

Don't Give Up the Ghost:

An AWA Summer Hike

By Ian Urquhart



As I drove towards Cochrane I was trying to recall all of the reasons I've had over the years for hiking. There were the times, years ago, when my friends and I were speed freaks – we weren't concerned with much more than how quickly we could complete a route such as the trail from the abandoned Molly Gibson mine site to Slocan Chief Cabin in Kokanee Provincial Park. Now discovering new landscapes, revisiting familiar ones, finding solitude, learning about the flora, fauna, and histories of the land are the motives most likely to get me out of the city and onto the land.

Last June, I was headed northwest of Cochrane to take advantage of AWA's hikes program and explore some new terrain. I

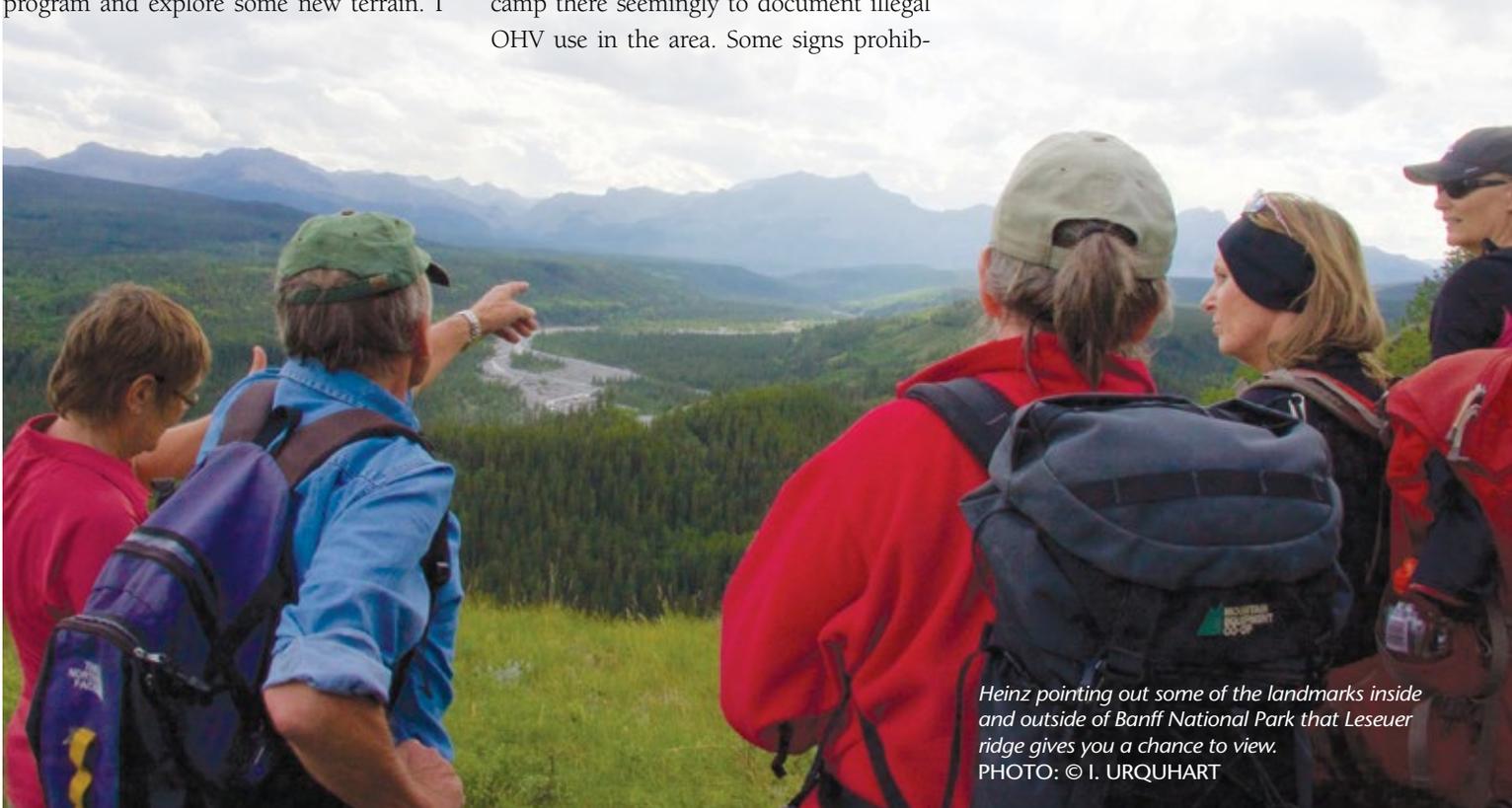
joined AWA Past-President and our group leader Heinz Unger, AWA Conservation Specialist Brittany Verbeek, and a handful of AWA members on the late afternoon/early evening Ghost View Ridge hike to Leseuer ridge.

I really wasn't sure what to expect. On the one hand, the Ghost didn't have a good reputation in my mind. My impression was formed by the newspaper reports of May long weekends in the Ghost-Waiparous where offroaders might have given film director James DeMonaco the idea for his movie "The Purge" – many reportedly behaved as if the law didn't matter. That impression wasn't soothed by the solitary soul we met at the trailhead. He had set up camp there seemingly to document illegal OHV use in the area. Some signs prohib-

iting OHV use on the trails displayed the kinds of wounds you could imagine would be inflicted by those who didn't think there should be limits on their freedom to ride where they wanted to.

