

A WILDLANDS ADVOCATE

THE ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION JOURNAL

JUNE 2020

C O N T E N T S

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Cover Photo

Karen McKeown took this issue's cover photo during the "Getting Dave to the Summit" Adventure for Wilderness. See more of Karen's photos, along with Ed Hergott's written and photographic record of that memorable adventure, starting on page 24.



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ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

Dedicated to the conservation of wilderness and the completion of a protected areas network, **Alberta Wilderness Association** is a voice for the environment. Since 1965, AWA has inspired communities to care for Alberta's wild spaces through awareness and action. With a provincial office and library in Calgary, AWA has active members, volunteers, and sponsors throughout Alberta and beyond. AWA is a non-profit, federally registered, charitable society. Donations and financial support are greatly appreciated, please call 403 283-2025 or contribute online at AlbertaWilderness.ca

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Dickens' Dichotomy

In the first half of 2020, I have thought much about the dichotomy Dickens presented in the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*, his classic novel set during the French Revolution. Is our future likely to be one of light or darkness? Of the best of times or the worst of times?

Often, too often perhaps, darkness gets the better of me. The worst of times? The age of foolishness? The epoch of incredulity? The season of darkness? The winter of despair? It is easy to associate those phrases from Dickens with the fates of people such as George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Chantel Moore. It's easy to see them live too in some of the elderly care facilities where many of Canada's COVID-19 deaths have occurred. Unemployment levels reminiscent of the Great Depression, household debt levels near all-time highs, sharp contractions in investment and shrinking economies – it's standing room only in my mind on the dark side of Dickens' ledger. And then there's a certain political leader who wonders out loud if injecting disinfectant into patients or hitting them with powerful light might be promising COVID-19 treatments. Sounds interesting.

I hope you will see this issue of *Wild Lands Advocate* as restorative, as a volume helping to sustain light, hope, and wisdom. Its content challenges the foolishness and despair the provincial government served us with through its decision to strip protected and public status from nearly 200 sites in Alberta. AWA invited you over the past months to send us your stories about what public, protected spaces mean to you. Some of those stories have appeared on our website; others are told here. In story after story you have affirmed the importance of provincial parks and protected areas to the quality of our lives. They underline the value of our parks system to building and sustaining a better Alberta.

Henry Wismayer wrote in *The Guardian* that: "It is no exaggera-

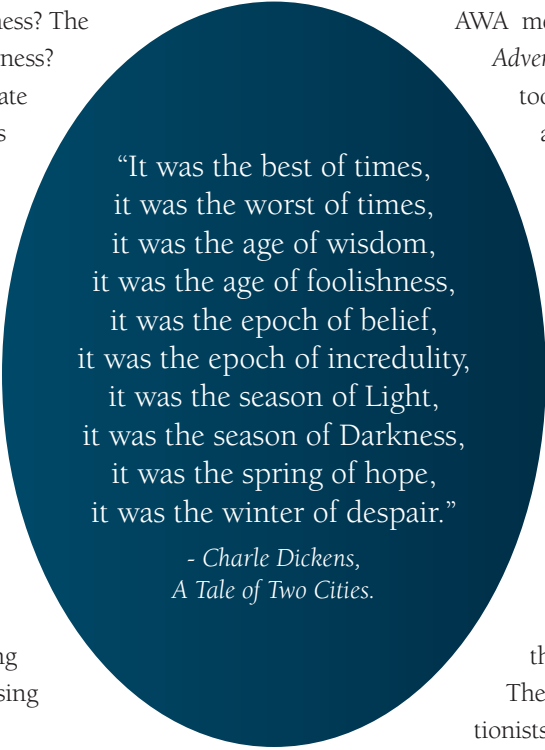
tion to say that humans are almost universally terrible at admitting when they are wrong." Your reflections hopefully will make it easier for the Minister of Environment and Parks to admit exactly that, to rectify the "penny wise, pound foolish" nature of his decision to "optimize" our parks system.

This WLA also highlights several of the adventures AWA members have offered through AWA's new *Adventures 4 Wilderness* program. Those stories too are ones promoting the light, wisdom, and hope our organization strives to see in Alberta's future. They illustrate well the health of the AWA community, of our community's dedication to share valued nature-oriented experiences with like-minded individuals.

Some recent commentaries try to slur the actions and ambitions of conservationists as "ideological," where this label is understood to mean opposed to the public or common good. I hope that, before people consider using that term in that way, they will spend a few minutes reading Ed Hergott's account of the "Getting Dave to the Summit" adventure. There you read about the efforts of conservationists/adventurists to help their legally-blind friend experience getting to the top of a ridge in Kananaskis country. It's a story of people coming together to help someone they care for enjoy an experience in the outdoors that he can no longer accomplish on his own. If that's what "ideological" means, I hope Alberta's future is a very ideological one.

Whether you turn to June's stories about parks or to its stories about *Adventures 4 Wilderness* you will encounter the values and actions that strengthen community and the public good. Let's be optimistic that our current political leaders will realize the wisdom of embracing those ideas and revise their policies accordingly.

- Ian Urquhart



"It was the best of times,
it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom,
it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief,
it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light,
it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope,
it was the winter of despair."

- Charles Dickens,
A Tale of Two Cities.

The Alberta Parks Clearance Sale:

Wiping Out Memories

By Lorne Fitch, *P. Biol.*



The Alberta government plan to divest, downgrade or deconsecrate 184 of the province's Parks and Recreation Areas is bold, imperious and tone-deaf. This scheme targets "small, underutilized" Parks and their facilities for the ostensible rationale that this decision will save money. It is an ironic twist, given the desire to increase tourism (and tourism dollars) to bolster an otherwise failing economy. If tourism is a new provincial pot of gold what sense does it make to divest ourselves of the "pots"—the provincial Parks and Recreation Areas that add to the destinations of interest? It seems a more prudent strategy would be to extoll the diversity of choices available for recreational users, rather than to cut choices.

We have been here before with this perverse ideological bent that recreation, based on Parks facilities, is an unnecessary luxury to be dumped in economic downturns. During the infamous Klein cuts many Parks facilities were privatized. The net impact of that short-sighted decision was the erosion of services, widespread user dissatisfaction, declines in use, failure to maintain Parks infrastructure and, a huge public rebuilding cost to bring facilities back to acceptable standards. How that decision saved us money remains unanswered. One might think even a casual review of history might provide pause to the current thinking.

Parks on the list of the damned touch people in every part of Alberta. They form an interconnected network to experience all that is Alberta, and are envied by many other jurisdictions. Yes, some of these are

small and uncrowded — those are two of their virtues, not a reason to dump them. They are viable alternatives to those popular (and overused) Parks that fill up immediately when the reservation line is opened.

Others on the hit list are extremely popular, contradicting the stated assertion all

are underutilized. The metric for decision making is either flawed, suspect, or both.

What is missing from this cold-hearted, clinical economic evaluation of Parks performance is the human aspect. These places figure prominently in Albertans' (and others) memories, forging an al-



The Oldman River as it emerges from the Gap in the Livingstone Range. Three provincial recreation areas along the Oldman River will be removed from the provincial parks system. They are among the 164 sites that will then "be available for partnership opportunities or alternative management approaches."

PHOTO: © L. FITCH

legiance with the outdoors. Some were places where a kid first spent a night outdoors, tingling with fear at all the ominous night sounds. Later these spots were the avenue for interacting with wildlife, catching a fish and gaining some rudimentary appreciation for wilder landscapes. Many became the go-to sites for escaping noisy, busy cityscapes and the stresses of work responsibilities to experience fresh air, quiet and relaxation. For those of us no longer gainfully employed these are a cheap holiday choice, especially mid-week, to sample more of Alberta.

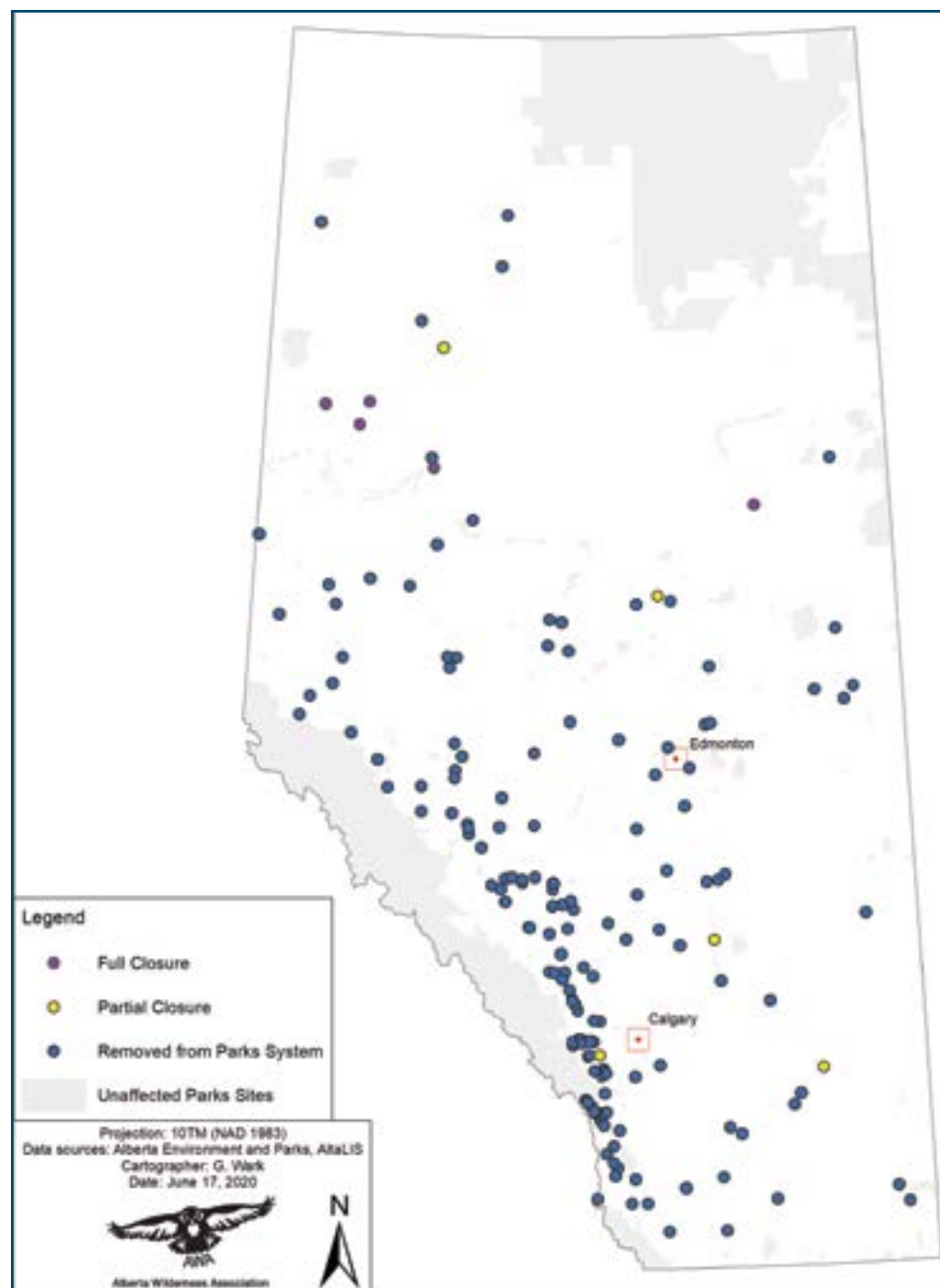
There are memories from these places that time does not erase. Memories warm you up from the inside, like hot chocolate on a frigid day. But they also tear you apart, like learning of the loss of a place that inspired, motivated and educated you.

In a deep pool, beneath an immense logjam I saw my first bull trout. I didn't know then it was a bull trout; I was to learn that much later. Precariously perched on that logjam, peering into the deep water, that baseball bat-shaped fish, with white leading edges on its fins made an inescapable impression on me.

This occurred on a family picnic on the Tay River, a small tributary of the Clearwater River, west of Caroline. The little picnic site later morphed into the Tay River Provincial Recreation Area. I had snuck off from potato salad and chicken sandwiches coupled with boring adult conversation, to scramble out on that logjam.

The context is still clear—the logs had collected on an outside bend, pick-up stick fashion, I suppose from a previous flood, maybe several. Some of the logs were white with age, the bark sloughing off them; other trees were fresh and you could get a good grip on them. Clambering out on this precarious perch I could stare down into a mesmerizing abyss beneath my feet, as the stream swirled and disappeared under the logjam.

