

TRAIL 14

→ Taber *and* Purple Springs

A & B → Taber Lake

Taber Lake is an irrigation reservoir fed by canals coming from the St. Mary River. Water from this system nourishes the many valuable irrigated crops in this area, such as sugar beets, potatoes, corn, and dry beans. At the same time, the reservoir provides excellent marsh habitat, as well as nesting islands for gulls, pelicans and cormorants.

The lake starts just north and east of the Lantic Inc. sugar factory yard on the east side of Taber, and it extends to the east for about 5 km ending in a high dike. Three small islands have nesting colonies of California Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, and Double-crested Cormorants. The land around the lake is fairly flat, and the water is probably not much more than a metre deep in any part of the lake.

The west side of the lake (**A**) can be accessed from Hwy 36 by going east on 57th Avenue, just north of the sugar factory yard, and just south of Kirk's Tirecraft. After about 500 meters turn left, crossing a small Texas gate, and from there the lake is in sight.

The lake to the east of the road has all of the expected diving and dabbling ducks, as well as being a good breeding area for Eared and Red-necked Grebes, Ruddy Duck, and American Coot. The extensive areas of cattail and bulrush marshes support large numbers of breeding Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Common Yellowthroat, Marsh Wren, and Sora. A large area of bulrushes in the middle of the lake supports a colony of nesting Franklin's Gulls. Western Grebes, which are rare breeders in this area, have nested at the lake. Some of the less common birds that have been found here include Black-crowned Night-Heron, American Bittern, White-winged Scoter, Forster's Tern, Caspian Tern, Virginia Rail, and migrating Swamp Sparrow, Common Loon, Surf Scoter, Greater White-fronted Goose, Red-breasted Merganser, Greater Scaup, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Thayer's Gull, and Long-tailed Duck. Both a Ross's Goose and a Snow Goose spent parts of a summer along the south side of the lake.

To the west side of the road lies a small area of shallow water maybe 150 meters in length, which attracts a large number of birds. Some of the puddle ducks can concentrate here in spring and fall, and as well, many shorebirds are attracted to this area, both migrants and the summer residents. Some of the unusual birds that have been found here include: Cattle Egret, Eurasian Wigeon, Ruddy Turnstone, and Hudsonian Godwit. Flocks of Whimbrels are sometimes found here in May, and White-faced Ibises are present in increasing numbers, especially in late summer.

Another access point on the east side of the lake (**B**) is worth checking out. From the intersection of Hwys 3 and 36 on the east end of Taber, go east for 4.8 km, and turn north on RGE RD 16-1 (Note: This signage is used in the Municipal District of Taber; in other counties this is equivalent to RGE RD 161). After about 300 metres cross a small canal. Turn west on the canal and follow the dirt trail for about 500 metres. The top of the steep dike gives good views of the lake. Patches of willows and other bushes and some large cottonwoods can have a number of songbirds, including Bullock's Oriole and Rusty Blackbird.

C & D → Fincastle Lake

Fincastle Lake (**C**) is also an irrigation reservoir, located just a few minutes east of Taber Lake. The lake is surrounded by a narrow strip of pasture featuring rolling hills. The lake is only about 2 km long and about 1.5 km wide. The best access point is on the east side of the lake. To get there turn north onto RGE RD 15-3 (153) about 11 km from Taber. On the east side of the road is the large Lamb Weston potato plant. Go north almost a kilometre, to the large Buck for Wildlife sign on the left. Turn into a narrow gate and follow a dirt trail, which heads to the northwest, until you reach the lake. This part of the lake is popular with fishermen, both in summer and winter. It is also a great place for birding. Because of the rolling hills, there are many islands in the lake, which offer secure nesting areas for many birds. The first thing people notice when they get out here is the Great Blue Heron colony a couple of hundred metres to the west, on an island. Formerly all of the nests were in a large cottonwood tree, but when the tree started to die the Alberta Conservation Association erected a few nest platforms on poles that are now used by the herons. Canada Geese nest on the islands in large numbers, as well as Ring-billed and California Gulls, Common Tern, Double-crested Cormorant, and in some years a pair of Caspian Terns.

