

# Alberta's Neutral Hills

## Grassroots Protection of the Grasslands

By Joyce Hildebrand

Eighteen years ago, the Alberta Wilderness Association identified the grasslands of the Neutral Hills in east-central Alberta as a natural area that required long-term protection. Three years ago one of the largest drilling booms in recent memory started in the area and the AWA became concerned about the Hills' future. Thus began a process involving all of the interest groups, especially the local ranchers and farmers, so that a final management plan could be formulated and supported by all concerned.

### An island of native prairie

Covering 50 km<sup>2</sup> the Neutral Hills sit on the border between two vanishing ecoregions of Alberta: northern fescue grassland to the south and central parkland to the north. Less than 1% of the northern fescue region in Alberta is still in its natural condition, and only 26.7 km<sup>2</sup> of this subregion are formally protected. Of the central parkland region, less than 5% remains natural with 212 km<sup>2</sup> protected.

Grassland is the most endangered ecosystem in North America. During the last 100 years, over 80% of Alberta's native grasslands have become cropland, leaving the prairie as one of the most threatened natural regions in the province. The Neutral Hills have remained relatively undisturbed in the midst of this agricultural activity partly because they are a glacial remnant, composed of boulders and sand covered with a layer of soil too thin to support cropping.

The hills have also been spared because of the local people's sense of stewardship. The ranchers and farmers have a long history of connection to this land, attested to by the gravestones of their homesteading ancestors. They have been grazing cattle on the hills for a century without degrading the land. David Holloway, an AWA Director on the committee spearheading this project, visited the area early this past summer. He was impressed with the local residents' knowledge of and concern for the land. "They know the plants on their land, and which plants grow better on which sides of the hills. They know where the springs are and how they function, and the importance of having a diversity of life on the land."

The other party managing the Neutral Hills is the Special Areas Board. In the late 1930s, the communities of east-central Alberta, decimated by the Depression, joined together to create the Special Areas of Alberta, a land base administered by a Board set up by the Special Areas Act of 1938. About two million hectares remain and are managed by a Board of Directors and an Advisory Council. In addition to providing municipal services, their mandate is to manage the public lands in the Special Areas, maintaining the land in an economically and environmentally viable state.



There has been intensive oil and gas activity in the area surrounding the Neutral Hills.

have gradually reduced the natural value of the land. One of the biggest oil and gas rushes of the early 1990s took place in the area surrounding the Neutral Hills. There has been exploratory drilling along the flanks of the hills, and oil and gas have already been found on the north end. "We're concerned that if that activity spreads, we would have intensive oil and gas development, facilities, pumpjacks, roading, and upgrading of existing roads," says Holloway. "Once you begin to road an area, you fragment it, and the prairie just won't survive." There must be a formal recognition of the land's natural value through protected designation, in order to control surface disturbance and preserve the native grassland. The ranchers and farmers have mixed feelings about oil and gas development in the area. It brings jobs to their communities, but they can see that ecological integrity is being compromised. "From my conversations with them, most

of them prefer to see no more surface disturbance on the Hills, but they don't want to reduce the oil and gas activity in the general area," Holloway says.

One thing the local people need not fear from a protective designation is changes to their cattle grazing practices. The grasslands relied on the cycle of grazing and growth when the buffalo roamed the prairies, long before the cattle arrived. Cattle grazing maintains this cycle and is in fact necessary for the maintenance of the prairie.

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### What's so special about the Neutral Hills?

- The Hills cover 50 km<sup>2</sup>, forming one of the largest remaining blocks of unbroken northern fescue grassland in Alberta. The area is uninhabited and unroaded with minimal human disturbance.
- Uncommon ice thrust ridge topography underlies scenic rolling hills and provides ideal cover for wildlife.
- Natural springs and seeps create unique wetland habitat and one of the few year-round water supplies for wildlife and cattle.
- Cattle grazing has helped to keep the prairie ecosystem in balance for the last 100 years.
- The Hills provide potential habitat for the threatened Baird's sparrow and loggerhead shrike, as well as the uncommon upland sandpiper, sharp-tailed grouse, stilt sandpiper, and Cooper's hawk.
- Ideal habitat for rare or endangered plants such as the crowfoot violet, few-flowered rush, taraxia, western wood lily, shining arnica, yellow paintbrush, scratch grass, Nevada bulrush, sand spurry, few-flowered aster, giant hyssop, and American dragonhead.
- Gooseberry Lake is an important staging area for migrating shorebirds and is a candidate WHSRN site. The lakeshore provides potential nesting sites for the endangered piping plover.