Had my mother caught me there, words would have been spoken, followed with an obligatory swat or two. I suppose I would have been about ten and at that age



Proposed Closures and Removals from the Provincial Parks System. On June 23, 2020 the government very quietly announced it would keep 17 of the 20 parks originally slated for closure open this summer “because we want to give Albertans more opportunities to camp and connect with nature over the summer as we all recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.” Apparently, such opportunities aren’t needed if and when Alberta recovers from the pandemic. PHOTO: © G. WARK/AWA

the scale of water depth, danger and adventure were far out of proportion to adult sensibilities, especially maternal ones.

But I swear, that bull trout was as long as I was tall, or nearly so, it seemed to me. On that I am clear after nearly 60 years. I dropped my only lure, a Len Thompson red and white, down to dangle it in front of its nose. My parents frowned at the idea of lure redundancy, having more than one hook in the tackle box. It was expected

that a lure was to be protected, stewarded and, if lost, retrieved. It was a gamble to present it to this fish since it took some maneuvering to get it down through the labyrinth of logs. The fish didn't take the bait, saving both of us considerable grief.

A picture of that bull trout still hangs in my mind, unclouded by the passage of time or the trivialities of living. The memory remains vivid and still resonates. Without the little provincial picnic area on

the Tay River that experience would not have happened. The current site on the Tay River is on the list to be outsourced, privatized or otherwise stigmatized. If it is cut loose, it is unlikely that someday, another kid will peer through a new logjam and be inspired by another bull trout. No guarantees exist that a privatized, for-profit site, or worse, a closed one, will offer those chances.

In 1970 a friend and I spent a couple of weeks following the Forestry Trunk Road from Nordegg to Coleman. We fished, hiked and camped, using Forest Service campsites as our bases. Memories (but sadly few photographs) include campsites on the North Ram, Elk Creek, Wildhorse Creek, Fallentimber Creek, Cataract Creek and Livingstone Falls. All of these are now due for some type of political malevolence, verging on extreme prejudice.

It was a low budget trip, partly through a lack of resources and mostly through poor planning, especially in the grocery department. We ate a lot of trout, and bartered trout to unsuccessful anglers to round out our diet. Many campsites harbored wild strawberries, raspberries; some had blueberries. We staved off scurvy with our wild fruit harvests. There was a sense you could live off the land—with the occasional handout of bread, peanut butter and wieners. None of these sites were crowded, but it was also a time when random camping was discouraged.

My explorations were facilitated by the Forest Service campsites (later to be integrated into Provincial Recreation Areas). From those bases I was able to gain an understanding of Alberta landscapes, especially the foothills and mountains. The angling experience provided a tutorial on the fish populations of the Eastern Slopes, which was to come in handy as I took on my career aspiration of being a biologist. In retrospect, those small campsites showed how recreation could be effectively managed. This was to change over the next decade with Dogpatch-like mobs of recreational vehicles randomly hogging nearly every grassy glade and accessible

stream bank.

The Narrows is a channel joining Buffalo Lake to smaller waterbodies and wetlands on the southwest corner of the lake. It was there I began my career as a biologist. I worked on the northern pike population of Buffalo Lake, trying to solve a perplexing puzzle of where the fish spawned. A fish trap in the Narrows channel allowed us to capture pike, tag them, and then follow their movements. This all happened in the spring, immediately after ice out. The aspen woodlands at the Narrows resounded with a cacophony of bird song, from returning migrants. Geese, sandhill cranes, great blue herons, every possible puddle duck and chorus frogs added to the harmony. For a young biologist this was nirvana.

The site became The Narrows Provincial Recreation Area, more upscale, more facility based. This was all necessary to deal with the uptick in use, to control vehicle access on the edge of the wetland and to provide some rules, anathema to some users. The Narrows is yet another site proposed for some retrogressive status.

Changes to Park status, divestment, privatization or abandonment will have some

consequences. I believe those consequences are predictable. Standards will change, rules will be watered down or disappear, and these will cause many to reconsider whether these places are safe destinations, especially for family use. Those sites turned over to “partnership” agreements will be subject to different business models, more expensive for users, with a shift from the original intent of a Parks site.

A very real concern is that many sites will revert to party spots, subject to bad behaviour, indiscriminate shooting, random camping, no toilet facilities, unregulated off highway vehicle use, vandalism and rampant disregard for any rules. There is the sense from the Minister of Environment and Parks that an ad hoc approach to the management of former Parks sites will produce a superior outcome to the current situation. The Minister thinks all Albertans will be good stewards of these places after all of the rules and enforcement disappears. This is delusional.

This will lead to increased conflict with wildlife and between user groups. That will require more management presence after the fact to clean up the mess. Who will bear this cost—the Alberta taxpayer.



There isn't any eleventh reprieve for the Elk Creek provincial recreation area and fish pond.
PHOTO: © L. FITCH

In fact, several of the Parks sites on the list were examples of this, until local authorities asked for Parks status to be applied to deal with the issues.

In the fullness of time, if these draconian parks cuts happen, many Albertans may muse that once we had a provincial parks system and it worked very well. Long forgotten will be the infinitesimal and largely illusionary cost savings of the cuts. People will remember though the lost opportunities for outdoor recreational activities spread over all of Alberta. There was variety and one could, as part of the same system, experience the grasslands, the foothills, the mountains, the parkland, the boreal, and even a sliver of the Canadian Shield. There were lakes and streams, prairie grasslands, aspen woodlands, the brooding mixed-wood forest, the crags, the piney odor of lodgepole pine to revel in. One could see grizzlies, mountain sheep, warblers, cutthroat trout, cactus,

and calypso orchids.

Because these were provincial Parks and Recreation Areas Albertans knew that the same standards applied to all. You didn't need a membership or a platinum credit card. The sites were clean, the toilets maintained, the garbage picked up and water was available. The cost of camping was affordable regardless of your family's financial realities. Interpretive materials, hiking trails, firewood and picnic tables were often standard features.

Yes, it was basic, but of a known quality. There was also a consistent set of rules for users—quiet times, restrictions on pets, where fires can occur—all designed to enhance recreational experience and safety as well as protect the site facilities, wildlife and vegetation. Often, patrols by Parks staff with enforcement capability occurred.

Generations of Albertans have fond memories of park use embedded in their psyches. I certainly do! Parks not only

satisfy our recreational needs, but also provide nature appreciation, improved physical and mental health, a better understanding of the diversity of Alberta and, for local businesses, sales of gas, groceries and beer. It seems evident to me that the proposed clearance sale on provincial Parks and Recreation Areas indicates the architects of this know the cost of everything, but the value of nothing.

Provincial politicians need reminding, from time to time, that memories are strong about the role of Parks in the lives of Albertans. People will remember politicians who were builders and those who were dismantlers. Those remembered fondly will leave legacies—not liabilities. The proposal to dramatically gut the provincial parks system is an avoidable liability. ▲

Lorne Fitch is a professional biologist, a retired provincial fish and wildlife biologist and a former Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary.



Given a stay of execution by Environment and Parks Minister on June 23rd, the government still seems intent on closing the Tolman Bridge campgrounds in Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park in 2021.

Redemption in Kananaskis

By Ruth McKeeman



Within the large expanse of emotions a young child feels, the overwhelming one I grew up with in Alberta was fear.

Being raised by an angry, volatile, emotionally and physically abusive father cast a dark shadow over my everyday life. As an extremely passionate, fundamentalist, evangelical hellfire-and-brimstone preacher, my dad knew precisely how to instill fear, guilt, and anguish in his audience. I had no reason to question the belief system and values, as we lived in a strict religious community where systemic abuse of all shades was normalized. Because of my terror of eternal torture in hell – where I was sure I was going – I used to pray fervently, daily, that I could somehow be ‘unborn’ to escape this horrific ending to my life story.

Something saved this child, in a deep and visceral way, and that was my dad’s love of wilderness. Every possible chance we got – six people, the canvas tent, bacon, potatoes, bread and jam, wool sleeping bags, binoculars and bug spray – were loaded into the old Chevy, and off we went.

Bleriot ferry campground was a favourite destination, where we roamed on our own in the badlands. No one worried about where we were, and we came back to the campsite when we pleased. We went to many provincial parks and recreation areas. But the best destination was the Kananaskis area, long before the creation of the parks. We would follow the narrow gravel road in, random camp somewhere, and always have a fire to greet the night. We climbed the ridges, lost ourselves in

the trees, learned to read the forest floor and the flowing water. We collected special rocks and learned to identify them. Birds, insects, and small creatures around us also challenged our identification skills. We were unafraid of the larger mammals. We watched foxes and talked quietly to bears and moose. I even saw a wolverine. We listened to the loons, the coyote, the pikas. We tried not to startle the deer.

For this child, these wilderness areas were truly magical places and the time spent in them was life-saving as well as life-giving. There my dad became a completely different person. He was joyful, relaxed, peaceful. He laughed and sang. The threats and punishments vanished. I wasn’t afraid – not of him, nor of hell. I experienced redemption. I was able to believe kindness and love really existed.

According to the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, the Kenney government will either partially close or remove nearly 40 parks sites in Kananaskis Country from the provincial parks system.

As the Kananaskis developed, all of us continued to go there as often as possible. We enjoyed the established trail system, the campgrounds. We paddled the waters. For a few years we enjoyed the privilege of a cabin on the Lower Lake. I taught my parents to cross-country ski there, when they were in their 70s. They both continued to ski those trails well into their 80s. The groomed trails from Pocaterra and

from William Watson Lodge hold countless happy memories for me. Some are of my very excited dad, eyes shining, ear to ear grin, skiing like a bat out of hell. There are memories too of a much more cautious and sedate mum, skiing slowly and happily after two hip replacements. Pulling my own children there in the sled is another wonderful set of memories, as is remembering teaching them to ski on the tracks right outside Pocaterra lodge. I fondly remember teaching ski lessons there for years with my husband, and teaching the students about the value of that whole area.

As I have unpacked my own history as an adult, I am grateful most of all for how the wilderness areas around me literally saved my soul. As a child, I realized my dad was more than hurtfulness. I saw the joy that wild spaces sparked in him. Experiencing this gave me the wondrous gift of hope – hope that life is good and that there is no need for fear.

My children were raised with very frequent extended stays in Kananaskis country as a whole. They have retained, as adults, the values they learned there. All of my dad’s grandchildren have held on to this love of wild landscapes and all are backcountry people.

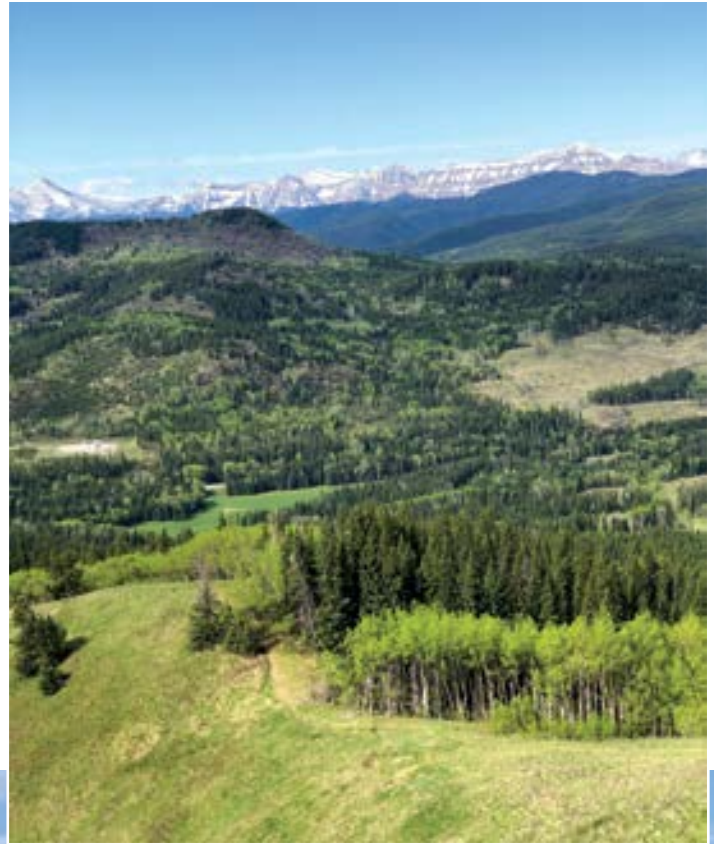
I have brought many visitors to these places that are so meaningful to me. We first do the obligatory Banff and Lake Louise trip, as that is what was promoted to them. Then, we go to the Kananaskis, to many of the places that the government is cutting from the parks system. My visitors are always enchanted, whether by the

adrenaline rush from seeing a mama grizzly and cubs or by the cuteness of the pikas and chipmunks. The water, the landscape, the flowers, the quiet – these are the treasures the government is robbing from Albertans and visitors alike. Our visitors go home to Europe, to Australia, America, and eastern Canada and speak of how grateful they were to experience our provincial parks and recreation areas...and how crowded and over rated Banff and Lake Louise were! And then, they come back.

