

Can Geo in the Classroom - A Guide to Nine Must-visit National Wildlife Areas Close to Urban Areas

Inquiry Question

How can protected areas help conserve wildlife while also allowing people to connect with nature?

Time

60-75 mins

Grade Level

8-12

Learning goals

Students will:

- Understand the purpose of national wildlife areas in Canada.
- Identify how people can visit protected natural areas responsibly.
- Explain why environmental stewardship is important for protecting ecosystems.

Part A: Minds On

Before reading the article, determine what students already know about protected areas by using the following questions to generate a class discussion.

- How are protected areas created?
- What is the purpose of a protected area? Who protects it?
- Should people be allowed to visit a protected area? Why or why not?
- How can people enjoy nature without harming it?

Part B: Article Analysis

Distribute a copy of the article and the Exploring Canada's National Wildlife Areas worksheet to each student. Allow time for students to read the article and use the information to complete the table.

Encourage students to focus on identifying and describing the location, environment, wildlife, plant life, and low impact visitor activities for each national wildlife area listed in the article. Remind students to look for similarities and differences between the examples as they read.

Part C: Inquiry and Critical Thinking

After students have completed the table, have them answer the critical thinking questions using information and examples from the article. Encourage students to make connections between the importance of protecting natural environments and the ways in which people can visit and use these areas responsibly.


Students should support their responses with evidence from the text and write in complete sentences.

Optional: Discuss responses as a class to highlight geographic patterns, conservation themes, and the balance between environmental protection and human activity.

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Student worksheet - Exploring Canada's National Wildlife Areas

National Wildlife Area	Province/Territory	wildlife and Plants	Environment/Landforms	Visitor Activities
Vaseux-Bighorn NWA				
Alaksen NWA				
Blue Quills NWA				
Last Mountain Lake NWA				
Prince Edward Point NWA				
Big Creek NWA				
Cap Tourmente NWA				
Cape Jourimain NWA				
Chignecto NWA				



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Critical Thinking Questions

After reading the article, answer the questions below. Write in complete sentences.

1. Based on the examples in the article, explain two important roles that National Wildlife Areas play in protecting Canada's ecosystems (wildlife, wildlife habitat and plants). Use specific evidence from the article.

2. Many of the wildlife areas described are located near forests, grasslands, wetlands, coasts, oceans, lakes, or migration routes. Why are these types of environments especially important to protect?

3. The article shows that people can visit National Wildlife Areas for low impact activities such as hiking, birdwatching, paddling, or learning about nature. How can visiting these places help Canadians better understand and care for the environment?

4. Using evidence from the article, explain how national wildlife areas are spaces where both conservation and low impact human activities take place. Why is managing this balance important?

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ANIMAL MAGNETISM

Canadian Geographic's guide to nine must-visit national wildlife areas close to urban areas

BY MICHELA ROSANO

A languid marsh bursts with birdsong near the Fraser River mudflats. Prairie grassland ripples in the wind as thousands of sandhill cranes swoop down from the skies. The cedar thickets of Prince Edward Point in Lake Ontario are dressed in monarch butterflies during the fall.

With 64 sites across the country, national wildlife areas protect some 35,000 square kilometres of habitat critical for migratory birds and other wildlife. Together with migratory bird sanctuaries, these areas managed by Environment and Climate Change Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service form a network of wildlife conservation and research from coast to coast to coast.

While national wildlife areas prioritize conservation and research, some of these sites are open to the public for day use, offering low-impact recreational activities such as hiking trails, paddling, educational activities and more. Here are nine must-visit national wildlife areas within easy reach of urban areas.

Vaseux-Bighorn National Wildlife Area, B.C.

Watch bighorn sheep tiptoe the rugged cliffs in Canada's only true desert landscape, an hour's drive from Kelowna, B.C. But don't mistake desert for desolate; this conservation area packs a biodiversity punch, boasting wetlands, thickets, grasslands, dry forest and rugged cliffs.

While sheep rule the cliffs, snake species like the at-risk western yellow-bellied racers glide along the arid valley, and flocks of migratory birds, such as white pelicans, ply the lake and adjacent marshes at the valley bottom. Other birds, like the endangered sage thrasher and western screech owl, inhabit the higher elevation grasslands and ponderosa pine-laden hillsides.

