



WILDERNESS WANDERINGS – TRAVELS IN ALBERTA’S MOST PRECIOUS WILD SPACES

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

– John Muir

This summer, AWA staff had the privilege of visiting two of Alberta’s most spectacular wilderness areas. On the face of it, Willmore Wilderness north of Jasper and Suffield National Wildlife Area near Medicine Hat don’t have a great deal in common, but they both have a tremendous significance in AWA’s past history and in its future plans.



C. Olson

Suffield National Wildlife Area is a land of broad sweeping prairies and endless horizons.



N. Douglas

This misty peak in the soft light of a Willmore morning was a welcome sight upon opening our tent flaps.

Willmore Wilderness

The Willmore is Alberta’s greatest remaining true wilderness, covering 460 km² of breathtaking mountain vistas, cascading crystal streams, and habitat for some of Alberta’s most spectacular wildlife: grizzlies, wolves, and the elusive woodland caribou.

AWA staff spent seven days in the Willmore in August this year, and it was a profoundly memorable experience. Whether it was the sight of skittish caribou always running on some mysterious errand, the contrast of a warming sun direct on the heels of a brief but spiteful hailstorm, or three wolves slinking guiltily away along an open hillside, there was always something new and exciting to encounter over the next ridge. Where else could you be two days’ hike from the nearest highway and bump into a cowboy with a horse on a lead rein in one hand and the newly released Harry Potter book in the other?

Without the startling abrupt peaks of Kananaskis, this part of the Willmore still left us with an impression of remoteness beyond anything experienced elsewhere in Alberta. Our host, Ray Rasmussen, who has traveled the Willmore for many years, describes it aptly as a “gentle, human-scale

wilderness.” Checking the maps on our return to civilization, we appreciated that we had only dipped our toes into the Willmore. We were left with the impression that we could explore it for years and still continue to be surprised by its beauty.

The Willmore Wilderness Park was created in 1959, but even in those heady days, “protection” was not necessarily enough. The Willmore continued to face demands for inappropriate resource development such as coal, forestry, oil and gas, and tourism. The early AWA came into its own in the early 1970s as it successfully mobilized the public to call for strengthened legislation to truly protect the Willmore from any industrial development, including tourism.

Even to this day, we have to be vigilant about maintaining its protection. The town of Grande Cache recently expressed its desire to build a ski hill in the Willmore, and there is constant pressure to open the area up to motorized access and to build private cabins. It seems that we can never relax for long: as AWA Director Vivian Pharis observed in the 1970s, “Development can lose battle after battle; wilderness can be lost only once.”

Suffield National Wildlife Area

Suffield National Wildlife Area does not have the peaks and the sweeping ridges of the Willmore, but it is still a true wilderness area. It is a land of broad sweeping prairies and endless horizons, home to grassland specialists such as rattlesnakes, burrowing owls, and kangaroo rats.

AWA's bus trip to Suffield in July 2007 was a rare opportunity for our supporters to visit this breathtaking landscape, which, because it is part of the military base at CFB Suffield, is not open to the public. The lucky participants were left with glorious memories of a subtly dramatic environment with a surprising variety of natural habitats: a rattlesnake rattling its disgust from the depths of a sage bush; the ever-twisting South

Saskatchewan River flowing calmly past its honour guard of solemn cottonwood trees; the profound evening peace of the fading sun over the intricate system of coulees.

Suffield's history of protection is considerably more recent than the Willmore. The Suffield NWA was designated in 2003, following many years of concerted effort by a number of organizations (including AWA). This time it was not even three years before it became clear that, once again, "protection" was not enough. In October 2005, EnCana applied to drill 1,275 more gas wells in the newly protected National Wildlife Area, and the Alberta government is considering an approval of the project. Where else in the world could such a natural gem be treated with such disdain?

The battle over Suffield looks set to play out over the coming months as a coalition of environmental groups, including AWA, Nature Canada, Grassland Naturalists and the Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE), works to fend off this proposed desecration.

Defending Wild Alberta

AWA will continue, as ever, to work toward protection as a tool for achieving better land management and appreciation of sensitive landscapes and wildlife. But we are not naïve enough to believe that protection in itself is enough. If there is one lesson that both Willmore and Suffield can teach us, it is that we must be continually vigilant when it comes to Alberta's unsurpassed wildlands. Wilderness in Alberta will always need defenders.