

Adventures for Wilderness:

Albertans Honour AWA's 55th Year by Embarking on a Province-spanning Series of Wilderness Experiences

By Sean Nichols, AWA Program Specialist



A sense of anticipation permeated the association's Hillhurst Cottage School as the final days of 2019 rushed towards us and AWA began looking forward to its 55th year.

Every year since 1992 we have been holding our annual major fundraising event, the Climb for Wilderness, to mark Earth Day in April; first at the Calgary Tower, and later at the Bow Tower. For years this has been one of the main fixtures on the AWA calendar. It served both as a fundraiser and as an awareness-raising "open house" where we engaged with the broader public outside the traditional AWA family and invited them to explore the work we do across the province. Indeed many readers of this issue of the *Wild Lands Advocate* will doubtless recall an occasion or two taking the train downtown on a cold April morning to bump shoulders in the stairwell with other like-minded souls.

For just as long, though, something has been missing from that blueprint. Climbing a set of concrete stairs in a windowless abyss is in many ways the exact antithesis of the type of experience AWA members cherish. The wonderful murals painted over the years in the Calgary Tower notwithstanding, there was scant sense of nature, or of the outdoors, associated with the effort. Competitive climbers bounding up the stairs to see how many laps they can get in undoubtedly appreciated that aspect of the event, but a hike in the wilderness, or a walk in the woods, are for most of us not a race, not a competitive endeavour. Rather, these are more contemplative efforts; a chance to escape from the rat-race of daily life, to commune with nature, and to literally stop and smell the flowers.

So as fun as the Climb for Wilderness

was, we increasingly knew that something had to change. We needed to re-think what a truly wilderness-oriented fundraiser should look like.

After much soul searching, head scratching and brain storming, we came to a compelling realization: everyone has a different idea of what Wilderness means to them. Everyone has a different way that they like to engage with Wilderness; everyone has a different way that they like to be active.

Rather than try to come up with a one-size-fits-all event, we needed to let Albertans show us how they get out into nature. It's an idea we had talked about, now it was time to put it to the test. We would let our members, supporters, friends, and neighbours design their own activities: activities inspired by the mountains, forests, grasslands, and wetlands of the province. And we would work with them to turn those activities into fundraising

events for AWA that would allow the participants to truly connect with the parts of the province they were raising money to defend.

Thus was born Adventures for Wilderness.

Not one, but a whole anthology of adventures, events small and large, could be designed and embarked on by those Albertans with a passion to share their corner of the province with new-found friends. What would these adventures look like? What would our supporters bring to show us? We were curious to see.

We were also curious to see how the logistics would work out. Some adventures would likely be summer events and some might be winter events. Some might be indoors, in some fashion, and others might not be. We hoped that the adventures would take Albertans all over the province. With such a diversity of requirements, we quickly realized that they could not all be accommodated on the



Experiencing the vastness of Milk River Ridge PHOTO: © C. SAUNDERS



Moving Through Alberta's Badlands at Dry Island Buffalo Jump PHOTO: © R. BARRATT

same day, so the schedule would necessarily be spread out over the winter, spring, and summer months. We planned a grand celebration in June, to be held simultaneously in Calgary and Edmonton (and anywhere else that enthusiastic hosts would be able to step up to volunteer their time) to mark the UN Environment Day and Canadian Environment Week. Then we would have prizes and festivities. It was a pretty exciting plan.

In early March, the first adventures kicked off the schedule: *Friends Fish-a-Thon*, an ice fishing adventure combined with citizen science measuring ecological lake health; and *X-Country Ski Canmore to Banff*, an epic ski trip in the foothills along the Bow Valley. Adventures for Wilderness was off to a great start... (for stories and photos of those Adventures see the June issue of WLA).

Of course, no account of events in 2020 could fail to address what we all know happened next.

With the world's headlong descent into a global pandemic and the widespread cancellation of events as everyone wrapped their heads around what "social distancing" would mean, the Adventures for Wilderness were similarly affected. A few adventures were can-

celled; and many postponed or reconfigured to conform to Alberta's new reality.

The next adventure up was *Pollinator Power!*. Originally to be a day when everyone could get together and build bee boxes, we realized it could be re-shaped into an event where boxes could be built individually, at a distance, and the adventure could still take place while observing pandemic-related health guidelines.

As governments and citizens responded to the pandemic, an unexpected benefit of our new fundraiser format revealed itself. Had AWA planned to hold a Climb for Wilderness in 2020, it would have certainly been cancelled outright, with no replacement evident. But with many smaller adventures taking place instead, it was possible to reconfigure many of them in a way that they could still take place. Once some of the social distancing restrictions began easing in May, this became even easier to do, as a 10-person hike in the outdoors could logistically still occur, even in 2020.

