

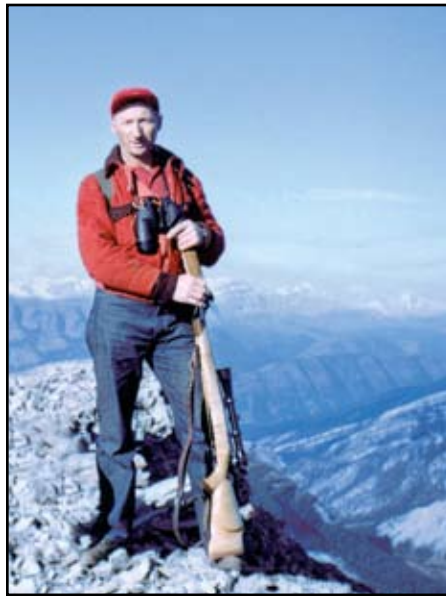
RECALL OF THE WILD - MAN OF THE LAND AND THE SKY

Steve Dixon - Man of the Land and the Sky

By Vivian Pharis and Norma Ruecker

Steve Dixon is a man of sharp mind and practical hand who has always acted on need. A challenging job presents itself and Steve is the man who will find a way to resolution through determination, ingenuity or maybe invention - he holds a dozen or so patents. In the early 1960s Steve was faced with a new and overwhelming need. His beloved prairie and alpine landscapes and wildlife habitats were suddenly being needlessly and senselessly destroyed by a rash of industrial road building and a new influx of recreational vehicles and yahoo hunters.

Steve saw the need for an organization dedicated to protecting the most critical land base for wildlife, which he knew to be wilderness. Steve spoke out at local gatherings about this need and fortunately caught the ear of two like-minded and equally concerned individuals – Floyd Stromstedt, a Calgary oilman and Willie Michalsky, a Lundbreck rancher and outfitter. Although the three did not know each other well, they shared a common vision to see wilderness lands protected and in 1965 formed Alberta Wilderness Association.



Steve Dixon

For more than 90 years Steve has been a thinker, doer and a hands-on advocate for the things he has cherished most through his long, full life. These things are farming, hunting, land conservation, community development, and above all else, flying small planes. Steve explains this to us while his well-worn hands emphasize points on the table top where his wife Helen, has just served us lunch. He explains that his appreciation of the land has gone through a progression since he was a child. For the first 30 or so years he appreciated it

close-up, on foot. He hunted bighorns, elk and deer in the south eastern slopes on foot, each trip bringing more joy than the last for the pure beauty and bounty of nature. Then foot travel evolved into horse travel as he hunted and explored further afield. Finally, his appreciation bounded skyward, and he and his constant co-pilot Helen, began a new appreciation of landscape from the air. It was from the air too, that he could witness best the rapid changes happening to his favourite landscapes.

Steve was born in Kamsack Saskatchewan almost 92 years ago. Within a few years, the family headed west to Calgary where Steve attended McDougall School and lived in his family's house on 6th Avenue. His father worked as a mechanic and foreman for Rumley Tractor. Steve's mechanical ingenuity was nurtured from a young age as he fondly recalls travelling by train with his father to service those old Oil Pull Rumleys. Around age 10, the family moved to the prairie farming community of Brant where Steve's father had purchased a garage. Eventually, Steve married his school sweetheart, Helen, when he was 22 and she 19. They still live on her family's wheat-producing farm and will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary later this year. While they have recently leased out their

land to other grain producers, the two continue to live in the house they built, surrounded by the substantial shelterbelt they planted and nurtured. Their home is a prairie oasis where they still raise a splendid vegetable garden and continue a life of near self sufficiency.

Early in childhood, a keen interest in guns and how they are made led Steve into a life-long fascination with them, with gun smithing, competition shooting, and hunting. As with so many early conservationists, hunting was the impetus for Steve to explore the lands around him and to learn to appreciate nature. His primary hunting grounds were the upper Sheep River and Burns Mine and the area around Highwood Pass (lands now within Kananaskis Country) as well as lands west of these, into the Elk River of B.C. In the 1940s, the locals referred to the area which is now South Kananaskis along the Sheep and Elbow Rivers, as the *Big Horn*. After the fires of 1936, the Big Horn became a big game mecca. Steve describes standing on Rickert's Pass above the old Burns Mine and seeing a grizzly at close range, bighorn rams further along the ridge and a herd of about 200 elk just beneath him in the meadow. People who have known such spectacles never forget them, and their hopes and standards for an area's wildlife potential are forever measured by them.

Serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force as an Air Force mechanic ignited Steve's greatest passion, which is flying bush planes. Although he never learned to fly in the RCAF, he took it up at the end of the war and received his pilot's license in 1946. His training and flight log shows, remarkably, that he became a pilot

with only 9 hours of flying time, quite possibly the fewest hours ever logged to become licensed in Canada, if not beyond Canada. Steve is rightfully proud of this achievement and his original log book was filled to capacity by 1983 with 1185 flying hours recorded, at which point he stopped keeping track. Right up until he quit flying two years ago at age 90, the eastern slopes mountains that were so familiar to him from the ground, remained a favourite flight path for Steve and Helen. They never tire of the alpine beauty from the ground or as it unfolds beneath them.

Over the years, they observed a lot of changes on those familiar slopes. The building of roads, loss of forests to logging and fires and human presence all increased over time. The most notable impact for Steve was the disappearance of the large elk herds of the 1940s and 1950s. Both Steve and Helen recall the spectacle of flying over wintering elk herds on Flat Top (Plateau Mountain). By 1967 the herds were gone and Flat Top was a maze of snowmobile tracks. Fortunately, Plateau Mountain was later closed to recreational vehicle use and made an ecological reserve.

Steve did not wait for the disappearance of all elk to take action to protect wildlife. Always forward thinking, he knew the eastern slopes populations were heading for disaster and he realized he must get involved. In 1944 he was on Cat Creek near Highwood Pass when he met with a couple of local Alberta Fish and Game Association members, Bud Davies and Andy Wallace, and realized they shared concerns for wildlife. This encounter prompted Steve

to join the High River Fish and Game Association and by the early '50s he was president. He worked hard to settle some of the many issues between hunters and ranchers regarding trespass, litter and vehicle access. But, he struggled to have his new association take on the advocacy work he saw was needed, for the conservation and protection of wildlife habitats.

Steve saw beyond local concerns and identified the need for province-wide land conservation. It was at an annual meeting of the Alberta Fish and Game Association that Steve met Willie Michalsky and discovered more common interest. As early as 1955, Steve and Willie were seriously discussing the need for organizing a conservation advocacy group. Steve was instrumental in early kitchen table meetings of like-minded individuals including Willie Michalsky and Floyd Stromstedt. Together they realized the need not only to curtail encroaching roads, motorized intrusion and unethical hunting; they identified the need for an overhaul of the hunting regulations, for a system of land protection and to protect a precious commodity of the recent past - wilderness solitude. The Alberta Wilderness Association was born.

Always a man reacting to need, once Steve saw that his beloved wild country had an energetic and organized group prepared to act in its defence, he felt the need to move on and apply his energies and skills to yet another area of need. This time it was in defence of disappearing public schools from rural communities. Steve and Helen remain active pursuing this need to this day. 🍷