

# COVID BEHIND THE SCENES:

Connecting with nature... and humans... during a pandemic



**If the spread of the COVID-19 virus across Canada and around the globe had one bright side, it might be that it connected people back to the world around them.**

Suddenly finding themselves locked at home 24/7, people battled the effects of cabin fever by walking, biking and hiking; enjoying their local parks and reconnecting with their neighbourhoods; and listening to the birds sing and the leaves rustle in the wind.

For members of the #ECCCFamily who operate and manage our cross-country network of National Wildlife Areas, the renewed interest in nature was good news... kind of.

The Canadian Wildlife Service is responsible for a growing network of protected areas that currently comprises 55 National Wildlife Areas across Canada. These protected areas serve two very important functions: wildlife and habitat conservation and providing a place where Canadians can go to soak in and learn about nature.

It is that second function that presented both opportunities and challenges for employees who work to maintain and protect these spaces. At the beginning of the pandemic, all of the National Wildlife Areas were shut down to comply with public health guidance – no easy task given that many of them are wide open and there are always those who find creative ways to get in. Then, as summer 2020 approached and it was clear that people needed outdoor activities, some National Wildlife Areas re-opened to the public but with limited services and facilities to prevent the spread of the virus, which posed another set of challenges.

ECCC News gathered a small group of employees who work on National Wildlife Areas to shed light on their experiences:

**Andrew Kennedy**, Protected Areas Coordinator in the Atlantic region

**Chantal Lepire**, Program Agent at the Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area in Quebec

**John Viengkone**, Operations Coordinator for Protected Areas in the Ontario region

**Jason Read**, Wildlife Technician for Protected Areas in Ontario

**Kerry Hecker**, Protected Areas Manager at the Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area in Saskatchewan

Their stories highlight the resourcefulness, creative problem solving and teamwork required to help Canadians connect with nature in an extraordinary time, while staying one-step ahead of human behavior.

## **How difficult was it to close the National Wildlife Areas once the lockdown order was given?**

**Chantal:** We had to close the National Wildlife Area in mid-March, which is the time we usually welcome people. They come into our bird feeders network to see the birds and walk on our trails. There was a lot of work to do on the internet site as well as putting up signs to explain to people that we were closed. We had to answer many emails because there was a lot of public pressure around the closure.

**Kerry:** I wondered how to close the Wildlife Area. It has multiple points of entry. There are at least 12 locations where you can drive in or, if you wanted, you could park and hop the barbed wire fence and you are in. We ended up installing signs that said “use at your own risk”. Luckily, nobody was deliberately coming out except for a handful of individuals and it was so few it didn’t matter that much.

***“I remember being in an odd headspace trying to grasp what was going on and how long it would last.”***

I was concerned about what we should do as the season progressed and we get more people who need to get out. How do you possibly manage that? It was a weird time and place.



**Kerry Hecker**, Protected Areas Manager at the Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area in Saskatchewan

**Jason:** We didn’t have the infrastructure to close off the area completely. At [Prince Edward Point](#), the public road runs pretty much the length of the Wildlife Area. You can park anywhere and go into the Wildlife Area so closing it off was very difficult.

***“We used a lot of caution tape and signage to try to limit access. Often, the caution tape was torn down the next day and people would be using the space.”***

**What challenges did you face re-opening the sites in the summer?**

**Andrew:** Three of our five National Wildlife Areas in this region are in two provinces and provincial borders were closed. We had to get approval to travel to some of our re-opened National Wildlife Areas because it involved crossing a provincial border that is heavily guarded each way. In order to cross, we had to provide proof of the necessity to do so.

***“The benefit was each one of our National Wildlife Areas has local people in the immediate area who are aware of the sites and know what to expect when they visit.”***

The staycation took on new meaning in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The local, homegrown visitation throughout July and August increased as people were looking for new things to do.



**Andrew Kennedy**, Protected Areas Coordinator in the Atlantic region

**John:** It was hard to secure PPE – we were not sure what PPE we needed because at that point we did not know enough about the virus and how it spreads. We got as much PPE as we could, knowing that if we didn’t use it we could donate it. At the start, it was very hard to find masks, gloves or hand sanitizer.

