

Gordon Kerr – A Champion of Habitat Protection: Then and Now

By Ian Urquhart

Envy and admiration – that was what I took away from a long conversation earlier this month with Gordon Kerr about subjects such as growing up in the Crowsnest and his distinguished public service career in wildlife management. As someone who gladly would trade his Powerpoint projector for a five-weight fly-rod it did not take long for my envy reflex to kick in. How could I not be envious of someone who grew up with the Forest Reserve’s thousands of square miles as his backyard?

Admiration soon followed. In his professional career, Gordon was before his time (although he is too modest to make this claim). He brought a keen sense of the critical importance of habitat to his work in Alberta’s Fish and Wildlife Division. Moreover, he recognized, earlier than most I believe, that it was vital to reach out to more than the usual constituencies of wildlife managers – hunters and fishers – if you wanted to make headway on habitat protection issues.

Many of Gordon’s early years were spent on a ranch a few miles west of Coleman. His father instilled in him an appreciation of “the great outdoors” just as his grandfather and grand-uncle had done for Gordon’s father. So he hunted, trapped, fished, and rode horses in his rather impressive backyard, one that had yet to taste the treads of four-wheel drives and off-highway vehicles.

These years, their bounty of outdoor pursuits aside, were noteworthy for the stewardship ethic that was central to the informal education his father delivered. At their own expense, the Kerr family transplanted trout to lakes in the mountains and foothills. They also participated, along with other members of local fish and game clubs, in transplanting pheasants and relocating beavers. These stewardship initiatives had an important public dimension; while Gordon might benefit from them in the future so would others.



Gordon Kerr PHOTO: I. URQUHART

At an early age, as he tried to take advantage of the Crowsnest’s natural attributes, Gordon gained the appreciation of habitat’s critical importance that would guide his professional career. It came, fittingly enough, courtesy of his fly-rod. When he was fourteen Alberta’s transportation department diverted a stream that ran through his family’s ranch so it could build a bridge. The diversion, he said, “destroyed all my fishing holes.” The bridge-building project ruined a mile of Allison Creek, nearly three miles of the Crowsnest River and therein, critical bull trout habitat. The young fly-fishing enthusiast received a hard first-hand lesson about the importance of maintaining habitat integrity.

After studying at the Universities of Montana and Alberta Gordon accepted his first job in the public service as the assistant district biologist in Lethbridge in 1963. There he was about to experience the brutal blizzard of 1964, a storm that decimated southern Alberta’s then-plentiful pheasant populations. The widespread wildlife deaths associated with that calamity – Gordon autopsied ninety-seven antelope in Taber that had

died in the storm – reinforced Gordon’s belief in the critical importance of habitat. “We began to realize,” he recounted, “that we can stockpile these animals but...they need a place to live... if they don’t have the habitat you are going to lose them all.” Consequently, the Division started to look at projects that would insure that habitat needs were met.

Earlier, I noted Gordon’s modesty. This attitude animated his comments about his years in Fish and Wildlife from the early 1960s up until the early 1980s. This was a golden age in wildlife management. Over a twelve year period the division’s staff and budget mushroomed; the Division’s staff tripled and their budget grew even more impressively. Gordon rose through the ranks rapidly, from assistant district biologist to chief wildlife biologist in just six years, promotions I am sure were due to more than his assertion that he was “the only guy around.” It was an era when the province treated its wildlife management responsibilities well and generously.

His manner may have been best illustrated by his views on what he regarded as one of the major successes during his tenure in Fish and Wildlife – the Buck for Wildlife program. Gordon will not claim the major or decisive role in the birth of this program. Instead, he praises the team he was able to work with in Fish and Wildlife and their partners in the Alberta Fish and Game Association. Fish and Wildlife’s emerging habitat focus was the team’s vision, not Gordon’s alone. Today the Alberta Conservation Association manages that program. More than thirty years after its birth, Buck for Wildlife underpins emphatically a pillar of Gordon’s ongoing approach to habitat protection and enhancement – ways must be found to encourage private landowners to adopt land management practices that will serve the broader public interest in sustainability.