On the other hand, I couldn't see Heinz (or AWA too) taking a group to hike an unsightly route. For Heinz, part of his motivation for volunteering his time to lead this hike was to correct the impression of people such as myself. He wanted to show people just how impressive the Ghost could be, that it really was an underappreciated gem on Calgary's doorstep. We'd see.

The first part of the trail wove its way higher through a mixed forest of fir and aspen. After about 15 minutes Heinz stopped



Heinz pointing out some of the landmarks inside and outside of Banff National Park that Leseuer ridge gives you a chance to view.
PHOTO: © I. URQUHART



Hiking atop Leseuer ridge. PHOTO: © B. VERBEEK

us beside an old fenceline that the trail parallels on the bottom section. He wanted to draw our attention to some post-logging regrowth. About twelve years ago part of the



Descending from the ridge to the valley trail
PHOTO: © B. VERBEEK

area on the other side of the fence had been logged; now young firs were establishing themselves between aspens that had not been felled.

It's at, or very close, to this point where the trail branched in two directions. The valley trail, as its name suggests, stayed close to the valley floor while the much steeper ridge trail beckoned us higher. Recent days had been dry and I was glad for that as we headed up the trail. I could imagine how slippery the trail could be if the ground had tasted rain recently. Wood lilies joined paintbrushes and at least three members of the sunflower family, blanket-flower, hairy arnica, and showy aster, in bordering the trail as we made our way towards the ridge. If the hike through the forest and atop a steep slope of grasses wasn't reward enough the westerly views from the ridge top certainly were. The viewscape set before us was a panorama of the front range of the Rockies. From the southwest to the northwest Heinz pointed out some of the notable landmarks: Devil's Head, Blackrock Mountain, Mount Aylmer, and the valley where Lake Minnewanka would be found. The remains of a lean-to rested in the trees just behind us – whoever had built it had chosen well if they wanted a spot with great views.

From the ridgetop we descended the steep slope to find the valley trail. Care and attention were called for in order not to lose your footing on some portions of the trail. Once on the valley trail we headed back to the junction with the ridge trail. I was struck at this point by how abruptly the vegetation changed over a very short distance. The steep, south facing slope we had just come down had few conifers, few aspen; grasses dominated. Just across Leseuer creek, quite literally within spitting distance of where we were walking, the vegetation was completely different. There the land was thick with conifers. To this layperson I think this vantage point exemplified what Downing and Pettapiece identified as a key feature of the montane natural subregion in their 2006 report for Alberta's Natural Regions Committee. Different aspects, slope positions, and wind exposures combine to generate very variable microclimates that, in turn, produce abrupt changes in vegetation patterns.

As twilight deepened and the colours became richer a hawk called out from the valley ahead as if to hurry us along. For me, by this point in time, Heinz's impression of the Ghost had triumphed.

Recently I asked Heinz again about his interest in introducing people to the Ghost.



Early fall family picnic along the valley trail. Yes...I've been back. PHOTO: © I. URQUHART

Heinz and his wife Marilyn have lived in the Ghost for 15 years now. Part of Heinz's inspiration goes back to when they were recent arrivals to the area. Then some of Heinz's new neighbours shared their knowledge of the area and this particular

trail with him. "It was the local knowledge passed on to a newcomer...so the discovery was very special to me." That spirit, of sharing something special with others, is so important to Heinz. It's a spirit I'm sure anyone who has hiked to the ridge feels.

Heinz told me that one of our group from last year brought her hiking club to the Ghost to hike the ridge trail. Now dozens more people can tell their hiking friends about the delight that sits on Calgary's western doorstep. 🐾

Some comments from hikers on the 2015 Ghost View Ridge hike:

"As an avid hiker, it was great to experience another lovely trail in the Glorious Ghost. This is an area close to Calgary but not known to many hikers and they are missing out on an excellent hike."

– Ann

"I loved the late afternoon sun finding its way to us through the aspens and highlighting the tall green grass. Everything was so lush and green! Dear Nature – thank you for the paintbrush and wild roses!"

– Brenda

"Wow, what an amazing night we had! Thank you so much for putting on this

hike so we can explore a unique and beautiful area in Alberta. Everyone was so pleasant and friendly it made for a very relaxed, enjoyable evening. Heinz your passion for the wilderness and the outdoors came through as you led us onto the ridge with amazing views of the Rocky Mountain range. I so appreciated your knowledge and history of the area and taking the time to explain the vegetation, flowers and names of the mountains and passes we saw. I learned so much! What great hosts! This was my very first AWA hike but it definitely won't be my last!"

– Lynn

"It was a great time with a nice group of people, and a great way to spend the evening! Our guide was very knowledgeable about the area and it was nice to have the sites pointed out from a local resident!"

– Ryan

"What a pleasure to be out and about in fresh mountain air and gorgeous wildland with a group of conscientious people."

– Sara