

ON FROZEN POND

The sensation of gliding over outdoor ice is as wonderful as it looks and sounds. We pay tribute to the ephemeral activity that is skating on the natural stuff.

WORDS BY VALERIE BERENYI • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEAH HENNEL

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Glance down (but not for long). Beneath your thin metal blades a kaleidoscope spins past—tawny leaves, bits of grass, bubbles of air, perhaps the shadows of fish deep below, all suspended in blue-white ice.

The boots of your ice skates bind your feet, exquisitely pinching in places as you push off, the tempered steel biting and then melting a whisper of water where solid ice and curved edge meet, ever so briefly. The hiss and scrape of your blades is amplified in the open space. Breathing in the sharp air, your face is bright with cold, the rest of you is hot, too hot, in layers of fleece, wool, nylon.

Thighs burn as you push hard down a straightaway (the odd bump or scattering of snow keeping you honest), then bank into the curve, casually but carefully crossing foot over foot. Again and again you push against the ice until, ahh, there's the sweet relief of the long glide as you gulp oxygen and drink in the landscape: the surface of the ice striped by the long shadows of trees, a sundog glinting low in the sky, the white-and-tan landscape punctuated by colourfully clad fellow skaters.

Skating on natural, unrefrigerated ice—the frozen ponds, lakes, rivers, canals and outdoor rinks in backyards and communities—is a quintessentially Canadian pastime inextricably linked to our childhood, says Marcel Lacroix. The lifelong skater grew up in Montreal where, as a preschooler, his mother would lace up his skates in the morning, shoo him across the street to skate for hours on a big outdoor rink beside the neighbourhood school, and then come fetch him at recess.

Lacroix raced for years as a short-track speed skater and then

went on to coach long- and short-track speed skating in three Olympic Games. He still lives and breathes skating as associate director of sport at Calgary's Olympic Oval, the first covered speed skating oval in North America. However, he can't wait to get out of the "icebox" and go skating with his kids at Bowness Lagoon for some physical and psychological fresh air.

"There are no time restrictions, no Zamboni, no rules. You don't have to follow the flow. There's this element of just wanting to skate for the love of skating," Lacroix says. "There are big kids and little kids playing hockey together. There are no helmets, no shin pads and no organization. There's that freedom of going out there and just having fun."

Sometimes, he takes his family to skate in the mountains, to places like Ghost Lake, Lake Louise and, memorably, Emerald Lake, near Field, B.C. "Wow, that was spectacular."

Likewise, photographer Leah Hennel started skating at age three. As a competitive figure skater most of her time was spent indoors on artificial ice. But she too prefers the freedom found on an icy Prairie lake. "You can hear the sounds your blades make when you carve in the ice, and smell the smoke from the fires on the shoreline. You can forget about everything out there on the ice."

Over the past few weeks in and around Calgary, Hennel sought to capture the joy, the beauty and the sensations of gliding over the sheets of frozen water that Mother Nature gives us and then too soon snatches away with a mid-winter melt. As her photographs on these pages show, skating on natural ice is at once an enduring and fleeting pleasure.

LACE 'EM UP

A local wag once noted that southern Alberta goes through more freeze-thaw cycles than a fast-food filet o' fish.

The weather does play havoc with natural ice rinks (see "On Thin Ice," page 29), but the City of Calgary does its best to maintain the following rinks and lagoons, flooding and clearing them through to the end of February. (Note: we didn't include Olympic Plaza because its ice is refrigerated. Tuck it in your back pocket for Chinook days.) For updates, call **311** or visit calgary.ca/parks.

BIG MARLBOROUGH PARK

Bleachers and a fire ring keep things toasty at this heavily used northeast park.

6033 Madigan Dr. N.E.

BOWNESS PARK LAGOON

Hands down the most romantic place to skate in town. **8900 48th Ave. N.W.**

CARBURN PARK

Newly opened in December, the one-acre rink is located on the ponds of this lovely natural area in Riverbend. **67 Riverview Dr. S.E.**

PRAIRIE WINDS PARK

Some of Calgary's best outdoor wading and spray pools do double duty come winter.

223 Castleridge Blvd. N.E.

PRINCE'S ISLAND LAGOON

The city turned this beloved downtown park into a winter destination when it created an ice rink in the lagoon. Now, can we please transform the lagoon into a swimming hole in summer?

