

# Alberta Wilderness Association



Annual Report

2019 - 2020



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Provincial Office – AWA Cottage School  
455 – 12 St NW, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1Y9

Phone 403.283.2025 • Fax 403.270.2743

Email: [awa@abwild.ca](mailto:awa@abwild.ca)

Web server: AlbertaWilderness.ca

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# President's Message

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Dear Friends of the Alberta Wilderness Association,

It is truly a privilege to serve as the President of the Board of Directors of the Alberta Wilderness Association. The AWA's mission to "Defend Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action" is core to my being, as I am sure it is for you. Little wonder that AWA members feel a sense of powerful kinship whenever we meet, and wherever the place.

While there are many elements to the past months that we could all have happily done without, the times have certainly provided an opportunity for the AWA to demonstrate its creativity, resilience and nimbleness in responding to emerging circumstances. A prime example has been the necessary shift from the long standing Climb for Wilderness to the Adventures for Wilderness. This has proven to be a very successful initiative that will be sustainable in the long term and well aligned with our values. Our sincere thanks to all the Adventure Coordinators and participants who have so enthusiastically embraced this concept.

We are pleased to report that our financial position remains strong though a diverse stream of revenue sources, and an ever prudent eye on expenses. This could not happen without your generous and steady support. You can be sure that your financial contributions are deeply appreciated, and we are ever mindful of the importance of good stewardship of your donations.

In particular, on behalf of the Board and Members I want to extend our warmest thanks to our long standing Executive Director, Christyann Olson, and the AWA staff team: Carolyn Campbell, Diane Mihalcheon, Sean Nichols, Nissa Petterson, Ian Urquhart, and Grace Wark. Theirs is exceptionally demanding work and yet every day they inspire us with their abilities, commitment and positive approach.

The year ahead will undoubtedly be filled with new challenges but we remain optimistic that an ever growing number of Albertans are becoming more acutely concerned about the importance of addressing environmental and conservation issues if we are going to have a world worth passing on to the next generations. With your continuing support we are confident that the AWA will continue to play a vital role to achieve this end.

Thank you, again, for all you do to make the Alberta Wilderness Association a vibrant and effective voice for Alberta's wildlife and wild places.

With Gratitude

Jim Campbell  
President  
Alberta Wilderness Association





# A Year of Challenge, Unprecedented Change, Untiring Support and Hope

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While the year 2019 – 2020 brought unprecedented change and unexpected challenges, as we reflect and write this report, we are thankful. We are thankful for our many supporters and the challenges that moved us to be resilient, healthy and strong in pandemic times. Throughout AWA's 55 years, but perhaps especially through this year, you have made a positive difference. With your help we have managed financially and emotionally in these past difficult months to stay strong and to keep all our staff working and responding to conservation concerns.

Fifty-five years later... so much has been achieved. Yet, there are days when we're disappointed that we haven't seen more substantial change, more measureable proof, of the difference we are making. Make no mistake though, we are making a difference.

In this year, we completed a massive review by all conservation staff of our extensive website. This required updating pages, developing content, and providing historical records for more than 53 Wild Spaces – does it make a difference? *Yes!* Just a few days ago a government employee told us, "AWA's website is the most valuable resource we have to understand what has happened in this area."

Strengthening cyber security and internal security was a priority this year. With the help of our Board of Directors, we have developed a comprehensive procedure to follow in the event of a cyber-attack; we have developed and strengthened security for access to online donations and purchases; we have maintained payment card industry (PCI) compliance and gateway security measures with the provider and developed internal policies regarding security including the use of passwords. While we have not had an issue we are far better prepared in the event we do.

Our Outreach Program, teaching about wilderness, wildlife and healthy living has been ongoing for years. This year we put the finishing touches on our *Adventures for Wilderness* program. The program has been tremendously successful – far more successful than we imagined. People from around Alberta have been creating, joining and supporting Adventures under the program's umbrella. With more than 27 Adventures that included extreme activities to learning about gardening under the Chinook Arch, to learning about pollinators and adding 65 native bee nesting boxes throughout the province, we are truly pleased with the success of the program. Four hundred and thirty-eight participants and more than 600 sponsors made our new program so successful that we needed to develop internal resources that would handle registrations and sponsorships in a more effective way. We invested in developing the needed computer software programs and our Program Specialist Sean Nichols took on that specialized work and has completed the upgrades we needed. People are excited and they are developing ideas and creating more Adventures for the months and years to come. We have developed a very successful outreach program.

Our Conservation staff has been devoted to some very difficult issues. Carolyn Campbell, our expert staff person on the caribou file, and board member Cliff Wallis have worked with the government of Alberta on Caribou Range Task Forces for more than a year now. Carolyn recently raised the public profile of a very quiet announcement from Jasper National Park: the



Maligne caribou herd is extirpated. That initiative has led to steps to work with the National Park and others to recover the Park's caribou populations. We manage and maintain a separate website on caribou at [www.Caribou4Ever.ca](http://www.Caribou4Ever.ca) to help provide better awareness of the plight of caribou in Alberta.

The Government of Alberta's announcement that it will delist more than 164 sites from Alberta's network of protected areas sparked an outpouring of engagement with members. We have developed excellent Briefing Notes and spoken with hundreds of members who have written or called their MLA. We remain hopeful that the government will re-think their decision. There is no doubt that this decision sacrifices protection. For example, more than five percent of what little protection we have in the Grasslands will be lost. Eleven Provincial Parks, 10 Natural Areas and 143 Provincial Recreation Areas will be removed from the network. This is happening despite the fact the government has not met the 17 percent protected areas target that the province has committed to. Grace Wark is our Conservation Specialist taking the lead on this file; she has created an air of urgency about the need to retain these protected areas and has inspired people to let elected officials know why these areas are important to them.

A resurgence in applications to explore and strip mine for metallurgic coal is putting formerly protected areas in jeopardy. On June 1<sup>st</sup> the government rescinded the 1976 Coal Policy without any public discussion (the government did discuss this change with the Coal Association of Canada). This policy change opens up much of the Eastern Slopes to strip mining. For more than five years now, we have worked to oppose a mine at Grassy Mountain in the Crowsnest Pass and a Joint Review Panel is evaluating the application (a public hearing into the project started on October 27<sup>th</sup>). AWA has full participation in this hearing and, along with the Grassy Mountain Group of landowners, we are being represented in the proceedings by the legal firm of Ackroyd Law. The decision from this panel promises to be precedent setting. A number of other applications are waiting for the outcome of this hearing. Nissa Petterson, Conservation Specialist and Ian Urquhart, Conservation Director are taking the lead on outreach and helping people understand the issues.

We have devoted time to many wildlife issues over the year. They include native trout, grizzly bears, sandhill cranes, and Greater sage-grouse. We are part of a monitoring project for the recovery of Athabasca rainbow trout in Apetowun Creek after the catastrophic Obed Mine spill. Joanna Skrajny, Conservation Specialist devoted significant time and effort to working with multi-stakeholder groups developing recovery strategies and plans for Alberta's native trout. Earlier this year the legal case we planned to intervene in between the Government of Canada and the City of Medicine Hat/LGX Oil and Gas was dismissed. The challenge against the *Species at Risk Act* Emergency Protection Order (EPO) for greater sage-grouse was dropped. While we were confident we would have helped successfully defend the EPO, we no longer have to prepare for that legal case.

Public Lands sales have been an issue for a very long time in Alberta. At the core of the concept of public lands is the belief that the public have access and enjoy those lands in the province. Public Lands sales threaten that freedom; so too do land use regulations allowing lease holders to control access to those lands. Sales that would convert native grasslands to agricultural lands (for crops such as potatoes) represent one particularly egregious initiative. AWA is constantly on the watch for and opposing any such initiative. We were unsuccessful in stopping one such sale this year and have been alerted to plans for another that we will oppose. Any conversion of



native prairie to crops is unacceptable given our native prairie, and the habitat it offers many endangered species, is threatened.

We have collaborated and cooperated with many groups over the past year. AWA chaired the international Great Plains Conservation Network and spearheaded the formation of an informal provincial Coal Policy Working Group in Alberta. In February, I participated in a Day for Nature organized by our colleagues at Nature Canada on Parliament Hill. Grace Wark, Conservation Specialist, has taken a leadership role with the Prairie Conservation Forum and has been an important contributor to the Connecting Corridors and State of the Prairie committees. I am on the Board of Directors for Prairie Conservation Forum. Nissa leads the Alberta Environment Network Water Caucus and Carolyn takes a leadership role for a regional Caribou ENGO committee and participates in a national Caribou ENGO group. Cliff Wallis is a Director on the Forest Stewardship Council (Canada) Board as one of two environmental chamber representatives.

AWA's on-the-ground research in the Bighorn area of the province was completed this July. A comprehensive report of the years 2012 -2017 to complement earlier reports was completed; and a synthesized report for the general public is also nearing completion and will be available on our website. Throughout the years we found that off highway vehicle use on the Bighorn's Hummingbird trail system has damaged the health of local ecosystems. We hope the report and data will help others researching similar issues and making decisions about where trails should be constructed.

Our Wild Lands Advocate magazine edited by Ian Urquhart is produced four times each year and receives praise and accolades from all who read the excellent articles. Each issue is delivered to 2,200 individuals with more than 900 also accessing the magazine on line. The June issue featured stories from people throughout the province who wanted to tell us why their favorite wild place was important and needed to remain part of our protected areas network. Indeed, more than ever it seems, the voice and insistence of individuals are needed to convince and influence decision makers to make decisions that respect the input of stakeholders and experts alike.

The following pages of this Annual Report are in the form of an Addendum that includes detailed summaries of our Areas of Concern, the Issues we have dealt with our Outreach activities and our strength and capacity.

I end this report as I began with a note of sincere appreciation for the many supporters and members AWA is proud to represent; your untiring, faithful contacts and financial support are the basis of our strength and day-to-day work. It is an honour to serve as your Executive Director.

Wishing you peace, good health and resiliency in these troubled times.

Christyann Olson  
Executive Director  
Alberta Wilderness Association



# Board and Staff

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## Board of Directors

President:	Jim Campbell, Calgary
First Vice-President:	Richard Secord, Edmonton
Second Vice-President:	Frank Calder, Edmonton
Secretary/Treasurer:	Chris Saunders, Calgary
Directors:	Clint Docken, Bragg Creek
	Owen McGoldrick, Calgary
	Cliff Wallis, Calgary
	Gail Docken, Edmonton
	Jamie Jack, Calgary
Director Emeritus:	Vivian Pharis, Cochrane

*AWA's board of directors is composed of dedicated volunteers with specific expertise and skill sets that support the needs of the organization and the staff. The board is a governance board supporting the staff to achieve priorities and goals for the association. Their strength helps achieve AWA's mission. The board recognizes the need for greater diversity and inclusion at AWA's board table and is actively working to improve representivity.*

## Staff

Executive Director:	Christyann Olson, BN, MSc
Conservation Director:	Ian Urquhart, PhD
Conservation Specialists:	Carolyn Campbell, BA, BEd, MA, MBA
	Joanna Skrajny, BSc (resigned August 2020)
	Grace Wark, BSc
	Nissa Petterson, BSc
Program Specialist:	Sean Nichols, BSc
Wild Lands Advocate Editor:	Ian Urquhart, PhD
Administrative Associate:	Diane Mihalcheon
Book Keeper:	Kim Bilan

*A hallmark of AWA's strength is its ability to adapt, reorganize, and be relevant in times of change. AWA has an excellent diverse staff, complemented by individuals on its board of directors who volunteer and provide tremendous support to the research, advocacy, and outreach work that is required throughout the province. Core staffing was supported by casual staff throughout the year to assist with specific projects and outreach.*





# Addendum

## Conservation, Stewardship, Outreach, Strength and Capacity

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The following pages provide a summary of AWA's work and cover the conservation, stewardship and outreach efforts made throughout the past year. Reports on financial strength and capacity are included. The detail in this part of our Annual Report is a continuation from the report given in the previous year and is a long-standing AWA tradition that shows the work done, progress made, disappointments realized and plans for the coming year.

Contributions to this section of AWA's Annual Report are provided by AWA board and staff with thanks to board members Chris Saunders, Vivian Pharis and Cliff Wallis and staff members, Ian Urquhart, Carolyn Campbell, Grace Wark, Nissa Petterson, Joanna Skrajny and Sean Nichols.

- Christyann Olson, Executive Director



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# Conservation, Stewardship, Outreach

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## CONSERVATION

*"Only if we understand, will we care. Only if we care, will we help.  
Only if we help, shall all be saved."  
— Jane Goodall*

This report tells the story of critical ecosystems, threatened wildlife and dedicated conservation efforts by AWA. The power of the people to make conservation and our environment part of the conversation and the decisions being made is as important today as it ever was.

Our challenge for 55 years has been to increase awareness throughout the province and help the general public and decision makers understand the urgency of our present day circumstances. We have taken action on a number of fronts including the critical habitat within the Castle parks; native trout in jeopardy; long overdue caribou range plans; threatened public lands and lack of access for the public; perennial issues for protecting sage-grouse and so many other grassland species; lack of cumulative effects planning; forestry operations based on harvest rather than ecosystem health; tailings pond dams that are not safe; insufficient funds for reclamation and restoration of industrial activities including wind farms, coal mining, oil sands; and a broad based awareness program *Wild Spaces 2020* that completes this calendar year. While we have focused on these priorities, work and achievements in other areas of concern has continued. As you read this report it will be hard to feel anything but pride in the significant achievements the small team of AWA staff has made with the help and expertise of Board members. We have remained strong in our messaging on conservation, on the protection of biodiversity and in the absolute difference individual, concerned people can make. We cannot achieve what we do without the help members and supporters give every day in terms of their expertise, their time, and their financial resources. We count all of you as part of the AWA team - thank you!



# Wild Spaces

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## WILD ALBERTA MAP

*“The love of wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need – if only we had the eyes to see.”*

— Edward Abbey

AWA uses the terms Wild Spaces and Areas of Concern to refer to areas that are critical to achieving a network of protected landscapes in Alberta that are representative of Alberta’s six Natural Regions. These areas and the networks they can create are the basis of our Wild Alberta map, and represent a visual strategic conservation plan for AWA.

The map has evolved through the years from hand-drawn “bubbles” to today’s more refined version that uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to detail known critical values, such as Environmentally Significant Areas (ESA) in Alberta’s landscapes. Connectivity and the network are vital elements as we look to see the best of what is left; what can be restored and what is still pristine.

The Wild Alberta map is complemented by an interactive webmap (*The Wild Alberta Interactive Map*). The interactive map highlights Alberta’s Natural Regions, the percentage of protection currently found within each Natural Region, and what it would look like to establish increased protections by formally adopting AWA’s Areas of Concern. The map encourages users to browse through the Natural Regions, toggle the visibility of the Protected Areas and Areas of Concern, and learn more about Areas of Concern through linked webpages. In the coming year we plan to develop even more interactive mapping tools that can be used for teaching and creating an awareness of our wild spaces.

The Wild Alberta Map is shared regularly with colleagues in government, industry, and the environmental field, as well as engaged Albertans and students at every grade level, to create a better understanding of critical ecological values, in addition to recognizing the significance of Alberta’s natural landscapes. It is perhaps one of our most effective educational tools.

