

Stewardship at Plateau Mountain

AWA makes a difference

By Chris Saunders, AWA Board Member



Many readers will be familiar with Plateau Mountain, a prominent landmark in south western Alberta between the Livingstone Range to the west and the prairie to the east. It is, as the name implies, a genuine plateau about eight kilometres long and one to two kilometres wide. Technically it qualifies as a nunatak, an area of high land that stood above the ice sheet during the last ice age. Its broad wind-swept summit hosts a remarkable variety of wildflowers and geological features. It provides important grazing for a number of wildlife species, particularly in the winter. To the visitor the plateau can feel like arctic tundra during inclement weather, quite different to the alpine and subalpine to the west. Plateau Mountain was declared an Ecological Reserve in 1991. It is a unique place.

An area is designated an Ecological Reserve because of its rare and fragile landscapes and ecosystems. The primary purpose of the designation is to protect the area for research and education. Access on foot is permitted to the general public for low impact activities such as walking, wildlife viewing, and photography. Activities such as camping, hunting, and the use of off-road vehicles are strictly prohibited.

There has been natural gas exploration and production on Plateau Mountain for many years. The wells and small buildings holding production equipment, now owned by Centrica Energy, are dormant; there has been no production since 2012. The roads that were built to service the wells are gated and are open to only vehicles approved by Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) and Centrica. These roads also serve as the pedestrian access.

AWA has been a volunteer steward for Plateau Mountain since 2001. This involves visiting the area on a regular basis and working with AEP and Centrica to resolve issues identified during these visits.

In November AWA volunteers made 2 reconnaissance visits to Plateau Mountain. The first was by Wendy Ryan, an experienced environmentalist from the ranching community of Pincher Creek with many years of “on the ground” experience. Wendy’s report noted that there were no signs to indicate that Plateau Mountain is an Ecological Reserve even at the points of access. In fact, on her visit she met an individual who was hunting just inside the boundary. When approached he advised he was unaware of the area’s Ecological Reserve status. Wendy also noted significant amounts of discarded gas field materials along the road. During the second visit a couple of weeks later Paul Sutherland and Chris and Jennifer Saunders experienced gale force winds with whiteout conditions in what turned out to be a rather epic hike along the top of the plateau. Nevertheless, they confirmed Wendy’s findings.

With the knowledge that there was an urgent need to put signage in place and re-

move a significant amount of waste AWA’s executive director, Christyann Olson, swung into action. She organized a volunteer work party consisting of: herself, Dan Olson, Sean Nichols, Wendy Ryan, and David Mitchell, to join Nathan Brown, the AEP representative, on site. At the end of an arduous day’s work on November 7, 2015 the group had put 11 signs in place along the road and at other possible access points. The signs clearly state that the area is an Ecological Reserve. In addition, they collected and hauled away about 300 pounds of metal and wood waste. This material, almost certainly left over from the operations of the gas field, had been left as unsightly and potentially dangerous litter in various places across the plateau.

More remains to be done. Signs are required explaining what activities are allowed and not allowed in the reserve, AEP has undertaken to do this in due course, and there are more piles of discarded material along the old road to the north which should be removed in the spring.

This is a good example of how AWA’s volunteer stewardship can assist AEP in maintaining and preserving a unique Alberta wilderness area. ▲



Volunteers cleaning up industrial refuse on Plateau Mountain. PHOTO: © C. OLSON