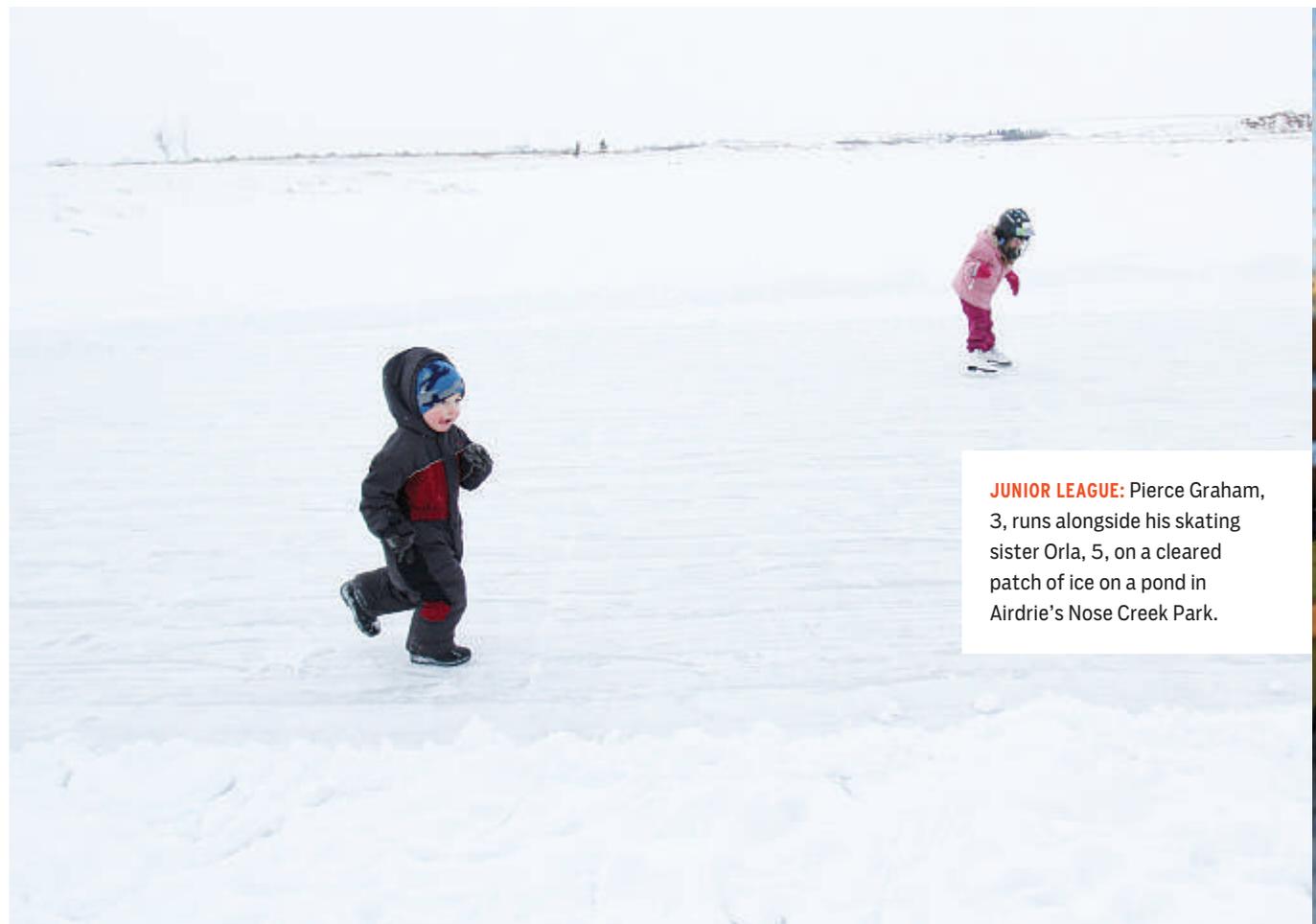
4th Street and 1st Avenue S.W.

MORE OUTDOOR RINKS

There are more than 35 outdoor rinks run by volunteers through the city's Adopt-a-Rink program. Find them at calgary.ca/parks.

As well, there are dozens of outdoor community skating rinks. To see a list, visit the Calgary Outdoors Rinks and Arenas website at calgaryarea.com/calgary_rinks_arenas.htm.

CLASSICS ON ICE: From left to right, shinny players Randy McKinley, Greg Salmon and Doug Shanks strike a pose on Chestermere Lake.