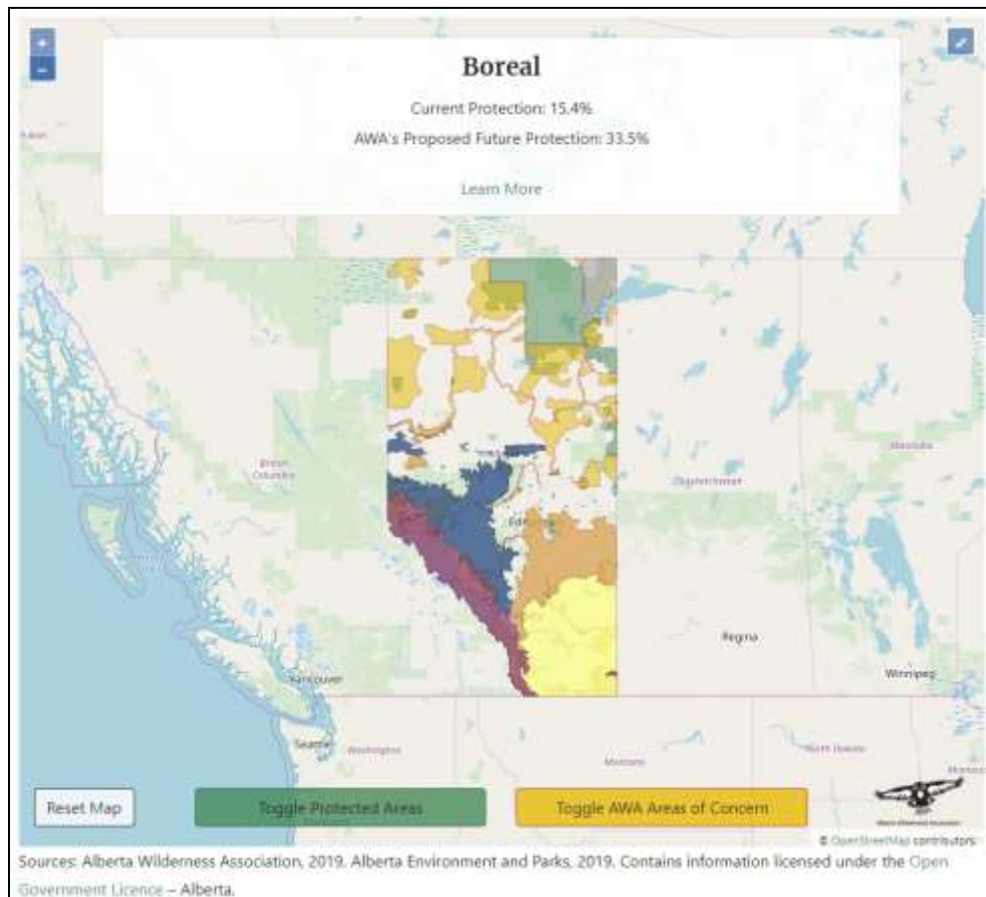
*Dr. Herb Kariel, professor, geographer and Board of Director emeritus never failed to remind us of the value of a map, no matter how simple. In 2017 he left AWA a significant bequest that means we are able to invest in our mapping tools. We gratefully dedicate our mapping work to his memory. Earlier this year, Dr. Richard Guy passed away at 103 years; his passion for wilderness and the alpine came from his interest as a young man in maps, compasses and exploring. With our maps, we hope to inspire more to learn about wild spaces through maps and inquiring minds.*





# Wild Alberta





*AWA's Wild Alberta Interactive Map - each of the natural regions can be selected and explored in detail while recognizing the levels of protection in place and work that needs to be done to complete a network of protected wild spaces.*





# Areas and Issues of Concern

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## BOREAL REGION

Alberta's Boreal Forest Natural Region covers 381,000 km<sup>2</sup>, more than 57 percent of the entire province. A total of 15.4 percent of Alberta's Boreal Natural Region is protected, mostly within the huge Wood Buffalo National Park. Protection is not evenly distributed amongst the eight Boreal Subregions and ranges from 78.2 percent protection of the Peace-Athabasca Delta Subregion to 1.6 percent of the Dry Mixedwood Subregion. Protecting AWA's proposed wild spaces within the boreal could bring the total to 33.5 percent. Canada committed to at least 17 percent protection by 2020 at the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2010; at that time, the Government of Alberta also committed to protect 17 percent of Alberta's landscape.

The Boreal Forest is Canada's largest ecosystem, covering 58 percent of the country. The old growth forests and wetland ecosystems that make up the boreal are vital for the habitat they provide for wildlife, water filtration and carbon storage. More than 200 billion tonnes of carbon are stored in Canadian Boreal trees, soils, water and peat. There is much more to be learned about the wildlife including birds and waterfowl that are dependent on the boreal and the unknown overall benefits the boreal provides.

### Primrose-Lakeland

AWA's Primrose-Lakeland Area of Concern is situated between Lac La Biche and Cold Lake in northeast Alberta, in the southern part of Alberta's large Central Mixedwood Boreal Subregion. This ecologically rich area has one of the highest concentrations of lakes in the province as well as important intact older forests. It includes the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range, which still has extensive areas of roadless forests and wetlands. AWA's vision for Primrose-Lakeland includes a large, connected protected area that extends from Lakeland Provincial Park and Provincial Recreation Area east to the Saskatchewan border and includes significant intact areas of the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range. AWA seeks strong ecosystem-based management plans for these conservation areas and supports a central role for Indigenous leadership in land stewardship.

AWA participated in the Cold Lake Caribou Sub-regional Task Force, one of three multi-sector task forces launched by the Government of Alberta in November 2019. AWA believes collaborative efforts are key to ensuring threatened Cold Lake and Christina woodland caribou populations survive and recover, and ensuring communities in these regions can also thrive. AWA seeks an enforceable land-use plan that achieves and maintains habitat conditions for naturally self-sustaining caribou. For areas outside caribou ranges, we seek management of cumulative land-use impacts to maintain ecosystem, species and genetic diversity, to fulfill Alberta's commitment under the 1995 Canadian Biodiversity Strategy.

AWA supports significant Indigenous leadership and participation in caribou monitoring and habitat conservation. We strongly supported both the draft Agreement (August 2019) and finalized Agreement (December 2019) between the federal government and Cold Lake First Nations to advance caribou recovery actions.



In autumn 2019, AWA led a hike in Lakeland Provincial Park, and met with the regional Alberta Parks staff to discuss management activities in the Park and in Lakeland Provincial Recreation Area.

### McClelland Lake

McClelland Lake and its adjacent wetlands form an outstanding wetland complex at the northern edge of Alberta's tar sands mineable region, 85 km north of Fort McMurray. Its lake and wetlands are significant natural fresh water bodies along the Lower Athabasca River valley, a major North American migratory flyway. Many bird species stop there enroute to the globally significant Peace-Athabasca Delta, others nest within the wetland complex. Its large groundwater-fed patterned fens are strikingly beautiful, featuring long rows of treed peat ridges separated by shallow water pools. It has some of the deepest peat soils in Alberta, formed over the millennia since the last glacial era. AWA's vision is for the entire 330 km<sup>2</sup> McClelland watershed to be designated a Provincial Park, with its two patterned fens designated Ecological Reserves.

The main threat to McClelland Lake wetlands is from potential open pit mining of its upper area and its contributing watershed, by Suncor's Fort Hills oil sands mine. To receive approval to mine the upper McClelland watershed, Suncor must demonstrate how it will maintain water levels, flows and chemistry in the unmined half of the McClelland patterned fen. To date, Suncor has not submitted such a plan.

AWA continues to seek a stronger provincial wetland policy that will deliver on its stated outcome to protect wetlands of the highest value for the long-term benefit of Albertans, we cite the outstanding McClelland wetlands as evidence this is still far from the case.

### Wood Buffalo National Park

Wood Buffalo National Park, 80 percent of which is located in Alberta, is Canada's largest National Park and its largest UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Peace-Athabasca Delta, which lies mostly within the Park, is one of the world's largest freshwater deltas and supports globally significant wildlife populations. In response to a Mikisew Cree First Nation petition, a UNESCO monitoring team concluded in 2017 that cumulative threats to the Delta are not being adequately managed, including threats from hydroelectric dams on the Peace River, climate change, and oil sands developments along the Athabasca River. As a result, Parks Canada developed a 142-point Action Plan in early 2019 to improve Indigenous governance-sharing and to address threats to the world heritage values of the Park.

AWA collaborates with Mikisew Cree First Nation and other First Nations and ENGOs to encourage federal and provincial actions to reduce threats to Wood Buffalo National Park and the Peace-Athabasca Delta. This year AWA urged the federal government to reject the proposed Teck Frontier tar sands mine, in part due to threats it would pose to wood bison populations and to the Peace-Athabasca Delta (see Birch-Wabasca for more details). We joined in calling for Parks Canada's Action Plan to be better resourced and to demonstrate progress with British Columbia to improve Peace River water flows, and with Alberta to reduce oil sands mine tailings risks to downstream waters.

In April 2020, AWA outlined our concerns to the provincial government about its March 31 decision to suspend most environmental compliance reporting requirements of the energy



industry, even as data gathering requirements remained. We also joined First Nations and other ENGOs in raising concerns when Alberta went on to suspend most environmental monitoring requirements in late April and early May at a time when other economic activities were re-opening with pandemic safety measures in place. (See section on [Oil Sands](#) for more details.)

### Birch-Wabasca

Situated just south of Wood Buffalo National Park, the Birch-Wabasca wilderness is one of the most diverse and relatively intact boreal hill systems in northern Alberta. Its numerous wetlands, shallow lakes and mixedwood forest areas provide valuable wildlife habitat. AWA's vision for Birch-Wabasca includes the restoration of legacy industrial exploration and development impacts, an expansion of Wildland Provincial Park designation across a large connected area of Birch-Wabasca, and meaningful Indigenous leadership and co-management of these lands.

This year AWA urged the Canadian government to reject Teck Resources Ltd.'s proposed Frontier open pit oil sands mine in this region. We were concerned about the destruction of important boreal forests and wetlands, degradation of Lower Athabasca River corridor habitat, threats to wood bison, caribou and other wildlife, and increased risks to the downstream Peace Athabasca Delta ecosystem in Wood Buffalo National Park. We pointed to these significant harmful impacts that were determined by the project's federal-provincial joint review panel in 2019:

“[the mine] is likely to result in significant adverse environmental effects to wetlands, old growth forests, wetland- and old-growth-reliant species at risk, the Ronald Lake bison herd, and biodiversity. The project is also likely to result in significant adverse effects to the asserted rights, use of lands and resources, and culture of indigenous groups who use the project area. The proposed mitigation measures have not been proven to be effective or to fully mitigate project effects on the environment or on indigenous rights, use of lands and resources, and culture.”

AWA also cited Alberta's weak regulation of oil sands mine reclamation, including inadequate financial security provisions and timelines, which make it unlikely these mines will be reclaimed by their operators.

We welcomed the decision by Teck in February 2020 to withdraw the mine project. We continue to seek expansion of the Kitaskino Nuwenënë Wildland Provincial Park and stronger management of woodland caribou and Ronald Lake wood bison ranges.

### Hay-Zama

The Hay-Zama Lakes complex is a lowland wetland region, encompassing marshes, lakes, swamps, river deltas, woodlands, and wet meadows. In 1982 the region was designated an internationally important wetland under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971). A portion of the area (486 km<sup>2</sup>) became a Wildland Park under the *Provincial Parks Act* in 1999. In addition to providing habitat and a movement corridor for woodland caribou and other ungulates, the complex is used by a diverse complement of waterfowl, shorebirds, and marsh birds. This landscape also provides critical staging and breeding habitat for many migratory bird species. The area is an ecological island in a highly degraded landscape, sitting above a productive oil and gas field that has been actively developed since the 1960's.



As an active member of the Hay-Zama Committee (which includes representatives from the Dene Tha' First Nation community, government, Ducks Unlimited Canada, and the energy industry) AWA helped see the oil and gas industry meet their commitment to complete their extraction activities three years ahead of schedule and begin reclamation. Considerable work remains to re-establish the ecological integrity of the area. AWA continues to work with the committee and to ensure that remediation of the Hay- Zama wilderness proceeds on schedule despite the financial challenges.

The Hay-Zama Committee uses a “bottom-up” process for multi-stakeholder collaboration that allows for consensual decision making. AWA promotes the Hay-Zama Committee’s consensus-based, collaborative process as a model for phasing out industrial activities within protected areas because it has effectively demonstrated that economic activities, environmental sensitivities, and cultural priorities can coexist. By assisting the diverse stakeholders work towards resolution through constructive discussion, the committee avoided the necessity for an EUB hearing, with this framework contributing significantly to the early phasing out of petroleum activities from the landscape.

In accordance with the 2008 Memorandum of Understanding on twinning Hay-Zama Lakes with Dalai Lakes Nature Reserve in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) in China, AWA continues to press the Government of Alberta to honour its commitments to the Dalai Lakes Nature Reserve. Staffing issues within the provincial government, related to the remoteness of this Alberta treasure, have made continuity in support and communications with our IMAR colleagues difficult. AWA is encouraged by the government's recent advice that there is and will be consistent staffing resources for Hay-Zama Wildland Park. AWA continues to support the co-management of the Wildland Park with the Dene Tha' First Nation, and hopes to see resources allocated to support and train officials. AWA remains hopeful that we may see a celebration of the Hay-Zama Committee's successes and the end of oil and gas extraction in the complex. It is a long overdue celebration.

Hay Zama was included in the Government of Alberta’s boundaries of the Bistcho sub-region for the purposes of developing a sub-regional land-use plan. AWA participated in the multi-stakeholder Bistcho caribou sub-regional Task Force launched by the Government of Alberta in November 2019.

### Peace River Valley

The Peace River Valley is one of the most diverse and productive river valleys in the Parkland and Boreal Forest regions of Canada. A nationally significant waterway that supplies water to the Peace-Athabasca Delta in Wood Buffalo National Park, the Peace is one of the largest freshwater deltas in the world. In Alberta, the river contains a high diversity of fish species, while the valley’s south-facing slopes retain important prairie and parkland vegetation. Plant communities of prairie grasses and cacti support butterfly and bird species that are far more northern than other populations. The valley provides important habitat for migratory birds, resident moose, elk and deer.

TransAlta cancelled their proposed Dunvegan dam project on the Peace River in 2015 and later that same year a group of financiers proposed the Amisk hydro project (AHP). The project proposes a 24 metre high dam across the river about 15 km upstream from the Dunvegan Bridge. This would create a 77 km long headpond, flooding river valley bottom and slopes, including native parkland vegetation areas both inside and outside of the Dunvegan West



Wildland Provincial Park. AWA requested a federal assessment and a more rigorous Environmental Impact Assessment of the proposed project. The agencies have agreed that the application will require a joint federal-provincial review.

In June 2020, AWA received a letter from the Stakeholder Engagement Lead for AHP Development Corporation detailing how the project continues to face delays. Elements such as the collection of environmental data continue to be postponed because of the lack of a Power Purchase Agreement and regulatory certainty. In personal correspondence with AHP's Stakeholder Engagement Lead, AWA learned that AHP did not want to invest any further into a long-term project such as Amisk as it is not feasible without having a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA). AHP also cited delays within their preliminary consultation phase because of the team's commitment to ensuring that they had a clear understanding of all potential stakeholder concerns before proceeding.