This stripping of protected status from our provincial wild spaces, so-called ‘under-utilized’ areas, is unprecedented and unconscionable. To pull an old but appropriate word up from my dad’s vocabulary, it is evil. Let’s find our hopeful courage to fight this.▲

Ruth has loved the Alberta wilderness for decades and is passionate about preserving and defending it.

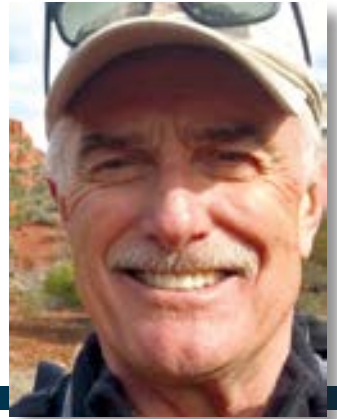
*Sunny times, for now, in Kananaskis Country’s Mesa Butte Provincial Recreation Area. Mesa Butte will be removed from the provincial parks system.
PHOTO: © J. WARK*



The gateway to the Gorge Creek Trail in Kananaskis Country’s Sheep River Provincial Park. PHOTO: © J. WARK

Greene Valley Provincial Park

By David T. Walty



It's a cold, crisp winter day and the sun is still throwing shadows across the deeply incised valley of the north Heart river. I've parked my vehicle in the parking lot just past the Heritage Towers Senior building and have crossed the metal suspension bridge to the town of Peace River's Twelve Foot Davis Park. From here, I can enter the almost inaccessible Greene Valley Provincial Park. The provincial government intends to close this 3,131 hectare park, located adjacent to the town of Peace River.

The lower Heart river has been a special wildlife conservation area since 1939 when local dentist, physician, and pioneer aviator Dr. William Greene personally lobbied the Alberta government for its protection. Although it's one of the oldest conservation areas in the province, it only became a provincial

park in the year 2000. The park is very difficult to access. Numerous attempts to create hiking trails have been short lived. The frequently meandering river, steep cliffs, and the need to cross the river often are not conducive to trail development. In addition, the river is prone to severe spring floods; they have wreaked havoc on any attempts to build bridge crossings. A few hikers, willing to get wet feet crisscrossing the creek and to blaze their own trail, occasionally brave the valley in summer and a few school kids swim at one of the deeper river pools near Twelve Foot Davis Park. A few rarely used quad trails can be found in the upper portions of the park but the very steep valleys slopes are not user friendly. The main access to the park is near the mouth of the Heart river where it meets the mighty Peace river, in the town of

Peace River, where I am now. The primary use of the park is in winter, when locals ski and snowshoe on the river ice. Winter access is growing in popularity.

The Twelve Foot Davis overlook and the Dr. Greene Cairn site, both incorporated when the sanctuary became a provincial park, offer a spectacular view of the Greene Valley Provincial Park; from there you look out over a boreal river valley of dry mixed-wood distinguished by the Heart river, cliffs, barren native grassland hills and steep rolling hummocky valley slopes. There is no human disturbance footprint in the rugged terrain and the park is frequented by moose, elk, mule deer, lots of coyotes and the occasional wolf. It is something of a refuge for wildlife in an otherwise largely agricultural landscape.

As I cross the snow covered field of Twelve



Greene Valley Provincial Park PHOTO: © D. WALTY

Foot Davis Park, I pause to gaze at the towering cliffs that form a natural amphitheatre around me. The town utilizes this exceptional site for occasional music festivals. At the edge of the field, I slip down the river bank slope to the snow covered ice surface and put on my cross country skis. Today I am fortunate; someone has gone before me and set a ski track. As I slide along the trail, I pass under a spectacular train trestle towering above my head. Ravens frequently congregate here in great numbers to roost and perform their aerial acrobatics. Rock cliffs form a long wall to my left all the way to the next bend in the river. The cliffs are cut by weather into ornate patterns. At one spot, an icicle over 20 feet long dangles down from a rock ledge. Soon the river starts its routine meanders. Fresh moose tracks cross my trail and the bench on my right is covered with old growth spruce.

Minister Nixon gave Greene Valley Provincial Park a reprieve from permanent closure, opening it to day use as of June 1, 2020 as part of the province's response to COVID-19. But, his department underlined this was no more than temporary: "This is a temporary measure for this camping season."

One giant tree leans precariously over the river, desperately holding on to avoid its inevitable fate. The next bend opens to yellowish stone cliffs, covered with intriguing art works formed by wet mud dripping down the rock face. The mud hardens into endless complex patterns. I have many photographs of these beautiful patterns. Here and there, beautiful adobe nests of cliff swallows cling to the underside of rock ledges. How the birds make these architectural wonders is inspiring. An old wasp nest clings to another spot. Straight ahead is an open expanse of grassy hills crisscrossed by deer trails. The deer are attracted to these sunny slopes for over winter feeding when snows are deep elsewhere. On numerous occasions I have come across remnants

of deer carcasses at the base of the cliffs. I have witnessed coyote groups herding deer on these slopes and am sure they use the "buffalo jump technique" to push deer off the cliffs. Such stories in the snow beckon me to keep coming back.

I pause, taking in the quiet, the tranquility, and the feeling of remoteness (I'm only a half mile from town). A raven breaks the silence with a squawk as he glides effortlessly along the turbulent air currents, funneling along the cliff face. A second and a third join him; are they playing, I wonder? A coyote now follows the ski trail, taking advantage of the "easy" footing for a brief respite from the

hardships of the endless hunt. I always ski close to the cliff faces as each one seems to display unique cliff features, each seeming to display a unique pattern of erosion, layering or colours. Many spots on the cliffs near the water's edge offer curious irregular anomalies of rocks. I often stop to examine them... hoping that one is a dinosaur bone.

I leave the cliffs behind as I near the first tributary and, without the wall of rock, the valley formations attract my attention. Very unstable soils and slopes characterize many valleys in the Peace country. The hills and hummocks cut the landscape into mosaics of barren grassy hills and forest valleys and



Projection: 1978 NAD 83
Source: Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS, USDA, USGS, Aero, GeoEye, AeroGRID, IGN, IGA, swisstopo, and the GIS User Community, Alberta Environment and Parks
Cartographer: G. Wark
Date: May 12, 2020

Greene Valley Provincial Park MAP: © G. WARK



Cross-country ski tracks under the cliffs along the Heart river. PHOTO: © D. WALTY

notches. New slumps have bared soil, broken and displaced trees, avalanched into a devastating scar on the landscape. But, this is the normal cycle in these deeply incised valleys. I always scan the barren grass hills and openings for critters. Everyone loves to see animals in the wild. It makes the trip. I see some wildlife every time; it's a common reward in this pocket of sanctuary cut into the flat prairie farmland. The area I am entering now is frequented by elk and I often hear their calls, barking at my invasion to their privacy.

As I venture further along the ski track into the valley, I see the tell-tale evidence that my track-laying skier friend turned around here.

I continue but am breaking my own trail now. Fortunately, the snow is not deep. I ski up beside an open patch of water, surrounded by ice. Rocks poke their heads upward, rippling the water. Giant ice crystals surround the hole, creating a magical entrance to another world below the ice. If you're quiet, you can hear the water tumbling over the rocks under the ice. In the quiet I hear ancient voices whispering tales of old.

Skiing on the Heart river is quite unique because the river frequently floods on top of the ice as a result of spring water bleeding from the banks and under ice damming. Often sections of the river are flooded for a couple of days but freeze up quickly. It is

not dangerous at all as the river is extremely shallow in winter. But, if you're unlucky, you can run into slush and get wet feet or ski icing. Most times I can skirt the areas or ski through them if they are just slushy spots. As a result of this periodic flooding, you can get some very fast skiing coming back towards town, which is downhill from the river's origins. The conditions are typically just a skim of snow over the ice. I even skate ski sometimes, gliding easily in long slow strides.

Typical of all trips, I seem to pay more attention going upstream than going downstream and as a result discover most of the exciting experiences going up. The trip back is a lot shorter and more of a work out. But I feel blessed to be able to experience this true wilderness just 15 minutes from home. I can't wait to go back again. There are always new things to see and experience.

Closure of this park mainly impacts the maintenance of infrastructure of the day use overlook sites and cairn. Since these sites are also funded through partnerships, the ongoing garbage and grading will be maintained by Northern Sunrise County and therefore day use of these very popular sites continues. As for the winter access, it continues whether the park is officially closed or not. Parks has only invested in one development of access into the valley and that was a short lived wooden staircase that was eventually removed due to it being more of a hazard than a benefit to summer hikers. Other than a significant investment in boundary markers around the Park's perimeter, the Park remains a pristine wilderness similar to the time Dr. Greene lobbied for its current status, 80 years ago. In recent years, winter use has actually increased substantially as word spreads and local nature and Facebook pages inform and provide pictures of the adventures so close to home. The valley continues to be an island of pristine habitat seeding the surrounding areas with a variety of wildlife; while some may be dismayed it even provides wildlife experiences right in town. 🌲

David T. Walty is a retired Alberta Fish and Wildlife biologist who lives on a ranch just outside of Peace River, Alberta.

Sunset on Little Fish Lake:

Park one of many Shuttered by Alberta government

By Lindsey Wallis



Little Fish Lake Provincial Park is small. The campground doesn't have showers or flush toilets. There is no power at the camp sites, no shop to buy ice cream for the kids, no playground – just a couple of rusty swings. It doesn't even have a picnic shelter anymore. Perhaps it blew down – I remember spending a miserable night huddled in there years ago, too afraid to set up our tent lest it get blown down by the gale-force winds. The bottom line is that Little Fish Lake has virtually no “amenities.”

Little Fish Lake Provincial Park's demise also has been delayed for one year. The government intended to open it on June 29 on a first-come, first-served basis.

But that's the point. Because the amenities it *does* have include burbling meadowlarks and keening red-tailed hawks, coyote choruses under the clear, star-filled night sky and a waterfowl-studded expanse of water. And the sunsets. Those spectacular, fiery prairie sunsets still take my breath away.

Our family has spent a night or two at Little Fish Lake for the past two years and have made some special memories. Karina, our four year old daughter, saw her first porcupine there last year. As we were taking a walk down the quiet road it trundled out of the brush, letting us get a good look before settling down for dinner in the undergrowth. Later that evening, the three of us, bundled in our puffy coats, sat around a

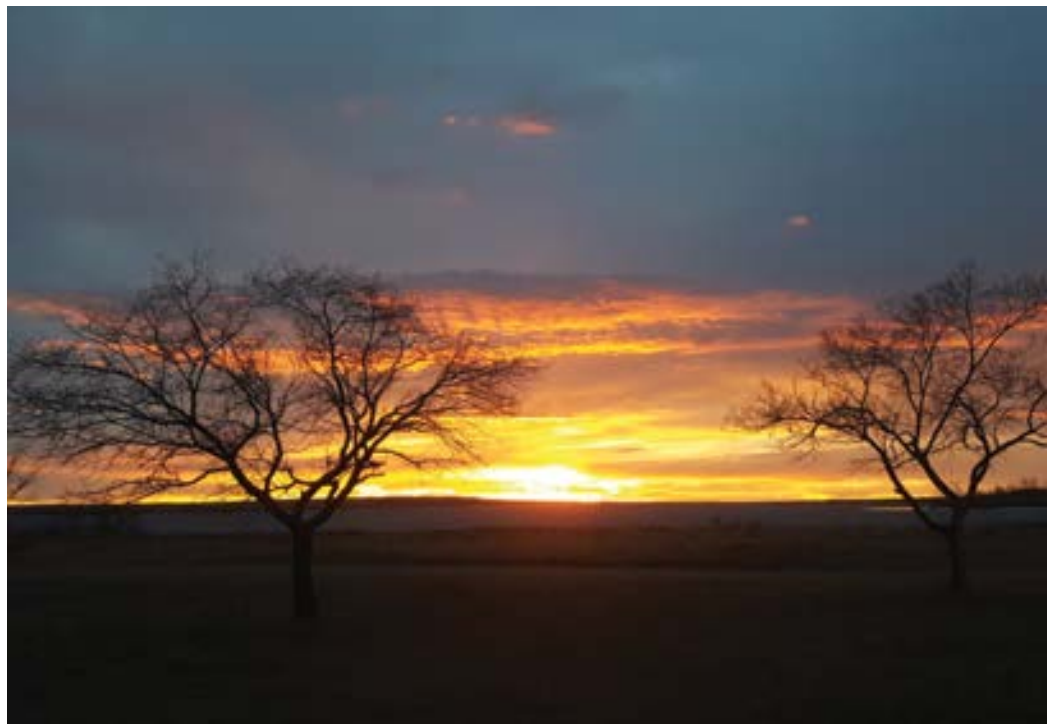
meal and enjoyed that golden hour of light, when edges soften and the prairie grasses seem to glow from within. Robins chirruped and gulls wheeled overhead as the clouds combusted into vibrant reds and oranges as the sun sank into the lake.

