

AWA Takes Toursim, Parks and Recreation Minister Cusanelli on Tour of Southeastern Alberta Grasslands

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Earlier this year, AWA had the opportunity to meet with Christine Cusanelli, the new minister of Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation (TPR). In that meeting we introduced the minister to AWA's concerns for many of Alberta's wild lands and wild spaces and the threats facing them. This introduction covered many of the same topics we have highlighted in the "2012 Priorities" series appearing in *WLA* over the course of this year. The meeting was followed up on July 26 with a tour of southeastern Alberta to give Minister Cusanelli the opportunity to see the grasslands "through AWA's eyes."

The tour started off with a visit to the two primary reaches of Pakowki Lake, giving the minister the opportunity to see first-hand the extensive marshes of this important staging area for migrating shorebirds. We had a chance to speak with a number of birders attempting to catch a glimpse of the black-headed gull that had been spotted on the lake the previous day – the first time this species has ever been seen in Alberta.

Next on the itinerary was the Pinhorn Grazing Reserve, a 77,000-acre expanse of natural grassland habitat that still supports a variety of wild species, including several species at risk such as soapweed, yucca moth, and burrowing owl. At the edge of the grazing reserve we stopped to take in the sweeping vistas of the Milk River canyon and get a quick hands-on lesson on Alberta's disappearing native grasses courtesy of Cheryl Bradley representing the Alberta Native Plant Council.

The final stop on the tour included an exquisite home-cooked meal at Bayot and Francisca Britschgi's J-bar-J ranch near Orion. The J-bar-J is part of an initiative by MultiSAR, an organization devoted to preserving grassland habitats for species at risk. The general initiative aims to foster coordination between the conservation and ranching communities. On ranches like the J-bar-J, experts from the different communities work together to adapt operations in ways that better support native vegetation and

animal species. For example, previously-cultivated parcels of the J-bar-J have been returned to native grass types. Fences on the ranch have also been modified to be friendlier to pronghorn antelope. Brad Downey from MultiSAR was on hand to discuss some of these measures and the Britschgis were able to give Minister Cusanelli a perspective on rural living that is increasingly difficult to some by.

AWA specifically chose the Grasslands Natural Region as the destination for the tour because with only 0.8 percent of the grassland's area enjoying any form of legal protection, it is the least-protected of Alberta's six Natural Regions. It falls far short of the 17 percent figure recommended by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Inexplicably, this is despite the fact that it is home to more species at risk than anywhere else in the province. From the iconic sage-grouse to its eponymous fescue grasses, settlement, industry, and agriculture have had a devastating effect on the wildlife, wild waters, and natural ecosystems of this "forgotten corner" of Alberta.

The reality is that Alberta's far southeast is no longer forgotten by industry – however the provincial government has not kept up with that development when it comes to ensuring that areas are set aside to maintain a continued home for these threatened species. So now, Alberta TPR has some catch-up work to do. This is the message AWA conveyed to the minister and her staff on this tour.

AWA appreciates the time taken by the minister and her staff to immerse

themselves in some of Alberta's lesser-seen wilderness, and to hear the perspective of AWA and some of our members and associates. We hope that the impressions made by this too-short visit will positively inform any policy decisions made by the department for the remainder of this session of the legislature and into the future. ▲



Top: Members and staff of AWA, the Alberta Native Plant Council, and Alberta TPR at the edge of the Milk River Canyon.

Bottom: Alberta TPR Minister Christine Cusanelli at the edge of the Milk River Canyon.

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Steve Dixon, an AWA founder, whose determination, tenacity, and untiring energy for defending wilderness helped shape AWA and the success we are today is shown here on his 95th birthday with Helen, his wife of 73 years, at their home near Brant, Alberta.

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