

# Updates

## Species at Risk in Alberta

In October, Ecojustice released *Failure to Protect: Grading Canada's Species at Risk Laws*, a report evaluating Canada's federal, provincial, and territorial approaches to protecting species at risk. As the report's title implies, those approaches were found wanting. AWA has been advocating for the protection of wildlife and wild spaces in Alberta for over four decades and is not surprised by the Ecojustice report. According to the best available evidence on species at risk conservation, Ecojustice used four main criteria to grade the governments on their species at risk legislation. The four categories are simple and intuitive; one might say that they are common-sensical. First, you must identify species that need help. Next, don't kill them! Finally, give them a home and help them recover.

Unlike many other provinces, Alberta has no specific species at risk legislation and utterly fails to meet three out of four of these critical criteria.

1. Identifying species at risk: Alberta's system for identifying species at risk is entirely voluntary. Voluntary processes have been demonstrated time and again to be ineffective when it comes to making the difficult trade-offs often required to protect species and habitats.

2. Don't kill species at risk: The Wildlife Act restricts hunting sensitive species.

3. Give species at risk a home: While it is a relief that we don't directly kill species at risk, their future is dim if they have nowhere to live, eat, and raise their young. Alberta has absolutely no legal requirement to protect species' habitats. Given that habitat loss is known to be one of the greatest threats to wildlife today, this is clearly an unacceptable legislative omission.

4. Help these species recover: In Alberta, there is no legal obligation to implement recovery action. While the government produces and implements recovery plans for some species, it is, again, a voluntary process that does not have legal teeth when difficult decisions must be made. History shows that species conservation will not win out over immediate development desires if there are no legal means to ensure that conservation has a place at the decision-making table.



*Meltdown August*  
30"x30" oil on canvas  
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In essence, there are no legal tools in Alberta to protect species facing severe population declines. These declines, if left unaddressed, will likely lead to extirpation or extinction.

Alberta has no excuse for this legislative vacuum or for relying completely on voluntary and ineffective processes. There are examples, nationally and internationally, of effective species at risk legislation. These laws protect and help species to recover. This is not a case of lacking the tools or the ability to address the problem; it's a case where our leaders lack the political will to adopt and implement readily available tools. AWA would like to see Alberta adopt effective species at risk legislation, such as the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA), that provides a solid legal basis for the protection of species. But, unlike the federal example, we would expect Alberta to respect the law's obligations

and follow through with protection of critical habitat. Protecting Alberta's endangered species cannot be addressed on a voluntary basis.

Species such as woodland caribou, grizzly bear, and greater sage-grouse are a few examples of where the governments of Alberta and Canada are failing to protect the natural heritage that Canadians deeply value. With the federal threat to weaken the *Species at Risk Act*, there is an even greater need for the provinces to be leaders and protect species at the provincial level. AWA will continue our work on critically endangered species in the province and push for legislation that will protect these unique and spectacular species and their homes. These magnificent creatures that are integral elements of our provincial identity deserve nothing less.

- Katie Rasmussen