For some time now, AWA has recognized that researching historical records of fish populations in Peace River would provide an important benchmark to measure and predict the disturbance to fish population caused by current dams and proposed new developments. If it exists, the information is difficult to locate and we hope to dedicate resources to researching this important baseline data in the coming year.

AWA is part of the Friends of the Peace River Valley coalition working to maintain water flows and important river corridor habitat. We work to create greater awareness of the proposals and their impacts with environmental groups and local citizens.

## Bistcho

The Bistcho region in the northwestern corner of Alberta is a diverse subarctic wetland that is highly sensitive to human activities. Bistcho Lake is one of Alberta's largest lakes, supporting northern pike, walleye, and whitefish. The threatened Bistcho boreal woodland caribou population relies on this landscape and its connectivity to adjoining BC and NWT caribou ranges. Parts of Bistcho remain fairly intact wilderness; other areas have been fragmented by energy industry disturbance. According to the Government of Alberta, the Bistcho caribou range was 91 percent disturbed by human footprint as of late 2017, mostly from historic seismic line disturbance. Bistcho currently has no protected areas.

AWA participated in the Bistcho caribou sub-regional Task Force, one of three multi-sector task forces launched by the Government of Alberta in November 2019. AWA believes collaborative efforts are key to ensuring threatened Bistcho woodland caribou populations survive and recover, and to ensuring communities in these regions can also thrive. AWA supports significant Indigenous leadership and participation in Bistcho wildlife and habitat conservation.

AWA seeks an enforceable land-use plan that achieves and maintains habitat conditions for naturally self-sustaining Bistcho caribou and prioritizes areas for long-term conservation. For areas of Bistcho sub-region outside caribou ranges, we seek management of cumulative land-use impacts to maintain ecosystem, species and genetic diversity, to fulfill Alberta's commitment under the 1995 Canadian Biodiversity Strategy.

## Chinchaga

With diverse forests and wetlands, the Chinchaga Area of Concern represents a haven of boreal highlands in northwestern Alberta. AWA believes the ecological integrity of the Chinchaga



boreal highlands must be maintained and restored to serve as a vital climate refuge for woodland caribou and other boreal forest wildlife. The threatened Chinchaga boreal woodland caribou population relies on this landscape and its connectivity to adjacent BC caribou range lands. According to the Government of Alberta, their home range is 97 percent disturbed by human footprint as of late 2017, mostly from historic seismic line disturbance. Despite the Government of Alberta's approval of the 2005 Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan and Caribou Policy in 2011, critical caribou habitat continues to be destroyed or degraded by industry activities with the absence of strict surface disturbance limits to minimize impacts to caribou populations.

AWA is seeking solutions to recover Chinchaga's wild spaces and sensitive wildlife while valuing community economic concerns. Extending permanent protection to the P8 Forest Management Unit (FMU) north of the existing 800 km<sup>2</sup> Chinchaga Wildland Provincial Park would expand the Park fivefold, with no impact to regional forestry and minimal impact to energy leases. The Government of Alberta committed to this protection in June 2016, and in December 2017 it proposed this FMU as a candidate protected area, but it has not followed through. Current and future commercial activity in the caribou range could be compatible with caribou recovery, if clustering and reduced infrastructure disturbance is required. Local employment opportunities from reclaiming historic seismic lines and abandoned wells, would renew the landscape's capacity to support wildlife, store water and carbon, and be resilient to climate change.

AWA's created interactive maps showing disturbance "hot spots" in Chinchaga caribou range that spotlight ongoing habitat decline and government inaction since the federal Boreal Woodland Caribou Recovery Strategy was released. The Bistcho-Yates economic study, commissioned by AWA and two ENGO partners, points out optimal approaches to recover caribou and support economic activity; these findings also apply to Chinchaga. (See sections on [Bistcho](#) and [Caribou](#) for more details). Disappointed with the lack of concrete action, AWA remains engaged and is working to see better protection as well as caribou range planning implemented with urgency.

### Cache Creek-Wolverine

Located east of Chinchaga in northwest Alberta, AWA's Cache Creek-Wolverine Area of Concern is a mosaic of vegetative communities that support a diverse array of animal species in the midst of many agricultural communities. Skirting around the productive waterways of the Peace River, the Cache Creek-Wolverine wilderness is 11,291 km<sup>2</sup> within the Boreal Forest Natural Region of Alberta, and as such, encompasses many different ecosystems and wildlife ranges. AWA believes the protection of this wilderness is vital to conserving Alberta's northern wilderness given its high biological diversity in both plant and animal communities, in addition to boasting a rich cultural history.

In May 2019, AWA spent time in the area and met members and colleagues. One of the stops on the trip was to the hamlet of Fort Vermilion which at the time was hosting many evacuees from High Level and the Dene Tha' First Nation due to nearby wildfires. AWA's visit to Fort Vermilion focused on connecting with the Hungry Bend Sandhills Society, a local grassroots organization that has long advocated for increased protection and improved land-use management for the sensitive local wilderness. The trip helped make connections and we learned more about current land-use practices and demands.





## Caribou Mountains

The 5,910 km<sup>2</sup> Caribou Mountains Wildland Park is located west of Wood Buffalo National Park. The area contains sensitive wetlands, fragile permafrost, and rare fens and palsas (peaty permafrost mounds containing a core of alternating layers of segregated ice and peat or mineral soil material). The relatively undisturbed, lichen-rich forests provide crucial habitat for an important population of endangered woodland caribou that ranges over almost all of the Wildland Park. The park is also home to wood bison with approximately 200 individuals residing in the Wentzel Lake area. With the exception of Ronald Lake and the Bison Management Area in northwestern Alberta, which contain herds that are disease-free, and classified as *Endangered* under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*, wood bison roaming outside of these boundaries can be hunted year-round. Hunting of wood bison within Caribou Mountains Wildland Park is prohibited except for Indigenous rights.

Due to the area's isolation, and lack of good biological information, AWA believes the Caribou Mountains are vulnerable to exploitation. The area contains substantial damage from geophysical exploration. Timber harvesting is occurring outside the Wildland Park along the southern edge of the caribou range, and trapping, hunting, and guiding-outfitting occur in the park. The park's caribou herd has declined by about seven percent per year from 2007 to 2017 (2017 Alberta draft provincial caribou range plan) and increased motorized access would further stress this endangered species. If the insulating organic cover is disturbed by human activity, the permafrost beneath can melt, damaging vegetation, soils, and water flow regime.

In 2006 AWA participated in the local advisory committee working to finalize the draft management plan for the Wildland Park and submitted extensive suggestions to support maintaining the area in its relatively undisturbed state. As of August 2020, despite assurances, the draft management plan has still not been produced.

The 2017 Alberta draft provincial caribou range plan noted that 45 percent of the range was disturbed by fire, and 37 percent was disturbed by seismic lines and forestry cutblocks, leaving only 35 percent of critical habitat undisturbed; to be self-sustaining, caribou require a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed habitat.

AWA supported the 2016 recommendation of a Government of Alberta-appointed mediator for woodland caribou range management to permanently protect the 6,000 km<sup>2</sup> Forest Management Unit F10, which is adjacent to the western borders of Wood Buffalo National Park and Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park. F10 has no industrial forest tenure. Establishing a Wildland Provincial Park over the F10 area would bring permanent protection to about 70 percent of the Yates woodland caribou range and add an important protected area for the caribou population in the Caribou Mountains. It would represent significant progress towards the minimum of 65 percent undisturbed habitat in these ranges mandated for all boreal woodland caribou ranges by the federal caribou recovery strategy. The mediator also recommended pursuing an opportunity to protect most of the F23 Forest Management Unit, south of Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park. No action has been taken by the government to implement these recommendations.



## ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION

Boasting some of Alberta's most iconic landscapes, the Rockies are a critical source of drinking water for Canada's prairies, and home to wildlife including grizzly bears, native trout, and woodland caribou. AWA believes that the Rocky Mountains must be protected in order to sustain biological diversity and viable wildlife populations, provide clean drinking water across Canada, and support long-term economic and recreational opportunities.

From the time of AWA's 1977 submission to the Eastern Slopes Hearings and publishing the *Eastern Slopes Wildlands* book, AWA has been dedicated to better protection of this region. Some parts of the Eastern Slopes have very little real protection and our work is never done as political decisions change long-standing policies and protective measures with little regard for headwaters protection, vital wildlife habitat and sustainable recreation.

### Willmore Wilderness Park

At more than 4,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Willmore Wilderness Park is a magnificent part of Alberta's protected areas network. Designated a park in 1959 by the provincial government, the Willmore has seen little tourism or recreational development, leaving the area largely pristine. The traditional activities of trail riding, hunting, and trapping are allowed in the park, continuing the rich heritage of Indigenous peoples and early outfitters.

The Willmore is dear to the heart of AWA as an example of what wilderness can and should be. Throughout the years, there have been battles over continued protection of the area and constant vigilance is required if protection is to be honoured in the future. That vigilance extends to educating civil servants who at times seem to place little value on true wilderness in Alberta. There is an ever-present push for fixed roof structures and routes, potentially increasing the degree of recreational access and impact within the park.

Approved and proposed logging operations immediately outside the boundary of the Willmore Wilderness Provincial Park highlight the need for a long-overdue comprehensive management plan for the Willmore. A preliminary management plan was produced in 1980, but never completed or released. A management plan for the Willmore Wilderness Park is needed to serve as the foundation underlying any future industrial, commercial or recreational developments in the park. There is a real danger that the many individual small decisions being made about Willmore Wilderness will produce cumulative effects that diminish the wilderness resources that the *Willmore Wilderness Act* was written to protect.

In 2017, AWA was told that there was a reasonable chance that a Willmore Wilderness Park management plan could be produced in 2018. A management plan that provides true protection of the pristine wilderness status of Willmore Wilderness Park is long overdue and at the time of this report (2020) no draft management plan has been produced.

Proposals to add the Willmore Wilderness Park and other areas adjacent in the Rocky Mountain Parks, to the Rocky Mountain World Heritage Site have stalled because of local opposition and there is no indication that consideration will be given to the this region in the near future.





## Kakwa

AWA's Kakwa Area of Concern is adjacent to the northernmost border of Jasper National Park. This area covers the most northerly portions of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta and includes the major wildlife corridor of Caw Ridge. It also includes much of the Kakwa River and Narraway River watersheds and extends north to the upper Wapiti River. The area is home to important wildlife populations, including mountain goats, bighorn sheep and the endangered Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway southern mountain caribou herds. AWA's concerns include inappropriate coal development, extensive new surface disturbance from oil and gas extraction, and forestry.

AWA opposes development on Caw Ridge and will continue to oppose applications for coal mining, and other industrial developments as well as high impact recreation in this sensitive area of wilderness. Coal mining in this area, as in other parts of Alberta, has gone through numerous boom and bust cycles and there have been a number of different operators. Reclamation and restoration of the area of the Grande Cache Coal mine has been problematic for many years. CST Canada Coal Company has since purchased the mine, and all permits, licences, leases and approvals have been transferred. The mine began operations mid 2018 and mining of the No. 8 mine surface operation is on-going although it was closed early in the pandemic because of Covid-19 pandemic that triggered a decline in demand that sent global coal prices plunging. There is speculation that although initially intended as a temporary shutdown as months pass it is more likely to become a permanent shutdown.

In May 2020, AWA learned of a coal exploration program slated for the area in and around Caw Ridge by Horn Ridge Resources Ltd, and subsequently submitted a Statement of Concern to the Alberta Energy Regulator against the application. AWA cited wildlife disturbance and displacement from exploratory activities, particularly focusing on the potential impacts from helicopter trips for field crews and gear, in addition to emphasizing the impacts of exploratory work on sensitive alpine vegetation and the construction of new access roads and trails. The application was refused by the AER, however the company can re-file their application. AWA commended the AER for rejecting this application.

Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway southern mountain woodland caribou rely upon the Kakwa landscape and its connectivity to other caribou ranges in Alberta and BC. The winter ranges of these caribou are heavily fragmented by a combination of energy industry surface disturbances and forestry clearcuts. AWA believes that solutions are within reach to protect and restore vital caribou habitat while supporting economic development compatible with self-sustaining caribou.

AWA continues to be very concerned with forestry environmental impacts in Weyerhaeuser's Forest Management Area, which overlaps with the Kakwa region. We believe that the federal Environment Minister's 2018 findings of "imminent threat to recovery" for the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou have not translated into Alberta forestry management decisions to prevent caribou extirpation. We appreciated that after many requests, Weyerhaeuser included AWA in its June 2019 slide presentation to stakeholders of a caribou-related multi-decade forestry harvest scenario that it was considering for its forthcoming "once per decade" Forest Management Plan (FMP). However, Weyerhaeuser's final FMP submission to the Government of Alberta in autumn 2019, including detailed analyses of its preferred harvest scenario, was inaccessible to public stakeholders such as AWA until it was approved by the Government of Alberta in March 2020. We believe that the conifer clear-cut areas within caribou ranges



authorized under the new plan will be intolerable for these endangered caribou, and we are also concerned by impacts to at-risk species such as barred owl that rely on mixedwood forests outside caribou ranges. It is positive the Government of Alberta has explicitly stated that its FMP approval is preliminary and that the FMP will be subject to an approved Upper Smoky sub-regional plan.

AWA participated in the Upper Smoky caribou sub-regional Task Force, one of three multi-sector task forces launched by the Government of Alberta in November 2019. AWA believes collaborative efforts are key to ensuring threatened Redrock Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou populations survive and recover, and to ensuring communities in these regions can also thrive. AWA seeks an enforceable land-use plan that achieves and maintains habitat conditions for naturally self-sustaining caribou. For areas outside caribou range, we seek effective management of cumulative land-use impacts to uphold Alberta's commitment under the 1995 Canadian Biodiversity Strategy to maintain ecosystem, species and genetic diversity. We also support significant Indigenous leadership and participation in the region's wildlife and habitat conservation.

Since June 2020, AWA has engaged directly with Seven Generations Energy around biodiversity concerns and opportunities in its Kakwa region lease holdings. (See section on [Conventional Oil and Gas](#) for further details).

### Little Smoky

The foothill forests of the Little Smoky region are highly fragmented because of intensive forestry and energy industry surface disturbance. Even so, these relatively wet and cool forests can serve as important refuges for forest species under a range of climate change scenarios. For now, the area contains a very important native fishery: some small creeks and rivers still support Athabasca rainbow trout and bull trout, both of which are now designated under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). Alberta's *Wildlife Act* designates them both as *Threatened* which has meant very little in terms of habitat protection. Some watercourses within the Little Smoky wilderness also support arctic grayling, listed as a *Species of Special Concern* within Alberta, which also means little for habitat protection.

In August 2019, Athabasca rainbow trout received a long overdue *Endangered* designation under SARA, which requires critical habitat designation and a recovery plan outlining how the critical habitat will be protected. The Western Arctic bull trout found in Upper Athabasca and Upper Peace waters, including in the Little Smoky, received a *Special Concern* SARA listing in August 2019, which requires a federal management plan but not necessarily habitat protection. In July 2020, AWA urged the federal government to greatly strengthen habitat protection in its proposed recovery strategy in order to save the species. Meaningful habitat measures for Athabasca rainbow trout would also greatly benefit valued bull trout and arctic grayling in those watersheds.