### Why protective status?

So why the need for formal protection of the Neutral Hills? That was the reaction of the local people and the Special Areas administration when the AWA approached them. Why not leave the hills to the care of the people who live on them or lease the land, since they have preserved this land adequately for a century without protective status?

Air photos show that over the last several decades seismic cutlines, oil and gas facilities, road building and upgrading, and recreational vehicles

Cattle grazing in the Neutral Hills. Grazing would be an integral part of the management plan, should the hills become formally protected.



The ranchers and farmers have mixed feelings about oil and gas development in the area. It brings jobs to their communities, but they can see that ecological integrity is being compromised.



# The Legacy of the Neutral Hills

By Anne McLean

Legend has it that, long before the not so distant past, the land of the Neutral Hills looked much like the rest of the level prairie. It was inhabited by two groups of warring Peoples, and the fighting caused great hardship and loss of life. Wishing to keep them apart and put an end to the conflicts, a Great Power caused the hills to rise up out of the surrounding landscape. Amazed at the sudden appearance of the hills, representatives of the Peoples followed the hills to the Little Gap. There they held a great meeting. They made peace and disposed of their weapons. Vowing never again to enter into hostilities against each other, the two groups came together and feasted.

From a distance, the landscape is a muted melding of tans and light greens broken by the occasional, reflective splash of dark blue water or the deep dark green of a grove of trees. The forbidding visage of mighty hills rapidly gives way to areas of flatter land or rolling hills or an amazing mixture of all three. With the seclusion that comes from the confines and speed of highway travel, the native prairie of the northern fescue grassland pales in comparison to the bright yellows and greens of the cultivated fields. On closer inspection, on actual contact, though, the beauty and diversity of this prairie region can be breathtaking.

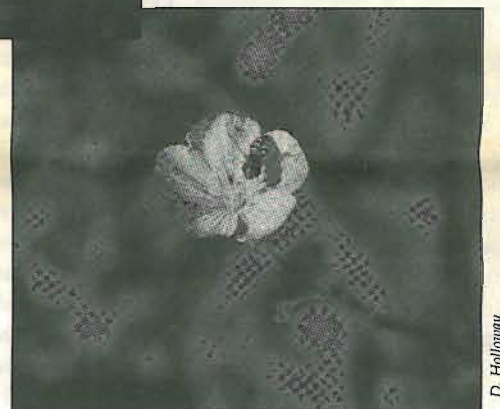
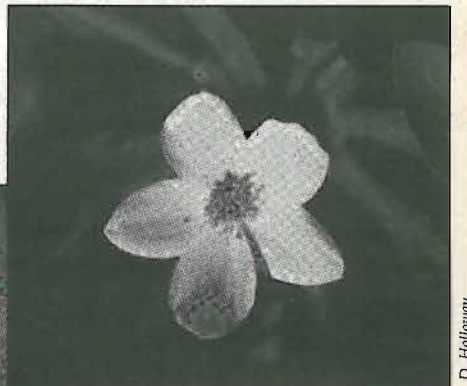
To walk deep into the prairie is to have the opportunity to experience a land teeming with life and full of gently vibrant colour. Every sense is satisfied by subtle blends of sounds, sights and sensations. Coyote yips, cricket trills and chorus frog choirs reverberate off star-filled skies. Avian glee clubs greet the sun with joyful anthems. Birds of prey balance unblinking on former fence posts, while coyotes slink cautiously over gently rounded hills. Fall skies fill with migratory birds, as do large sloughs and small potholes. The warmth of the summer sun seems to bring forth a delicate perfume of sage in combination with a myriad of scents so faint as to be unidentifiable. Porcupine grass seeds hitch rides, prickling the skin as they burrow into pant legs. Tiny flowers hide beneath shading grasses, while a few flowered cacti appear on sandy, arid slopes. The western wood lily nods its head where conditions warrant, and the lavender-pink prairie crocus, the harbinger of spring, appears almost before the snow is gone.

