

Lakeland's Time

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With intense international attention focused on Alberta's oil sands region, there is an opportunity for the new Alberta government to create an outstanding legacy by better protecting one of the treasures of Alberta's southern boreal forest: the Lakeland area.

Lakeland refers to the boreal forest, lakes and wetlands that extend eastward from Lac La Biche across and south of the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range to the Saskatchewan border. Lakeland is outstanding within Alberta's entire large boreal mixedwood natural region because of its high diversity of landforms and water forms. Its land and water provide richly varied vegetation habitats which in turn support wildlife ranging from large mammals – such as caribou, moose and black bear – to amphibians and native fish. Lakeland's old growth forests are rich in migratory and resident birds: over 200 species have been identified there, including the Cape May warbler, an Alberta species of special concern that favours old growth conifer forests.

AWA has urged government to protect this ecological gem for decades. In 1983, AWA served on an Alberta government Advisory Committee to review the proposed Lakeland Sub-Regional Integrated Resource Plan subsequently adopted by Cabinet in 1985. AWA, inspired by the late Tom Maccagno's love for this area, has championed Lakeland wilderness conservation in many consultative processes and has introduced many Albertans to Lakeland through hikes and canoe trips, talks and publications.

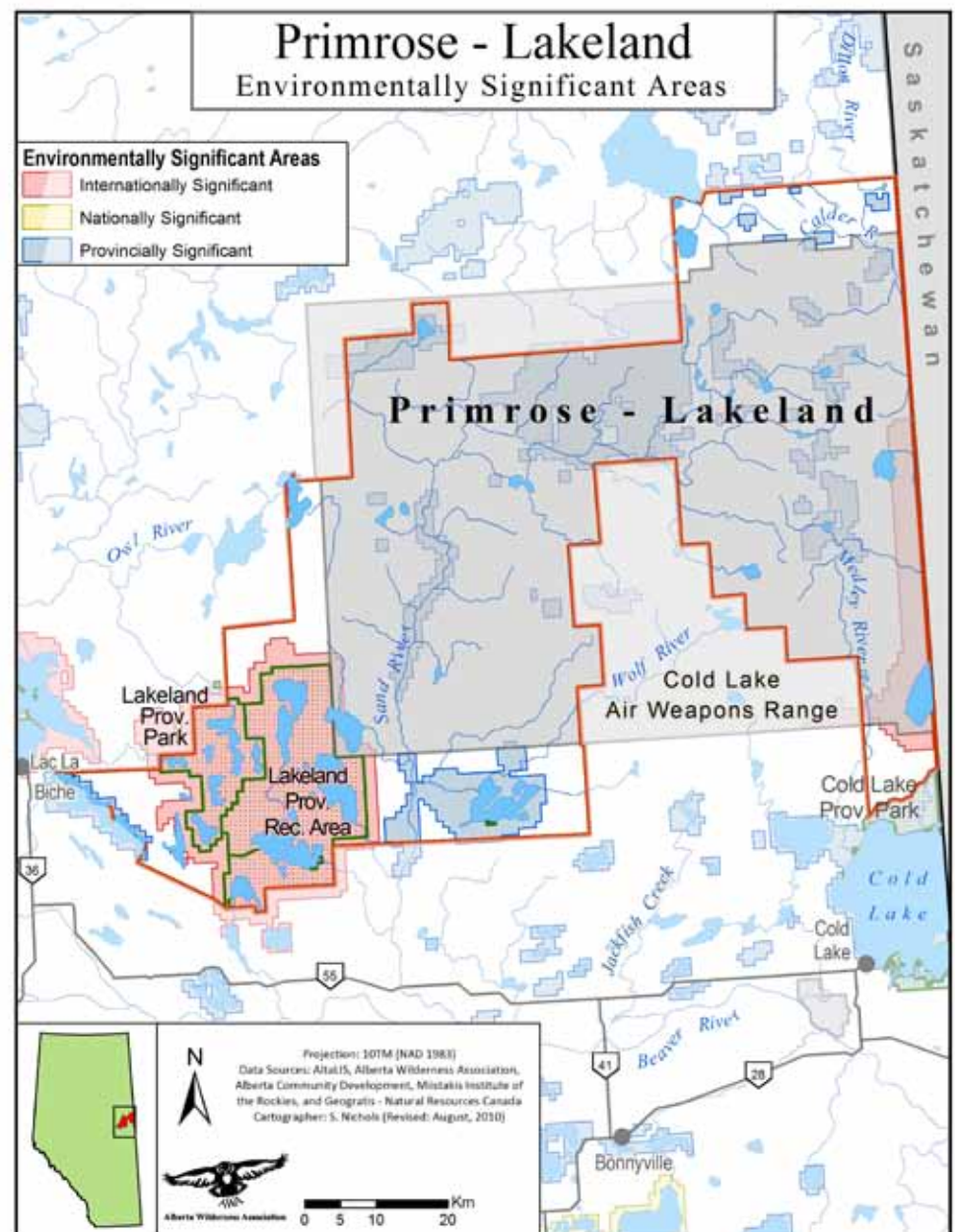
AWA identified an Area of Concern (AOC) for better ecological management and protection covering approximately 6,000 km², much of which overlaps with the 11,600 km² Cold Lake Air Weapons Range (see map). A small but important part of Lakeland (Lakeland Provincial Park and Provincial Recreation Area) received protected areas designation in 1992, but a management plan for these areas has yet to be finalized. Despite historic and ongoing pressures from settlement and industrial disturbance, the rest of the AOC remains an excellent