The endangered Little Smoky and A La Peche caribou populations are, at best, barely stabilized by a fourteen-year wolf cull implemented by the Government of Alberta. AWA believes the cull is an unethical band-aid substitute that avoids addressing habitat destruction by industry, which is the fundamental cause driving caribou population declines. AWA is working towards the long-term protection and restoration of the Little Smoky - A La Peche caribou ranges, including strict total disturbance limits and the end of in-range clearcut logging, which can be compatible with local economic opportunities. We believe solutions to the fear of economic loss for local



communities include: sharing timber allocations outside these small and highly fragmented west central Alberta ranges, piloting low impact selective harvesting with understory retention; clustering energy surface disturbance into a reduced, optimized infrastructure network; and extensive seismic line habitat restoration to provide local jobs and economic stimulus.

In November 2019, AWA began serving as an ENGO representative on the provincial government's west central caribou sub-regional planning task force, which focused on the two caribou ranges in the Kakwa/Upper Smoky region, just northwest of Little Smoky. AWA believes collaborative efforts are key to achieving enforceable land-use sub-regional plans to ensure the survival and recovery of caribou, multi-species conservation and thriving communities.

## Bighorn

The creation and legislation of a Bighorn Wildland Park has been a high priority for AWA since the organization's earliest days in the 1960s. The Bighorn is a large and intact wilderness that retains its ecological integrity due to the absence of roads and industrialized access, yet it remains largely unprotected legislatively. The Bighorn Wildland consists of a 5,000 km<sup>2</sup> pristine wilderness area that AWA proposes would be best protected as a Wildland Provincial Park. Within the Kiska/Willson Public Land Use Zone (PLUZ) and adjacent public lands east of the Bighorn, AWA would support a number of land use management strategies. These include the establishment of additional PLUZs where none exist, and undertaking associated sub-regional planning initiatives. These regulations would establish motorized and non-motorized trail systems and manage industrial development to a high standard in appropriate areas while protecting critical bull trout spawning areas and other key conservation values.

Following the provincial election in spring of 2019, the new provincial government confirmed it would not implement the Bighorn Country concept proposed by the former government, but would return the management planning of Bighorn to the North Saskatchewan Regional Planning process. AWA believes that the North Saskatchewan Regional Advisory Council recommendations fall short of the protection that is needed for the Bighorn Wildland and must include at minimum those areas promised for protection by the Government of Alberta since 1986 when the protected area actually showed on Alberta road maps. It has subsequently been removed.

AWA will participate in any new processes or public consultation opportunities to emphasize the importance of sound management in this region for watershed and wildlife health.

## Trail Monitoring

From 2003-2017 AWA completed comprehensive visits to the Ram/Clearwater trail system which is designated for off-road vehicle use. With the use of TRAFx monitoring units and ODK data collection system AWA catalogued, documented and described damage to the trail system. Illegal use, fragmentation of this wilderness landscape, impacts on wildlife, and associated erosion and sedimentation from numerous crossings of streams by vehicles has been documented. In 2019, AWA conducted two trips to download data from TRAFx units buried at strategic points along the trail system. The TRAFx units are used to monitor and document the amount of vehicle traffic on the trails. Findings since AWA's last cumulative report in 2012 are currently being analyzed and AWA anticipates the release of a final cumulative report this year. There is no doubt that the topography, soil, and vegetation of the region are not able to withstand motorized recreation.



## Bighorn Historic Trail

Since 1994, AWA has worked to open and maintain the Historic Bighorn Trail between Crescent Falls on the Bighorn River and the Wapiabi, Blackstone and Chungo Gaps. To our knowledge AWA was the only equestrian group to sign up to maintain a provincial trail when the Forester responsible for the Nordegg, Rocky Mountain House area set up the “Adopt-a-Trail” program in 1994.

AWA had just completed 10 years of cleaning backcountry campsites, most of them old outfitter camps, as well as some seismic exploration camps throughout the Bighorn region, from the Panther River in the south to the Brazeau River in the north. Cleanup trips were 7-10 days long with 4-6 volunteers all riding the Pharis string of pack and saddle horses.

By 1994 all major and most minor drainages had been cleaned, with the Alberta Forest Service flying out the bagged garbage each year. AWA agreed to take on maintenance of the historic Bighorn Trail, re-opening it since it was last cut out in the 1960's. Re-opening took nearly 5 years, with many of the volunteers hiking in to camps supplied by the Dick and Vivian Pharis and their pack string.

In September 2017, AWA staff and volunteers conducted a five day backcountry trip, the purpose of which was to undertake maintenance on a three-kilometre segment of the trail within the George Greek drainage and to scout other sections for future maintenance. Five participants hiked in from the Blackstone Gap and met up with two others, Vivian Pharis and Norma Ruecker, coming by horse from the Wapiabi Gap. The hiker volunteers were led by AWA Conservation Specialist Joanna Skrajny, and included Sean Nichols, Heinz Unger, Nick Pink and Joel VanRiper. Notably, for the first time in 23 years of maintenance work, the participants were assisted by helicopter dropped supplies and tools, courtesy of Alberta Environment and Parks. AWA confirmed the need to complete further planning for specific difficult segments of the trail.

For a number of reasons a trail maintenance trip was not conducted in 2018 or 2019. A trip into the Wapiabi and some of the most appealing segments of the trail was made in 2020.

There have been many volunteers who have been keen to enjoy rustic, physical labour days in the Bighorn Wilderness and have played key roles in opening and maintaining the trail through the years. Early volunteers on these long labour-intensive trips included Vivian and Dick Pharis, Dianne Pachal, Sam Gunsch, Verona Goodwin, Dan Olson, Rod Burns and his horses Alex and Rascal, Christyann Olson, and Tamini Snaith. In later years, Norma Ruecker, Heather Crone and their horses volunteered on the trail maintenance trips. We plan to collaborate with other volunteer organizations to continue maintenance of the Bighorn Historic Trail in coming years.

Volunteerism from AWA's humble beginnings in 1965 to today has made AWA's on the ground work, historic trail maintenance, motorized trail monitoring and researching, writing and publishing AWA's book, *Bighorn Wildland* and participating at every opportunity to see better decision making about this area possible. Tireless, dedicated volunteers Vivian and Richard Pharis led the way for so many to learn of the importance of the Bighorn.



## SOUTHERN EASTERN SLOPES REGION

The Crown of the Continent is a crucial mountain and foothills ecosystem spanning corners of southwest Alberta, southeast British Columbia and northwest Montana. In Alberta, this area approximates the Southern Eastern Slopes, stretching from the southern part of Kananaskis Country to the United States boundary in Waterton National Park. The region is a narrow forested band of public lands that provide a critical role as a reliable water source across southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. It is internationally recognized for its varied and impressive landscapes, biodiversity, and critical wildlife movement corridors. The Southern Eastern Slopes contain the following AWA Areas of Concern (from north to south): South Ghost, Bow-Canmore Corridor, Kananaskis, the Livingstone-Porcupine, and the Castle.

The *Eastern Slopes for Tomorrow Campaign, 2015 – 2016*, led to a communiqué created and signed by almost 70 individuals and groups. It remains a vital resource providing a benchmark for protection of our headwaters. Three main principles formed the core of the communiqué:

- Reduce the existing road and motorized trail density in Alberta's Eastern Slopes to scientifically defensible levels.
- Ban off-highway vehicles (OHVs) from protected areas in Alberta's Eastern Slopes and from areas identified by the province as *Prime Protection* and *Critical Wildlife Zones*. OHVs represent a land-use incompatible with the purpose of Provincial Parks.
- Permanently close and decommission OHV trails in threatened westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat, the destruction of which is illegal under the recently issued Critical Habitat Order.

Decisive actions which prioritize Albertans' health and well-being, and properly value intact and healthy landscapes are long overdue. *Eastern Slopes for Tomorrow* partners, while not engaged in a campaign, will need to continue being tireless in efforts to raise awareness and speak up for responsible land management decisions in Alberta's Eastern Slopes.

### South Ghost Wilderness Area - Ghost-Waiparous

Wilderness, wildlife, and water quality and quantity are essential values of the South Ghost Wilderness Area, and in the Ghost-Waiparous that forms a transition zone for the South Ghost area. Expansion of the adjacent Don Getty Wildland Park was promised in the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) and has not been implemented.

AWA works with Stop Ghost Clearcut and the Ghost Watershed Alliance Society (GWAS) to increase awareness of the lawless behaviour and unchecked off-highway vehicle (OHV) activity that has become prevalent in the Ghost-Waiparous area. Ghost-Waiparous is only one example of many areas experiencing similar problems throughout the Eastern Slopes' headwaters resulting from uncontrolled OHV use and abuse, illegal firearms and weapons discharge, and a lack of enforcement. AWA believes ecosystem health must be considered first and only then is it appropriate to see where recreation can fit. Vital natural ecosystems, including the security of our headwaters and our watersheds must be protected. GWAS continues to engage experts to conduct workshops on creating rough and loose barriers on popular river crossing sites and willow staking to stabilize and restore heavily disturbed areas. The trails themselves contribute increased sediment delivery to streams, habitat fragmentation, and stresses to wildlife; some progress with closure of water crossing areas is being made.



In April 2020, AWA staff were pleased to be included in an open house held by the Environmental Science department at the University of Calgary featuring research conducted within the Ghost Watershed. Students collaborated with local members of the Ghost community to assess water quality, carbon storage, sedimentation, feral horse population trends and effective messaging tools used for public recreation.

### Bow-Canmore Corridor

The Bow-Canmore Corridor is a crucial, yet vulnerable, internationally significant wildlife corridor, connecting wildlife movement from Kananaskis Country to Banff National Park. There has been significant development in the valley: the Trans-Canada highway, the railroad, and growing human settlements. AWA and environmental colleagues have worked to ensure a viable wildlife corridor. Without an effective corridor for wildlife movement, there is a significant risk of isolating wildlife populations, preventing natural gene flow and harming their sustainability. The trends of increasing development and commercialization in our National Parks and gateway communities such as Canmore are likely to increase pressures on wildlife. Local citizen groups have taken a strong role in defending the wildlife and the need for protection of wildlife corridors. AWA supports them in their work.

In September 2019, a land-swap took place between MD Bighorn, in which the Bow-Canmore Corridor is located, and the province of Alberta. MD Bighorn exchanged an important five hectare parcel adjacent to the G8 Legacy wildlife underpass for 23 hectares of land east of Exshaw. This swap allowed the government to protect more of the wildlife corridor, while providing MD Bighorn with opportunities to develop the larger, swapped land-parcel. In November of the same year, the Government of Alberta announced that they would be allocating \$20 million to construct wildlife fencing and overpasses across the province, importantly across Highway 1 in the Bow Valley Gap and Highway 3 in the Crowsnest Pass.

In March 2020, the Government of Alberta controversially approved Three Sisters Mountain Village's (TSMV) plans for the Smith Creek wildlife corridor. Previous plans for the corridor were rejected by the government for being too narrow in multiple locations. The final corridor remains under criticism for being far too narrow to facilitate wildlife movement, and falling largely on slopes which are too steep for wildlife to use. AWA is working with BOWCORD to formally question the approval and monitor the situation with TSMV. Any corridor must be supportive of wildlife first, with appropriate width and slopes for large mammal movement.

### Kananaskis Country

Kananaskis Country is one of the better-known areas of the Southern Eastern Slopes: it has tremendous wilderness value and provides essential habitat for large mammals including cougar, grizzly bear and numerous ungulates. 2018 marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the designation of Kananaskis Country, a designation that created controversy and tough debate at the time, but today is a jewel that people fiercely defend for its wildness.

AWA's vision for Kananaskis is that further commercial and industrial development, including forestry operations, will be halted until a scientifically-based ecosystem management plan has been developed. Our vision includes the long overdue enhanced designation of Evan-Thomas Provincial Recreation Area as a provincial park and the development of sustainable, small-scale ecotourism economies for Foothills gateway communities. We recognize that Kananaskis will before long reach visitor carrying capacity and it will be very difficult to effectively manage human-wildlife conflict. Ecological integrity will be significantly compromised without plans that consider the ecosystem and wildlife values that make this area so popular. Albertans love and





appreciate our protected areas network and protection of the segments of Kananaskis without formal designation is long overdue. Under the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP), a number of areas were promised for designation as new or expanded protected areas within Kananaskis Country but have not been implemented.

AWA is a steward for Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve in southern Kananaskis Country. Stewardship work includes recording observations, installing signs, and removing debris and garbage. AWA submitted a stewardship report to Alberta Environment and Parks including observations and conservation recommendations for the 2019 season; no stewardship trip was completed in 2020.

In July 2019, Fortress Mountain Holdings (FMH) submitted an application to amend their water license so that they could divert 50 million litres per year from a tributary of Galatea Creek for the purpose of selling it to a commercial water bottling facility. AWA opposed this application and requested that FMH withdraw their proposal. The Bow River, of which the Galatea is a tributary, is already over-allocated for meeting in-stream environmental needs. The Government of Alberta approved FMH's water license amendment in October 2019, despite having received 224 Statements of Concern during the public advisory period and against internal government concerns surrounding impacts to wildlife from increased traffic on the Fortress access road. AWA was outspoken on this issue throughout the decision making process including, including facilitating over 100 letters from AWA members to the Minister and FMH, staying involved with community members and a local community opposition group ("No Bottles for Fortress"), and publishing an article by Shaun Fluker in the *Wild Lands Advocate* on Fortress and the challenges of public participation under the *Water Act*.

If the Government of Alberta moves forward with the "Optimizing Alberta Parks" decision as proposed in March 2020, Kananaskis Country will lose a large number of parks and protected areas, many of which remain popular destinations during the Covid-19 pandemic. AEP intends to remove 164 sites from the parks system to either be divested to third-party partnerships or reverted to vacant public lands. AWA has serious concerns that this decision will result in a substantive loss of necessary protection and accessible recreation opportunities for Albertans and visitors.

### Castle Wildland Park and Castle Provincial Park

Since the September 2015 announcement of the Castle Parks, a great deal of committee work and consultation has led to the development of the *Castle Management Plan*, approved in 2018. AWA believes the final Castle plan reflects concerns raised in the consultation process and the wishes of Albertans to see this region protected. The plan commits to the phase-out of summer off highway vehicle (OHV) use in the parks.

In July 2019, with 132 km of trails remaining in the Castle Parks, the Government of Alberta decided to halt trail closures to reassess the suitability of OHVs within the area. AWA strongly supports upholding the commitment to phase out all trails within the Castle Parks, as the area contains critical habitat for threatened westslope cutthroat trout and grizzly bears. In July 2019, AWA met with the Minister of the Environment to discuss management of the Castle. AWA has also actively engaged in the regional recreation planning process through the Castle-Livingstone-Porcupine Hills Recreation Advisory Group. AWA and others have raised concerns about the advisory group's activities and its validity as a science-based, cumulative effects planning



process. We currently await a decision by the Minister on how motorized recreation in the Castle Parks will be managed.

