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Biology professor wants your wildlife photos

Edmonton – If your summer plans include heading out to the lake, going to the mountains, or simply strolling through your neighbourhood, Dr. Jessica Haines, assistant professor, Department of Biological Sciences at MacEwan University is hoping you'll take the time to snap a few photos of the wildlife that you see along the way.

Haines isn't only looking for hard-to-spot species – she also wants crows, gophers, ladybugs, pigeons, squirrels, warblers and everything in between. She's working with the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute (ABMI), designing a research project that will use data collected through its free NatureLynx mobile app. Users (a.k.a. "citizen scientists") have already uploaded more than 6,000 photos over the past year, and each image contributes to the bigger story of what's happening with biodiversity in our province.

"Every day we hear about species that are in decline or how humans are impacting the environment," says Haines. "Citizen science – getting a lot of different people, not just professional scientists, participating in data collection – is a positive way we can all contribute to understanding which species are in decline and which ones are actually doing well."

"Photos of species that are fairly easy to identify give us information about distribution – where they occur – and that is incredibly important because distribution can be tied to climate change, which can affect where certain species live," she said.

Haines is asking citizen scientists to upload anything they come across in the natural world over the next year. "Don't worry if you can't identify the insect, bird, mammal or plant that you snapped a photo of – you can have ABMI's team of experts check." All the photos will be verified, and Haines will have quality data to work with next summer when her research begins in earnest.

Haines is still determining which questions about Alberta biodiversity and the effectiveness of citizen science her research will ask, but she knows MacEwan students will have a part to play in answering them. She plans to enlist a group of student researchers to help with data collection.

"This type of research not only gives our students experience with data collection, it also combines science – trying to understand what the data tells us about biodiversity – with communication, and that's useful regardless of what career they eventually choose," added Haines.

Founded in 1971, MacEwan University inspires its students with a powerful combination of academic excellence and personal learning experiences. Offering more than 65 programs including undergraduate degrees, applied degrees, diplomas, certificates, continuing education and corporate training, the university provides a transformative education in a creative, collaborative and supportive learning environment where creativity and innovation thrive. Located in Edmonton, Alberta Canada, MacEwan University offers a unique student experience that opens up diverse pathways for achievement and growth.

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