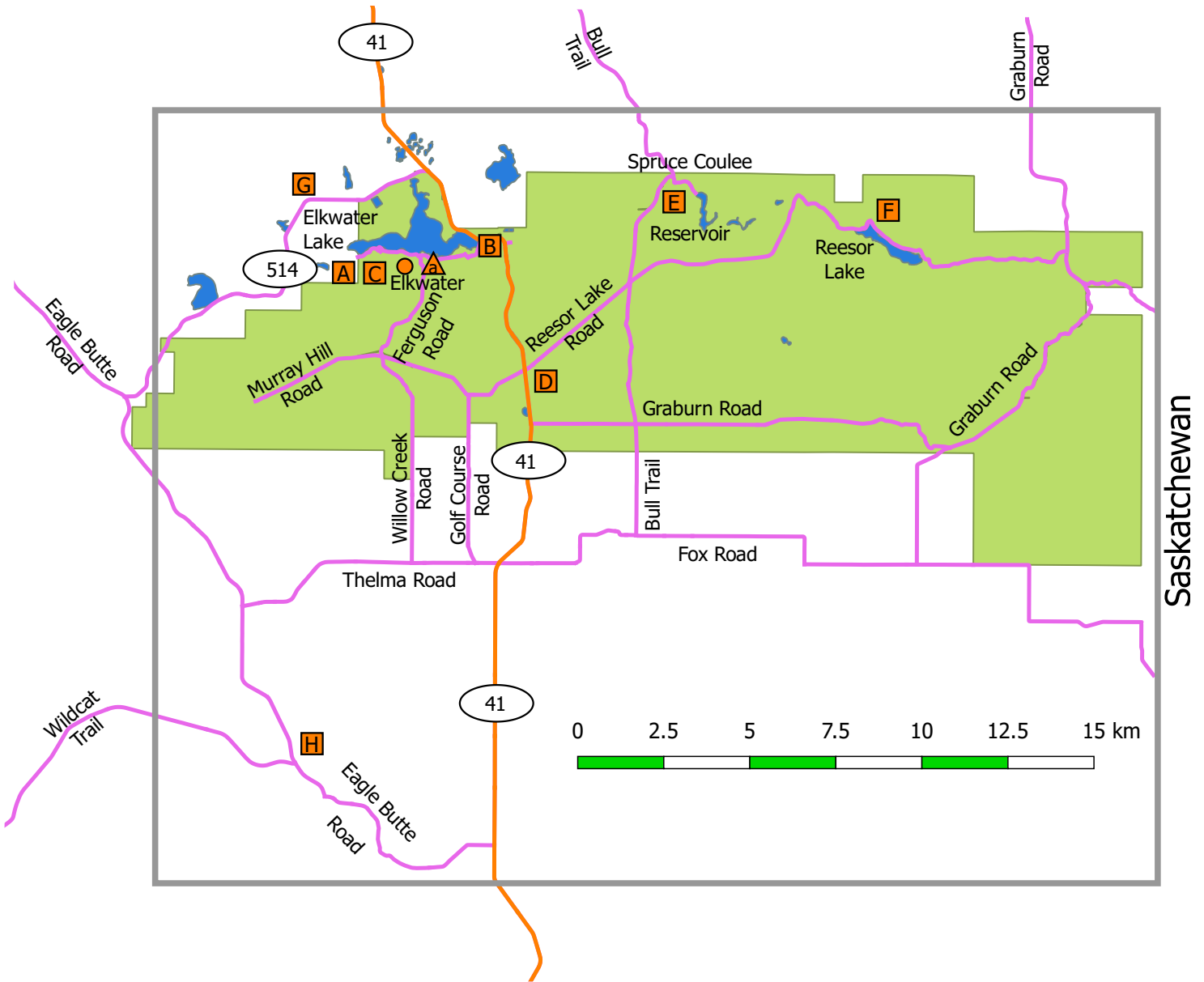
Cypress Hills
Rob Gardner



Elkwater Lake
Bob Frew



Trail 7



Trail 7: Elkwater / Cypress Hills

- | | |
|---|---|
| A Observation Points | ▲ Amenities |
| B Southwest End of Elkwater Lake | ▲ Elkwater: camping, meals, fuel, lodgings, restrooms, and interpretive centre. |
| C Soggy Bottom Trail | |
| D Beaver Creek Loop Trail | |
| E The Bench | |
| F Spruce Coulee Reservoir | |
| G Reesor Lake | |
| H Highway 514 (Jackpot Road) | |
| I Eagle Butte Road from Highway 514 south to Highway 41 | |

This map contains information licensed under the Open Government Licence – Alberta.