AWA continues to be concerned about the plan's commitment to the ongoing use of snowmobiles in the park, which states that "because of the relatively lower impact of winter OHV use, this activity will be permitted." Our reviews of this activity suggest significant impacts remain. Winter is a particularly stressful time for many animals as they cope with lower food availability and higher metabolic demands. Snowmobiles can cause increased stress levels as well as displacement and changes in animal behaviour. AWA's concerns also involve identifying an appropriate approach to safeguard these parks in a manner that retains and protects the wilderness values that make them so special. Responsible grazing practices, restoration of areas damaged through industrial and recreational use and avoidance of the commercialization of these parks are the focus of AWA's concern going forward.

In June 2020, AWA staff visited the Castle Provincial Park to assess the current state of the area. OHV use remains active on the trails located north of the Carbondale River, which is concerning to AWA given the road and trail use is in close proximity to westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat. Staff made some positive observations, as it appeared as though some recent restoration measures were implemented along the Sartoris Road to improve watercourse crossings and to prevent fording.

### Livingstone-Porcupine

Ongoing industrial-scale logging and motorized recreation in the sensitive watersheds of the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills continue to be major concerns for AWA. There are also new threats to the area in the form of renewed interest in coal development and pollution from earlier coal mining activities that require ongoing investigation and responses.

The Porcupine Hills Coalition formed in 2015 by concerned individuals, organizations (including AWA) and municipalities has expanded to include 40 signatories. The Coalition operates under a set of agreed principles including the recognition of watershed protection and biodiversity as important objectives, and advocating for an integrated land management approach which considers adjacent private lands and the visions of land stewardship organizations. The Coalition met regularly with government planners throughout the process of developing the Land Footprint Management Plan (LFMP) and Recreation Management Plan (RMP), both released in spring 2018. The creation of two new Public Land Use Zones (PLUZs), one in the Livingstone and another in the Porcupine Hills, added important enforcement strength to the management plans. The establishment of PLUZs provided designated trail systems for off-highway vehicles, along with clear guidance for both motorized and non-motorized users. It also provided enforcement officers with the tools they needed to improve enforcement of regulations governing illegal activities on these lands.

As the implementation phase of the LFMP and RMP began, Alberta Environment and Parks assembled a secondary group of stakeholders to advise on the overall implementation of the RMP, including trail planning within the PLUZs. The Recreation Advisory Group (RAG) consists of recreation groups, local landowners, industrial leaseholders and a small number of environmental NGOs. In fall 2019, under new directions from the Minister, the RAG broadened their focus beyond the Livingstone and Porcupine Hills PLUZs to include the Bob Creek Wildland Provincial Park, Black Creek Heritage Rangeland and the two Castle Parks. The scope was expanded to "explore opportunities for a regional trail network" and consider changes to the





existing management plans. AWA opposed the expanded scope as the management plans for the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills and Castle had already been completed with significant public consultation and scientific review, and changes to the plans could weaken existing environmental protections. We expect a decision on the future management of the region after the RAG submits their recommendations to the Minister in late-2020/early-2021. AWA will continue to advocate for effective management of the Livingstone-Porcupine's ecosystems and at-risk species through the implementation of the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills Management Plans.

AWA still awaits the completion of the cumulative effects planning in the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills under the Spatial Human Footprint Targets (SHF). Completion of the SHF and an Eastern Slopes Restoration Strategy were required within one year of the release of the LFMP. As of May 2019, the Government of Alberta has officially surpassed this one year deadline. The HSF is urgently needed to manage the increasing cumulative impacts of human footprint (including clearcuts and former coal mines) on the landscape.

In March 2020, ALCES and Lorne Fitch published the *Cumulative Effects of Land Uses and Conservation Priorities in Alberta's Southern East Slope Watersheds*, a report focused on the impacts of industrial and recreation activities on native trout and grizzly bear habitat in the Livingstone-Porcupine region. In support of this study, AWA supported the work with administrative and financial services and has facilitated a workshop on the report's findings.

The proposed Grassy Mountain Coal Mine is located within AWA's Livingstone-Porcupine Area of Concern and AWA has been working towards participation in joint review panel hearings for the past five years. The hearings will begin in the fall of 2020. (See section on [Energy – Coal](#) for further information.)



*Livingstone-Porcupine Area of Concern Fall 2020 - Photo © N.Petterson*



## PARKLAND REGION

The Parkland Natural Region is 60,747 km<sup>2</sup> in size, encompassing 9.2 percent of Alberta. As the transition between grasslands and forests, the Parkland is exceptionally diverse in both landscapes and vegetation. The Parkland is also the most populated containing the municipalities of Calgary, Red Deer and Edmonton and has extensive agricultural development. With only 5 percent of the Region's natural vegetation remaining, AWA believes that increased protection of the Parkland Natural Region is urgently needed. Protection would include a halt to new surface disturbances and the sale of public lands, in addition to the protection of public lands that contain native Parkland habitat.

### Waterton Parkland

The Waterton Parkland area consists mostly of private land to the east of Waterton Lakes National Park. The area is part of the Foothills Parkland Ecoregion. Rough fescue grasslands and trembling aspen groves characterize the region. Increasingly, landowners in this region are looking for and implementing ways to minimize the impacts of development on this landscape, as well as developing programs to minimize conflicts with wildlife. In June 2019, Nature Conservancy Canada (NCC) announced a new conservation easement for the Hansen Ranch, protecting over 900 acres of parkland habitat. The new conservation easement ensures that the landscapes within the Hansen Ranch will be managed sustainably, with provisions to ensure that if sold, the Ranch will never be subdivided and the wetlands within the area will never be drained.

AWA supports local landowners and conservationists in the region. Letters of support for landowners opposed to expanding developments and incursion into wild landscapes in the area have been written to local municipalities. In March 2020, a public notice was posted in the town of Cardston advertising a town hall meeting to discuss the Pole Haven Community Pasture and the importance of "keeping public lands in public hands." As advertised on the public notice, the MLA for Cardston-Siksika, and the Public Lands Alliance were the hosts of the town hall. Upon visiting the website link from the public notice, it was apparent that the town hall and the Public Lands Alliance were in place to promote the reintroduction of motorized use in the Pole Haven Community Pasture, which is managed by the grazing leaseholders, The Pole Haven Grazing Association. In 2016, the leaseholders closed the area to motorized recreation, at which time they were experiencing "over-access, rowdiness, human and livestock endangerment and an overall concern for the health of the land." The lands remain accessible by foot.

### Rumsey

Lying in the transition between the southern grasslands and the northern boreal forest, Rumsey is a mosaic of trembling aspen woodland, fescue grassland, and wetland habitats. Aspen parkland once stretched over 255,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the Prairie Provinces. In Alberta, the Central Parkland Natural Subregion sweeps in a wide arc from Airdrie to north of Edmonton, and east to Lloydminster and Provost. Today, the Rumsey Natural Area and Ecological Reserve (together, the Rumsey Block) are surrounded by a checkerboard of cropland and islands of native vegetation. Rumsey remains as the only large and relatively undisturbed area of aspen groveland on a landscape of hummocky disintegration moraine in the world. It represents a landscape that is almost extinct and provides a valuable ecological benchmark.

Progress has been made on the protection of Rumsey Natural Area from continuing industrial disturbance. As of February 29, 2012, all new petroleum and natural gas agreements within the Rumsey Natural Area include the provision that "Surface Access is Not Permitted." For AWA, this



was an encouraging first step in the long-term phase out of oil and gas activity in the Natural Area. As of August 2019, there are 103 wells sites within the Rumsey Natural Area. The last well was drilled in August 2006 and the current statistics are: Abandoned: 10; Dry and Abandoned: 65; Gas (producing): 14; Suspended: 6; Unassigned: 4.

AWA reviewed a long-awaited confidential draft of a management plan for Rumsey in 2015, and continues to ask for the draft to be released for public consultation. There has been no explanation provided for the delay and the lack of a management plan for Rumsey, which could inevitably see the loss of its remaining intact native features.

Grazing leaseholders received permission to mechanically clear aspen encroachments in the northwest block of the Ecological Reserve; the reintroduction of natural methods to address aspen encroachment including prescribed fire would likely be more appropriate to address these concerns.

A field tour of Rumsey led by Cheryl Bradley in late summer 2019 was a timely and important opportunity to see how things are unfolding with abandoned wells and range management practices. AWA will follow through on the management plan with letters to the departments.

### Parkland Dunes

With rolling hills of native grasses interspersed with lush aspen groves, peatlands, and vibrant wetlands, the Parkland Dunes is an oasis in an otherwise agriculture-dominated landscape. Located in east-central Alberta, southeast of the Town of Wainwright, the Parkland Dunes is approximately 932 km<sup>2</sup> in size, and contains a small protected area, the Wainwright Dunes Ecological Reserve, which is 28 km<sup>2</sup> in size. Management of the Wainwright Dunes Ecological Reserve is led by Alberta Parks, but is also guided by the Wainwright Dunes Ecological Reserve Advisory Committee. AWA serves on this advisory group for the Wainwright Dunes, which monitors the implementation of the management plan that was approved in 1999 for this nationally significant parkland sand dune and wetland wilderness.

In Wainwright Dunes Ecological Reserve, there has been a noted absence of fire, with the last recorded fire in the 1980s. As a result, shrub encroachment has been substantial and has contributed to the “squeezing out” of native species associated with the grasslands and dunes ecosystems, including a decrease in sharp tailed grouse. Concerns about managing aspen encroachment in the Ecological Reserve have been voiced for years with little decision-making or action taken. There is also some anecdotal evidence that elk populations continue to grow in the protected area and on surrounding lands, with concerns that they may outstrip the capacity of the area in the near future.

In 2018, the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan (NSRP) Regional Advisory Council (RAC) Advice was finally released. Under the plan, protection of the Parkland Dunes must be expanded beyond what has been identified in the plan. There are additional public lands within the area; many of these are leased for grazing purposes that could be included in the protected areas plan. AWA remains committed to the concept that the entire area needs to be conserved, which would provide a larger connected landscape for native fescue. AWA believes that the establishment of Heritage Rangelands would maintain the stewardship that current grazing leases offer, while conserving these landscapes for future generations.



## GRASSLANDS REGION

As the northernmost extent of the Great Plains, Alberta's Grasslands Natural Region is one of the most diverse and least protected regions in the province. AWA's vision for the grasslands is to conserve the full biodiversity of the Grassland Natural Region and establish large contiguous areas of native grassland that are protected in perpetuity both for their intrinsic value and for the benefit of present and future generations.

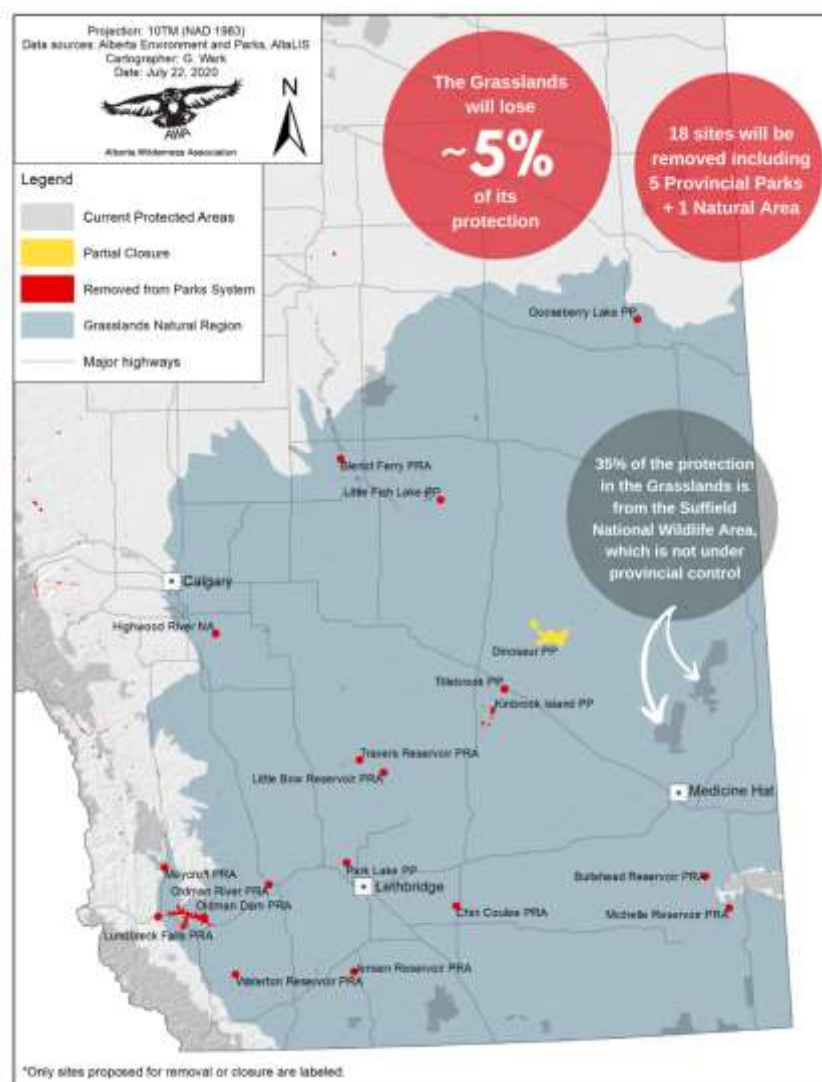
Alberta's track record for protecting the Grasslands Natural Region is abysmal: less than 2 percent of our overall grasslands, and less than 1 percent of the Foothills Fescue and Mixedgrass Natural Subregions have any legal protective designation. These levels are far below the global 12 percent protected areas target recommended by the 1987 Brundtland Commission (formally known as the World Commission on Environment and Development), which set protected areas targets as part of achieving sustainability. In a letter from the Government of Alberta in November 2018, the former Minister of the Environment disappointingly stated Alberta's target for protection in these regions is only 5 percent even though Canada and Alberta have committed to Target 11 of the IUCN Aichi Strategic Plan for Biodiversity (2011-2020). The commitment requires that at least 17 percent of terrestrial areas be conserved by 2020. Canada's commitment also promises that "areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, will be conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes." AWA is working to ensure this commitment can be upheld to benefit our vitally important native grasslands.

The Northern Great Plains Ecoregion has been identified as a global priority for conservation and protection as one of the World Wildlife Fund's Global 2000 ecoregions. Temperate grasslands are the biome most at risk in the World. Birds that nest in temperate grasslands are the most rapidly declining group of birds in North America. Large, relatively undisturbed blocks of native grassland are few in Alberta. Much of the native grassland is fragmented or degraded and although native grasslands are only currently about five percent of Alberta's land base, they support approximately half of the rare ecological communities, 40 percent of rare vascular plant species and 70 percent of mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species considered "at risk" or "may be at risk". The remaining large blocks of native grassland are extremely significant for biodiversity conservation and their protection is essential.





In February 2020, the Government of Alberta proposed the removal of 164 sites from the Alberta Parks system, to be either divested to a third party or reverted to vacant public lands. Once finalized, this decision will eliminate 19 sites from the Grasslands, which accounts for five percent of its existing protection. AWA is particularly concerned about the loss of protection from the Grasslands, given its importance for species at-risk and its current lack of existing protection. In July 2020, AWA called more than 200 members who live in the prairies to notify them of the parks closures and the impacts it will have on their region; many of these members went on to write to their MLA about this issue.