Of course, the Adventures for Wilderness have not proceeded precisely as anticipated; a few were cancelled and sadly the celebration in June never happened. However the

format has proven gratifyingly resilient and as of publication nearly 30 adventures have taken place, with several more remaining in the schedule for this year. For a "test run," taking place in this very strange year, we can only consider it an unqualified success.

Once this new approach was worked out, the adventures began taking place again, starting in late May: first up, *Getting Dave to the Summit*: an adventure (in many senses of the word) led by long-time Climb for Wilderness volunteer Ed Hergott, who challenged himself and his team of supporters to guide his friend Dave Wodelet to the summit of Junction Hill, despite the latter being legally blind (see the June WLA issue for Ed's account of this Adventure).

In early June, *Bob and Jim's Adventure for Wilderness* saw Bob Patterson celebrate his 65th birthday with a 65km trip entirely self-propelled, including legs (pardon the pun) undertaken by canoe, bicycle, and finally a good old-fashioned trail run.

No event schedule in the times of COVID-19 would be complete without a Zoom call, and that's exactly how George Campbell celebrated his birthday, and his and Carolyn's 20th wedding anniversary. George's Zoom birth-

day party included a singalong with friends from the AWA community – how very appropriate for someone who has put his heart and soul into designing and organizing AWA's Music for the Wild program for the better part of a decade.

Several socially-distant and reduced-capacity hikes followed, including the *Lethbridge Coulee Birding Tour* in Lethbridge and the *Jumping Pound Mountain Circuit Hike* in Kananaskis Country. Of particular note was the two-parter *Dinosaurs and Badlands* adventure organized by Elnora volunteers Rob and Tjarda Barratt. An evening slideshow presentation (again over Zoom) on the Paleontological Wonders of Alberta by Dr. François Therrien, Curator of Dinosaur Palaeoecology at the Royal Tyrrell Museum, was followed up by a hike to the world-renowned *Albertosaurus* bone bed in Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park.

Wild Gardens was a walking tour through a selection of three magnificent recreational gardens west of Calgary that explored different approaches to gardening in the Chinook Belt.

A two-day camping-and-hiking adventure on Mount Tecumseh in the Crownsnest Pass, *Tecumseh Adventure*, was followed by Joanna Skrajny and Grace Wark's *Weekend for Wilderness* at Boivin Lake in the Castle Wildland Provincial Park, celebrating the fruits of one of AWA's greatest success stories, the establishment of said park after many decades of hard work. July's last adventure was the well-received *Porcupine Hills Hike* among the wildflowers of that beautiful location.

August saw another four adventures, including one of the first to be added to the Adventures for Wilderness schedule: *Prairie Paddling* comprised a summer stand-up paddle boarders paddling down the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton. This was joined by the hike *Exploring the Wainwright Dunes*. There participants explored the Wainwright Dunes Ecological Reserve which contains one of the world's last large remnants of the aspen parkland. Senior petroleum geologist Tako Koning led his adventurers on *Field Tripping Southern Alberta*, an all-day road trip visiting diverse locations including a shallow water slough where hundreds of bird species

have been identified and the site of an orphan gas well assigned to the Orphan Well Association for abandonment and site remediation. Finally, one of the more unusual adventures was *Trivia in the Garden*, a charity trivia event held in the gardens on the AWA grounds where participants competed to raise money to defend wild Alberta.

The Adventures for Wilderness format has also lent itself to several adventures that are ongoing or recurring. *Keep It Wild, Help Us Clean* challenges participants to choose a location of particular interest to them and keep it clean of the garbage that is potentially harming wildlife. *Biodiversity Bees in Brentwood* hosted by Polly Knowlton Cockett and Robin Cockett is a weekly meetup involving social stewardship through biodiversity conservation. And *Photographs for Wilderness*, an ongoing nature photography contest, has brought in some truly stunning photographs by amateur (and not-so-amateur) photographers from around the province. We'll be particularly excited to feature some of the winning photos from this adventure in the December issue of the *Wild Lands Advocate*.

As of press time, several more adventures

are coming up on the schedule, with new ones being added regularly. We couldn't be more thrilled with how this series of events has taken shape and we hope you will check out the website to see if there are any upcoming adventures that tickle your fancy. Of course, if you would like to host your own adventure, we would be ecstatic to get in touch and work with you to make it happen.

All of these adventures, with signup forms, can be found on our website www.adventuresforwilderness.ca. You will also find full stories and photographs from past adventures, and more, at <https://www.adventuresforwilderness.ca/photo-gallery/>. Additionally, the site includes an interactive map of Alberta showing where adventures have been taking place. We are excited to watch the map fill up with adventures showing where members of the AWA community are inviting us to engage with and take care of their favourite spots in the province. We highly encourage you to check it out.

And of course, we can't wait to see what Adventures next year will bring. That sense of anticipation? It's only growing stronger, every day. 🌲



Taking in a Bit of Heaven on the Tryst Lake Hike PHOTO: © D. CHANG-YEN