Later, snuggled into our sleeping bags Karina listened with us to the sounds of a prairie night. We strained our ears to hear the sound of far-off coyotes and then joined in with our own yips and howls. We have a book at home about a howling wolf pup but nothing beats actually experiencing these kinds of sounds and I am grateful we are able to share these moments with her. I hope they will stay with her for the rest of her life.

We planned to make a camping trip to

Little Fish Lake a yearly adventure but, even before the COVID-19 crisis shut down all parks, the government chose to permanently close Little Fish Lake Provincial Park, along with 19 others that were “under-utilized.” The UCP government did this with zero public consultation. It is clear that this is a government that values the rights of industry and their corporate friends over conservation of natural ecosystems and the rights of everyday Albertans to respectfully enjoy our public lands.

Spending time in our wild backyard is the way we connect and unwind as a family. It also allows us the opportunity to share memorable experiences with our daughter and instill a love for wilderness in her. The experiences Alberta parks of-



Sunset at Little Fish Lake PHOTO: © L. WALLIS



Who's Doing the Work Here? Kyle and Karina paddling on the Red Deer River.
PHOTO: © L. WALLIS

fer families like ours are far more valuable than the measly \$5 million the government is claiming to save with this move. Alberta's public lands are infinitely valuable, both for conservation and recreation. It took half a century of hard work by dedicated individuals to finally add the Castle to the province's list of protected areas. Imagine how much effort it will require to bring back 20 protected areas that the government will permanently close, not to mention the 164 sites that are proposed for delisting.

Little Fish Lake Provincial Park in particular is special because it represents one

of the few parks in the province which protects a natural prairie lake. The lake is important both for migrating and nesting birds, as well as deer, pronghorn, and other animals like our porcupine friend we met last year. There is something special about the prairies, and as the least protected ecosystem in the province (less than two per cent of Alberta's grasslands are protected) the opportunities for everyday Albertans to enjoy them in their natural state are dwindling.

Thinking back over the past two years at our adventures as a family in Alberta's parks, these closures would have made two other trips significantly more difficult

or impossible. The first is our yearly prairie river trip with friends from Lethbridge. Last year it was on the Red Deer River and we began the week-long trip with a night at the Bleriot Ferry Provincial Recreation Area, a jewel-green stretch abutting the lazily flowing river, shaded by cottonwoods. It will be permanently shuttered by Premier Kenney's United Conservative Party. As part of this trip we also spent time hiking in Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park, another park facing partial closure. The second is our yearly winter ski trip. This February we spent a night at the Elk Lakes cabin in B.C., accessed via the cross-country ski trails in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park, which will no longer receive maintenance.

I want my daughter to grow up with an understanding and love of the natural world around us. If we don't fight for these areas to be protected they won't exist for future generations to enjoy, either because they have been degraded by industrial and agricultural uses or because they have been sold out from under us, just as the UCP is currently doing with a parcel of Crown land near Taber. Public land belongs to all Albertans but if we don't fight for it we may not have it for long. 🐾



Who's Doing the Work Here? Kyle and Karina hiking in Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park.
PHOTO: © L. WALLIS

“Optimizing” Parks? Many questions, no answers...so far



By John Bargman and Ena Spalding

Like many Albertans, we are avid outdoor enthusiasts. We camp, watch wildlife, hike, cycle and cross-country ski – in provincial parks, national parks, and other public spaces.

So, we were shocked when the Alberta Government announced it was “optimizing” parks by removing some from the parks system and privatizing the management of many others through new partnerships.

Two parks on the “optimizing” list are Kinbrook Island and nearby Tillebrook in the Brooks area. We have been lucky enough to spend time at these parks over the last few years, including while helping out with the Brooks May Species Bird Count.

Both parks may superficially look like

just busy campsites, which they are, especially popular with local residents. But they are also much more than that. Every spring, when bird migration is at its peak, the weather is often variable – a few days of storm followed by calmer weather. On those stormy days, it’s essential for migrant birds to quickly find refuge – shelter and food – until conditions allow them to resume their arduous journey to their boreal forest breeding grounds.

Across the (mostly) treeless prairies of southern Alberta, Kinbrook Island and Tillebrook are sought-out oases in a storm for exhausted migrants. From a bird’s-eye view these two parks literally stand out as safe havens and critical feeding stopovers.

In poor weather, hundreds and even thousands of birds touch down to refuel for the long flight north. We have witnessed huge migrant “fall-outs” at these parks – warblers, sparrows, thrushes, flycatchers, vireos – sometimes many species in one shrub or tree. Depending on conditions they may stay for a few hours or a few days to wait for the weather to improve. When it does they take flight, often at night.

These critical stopovers must provide migrants with the appropriate food and shelter, and for many songbirds that means trees. Both Tillebrook and Kinbrook Island have mature stands of balsam poplar, supplemented by plantings of



Kinbrook Marsh Complex PHOTO: © E. SPALDING

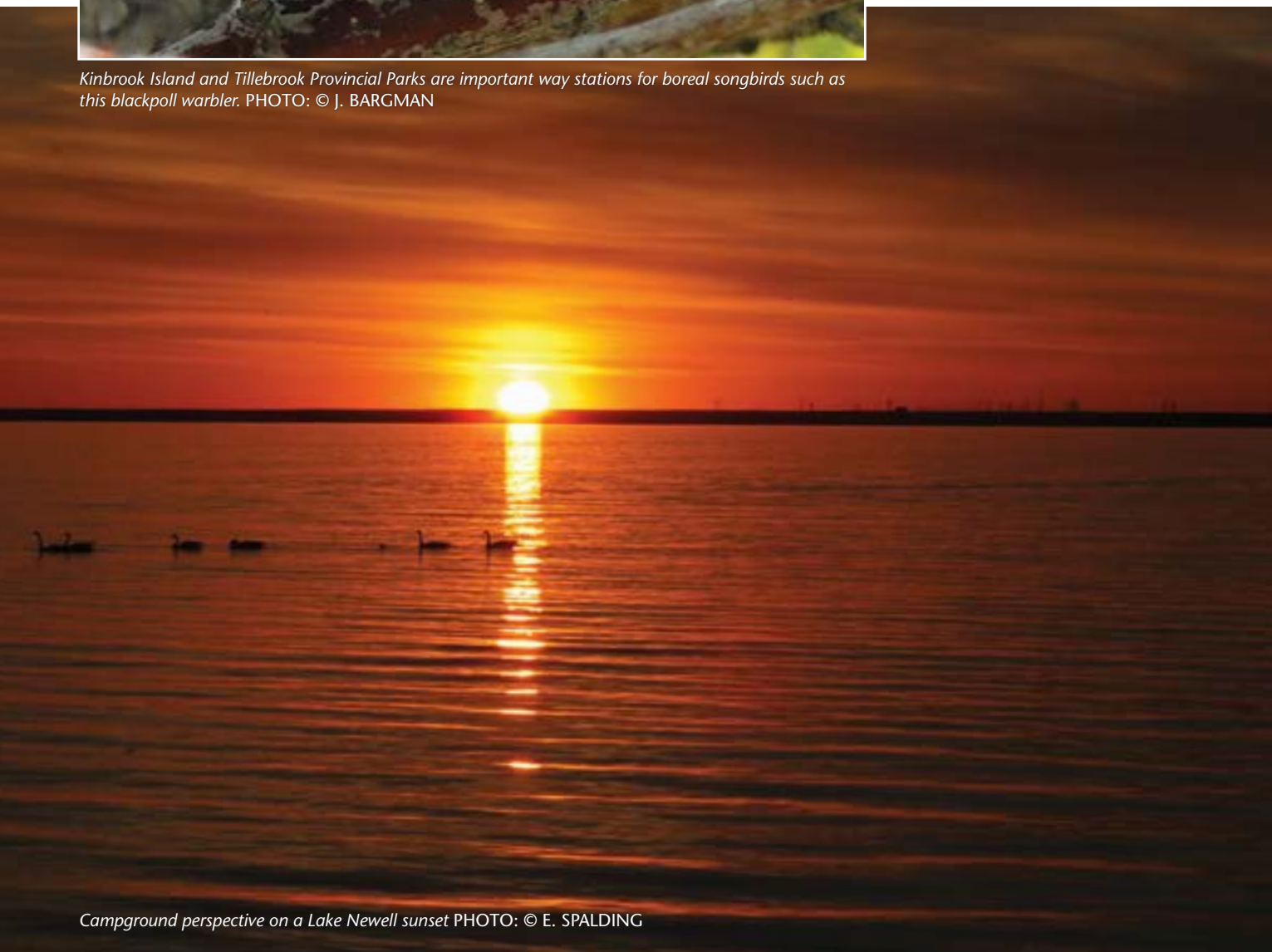


Kinbrook Island and Tillebrook Provincial Parks are important way stations for boreal songbirds such as this blackpoll warbler. PHOTO: © J. BARGMAN

conifers and a variety of other trees and shrubs. For waterfowl, Kinbrook Island Provincial Park also provides open water (Lake Newell), wetlands, ponds, and sloughs. It also offers prairie fields suited to grassland birds.

Lake Newell is a large man-made reservoir filled in 1914 through the construction of the Bassano Dam (northwest of Kinbrook Island). The Bassano Dam diverts water from the Bow River and routes it through a canal into Lake Newell, which supplies most of the County of Newell with water for irrigation, drinking, and recreation.

The Kinbrook marsh complex (200 hectares), a North American Waterfowl Management Plan Project, was built by a partnership of the Eastern Irrigation District (EID), Ducks Unlimited, and Alberta Fish



Campground perspective on a Lake Newell sunset PHOTO: © E. SPALDING

and Wildlife. The project isolated two shallow bays from Lake Newell by a system of three dikes. This separation prevents marsh water levels from being impacted by irrigation draw-downs of Lake Newell.

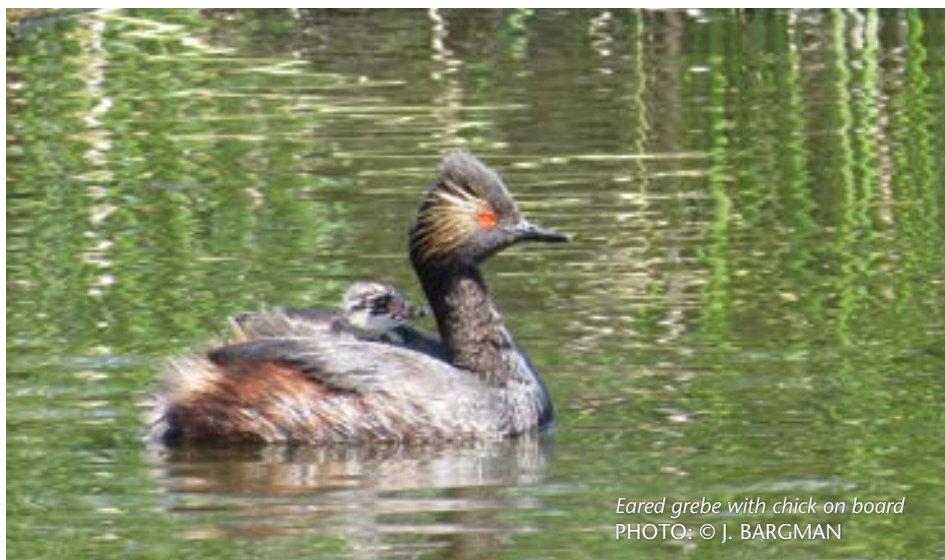
Kinbrook Island, which is in Lake Newell, became a provincial park in 1951 after the Brooks Kinsmen Club got a recreational lease for the island. The park was enlarged to include all the islands in Lake Newell to protect nesting sites for pelicans, cormorants, geese, and numerous other migratory birds. Significantly, Lake Newell and nearby Kitsim Reservoir are nationally designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) [see Note/sidebar].

The local community has invested in and protected this area for decades. Wildfowl depend on the marshlands and open water. Songbirds stake their lives on the biodiversity of these natural areas during migration. These investments and trusts should not be broken by the government proposal to take these provincial parks and natural areas out of the parks system.

Our concerns include: under proposed new partnerships, will these sites/areas removed from the park system also lose the environmental protections currently provided by provincial parks? The new partner's main focus at Kinbrook Island would be management of facilities (including campgrounds, day use areas, boat launches, fishing, beach access, playgrounds, and the concession). Who will manage and protect the environmentally sensitive and natural areas for the migrant and breeding birds and other wildlife? Will this public duty be privatized to the new partner? We have asked the Minister this and other related questions. So far, no answers.

Meanwhile, we must keep up our pressure on government MLAs to change their minds on this decision to remove so many parks and natural areas from the park system. Please contact your MLA (again!) and let them know your concerns. 🐾

John and Ena have appreciated wildlife and wild places all their lives, starting in East Africa and Scotland individually, then together in Canada and the rest of our beautiful planet.



