

Ribbon of Brown

By Eric Gormley,
Kristine Kowalchuk,
and Raquel Feroe



Wildlands Advocate has published excellent articles on diverse wild backcountry places. This discussion is about a wild urban place, the North Saskatchewan river valley through Edmonton. Wandering home after a night downtown you might step off the hard surfaces to the top bank of the river valley, and see darkness below. Urbanites could see a void—vast lands undeveloped—but conservationists know what can't be easily seen is often where the good stuff happens. Edmonton's river valley represents the largest expanse of urban parkland in all of North America, and until now it has remained, on the whole, natural. Human beings gain mental and physical benefit from spending time in the valley, away from noise, away from artificial lights, with a nighttime view of the stars. It calms

us. Just as important, it provides habitat for dozens of species of plants and animals and is the only corridor for wildlife movement across the city—most commonly coyotes and deer, but also moose, and the odd black bear. It is the “emptiness” that makes it so valuable. As local biologist Ross Wein says, “the river valley is our eco-corridor, it's all we have in the Edmonton area.”

And yet, rather than rejoicing in this green gift that makes us the envy of cities everywhere and doing our best to protect it, Edmonton has recently begun to actively promote the river valley as a backdrop for human recreational activities and, increasingly, to destroy it by turning it into the equivalent of an outdoor mall, replete with escalators, amusement activities and commercial centres. Balancing humans' place in our city's river valley has never been easy, but in the past few years there has been a sudden change in direction in river valley management. Unless there is greater awareness of the river valley's ecological, historical, and cultural value, we are poised to lose the most important natural area of our entire city.

Edmonton's river valley park today is no accident. It has benefitted from thousands of years of wise stewardship of indigenous peoples who used the area as a source of fish, game, saskatoons, chokecherries, cranberries, and materials for making tools and fire—as well as a source of spiritual connection with the land. The valley's long history of human occupation reminds us of how important nature is to our well-being.

Over a century of protection has respected this heritage. In 1907 Montreal land-

scape architect Frederick Todd offered the emerging city of Edmonton a unique vision, something eastern cities had long forfeited—a “necklace of parks” running through the river valley. Assembling this park has been a constant thread in Edmonton's DNA ever since.

Many people over the decades endorsed Todd's remarkable vision. The last century focused on acquiring valley lands for parks, including from reclaimed dumps and industrial sites. Parkland grew from 294 acres in 1906 to 2,000 acres in 1947 and nearly 5,000 acres in 1965. Fifty years after Todd had imagined it, Edmonton director of parks J.R. Wright surmised, “continuity and unity are probably the strongest intangible elements contributing to the uniqueness of the River Valley.” The vision for this park was to make it feel like the countryside. When the City acquired 1,300 acres of Whitemud Ravine from 20 different owners in 1960, Wright wanted housing setbacks at the top of the ravine so people below in Whitemud Creek would look up and see only nature. Putting people in touch with nature—especially those lacking means to travel to the mountains or other rural areas—was the aim.

Along the way, park builders from Wright to city councillors, bureaucrats and business people cautioned against short-sighted policies that would erode the great civic plan. Edmonton's citizens acted to save Mill Creek and MacKinnon ravines from traffic engineers in the 60s and 70s, the latter after shovels were already in the ground. In response to these threats, in 1975 the Province and City together bought land and built



Blue clematis, south bank of the North Saskatchewan River, east of Dawson Bridge
PHOTO: © E. GORMLEY



Trail through poplar and carragana in Dawson Park PHOTO: © E. GORMLEY

a continuous trail system on both sides of the river from Edmonton's east end to the High Level Bridge, creating a 13 kilometre riparian zone in the process. The Province further protected lands along the river from Fort Saskatchewan to Devon from commercial and industrial use by designating them a "restricted development area." In 1976, the John Janzen Nature Centre was opened to provide public awareness and education of nature. This was followed in 1985 by the River Valley Bylaw, which extended the river park to the western limits of the city and noted the need to protect against the intrusion of roads and utilities. In the early 90s the City's Ribbon of Green document confirmed, "the public now recognizes the valley can be easily damaged as well as conserved." It resolved, "the major portion of the river valley will remain in a natural state," and in support of this vision, education "programs will increase awareness of natural and human history."

This theme of a continuous greenway was reinforced in the City's Biodiversity Report (2008), declaring the North Saskatchewan

River to be a "major ecological corridor across Alberta." The report observed the valley and ravines are still "well-connected, and maintaining and improving this connectivity will be critical to protecting biodiversity over the long term." In 2011, the City published "The Way We Green," its environment master plan. It lamented the loss of natural areas and pledged to protect "ecological connectivity in the North Saskatchewan River Valley — one of the region's key biological corridors." A Natural Areas Advisory Committee and the City's Master Naturalist Program that trained citizens in stewardship practices grew out of these initiatives. In the past few years both have been suspended...and this seems to have portended the shift to come.

