



WILDERNESS AND CREATIVITY – REFLECTIONS FROM THE WHALEBACK

By Bob Blaxley

Many land-use discussions these days include the option of “protected areas.” Arguments advanced for protecting an area such as the Whaleback in southwestern Alberta are frequently limited to scientific concerns related to ecosystem function or socio-economic values such as the area’s attraction for tourism and recreation.

I have guided numerous groups through the area since the Whaleback was formally protected 10 years ago. I now feel that the aesthetic, creative, and artistic responses individuals have to untrammelled country are of great importance when considering the benefit of protecting landscapes. The conviction that people value wilderness for their sense of creative connection was brought home to me recently when I helped facilitate a writers’ workshop held in this area.

We start, as many pilgrimages do these days, from the parking lot. We travel north, crossing Bob Creek, and where the trail branches, we go uphill to the east. We move into a higher valley with many a backward glance at the glory of the Livingstone Range dominating the southwestern skyline.

Near a pool dammed by beavers, we rest and acquaint ourselves with the grasses and the other plant folk. A rock-crowned ridge beckons with promises of new vistas. Shedding jackets, we toil upward. The day grows hot and we seek shelter in the shade of a centuries-old Douglas fir. It grows out of rock, anchored, firm, though many of the limber pines beside it are dead or dying. I attempt to tell their tragic story and find that I’m unsteady, distracted, and overwhelmed with sadness.

We move on up the ridge, heading north. Near the top we turn west and gain the ridge top. The day is spectacular for late September, warm and breezy, and the country spreads out around us in wave after wave of hills and mountains and valleys.



Fall in the Whaleback PHOTO: R.V. RASMUSSEN – RAYSWEB.NET

Moving south now, I am hoping for a glimpse of Chief Mountain far off in Montana. Not today – it’s too hot and hazy. No matter, I’m in the rhythm of the country now. On rambles like this I can feel the land start to infiltrate my being, moving up from my feet into my legs, slowing down and lengthening my gait.

We stop on the last high point of the ridge, overlooking the valley of the Oldman River, and separate from one another to spend time alone. I find a perfectly shaped depression in the shade of a Douglas fir and doze.

I’m about as comfortable as in the living room at home, but I’m more alert and aware. A game trail passes my spot, and I’m scanning for bears. For me, that is one important difference in wilderness – we’re not the masters. As I’m not in control, I have to be aware of what’s happening; that heightened awareness helps keep me safe and allows me to perceive the precious beauty of the land.

We regroup and descend the ridge. Halfway to the valley floor we pay our respects to an ancient lightning-blasted limber pine. More than 700 years old, this matriarch is still healthy despite its upper charred limbs. We continue down along

the valley and cross the creek back to the parking lot.

This day was what many would describe as just a walk in the park, but comments that evening from all involved revealed that all had felt a profound connection to the landscape, and that connection had opened doors and windows within themselves. Clearly, the experience of nature in an environment “protected” from the distractions of the modern world releases and nourishes the wellsprings of creativity.

I believe that these intangible factors are important in decisions about protected areas. I urge everyone involved in land-use decisions to spend quality time in the areas they are considering in order to comprehend fully the landscape’s beauty and significance. 🐾

Bob Blaxley, author of The Whaleback: A Walking Guide, has roamed the landscapes of southern Alberta for more than 35 years. Completing his environmental design masters degree in the early 1990s led him into an intimate relationship with the Whaleback.