

The Fellowship of Nature: Protecting the Rosebud River Valley

Fellowship is synonymous with December's holidays. They are opportunities for us to gather with family, friends, or those with whom we share an interest or sentiment. They are opportunities to enjoy the company of likeminded people.

One privilege of working with AWA is seeing a nature-focused fellowship blossom over the years. This fellowship grows when we build relationships with kindred spirits, when we join together to push for passing on healthy natural legacies to future generations.

Developing this nature-inspired fellowship is the conservation long-game. Being ahead in that game won't necessarily show up on today's score card. It may be the case, and certainly is in Alberta, that this fellowship grows while governing parties ignore it. For example, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative released a poll in early December showing a strong majority of Albertans want to see a new park or protected wilderness in the Bighorn. Minister Nixon made it clear during second reading debate on the *Trails Act* that he's proud to be opposed to that ambition.

For now, one way to measure the success of nurturing a nature-inspired fellowship is seeing the commitments people make in their personal lives to privilege conservation values.

This is what brings me to the Rosebud River Valley, critical habitat for bank swallows and nesting sites for golden eagles. For years now, local landowners and people in the hamlet of Rosebud have opposed, using every conceivable means, the nightmare that a car racing enthusiast imagines for the valley – a car racing resort with multiple racetracks and accommodations.

This fall I met with Rick Skibsted and the Clarks (Richard and Wendy), three of those landowners. Their recent efforts to stop this madness will be featured in the next issue of the Advocate. Here I want to focus on the fellowship of nature they have helped to maintain and strengthen with respect to this very special valley in the heart of the Badlands.

Their families settled in the valley more than 100 years ago. At times, it must seem to them that their opposition to the racetrack has lasted as long. These landowners walk their conservation talk. Conservation animates their daily lives. In May 2020, for example, they placed conservation easements on more than 4,000 acres of land they own in the valley.

Wendy made the point to me that the opposition to the racetrack isn't just their show; many in the community are part of a growing fellowship intent on sparing the valley from the insult of the racetrack. Dozens and dozens of individual letters have been sent to NDP and UCP leaders alike; nearly 1,000 copies of their form letter have been sent to our last two Premiers (visit their website to see how involved they have been: <https://www.savetherosebud.ca>).

And then there's the issue of identifying/protecting critical habitat for the bank swallow, a threatened species under the federal *Species at Risk Act*. The Clarks and Skibsteds are part of an informal coalition of 18 landowners with properties stretching along more than 16 kilometres of the Rosebud Valley. They support efforts to help the bank swallow recover in their community. "We will continue to steward the critical habitat in the Rosebud River Valley," they wrote to Ottawa about the proposed recovery strategy for the swallow, "recognizing that keeping the valley in its natural state is the best protection for the bank swallow and all wildlife and native plants."

Today in the realm of politics and policy, the landowners in Rosebud haven't stopped the racetrack...yet. But they can claim to have contributed to mobilizing friends and neighbours to join them in developing a nature-inspired fellowship. Eventually, the growing conservation ethic they are part of will not be denied. The powers that be today will either bow before that ethic or be swept aside.

I hope that 2022 will be a year when we bring that future closer to becoming a reality.

- Ian Urquhart, Editor