*Map produced by G. Wark, AWA staff to help show the change that the closure announcement will mean to Alberta's Grasslands.*

### Middle Sand Hills

AWA's Middle Sand Hills Area of Concern lies forty miles north of the city of Medicine Hat, to the west of the South Saskatchewan River, and to the south of the Red Deer River. It is approximately 2,480 km<sup>2</sup> in size. Relatively untouched until recent years, the near-native conditions in the Middle Sand Hills area are reminiscent of the Great Plains as they once were.



The extensive mixed grasslands, sand hills, coulees and wetlands that comprise the Middle Sand Hills Area of Concern are home to 1,100 native prairie species, including 13 federal Species at Risk and 78 provincially listed “at risk” species.

A large portion of the Middle Sand Hills Area of Concern lies within the boundaries of the Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Suffield military reserve. As such, the military is intricately tied to the history, and fate of this wildland. Since 1971, the Department of National Defence has recognized the fragility of the area and has zoned the eastern part of the base out-of-bounds for military training. AWA would like to see increased protection and more ecologically sensitive management of the larger Middle Sand Hills Area of Concern and would like to be engaged in a management planning process.

### Suffield National Wildlife Area

The Suffield National Wildlife Area (NWA), designated as a federally-protected wildlife refuge in 2003, lies within CFB Suffield and is one of the last six remaining large native grasslands left in the glaciated northern plains. The NWA comprises 458 km<sup>2</sup> of rare unbroken prairie containing landscapes of national significance, including sand hills, ancient glacial coulees, and the stunning South Saskatchewan River valley. Home to more than 1,100 species of plants and animals, the NWA is a haven for 94 species of concern, 18 of which are federally-listed species at risk of extinction. It also contains numerous historical sites including medicine wheels, bison kill sites, and stone cairns. Many of the area’s dinosaur remains and fossilized trees remain unclassified.

There are still diverse views on elk population impacts on the NWA and on adjacent cattle grazing areas. In general, AWA is neither in favour nor opposed to an elk hunt at Suffield NWA, provided it is done on foot and the need to control the numbers of elk is clearly demonstrated. The situation at Suffield is somewhat complicated as historical predators of elk, e.g.: grizzly bears and wolves, no longer roam the military base area. AWA would support the reintroduction of predators to the NWA as a natural measure of population control.

AWA has been asking the federal government for a management plan for the NWA for almost a decade. While it has been promised many times, there have been no public consultations and no significant movement to release a draft plan for public review. Such a plan offers the best hope that a science-based approach to wildlife protection and management will be implemented with a reasonable measure of public involvement. In the coming year following through on the promise for a management plan is a priority.

### Milk River-Sage Creek

The 5,000 km<sup>2</sup> Milk River-Sage Creek Area of Concern in the grasslands of southeastern Alberta comprises three main units:

- Cypress Hills – a montane outlier with forests and lush fescue grasslands;
- Pakowki Lake – an area of sandhills and a large “playa” (meaning a flat, often dry basin) lake that is very productive for waterfowl and shorebirds in wetter years;
- The balance of the area, including the Milk River Canyon and associated badlands as well as some of the most extensive native mixed grassland, silver sagebrush and ephemeral wetland habitat in Canada.

The Milk River-Sage Creek area is one of the least fragmented, most extensive, and most geologically and biologically diverse grassland landscapes remaining on the North American



plains. For generations, this wilderness has been protected by its isolation and by grazing patterns that have perpetuated the richness and diversity of the native grassland. AWA believes the future of the area as a wild place and as a refuge for native plants and animals that have long disappeared from much of the Great Plains rests in our hands.

Re-fencing initiatives to help improve pronghorn antelope passage through the Milk River-Sage Creek area have been hosted by Alberta Fish and Game Association (AFGA) and involved removing the barbed wire fencing in the area and replacing it with smooth wire with the lower strand 18" above the ground. As pronghorns cannot jump they go under fencing, making barbed wire particularly dangerous. The re-fencing programs have proved successful, and help demonstrate how human land-use decisions impact wildlife and their migration. AWA volunteered on a 2017 re-fencing project.

### Cypress Hills

The Cypress Hills span the southern Alberta-Saskatchewan border and are recognized internationally as a significant natural area. The upper portion of the hills is part of the Montane Natural Subregion, having been left unglaciated during the last ice age. The hills are surrounded by native grassland, and the meeting of the diverse communities of flora and fauna from these two natural regions creates a unique and valuable ecological resource.

In the Cypress Hills Fringe Area Structure Plan, Cypress County initially recognized the importance of preserving a buffer zone around Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park. When wind farms were proposed in the Fringe Area, AWA was among those who spoke out in favour of the intent of the Fringe Plan, which opposes industrialization in the area. AWA continues to oppose development in the Fringe Area. Regrettably, the proposals have been approved.

### Pakowki Lake

Pakowki Lake Area of Concern is located southeast of the Cypress Hills and north of the Milk River, in the Grassland Natural Region. An area of national environmental significance, it encompasses the large, intermittent lake itself, as well as the surrounding prairie uplands and a large sand dune-wetland complex, including extensive bulrush marshes. Pakowki Lake is an important staging area for migrating shorebirds and provides nesting sites for birds of a quality that occur in few other places in Canada. The area is also important for the rare and uncommon plants found in the sand dune and wetland habitats. A number of endangered species live in the Pakowki Lake region, including the greater sage-grouse, which has been federally listed as *Endangered*.

None of the Pakowki Lake Area of Concern has provincial or federal protected status, although a portion is designated as a game bird sanctuary. Pakowki Lake is designated an Important Bird Area (IBA) through the BirdLife International IBA program. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has classified Pakowki Lake as a Category IV Habitat/Species Management Area, meaning it should be managed mainly for conservation of habitats and biodiversity. The Pakowki Sandhills are public land held under grazing lease; some cultivation has taken place on adjacent parcels of privately owned land.

AWA believes Pakowki Lake should be formally recognized for its national environmental significance with legislated provincial protection. Unfortunately, while the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) identifies this area for future grassland conservation, it seems it is unlikely to prohibit new industrial development.



## Milk River Ridge

This area is known for its sensitive foothills grasslands, productive wetlands and the only open plains habitat for Grizzly Bears in Alberta. Oil and gas development in the Alberta Bakken is surrounding the few remaining intact patches. The local leaseholders want protection under Heritage Rangeland designation, which AWA strongly supported during the SSRP regional planning process. The government has recognized the area needs protection in the SSRP and yet incredibly, continued to approve applications for new oil development in this sensitive area.

Since 2015, AWA engaged repeatedly with government departments and the Alberta Energy Regulator to seek restrictions on industrial development and advance formal protected area status. Our efforts were completely frustrated by Alberta Energy's renewal of Granite Oil Corp.'s subsurface leases in June 2018 and the dispute about prohibiting surface access. In October 2018, the Alberta Energy Regulator announced that there would be a hearing to determine whether or not Granite Oil's application for surface access would be approved. However, in December 2018, Granite withdrew their lease application.

Late 2018 brought forward promising changes with Alberta Environment and Parks proposing to expand and re-designate the Twin River Heritage Rangeland Natural Area. The proposal included expanding the protected area by 3,173 hectares and re-designating it as a Heritage Rangeland; the Heritage Rangeland status would offer improved protection for grasslands and acknowledges grazing as an integral part of grassland ecology. While public consultation showed significant public support for the proposed changes, the expansion and re-designation never reached cabinet. AWA will continue to pursue the expansion and re-designation.

AWA included a hiking tour of the area in early September 2020 as part of its Adventures for Wilderness program; this successful day brought beautiful weather and an opportunity to meet with the lease holder who helped the group understand grazing practices and the family's philosophy of stewardship for these native grasslands.

## Milk River

In June 2020, a collapsed concrete drop structure in the Montana reaches of the Milk River reduced stream flows in Alberta to only 4.5 cubic metres per second (from an annual mean of 18 cubic metres per second at this time of year). This was a core part of the diversion system that redirects flows from the St. Mary's River to the Milk River. Since the collapse, the Milk River has experienced natural flow levels (less than 1 cubic metre per second) for the first time in 105 years, which is expected to have serious impacts on southern Alberta communities and producers who rely on this water supply. Construction is underway to repair the drop structure. AWA will continue to monitor the situation given the importance of the Milk River for numerous wildlife species.

## Milk River Management Committee

After more than three decades of involvement, AWA continues to participate, as a member of the Milk River Management Committee and Milk River Management Society (MRMS), in formal stewardship of the Milk River Natural Area and Kennedy Coulee Ecological Reserve. This rolling grassland in extreme southeastern Alberta contains a wide variety of habitats supporting hundreds of native species, including dozens which are species of conservation concern. AWA works alongside representatives from the local county, the ranching community, the Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE), and provincial government agencies.





The decision to form the MRMS and create a lease for the area came out of the management planning process in the 1980s. As part of its mandate, the MRMS is responsible for administering the grazing contract and long-term research monitoring, which has been ongoing since the early 1990s. This region is perhaps the longest continuously monitored grassland site in the province for native vegetation and wildlife. Renewal of the lease has been stalled in government channels, and was expected before year end 2017 - we are still waiting. In the fall of 2019 meetings and correspondence about the lease seemed encouraging however, we have no news at the time of writing this report that would suggest the process may be moving forward.

During the last 4 years, the MRMS has undertaken experimental grazing on the Kennedy Coulee Ecological Reserve (KCER) to study the effects of grazing on attempts to reduce invasive and non-native plant species. In the summer of 2017, 2,500 hectares were burned in three fires caused by lightning strikes. One started in the Pinhorn area to the west of KCER. The second started in Montana just south of KCER. Cattle were removed safely escaping the fire from the south. The entire KCER and the southern third of the Milk River Natural Area were burned. An inspection tour of the burned area by MRMS occurred in the spring of 2018. Repairs to fencing damaged by the fire are ongoing and despite this work being a shared responsibility the government has not helped and the MRMS is bearing the total cost of the work being done.

The MRMS generally meets twice a year and will continue to manage this area with maintenance of ecological integrity as its priority.

Over the years, the local representatives have taken ownership, responding appropriately to threats to the area. Along with the Hay-Zama Committee in the far northwest of the province, the MRMS is an example of collaborative management of a protected area.

### Prairie Conservation Forum

The Prairie Conservation Forum (PCF) is a voluntary coalition of stakeholder groups whose members are interested in the conservation of native prairie and parkland environments in Alberta. It is a common platform to share ideas, collaborate on projects, and promote conservation of these environments.

PCF was established by the Government of Alberta in 1989 to convey support and commitment to implementing the Prairie Conservation Action Plan (PCAP). A PCAP is a five year blueprint for conserving, protecting and managing native prairie and parkland species, communities and habitats. The process was initiated by the World Wildlife Fund, Canada and the provincial governments of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to offer a comprehensive vision for the preservation of Canada's prairies. Developing and renewing the current PCAP is one of the main roles of the PCF. The PCAP is currently under review and, once finalized, will be in effect from 2021-2025.

PCF meetings are an important way to meet with representatives from many different interests and perspectives; Alberta's PCF has almost 50 members. Members represent agricultural groups, conservation groups, land and resource management organizations, federal and provincial agencies, local and regional authorities and service agencies, industry, academia, and individuals. Member updates are helpful to learn about the work of different groups. Not every member has the same objectives but everyone is at the table for a common goal – native prairie and parkland conservation.



AWA's executive director Christyann Olson was nominated to the PCF Board in 2018 for a two year term that was renewed in 2020. In 2020, AWA Conservation Specialist Grace Wark took up roles on two PCF subcommittees that Christyann stepped down from. The work has concentrated on the PCAP objectives related to increasing connectivity within the prairie and parkland regions, and creating and sharing extension materials on the state of Alberta's native prairie.

AWA played a significant role in archiving PCF historic documents in 2019. All paper files were organized, digitized and stored electronically with access for PCF executives and coordinators. All important historic paper documents are now stored within the AWA Wilderness Resource Library.

### Grassland Restoration Forum

Foothills Restoration Forum (FRF) promotes the conservation and restoration of native grasslands in Alberta through education, outreach and research to improve reclamation practice and foster stewardship. The FRF changed its name to Grassland Restoration Forum (GRF) this year. The forum began in 2006 as collaboration between members of provincial agencies, the ranching community, conservation organizations, industry, plant ecologists and reclamation practitioners. AWA has been a member of the Technical Advisory Committee of the FRF in the past and attends meetings of the forum. The multi-stakeholder group is focused on best practices for restoring fescue grasslands. The GRF provides the opportunity for informed debate and discussion. In November of 2019, AWA attended the fall forum themed "Succession: From Invasives to Restoration." The forum addressed a number of techniques and opportunities surrounding grasslands restoration and identifying invasive species. The document *Minimizing Disturbance of Alberta's Native Prairie by Wind Energy Development* developed as part of our work with the FRF continues to be an important resource.



*The Milk River area boasts some of the most magnificent grasslands landscapes - Photo © C. Olson*



## WATER

*“I hope that perhaps if my grandchildren or great-grandchildren are at a lake they won’t be afraid to swim or drink the water.”*

*– Dr. David Schindler on what he hopes his legacy will be to future generations.*

AWA seeks healthy, natural ecosystems in Alberta’s river headwaters, plentiful clean water for all Albertans, province-wide awareness and stewardship of water as a precious, life-giving resource and effective, ecosystem-based management of Alberta’s watersheds, groundwater, river valleys, lakes, and wetlands.



*Buffalo Lake provides habitat for numerous waterfowl and endangered yellow lady slipper orchids are protected in the Narrows – photo © C. Olson*

AWA chairs the Alberta Environmental Network’s Water Caucus and organizes its monthly calls. This year Water Caucus members exchanged information on coal mining and oil sands water impacts and threats, discussed federal water-related regulatory consultations, and updated each other on emerging issues in members’ respective watersheds.

In January 2020, AWA commented on draft Canadian groundwater quality guidelines, seeking stronger linkages between cumulative land-use issues and groundwater quality. In May 2020 we commented on draft Canadian water quality guidelines for neonicotinoid insecticides; we were concerned the draft thresholds were too low for exposure events, and did not consider environmental conditions and interactions with fertilizers and other chemicals that can intensify the pesticides’ impacts.

For the Peace watershed, we commented in March 2020 on the Wapiti River water management plan. We generally supported its overall objectives, and how its proposed Water Conservation Objectives were chosen to maintain a certain level of ecological integrity while



addressing social and economic demands. (See section on [Wood Buffalo National Park](#) for other elements of our work in the Peace watershed. See section on [Oil Sands](#) for our Athabasca watershed work.)

In the Red Deer River watershed, AWA continues to urge the Government of Alberta not to proceed with the Special Areas Water Pipeline proposal, as it is neither environmentally nor financially responsible. The proposal would build a costly water pipeline to divert water from the Red Deer River and pump it 100 km eastward to benefit a small number of residents in the Special Areas. The water uses would be for livestock and to convert ecologically vital grasslands stream corridors to irrigated tame pasture. The pipeline will further reduce optimal habitat of endangered grassland species such as burrowing owl. According to the government's commissioned socioeconomic review, the pipeline is expected to have "minimal effect on the overall economic condition in the Special Areas"; while its overall costs to Albertans would exceed projected regional economic benefits by hundreds of millions of dollars. AWA completed a March 2020 survey on the project, and wrote a June 2020 letter to the provincial government outlining the significant financial and environmental drawbacks of the project. Turning to gravel industry concerns, in July 2020 AWA submitted our concerns to the Government of Alberta about a proposed gravel mining operation that we believe could harm aquatic ecosystems in a sensitive flood plain area between the Red Deer and Medicine Rivers.

