



Wild Lands Advocate 12(6): 12, December 2004

New Report Shows Primrose-Lakeland Area Worthy of Protection

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The past several months have seen a number of significant developments – some positive, others less so – in AWA's pursuit of protection for the Primrose-Lakeland area in northeastern Alberta. Let's start with the good news. Thanks to the funding we have received from the Richard Ivey Foundation, we were able to retain Kevin Timoney to prepare a study for AWA on the potential conservation value offered by portions of the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range (CLAWR). From a biodiversity perspective, the Lakeland/CLAWR area is important because it spans both the Dry Mixedwood and the Central Mixedwood subregions of Alberta's boreal forest. The data that Kevin was able to gather and analyze indicate that, in his words, "the region is indeed biologically diverse, relatively unfragmented, and worthy of protection." It therefore lends considerable strength to our case.

But even this encouraging message has aspects we should be concerned about. While the area's biodiversity conservation potential is high, the report also underlines the need to gather better information about the flora and fauna found on the range. For decades the military and the energy industry have controlled – make that limited – access to the Range. Consequently, the CLAWR has often been excluded from scientific studies. When it comes to the species tracked by the Alberta Natural Heritage Information Centre and the Biodiversity Species Observation Database, the CLAWR is a "virtual terra incognita." "It is almost a certainty," the report notes, "that many rare, uncommon, 'at risk', 'sensitive', 'keystone', 'umbrella', or otherwise significant species, communities, and ecosystems occur in the CLAWR about which little or nothing is known."

Another challenge that Kevin Timoney's report confirms or underlines is the threat that the petroleum industry's thirst for oil and gas poses to our conservation agenda for the CLAWR. Over the past month we have been mapping the locations of active petroleum, natural gas, and oil sands leases on the CLAWR. Some townships, particularly those in the south-central portion of the Range, appear to be characterized by more wells than forest. One oilsands company, for example, has erected 796 wells on 54 sections of land inside the southern boundary of the Range.

This report will play an important part in our efforts to try to secure the support and participation of local conservation groups and First Nations in the vicinity of Lac La Biche and Cold Lake. December and January promise to be months where we meet with organizations such as the Beaver River Naturalist Society, the Cold Lake First Nations, and the Lac La Biche Birding Society in order to outline our objectives and to try to secure the local support and participation we believe to be essential to promoting sustainability in Primrose-Lakeland.

Now that the provincial election is behind us and the new cabinet has been sworn in, we will be focusing some of our attention on the MLAs from Lac La Biche-St. Paul and Bonnyville-Cold Lake, and the Honourable Gary Mar, the new Minister of Community Development. Given Ray Danyluk's (Lac La Biche-St. Paul) support for the protection of the Garner Fen, as well as comments he has made in the Legislature about Lakeland's potential to become a "Kananaskis of the North," we are very hopeful that we will be able to work together to finally get the government to adopt an ecologically sensitive management plan for Lakeland Provincial Park and Recreation Area.