Some birds may concentrate here during migration, especially in spring. For example, both Common Loons and Red-breasted Mergansers are found here in higher numbers than any nearby lake in spring. Perhaps the best known rarity in this area is the Whimbrel, which is a rare spring migrant in most of Alberta. While they may be found anywhere in the Taber area in spring, the biggest flocks of Whimbrels are frequently found in the area of Fincastle Lake, mostly in fields to the north and northwest of the lake (**D**). At times they can be seen resting on the shores of the lake. They arrive here in late April or early May, and stay for at least 3 weeks.

In spring and fall, huge flocks of blackbirds and starlings can sometimes be found at a feedlot just north of the lake, and some overwinter there. The blackbirds are mostly Brewer's, but others such as Red-winged, Yellow-headed, and Rusty, and even a Brown-headed Cowbird have been seen here in the winter. American Kestrel and Sharp-shinned Hawk have also been seen here in the winter.

A large number of rare birds have been found here. Some of these include: Pacific and Red-throated Loons, Cattle Egret, Great Egret (One bird spent several weeks here, and was re-arranging sticks in one of the heron nests in July.), Glaucous Gull, Mew Gull, Sabine's Gull and Clark's Grebe. Eurasian Wigeon can be common here in the spring, and Brewer's Sparrow has been found in the prairie near the lake. The trees and bushes near the lake and in nearby farmyards have had unusual birds such as Cassin's Vireo and a singing MacGillivray's Warbler.



Common Nighthawk
Milt Spitzer

E & F → Purple Springs Dunes

This is a great place to see the typical prairie birds, such as Western Meadowlark, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Horned Lark, Vesper and Savannah Sparrows, and Swainson's Hawk. Some of the less common birds found here are: Brewer's, Grasshopper, and Baird's Sparrows, Lark Bunting, Ferruginous Hawk, Burrowing Owl, Golden Eagle, Prairie Falcon, Upland Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, Sprague's Pipit, and Sharp-tailed Grouse. The wetlands in this area can have large numbers of breeding waterfowl, such as puddle and diving ducks, Red-necked and Pied-billed Grebes, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and both Common and Black Terns. American White Pelican and Double-crested Cormorant commonly feed here, and White-faced Ibis have been seen here recently. The banks of the sand dunes can have nesting Bank and Northern Rough-winged Swallows.

The Purple Springs Dunes area is fascinating, whether you enjoy birds, animals, plants, insects, or just the feel of the wide open prairie. As the name suggests, this area of very sandy soil still has a number of active sand dunes. Some of the land is a grazing reserve, belonging to the M.D. of Taber (open to the public). Some areas farther east are privately owned. This sandy area extends eastward almost to the north of Grassy Lake. A wide variety of plants have adapted to live in this sandy soil, and a number of rare plants are found here, some of which only grow in the loose sand of dunes. Mammals found here include large ones like the Pronghorn and Mule Deer, as well as the rest of the typical prairie animals. The Prairie Rattlesnake and Plains Garter Snake can be found here. Surprisingly, three species of toad live in the area: the endangered Great Plains Toad and the Canadian and Spadefoot Toads.

The Purple Springs Dunes (**E**) can be accessed from Hwy 3, about 16 km east of Taber. Go north on RGE RD 15-0 (150). Go north on this road, and soon you will have prairie on both sides. The best way to find the birds of the area is to stop the vehicle frequently; get out and listen and watch for the vast variety of bird species. As one continues north, notice how the landscape changes. Most of the west side of the road is fairly flat, but then some areas are very rugged and uneven, because they were shaped by wind erosion and shifting sand. Maybe 6 km from the highway the road crosses a lake (**F**), which is a good place to stop and look around. Just north of the lake a white sign marks the public use area. The prairie ends about 2 km north of here, so it is recommended to turn around and go back south to TWP RD 10-4 (104). Go west for a mile here, then go south again on RGE RD 15-1 (151), ending up again at Hwy 3.

