

Protect the Parkland Dunes



By Joanna Skrajny, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

It was an idyllic morning in early July, the summer sun already high up in the sky, the air sweet and fresh, as we headed out on an AWA hike led by Cliff Wallis to the Wainwright Dunes Ecological Reserve. The group, consisting of provincial biologists, AWA members, conservationists, and local leaseholders, hailed from all over the province. The trip to reach the Wainwright Dunes, located in east-central Alberta near the Saskatchewan border, involved a four hour drive for those travelling from Calgary and Edmonton, a short drive across a series of prairie roads in varying conditions, and a two kilometre hike to reach the border of

the reserve.

By this point, my interest was thoroughly piqued – what was this place? What was so special about it that it drew in a diverse and passionate group of people from all over the province to this non-descript place?

However, as soon as we set out on our hike, my curiosity became pure joy. Our morning began by traversing through aspen groves, the underbrush dappled by the sunlight breaking through the canopy. Bees happily buzzed away around the wildflowers underfoot. As we broke our way through the forest, wetlands alive with birdsong and rolling hills of grasses

greeted us. Cliff then guided us across a large wetland complex by means of the enormous beaver dam which created it. As the sun rose in the sky, we wove our way back into the aspen stands and then came upon a series of sand dunes, dunes formed from glacial deposits subjected to battering winds.

As equally bright as the sun overhead was the beaming smile on Cliff's face throughout the day. It was so obvious to anyone looking at him that this was one of his favourite places to be. I couldn't help but agree, feeling that I had returned to a place that felt so right. It was invigorating.

This trip to the parkland reminded me



Making our way across logs carefully arranged by nature's most industrious wetland architect. PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY

of my childhood exploring and playing in stretches of grasslands and stands of aspen. Endless summer days were spent playing hide and go seek under their trembling branches. On Sunday afternoons we'd go down for a family walk, bike ride, or take a picnic in the park.

Of course, I didn't appreciate the parkland then – at least not for its natural features. I loved going camping and hiking, but I viewed the mountains as where Nature was at her best.

Over the years, the landscape of my backyard wildland changed. The grasslands were torn up to make way for a highway; the park where we played among the aspens was boxed in by bigger homes.

It wasn't until I visited the Wainwright Dunes that I'd realized what I'd lost. Lazy summer evenings serenaded by singing birds and frogs; winter days crunching through a snowscape dotted with tracks of all shapes and sizes.

The more often we see the things around us - even the beautiful and wonderful things - the more they become invisible to us. That is why we often take for granted the beauty of this world: the flowers, the trees, the birds, the clouds - even those we love. Because we see things so often, we see them less and less.

- Joseph B. Wirthlin

The Parkland Natural Region extends in a broad arc from the southern Rockies to east-central Alberta, where Alberta's prairies meet the forests of the boreal and Rocky Mountains. As the transition between two incredibly different ecosystems, the Parkland is exceptionally diverse in both landscape and vegetation. The Parkland Natural Region has three distinct Natural Subregions within it, distinguished by their geographic location: the Peace River Parkland in the north, Foothills Parkland to the east of the Rocky Mountains, and Central Parkland stretching in a north-easterly arc from Calgary to

the Saskatchewan border at Lloydminster.

Home to the municipalities of Calgary, Red Deer, and Edmonton, the Parkland is also Alberta's most populated Natural Region and has extensive agricultural development. Estimates suggest that about 90 percent of the Peace River Parkland subregion, 92 percent of the Central Parkland subregion, and 75 percent of the Foothills Parkland subregion is privately owned.

Since so many Albertans live, work, and play in the Parkland Natural Region, I am certain that my childhood story is one that is shared by many of my generation. A backyard haven, river valley, or pathway has tasted "progress." Those refuges have made way for development and are now so overused that they have become shadows of their former selves. AWA leads regular 'pilgrimages' to the Wainwright Dunes not only because of its splendour and unique ecological values. It is also because of the sobering reason that it is one of the only protected areas located within the Parkland Natural Region.

Currently, only 0.9 percent of the Parkland Natural Region is protected. It's no coincidence that only an estimated five percent of the Region's natural vegetation remains. Now, more than ever, it's important to protect the wild spaces left within the Parkland.

While at 28 km² the Wainwright Dunes Ecological Reserve is relatively small, it is part of a larger patchwork of public lands that AWA refers to as the Parkland Dunes. As its name suggests, these dunes are located largely within the Parkland Natural Region.

Thanks to its unsuitability for agriculture and relatively remote location, the Parkland Dunes has become an oasis in an otherwise developed landscape. Grazing, the area's primary land use, has conserved the native vegetation of the area. This is a great thing because the Parkland Dunes packs a lot of "ecological punch," containing a wide variety of distinct landscapes that makes this area uniquely rich in biodiversity.

The first distinct "region," the northern

half of the Parkland Dunes (containing C.F.B. Wainwright along with Wainwright Dunes Ecological Reserve), is distinguished by its extensive sand plains and dunes, grasslands, and aspen groves. It also contains a high variety of wetland types including patterned and sloped fens. These unique wetlands are often metres deep, fed by groundwater springs and rich in organic matter. One such sloped fen in Wainwright Dunes feeds into David Lake, which is an important area for waterfowl.

Other lakes within the Parkland Dunes include Sunken Lake, Sounding Lake, and a cluster of unnamed lakes. Ranging from slightly to strongly saline, many of these lakes dry up during the summer and are an important breeding area for bird species including the endangered piping plover. These lakes critically contribute to the area's importance. The Parkland historically contained countless small lakes and wetlands which supported a suite of plant and animal species and served as important water storage during periods of flood and drought. It is estimated that 60 percent of the wetlands from this natural region have been lost, largely due to draining and conversion for agricultural use.