Another important, laudable aspect of the vision Gordon brought to his wildlife management duties was its inclusiveness. All wildlife, not just game species, needed to be incorporated into the division’s mandate if it was to generate



With the majestic Crowsnest Mountain as his backyard, Gordon Kerr learned from an early age the value of wildness.

PHOTO: M. MACQUARRIE

support among the broader public for his wildlife and habitat management ambitions. In the late 1970s/early 1980s “we found, unless you made it of interest to the non-hunters and benefit of non-hunters, there was going to be a big wall approaching pretty soon and we were going to run into it.”

This era, one where Fish and Wildlife was able to win some important land “set aside” decisions from departments such as Public Lands, ended resoundingly at the very moment when Gordon was championing this more inclusive approach to wildlife management. Budgets for Fish and Wildlife were cut; the Division’s staff was pruned dramatically.

I believe I sensed some tiredness and frustration in Gordon’s voice when we discussed the disputes that arguably took place between his vision and those of Forestry, Public Lands, and Energy at that time. His perspective on the importance of wildlife habitat led to conflict with those who looked at habitat through the lenses of board feet of merchantable timber or jobs in the forestry or agricultural sectors. This was the beginning of a dark time for Fish and Wildlife and for advocates who believed that wildlife habitat should be an important consideration in land-use planning.

What was so frustrating for the Gordon Kerrs in government was the political failure to implement the recommendations produced by excellent, thoughtful planning processes that sought to strike a genuine balance between

interests on the land. Kananaskis Country was one example. “K-Country had a tremendous planning process go into it,” he said. “We had agreed to very many habitat things in K-Country...if you are going to put an alpine village here and offset that then you need to have wildlife preservation over there...that all looked really good until they said we’re going to have alpine villages in both places...they totally ignored the plan.”

He told the same story about the Eastern Slopes. Again, countless hours and millions of dollars were devoted to identifying the key features of the Eastern Slopes and deciding what habitat the Prime Protection Zone should cover. “I thought we were really arriving and the government adopted it and promptly threw it in the cabinet and locked it up.” A good indication of just how mistaken government was to do that came in one of Gordon’s later comments: “The Eastern Slopes plan would be excellent to take it off the wall today and use it.”

Tired of fighting with other government departments and divisions that controlled the land and refused to see the value of wildlife habitat preservation Gordon moved on to the Canadian Wildlife Service. There, as the Director of the Prairie and Northern region, Gordon was able again to pursue his lifelong interest in building teams and partnerships to promote habitat protection. He helped create Wildlife Habitat Canada, a national non-profit conservation organization, in 1984.

The most significant product of this approach came in the form of the North

American Waterfowl Management Plan. This international partnership includes national and regional governments from Canada, the United States, and Mexico as well as conservation organizations such as Ducks Unlimited and the Nature Conservancy. In its first six years the partners spent \$500 million on the restoration and protection of North American wetlands (by 2009 the partnership had spent \$4.5 billion to protect or enhance 15.7 million acres of wetlands habitat).

Although Gordon retired from the public service in 1994 he continues to serve the public and pursue his passion for habitat preservation through the Land Stewardship Centre. There his approach remains very much the same as the one he adopted nearly forty years ago. He tries to reach out to the wider public and explain “to them why they should be concerned and if the government’s going to give a subsidy for a farmer to maintain a marsh and look after it and manage it for the people that’s not just for duck hunters that’s for everybody.”

Here is where his optimism about the future shows. He does not see the public as being opposed to ideas such as preserving wetlands and forests; they are though not aware enough of how important those habitats are to delivering the “many environmental benefits that society desperately needs.” Let’s hope that, as drought looms as the “new normal” in our lives, the broader public and our political leaders embrace Gordon’s message. 🍷