It is a land of extremes. It is a land where the spectacular fireworks of a July thunderstorm give way to the delicate dance of January's northern lights. It is a place where the desert-dry

days of summer seem to fade into the prehistoric past when the temperature drops to -50°C on the occasional winter day. However, the wind is almost always there. It swirls the dust on summer days, hurling stinging grains of sand against any obstacle. It builds sparkling drifts of snow that glisten in the brief light of winter, their beauty diminishing the memory of the bitter blizzard battles fought by man's machines ... but even the wind is unpredictable. It is a gale force at one moment; a bare movement of leaves at the next. It brings rain from the east one day, but sends hot, dry days from the same direction a while later. It helps create a climate where people quickly learn to respect the great powers of nature or suffer the inevitable consequences. Like the land itself, the climate is unforgettable - and unforgiving.

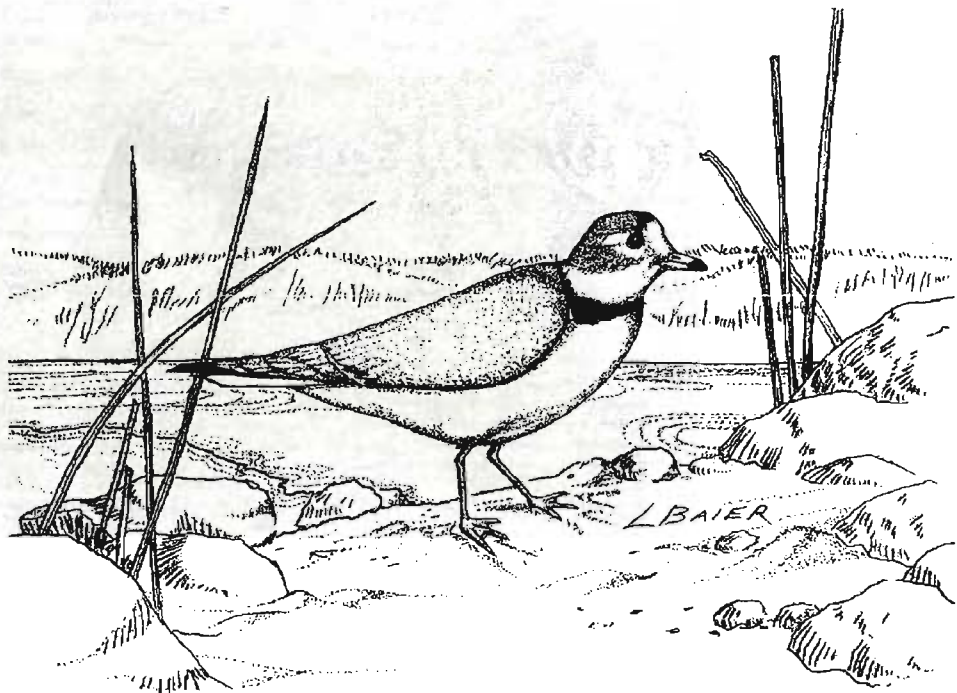
There are people there, too, though they are few and far between. They are strong and independent, honest and proud. Their links to the land, and their great respect for it, are second to none. These are people who will stop at their busiest time of year to quietly watch the wildlife with which they share land. Who will race back to the house for a field guide in an effort to identify a previously unseen bird. There are many who will avoid working portions of their cultivated land if to do so would mean disturbing nesting birds. They are not major consumers of herbicides and pesticides, for they feel excessive use of such chemicals helps nothing, and there is little use for such

Some flora of the Neutral Hills. Top to bottom: Canada anemone, mouse ear chickweed and blue flax.



things on native grass.

In the drought years of the '80s, it was not unusual for area cattlemen to truck their cattle out to rented tame pastures in other parts of the province, at no small expense. They knew the drought-stressed grassland would only be damaged by continued grazing. These are people who deeply resent the damage done to the northern fescue prairie by unauthorized access, yet proudly show off the features of the grasslands when politely asked to do so. Whether from large ranches supporting several families or from small family holdings, they take their responsibility as stewards of the land very seriously. They are proud of the job they've done. Their pride is valid, for they are the



Gooseberry Lake, at the southeast end of the Neutral Hills, provides potential nesting sites for the endangered piping plover.

reason there is northern fescue grassland left in the province of Alberta.

There are many among them who will fight beyond the limits of their resources to prevent the adverse impacts of industrial encroachment on the fragile grasslands they occupy. There are also those among them who know that the life span of the petrochemical industry in the area will be short; who feel confident that the guidelines in place for such development will provide sufficient protection in the long run. Some are passionate promoters of increased ethanol production but would never break one acre of their native fescue to take advantage of increased demands for cereal grains brought on by such production. Yet they are depicted in the popular press, with all cattlemen, as individuals who make vast fortunes from petrochemical development and who mine the grasslands for all they are worth. There aren't a lot of even small fortunes made from industrial-style development by the ranchers and farmers of the northern fescue grassland. More time and resources are sometimes spent fighting such developments than the small recompense received can begin to cover.

