

Plan in works to bring back wetlands

Water board estimates more than 85 per cent of Valley's wetlands and riparian areas are gone, and the remaining ones are at risk

By DON PLANT
The Daily Courier

Wetlands, a shrinking remnant of the Okanagan's early years, could make a comeback if a new water project pays off.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board has launched a \$65,000 project to map all the ponds in the Valley and to collect opinions on which wetlands are worth saving. Even ponds that have dried up could be rejuvenated if enough people pool their efforts, said Nelson Jatel, the board's project leader.

"One thing we're looking for is people's sense of wetlands that are either endangered or have disappeared and they'd like to have them re-established," he said.

"We'll have the most comprehensive wetland inventory map to date. These map layers will identify... which wetlands are critically important for us to enhance, protect and restore."

Hundreds of ponds, marshes and other wetlands remain on a valley bottom that used to host thousands. Developers have filled in many to make way for construction. Others have dried up since 1998 because the water table has dropped.

Hotter weather is partly to blame. Increasing pressure on aquifers from homeowners using water wells is another. The result is animals are losing habitat, said Dick Cannings, a biologist and birder in Penticton.

Wildlife species that depend on wetlands are suffering, he said, notably the tiger salamander and the olive clubtail dragonfly — both endangered in Canada. The Northern leopard frog is extinct. The painted turtle, an icon of Okanagan ponds, is now a species of special concern.

"A lot of these species are like canaries in the coalmine. If we have species that are declining or in trouble because their habitat has been degraded, or too much has been filled in... then we should get concerned and



File photo

A Great Blue Heron perches on piece of driftwood at the Rotary Marshes at Brandt's Creek on Tuesday. A workshop and open house today will hear from experts on the topic of wetlands, and people are invited to fill out a survey.

see how we can fix that problem," Cannings said.

The water board estimates more than 85 per cent of the Valley's wetlands and riparian areas are gone, and the remaining ones are at risk.

Cannings and other experts are speaking today at a workshop and open house at the Kelowna's downtown library.

The water board is consulting with fish and game clubs, birders, local governments and residents' groups.

People are invited to prioritize which wetlands should be protected and to fill out a survey. They'll learn where the ponds are located on an extensive map the OBWB is building

as more wetland information comes in.

Until now, the maps have been piecemeal, Jatel said. The goal is to identify which ponds are connected and offer the best habitat corridors for animals. The survey's aim is to find out what people enjoy about wetlands and why they use them.

"What is it they do around them? For some it's walking their dog; for others it's an opportunity to see a glimpse of the Okanagan as what it used to be like," Jatel said.

For critics, wetlands are just dried-up depressions in the ground that should be filled in. It's true that almost every pond is shrinking each year, said Cannings. But they help improve surface-water runoff, reduce chem-

icals entering the lake and act as sponges after a major rainfall.

"We're going to get more of these big rainfall events as climate gets weirder over the next century. They soak up that water to buffer the downstream effects of heavy runoff."

"To say 'let's just develop this marsh because it's going to dry up anyway' is very short-sighted. Once you develop something, there's no turning back if the water tables come up."

The workshop runs from 1:30 to 4 p.m.; the open house ends at 6 p.m.

To fill out the online survey, visit tinyurl.com/q7f48nh.



RON SEYMOUR/The Daily Courier

Almost skating time

The first ice layers are being put down at the Stuart Park ice rink on Water Street. City employees Ken Leis, left, and Rob Patton were hosing down the popular skating venue late Tuesday afternoon as the sun set. The rink is scheduled to open on Monday.

Hazmat team called out to investigate bucket of flour

Firefighters brought in their hazmat team and cordoned off a children's park after a city worker reported a strange substance on the ground.

The man was walking through Davie Park, a small green space in Rutland, early Wednesday morning when he noticed a half-full bucket and white powder strewn over four square metres. Two hours later, an expert in hazardous materials determined the substance in the bucket and on the ground was flour.

Even so, Platoon Capt. Kelly Stephens is happy the worker notified authorities.

"He didn't know what it was," he said Wednesday. "If something seems out of the ordinary and you feel it's wrong, call us and we'll investigate."

Fifteen personnel attended the park. Fire crews secured the area as firefighters who specialize in hazardous chemicals put on plastic-coated coveralls, rubber gloves and boots. The bucket wasn't labelled, so crews took no chances, Stephens said.

— Staff

Kelowna man to be escorted to Edmonton for murder charge

Thaven Gardiner is waiting in the RCMP lockup Wednesday for sheriffs to escort him back to Edmonton on a first-degree murder charge.

Edmonton police arrested the Kelowna man on Tuesday. An Edmonton investigator interviewed him at the Kelowna detachment about the death of Philipp Jochen Woehrle, whose body was found by fire crews extinguishing a house fire in Edmonton last year.

A medical examiner determined Woehrle, 28, died of foul play and not as a result of the fire.

Although Gardiner lived in Kelowna before and after the fire in May 2012, police suspect he was staying in Edmonton at that time. He's also charged with causing damage to a home by fire.

Gardiner, 38, is being held on a six-day remand. Sheriffs will transport him from Kelowna to Edmonton by next week, when he goes before a judge.

A computer check revealed he was convicted of common assault in Kelowna in 2005. He was fined \$230.

— Staff