

Our Need for Nature:

Kevin Van Tighem – Wilderness Defender



By Vivian Pharis, *AWA Board Member Emeritus*



Even though Kevin Van Tighem's primary career began and ended with Parks Canada, early on he enjoyed a challenging, productive and very happy eight-year interlude with Canada's Wildlife Service. This job was to assess what we now call biodiversity but in the 1980s was simply called a wildlife inventory. At an opportune time for the young biologist, Canada commissioned biologists to catalog and describe natural life throughout the four mountain parks as well as Elk Island Park near Edmonton. Working with such wildlife icons as Geoff Holroyd, Margaret Skeel, Joe McGillis and George Scotter over eight years the team used helicopters and hiking boots to access the most critical, inaccessible and fabulous lands in Canada's Rockies. It was a dream job - one where the grand picture could gradually come into focus and grand ideas

could form: Ideas like the need for humans to remember they are part of nature, something they cannot escape or live without, either physically or psychologically.

But, how did young Kevin find his way so deeply touched by the natural world that it directed his life and career? Understandably, Dad did it again! Kevin and his siblings were taken on excursions, fishing and hunting at early ages, with the first fish to nab Kevin's line at around the age of seven. The Van Tighem children grew up on the edges of Scarborough, an inner city community in Calgary, with nature just steps away. One day of the week out with Dad however, only whetted Kevin's appetite for hunting. On his own he would scour neighboring rough lands for pheasant, but instead he found kinglets, grosbeaks, and chorus frogs, and realized they too were interesting, even exciting. A naturalist was born.

But, a naturalist can be lost too. As Kevin's childhood advanced and hormones raced and a hippie lifestyle beckoned, old interests faded. Graduating too young and immediately enrolling in university at age 17 left too much to sort out and after two fruitless years testing an arts program and not achieving, Kevin dropped out – a lost soul.

However, just as happened a number of fateful times in his life, as when he was there at the right time and place to become part of the Canadian Wildlife Service's team, an old friend stepped back into Kevin's life. This old friend was Cleve Wershler, a long-time AWA supporter. Cleve introduced Kevin to another AWA notable, Cliff Wallis. Cliff, Cleve and another friend had all just graduated with degrees in biology from the

University of Calgary and were about to treat themselves to a graduation present – a naturalist trip to the Arizona desert. That is, if they could scabble together enough cash to put four new tires on Cliff's old beater to get them there and back. Kevin had enough funds to buy the fourth needed tire. The trip was on and Kevin credits Cliff, Cleve and that trip for turning his life around and setting him back on the right track, the track of nature!

That fall, Kevin returned to university and four years later graduated with Distinction, as a biologist. His parents were relieved, to put it mildly.

He'd started his park's career as a seasonal naturalist in Kootenay National Park, and returned to the parks eight years later as a seasoned biologist, taking on roles as interpreter and warden in Waterton Lakes National Park, soon climbing into a managerial position in Jasper's Ecosystems Secretariat, and culminating with the Superintendent's office of two national parks. For two years Kevin held the highest position in Prince Albert National Park, before being promoted into one of Canada's toughest park's positions – the superintendent of Banff National Park. There, Kevin served three and a half years of what he described as constant turmoil, where every decision was contested and the park sometimes seemed to have a half dozen superintendents, most of them in Ottawa. He broke down old boys' clubs, welcomed the Stoney First Nations back to their ancestral lands and worked with staff to produce a new management plan for the park, but life in the fish bowl took its toll.

Feeling tired and battered, Kevin took

leave of the parks system in 2011, and entered a whole new phase of life, one directed now, by himself. Not yet able to curtail his workaholic tendencies, the next phase found Kevin on a writing binge. Four books were set free in rapid succession, adding to a number already in publication. To date, Kevin has released 14 books and another is to reach the world in 2021. Through books like *Our Place*, *Heart Waters*, *Bears Without Fear*, and *The Homeward Wolf*, Kevin has deliberately set the route for Albertans to explore their home world and its abundance of natural features and fellow life. These books are also designed to instill a “sense of place” and to arouse feelings of pride and ownership in our home lands. They are meant to gently lead readers into understanding and activism.

Before long, Kevin’s ability to reach fellow Albertans with nature and conservation-related stories, caught the eye of those responsible for producing *Alberta Views* magazine and he became a regular contributor and an integral member. Working with *Alberta Views*, Kevin says, is like working within another family - a cordial, fun and principled one. But, as he continues to live a more relaxed life, even a monthly column means meeting a lot of deadlines, so Kevin

is pleased to have his column appear now, only in alternate issues.

Today, living in a Canmore condo but also able to escape to an Oldman cabin and vegetable garden, Kevin continues to write his column and books. Increasingly, however, Kevin is finding reward in social media and in leading his growing numbers of Facebook followers into understanding their essential place in nature and their essential role in fostering and maintaining that place, or those places. It is Kevin’s premise that people love nature - they love it knowingly and intrinsically. And, if one can guide them in how to reconnect to nature and instill their love, one can also instill enough passion in many people that they will act on behalf of nature, as its protective owner. Owners will tend to defend their home places.

Although not lucrative, helping citizens to regain their natural connections through social media, by increasing their understanding of biodiversity and sustainability, then raising their passions for the natural world and encouraging their activism is rewarding to him. However, he says this approach must be guided carefully and cautiously so as to maintain comfort zones while edging people along to greater understanding and action. It takes time and

patience and his Facebook pages must include enough encouraging examples and ideas to keep inspiring people. Kevin feels his Facebook efforts, although time consuming, are yielding results. Enough, that he has set up a new page (“Coalition of Alberta Conservation Voters”) designed to encourage specific citizen activism, at the ballot box.

Ever the determined optimist, Kevin feels that no matter how bad the current ecological situation is, it can be fixed, but only if enough people become mobilized or engaged. We must be willing to forego the commodification of nature and outdoor experience that has gripped us for so long, to say “no” to the corporate agenda that has long directed our and our government’s thinking, and to fight the good fight for home place, be that a city lot or the planet. He feels that enough engaged people can change the world, and his goal in life now, is to raise those numbers through the best way he knows - by educating people through writing and social media.

Finally, I asked Kevin for some wise words to guide AWA into the future. Surprisingly, his advice for AWA is to keep doing what it does best, just do more of it - make it more obvious and hold it up with greater pride. And that is? To keep reminding people of who they are - that they are conservationists AND Albertans, not conservationists versus Albertans. Remind them that they are part of a majority of Albertans who love nature, a healthy planet and a sustainable life. We are the real Albertans. And AWA is there to represent those who love nature, a healthy planet and want a sustainable life. AWA, in Kevin’s view, should flaunt the fact that it is the “home” conservation group, with roots totally within the province and that it has always been the group “on guard” for Our Place. AWA needs to maintain its grassroots connections and build on its strengths as friends and neighbours within Our Place. 🌱

Kevin lives in Canmore with his wife, hiking buddy and life-long partner, Gail. They have three children and one grandchild and conservation activism appears likely to be a continuing family tradition.

Featured Artist Tyler Los-Jones

Aggregates no.4
Archival ink on rag paper
40.6cm x 61cm, 2018 PHOTO: © T. LOS-JONES