It would be a simple matter to argue that this is a land populated by

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environmentalists. Simple but foolhardy, for to do so would be viewed by the people of the fescue prairie as an assault on their integrity. They seem proud to wear the label of "conservationist," but for them the term "environmentalist" conjures up images of litigation, confrontation and threats. It is hard to refute the validity of those images. The greatest news coverage of the associations promoting ecological preservation seems to report nothing but lawsuits and verbal battles. The people who live in the areas surrounding the Neutral Hills are not accustomed to solving problems that way. They prefer to arrive at solutions by consensus, not domination. They like to put all their cards on the table and expect others to do the same. It is no wonder they feel threatened by those from outside who, they believe, keep hidden agendas. The popular press reports motives and desires of environmentalists too, and those motives and desires do not always coincide with what ranchers are told by representatives of the organizations behind ecological initiatives. Area residents have only to look to the United States and British Columbia for evidence to validate their concerns.

The northern fescue grassland of east-central Alberta is beautiful and unique. It is worthy of preservation – just ask the people who have done so since the land was first homesteaded. They deserve to have the opportunity to continue doing so without the threat, real or imagined, that their entire livelihood is at stake. They know that without the benefits of the cattle which have taken the place of the bison, the ecology of the region cannot be maintained. They've been told so by the very biologists who are fighting to preserve the region. They know the value of restricted grazing, for to overgraze the lands they care for means running the risk of economic suicide. It is the individual voices of those who live on the land which must be heard, not the voices of umbrella organizations, such as the Alberta Cattle Commission, whose mandate may not fully reflect the wishes of the people of a region.

Any organization which wishes to participate in the management of natural lands, such as the northern fescue grassland, must come to the table prepared to put forward a clearly defined policy on the issue of cattle grazing if it wishes to be heard. It must

The seasonal beauty of the Neutral Hills area - winter frost and the new life of spring.



Anne McLean

lay its full agenda before the public with regards to access and the future of agriculture in the area. It must be willing to listen and to arrive at a compromise acceptable to all concerned. Its members must see for themselves the high level of management that has served the grasslands well in the past, and it must be diplomatic in its work to help area residents improve the level of management if any deficiencies are found. The worst thing that could happen to the prairie ecosystem would be the extinction of communication, compromise and cooperation.

It is said that in the times of the bison hunts, in the not so distant past, different Peoples would gather at the Neutral Hills in the summertime. There the necessities of the time, and a common purpose, caused them to set aside their hostilities.

It is time to look to the legacy of the past.

[Anne McLean is a freelance prairie writer and passionate defender of not only the grasslands, but also the people who care for them!]

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### The process – collaborative and proactive

The AWA feels that the only effective way to protect the Neutral Hills is through dialogue and cooperation with the local people. "Success will be measured by the number of locals that truly buy into the process and realize, through their own involvement, the importance of some kind of conservation measures," says Colleen Biggs, a rancher in the Coronation area and an AWA Director at the time this project began in 1992 (see her article in *Wilderness Alberta*, December, 1992).

The approach that Biggs recommended, and that the AWA is taking, is "as far down in the grassroots as possible." A cooperative approach between the local people, the Special Areas administration, and the AWA is the only effective way to achieve long-term protection. "If we don't have the public involvement, we're going to be in a fight every step of the way, and fights don't benefit the people or the land," says Holloway.

Such a collaborative process is slow and painstaking. It involves building trust and rapport, identifying the stakeholders and their motivations, and analyzing the issues. Time is needed to digest information and to understand each other's points of view. "Right now it's a lot of PR, a lot of talking with people," says Holloway. "Trying to educate and establish relationships is our goal at this point."

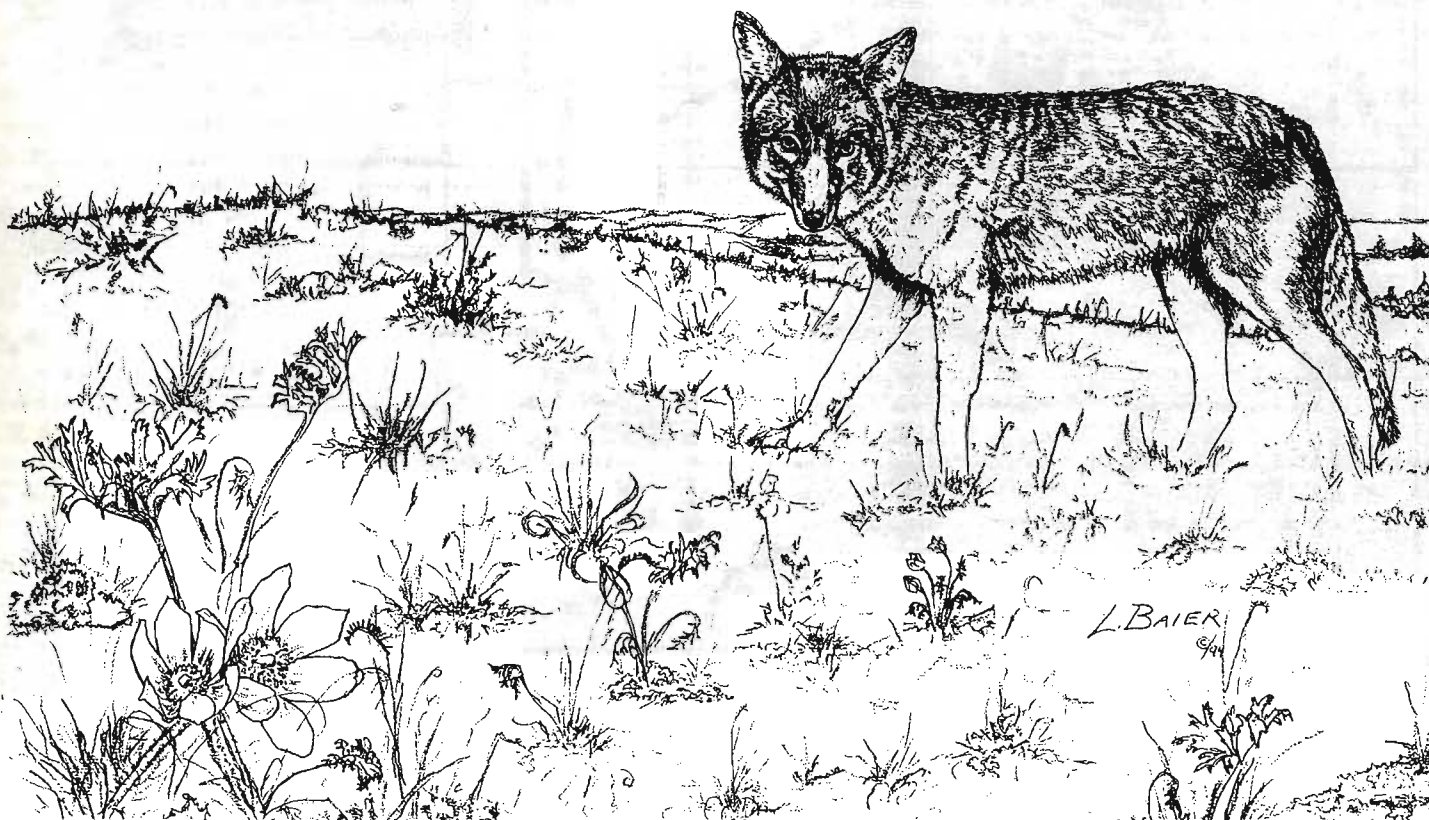
One local response to protected status of the Neutral Hills has been a reaction against agencies from outside the Special Areas community imposing land management practices that would directly affect the economic situation of the local people. Both the Board and the local people agree that the area has special significance, but they suspect any outside agency that might take control of the land. The Board feels that there is no need for any outside involvement, including Special Places 2000.

Ironically, preoccupation with Special Places 2000 is holding up the process of a protected designation for the Neutral Hills. Both the local residents and the Special Areas Board are distrustful of the Special Places 2000 initiative. Many of the residents didn't even know about the program until spring of this year, and they fear that if it is adopted the land they currently hold as leases will be locked away, inaccessible to any type of industrial or agricultural activity.

The Special Areas Board is considering setting up their own natural areas program and is asking to be excluded from Special Places 2000. They are currently putting together a draft document outlining how they would like to see their special places administered. According to Holloway, it doesn't matter how the Neutral Hills gain protected status, as long as the natural values of the land are protected before it's too late. "Special Areas is a part of the government that the people trust, so if they administer it [a protected area], then the people will support it." The support of Environmental Protection would be beneficial, but is not critical.

