



PHOTO: C. WALLIS

## Continuing Failure to Protect Burrowing Owl Habitat in Suffield

AWA is baffled by a federal government decision to limit habitat protection for the endangered burrowing owl. In a letter sent to Environment Minister Jim Prentice in September, AWA and other members of the Suffield Coalition voiced their concern that his department's apparently selective identification of critical habitat overlooks burrowing owls in the Suffield National Wildlife Area.

The *Species at Risk Act* required the federal government to produce a Recovery Strategy for the burrowing owl by June 2006 and to identify the species' critical habitat, to the extent possible, based on the best available information. Now four years late, the current draft still fails to do so. Once again, the issue is not one of a lack of data. Environment Canada, in its own testimony before a joint environmental assessment review panel in February 2008, noted that the endangered owls are known to nest in the area's rare natural prairie environment.

The case has echoes of the successful sage-grouse court case in 2009, when a federal court judge ruled that Environment Canada broke the law by refusing to identify critical habitat in its recovery strategy, stating that it was "unreasonable" for the government to claim it could not identify breeding

grounds when knowledge of their locations was "notorious."

AWA believes that National Wildlife Areas should be havens for species at risk. The decision to overlook critical habitat for endangered burrowing owls in Suffield National Wildlife Area comes while the minister is still deciding whether or not to approve plans to drill 1,275 new gas wells in the area.

The Suffield Joint Review Panel released its report and recommendations regarding EnCana's proposed drilling project in the Suffield National Wildlife Area (NWA) in January 2009. The Panel confirmed the primary role of the NWA – to protect wildlife. AWA believes that the minister must act to prohibit any further oil and gas development in the NWA, and immediately identify known critical habitat for species at risk, including burrowing owls.

The Suffield Coalition comprises seven groups: Alberta Wilderness Association, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, World Wildlife Fund Canada, Nature Saskatchewan, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment, Grasslands Naturalists, and Nature Canada.

- Nigel Douglas

## Lower Athabasca Regional Plan

AWA has both contributed to and closely watched the evolution of the provincial Land-use Framework planning process. We were supportive of the promised outcome of better management of cumulative effects on the landscape. In late August, the broad principles of the first regional plan were released for the Lower Athabasca, covering northeast Alberta. In September AWA staff participated in stakeholder and public consultation sessions on these principles in four locales: Fort Chipewyan, Fort McMurray, Lac La Biche and Calgary. We are disappointed to conclude that significant strengthening of the environmental commitments are needed for this to constitute an approach to cumulative effects management that respects Alberta's commitment to maintain biodiversity in the region.

The 40 page Vision document that Alberta's new Land-use Secretariat

released in late August 2010 was drafted by its appointed Lower Athabasca Regional Advisory Council (RAC). This multi-stakeholder Council included tar sands industry, forestry industry, municipal, federal and aboriginal representation. There was a representative from a wetland conservation organization, but no member of the Alberta Environment Network, to which AWA belongs. The Vision document plus an accompanying "workbook" survey were the basis for public consultation sessions and written input from early September to early October. Regrettably, more detailed recommendations, whether unanimous or non-consensus, that were in "letters of advice" that RAC sent to Cabinet, remain secret, depriving the public of a key means to assess more fully what may be in store.

Before turning to our major concerns with the proposals, several positive concepts should be acknowledged. Outside existing protected areas, there are five main land zones proposed, with different priority uses: conservation, recreation and tourism, population centres, agriculture, and mixed-use resource (the latter mainly forestry and tar sands extraction). This is a step forward compared to the prevailing "all uses, anytime, anywhere" land management system. For example, we should recognize that recreation and tourism further important economic and social goals but that they are not necessarily compatible with conservation goals. Another good concept is to place a cap within the mixed-use resource area on the total footprint of oil sands (mining or in situ) extraction, which could shift locations as reclamation occurs – though we believe the suggested cap of 15 percent of the mixed-use area for intensive oil sands extraction is too high.

Another good concept is to identify overlays that cut across other zones and have special management considerations. Multi-use corridors in theory would bundle linear disturbance from transportation, pipeline and utility infrastructure to minimize environmental impacts. River and stream corridors would maintain water quality and quantity, maintain biodiversity and provide critical fish and wildlife habitat. There is reference to "equally