Eared grebe with chick on board
PHOTO: © J. BARGMAN

Lake Newell and Kitsim Reservoir (AB015)

IBA Criteria: Nationally Significant for congregatory species and colonial waterbird concentrations

Habitats: deciduous woods (temperate), native grassland, freshwater lake, freshwater marsh, arable and cultivated lands, parks/gardens

The site is significant for a population of Great Plains Toad (red-listed in Alberta) and is also possibly the only site in Canada for Water Hyssop and one of only three known Alberta locations for Slender Mouse-ear Cress.

Over 1,000 American White Pelicans have been recorded here, which is about one percent of the national population. In 1976, 6,091 Ring-billed Gull nests were recorded on Lake Newell which would have been more than one percent of this species' national population. Since then, Ring-billed Gull numbers have decreased (4,272 nests in 1998) but the numbers there are still impressive. A 1998 survey of Lake Newell and Kitsim Reservoir found these nesting species: California Gull (760 nests), American White Pelican (21 nests), Double-crested Cormorant (1,324 nests) and Caspian Tern (74 nests). Eared Grebe, Great Blue Heron

and Common Tern also nest here.

Shorebirds use the area during migration, in close to globally significant numbers, such as 1,300 Black-bellied Plovers (as much as 0.9 percent of the North American population) recorded in 1998. Other species with notable occurrences here are: Whimbrel, Sprague's Pipit and Chestnut-collared Longspur. The lakes are ideal staging areas for many other bird species, e.g., Western Grebes (more than 500 summering) and waterfowl (over 3,000 a day in spring and fall).

Long-billed Curlew (nationally vulnerable) and Burrowing Owl (nationally endangered) also nest here annually. The nationally endangered Piping Plover has also been recorded here.

<https://www.ibacanada.ca/sitejsp?siteID=AB015&lang=EN&frame=null&version=2013&range=A&seedet=N>

Canada's Important Bird Areas Program is a science-based initiative to identify, conserve and monitor a network of sites that provide essential habitat for Canada's bird populations. There are 43 designated Important Bird Areas in Alberta. Thirty parks help to protect all or portions of 19 Important Bird Areas in Alberta.

Comfort camping closed in Dinosaur Provincial Park

By Joanna Skrajny, AWA Conservation Specialist



Up until recently, my perception of comfort camping was dismissive, believing it to be an unnecessary luxury. I pictured rich people, rolling up in designer wear and flashy cars – name brand coffee and phone in hand – using the comfort camping yurts as a way to show off to their social media followers.

Environment Minister Jason Nixon made similar comments when he announced the closure of some comfort camping sites in the province:

The NDP brought in comfort camping. This is the situation: My constituents and many Albertans across this province are struggling to be able to pay their mortgages and the luxury of comfort camping is not something they want us to focus on.

Ironically, my perspective was changed by an experience I had at Dinosaur Provincial Park, which is one of the very sites that Nixon was disparaging and will now be closed.

I was visiting Dinosaur in June a couple of years ago and happened to talk to a young couple that was staying at one of the canvas wall tents. They admitted they had never been camping before and had been uncertain about whether they would enjoy the experience. While at \$100 a night, it wasn't the most affordable weekend, it was cheaper than having to buy all of the equipment just to see if they enjoyed the experience. Renting camping gear made them equally nervous; what if they couldn't figure out how to set up a tent or start a fire? In the end, they decided to rent out one of the canvas wall tents. They liked the fact that everything was "set up," so they could spend their time exploring the park and going on tours. From the animated

looks on their faces, I could see they were hooked, and they gushed that they were already planning ahead to future trips.

After spending the next couple of cold nights with torrential downpours in our cheap tent, I have to admit I was pretty jealous of their setup.

There are plenty of other reasons why someone might want to rent a comfort cabin besides "doing it for the 'gram." For some, such as busy parents or working professionals, it might be an easier way of getting out than having to wrangle all of your equipment together and plan ahead just to be able to get outdoors. It's also a lower cost alternative to other, more comfortable forms of camping such as purchasing or renting trailer units. It also provides more peace of mind during the shoulder season or for folks who are wary of spending the night outdoors in a tent.

Finally, if it isn't hurting anybody or the land, what is the harm if some people are willing to spend extra for a little luxury? While AWA has legitimate concerns about structures such as fixed-roof cabins in back-

country areas – where they have a large footprint, reduce the wilderness experience and are potential attractants for wildlife – in a gravelled front country campground, the impact of comfort camping is likely comparable to trailers.

I would seriously contest the Minister's claims that comfort camping sites were costing the government money to maintain. Environment Critic Marlin Schmidt stated in an interview that in his experience the Dinosaur comfort camping sites, the only comfort camping sites targeted by Minister Nixon, were "overbooked."

The comfort camping sites probably provided a good alternative for both Albertans and out-of-province tourists without camping gear who wanted to spend a couple of days taking tours to see dinosaur bones, and learning about our incredible badlands. While comfort camping is something I probably won't use personally, I don't think it does any harm to provide some alternative ways to get outdoors. And now that option is gone. 🐾



The long-billed curlew, a COSEWIC species of special concern, is a species noted for remarkable aerial displays during the formation of breeding pairs. PHOTO: © C. WALLIS

Mesa Butte Romance

By Nora Maidman



People sometimes ask how Rick and I met. Our marriage is the second one for both of us with our previous partners long gone and no children to tie us to them. Rick is seven years younger so I was 42 and Rick was 35 when we met.

Not surprisingly, it was horses and music that brought us together. The Mesa Butte Equestrian campground in Kananaskis Country has a group camping area and my Riding Club had it booked for the long weekend in September. The Club has booked a weekend at Mesa Butte every summer since the early 1980s. The more experienced riders taught the newer ones the fine art of safe, responsible trail riding in the mountains. We had room for more people so some friends from other riding clubs came out for the weekend. Rick was one of these. We both rode with our own friends but in the evening the community campfire attracted everyone. I was sitting at the fire playing my guitar and singing when this bearded fellow in a fringed leather jacket showed up carrying his guitar. That was Rick and that was the first time we met.

That night was quite special. Among the group around the campfire were a couple of professional musicians from the Foothills Brass. He had his trumpet along which was normal for him. You might wonder how a trumpet fits into a sing-song around a campfire but he made it work! He did beautiful little fills in between the words of the songs and it was magic. Then, as the moon came up over the ridge, the whole group sang “Amaz-



ing Grace” with harmonies and that trumpet singing too. Those who were there would never forget that night!

The next night we played music again at the campfire and I invited Rick to start coming to a friend’s weekly jam session. He did and the rest, as they say, is history.

At our next Riding Club meeting, my dear friend (only time I ever questioned that) reported on the Trail Ride pointing out that “Nora got lucky on the Trail Ride.” Great choice of words. So much for my reputation! Anyway, everyone had a good laugh and three years later in 1999 I ended up with a husband. 🐾

After obtaining a BSc in Environmental Biology from the U of C, Nora joined AWA and worked as an Animal Health Technologist for nearly 20 years. As her story suggests, Nora also is a musician. A past president of the Foothills Bluegrass Music Society she released the solo CD *Angel of St. Mary’s* in 2018. She lives with Rick on an acreage near Carseland.

Nora’s husband Rick... their courtship and marriage may perhaps be one of the more unusual gifts offered by Alberta’s provincial parks system. PHOTO: © N. MAIDMAN

Dinosaur Provincial Park:

Taking No Comfort

By Allison McPhail



Alberta's parks have been a part of my life as long as I can remember. Even as a small child, my father would take me out with him to enjoy the beauty and fresh air of our wonderful outdoor sites. This fostered an early love for being in nature that has only grown with time. I went from "tenting" with my father and siblings as a kid, to hiking, camping, and canoeing in my grade school Outdoor Education programs. After five years out of the province for university, I was ecstatic to celebrate my homecoming with an overnight trip to the Kananaskis backcountry.

There are many reasons to love Alberta's glorious variety of parks, both the recreational ones and those restricted for conservation. But one that will forever hold a special place in my heart is the always-popular Dinosaur Provincial Park.

I have a multitude of happy memories from Dinosaur. I first camped there at a young age, but returned again and again. The trails and tours became familiar, something to look forward to every time a new trip was planned. The mosquitos maybe got a little too familiar in the evenings, yet a few bug bites that quickly faded were a small price to pay for the joy of a weekend spent traipsing through the Badlands and learning from friendly Parks staff. This, too, was a park I returned to after completing my studies out-of-province.

Dinosaur really is a special place. The trees and terrain are gorgeous. The excitement of "discovering" fossils during a guided tour will make any child giggle with glee. There is a wealth of educational material available for the eggheads like me and, on weekends, it

is a delightful setting for live musicals. Then there is the sheer, simple pleasure of just picking a trail and wandering down it!

That said, one of my fondest memories of the park took place right in the middle of the campground. Past visitors will be familiar with a small creek running through the area, a safe and refreshing place to cool one's feet on a hot day. Or, if you've brought a swimsuit, why not sit right in the water? That's what my sisters and I thought, anyway!

Oh, yes. The three of us loved to play in that little creek. We'd splash and jump around as only children really can, before we enter the



The grasslands are home to the plains spadefoot toad. PHOTO: © C. WALLIS

more inhibited world. And I remember quite distinctly the day we set to making mud pies.

We were novice mud bakers at the start of the day. We piled mud up and tried to shape it. But we soon found that, much like working with real dough, the consistency was crucial. So, we spent a good deal of time experimenting with different mixes. A small sandbar proved to be a key source for this.

Upon mastering the necessary mud making consistency, we got down to the serious business of pie shaping. The creek bank was

soon covered in neatly-formed lumps. Other children, seeing our great delight as novice mud pie makers, were eager to join in. It began quite the industry!

Of course, I have numerous other precious memories of my different trips to this gem of a park. In adulthood, a good friend of mine was employed at Dinosaur. It was exciting to take the bus tour with her and watch her guide us with her own unique flair. In the evening, we sat around a campfire with her and her other friends, making s'mores and laughing.

Truly, Dinosaur Provincial Park is a special place. I believe it is an experience everyone deserves to have. As I have now dealt with a physical disability for several years, I have developed a new appreciation for the comfort camping sites run there. Anything that makes the park more accessible seems to me a worthwhile investment. I had hoped to make use of the facilities myself, once I developed sufficient tolerance to car rides to drive that far. It is therefore deeply troubling and saddening that Minister Nixon has announced plans to close the comfort camping section (as part of the 20 partial/full closures announced in Alberta's 2020 budget). Unlike some of the other sites discussed in this issue of the *Advocate*, this camping option didn't receive a reprieve from the Minister in June. We shouldn't take any comfort from these actions.

Allison McPhail is an aerospace engineer, artisan jeweller, and professional writer. The worsening climate crisis terrifies her, and she is dedicated to combatting it through activism. ▲

Reflections on Wiener Stick Parking Lots, Growing Up, and the War on the Environment

By Cliff Wallis *P. Biol. and Director, Alberta Wilderness Association*



I grew up on the banks of the “River” Rom on the east side of London in the United Kingdom. It was a place where kids could get closer to nature. Humans need all kinds of natural and recreation spaces and we need more, not less, of them. If COVID-19 has taught me anything, it is the value of the natural world and how little is available for us to get out into without crowding out each other or crowding out the wild things that matter most to us lovers of wild spaces.

As a young biologist working with Alberta Parks, I might have been inclined to agree with the current policy to delist dozens of protected spaces. We would sometimes refer disparagingly to several of these places as “wiener stick parking lots.” As I have matured, I have come to realize the importance of those bits of nature and outdoor recreation spaces – they are the kinds of spots where families have gathered and kids played close to nature. They also have been convenient for a quick overnight on a family road trip to even wilder spaces. I no longer disparage the “wiener stick parking lots.”

One hundred and seventy-five sites are slated for full closure or removal from the system. Not all the lands on the recreation and conservation areas chopping block are simple open recreation space. Some also provide access to some of the finest natural spaces on the planet or have special meaning in one way or another. At least 102 of the sites occur in lands designated as Environmentally Significant Areas of provincial or greater significance. These jewels and waysides are scattered across all of Alberta’s natural regions – Boreal Forest, Foothills, Grassland, Parkland and Rocky Mountains. Most occur in the Foothills and Rocky Mountains where many Albertans focus their recreation activities.

I have been fortunate to visit somewhere between a third and a half of these areas that will be lost, either as a kid out on a weekend fishing trip with my dad or later as father, with my daughter, exploring the nooks and crannies of Alberta’s natural regions as we searched for areas of environmental significance and mini-adventures. Just last spring, I was at the North Fork Provincial Recreation

Area observing nesting barred owls with my granddaughter. North Fork will be delisted from the parks system.

