

A Defender of Native Plant Communities: Reg Ernst

By Nick Pink, AWA Conservation Specialist



For Reg Ernst, newly minted 2017 recipient of AWA's Wilderness Defender Award, the second time was the charm. A few short decades ago, Reg Ernst was working as an air traffic controller at the Calgary International Airport. From where we are walking at Nose Hill Park this beautiful August morning, we can easily make out the airport control tower through the smoggy forest fire haze that has filled the air for most of the summer. Of course, Reg isn't receiving this award for exemplary air traffic control; after working for more than 20 years at the airport, Reg started down the runway to a new career.

"I really enjoyed the job," says Reg, as we talk beside a group of quarried sandstone boulders, on a hill overlooking eastern Calgary, "but it was time for a change."

At the time, Reg thought he would retire. He had a small farm and figured he could get by raising horses, and so he enrolled in the agriculture program at Olds College. Yet he soon discovered that, his love of horses and country aside, agriculture was not where his passion lay. Instead, he became interested in ecology, particularly land reclamation. Near the end of the Olds program, his advisor suggested that he go to Montana State University to complete his undergraduate degree in ecology.

"I said, 'no I don't think so,'" Reg recalls, "but then I thought about and, why not? I really enjoyed that, it was an interesting place. I did some interesting field work. For example, on the Beartooth Plateau we studied alpine ecology and camped at something like eight or ten thousand feet [above sea level]."

Following his undergraduate degree, Reg

completed a Master of Science degree in Ecology and Wildlife Management from New Mexico State University.

I ask him whether his interest in the environment was something he discovered when he went back to school. "I've always had an interest in animals and plants. I think that goes back to childhood," he says, "but it didn't really mature until I started at Olds College and Montana State. I did a lot of traveling in the backcountry before that, so of course I was interested in what was going on out there, but I didn't have the knowledge to really recognize many things."

Reg applied his growing knowledge to better understand native plant communities in Alberta's alpine. His backcountry trips included hiking to remote alpine locations to study whitebark and limber pine – species identified as endangered both provincially and nationally (although limber pine doesn't have any status under the *Species at Risk Act* the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada assessed the species as endangered in 2014). His work included observing disease prevalence, such as blister rust, and counting the number of successful seedlings. This project, he tells me, is one he recalls as being particularly fulfilling, as much of the information he collected has been useful to colleagues.

"The alpine was always the most interesting area to work, in my opinion. It still has intact native plant communities, they haven't been disturbed very much, and just the natural beauty of it as well," says Reg.

But studying endangered species may expose some harsh realities too. While it's encouraging that we may still be able to recover

these species it's also disappointing that more isn't being done. Reg tells me that there are areas that could be cleared of competing sub-alpine firs, spruce, and lodgepole pine. Such clearing would allow whitebark pine to flourish. He also has an eye towards restoration and mentions that, by reclaiming disturbed areas with endangered species, such as these endangered species of pine, we could be doing two important jobs for the price of one.

"If it wasn't for Christyann, we wouldn't have done those projects." Reg points out that AWA's Christyann Olson was instrumental in helping to identify projects and secure funding for them.

For Reg, we need to be more of this work. "Especially in areas like the Castle," he says, "where there's a lot of roaded areas and well-sites. I visited one site last year that they were in the process of reclaiming. They planted native vegetation there but I was disappointed to not see limber pine, it would have been a good site."

Reg is very concerned about the threat invasive species pose to native plants. One has to look no further than the ground we're standing on in Nose Hill to see the impacts. While still home to native rough fescue, the park is covered in smooth brome, large patches of invasive thistles, and yellow

clematis growing over other vegetation. The clematis is literally choking other species to death. This is not the case yet in much of the alpine where Reg spent much of his career; the non-native plants haven't yet developed the tolerance or access to these high elevations. Unfortunately, with a changing climate, it appears the ground-work for an invasion is already being laid.

Cattle also are helping non-native plants invade the alpine. Cows facilitate migration of invasive species when they graze at lower elevations and drop plants from their bodies and in their dung when they climb to higher areas. Reg was surprised the first time he saw cows in the alpine. "I looked up, jeez those look like cattle up there. That can't be, they wouldn't be up there."

He went out to check the next week, and sure enough, the cows were there.

"Cattle do not belong in the alpine," Reg says (To see a photo of cattle in the Castle alpine see the cover of the June 2015 issue of the *Advocate*). "Whenever cows go into any natural system, they're going to change it. The areas down below have already been converted to non-native species, so with proper control grazing cattle are not going to cause any more harm."

Although he spent much of his second career in the alpine, Reg holds a similar passion for Alberta's native grasslands. Grasslands, one of the three least protected ecosystems in Alberta (the others are the Parkland and Foothills), provide the habitat to the majority of Alberta's endangered species.

"Grasslands have so much value for cattle grazing and there's lots of oil and gas activity," Reg replies, when I ask him why he thinks they remain so unprotected. "But they're so interesting in their own right and should be protected. Suffield is a prime example of an area that has really been hammered by oil and gas activity and animals like horses and now elk. Usually economics takes precedence over everything else and it's really difficult to protect anything."

Yet conservation needs not be only confined to the creation of protected areas. In Lethbridge, Reg led a rattlesnake awareness and education conservation program. At the time,

large numbers of snakes were being run over, so part of the program included putting up signs notifying people that rattlesnakes lived in the area. Another part of the program involved presenting to and educating the public to foster a positive attitude. The program was a success. Reg found that people were generally willing to accept that they were living in rattlesnake habitat and cooperated by phoning in the location of rattlesnakes, which Reg would then relocate back to their den.

Reg recounts an anecdote about misconceptions some may have about staying safe in rattlesnake habitat. A lady told him she made sure her kids made lots of noise when they were outside so they didn't have to worry about rattlesnakes. "Well of course, rattlesnakes can't hear," Reg chuckles, "so she was living under a false sense of security on that one."

He later said the program remains a fond memory. "I think we did benefit them. The rattlesnake program was really important because it drew attention to their plight and re-educated a lot of people."

Though he's had two successful careers, Reg still keeps busy in his second retirement. He

enjoys spending time in the valley that runs through Camrose, where he now resides. There he tries his best to influence the city to develop in an environmentally friendly manner. Reg also volunteers his time to teach Vietnamese students English, over Skype and during yearly visits to Vietnam. With such an accomplished career, it's hard to imagine that he has too many regrets but when I ask, one sticks out in his mind. "I wanted to do a PhD – a backcountry study in the national parks for horse grazing – but I put together a sloppy proposal." But missing that opportunity had a silver lining: "in hindsight I suppose it gave me the opportunity to do other things."

Though Reg is grateful to be recognized as a Wilderness Defender by his peers in conservation, he is quick to tell me that he certainly never did it for the recognition but instead was motivated by a sense of duty. His work was just something he felt he was obliged to do. But despite the accomplishments of Reg and other Wilderness Defenders for Alberta's wilderness and wildlife, the work never ends. Here's hoping Reg's story inspires more Albertans to carry the conservation cause into the future. ▲



Limber pine, one of Alberta's native plant species that has benefited from Reg Ernst's stewardship. PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS