

Wayne Howse:

Keeping the Peace for Nature

By Vivian Pharis, *Emeritus Board Member*



Wayne Howse was formally recognized for bravery several times during the 36 years he served as an RCMP Officer. In 2021 his bravery will again be recognized, but this time it will be for standing in defense of Alberta's public lands. Wayne will be honoured as one of AWA's Wilderness and Wildlife Defenders for his steadfast dedication in protecting public lands and wildlife, while both on and off duty. Sometimes he faced hostility, even danger, for that dedication. Strong childhood ties bind him to the land and have long compelled him to value and protect it. He did this by staying calm, knowing the law and applying it firmly and fairly, but only after first trying education to change destructive behaviour.

Wayne is an original Canadian, having grown up the eldest of six children on the Buffalo Lake Metis Settlement in north-central Alberta. Raised on a mixed farm, he learned early the practicalities of living close to the land with cattle and horses, of nurturing a large garden and utilizing the bush, streams, and lake for sustenance. He rode the local school bus to Caslan, later riding 50 km twice each day to High School in Lac La Biche. When considering a career, the life of a Conservation Officer or "Keeper-of-the-Land" appealed, but a far-sighted community project offered by local RCMP at Boyle won him over. That program allowed teenagers like the 18 year old Wayne to "ride along" and see what police work was all about. "The Force" drew him in. At the age of only 19 he joined up and thirty-five years later was awarded with a special long-service pin. Along the way, Wayne wore titles of Constable and Corporal and was awarded for acts of bravery and for performing emergency services.

The Howse name is one well connected historically with the Rocky Mountains and foothills. Wayne is a direct descendant of Joseph Howse, whose name adorns the pass between Alberta and B.C. at the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River. Great, great, great grandfather Joseph is described as an English gentleman who became a Hudson's Bay Company factor and early explorer. But he is arguably best known for compiling the first grammar of the Cree language. He married a Cree lady and his descendants continue on, in Alberta and B.C. Wayne is proud that one of his sons, a Calgary area Search and Rescue Instructor, recently climbed the challenging Mt. Howse, recognized in the Rockies West Climbers Guide, Volume III.

Twenty-five of his 36 years with the RCMP put Wayne on duty in Alberta, while other years found him patrolling the Yukon and parts of B.C. He has served as a Corporal and as Supervisor of a Watch with 5 to 6 constables under his command. Work generally involved intervening with the public, reviewing investigations and providing direction and advice. But, Wayne also conducted his own investigations. Then he was most resourceful when investigating the abuse or disrespect for the public lands he treasures.

Now living in semi-retirement in Rocky Mountain House, Wayne continues to take on temporary or relief positions throughout the province when needed. This year he patrolled 3 weeks in Waterton Lakes National Park and filled in for officers at Turner Valley where his territory included the wild Upper Sheep River. The Upper Sheep is wide-open territory loved by hikers and equestrians, but the open spaces also lure the less scrupulous

who expect to be out of the law's reach. When policing places like the Upper Sheep or the Bighorn's Backcountry, Wayne is often in the company of provincial Fish and Wildlife or Conservation Officers. Together several arms of the law discipline the unruly and disrespectful when necessary, as when motor cyclists reach 250 km/hr on the empty, winding roads of the Upper Sheep.

More than 50 possible recreational infractions fall under Alberta's Forests Protection and Public lands Acts. Most range around the misuse of fire, recreational vehicles and garbage disposal, but careless use of firearms, private lands trespass, disrespect for regulations and regulators and even riding a horse on certain cross-country trails could be offenses. At one point in order to educate people, Wayne simplified these regulations and their fine structure, making copies available from gas stations and general stores around Rocky Mountain House. This improved behavior, but he points out that overcoming ignorance, obstinance and unwarranted senses of entitlement are difficult challenges to overcome. Wayne stresses too that, after a previous government expanded backcountry enforcement numbers and hired additional summer staff, more recent budget cuts have depleted these guardians. The managerial load on remaining provincial officers and the RCMP is increasingly unmanageable.

Pressed for examples of extreme situations he has had to deal with, Wayne is full of hair-raising, sometimes life-threatening stories, about his life in parks and other public lands. He's proud that sometimes, people originally hostile at being charged, for example, with destroying fish habitat, come to



Wayne on the public lands he treasured and protected. PHOTO: © J. HOWSE

understand why rules exist and end up being apologetic. Unfortunately, they are the few. Others may receive substantial fines and have equipment confiscated. One noteworthy case under Wayne's watch got a good public airing. It arose when upset citizens alerted the Rocky RCMP detachment and Alberta Environment and Parks that videos were being posted on YouTube showing people stunting with OHVs in Swan Creek west of Rocky. Wayne and his colleagues analyzed a number of the videos, finding violations extending over several years. A judge issued a search warrant to en-

ter the premises of the main perpetrator who was charged under the *Public Lands and Water Acts* with harming a stream bed. He was fined \$1,000 and forfeited his \$10,000 OHV to the Crown. In another case, a young fellow was caught running from a fire he let get out of control. His parents had to re-mortgage their house to pay the cost of fire fighting.

While the video case satisfied the investigators, Wayne points out that the provincial fine structure has recently been significantly altered. Fines under the *Forest Protection Act* for behaviour like leaving combustible gar-

bage and broken bottles in campsites were increased from \$425 to \$840. But, fines for *Public Lands Act* violations were cut from highs of between \$1,500 and \$300 now to a range of \$575 to \$115. Charges for littering, for example, have dropped from \$500 to \$180. AWA believes these latter changes are wrongheaded.

Several years ago now AWA's Conservation Specialist Joanna Skrajny was given a rare chance to experience Wayne's strategies to educate, defend, and apply the law to those abusing public lands, when he took her on patrol through the Abraham dam area and Kiska/Willson portions of the Bighorn Wildland. The OHV community heavily uses these two areas. Joanna came away impressed by Wayne's understanding of the need to protect wild lands and the gentle, reasoned, but firm way he tries to educate or otherwise deal with people who disrespect the land he so respects.

Asked what he thinks could help alleviate the problems he sees with mistreatment of public lands, he offers a number of ideas. They include: more land protection, more enforcement people on patrol, and incorporating Provincial Sheriffs into backcountry law enforcement. Sheriffs already apply all provincial and federal laws that are already administered by the Province's Justice Department.

Fall is a favourite season for Wayne. It's when he takes to the woods in traditional fashion and brings home the winter's meat. It's also a favourite time of year because Wayne is an avid photographer and delights in taking photos of wildlife and magically lit landscapes. One fall photo of Wayne, taken by a close friend who is also a professional photographer, speaks volumes to the vocation and values Wayne has dedicated his life to. Wayne is wearing his red serge dress uniform and in the background is the rich green of a mixed conifer forest in the foothills. There too in the background is a bull moose studying what Wayne and his friend are up to. I have no doubt this photo reflects Wayne's ideal world, one where the forests are intact, lands are protected, the moose are magnificent, and a healthy natural order is what citizens and governments alike aspire to create and maintain. 🍄