

The Cardinal Divide, Whitehorse Wildland Provincial Park, and Their Stewards

By Nissa Petterson, *AWA Conservation Specialist*



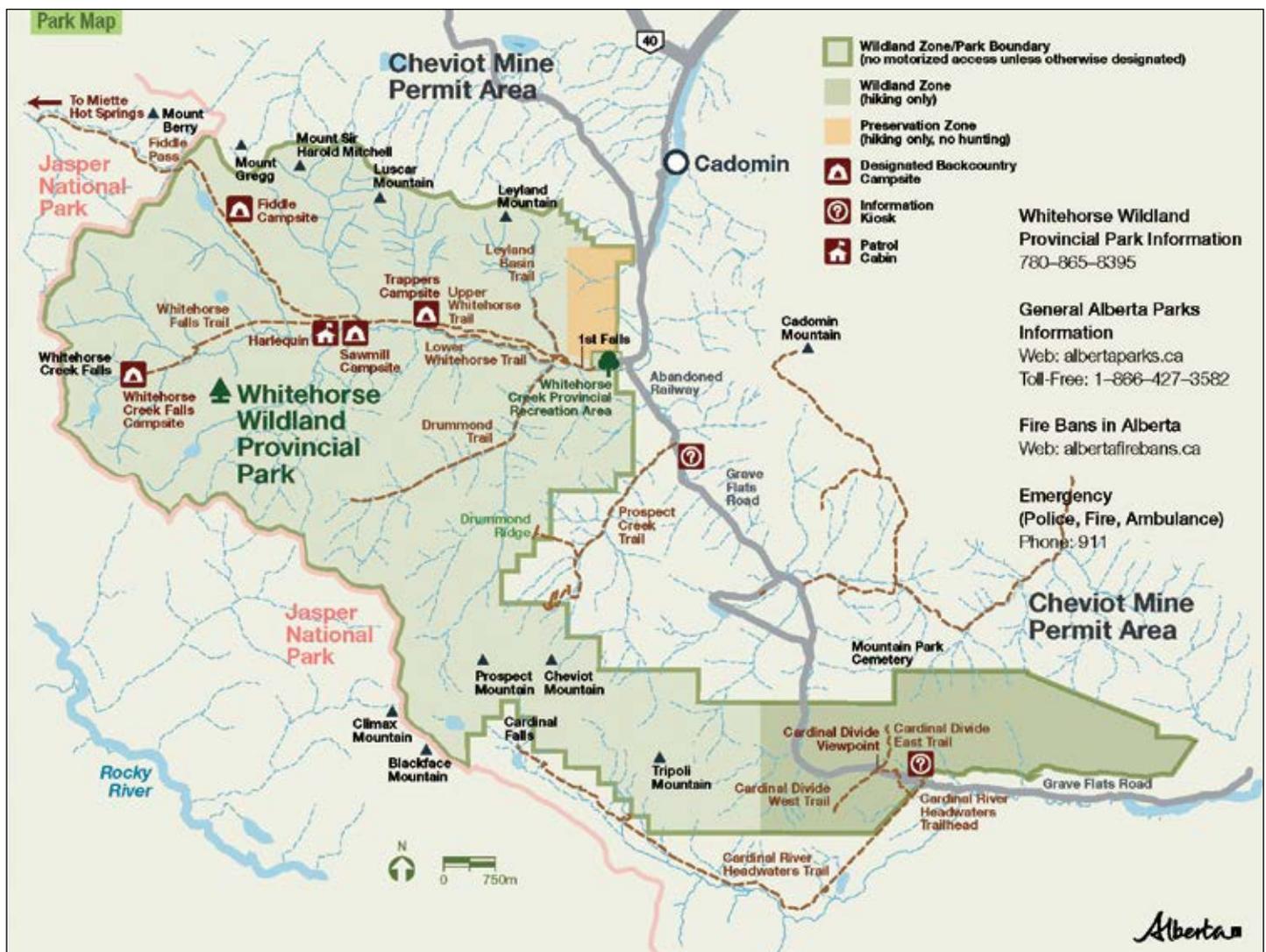
The Whitehorse Wildland Provincial Park is a hidden gem, unknown to many within Alberta; if you haven't heard of it, you are not alone. Located about 60 kilometres south of Hinton and a stone's throw from the hamlet of Cadomin, Whitehorse Wildland Park is hidden away in a relatively remote region,

