



Wild Lands Advocate 11(3): 13, June 2003

## BIGHORN MONITORING PROJECT 2003 – YOU CALL THIS WORK?

By Laurie Wein, AWA Conservation Biologist

I have just spent my first week “working” for the AWA. And now I am wondering how I got so lucky to find a job where I am paid to backpack in the east slopes of the Rockies. After only three days at the office, I joined conservation biologist Tamaini Snaith, board member Heinz Unger, and AWA volunteer Rod Burns (along with Rascal and Jiggs – AWA volunteers of the four legged kind) and spent eight days backpacking through the Clearwater-Ram district of the Bighorn Wildland.

The goal of our trip was to begin a human-use monitoring project for the Bighorn Wildland. As you may know, AWA is concerned with the increase in backcountry recreational activity in the Bighorn and the impacts this activity is having on the ecological integrity of the region. This summer AWA will assess the levels of this recreational activity and study its effects.

Of particular concern are the effects of motorized activity, particularly off-highway vehicles (OHVs). The environmental impacts of this type of recreational use include damage to soils and vegetation, increased erosion and sedimentation in streams, and the displacement and disruption of plant and wildlife populations. While Alberta's Eastern Slopes Policy has traditionally protected this area from these kinds of damages by designating it a Prime Protection Zone, the policy has been poorly enforced to date. Recently, the Alberta government has overridden the policy and authorized the access of OHVs on designated trails in these formerly protected areas.

AWA is concerned that current levels of both legal and illegal, motorized and non-motorized recreational activity may prove damaging to the Bighorn. As part of the AWA study, we will collect baseline data on the levels of damage that are already present as well as monitor the environmental changes that occur.

We began our trip from the Hummingbird equestrian staging area. After testing the Hummingbird River crossing at the staging area (and getting soggy in the process) we decided that heading down Ranger Creek to the Ram River was too ambitious this early in the season, with river levels rising rapidly due to increased runoff from the mountain slopes. Instead, we hiked west along Hummingbird Creek to the Onion Creek confluence and into Onion Lake.

Most of the main trail follows an old exploration road used in the 1950s that now sees use by hikers, horse parties and OHVs. Several side trails for hikers and horses parallel the main trail and provide views just as beautiful but with fewer mud holes. With beautiful warm weather we were lucky to have dry trails for the majority of our trip and hot sun to warm our frigid feet after walking sandal-footed through several small creeks and seepages whose run-off was bone-numbingly cold. We camped along the trail at outfitters' camps, including one at Onion Lake, where we set our tents on a high bluff overlooking the lake. Onion Lake is named for the nodding onion, which grows at its south end. Unfortunately, we were too early in the season to see any in bloom.

Since this was a research trip, most of our time was spent getting an overview of the area, working out the glitches in our more technical equipment and discussing how to designate our sites for data collection. This meant we spent much of our time debating where we were exactly with regards to the topographic map or what the GPS was trying to say when it kept beeping at us. Sometimes we were so focused on our equipment that we failed to notice what was going on around us. Rod, in particular, had a close encounter with an elk while his attention was fixed on the GPS as it tracked our route. Luckily, both Rod and the elk emerged unscathed by the experience.





We were lucky enough to see a variety of animals on the trail, including mule and white-tailed deer, spruce grouse, bald eagles, harlequin ducks, and one lone bighorn sheep. One of the real treats was a sighting of three elk cows with a newborn calf. He was still wobbly on his legs and having a tough time crossing a stream after his mom, but we watched from a distance and silently cheered him on as he made it across safely. Many tracks intersected our own – coyote, wolf, black bear and grizzly. Tamaini was sure that a grizzly wandered through our camp on one of the nights. I'm just thankful I hadn't chosen that particular night for a midnight trip to the bushes.

After eight days out we had achieved our objectives for the first trip of the season. We hope to be back in the Bighorn several times this season to continue our monitoring work. Maybe we will see you out there on the trail sometime this summer. You'll know us when you see us; we'll be the ones "working" under the beautiful sun, enjoying the animal sightings and the spectacular views of the Rockies to the west. See you on the trails.

*If you are interested in participating in the Bighorn Recreational Monitoring, or any other project of Alberta Wilderness Watch, please contact us at AWA.*