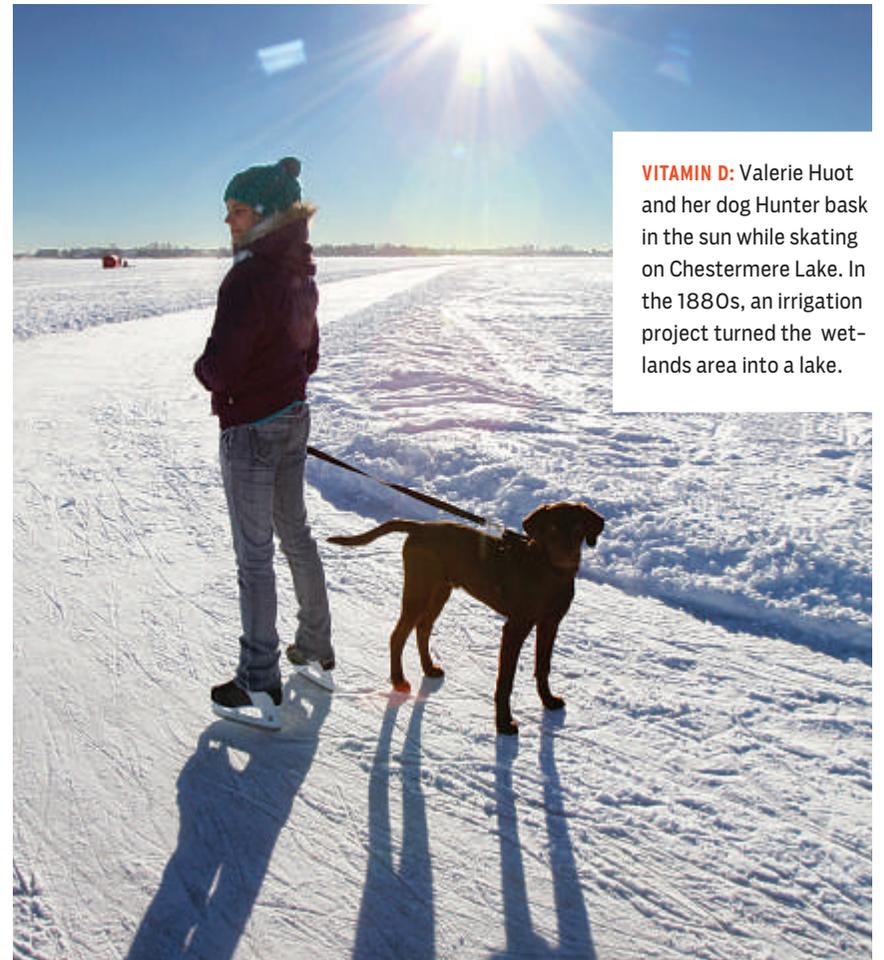


JUNIOR LEAGUE: Pierce Graham, 3, runs alongside his skating sister Orla, 5, on a cleared patch of ice on a pond in Airdrie's Nose Creek Park.

STEEPED IN CANADIANA: The Spray Meadow outdoor rink, located below the Fairmont Banff Springs' Waldhaus Restaurant and adjacent to the Spray River, offers free skating to the public in a gorgeous mountain setting.



BENCH TIME: A skater takes a breather to watch her family skate on the outdoor rink at the Shaganappi Community Association Hall.



VITAMIN D: Valerie Huot and her dog Hunter bask in the sun while skating on Chestermere Lake. In the 1880s, an irrigation project turned the wetlands area into a lake.



TIMELESS PASTIME: Members of a Hutterite colony south of High River enjoy a game of pond hockey on a mild Sunday afternoon. Their conservative, old-fashioned clothing doesn't get in the way of some fun time on ice. In keeping with their camera- and publicity-shy traditions, the colony members permitted photographer Leah Hennel to capture the skating party, but they asked that their names and that of the colony not be published.



ON THIN ICE

Skating on the ponds, lakes and rivers of the Canadian Rockies is spectacular when the conditions are right, but it involves many more natural hazards than the outdoor rinks and lagoons in town.

A good choice, according to Chris Gooliaff, a visitor safety specialist with Parks Canada in Banff National Park, is the portion of Lake Louise that's continually scraped and kept clean by staff at the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. "With the backdrop of the Rockies in the background it's pretty hard to beat," he says. As well, the well-maintained outdoor rink located below the Fairmont Banff Springs and east of the Bow Falls parking lot on Spray Avenue in Banff is a great option.

An icy November, before the snow comes, is the ideal time of year for skating in the mountains, but if you're willing to heft a shovel and a scraper, Gooliaff says that Johnson Lake and the west end of Two Jack Lake (stay away from the dam at the east end, which has open water and thin ice), both located near Banff, are good options. Avoid Vermilion Lakes where warm springs flow year round, making for areas with open water and variable ice thickness.

Gooliaff offers a few other pointers for safe skating, given that hazards are not marked in the park:

- Always check the ice thickness; it should be at least six inches thick. The best way to check is by drilling with an auger.
- Clear the ice surface of snow first so that you can see what you're skating on.
- Never skate at night or alone.
- Water vapour above the ice, or creaking and cracking noises, indicate weak ice.
- The thickness of natural ice varies from place to place on any pond. And, when the weather is warm, the thickness of natural ice can change from day to day. "We don't get Chinooks as dramatically as you do in [Calgary], but things can warm up. If it's above freezing, you need to pay attention. The ice can be thinner. Always check." **S**

A SLICE OF ICE

On her travels to outdoor rinks, ponds and lagoons, photographer Leah Hennel also put together a video about skating on natural ice. To see it, go to SWERVE.CALGARY.COM.