candidate for long-term ecological protection: the Weapons Range portion would be compatible with continued military use and the portion outside the Range could be managed to generate significant sustainable economic benefits for the surrounding communities.

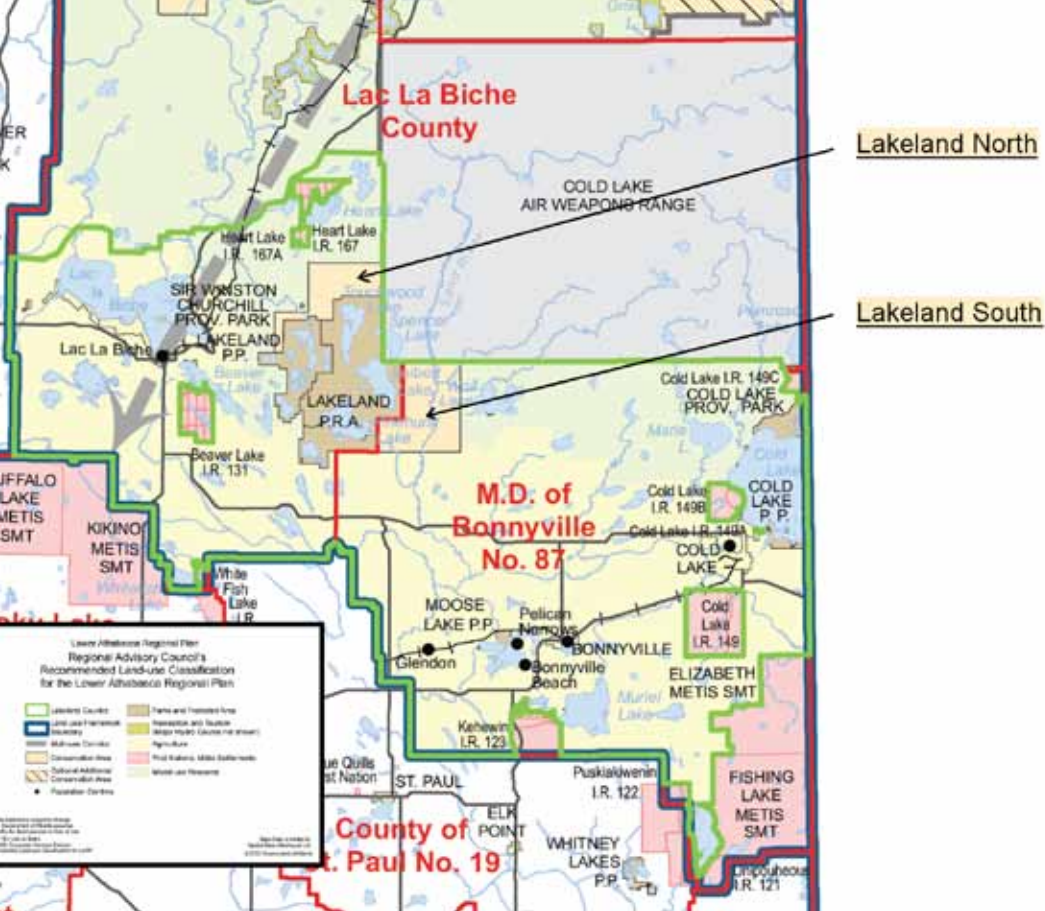
Alberta's southern boreal is under intensive, escalating pressure from the cumulative effects of agricultural, forestry and energy development. In 2009, Peter Lee, Executive Director of Global Forest Watch Canada, told AWA