comfortably “off the beaten path.” In late July, Alison Dinwoodie (an AWA Wilderness Defender), Kristen Anderson, and Elisabeth Beaubien took AWA staff on a guided trip through the park to understand the new and ongoing issues afflicting the area.

At 175 km², the park is relatively small, but it is a very important place to protect due to

its ecological biodiversity. The Whitehorse Wildland Park is situated in the front ranges of the Rocky Mountain Natural Region, with its western boundary against the eastern border of Jasper National Park.

If you can successfully navigate the rough and bumpy “roadways” of Grave Flats Road (having a spare tire handy is highly recom-



CREDIT: GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

mended), your efforts will be rewarded by an exceptional wilderness experience. With the majority of the park located above the tree line, impressive views of the Rocky Mountains and Foothills are endless. And the park is not just appealing to people; its wild spaces are vital habitat for a variety of wildlife including bighorn sheep, elk, moose, wolves, cougars, marmots, mountain bluebird, horned lark, and golden-crowned sparrow. In addition, the Whitehorse Wildland Park contains important habitat for some of Alberta's at risk species; the park is a migration corridor for threatened grizzly bears and the banks of its clear mountain streams are home to the harlequin duck.

Despite its abundant natural splendor, the *pièce de résistance* of the Whitehorse Wildland Park just might be its noteworthy topographical feature: the Cardinal Divide. The Divide is a wide ridge that separates two major watersheds, the Athabasca River to the north, and the North Saskatchewan River, to the east which contribute to the area's famed biodiversity.

The Grave Flats Road passes through Cadomin, then past the extensive Cheviot mine site. For over a century, intermittent coal mining in this area had supported surrounding communities.

In the 1980s, a new extension of the mine was proposed east and west of the Grave Flats Road. Because of the sensitive ecology of the terrain, an Environmental Impact Assessment was carried out. The mine was approved but the Cardinal Divide and the rest of the headwaters would be protected. This resulted in the designation of the Whitehorse Wildland Provincial Park in 1998. No motorized traffic would be allowed, to prevent the destruction of the sensitive alpine and subalpine terrain and its vegetation.

Teck Resources Ltd. currently operates the Cheviot mine extension to the east while the two completed pits west of the Grave Flats Road are now waiting to be revegetated before they will be reopened to the public.

When you arrive at the Cardinal Divide viewpoint parking lot there are two hiking trails – one heading east, the other heading west. The Cardinal Divide East Trail takes

you to the top of the ridge and, after a short and relatively easy hike, you can experience and enjoy the heart of the Whitehorse Wildland Provincial Park. The trail winds through lush alpine meadows and subalpine slopes which are the canvas for the unique and beautiful flora communities of the park.

The plant diversity is one of the most exceptional features of the park; it boasts over 250 species of plants, some of which are considered rare or to have unusual distribution. This diversity of flora is thought to be attributed to a glacial refugium or a "nunatak." A nunatak is an exposed ridge that was high enough to remain glacier-free during the last ice age, allowing its vegetation to survive. Although prominent, this hypothesis hasn't ended the debate surrounding the source of the Divide's biodiversity.

The flower communities of the Cardinal Divide have charmed and made a lasting impression on many people who visit this place; they have captivated people like Alison, Kristen, and Elisabeth. From organizing volunteer reclamation weekends to writing a field guide for the Whitehorse wilderness, these dedicated people have devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to exploring, documenting, and advocating for the responsible management and use of these public lands. We were fortunate to have these people, who work tirelessly to protect

the wilderness values of the park, lead AWA's trip to the Cardinal.

