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My Volunteer Experience in the Bighorn

By Darren Bezushko, AWA Volunteer

In July of this year, Nigel Douglas, AWA's outreach coordinator, called to ask if I would be interested in participating in six days of fieldwork for AWA's Bighorn Monitoring Project. This was something I was keen to do, my only dilemma being my lack of backpacking gear for the trip. Through the resourceful staff at AWA, enough gear was assembled and I was soon ready to go.

The trip started out with myself, Lara Smandych and Laurie Wein, both conservation biologists with AWA. We arrived at our destination, the Hummingbird equestrian staging area, and set up camp. Once this was done, we went straight to work collecting field data. I must admit that I was a little apprehensive as to what my role would be on the trip. However, Lara and Laurie had me participating in no time. They taught me to use a GPS and explained the importance of various field equipment they use to monitor the impact of recreational activity in the region. I was soon measuring depths and cross-sectional areas of ruts as well as widths of trails and slopes, learning a lot about the importance of protecting this uniquely beautiful area.

The second day of the trip, Laurie's husband Dave and their dog Tipper joined us. We couldn't have asked for better weather; however, the smoke haze from smouldering forest fires partially obstructed our views of the beautiful scenery. After travelling a fair distance it became very clear to me that there is a definite need to monitor human activity in this area, particularly off-highway vehicles (OHVs). Although, we did not have any encounters with illegal OHV use, the signs were there.

The wildlife viewing was fairly limited on this trip. However, we did see some wolf tracks in a mud flat, as well as a cow elk and her calf on the trail. That's Mother Nature for you: one can never predict what one will see.

I have to admit that the trip was a lot of fun and Lara, Laurie and Dave were great company. They made sure I was well fed and having a good time. It was wonderful to see the dedication and professionalism that Lara and Laurie demonstrated towards their work. The monitoring of this area is critical to its long-term protection. If you want to have a fun, rewarding and great learning experience, I would highly recommend participating in AWA's Bighorn Recreational Monitoring Project.