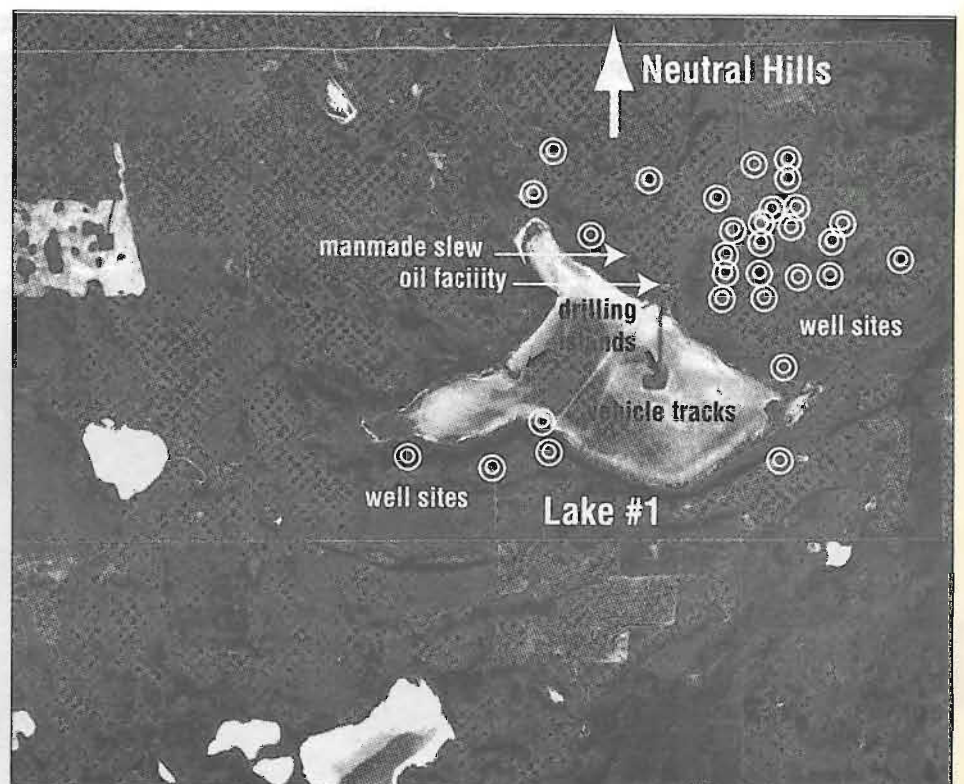
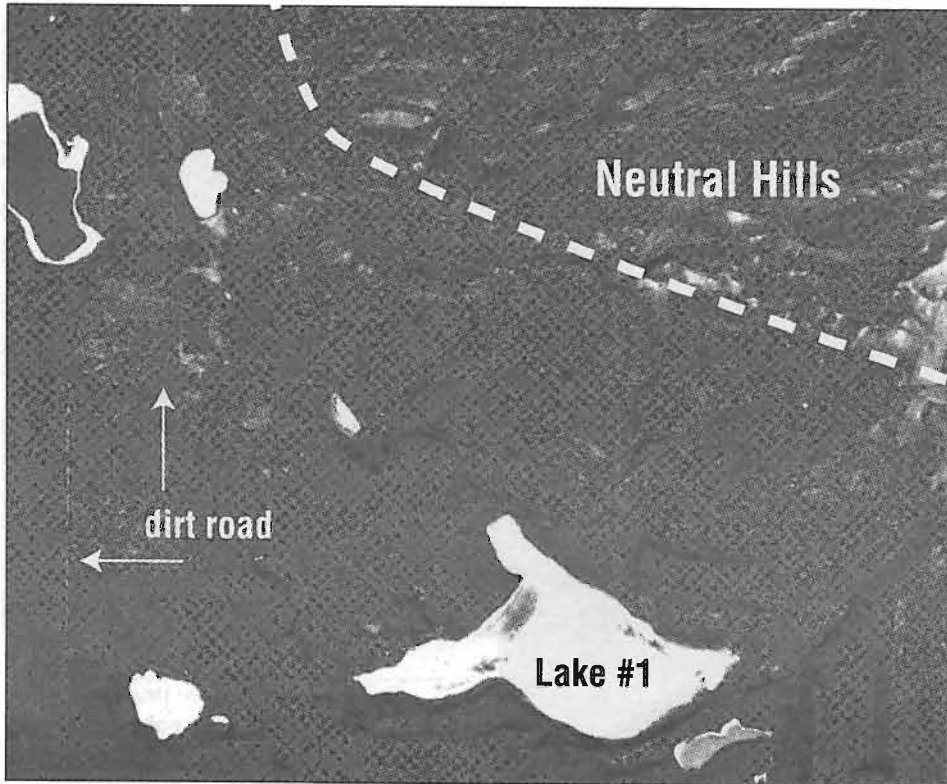
The other stakeholder here is the oil and gas industry. Fletcher Challenge, one of the largest subsurface leaseholders in the area, appears to be sympathetic but cautious about the idea of having a protected designation for the Hills. "I think the oil and gas companies can be worked with without freezing them out, but they would be inconvenienced. Surface access to oil and gas reserves would have to be done through directional drilling from the edges of the protected area," says Holloway. "I don't think all oil and gas companies can be seen to be environmental tyrants anymore. Some are doing their best to change their image."