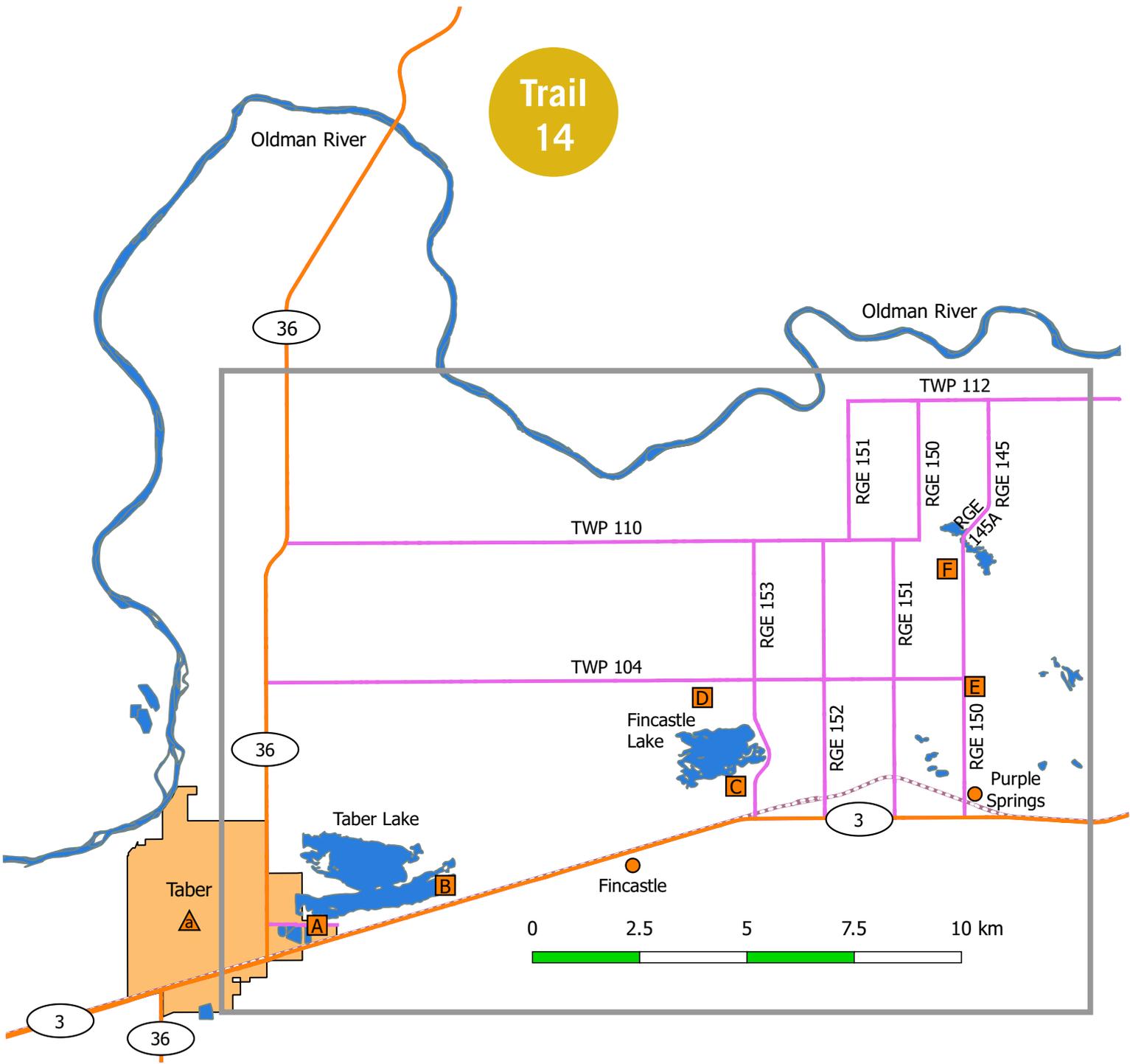


Whimbrel
Milt Spitzer



Fincastle Lake
Ken Orich

Trail 14



Trail 14: Taber and Purple Springs

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|  Observation Points |  Amenities |
|  West side of Taber Lake |  Taber: all amenities |
|  East side of Taber Lake | |
|  Fincastle Lake | |
|  Fields north and west of Fincastle Lake | |
|  Purple Springs Dunes | |
|  Lake on Rge. Rd. 150 | |

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