Washrooms were a problem in Ontario. We were told that we needed to clean washrooms twice a day for them to be safe for visitors. Only two of our sites actually have staff on site. We had to figure out how to get contractors to clean washrooms in a remote site twice a day. In some places, we put up signs that said “use at your own risk” because it was only possible to clean them once a day.

We had a unique opportunity to staff some sites with students during the summer. Prince Edward Point is an unstaffed site but in 2020, we had two students living on site. We had to work out logistics such as how we could have them living in the same field house while staying safe from each other and the public. It was worth it because we learned a lot about the site over the summer.

***“We always had to guess the number of people that came to visit but actually having staff on site meant they were able to count the number of cars and the number of people that were actually there.”***

**Kerry:** I was pleased to see that we were designated as critical for specific services. That included land management, like grazing and haying, which connects us to the surrounding community. Invasive species management was included, which is important because if you miss a year you have taken multiple steps back. I was also so glad that being outdoors in nature was identified as being critical.

**Did you get more visitors because of the increased interest in nature?**

**John:** We definitely had more people at our sites looking for any green space that they could access. They were hopping the fence, ignoring the signs, and just going in and winding up in areas closed to the public. That continued into the winter and we worried about people falling through the ice in the marshes. People wanted a place to skate and all the ice rinks were closed.



**John Viengkone**, Operations Coordinator for Protected Areas in the Ontario region

**Kerry:** We do not have the population pressure that Ontario and Quebec have. We do not have a major center within 150 kilometres of us. Most of the people who were coming out were either hard-core birders who knew about us from the cities or the locals. We saw a substantial increase in visits with people coming for a walk or a run. I thought it was awesome and I hope they come back and do that some more.

**Do you think the renewed interest in nature is something that is going to stay post-pandemic?**

**Andrew:** It's my firm belief that we were on the cusp of new and renewed interest and have been for two to three years. As social media platforms exploded, people are learning about our National Wildlife Areas as special places where they get out and try something new. People were finding out about our sites, appreciating them and wanting to come back for more. I think this trend is going to continue.

**John:** We have a few sites that are part of the Connecting Canadians to Nature project and they were already starting to increase in popularity. COVID accelerated that process and that is actually one of the positives that came out of this. We also had to work to accelerate our own plans in terms of visitor management and learning how to deal with the increased pressure on the environment.

**Chantal:** It was great to welcome new visitors and to increase the visitation. I am convinced that will continue and will grow.

***“The pandemic reinforced the importance of nature in our lives.”***

My only regret is we did not have the opportunity to do any outreach activities because of COVID. The interpretation centre was closed to keep people safe and respect public health advice. We have a new exhibit that could show people many ways to protect nature. We are really looking forward to resuming our outreach activities to build public awareness of the importance of National Wildlife Areas!



**Chantal Lepire**, Program Agent at the Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area in Quebec

**Kerry:** One of the events that we created and have been holding very successfully before the pandemic is mentored hunts. It is a weekend event with adults who never hunted before but had a real interest. It attracted foodies, people who wanted to eat food from close to home, people concerned with food security and people who wanted the good stuff. It does not get much more close and personal with your food than hunting. We were seeing a lot of interest in that. I think that's going to continue and ramp up more quickly. All you have to do is talk to a seed supplier in the gardening industry. People are picking up gardening on their balconies, rooftops, indoors, hydroponics, wherever they can get it so that food security and connectedness to nature is really picking up.

I am concerned about how we help the relationship along. You can do a lot of damage without intending to when entering into wild spaces as a consumer. Being part of the solution rather than the difficulty is not always intuitive and that is where we come in – that is where we can help.

Got a COVID-related story that you think we should feature?  
Write to us at [ec.communicationsinternes-internalcommunications.ec@canada.ca](mailto:ec.communicationsinternes-internalcommunications.ec@canada.ca)