

AWA'S 2012 PRIORITIES: Water, the Lifeblood of Alberta

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The southwest portion of the McClelland fen.
PHOTO: © I. URQUHART



The North Saskatchewan River headwaters in Jasper National Park.
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Like a great circulatory system, an intricate network of rivers, streams, and creeks stretches across Alberta, distributing its precious lifeblood from the headwaters in the Rocky Mountains' eastern slopes down across the prairie to the east. Even the driest parts of the grasslands would be a wasteland without the nourishment provided by water. It becomes self-evident, then, that AWA would consider sustaining a clean wild water system for Alberta and all Albertans – human and non-human alike – one of its very highest priorities. When we were setting out our ten highest priorities for 2012 after last year's Annual General Meeting, the AWA board, staff, and members engaged in lengthy debates considering the relative merits of the many candidate issues. But little debate was needed regarding the importance of safeguarding Alberta's water: we all knew this issue would find a place at the top of the list.

One of the most significant components of that circulatory system are the magnificent and extensive patterned fens of the McClelland Lake wetland complex, of which AWA has already written much over the last several years. Recognized in 1998 by the Alberta government as an Environmentally Significant Area and described at the time as being "worthy of a strenuous protection effort," the complex has been a top AWA priority since the mid-1990s when proposals were first made to develop oil sands mining projects in the Fort Hills adjacent to the lake. Fens and other peatlands around the world are disappearing rapidly due to human impact from activities such as mining, forestry, and agriculture, making the protection of those that remain even more crucial. When intact, fens provide important ecological benefits. They store carbon, control flooding, recharge groundwater, filter surface water, and offer habitat for a diverse community of unique plant and animal species.

Water: Quantity and Quality

AWA position on Water: Healthy ecosystems purify water and provide drought and flood protection. To increase our water security, Alberta must improve headwaters, wetland, and river corridor management. This



Glacial Erosion
24"x48" on wooden cradle panel
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is a particularly important precaution for potential effects of climate change on our water supplies. For most Alberta rivers, headwaters areas in the mountain and foothills contribute more than 80 percent of total flows; they accumulate, store, purify and gradually release surface and groundwater flows. They are critical source water areas, best protected by intact functioning ecosystems. Alberta must fill gaps in headwaters protection by designating the Castle area in the Oldman River basin and the Bighorn area in the Red Deer and North Saskatchewan River basins as free from industrial activity. In all headwaters regions, legacy linear disturbance must be greatly reduced and recreation access better managed for water quality and threatened native species such as westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, and grizzly bear. Healthy wetlands absorb, slowly release and purify our water, and provide critical wildlife habitat; Alberta has already lost two thirds of our central and southern wetlands and an unknown area of northern wetlands. The Alberta government needs to adopt a "no net loss" provincial wetland policy and implement stronger incentives to increase wetlands in areas of high historic loss.

In this issue: Carolyn Campbell updates us on the many current developments

across Alberta related to the development of water and wetland policy. Associations such as the Milk River Watershed Council are busy at work around the province, designing new policy under the auspices of the Land Use Framework planning process. Also of note in this issue are Carolyn's updates regarding the Bow/Oldman process, and the Alberta Water Council. Finally, Glynnis Hood, author of *The Beaver Manifesto*, writes about that animal giving us a first-hand look at one species that calls Alberta's riparian areas home.

8,000 Years in the Making, a Decade in the Taking

AWA position on McClelland: The McClelland Lake wetland complex is located north of Fort McMurray at the northern edge of the mineable oil sands region. It is at risk from land and groundwater disturbance from immediately adjacent tar sands mining projects and proposals. McClelland Lake is the largest natural water body between Fort McMurray and the Athabasca River delta. Two of Alberta's largest patterned fens lie on either side of the lake. The McClelland Lake fen to the southwest has built up over 8,000 years since the last glacial retreat; it is intricately patterned,

with hundreds of narrow treed ridges separating long, narrow, shallow pools of water. The watershed also features twelve sinkhole lakes, rare in Alberta. McClelland Lake and the wetland complex are an important way station and breeding area along one of North America's major migratory bird routes. The endangered whooping crane has been observed there on several occasions; other species of concern noted there include the Canadian toad, sandhill crane, yellow rail, black tern, and short-eared owl. The wetland complex hosts twenty rare or endangered plant species and a rare vegetation community. AWA seeks legislated protection for the wetland complex and a ban on industrial disturbance within the watershed.

In this issue: Carolyn investigates the closure plans for mining operations in McClelland and discusses what effects these plans can be expected to have on the area as a whole.

As we begin to close out the year, and begin to cast an eye forward to 2013, keep your other eye on the upcoming December issue of *WLA*, where we will update you on the final two priorities that AWA has been pursuing in 2012, and that are sure to continue to inform our work in the year to come. 🐾