Finally, the Neutral Hills, located in the southeast portion of the Parkland Dunes, contain a series of "ice thrust ridges" which are sheets of bedrock which were folded by glacial activity into discontinuous hills. Also found in the Neutral Hills are erratics and steep coulees formed by erosion processes. Unsurprisingly, this diverse topography provides habitat for many unique plant and animal species. The Neutral Hills also holds significance for Indigenous Peoples as an important hunting ground and location for winter camps. Tipi rings, arrow heads, and cairns are common artifacts found here.

While there are many ecological reasons for protecting the Parkland Dunes, there also are more sociological and practical reasons for conserving this landscape.

To begin, there is an opportunity to advance protection of the Parkland Dunes within the North Saskatchewan Region-

al Plan under the Land-use Framework. According to this plan, the government is required to identify and create new protected areas. Part of the process involves appointing an Advisory Council, which among other things, will provide advice on whether the Council believes the government should proceed with protecting areas the government has identified as significant.

It's clear the government recognizes the critical need to increase protection of the Parkland Natural Region. In background documents submitted by the provincial government to the North Saskatchewan Region's Advisory Committee, provincial biologists noted that "the North Saskatchewan Region is essentially the only region that can fill representation gaps in the Central Parkland natural sub region on public land".

There was a consensus in the Advisory Council supporting the province's assessment and the Council consequently

agreed with the protected areas proposed by the government. Unfortunately, the areas the government proposed for protection are small and fragmented. There exists a much larger piece of public lands within the Parkland Dunes that could be conserved.

Protection of public lands within the Parkland Dunes and the surrounding area could potentially protect up to 930 km², which would increase protection of the Parkland Natural Region from a paltry 0.9 percent up to 2.4 percent. While this total is still insufficient, the increase would be significant.

Conservation science tells us that protecting larger landscapes is beneficial in order to help maintain their ecological integrity. It makes sense. Wildlife needs room to roam and survive, and so a small patch of land just isn't going to cut it for maintaining an area's ecological function. Even if not all of it remains in its natural condition, protecting a larger, largely

functional piece may help prevent further degradation.

In short, protecting a larger piece of the Parkland Natural Region may help conserve what makes it "parkland" in the first place.

The lands identified by AWA constitute a critical piece and objective, not least because the Parkland Natural Region is unique to North America. Indeed, Alberta contains the largest remaining blocks of Parkland in the world – the Parkland Dunes block and the Rumsey block. I believe we have a moral obligation to protect what is uniquely ours so that others may know and benefit from it too.

AWA has recommended protecting the Parkland Dunes as a Heritage Rangeland, which would maintain the stewardship that grazing has provided, while simultaneously conserving these landscapes for future generations. This designation would result in minimal changes to the current status quo of the area while si-



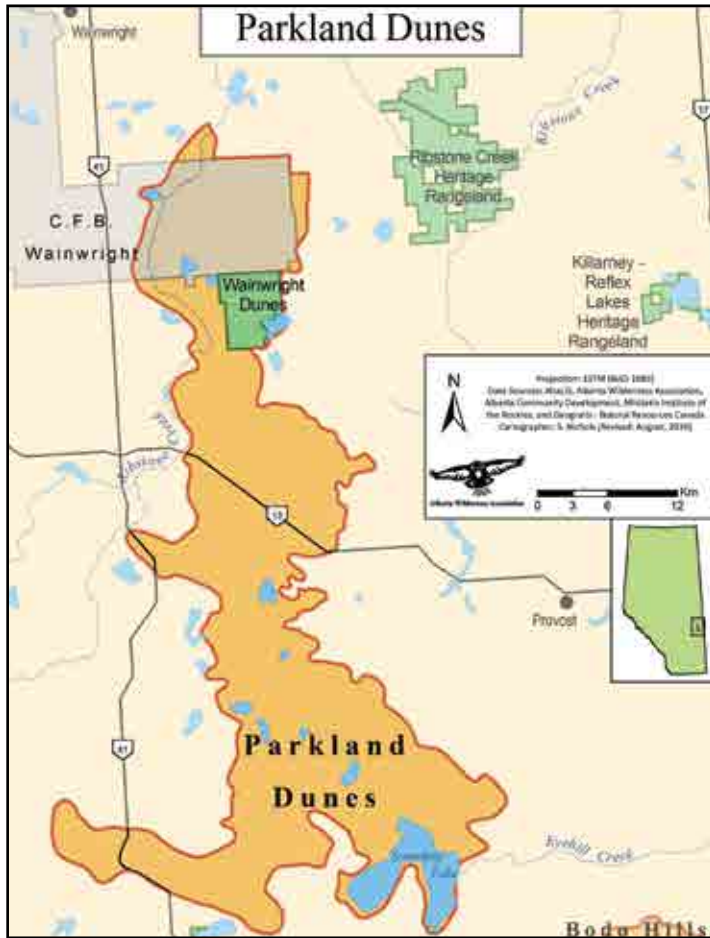
The Parkland – where the grasslands meet forests. PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY

multaneously protecting this landscape from further destruction. It would prevent future surface disturbances such as drilling, renewable energy development, and road building. These activities pose serious threats to the integrity of the area

by further fragmenting habitat, destroying native grasslands, and introducing invasive species.

The final and perhaps the most intuitive reason for protecting the Parkland Dunes is to provide the opportunity to reconnect

with a landscape that is so unique, so vibrant, and so unabashedly alive. It would do a lot of spiritual good for Albertans to know and take pride in a landscape that is one they knew and loved as kids. 🌱



AWA's 932 km² Parkland Dunes Area of Concern stretches from the Canadian Forces Base (C.F.B.) Wainwright in the north to Sounding Lake and Neutral Hills in the south. MAP: © AWA



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