In addition to being cooperative, the process that the AWA has initiated is (continued on page 14)



Louanne Baier





Compare the 1949 air photo (left) of Lake #1, just one mile southwest of the Neutral Hills, to the 1992 photo (right) which shows the oil development in and around the same lake. Note the proliferation and upgrading of roads that has taken place, creating habitat fragmentation. Two drilling pad islands were built into the lakebed in 1967 and service tracks radiate out from the oil facility on the north shore. Today's regulations would prohibit industrial activity within 100 m of the lakeshore, but no such regulations exist to protect the Neutral Hills from intensive development. Slant drilling technology could be used to access oil and gas underneath the Hills. Although native grass mix is now available and should be used for reclamation, tame grasses are being reseeded on reclaimed wellsites and pipelines.

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proactive. There is currently little conflict over the Neutral Hills, since there is limited industrial activity in the hills. "There's no point in mitigation after the prairie is gone, because prairie is very difficult to reestablish once you rip it up," says Holloway. If the hills can be designated as protected before damage occurs, then confrontation can be avoided and the prairie can be preserved intact.

**Thinking Ahead**

The AWA will continue building relationships with local farmers and ranchers in the area, as well as with

Special Areas administrators. When there is enough support from both of those parties for protected designation, public meetings will be set up for people in the general area who might be affected by such a designation.

Natural Area status will be sought for the southeast end of the hills, an area which has been researched and determined to have high natural value. For the rest of the area, which will act as a buffer zone, a lesser designation would be adequate.

If protected designation were achieved, a management board would be set up consisting of representatives from the local people, the Special Areas Board, environmental groups, and the oil and gas industry. This board would set up specific guidelines to determine

sustainable use of the land, with the integrity of the ecosystem being the first priority.

One management concern that the AWA and those ranchers that they have talked with agree on is surface disturbance - any industrial activity whatsoever that disturbs the surface of the hills is seen as unacceptable, including drilling and road building.