One would expect current concerns over climate change and species loss would heighten appreciation for nature's work in helping to control pollution, manage floods, and add to the physical and mental health of people—but the pendulum has swung towards development of the river valley. In 2013, the Province dropped the

last of its valley restricted development caveats, the section from Edmonton to Devon. That same year, the city approved the Valley Line LRT, even though its route passes straight through landscape that connects Mill Creek Ravine—"a biodiversity core area"—to the river valley regional wildlife corridor. According to the environmental impact assessment, the LRT track and long retaining walls beside the existing three lane roadway are "expected to impede local wildlife movement," and have a "major impact" on the local ecosystem.

Meanwhile, the 1975 Capital City Recreation Park agreement the Province signed with the City, requiring the City to consult with the Province over development in the eastern half of the river valley, has slipped into a coma, and now is in danger of being buried. The City and the Province are also both providing infrastructure funding to River Valley Alliance, a quasi-official body whose motto "preserve, protect, and enhance" has been recently updated to "promote, protect, and enhance."

City administration still is careful to ac-

knowledge ecology, but rarely makes it a priority. In rapid succession the central river valley is seeing a host of infrastructure projects, including the Valley Line LRT and, just 450 metres away, a \$24 million funicular—an outdoor elevator—under the iconic, hundred-year-old Hotel Macdonald. Even though the same contractor performed the EIAs for both projects, there is no mention in the EIAs of cumulative effects. Both projects encroach upon shrubby areas in the north bank of the valley, the only sub-areas in both surveys in which biologists discovered the presence of the grey catbird. These two shrubby areas scored highest in avian diversity and abundance, partly because they were removed from roads and traffic. Both shrub areas will undergo major disturbance and house new mechanical workings. Some vegetation will grow back, but one must assume the two projects, together, will impact bird activity in this part of the river valley.

This fall the City also approved a 15-metre “climbing gym” in Whitemud Nature Preserve, and eight days later, it approved seven new docks and boat launches, each requiring tree cutting, construction of trails, and consequent loss of habitat. City Council deemed every one of these projects “essential.” Expected soon is the announcement of a paved promenade in Rosssdale with “plazas, walkways, and docks.” The idea of a concrete seawall west from there

along River Valley Road is being floated.

There has always been room for some appropriately placed, low-cost infrastructure to accommodate river valley users, like picnic shelters or a building in Hawrelak Park where people can put on their skates and access washrooms. But now the City wants to place infrastructure in the valley as a way of attracting and capitalizing on new user groups. Tourists, for instance, drawn by water taxis, and paying customers for upscale patio restaurants who may never have come to the valley otherwise, and who, after their meal, return to the city rather than venturing into the woods. The rationale given is if the public wants urban amenities in the valley, we need to provide them. Contrast this with River Valley Bylaw, which informs us, “[since 1910] municipal, regional and provincial authorities have sought to protect the North Saskatchewan River Valley’s natural open spaces from urban development....”

This begs the question: Is the City forgetting its history? This rush to construct in and commercialize the river valley seems to discount all of the City’s accumulated wisdom over the past century of the value of nature in the city. The river valley is more than abundantly wonderful already. Yet now one hears less about sightings of a pair of pelicans, or a grove of sweet cicely than one does about boat launches and flashy promenades linking riverside cafes.

What people come to expect from nature in the city can’t help but translate into a conservation ethic that will guide stewardship practices of Alberta’s remote lands, as well.

As an antidote to the development trend, we would like to see the conversation deepened about Edmonton’s greatest asset. The river valley cannot be all things to all people and remain important as a conservation corridor. The voices to weigh the most heavily are the voices of those who know the valley’s worth as a natural landscape, and they need to be amplified. Clearly, many citizens value the river valley as more than just a backdrop for urban pursuits. Strengthening governance of the valley, abiding by indigenous respect for the earth, and staying true to the vision of men and women who assembled and bequeathed these parks is vital. We must rekindle the forums and collaborations that led to the 2006 *Coyotes Still Sing in My Valley* and 2005 *North Saskatchewan River Heritage Study*. And do more to alert people to the valley’s superb flora and fauna. Frederick Todd’s words are truer today than when he spoke them a century ago — “a crowded population, if they are to live in health and happiness, must have space for the enjoyment of that peaceful beauty of nature, which is the opposite of all that is sordid and artificial in our city lives.”

We would like to hear from those with expertise and passion—the readers of *Wildlands Advocate*. To receive notice for forums being planned or to share your ideas, please contact Eric Gormley at erigormley@gmail.com 🍌



Retaining walls and LRT track will block the wildlife corridor from Mill Creek ravine to the river valley
PHOTO: © E. GORMLEY

Eric Gormley is a retired educator and a beginner naturalist. Raquel Feroe is a physician who promotes awareness of known links between human and environmental health. Kristine Kowalchuk is a food and environment writer who teaches English at NAIT in Edmonton. Her book, Preserving on Paper, will be out in May 2017 from University of Toronto Press. All call Edmonton home.