Featured on maps and tourist information pamphlets, Lundbreck Falls Provincial Recreation Area was one of my earliest memories of Alberta after we came from England. Cataract Creek, Dutch, Oldman River North, Racehorse – all staging areas to access magnificent fishing in the wild streams that fed my youth. Jumping Pound, Sibbald Lake and numerous sites along the Highwood River now in Kananaskis Country all the way to the junction with the Bow River supplied areas for my first self-sufficient camping and fishing with my best friend in my early teens. These sites will be stripped of their protected status.

The world’s most extensive rough fescue grasslands occur across from Little Fish Lake Provincial Park east of Drumheller. The lake hosts a diversity of nesting birds, including endangered piping plover. The campground sits next to this natural wonder. Since the late 1960s, I have enjoyed many a fine day reveling in the prairie bell chorus of western



Looking towards Michelle Reservoir Provincial Recreation Area Wayne Eagle Butte.
PHOTO: © C. WALLIS



Nearly 8,000 people attended the Oldman River Concert at Maycroft in 1989. The concert, initiated by singer/songwriter/rancher Ian Tyson, was held to protest the damming of the Oldman River. PHOTO: © C. WERSHLER



Daughter Lindsey in the Whaleback PHOTO: © C. WALLIS

meadowlarks, Sprague's pipits, and Baird's sparrows in the tussocky grasses; or photographing nesting avocets and terns. My daughter and granddaughter have followed in those footsteps. As Lindsey pointed out earlier in this issue, Little Fish Lake Provincial Park will be shuttered too.

Kinbrook Island Provincial Park contains offshore islands that support colonial nesting birds of conservation concern including American white pelican, great blue heron, and Caspian tern.

Bullshead Reservoir and Michelle lie at the edge of the most gorgeous grassland country in southeast Alberta, part of one of a handful of large, relatively intact blocks (5,000 square kilometres) of native habitats in the Northern Glaciated Plains.

JJ Collett Natural Area has some wonderful, but endangered, Central Parkland habitat just steps off the QEII highway between

Edmonton and Calgary.

Maycroft Provincial Recreation Area was the site of the Oldman Dam concert featuring Ian Tyson, Gordon Lightfoot, and David Suzuki. It attracted thousands of Albertans to the banks of the Oldman River and the foot of the magnificent Whaleback Ridge.

The names continue to roll off my tongue -- many bringing a special memory: Crow Lake (old growth forest), Chin Coulee (rare plants), Indian Graves (foothills retreat), Chain Lakes (rare Foothills Parkland), Kinbrook (colonial birds), Gooseberry Lake (thousands of red-necked phalaropes), Muriel Lake (my first audio recordings of great crested flycatchers), Williamson (accessing Young's Point by boat across Sturgeon Lake before roads were built), O'Brien and Notikewin (barred owls, magnificent old growth forest)

The memories and the thought of closure

prompt a range of emotions from sadness to rage. It is important to turn that anger into something productive. We have to be in this conservation game for the long haul. It is a marathon not a sprint. Governments come and go but, fortunately, the conservation crowd persists.

There is a disconnect between what Albertans say they value in polls going back to the 1980s and how the government's work proceeds. Recent announcements to relax the environmental monitoring and reporting for the oil and gas industry, the termination of the Coal Policy (in place since the Lougheed years), the ongoing sale of Public Lands without public consultation, and the removal or closure of parks and recreation areas all send a strong signal that Alberta continues to wage a war on its own environment.

I have grown up a lot since I was a kid fishing on the banks of the Oldman River or a young biologist who hadn't figured out what was truly valuable. I hope this government will mature and find its way to a more sustainable future. I have written to the government, objecting strenuously to these moves. I urge more Albertans to follow the Alberta Wilderness Association's leadership and express their concerns and support for more protection for the protected places that have made their lives a whole lot better. 🐟

Louise and Richard Guy Poetry Corner



NOSE HILL SPRING: SEVEN HAIKU

By Nick Todd

i)

As hesitant as
A fox by the road at night
Prairie spring comes near

ii)

Light breeze on spring pond
Winter lies dead on the ground
How the frogs rejoice!

iii)

The windflower opens
Like the blue lips on winter's corpse
Hailing the equinox

iv)

Shaken by the wind
Your blue eyes open and turn
Toward the heavens

v)

A happy zig-zag
Traced against far white mountains
Butterfly of joy!

vi)

Evening deer look up
Owls call as stars fill the night
Dragonfly at dawn

vii)

Prairie rivers flow
Tears from the great whitenesses
Shining in the west



Getting Dave to the Summit:

An Unconventional Photo Essay of an Unconventional Adventure

By Ed Hergott



Origin of the idea

When it was clear that the AWA could no longer do a tower climb as a key fundraiser, I was elated that Adventures for Wilderness was born. I immediately confirmed with Christyann that I'd take responsibility for one of the \$2,000 (minimum) places. We spend a lot of time 'adventuring in the wilderness' so there had to be lots of potential.

Some notions came together in my thinking. Ever since I've been volunteering for the annual Tower Climb (1997), I've involved my Mountain Manics companions. For the last one at the Bow Tower, we had a team of 34 volunteers...many of them Manics. And in addition to volunteering, we selected one of our own as a standard bearer, Dave Wodelet. Dave came second in fundraising, losing out to the incomparable Richard Guy. A bit more thought and I was ready to go for coffee with Dave and make him an offer.

Dave Wodelet

I first met Dave in 2011 when Don Cockerton, a good friend of his, brought him out to a Manic bike trip. Dave had to take early work retirement due to a worsening of glaucoma. For several good years Dave's eye condition allowed him to do all of our activities.

Dave enjoyed the Manics and the Manics enjoyed him. He has a wicked sense of humour that I personally thoroughly enjoyed. Later his wife Kathy retired and also joined us. They were the youngest in our group and we called them 'The Teenagers.' Unfortunately, his glaucoma worsened and he could no longer safely bike ride or scramble with us. I tried to stay in touch with him by going for coffee, at a place both he and I could easily reach by walking.

So on a cold January day I invited him to come for a coffee and dropped a bombshell on him. I suggested that for the AWA fundraiser, we would guide him to the summit of Ha Ling Peak. In a recent note to Christyann, Dave explains:

When Ed first proposed the idea to me, I thought he was crazy. When I accepted, I knew we were both crazy. What could go wrong, taking a guy who's legally blind up a steep mountain slope with many stumble hazards and pointy tree branches ready to skewer



Dave on Heart Mountain without a guide PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT

you if someone didn't yell "duck!" And that's not even mentioning the precipitous drops along the ridge as one approached the summit. Ed is the only one that I would trust to pull off this adventure. During the time that I was an active member of the Manics I grew to trust and appreciate his exceptional mountaineering and organizational skills.

And the rest, as they say, is now history.

Organizing the climb

When COVID-19 hit, the Manics adjusted and we're proud to say we haven't missed a single Tuesday. We drove out to trailheads alone in our cars and socially distanced on the trail. When the public lands were closed, we biked or hiked in the city.

Our date for Ha Ling was May 12. The parks opened a few days before that and we thought we could pull it off. But no...Ha Ling was closed to the public for environmental reasons. What to do? Most of our scrambles are not suited for a blind hiker, even with a guide. I remembered that in 2018 we had found an easy approach on an old exploration road to the ridge top of Junction Hill. The upper part of the mountain is tougher but we could make good time on the lower stretch. I discussed it with Dave and Kathy and set the date for Tuesday, May 26.

Twelve other Manics volunteered to help with the climb. We had

an Advance Team: Gerry Fijal, Peter Ermann, Gord Daw, Al Sosiak and Susan Miller. Their job was to secure the route, remove obstacles, and pack down residual snow. And we had the First Aid/Support Team: Sue Verbeek, Janet Grenier, Anne Hergott, Fred Goldsmith, and Jim Dunne. They would deal with any emergencies or unforeseen difficulties. Finally, we had the Climbing Team: Don Cockerton, Ed Hergott, Kathy Wodelet and Dave.

And we had radios for easy contact between the groups.

The Climb

We started the day promptly at 10:00 am with a group shot.



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT

The first part of the hike climbed up easy grass slopes. Without any difficulty we

reached the ridge top and enjoyed its spectacular views of the Continental Divide.



PHOTO: © K. McKEOWN



PHOTO: © K. McKEOWN



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT

Kathy stayed immediately in front of Dave and warned him of obstacles. She did a great job and was a key player in our success. As usual, Dave was in good spirits and going strong. He helped fuel our optimism.



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT

Once we got higher on the ridge, the views expanded and the difficulty of the hike increased.



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT

Don's sharp eye caught sight of a blue grouse. It patiently let me take a close up photo.



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT

Near the summit ridge we hit some snow. We feared it would be more extensive. Just the week before we were up to our hips at a lower elevation. Today we could miss most of it and the Advance Team pounded out a good trail through what was unavoidable. An enormous snow drift welcomed us to the summit ridget



After the snow drift, the Climbing Team took the lead. The rest of the team was ready to help with any exigencies. The route got steeper with loose rock:



PHOTO: © K. McKEOWN



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT



Peter, Al, Susan, and the snow drift PHOTO: © G. DAW

A small rock band blocked us from the summit; Dave handled it well..



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT



PHOTO: © K. McKEOWN

Dave offers a well-earned, jubilant shout., joined by Kathy, his excellent guide in life and in the mountains.



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT

We had cell reception at the summit and we made several calls. Here's Dave receiving congratulations from AWA's Christyann Olson.



PHOTO: © K. McKEOWN

As the coordinator of our Getting Dave to the Summit project, I'm proud of this entire group who worked hard to pull this off.



PHOTO: © E. HERGOTT

Conclusion

Dave's adventure is in the number two fundraising position having raised just over \$6,000 (if you feel inspired to support our Adventure and get us well over the \$6,000 mark please visit and donate at <https://www.adventuresforwilderness.ca>).

Dave, like the Monty Python cast in their skit about attempting to climb the twin summits of Kilimanjaro, also had dual objectives: Make the summit of Junction Hill and be #1 in fundraising. The first one was under his control and he accomplished it with grace and wit. The second one is for the benefit of the Alberta Wilderness Association. If he loses it, it's for the good of the cause.

And he knows, in his heart, that he did the best that he could. We are privileged to be his friends and assist him in his efforts. 🌲

Our Adventure on the Goat Creek Trail

By Hannah Slomp



Sky and Hannah on either side of Jamie Jack, AWA Board Member. Jamie's wardrobe appears to be channeling her inner Edith Prickley.

It was Sunday, March 15th at 8:00 am. We – Hannah, Sky and Jamie – were packing our cross-country skis into the back of Jamie's Mazda in Calgary and heading to Banff. Little did we know that we were on the eve of a public health emergency and life would change dramatically. No, for us, that morning promised great things. The sun was shining and the temperature would rise from -24 degrees to a balmy -9. Our AWA Adventure for Wilderness, to ski from Canmore to Banff along the Goat Creek Trail, was about to begin.

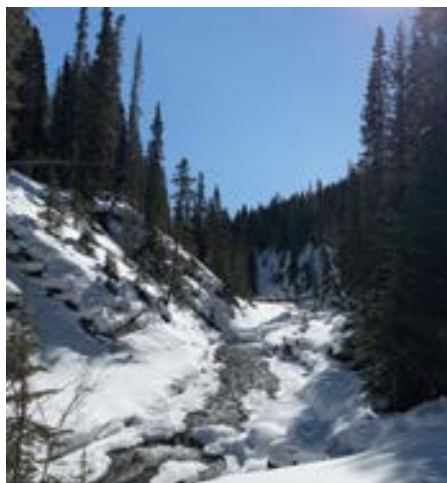
My 1990s Peltanons were freshly waxed. I went with multiple Swix™ layers. Purple, then blue, then green, made perfect sense given how the day promised to unfold. Coffees were poured into thermoses and Jamie tossed "Aussie Bites" into a trail pack while Sky donned a hand-made bear toque. Animal prints was the theme of the day and the trunk was full of leopard prints, sequined bunny sweatshirts, satin zebra print scarves, and other Value Village treasures.

We made it to the Banff Springs Hotel in

good time. We needed to park our car, find a bus that would take us to Canmore, where we would then get a taxi to drop us off at the trailhead. The brisk mountain morning and the details of our itinerary seemed daunting. But we schlepped our gear along the Bow Falls trail into town and ended up taking a taxi all the way back to Canmore. Our driver blasted the heat and cranked kooky tunes while we fueled up for our impending expedition.

Our trailhead lay in the shadow of Ha Ling Peak. We got out and stared down a freshly groomed trail to where it bent in the undergrowth. After a potty break, zipping up, clipping in, and hair toss, the animal-print-clad trio set their skis in the tracks and set out for Banff.