In the Bow River watershed, AWA submitted comments in October 2019 to the Government of Alberta on Bow River flood mitigation concepts. AWA believes that the primary strategy for flood mitigation for Calgary and surrounding communities should not be on-stream dam infrastructure, but rather upstream land use improvements, and strictly limiting the future establishment of commercial, industrial and residential developments within the floodplain of the Bow River. On-stream new or expanded dam options have gained considerable momentum without adequate scrutiny of environmental impacts or of alternatives. AWA strongly believes that all three dam options must be vetted thoroughly for potential negative ecological effects. While we support none of the projects, we believe that the Ghost River dam relocation option is potentially the least harmful. (See sections on [Castle](#), [Livingstone-Porcupine](#), and [Coal](#) for our Oldman watershed work.)

## Wetlands

Wetlands play a crucial ecological role, moderating the intensity of floods, drought and fires, providing wildlife habitat, and filtering water. Alberta's extensive boreal peat wetlands (peatlands) are also an important storage sink for carbon. Avoiding wetland destruction, fragmentation and desiccation is crucial to retaining these benefits. Alberta's Wetland Policy goals are to protect wetlands of the highest value, to conserve and restore wetlands in areas of high loss, to avoid and minimize negative impacts to wetlands and, where necessary, to replace lost wetland value. However, large pre-2016 industrial projects, including the oil sands industry, are almost all exempt from its requirements. The loss of high value natural wetlands in settlements and agricultural lands also remains concerning. AWA continues to work towards a clear 'no net loss' wetland policy.

In the September 2019 Wild Lands Advocate we were pleased to feature a guest-authored article outlining how wetland policy is applied in Alberta's settled areas, describing progress and gaps remaining in wetland policy implementation there.





In November 2019 AWA became the ENGO representative for the new wetland technical advisory committee (TAC) within the federal-provincial Oil Sands Monitoring program. (See section on [Oil Sands](#) for further details.)

AWA staff participated in wetlands-related education and research events. These included: an October 2019 workshop on boreal climate change refugia, underlining the role of peatlands in supporting the boreal region's resilience to climate change; a February 2020 wetlands research symposium; a Wetlands 101 course; and an April 2020 workshop on recent boreal ecosystem recovery and resilience research, including boreal peatlands reclamation challenges.

### Water for Life

Alberta's 'Water for Life' strategy has three goals: safe, secure drinking water supply; healthy aquatic ecosystems; and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy. AWA continues to seek progress to improve aquatic ecosystem health, which has lagged behind the other two goals.

AWA is one of the Environmental Sector Board members of the multi-sector Alberta Water Council, which provides advice to the Government of Alberta on implementing Water for Life goals. Together with our ENGO colleagues, this year we reviewed the recommendations to Council for 'building resiliency to multi-year drought' and for a guide to source water protection planning. We also contributed to the Water for Life Implementation Review.

Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils (WPACs) are the key regional partnerships of the Water for Life strategy. AWA is a member of most WPACs. Our staff regularly attend Bow River Basin Council quarterly and annual meetings, and our members attend events and meetings of many other WPACs. In June 2020, an AWA representative was elected to the Board of the Red Deer River Watershed Alliance.



*Bovin Lake, Castle Wildland Park treasures on a summer 2020 backpack trip – photo © J. Skrajny*



## FORESTS

*The greatest wonder is that we can see these trees and not wonder more.*  
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Alberta's boreal and Eastern Slopes forests continue to be managed with a timber-centric philosophy. Policies need to place greater emphasis on forests as vital ecosystems and habitat, providing carbon and water storage, purification of water and air, and the related buffering of floods and drought. Healthy forests mean healthy wildlife and healthy communities, they are inextricably linked.

AWA has supported local communities and watershed groups to strengthen their advocacy against unsustainable levels of land use including industrial development, clearcut logging and off-highway vehicle abuse in the Eastern Slopes. There are two major themes we commonly see and hear about: a failure to manage forests for their many non-forestry values, and a lack of meaningful public involvement in management decisions. Joining forces with many other individuals and groups seeking an ecosystem-based approach to forest management has helped influence some decision making processes, although much more change is needed.

This year AWA staff extensively reviewed mountain pine beetle impacts to caribou habitat to assist in our caribou task force participation. We also publicized what we believe were little-known conclusions of government-commissioned research on overall impacts to forests from the extensive, climate-change-assisted pine beetle flights of 2005/2006 and 2009 from B.C. into Alberta. Impacts to Alberta's central and northern foothills forests were much less than projected. Moreover, researchers found that the preferred way to reduce the extent of pine beetle outbreaks is by selective identification and removal of infected trees, not clearcuts. We profiled these findings in the June 2020 Wild Lands Advocate.

In May 2020, Alberta Agriculture and Forestry announced an increase in Annual Allowable Cut (AAC) in the province by up to 13 percent. AWA is concerned that any increase in AAC, paired with the existing degree of industrial fragmentation and the low retention rates in Alberta's forests, could further impair forest water and wildlife values. At this point in time, it is up to individual tenure holders to propose increased AAC within their Forest Management Area based on the policies outlined by Forestry to facilitate increased cut. AWA will continue to monitor the situation and work to ensure that any changes proposed do not degrade important non-timber values.

### Fish and Forests Initiative

In 2011, AWA's discussions with community members about how to advance inclusive and ecosystem-based forest management in the southern foothills led AWA to form the Fish and Forests Forum. For the past nine years, we have continued to facilitate the Fish and Forests Forum as a collaborative and workshop-based way to bring together experts for constructive exchanges of ideas. Various local groups, scientists, ENGOs and other members of the public concerned about issues related to forests meet two to three times each year, in order to share information, focus efforts and prioritize actions around improving forest management and protecting forest values. There are now more than 25 individuals and groups who participate. The scope of concern comprises the forests across the province and the watersheds in those forests.





AWA hosted three Fish and Forests roundtables in the past year, in September, January, and June, with an additional call in May to address the 13 percent increase in Annual Allowable Cut (AAC). We addressed a wide variety of themes during the 2019-2020 meetings, including cumulative effects planning and native trout recovery, the lasting impacts of seismic exploration in boreal wetlands, mountain pine beetle spread and carbon storage, impacts to biodiversity from industrial clearcuts, and ecosystem memory in the boreal. We are working to make the Fish and Forests meetings more widely accessible through digital platforms, which has facilitated safe gathering during Covid-19 and has allowed more Fish and Forest members to participate, as many members reside outside of Calgary. The May call and June Fish and Forests Forum were both successfully hosted online.

### FSC Canada

AWA is an active member and participant in Forest Stewardship Council Canada (FSC Canada) activities, including recent coordination with other ENGO FSC members that worked on the new National Forest Management Standard for Canada. In recent years, AWA was one of two ENGOs represented on the Standard Development Group which drafted the final standard that was submitted to and approved by FSC International. Key issues for the Standard Development Group included high conservation value forests, protected areas, intact forest landscapes, caribou, and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) for Indigenous Peoples. The new National Forest Management Standard for Canada was approved in June of 2019 and began implementation in January 2020. AWA's Cliff Wallis is a Director on the Forest Stewardship Council (Canada) Board as one of two environmental chamber representatives.

In June 2017, AWA and other ENGO colleagues raised concerns with auditors about timber sourced in Alberta's west central foothills being re-certified under the FSC Canada's Controlled Wood standard. We believed that the company-conducted risk assessments did not reflect the high conservation values at risk from ongoing logging, including threatened woodland caribou populations. Since 2016, FSC Canada has facilitated a number of consultation opportunities to create a National Risk Assessment standard for a consistent, credible application of Controlled Wood designations. A new Controlled Wood National Risk Assessment was finalized in June 2019 that better reflects conservation risks.

From November 2019 to spring 2020, AWA provided stakeholder feedback to Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Inc. (Al-Pac) in its re-assessment of High Conservation Values within the FSC-certified forests of its Forest Management Agreement area. This assessment is updated every 5 years as part of Al-Pac's FSC re-certification process; this time it coincided with Al-Pac's implementation of the new FSC Canada National Forest Stewardship Standard.

Work has continued on implementation of the new Canadian standard especially in relation to caribou and FPIC as well as approaches to incorporating Intact Forest Landscapes (IFLs) within a forest management standard.



## ENERGY

AWA believes that energy exploration and development must be regulated in a manner that is consistent with the maintenance of wilderness values. AWA's mandate throughout its five decades has been the protection of intact, representative ecosystems across Alberta. In areas where economic development is integrated within a working landscape, AWA supports robust management, regulation, and enforcement strategies. Collectively, we know that the economic value of the ecosystem services performed by natural ecosystems for humankind far exceeds that of industrial development.

### Conventional Oil and Gas

The cumulative density of seismic lines, roads, pipelines and other energy-related disturbance on Alberta public lands, including within species-at-risk habitat, continues to be a form of land-use disturbance that is largely uncontrolled and escalating. An exception is in identified greater sage-grouse habitat where federal emergency protection orders apply.

AWA believes that responsible energy development must occur within overarching policies, targets and legislation that prioritize the protection of the ecological integrity of Alberta's wild spaces. We believe that both Alberta Energy and the Alberta Energy Regulator must begin to apply science-based cumulative effects thresholds for land disturbance and biodiversity, including for species at risk, and should assess projects considering cumulative local and sub-regional land uses.

In February 2020, AWA learned that Alberta-based Seven Generations Energy was the first Canadian natural gas producer to receive Equitable Origins' (EO) certification to the EO100 standard. Since February, AWA has engaged with Equitable Origins certifiers to support a sound application of the biodiversity provisions of their oil and gas certification, which we believe could help improve energy industry land-use practices. Since June 2020, AWA has engaged directly with Seven Generations Energy around biodiversity concerns and opportunities in its Kakwa region lease holdings.

In early April 2020, AWA voiced concerns about Alberta's March 31 decision to suspend most energy industry environmental compliance reporting requirements. We were unconvinced that this was a pandemic safety-related measure since all data gathering and record-keeping requirements remained. We joined First Nations and other ENGOs in raising concerns when Alberta further suspended most environmental monitoring requirements in late April and early May; this occurred at a time when other economic activities were re-opening with pandemic safety measures in place. Although reporting and monitoring resumed in July 2020, AWA remains concerned about the interruption of compliance reporting and loss of data collection without transparent justification.

AWA continues to follow the growing concerns about environmental impacts of Alberta's thousands of inactive wells. Compared to some other North American jurisdictions, Alberta has weak regulations, with inadequate financial security requirements and no required reclamation timelines. AWA will continue to seek regulatory improvements to address continuing harmful cumulative environmental impacts from energy development.



## Oil Sands Monitoring

In November 2018, a positive new governance framework for the joint federal-provincial Oil Sands Monitoring (OSM) program was finalized. It includes significant Indigenous participation at all levels.

This OSM framework includes a role for ENGOs on technical advisory committees (TACs). TAC members provide advice on monitoring and evaluation activities to date and review new work plans. Since December 2018, AWA has been the Alberta Environmental Network (AEN) delegate on the Terrestrial Biological Monitoring TAC. In November 2019, AWA also became the AEN delegate to the new Wetland Monitoring TAC.

Cumulative land-use effects and oil sands-related effects are both important to identify and monitor in OSM. From autumn 2019 to February 2020, intensive workshops and meetings occurred at the Terrestrial Biological TAC to confirm and ensure monitoring programs align with OSM “stressor-pathway-receptor” conceptual models. There were discussions of ongoing integration across OSM Program elements of Air, Surface Water, Ground Water and Data and Integrated Analytics. The new Wetlands TAC built upon OSM-related Wetlands work of past few years and had similar discussions.

Unfortunately, OSM funding decisions and field work plans for 2020-21 were interrupted by the pandemic. In August 2020, OSM 2020-21 funding decisions were made public. They included significant cuts to Terrestrial Biodiversity Monitoring (\$4.2 million compared to \$8.3 million funded the year before) and Wetlands Monitoring (\$0.6 million compared to \$2.7 million the year before). AWA looks forward to revived programs for 2021-22.

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This year AWA urged the Canadian government to reject Teck Resources Ltd.’s proposed Frontier open pit bitumen mine because of significant adverse effects to the environment and to the rights, land use and culture of Indigenous groups who use the project area. The federal-provincial joint review panel for Teck Frontier concluded that the proposed mitigation measures were not proven to be effective or to fully mitigate project effects. AWA also cited Alberta’s weak oil sands mine reclamation regulations, including inadequate financial security provisions and timelines, which we believe make it unlikely these mines will be reclaimed by their operators. AWA welcomed Teck’s decision in February 2020 to withdraw the mine project.

## Renewable Energy

In 2015, Alberta’s Climate Leadership Plan committed to securing 30 percent of the electricity in Alberta’s grid from renewable energy sources by 2030. As much as AWA supported this goal, AWA believes that developing renewable energy sources such as wind and solar must proceed in a fashion respecting and promoting the health of Alberta’s wildlife and landscapes.



Renewable energy projects must proceed in ways that do not create damaging new disturbances. AWA continues to oppose any renewable energy project, including transmission lines and other infrastructure, on public lands (leased or not-leased). AWA also urges renewable energy developers to consider previously-disturbed brownfield locations as the sites for their projects. In AWA's view, these considerations are not given enough weight in the provincial regulatory process. In part this is due to the fact that AWA, as a provincial conservation organization, is seldom given standing to intervene when energy developers apply to the Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC). The AUC regulatory process should be a process that is more hospitable to public interest arguments.

The current provincial government informed the Alberta Electric System Operator (AESO), that it would not be continuing the previous government's Renewable Electricity Program (REP). While the government will not support renewable energy subsidies, they have promised to honor the existing contracts reached through the REP program. It also welcomes "market-driven" renewables that can compete with other forms of power production.

AWA hopes that renewable energy has a bright future in Alberta. But provincial regulatory processes must ensure that renewable energy developments prioritize the ecological integrity of a landscape to support healthy wildlife populations and surrounding communities.

## Coal

### Coal-fired Electricity

The UCP provincial government has not reversed course on the previous administration's plan to phase out emissions from coal-fired electricity generation by 2030 under the Climate Leadership Plan. The plan stated that Alberta will increase the percentage of electricity supplied from renewable energy sources to 30 percent by 2030; it would do this by replacing up to two thirds of the retiring coal capacity with renewable energy. One third of that coal capacity would be replaced with natural gas. This was anticipated to be an enormous task since Statistics Canada reported that in 2014, 56 percent of the electricity generated in Alberta came from coal. However, the Parkland Institute estimates that, by the end of 2023, the province will have little coal-fired electricity left. The coal phase-out, arguably the most climate-friendly component of the NDP's climate plan, was made palatable to coal-fired electricity producers through a \$1.36 billion compensation agreement.

AWA, in the names of the climate, health, and wilderness, unconditionally supports the complete phase-out of coal-fired electricity production.

### Coal Mining Effluent Regulations

In January 2019, AWA commented on the Proposed Approach for Coal Mining Effluent Regulations within Canada. These coal mining effluent regulations should prioritize the protection of wildlife habitat and the natural integrity and functioning of a landscape. The proposed regulations required a strengthened cumulative effects approach as well as the consideration of legacy effects and contamination of decommissioned sites.