Plan to spend a few hours in this small national wildlife area and adjacent migratory bird sanctuary. Explore the trails and boardwalks, spot some sheep from the wildlife viewing tower, or bring a canoe or kayak to enjoy wildlife watching from the water. Remember, stay on the trails — and don't forget your camera.

Alaksen National Wildlife Area, B.C.

Bring your binoculars — this bird migration hotspot has plenty to fill your field of vision. Protecting a portion of the Fraser Delta and overlapping part of the George C. Reifel Bird Sanctuary, this mosaic of estuary, wetlands, forests, agricultural fields and urbanized areas sees 1.4 million birds each year.

Species like trumpeter swans and lesser snow geese pick the agricultural fields clean in fall and winter, while dabbling ducks like northern pintails glide through the calmer marsh areas. Great blue herons hunt the adjacent estuary for small fish in the spring and summer. Raptors including barn owls, short-eared owls and peregrine falcons — all species at-risk — watch the fields from nearby stands of trees.

This national wildlife area is just a 20-minute drive from Delta, B.C., through the migratory bird sanctuary. Trails wind through picturesque coastal landscapes, with lookouts and viewing towers along the way. Check whether you need a reservation before you go: the area is carefully managed to ensure minimal overcrowding.

Note: at the time of publication, the national wildlife area and migratory bird sanctuary are temporarily closed while the Westham Island Bridge is under construction.

Blue Quills National Wildlife Area, Alta.

Wild roses and serviceberries bloom pink and white beneath an aspen canopy in this national wildlife area just a few hours northeast of Edmonton. The landscape here occupies a transition zone, where boreal forest to the north begins to thin to the grasslands farther south, creating a mix of meadows, aspen forests and fleeting seasonal wetlands. Rusty blackbirds and short-eared owls are the two flagship species here, while songbirds, such as yellow warblers, white-throated sparrows and black-capped chickadees, thrive in the wooded areas. Mallards, horned grebes and American coots rule the wetlands.

Stop in for a picnic in the early summer during berry season, and fill your bowl (responsibly) with strawberries, wild raspberries and serviceberries alongside the trails that snake through the tiny conservation area. Be sure to watch and listen for hunters during the spring and fall.

Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area, Sask.

Last Mountain Lake, between Regina and Saskatoon, is at the heart of a bird migration superhighway extending the length of the Americas. Covering 100 square kilometres at the northern end of Last Mountain Lake, the national wildlife area has long shallow bays that reach out like fingers into the surrounding grasslands, creating numerous narrow channels and wetlands. Visit during spring and fall when the sky comes alive with hundreds of bird species, including up to 50,000 sandhill cranes

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(and sometimes endangered whooping cranes), 450,000 geese and hundreds of thousands of ducks, not to mention the scores of songbirds. This wetland of international significance is also a crucial breeding habitat for American white pelicans, common terns and western grebes.

With all the avian attention, it's no wonder Last Mountain Lake has been recognized and protected since 1887. Learn more about the site's history and ecology at the interpretive pavilion, and explore three manageable main trails running along the lake's shoreline, through prairie grasslands and alongside wetlands. Activities like dark-sky stargazing and guided birdwatching happen throughout the year.

Prince Edward Point National Wildlife Area, Ont.

Take an afternoon off from wine touring the county and head south to Prince Edward Point, where pebble beaches stretch into cerulean Lake Ontario, migratory birds abound, and monarch butterflies flutter through thickets.

Prince Edward Point is a popular rest stop for hundreds of migratory bird species crossing the unruly inland sea, including ruby-crowned kinglets, white-winged scoters and northern saw-whet owls. Plus, as one of three international monarch butterfly reserves in southern Ontario, the point sees thousands of this at-risk species each year. In the late summer and early fall, monarchs drape the cedars on the southeastern tip of the peninsula as they rest, feed and wait out the wind before continuing their Herculean journey south to Mexico.

Activities abound here: hike, swim, launch a boat and — of course — birdwatch. Stop at the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory for seasonal activities, including the spring birding festival in early May, featuring presentations, family fun and banding demonstrations. In the fall, the Starry Nights with Saw-Whets event has guests gather at dusk to watch as the owls are banded.

Big Creek National Wildlife Area, Ont.