The sky above was strikingly cloudless, the ambient temperature felt refreshing and encouraging. We were on our way. A few metres past the trailhead the trail turns south and takes a somewhat dramatic descent into the Spray Lakes valley. This is the beginning of the 150-metre elevation fluctuation along this trail. The downhill leads to a scenic bridge where



A glorious late winter day along the Goat Creek Trail.

you may admire the pristine surroundings.

We left society behind on that trail. In fact, for most of the 19.3 kms, we saw few people. I remember posting a video on Instagram later that day with the hashtag #NoCoronaVirusOutHere. Looking back to that day now, almost exactly two months later, it was a very different world. Since then we've had two months of social distancing, two months of working from home, and two months of zoom calls. In this new normal facemasks are the latest, essential fashion accessory. Looking back on that bluebird day, it was the last hurrah before the new COVID-19 reality.

The rest of the day unfolded just as we had imagined it: with laughter and stories, with hard work and photo ops, with pit stops. All the while our animal prints were transforming us into our inner safari animal out on the savanna, free and wild.

After about four hours, the trail became more populated. We sensed we were near the end of our journey. After 900 more metres, the Banff Springs Hotel emerged on the escarpment above the Bow River. We unclipped our boots from our skis, and eventually found the Waldhaus Pub. It had been our vision to end up at the pub. There we reminisced over ample steins of fine German ale. It was the last social establishment any of us would patronize for quite some time.

We had skied the Goat Creek Trail. It had been exciting to plan, thrilling to do, and was one of the first long point-to-point skis I had ever done. The Adventures for Wilderness was the trip's catalyst. We had all the things we'd miss for the months to come: friends nearby, the wondrous beauty of our special mountains, adventure, and laughter over a pint. 🍷

A Frozen Adventure:

Friends Fish-A-Thon

By Nissa Petterson, *AWA Conservation Specialist*



I have a tendency to be a warmer weather recreationist, choosing to spend my time outdoors during the spring and summer months. On long, warm sunny days teeming with new and renewed life, it's easy to relax and let the beauty of nature displace your worries and sense of time. Alternatively, winter recreation in Alberta has a different appeal. While cold, winter days can be spectacular, spending time in the cold outdoors generally takes more effort and work. Most of my outdoor recreation in wintry conditions takes place during the hunting seasons, when you are putting in days upon days with a singular objective in mind, filling your freezer. While I think winter recreation may take more effort, I have recently learned that, as for summer pastimes, there is an equal opportunity for fun to be had.

Over the past three years, I have been fortunate enough to expand the breadth of my winter activities thanks to some dear friends. In particular, my friends and I have committed many weekends in the winter months to ice fishing. I've learned to love it.

This year's introduction of AWA's *Adventures for Wilderness* gave me the opportunity to organize a new challenge for our ice-fishing escapades – an overnight ice-fishing camping trip to Burnstick Lake. The *Adventures for Wilderness* fundraising program gives staff and AWA members the opportunity to invite fellow outdoor enthusiasts and conservationists to join them in adventures that speak to their unique or favourite ways to experience Alberta's wilderness. My friends and I imagined the Friends Fish-A-Thon as our adventurous vehicle for raising money for a wonderful organization and its work.

On Friday, March 6th, we packed up our gear and drove to Burnstick Lake. The weather was agreeable, approximately 10 degrees with sun and cloud which made the setup of our staging area relatively stress free. One of my friends had already scouted out a spot on the lake near the boat launch, that was somewhat sheltered by a crest of evergreen trees. He had already been out there for a full day, and didn't really have a lot of excitement on the other end of his line, but that didn't dampen our spirits!

While many clothing layers and hot beverages are a must, my friends and I are by no means "roughing" it on our ice fishing trips. We fish from a small, but decked out, insulated shack that can seat up to six people. We had organized our fully enclosed fishing shelter, otherwise known as the "Ice Palace," to open up into a pop up canopy



PHOTO: © N. PETTERSON



PHOTO: © N. COLE

tent, where we bored two holes through the ice. The canopy tent was our main fishing area, we had a table for our supplies, gear, and propane cooking stove. Camping chairs were placed strategically for a clear line of sight of our fishing holes and to accommodate the flow of traffic into and out of the Ice Palace. We also drilled five holes outside of the canopy tent, with belled/flagged tip-up rods to increase our chances of catching fish throughout the weekend.

The Ice Palace was a pretty comfortable home away from home; we had managed to fit two inflatable queen mattresses on stands side by side, with foam pads lining the floor to help with insulation and to keep the moisture out. The Ice Palace was heated with a wood burning stove, which we routinely stoked with wood. Keeping the stove burning hot was imperative. We needed it hot to maintain a comfortable temperature inside the Ice Palace and to prevent the fire from reaching a smoldering point. When it smoldered it just coughed

out plumes of smoke, something that was highly problematic in the evenings while we were trying to sleep. There were definitely some bumps in the road when it came to figuring out the intricacies of the wood stove, but overall it made for some really good learning opportunities.

Keeping the stove hot in the Ice Palace became even more crucial as the weekend went on. By Friday night, we found ourselves in a complete white out on the lake, with all other anglers having packed up and left. The temperature dropped dramatically, reaching a low of minus 20 during the night. It also snowed throughout the night, almost four inches, making us add the chore of sweeping snow off the roof of the Ice Palace to our house-keeping list.

Saturday morning came with a pause in the snow and slightly warmer temperatures (-15). Some more friends and colleagues joined us for some fun just during the day. They brought their day gear, families, and even cooked up some delicious chicken

wings to share alongside great conversation. The fish weren't biting, but that didn't seem to dampen the mood. By midday, the Friends-Fish-A-thon group had grown to almost 20 people, with children playing in the snow and practicing how to use the fish-camera, in hopes to catch a glimpse of our elusive fish friends.

We also took some time during the afternoon to take samples from Burntstick Lake for our colleagues from the Alberta Lake Management Society (ALMS) as part of their Winter LakeKeepers Program. The program assesses the overall ecological health of Alberta's lakes with the help of citizen science. Volunteers can contact ALMS for testing kits which contains the gear necessary to measure a variety of parameters such as dissolved oxygen, temperature, and phosphorous content of the lake water. The program registered over 40 samples this season, helping significantly to depict the aquatic health of lakes sampled across Alberta. Having the opportunity to



While on Burnstick Lake we sampled the lake's water quality as part of the Alberta Lake Management Winter LakeKeepers program. PHOTO: © N. PINK

help collect samples that generate data and a real-time picture of the ecological health of a lake allows the public to be actively engaged in conservation initiatives. It gives them a stake in protecting places that are near and dear to them.

By late afternoon Saturday, the snow had returned with a vengeance, and our extended Friends-Fish-A-Thon group soon cleared out. Once the sun set, the temperature dropped to -25 with no sign of the snow stopping. We bunkered down into the canopy tent hoping to catch a fish, while our dinner, Costco lasagna, baked on top of the wood stove. With no catches to date, the possibility of being shut out on our Fish-A-Thon adventure looked more and more likely. Then, Mother Nature threw us a bone.

Prior to supper being ready, one of our friends had gone to check his wood stove, when he noticed a bright little orange flag fluttering in the wind. Once he reached the line, he could tell there was a fish on the other end given the tautness of the line. While he was slowly reeling the line up, the fish kicked off, but the bait was still intact. Determined to catch the same patrolling fish, he lowered the line down again and held it still in his hand. After a few moments, there was a small nibble,

and then there was a full bite. Pulling the line up again, he hollered to the rest of us inside the canopy tent that he had caught something. By the time we all made it out of the canopy tent, he was holding his prize: a 26-inch northern pike. This catch buoyed our spirits. To celebrate our big catch, we decided a side of battered fried pike would be a nice accompanying side to our lasagna dinner.

The remainder of Saturday evening was quiet on the fishing front. But, we didn't mind that one bit as we filled the tent with lively conversation. Despite only catching one fish over the entire weekend, we considered our adventure to be a success. Between the less-than-desirable weather, finicky wood stove and the sleeping schools of fish, we had learned a lot of valuable lessons. To quote my friend Karsten "we're only going to get better at this".

A brilliant sun and clear, blue skies greeted us when we woke up Sunday morning. As we dug ourselves out of the snow and tore down our camp, the temperature continued to rise, and the clothing layers started coming off. By afternoon, we were packing up in our t-shirts. I'd be lying if I told you we didn't feel some resentment towards Mother Nature for not giving us the beautiful weather earlier. After we threw a few snowballs and took some "fun in the sun pictures," we had everything packed

up. The snow on the lake was considerably deeper than when we had arrived Friday afternoon, with the top layer becoming pretty soft from the bright sun beating down. We weren't very surprised then when one of the vehicles in our convoy got stuck, causing us to unpack the kitty litter and start digging. Eventually the car broke free, and we made our way back to Calgary.

Friends-Fish-A-Thon was a true adventure; there were highs and lows, challenges and victories, and of course, sun and snow. All of it made for a unique experience that taught us many valuable lessons. And while it was a considerable amount of work and effort, I don't think any of us would have wanted to have it any other way. As one of my friends said, we have a foundation to build upon now, and experiences that refine our skills and allow us to take on new adventures in the future. We can thank AWA's *Adventures for Wilderness* for helping us build that foundation. I'm not sure whether I would have broadened my horizons and learnt how to overnight ice fish if it weren't for *Adventures for Wilderness*. Regardless, I am thankful for the experience because it put my feet to the wood stove fire. Perhaps the Friends-Fish-A-Thon will become an annual adventure that we can share with more people, helping them broaden their horizons and celebrate Alberta's wilderness through a different experience. 🌲



PHOTO: © D. SHANKS

Southern Alberta Field Trip:

"Birds, Rocks, Hills and Fields"

By Tako Koning, *Senior Geologist and AWA Member*



When I read the June, 2019 issue of the *Wildlands Advocate*, I was struck by the legion of AWA volunteers mentioned in the editorial. In the same issue, Dianne Pachal mentioned the benefits many volunteers provide to Parks Canada in Waterton Lakes National Park. This inspired me to volunteer to lead a field trip for AWA since I have always had a passion for the preservation of wild spaces.

Born in Holland, I grew up in Canada and have a B.Sc. in Geology from the University of Alberta and a B.A. in Economics from the University of Calgary. As a

Registered Professional Geologist, I have worked in the oil industry for over 45 years. In addition to working in Canada, I have spent more than half of my career living and working overseas in Indonesia, Nigeria and Angola doing onshore and offshore exploration. I am familiar with the environmental issues associated with oil and gas exploration and production.

On two occasions before the trip, which was held on August 24, I scouted out an area south of Calgary that features interesting environmental and geological areas as well as areas impacted by oil in-

dustry activities.

The weather was splendid on the day of the field trip despite the touch of fall in the air. We had 23 attendees on the trip and Carolyn Campbell, Conservation Specialist, represented AWA on the trip. The first stop was Frank Lake, a restored wetland east of High River which is a Ducks Unlimited project. At the turn off into Frank Lake the birders on the trip were thrilled to see a golden eagle on a nearby telephone pole. We knew the trip was off to a good start!

Frank Lake is a shallow slough typical of



A glorious September day in the Whaleback.
PHOTO: © N. PETTERSON

the sloughs in the grasslands of southern Alberta. Hundreds of bird species have been identified there including ibis, herons, avocets, blackbirds, Canada geese, and cormorants. The water in Frank Lake comes from treated wastewater from the town of High River and from the Cargill Meat Packing Plant which processes approximately 4,000 head of cattle every day. Two small streams, Mazeppa and Blackie, also provide natural water into Frank Lake in the spring. Alberta Environment & Parks monitors the wastewater from High River and Cargill and regulates their allowable discharge into the lake.

Our second stop was a very brief tour of Nanton which was established in 1903. We drove through one of the historic neighborhoods which still has some century-old houses.

At Stavelly we turned west onto Highway 527 to our third stop which was

the Pine Coulee Reservoir. This reservoir stores water from Willow Creek for surrounding towns and provides pike, walleye, and rainbow trout for anglers.

We continued westwards to our fourth stop which was Willow Creek Municipal Park, a little known but beautiful 200-acre park which lies in a lush valley surrounded by grasslands above. A nearby, well-defined First Nations teepee ring was also visited.

From Highway 527 we continued westwards on the Flying E Road, a gravel road that climbs through magnificent rolling ranchland, past the historic Flying E

Ranch bought in 1891 by George Lane, “Canada’s Cattle King.” He was one of the so-called Big Four who founded the Calgary Stampede.

Our fifth stop was where signs posted along the road stated “this site is under the management of the Orphan Well Association.” Accordingly, this area encompassed a gas field abandoned by an oil company. There we had a spirited discussion on the issue of orphan wells, abandoned oil gathering stations, and abandoned pipelines/well sites – all of which need environmental remediation.