that: "Our mapping of ecologically intact forest landscapes clearly demonstrates that, compared to other jurisdictions, Alberta has lost much of its ecologically intact forest landscapes in a short time." Restoring and maintaining a healthy boreal ecosystem the size of Lakeland would provide a vital scale of habitat connectedness for an outstanding area of Alberta's southern boreal forest as it faces multiple pressures from climate change and development.

Three important components of



AWA's "Primrose-Lakeland" Area of Concern map showing ecologically significant areas of opportunity.



Lower Athabasca Regional Advisory Council's recommended Conservation Areas for Lakeland North and South, which have not yet been adopted.

Lakeland protection include extending protected areas outside the Air Weapons Range, establishing Ecological Reserves inside the Air Weapons Range, and finalizing an ecosystem-based management plan. Each option offers considerable opportunities for the new Redford government to pursue now.

Extend Lakeland Park

Lakeland Provincial Park (147 km²) and Lakeland Provincial Recreation Area (443 km²) were created in 1992. While an important step forward, this initiative was only half the protected area size recommended by a government-commissioned scientific assessment and supported by the 1990 government-commissioned Lakeland Public Opinion Survey.

The 1991 scientific study recommended extending the protected area east to include the Sand River Valley, which was also supported by public opinion. The Sand River is a major headwaters tributary originating in the Air Weapons Range that contributes 50 percent of the flow of the Beaver River. It is one of the most intact and diverse river valleys in Alberta's boreal forest

and an important wildlife corridor. It has important moose wintering grounds and has been identified as one of Alberta's most important river otter habitat areas. Woodland caribou tracks were recorded there south of the Weapons Range in 1990.

Another logical extension of the protected area is to the north of the existing Park and Provincial Recreation Area (PRA) boundaries. AWA and local park advocates have championed this area because of its rich old growth forest. In 2005, as part of its Forest Stewardship Council certification application, Al-Pac Industries deferred logging in the Touchwood Road area north of the PRA.

It looked as though Touchwood and Sand River valley protection were close at hand when, in 2010, the government-appointed multi-stakeholder Lower Athabasca Regional Advisory Council (RAC) recommended Conservation Areas connected to the Park and PRA called "Lakeland North" and "Lakeland South" (see map). These would include the Touchwood and Sand River valley areas, and would extend the protected area connected to the Air Weapons Range. To date, the government has not moved

forward in establishing these important extensions of wilderness habitat. Given the recent cross-sector support reflected in the RAC's proposal, moving forward with a low impact recreation-oriented Wildland Park designation in these areas would be a relatively easy and vitally important step by this government.

Establish Protected Areas on the Air Weapons Range

A second important Lakeland opportunity is for Alberta to follow Saskatchewan's lead and establish Ecological Reserves on the Alberta side of the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range (CLAWR). The range of the CLAWR population of endangered woodland caribou is currently mapped as covering most of the northern and central parts of the Alberta side of the Weapons Range. A 213-km² area adjacent to the Saskatchewan border is part of the Primrose Lake Important Bird Area and is rated as internationally significant under Alberta's Environmentally Significant Areas designation. While the Range's central area is under the boots of industry as a result of Alberta government's permitting of oilsands "in situ" exploration and development, many other portions of the Range remain high quality habitat because Canadian Forces Base Cold Lake strictly limits access and requires large roadless areas on the Range.

