



A LAST LOOK AT AWA'S 2012 Priorities



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As December marches on, it seems appropriate to look back through the various issues of *WLA* we've put out this year. Thumbing through the April issue, I notice the article that kicked off this series presenting AWA's 2012 priorities focused on two of Alberta's iconic endangered fauna: the woodland caribou and the greater sage-grouse. The June issue moved on to look more specifically at land-based issues, focusing on AWA's concerns and efforts regarding the conservation of Alberta's forests, and especially the Castle in the province's far southwest. The August issue gazed first at another threatened species, the grizzly bear, before casting an eye further north to look at the Cold Lake area in the province's boreal forest: an area that AWA believed – and continues to believe – offers significant opportunities for seeing the establishment of new protected areas. Another area of concern in northern Alberta highlighted the October issue of *WLA*: McClelland Lake and its patterned fen that is at great risk from

tar sands-related industrialization. More broadly, water was the other theme of October's priorities article: the pressures on Alberta's wetlands, headwaters, and riparian areas.

This brings us to December, and the two remaining issues AWA has designated as priorities for this year. Alberta's wild waters are of course a matter of serious concern, but so too are our wildlands and wild life. These two overarching concerns are addressed by the priorities we chose to highlight in the last entry in this series: the management of our public lands and the establishment of a provincial biodiversity strategy.

Most of the province's outstanding pristine – and priceless – wildlands exist as public lands, lands held in trust for current and future Albertans by the government. Both the Alberta public and the government are responsible for the stewardship of these lands and for the wellbeing of the innumerable species that presently call them home. Public lands are found across the province, in

all six of our Natural Regions. They take the form of parks and protected areas, of swathes of boreal and alpine forest, and most notably of the undulating fescue plains characteristic of Alberta's southern grasslands. In the case of this latter region especially, public lands are under great pressure to be auctioned off into private hands, to be ploughed under and exploited in a manner that is the absolute antithesis of responsible stewardship. Such thoughtlessness was at the heart of the "Potatogate" case that so enraged Albertans last year. Such thoughtlessness prompted the campaign promise by Premier Redford to prohibit that sale. AWA applauded her for keeping her word. Yet the conditions that allowed the sale to be proposed in the first place remain. AWA is firmly opposed to all sales of public land in Alberta, and remains committed to insisting that they be managed to protect and enhance native biodiversity.

Arguably much of the value in Alberta's wildlands lies in the species



The healthy, diverse landscape near Del Bonita (previous page) stands in sharp contrast to the monoculture in Warner County.

PHOTO: © C. OLSON

those lands support. From the tiniest alpine flower in a mountain meadow to the caribou picking their way through the boreal wetlands, innumerable species of flora and fauna interweave in the great mosaic of life that blankets the province. Yet the diversity and range of this mosaic belies its fragility. Species interact to such an extent that the upsetting of just a few of these species can have far-ranging ripple effects as the species relying on the first are also affected, affecting in turn more species yet. In a sense, all of AWA's priority issues – as well as those concerns that were not on the “top ten” list – aim to maintain and sustain the equilibrium of Alberta's network of life: its biodiversity. To properly ensure that this network can survive and thrive, biodiversity must be sustained not merely as an afterthought or side effect of first-order policies. Rather biodiversity needs to be addressed foremost through an explicit strategy. With such a biodiversity strategy in place, there could be real optimism that human developments in Alberta take place in a

context that supports sustainability as a real concept and not just a buzzword.

Public Land is the Best Thing the West Has Done

AWA Position: Public lands are held in trust for Albertans by elected representatives and must be managed in the best interest of all Albertans. AWA believes this is best achieved by preserving native ecosystems and protecting endangered species for the benefit of present and future generations. The sale of public lands takes place at the discretion of the Minister for Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, with no requirement for a transparent public process. AWA believes all public land sales should be suspended until a full, transparent process is developed to allow for public input. In particular, AWA is strongly opposed to the conversion of native prairie and rangeland on public lands for industrial or agricultural use. Less than 43 percent of our native grasslands remain intact

and although over 70 percent of the species at risk in Alberta are found in the Grassland Natural Region, less than one percent is currently protected. In Alberta, the provincial government continues to authorize the conversion of dwindling rangelands and the continued alteration and destruction of these sensitive ecosystems by expanding industrial and agricultural development.

In this issue: As many of AWA's ongoing concerns relate to species and activities occurring on public lands, a case could be made that almost all the articles in this issue relate to public land in some manner. AWA's newest conservation specialist, Katie Rasmussen, keeps us posted on this issue with a pair of updates concerning Bill 202, the *Public Lands (Grasslands Preservation) Amendment Act 2012*. This private member's bill seeks to require greater public input and participation during the process surrounding sales of public grasslands in Alberta, and came up for second reading in the legislature this November.



Aspen Meltdown
30"x30" oil on canvas
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Precaution – Worth a Pound of Cure

AWA Position: Biodiversity has intrinsic value and enormous environmental, economic, and social value to humanity, underpinning the Earth's life support systems. A precautionary principle is important because the complex interactions between native organisms within an ecosystem remain poorly understood. The Government of Alberta has made commitments to maintain and restore biodiversity in keeping with Canadian and international commitments and to fulfill its responsibility to future generations of Albertans. Alberta officials pledged that a biodiversity action plan would be one of the provincial policy pillars guiding the implementation of the Land-use Framework. The February 2009 oil sands strategy also committed to protect and maintain biodiversity in the oil sands region. A provincial biodiversity strategy and policy framework still needs to be developed to maintain and restore Alberta's biodiversity. At the regional level, it should be applied to assess risks and define thresholds and triggers for

management action. It should include land disturbance targets and thresholds as well as appropriate regulatory actions to inform land use planning and approval processes.

In this issue: With biodiversity being a topic concerned with the interactions among multiple species, we believe it is appropriate in this issue of *WLA* to feature an article, a collage if you will, whose structure mirrors those interactions. Peter Sherrington, Reg Ernst and Cyndi Smith bring their expertise to bear in a collaborative article that examines the biodiversity in Alberta's southwest corner, one of the rare places where the grasslands abut the alpine. Carolyn Campbell contributes to this discussion with an update on the progress being made toward an overdue provincial biodiversity strategy: where is the Government of Alberta in their progress toward that goal? What lessons can we take from other jurisdictions where a similar strategy has already been developed? Katie Rasmussen jumps on board with her inimitable enthusiasm and contributes two articles. In one

she introduces the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute, an organization dedicated to the monitoring of more than 2,000 species and habitats to support decision-making about provincial biodiversity. Katie's other article looks at biodiversity from a more general perspective, placing it into a wider context that takes into consideration the federal *Species at Risk Act*.

Where To Next?

As I wrote in the first article of this series, back in April, this list of priorities represents one outcome of the long-term planning that AWA does at the beginning of every year. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list of our concerns nor is it meant to be a rigid plan dictating our every position on these issues. Instead it is meant to guide our conservation efforts over the course of a year, to help us pick out a path when we are faced with a multitude of options.

It would of course be wonderful if these paths all met with immediate success and we were able to end every year with a neat list of checkmarks, then progress to a new list. Life is of course not like that and we begin each year aware that more progress will be made on some paths than others. Especially in this type of enterprise there will be successes and setbacks, and so long as there is life in Alberta's wilderness, the undertaking will never be over.

We now look forward to 2013 by re-holding our annual deliberations. Up for discussion: which of these issues will remain priorities in the new year? Some of them certainly will be; the Castle has remained dear to our hearts for 47 years and so long as that special place remains unprotected, I cannot imagine a day when it will not find a place on our list of priorities. Other issues may be more likely to be re-evaluated.

Our guiding principles, of course, remain the same. We remain absolutely committed to defending wild Alberta, and will select our 2013 priorities such that they represent issues we know are vitally important to the ecological health and natural wellbeing of Alberta. As always, there will be many worthy issues from which to choose and the debate will be long and heartfelt.

We hope you will join us in the new year, when we plan to discuss our priorities in a future issue of *WLA*. 🌲