Abandoned well and petroleum facility site signs are becoming an increasingly common sight on the prairies.
PHOTO: © T. KONING

These signs represent the “tip of an iceberg,” a large and increasing problem for Alberta’s residents. As of November 1, 2019, the number of “orphan wells for abandonment” listed in the Orphan Well Association’s inventory was 3,406. The Association is financed primarily by the oil industry through levies charged by the Alberta government. Added to that total is another 6,593 orphan facilities, pipeline segments, and sites.

We continued travelling southwestwards and our sixth stop was along Ridley Road where the geology of the Porcupine Hills was explained. The Porcupine

Hills are not foothills structures. Rather, they are major north-to-south trending erosional remnants modified by glaciation. We stopped twice to admire the stunning views both westwards and eastwards from the crest of the Porcupine Hills. This scenery is Alberta at its best.

At the intersection with Highway 22, also known as the Cowboy Trail, we travelled northwards to the village of Longview which was our seventh and final stop. A very active program of about 30 oil wells have been drilled and oil production is being carried out along the

southern, western and northern edges of Longview as well as in the center of the village. This is not a hydraulic fracturing, colloquially known as fracking, operation. Rather it is a conventional drilling operation with short distance horizontal wells drilled into the porous limestones of the Turn-

er Valley formation. From an important environmental view point, the field trip attendees were reminded that, when this field is eventually depleted, the oil field’s operator will need to properly abandon the wells and environmentally remediate the well sites.

As my industry background and affiliation with AWA suggests, I believe the remediation of the oil industry’s activity must be a priority of industry and government. I hope that message was one the attendees took home with them after a splendid August outing. 🌲

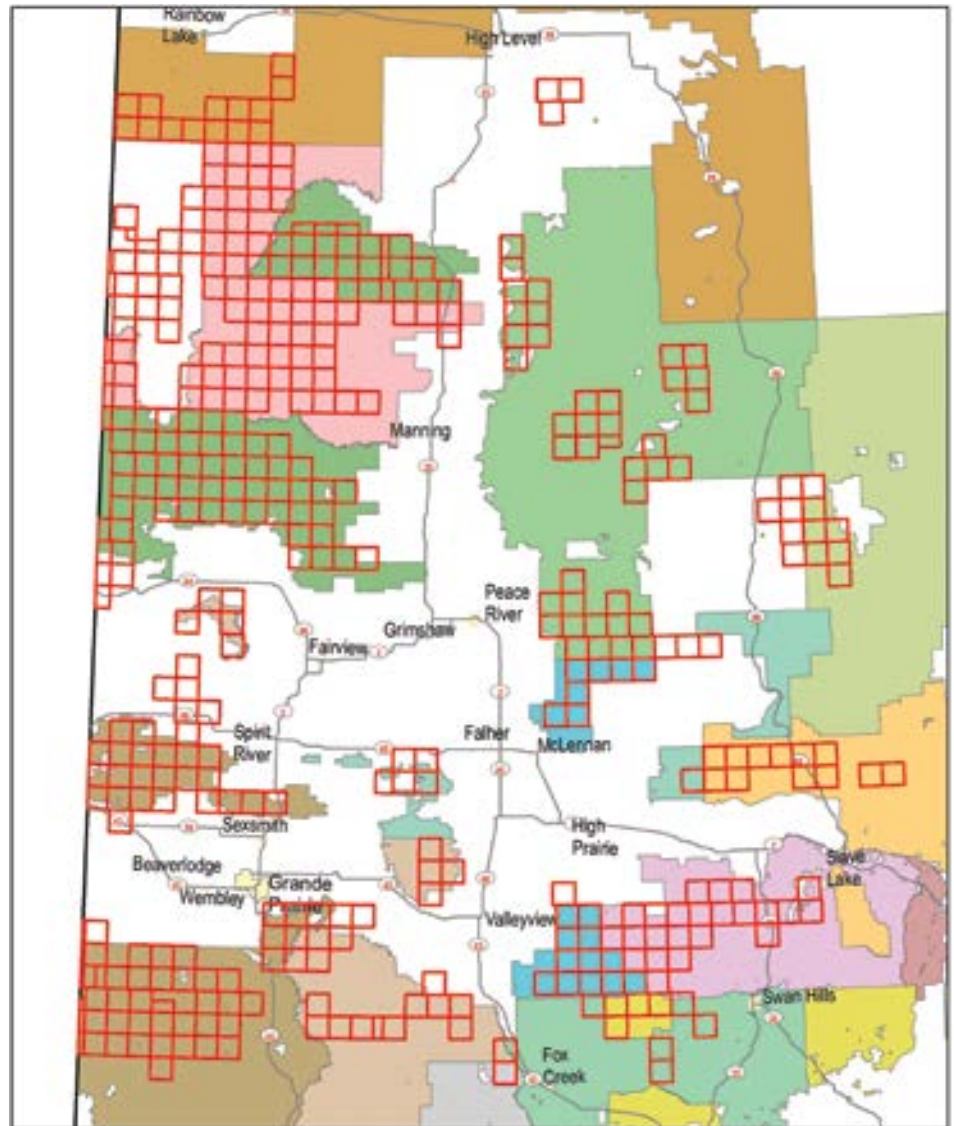
Updates

Alberta Mountain Pine Beetle – Lower than predicted impacts, ineffective clearcuts

Thanks to a February 2020 presentation by the Alberta government's 'Forest Health and Adaptation' Director, I learned of two important conclusions of government-commissioned mountain pine beetle research. First, Alberta mountain pine beetle impacts have been less than projected. Second, the preferred way to reduce the extent of the pine beetle outbreak extent is by selective identification and removal, not by clearcuts.

Mountain pine beetles (MPB) are native insects that are part of natural disturbance cycles in Alberta southern foothills forests, attacking mainly larger diameter (therefore older) pines. In 2005/2006 and 2009, there were extensive, climate-change-assisted pine beetle flights from B.C. into Alberta's central and northern foothills. As Burke, Bohlmann, and Carroll wrote in *Ecosphere*, because these higher latitude lodgepole pine forests had not co-evolved with the beetle, this outbreak was seen as a threat to older lodgepole pine stands, the main conifer for commercial timber supply in those regions. The beetles were also viewed as a novel potential threat to boreal jack pine forests in eastern Alberta and potentially across Canada.

As brief background, AWA has had long-standing forest ecology concerns with government-approved clearcut logging techniques in Alberta. For example, generally the required retention rates in logged conifer stands are very low (below 5%). This results in lower diversity, single age-class regenerating stands compared to natural fire-and-insect-disturbed forests. AWA has maintained that Alberta forest regulators compounded environmental harm when, in 2007, they authorized *increased* clearcut logging as a prime MPB control measure (called 'Level 2 control'). Many conifer-harvesting forestry companies received significantly elevated annual allowable cut levels (AACs). These



Alberta Agriculture and Forestry

Cumulative mortality of pine due to mountain pine beetle project area

Alberta government research on 412 townships (outlined in red) across northern Alberta found that pine forests were not nearly as affected by mountain pine beetle as had been predicted.

CREDIT: GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA.

"surge" clearcut levels were intended to reduce 'susceptible' pine on companies' operating land base by 75 percent over 20 years. Alberta's 2007 MPB Action Plan justified the surge in order to "reduce or hold the beetle population in check."

At the time, all agreed the surge cut levels were unsustainable from a long-term timber supply perspective; likewise, all agreed that AAC levels would have to 'fall down' below what they would otherwise have been with-

out surge cuts. AWA also was convinced that the surge clearcuts were worse for forest biodiversity than the beetle outbreak itself. They were especially inappropriate in species at risk habitat such as the ranges of threatened woodland caribou. Therefore, AWA requested evidence-based, lower impact measures to encourage diversity in forest stand species and age classes. In caribou ranges, we also supported so-called 'Level 1 control' by the Alberta government. Such control consists

of aerial surveys and selective removal of MPB-infested trees.

One government research effort I reviewed examined northern Alberta mountain pine beetle impacts to merchantable timber, a key forestry industry concern. Detailed in two *Forest Health and Adaptation in Alberta* annual reports, 412 townships were analyzed using high resolution aerial imagery. Strikingly, the researchers determined that only 16 percent of pine-leading stands had 30 percent or more merchantable wood mortality. Only four percent of pine-leading stands had greater than 50 percent mortality of merchantable wood; the technical term for this is 'merchantable basal area' mortality. The Level 1 control strategy wasn't employed in these townships for one of two reasons. Either MPB infestations were considered too high for selective removal treatment to be cost-effective or the affected pine stands had low connectivity so the spread of MPB was considered unlikely.

The research concluded: "Subsequent to the large MPB migration into Alberta in 2006 and 2009, pine stands in the northwestern [area] were expected to be severely impacted but the results of this project contradict that line of thought. Forest companies have been aggressively targeting MPB-infested stands and [the Alberta government's Forestry division] continues to be very aggressive in Level 1 control work."

Should either the Level 2 surge clearcuts or the Level 1 selective removal be credited for slowing down MPB spread? When it comes to our foothills forests, elevation may be the key factor, not human treatment. The Alberta government's Forest Health and Adaptation Director noted in February 2020 that in higher elevation foothills forests, mountain pine beetles may be present but don't seem to increase to serious levels. An elevation range of 1,200 to 1,400 metres seems to be a threshold separating severe impacts from less severe ones. Further research is underway to confirm that.

UBC scientists assessed Alberta's mountain pine beetle management in 2017. They found that the territory colonized by beetles "was particularly sensitive to the efficacy of early detection and eradication, and the amount of

level 1 control (single tree treatments), but not level 2 control (clear cut harvesting)." Level 1 control was effective provided it was consistent (annual) and comprehensive in areas of small infestations. Carroll, Seely, Welham, and Nelson suggested that clearcut harvesting was not effective due to strong positive feedbacks in MPB populations as infestations grow. Those feedbacks outstrip human control measures.

AWA's understanding is that Level 1 MPB control activities do not create new roads or trails, and generally have minimal ecological impacts. Although it's expensive, a positive element of Alberta's MPB Level 1 program is that it provides low-impact forestry jobs to local communities. These findings reinforce AWA's determination to engage with Alberta to end harmful, unsustainable, and ineffective Level 2 pine surge cuts as soon as possible.

A final observation, unrelated to the efficacy of Level 1 and Level 2 treatments, is that pine beetle outbreaks north of their historic ranges provide more evidence that human-caused climate change is a serious problem for Alberta forests. For this and many other reasons, it is urgent we act to significantly reduce carbon emissions.

- Carolyn Campbell

Coalspur Vista Coal Mine Phase II

Last May, AWA in conjunction with Fraser Thomson of Ecojustice, wrote Environment and Climate Change Canada Minister McKenna requesting an environmental assessment of Coalspur's Vista Coal Mine Phase II. Located near Hinton, AWA cited adverse ecological impacts from the overall expansion of the Coalspur mine, with particular emphasis on the expansion's proximity to McPherson Creek.

As part of the McLeod River watershed, McPherson creek supports populations of endangered Athabasca Rainbow Trout and threatened bull trout. It also provides an important wildlife corridor and has been identified as an integral part of traditional ecological knowledge for local Indigenous Peoples.

In December 2019, AWA was notified by the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada

that "the Minister decided that the Project does not warrant a federal environmental assessment.

In early March 2020, AWA filed a Statement of Concern (SOC) with the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) regarding Coalspur Mines (Operations) Ltd. application to divert water out of the McLeod River. AWA believes diverting for development operations will have harmful ecological impacts to both aquatic and terrestrial communities.

Coalspur's legal counsel replied to AWA's SOC in early May, a response required by AER within a given timeline. Coalspur's letter to AWA stated that "AWA has not demonstrated that it is directly and adversely affected by the Project." Accordingly, it requested "...that the AER disregard the SOC filed by AWA and proceed with the timely processing of its Application."

Despite the results, AWA continues to monitor both coal mining exploration and development applications submitted to the AER. This monitoring becomes even more prudent since the provincial government rescinded the Coal Policy (1976). AWA firmly believes that the Coal Policy, a policy the government calls "outdated," is vital to protecting sensitive mountain and foothills landscapes. Without that policy we are left with zoning gaps that result from a regulatory process that employs a case-by-case approval approach. The provincial government believes that our current regulatory system, alongside land-use planning, is robust enough to protect sensitive landscapes throughout the eastern slopes, while promoting the increased expansion of coal mining activities. The truth of the matter is that Alberta currently has no cumulative effects framework or thresholds in place to foresee and manage effectively the impacts of land-use activities on wildlife and waters. Nor do we have finalized, binding, land-use plans for most of the Eastern Slopes.

Furthermore, AWA believes this policy change ignores the value of consulting Albertans about how their public lands should be managed. It betrays the idea that Alberta's public lands should be managed in a sustainable manner that benefits all Albertans.

- Nissa Petterson

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