As we made our way up the eastward trail, a rock cairn was obvious at the top of the ridge. These human-made stacks of stones have spanned many cultures, and therefore, have a variety of purposes. Historically cairns have been used as burial monuments, for hunting and defence, to indicate food caches, or land guides for marine navigation. Today's cairns in the Rockies are more likely to serve as hiking trail markers or personalized artistic creations. Yes, the modern art of stone balancing is a real thing. But there's one attribute that spans all cultures and eras: they're manmade, a sign of human presence, and our guides were not particularly pleased with their contemporary uses. They are just another way in which this fragile environment is disturbed unnecessarily.

Regardless of their origin or significance to their creator, the resurgence of these statues in our wild spaces changes their meaning entirely. Nowadays these cairns often are symbolic of current recreation behaviors – the need to show that "I was here." A more passive approach to exploring wilderness – "leave no trace" – is challenged by the need some have to show they were there.

While constructing a rock cairn may be relatively minor in terms of impact, it is not without repercussions. Rocks provide a



Off-trail OHV damage above Cardinal Falls CREDIT: AWA



The Cheviot Mine PHOTO: © E. BEAUBIEN

multitude of ecological services through the microhabitats they create; their surfaces can be the protection needed for sheltering new growth, or facilitating the attachment and growth of moss and lichen. Beneath them there could be habitat for insect species that will be a meal for the next grizzly bear that comes along. Regardless if rocks are removed from streams or the top of a ridge, relocating these rocks is actively dismantling the biological communities that depend on them. If we cannot acknowledge the complexity and sensitivity of ecosystems, we open the door to less conscientious interactions with nature. Unfortunately, the Cardinal Divide

has seen a great deal of this behaviour and curbing it has been an arduous battle for the stewards of this area.

On a much greater scale than building cairns, the Cardinal Divide is currently subjected to a significant amount of motorized recreation. This activity takes place despite the fact that motorized recreation is prohibited in the Park. Scars old and new are carved into the landscape far beyond the boundaries of the single designated off-highway vehicle (OHV) trail, the Cardinal Headwaters Trail, that runs just outside the south/southeastern boundaries of the Park. The Cardinal Headwaters trail transects a subalpine valley



Near the headwaters of the Cardinal River PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY

sandwiched between the Whitehorse Wildland Provincial Park and Jasper National Park. Over time, the trail has become severely eroded and rutted and now braids in between protected areas. Vegetation cover of the soil has been completely eliminated; continuous traffic closes the window for regeneration. These are the unfortunate consequences of inappropriate land use and the growing epidemic of poorly regulated OHV use.

The Cardinal Divide's biodiversity clearly cannot tolerate this form of recreation. More signage and, most importantly, more enforcement of the regulations needs to happen. Without these steps these so-called protected lands will continue to be degraded. What is the purpose of formally protecting unique ecosystems such as the Whitehorse Wildland Park if inadequate protected areas management only facilitates its destruction?

The forms of high-impact recreation that plague the landscapes of the Whitehorse Wildland Park are found in too many of Alberta's wilderness areas. Governments and user groups alike must give a very high priority to re-educating recreationists about the importance of treading lightly in our wilderness areas. AWA hopes that with increased awareness, the likelihood of recreationists choosing to partake in high-impact activities will diminish. This, in turn, will continue to build momentum for caring and protecting Alberta's wilderness areas. We, as members of the public, must act as stewards and task ourselves with the responsibility of propagating an approach to the use of public lands that respects the fragile balance often found there.

So the next time you're out in Alberta's wild spaces, take a minute to think about the impact you may be having before you pick the last beautiful wildflower, disturb the undergrowth to build a rock cairn, or build a dam in a shallow stream to swim in. Such thoughts will encourage us to recognize our duty, as the Cardinal Divide's stewards know so well, to care for these valuable areas. 🌲

AWA would like to thank Alison, Kristen, and Elisabeth for taking staff on this hike and to thank Alison for her comments on this article.