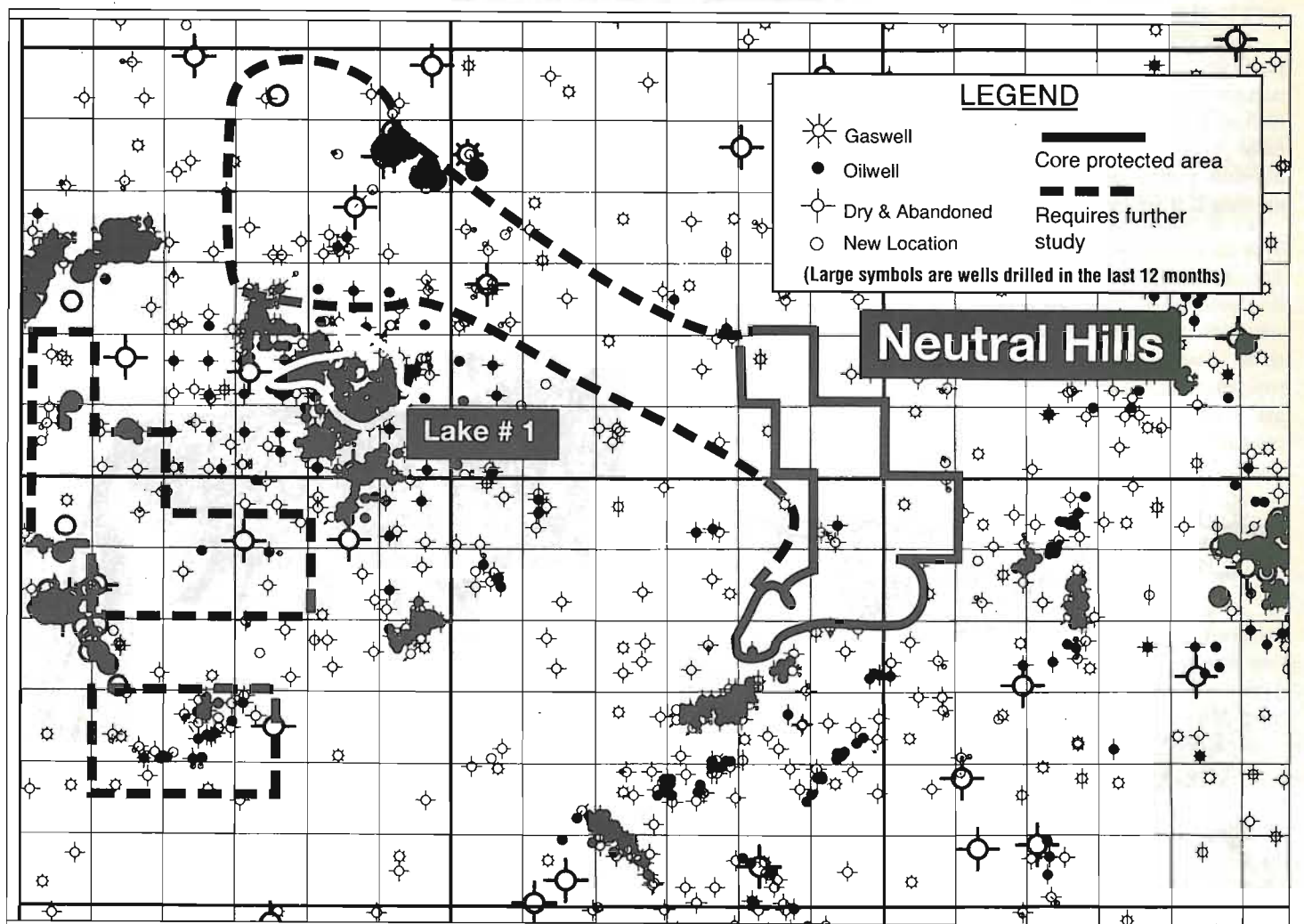
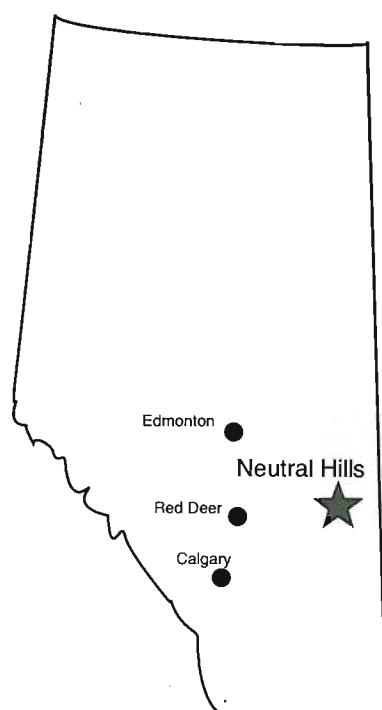
Another concern is the spread of aspen on the Hills. Without the regular brush fires that used to keep the aspen from encroaching on the grasslands, the aspen from the coulees are beginning to overrun the prairie. Carrying out a maintenance plan to control the spread of the aspen will probably require government assistance.

Although they are not major

concerns at this point, ATV use and hunting are issues that might be regulated by a management board in the future. There is currently some ATV activity around Gooseberry Lake at the southeast end of the Neutral Hills. This shallow saline lake is important to migrating shorebirds and is a candidate Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network site.

Everyone involved in this process agrees that the Neutral Hills are worth protecting, but just how that will be done remains to be decided. If you would like more information on the Neutral Hills project, contact David Holloway at 286-6323.

[Joyce Hildebrand is Production Coordinator for the WLA.]



*This Neutral Hills focus was compiled by David Holloway and Joyce Hildebrand. Special thanks to artist Louanne Baier and writer/photographer Anne McLean, residents of east-central Alberta, for their contributions.*

Oil and gas drilling is encroaching on the Neutral Hills and there is currently no protection from similar industrial development for the Hills themselves.