

Nose Hill Park:

AWA Offers A First Look At An Old Grassland

By Nathan Schmidt

For many Calgarians, Nose Hill Park is a natural refuge amidst the sounds and activities of a bustling city. It's an important reminder of the expansive grasslands that rested where Calgary now stands. Nestled between the northwest and northeast quadrants of the city, the park is a significant natural landmark that rivals any of the impressive skyscrapers populating the downtown core. Beyond that, it is also an example of successfully restoring and preserving an important ecological landmark in an urban environment. Nose Hill Park, eleven square kilometres in size, is one of Canada's largest urban parks – hard to miss if you've ever driven in north Calgary.

Known for its wildlife, flora, scenic sights, geology, and suitability for any number of recreational activities, Nose Hill Park is a beloved and well-used wild space. Because of its prominence within the city and significance as a grassland environment, it offered a perfect setting for AWA to use in its program introducing new Canadians to the natural regions of Alberta. While past programs have included excursions to exotic areas like the badlands of Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park, a hike through Nose Hill Park gave the new Canadians the opportunity to explore an area literally in their backyard.

Over twenty participants from the Centre for Newcomers came along for the journey and were treated to an in-depth and educational look at the value Nose Hill has to offer. Leading the new Canadians were Gus Yaki and Karel Bergman, two well-known local naturalists, and AWA's own Carolyn

Campbell and Nick Pink.

Although surrounded by 12 residential communities in the middle of one of Canada's biggest urban centres, Nose Hill provides enough quality habitat to sustain the likes of deer and coyotes as well as smaller mammals like porcupine, northern pocket squirrels, and Richardson's ground squirrels. A typical day in Nose Hill also offers northern harriers and Swainson's hawks as constant companions, circling the skies above the park searching for prey.

Shortly after the hike began, the participants split into two groups, one led by Gus and the other by Karel. The groups ventured in opposite directions towards the top of the park where the hikers were treated to spectacular views of the Calgary skyline and an impressive perspective of a new city still somewhat unfamiliar to many of them. While the journey might take only thirty minutes at a standard walking pace, there was rarely a stretch of more than one hundred metres travelled before Gus or Karel stopped the group to share a little about the surroundings.

One oft-visited topic in Karel's group was the invasion of non-native plants in the park and a general lack of action on account of the City of Calgary. "Goatsbeard is child's play," Karel says of the blowball weed that plagues City greenbelts and residential yards alike.

At one stop, Karel explains the pervasiveness of non-native thistle in the Park. Hard to eradicate and all too easily spread, entire hillsides are covered in the thorny, purple-flowered weed. At another stop, Karel points out vines of yellow clematis climb-

ing over native vegetation and trees, choking them out. Yellow clematis is "public enemy number two... at least" he explains to the group, noting its abundance throughout the city of Calgary. "At least this plant is pretty to look at," he concedes.

The rise of invasive species in the Park is particularly troubling as the prairie grassland that populates much of Nose Hill is one of the most under-protected ecosystems in Canada. The Park remains a compelling example of what we are in danger of losing should we continue to neglect these threatened regions. Although perhaps not as visually stunning at first as a trip to a Rocky Mountains park, a closer look at the grasses of Nose Hill reveals a complex, beautiful world.

Gus's group was treated to his encyclopedic knowledge of the birds and plants found in the park. Just off the beaten trail, a small number of Yucca shrubs were found hugging the ground. Yuccas are characterized by pointy leaves that grow out from the centre, creating a spiky-ball look.

Further up the trail, the group came across a large rock that was strangely smooth. "What caused this?" Gus asks. "Water? Wind? Ice?" No, the smoothness resulted from the fact livestock had used the rock as a rubbing stone when they were formerly allowed to graze on the rough fescue grassland.

Nestled amidst the rough fescue grasses was a beautiful selection of wildflowers peppered by a consistent stream of bees busily collecting pollen. The Saskatoons provided the hikers with a literal taste of the Prairies, as the tour was temporarily

derailed by the opportunity to pick berries when the group came across a large stand of fruiting bushes.

For AWA, a program like this is valuable in many ways. It's a strong representation of a core belief that Alberta's wilderness should be appreciated and treasured by all its citizens. Perhaps more significantly in this case, these citizens are just beginning to experience what the province has to offer.

"We always talk about creating friends for Alberta's natural regions," says AWA's Nick Pink, "the idea being that when these areas come under threat, there are people who

value the area who will stand up to protect it. When we do our summer hikes, we hope that we are showing a side of Alberta that few people make the effort to go and see and that this creates a bond or interest in these areas." Nick believes the Nose Hill hike contributed importantly to this goal. "The participants were so interested and so hungry to learn about the plants and animals of the Park and left with a solid knowledge of the area, he said. "This, combined with the unique ability of Gus and Karel to find something fascinating in the smallest of things made this hike a really great time."

Familiarizing yourself with a new home can often be intimidating. But by offering an accessible introduction, AWA helped these new Canadians develop a positive first impression of their new environment. Our enthusiastic, knowledgeable guides helped all who attended to gain a better appreciation of the grasslands and our connection to them. 🌱

Nathan is an AWA Volunteer who has helped staff in a number of roles including as our mascot Little Smoky the bear since he began volunteering only a few months ago.