AWA commissioned a study by ecologist Kevin Timoney of Alberta's CLAWR biodiversity conservation potential in 2004. He concluded that "the available data indicate that the region is biologically diverse, relatively unfragmented and worthy of protection." Timoney noted forestry impacts were minimal and military landscape disturbance appeared insignificant: the growing forest fragmentation due to energy industry exploration and development was the only significant disturbance. Timoney drew on an unpublished 1994 environmental assessment of CLAWR by Westworth and Associates, commissioned by the Department of National Defence (DND), for some biodiversity information. That study noted that a significant portion of the Range's total old growth aspen forest and white spruce mixedwood forests occurred on the Alberta side, particularly in the southwest and southeast quadrants.

Peat wetlands dominate elsewhere, with fens (peatlands fed by surface water or shallow groundwater) being the most abundant type. Timoney recommended further fieldwork on habitat and wildlife to guide conservation planning on the Alberta side.

The Air Weapons Range is provincially owned land under lease to the federal government. Just as Alberta opened some of the Range to energy development, it could partner with DND in a conservation initiative to protect the best ecological areas on the Range, which would not displace Canadian forces use or existing industry. It would be a widely praised and vitally important step by this government.

Saskatchewan added about 1,600 km² to its protected areas network from the Saskatchewan side of CLAWR. I recently spoke to Marlon Klassen of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment about these Ecological Reserves.

Although he was not involved in the designation, he generously reviewed their internal documentation in order to discuss the process with AWA. Klassen stated that there were two years of negotiations from 1996 to 1998. The scope of their process included some First Nations access issues that had previously arisen, as well as federal and provincial government interests. The Saskatchewan government had endorsed a Representative Areas Network program, and based on the 1994 Westworth study, the Environment Ministry saw the lands as high quality. They chose the McCusker area in the northeast part of the Range, partly due to its caribou habitat, and chose the Primrose Lake area near the Alberta border due to its important bird habitat. There was relatively low potential in both areas for oil and gas operations so, after consultation with Saskatchewan's Ministry of Energy and Resources, the province agreed to prevent any subsurface exploration or development. On the federal government side, DND did not want the designations to hinder their operations at all, but once the details were hammered out, they were very supportive.

A 2008 study for Saskatchewan Environment estimated the intactness of Primrose Lake Ecological Reserve at 96%, and that of McCusker at 84%. AWA strongly encourages the new Alberta government to show similar leadership to that exhibited by Saskatchewan



Lakeland's diverse forests, wetlands and lakes are important habitat for a multitude of wildlife species.

PHOTO: © M. MATHEWSON

and commence a process to establish Ecological Reserves on the Alberta side of the Air Weapons Range.

Finalize an Ecosystem-based Management plan

As noted above, Lakeland Provincial Park and PRA were established in 1992. Lakeland Provincial Park contains Alberta's only recognized canoe circuit, with maintained portage routes facilitated by signage and carts. Sadly, most Albertans are still unaware of the circuit and of the wonderful hiking and backpacking wilderness opportunities to be found in Lakeland Park.

The Park and PRA still lack a formal management plan to ensure that the primary conservation and wilderness-based recreation motives that gave rise to these areas are sustained for the long term. The Lakeland Public Advisory Committee (PAC), appointed by the Alberta Government, deliberated over 18 months in the mid-1990s, and issued recommendations, which were promptly ignored and are still gathering dust. Given the severe pressures on Alberta's southern boreal forest, it is imperative that the Alberta government finalize an ecologically sensitive management plan for these protected areas, including

the extensions north and to the Sand Valley. Recovery of lands altered by industry, low impact recreation, and healthy ecosystems to sustain its great diversity of wildlife populations should be prioritized.

Conclusion

There is an outstanding opportunity to protect and manage Lakeland for watershed health, wildlife and low impact nature-based recreation. Long-term protection of roadless areas of the Air Weapons Range, the Touchwood North area and the Sand River would create a major positive legacy for Alberta's southern boreal forest, which is now suffering from the cumulative effects of the agriculture, forestry, and energy industries. An ecosystem-based approved management plan for the areas outside the Range would provide long-term sustainable benefits to watersheds, wildlife and surrounding communities. AWA has been working to ensure that new MLAs and decision makers are well aware of Lakeland's importance.

Restoring and maintaining a healthy boreal ecosystem in Lakeland is possible, and the time is right for the Alberta government to make this happen. 🌲