On a heavily developed shoreline like Lake Erie's, Big Creek's extensive sand spit of beaches, dunes, marshes, wet meadows and wooded swamps is an oasis for migratory birds and endangered Carolinian species. More than 30,000 tundra swans pass through this site — also a UNESCO biosphere reserve and a wetland of international significance — each spring, with the greater area welcoming as much as 10 per cent of the *world's* population of canvasback and redhead ducks. It's also one of the few locations in Canada where birders can spot the rare and endangered prothonotary warbler.

The national wildlife area is broken into two sections — the Big Creek unit has a walking trail and two viewing towers open year-round, while a short walking trail that accesses the marsh

interior is open mid-May through mid-September. The Hahn Marsh unit is open for day use year-round. At the Big Creek unit, start with a bird's-eye view from the two viewing towers. After getting the lay of the land, head down the short trail into the marsh, keeping watch for the big pink blooms of the at-risk swamp rose-mallow or one of the many threatened snake species, including the eastern foxsnake. Or explore a wooded swamp by kayak through the Hahn Marsh — if you're lucky, you just might spot the tropical plumage of a prothonotary warbler.

Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area, Que.

This national wildlife area is just a half-hour drive northeast of Quebec City, but feels worlds away with its dramatic cliffs, coastal marshes, lush forest and open plains rolling into the St. Lawrence. This quilt of habitats at the confluence of the Canadian Shield, the St. Lawrence Lowlands and the Appalachians, is home to more than 200 bird and mammal species and is considered a wetland of international significance.

Each spring and fall, tens of thousands of greater snow geese fill the sky along the cape's escarpment en route to nearby bulrush marshes to feed. Birds like the threatened bobolink, elusive Nelson's sparrow and the rebounded peregrine falcon can also be found in this 23-square-kilometre conservation area. In the winter, muskrats and white-tailed deer are often sighted, while black bears, porcupines and red foxes are occasional inhabitants.

More than 20 kilometres of trails run through a variety of habitats from spring to fall and a few remain open for snowshoeing in the winter, taking visitors through a network of bird feeders popular with chickadees and blue jays. Visit the interpretation centre first to learn more about the landscape, including its history of human presence. Then, grab a pair of binoculars and a wildlife guide and hit the trails.

Cape Jourmain National Wildlife Area, N.B.

This area on New Brunswick's southeastern shore is one of the best in all of Atlantic Canada to spot shorebirds, and it's just one hour from Moncton, N.B., or Charlottetown. A combination of salt and brackish marshes and freshwater wetlands, along with beaches, dunes and forested areas, creates the ideal stopping point for flocks of migratory shorebirds, including piping plovers, sanderlings, short-billed dowitchers and willets. Plus, plenty of waterfowl like American black ducks and scoters arrive in spring and fall, as well as ospreys, which use the many nesting platforms.

From the ground, hike an easy two-kilometre loop to the historic Cape Jourmain lighthouse and get incredible coastal views of the Confederation Bridge, the Northumberland Strait and Prince Edward Island. Then, hit the equally short Gunning Trail leading through fields of wild roses to an observation deck

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over a brackish marsh, or trek a little longer into the woods on the Trenholm Trail, and come out to views of Cape Jourimain's sprawling salt marsh. Those preferring to explore the coast from the water can make use of the boat launch to put in a canoe, kayak or small motorized boat. After working up an appetite, grab a bite to eat at the nature centre and check out crafts made by local artisans.

Chignecto National Wildlife Area, N.S.

Set in a pinch point between mainland Canada and the rest of Nova Scotia, Chignecto National Wildlife Area at the head of the Bay of Fundy protects a 4.3-square-kilometre space within a wildlife migration corridor. The site also overlaps the Amherst Point Migratory Bird Sanctuary and is next to the John Lusby Marsh National Wildlife Area.

The waterbodies at Chignecto National Wildlife Area, including marshes, bogs and lakes, are important to migrating waterfowl like northern pintails and ring-necked ducks, as well as breeding marsh birds, including pied-billed grebes and Virginia rail. Its forests, meanwhile, support species like northern flying squirrels, red foxes, snowshoe hares, woodchucks and an impressive 250-year-old sugar maple.

Pack a picnic and explore the 2.5-kilometre interpretive trail circling Laytons Lake, with spectacular views of the lake and great birdwatching from the hillside. In the winter, don cross-country skis or snowshoes on this trail and get acquainted with the site's year-round residents, including songbirds, woodpeckers, grouse and owls.