The mining effluent regulations were developed with standards and requirements on effluent discharge, limits on deleterious substances (including selenium), as well as reporting and reclamation requirements. After the first round of public consultation, an updated proposal was



delivered in February 2020. It further clarified the effluent standards for new and existing mines, in addition to standards that will apply to mine expansions. The federal government also detailed plans to regulate and manage the chronic legacy mining issues in the Elk Valley that have caused extensive selenium poisoning to local waterways and to population collapses and deformities in westslope cutthroat trout.

In April 2020, the federal government announced a delay in the publication and public consultation of the draft Coal Mining Effluent Regulations until the fall 2021 due to “the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic.”

### Vista Coal Mine Phase II

In May 2019 the westward expansion of an open pit surface mine, Phase II of the Vista Coal Mine by Coalspur Mine Ltd, was announced. The mine is located near Hinton and the expansion intends to increase annual production from 10 to 15 million clean tonnes per year. AWA wrote to the AER and the Minister of Environment and Climate Change requesting that the approval of the expansion be reconsidered, and that the project be designated for an environmental assessment under section 14(2) of the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, 2012*.

McPherson Creek, adjacent to the proposed expansion, provides an essential wildlife corridor, numerous wetlands critical to wildlife habitat, and is home to vital populations of endangered and threatened Athabasca Rainbow Trout and Bull Trout respectively. McPherson Creek also provides traditional ecological knowledge value for local Indigenous people including Alexis Nakota Sioux, Samson Cree, Whitefish Lake, and Ermineskin Cree First Nations.

On August 28, 2019, the *Impact Assessment Act (IAA)* came into force, replacing the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, 2012 (CEAA 2012)*. In December 2019, Minister Wilkinson accepted the analysis of the Impact Assessment Agency that the Vista expansion did not require an Impact Assessment under the *IAA*. This decision came despite the anticipated significant and irreversible impacts to local fisheries and endangered Athabasca rainbow trout habitat near the Vista mine.

In early July 2020, AWA once again wrote Minister Wilkinson. With Ecojustice and other NGO partners, AWA requested that he revisit his 2019 decision and exercise his discretionary powers to reverse his earlier decision and designate the Vista expansion for an Impact Assessment. This second request came with considerable urgency given that the Government of Alberta had repealed Alberta’s *Coal Policy* on June 1, 2020. This surprise decision from the government effectively removed a valuable zoning framework that offered some protection for important regions within the Eastern Slopes from coal mining activities. On July 31, 2020, the Minister reversed his 2019 decision and would require a federal Impact Assessment for Coalspur’s Vista Mine.

### Obed Mine Spill –

#### *Monitoring the Effort to Restore Athabasca Rainbow Trout to Apetowun Creek*

In 2013 the Obed Mountain coal mine experienced a catastrophic failure. An estimated 670 million litres of toxic water overflowed from a tailings pond at the mine site, east of Hinton. The water roared down Apetowun Creek, destroying both aquatic and riparian habitats in the upper reaches of the creek. Prairie Mines and Royalty, wholly owned by the U.S. coal miner Westmoreland, pled guilty in June 2017 to violating both the federal *Fisheries Act* and Alberta’s *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act*. The company was fined \$4,425,000.



Further to this incident, Chief Ron Kreutzer on behalf of the Fort McMurray First Nation No. 468 launched a class action against the offending corporation. As part of the settlement agreement in that case, AWA received funding to monitor the company's efforts to restore the Athabasca Rainbow Trout population into Apetowun Creek. Hatfield Consultants is responsible for the restoration work in Apetowun Creek.

In the first half of 2020, AWA contacted the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Westmoreland Mining, and Hatfield Consultants in order to arrange to see the restoration work. In July 2020, Joanna Skrajny and Ian Urquhart visited the Obed mine site and Apetowun Creek. During that visit they toured the mine site, observed the progress of rebuilding the mid-section of Apetowun Creek, and observed electrofishing of the creek. Caudal fin clips from the Athabasca Rainbow Trout caught in that operation were to be tested genetically; the fish were released into natural holding areas in the lower section of the creek. In 2021, fish that are confirmed as pure-strain Athabasca Rainbow trout will be re-located to upper Apetowun Creek. A fish passage barrier will prevent those fish from migrating to the lower sections of the creek where they could mix with non pure-strain trout. In 2021 AWA will once again arrange to visit Apetowun to monitor the progress being made in this important restoration work.

### Grassy Mountain Coal Mine Project

Benga Mining Limited proposes to develop and operate an open-pit metallurgical coal mine located seven km north of Blairmore in the Crowsnest Pass. This mine would have a footprint of nearly 1,600 hectares (nearly 16 km<sup>2</sup>). The mine has an expected life of 25 years with a production capacity of 4.5 million tonnes a year. AWA has followed this proposed project since 2014 with a view to ensuring that this rejuvenation of coal mining in the Crowsnest Pass does not proceed.

For nearly five years, the federal Impact Assessment Agency found Benga's Impact Assessment lacking. The agency required Benga to submit 12 addenda to its original Environmental Impact Assessment before finally informing Benga, on June 25, 2020, that the company had submitted sufficient information to warrant proceeding to a public hearing.

On June 29, 2020 the Joint Review Panel established to assess this project invited the Coalition of AWA and Grassy Mountain Group to participate in this public hearing. Our coalition had demonstrated that we may be directly and adversely affected by the project and that we had relevant information or expertise to assist the Panel in its deliberations.

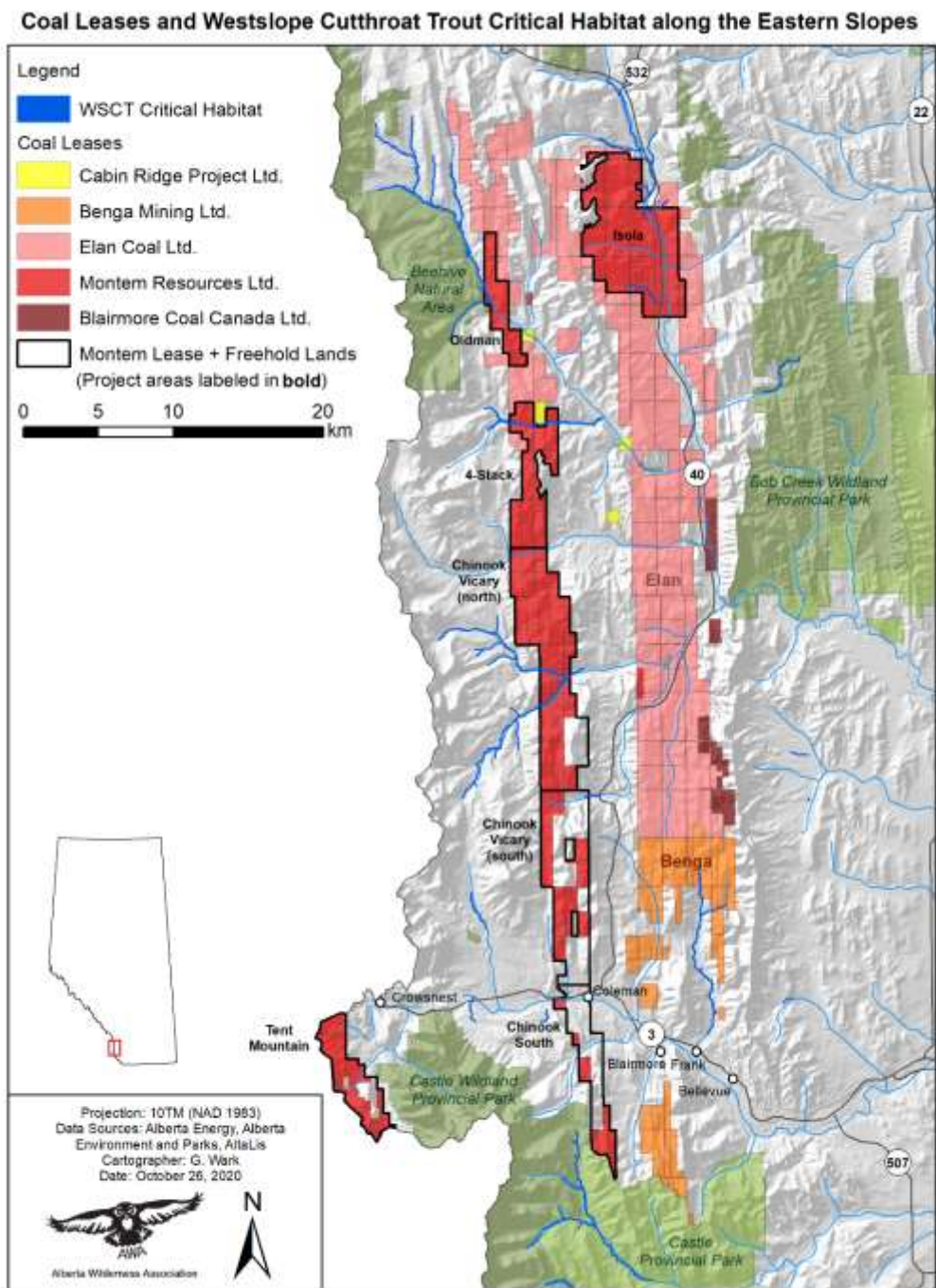
Richard Secord and Ifeoma Okoye, from the law firm Ackroyd LLP, are representing AWA and the Grassy Mountain Group in this hearing. Over the course of the summer, expert reports were commissioned on the following subjects:

- Land use, Access, and Residential Impacts;
- Property devaluation;
- Water impacts, including ground water and surface water impacts, inflow needs assessment and water chemistry, impacts on aquatic resources including Westslope Cutthroat Trout, and climate change;
- Wildlife, biodiversity, and habitats impact assessment;
- Noise and air pollution impacts; and
- Socio-economic effects.





The hearing began on October 27, 2020 and is expected to conclude at the end of November. After this stage of the assessment is completed, the Panel will prepare its report, with its recommendations, for the federal government. The Panel has requested an extension to the deadline for submitting its report until mid-June 2021.



## WILDLIFE

*I love bears and the wildlands where they live.  
Bears have fascinated me, scared me 'til my heart pounded, and inspired me...  
They have helped me to learn about the diversity of life  
on earth and how nature works.  
— Dr. Steven Herrero*

Adopted in 1982, Alberta's Fish and Wildlife Policy does little to protect wildlife, and does not represent contemporary science or the public's regard for wildlife. The Policy was written at a time when there was far less regard for the intrinsic value of wildlife, when certain populations and their habitats were seen as inexhaustible and the primary consideration was for "wildlife to pay its way." AWA believes that this mandate is seriously outdated, and that Alberta needs an updated policy and accompanying regulations that will protect sensitive species and biodiversity generally, in line with its international commitments.

### Species at Risk

AWA is actively involved in providing feedback and recommendations for Alberta's species at risk, whether they are provincially or federally designated. The federal *Species at Risk Act (SARA)* and other pieces of legislation provide stronger measures of protection than Alberta's *Wildlife Act*. AWA seeks more comprehensive provincial policy and legislation, and for federal enforcement to be as strong as possible.

With immense declines in global biodiversity, public representatives need to be accountable for creating a framework that is robust enough to protect Alberta's wildlife and habitat, and is reflective of the public's intrinsic value for wildlife.

Alberta's *Wildlife Act* has a tremendous number of bureaucratic hurdles that hinders effective progress towards preventing the extirpation of endangered or threatened species in Alberta. AWA continues to raise awareness and advocate for improved provincial legislation that hastens the designation of species at risk, requires the legal protection of critical habitat, and provides means for developing and implementing recovery strategies within obligatory timelines.

AWA continues to monitor and provide input on the progress of recovery processes for wildlife, including proposed additions to the species listed under SARA. When the opportunity arises, AWA provides comments on proposed documents open for public consultation prepared under SARA.

Effective application of SARA to bring about more habitat protection is needed. Species at risk listings usually occur several years after the Committee On the Status of Endangered Wildlife In Canada (COSEWIC) recommends a certain species is at some level of risk of extirpation. Studies have shown that when a listing decision is made, species perceived to be economically valuable, species managed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), or those that occur only in Canada are the least likely to receive listing. Recovery strategies, protection orders, and action plans for the majority of species listed under SARA are either issued well past legislated deadlines or not at all.

In the case of woodland caribou, AWA has been working with colleagues across the country to ensure enough habitat is protected to stabilize and recover this iconic species. We reviewed the



Draft Canada-Alberta Caribou Conservation Agreement released in August 2019. It lacked interim habitat protection to ensure Alberta met its stated commitments to complete overdue SARA-compliant caribou Range Plans. This agreement had not been finalized as of August 2020. In January 2019, Ecojustice, representing AWA, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, and David Suzuki Foundation, launched a lawsuit against the federal environment minister for failing to issue a safety net order for the critical habitat of five boreal woodland caribou populations in northeast Alberta. Safety net orders extend the protections under SARA to provincial and territorial lands. To date, not a single safety net order has been issued. In December 2019, our legal case was adjourned, pending further discussions with the federal government.

AWA and partner conservation groups remain vigilant and have found it necessary to turn to legal action in order to have SARA invoked. Please refer to specific sections for details of our work on species at risk that include [woodland caribou](#), [greater sage-grouse](#), [native trout](#) including [westslope cutthroat trout](#), [Athabasca rainbow trout](#), [bull trout](#), [wood and plains bison](#).

### Grizzly Bears

Since the designation of the grizzly bear as a provincially *Threatened* species in June 2010, AWA has worked to ensure that this status leads to on-the-ground improvements to known grizzly habitat; in particular government and industrial support and action to reduce human use of access. The province's 2008 Recovery Plan for grizzly bears was clear; it stated "human use of access (specifically, motorized vehicle routes) is one of the primary threats to grizzly bear persistence."

The 2008 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan expired in 2013 and despite expectations that it would be renewed at the end of 2013 (or early 2014) with only minor changes, the government decided to undertake a complete rewrite. On June 1, 2016, the draft revised Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan was released. The long overdue document has not been released. The final Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan must apply the Precautionary Principle to reduce disturbances and human access in grizzly habitat before there can be a viable population in Alberta. AWA is anticipating the release of the final Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan although a search of the government website at the time of writing only provides the 2008-2013 Recovery Plan.

The number of recorded grizzly bear deaths over the last two years clearly show the threatened species is dying at a troubling rate. Grizzly bear deaths in 2016 marked the highest number of human-caused grizzly deaths since stopping the hunt in 2006. When the Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan was written in 2008, it was estimated that there were fewer than 700 grizzlies remaining in the province. Since that time, a total of 227 bear deaths have been documented, of those, 208 deaths were known to be human caused.

No update to these statistics has been published. In the past year, mortality reports included the highway death of a 275 kg male grizzly near Jumpingpound Creek, the loss of a male grizzly bear that was struck and killed by a semi-trailer south of the Trans-Canada Highway, and an emaciated young female grizzly who was euthanized after being struck by a vehicle on the highway only 10 days prior.

The rehabilitation of grizzly bears, a threatened species, continues to be banned even though Alberta's grizzly bears have some of the lowest reproduction rates of any species in the world. In early May 2020, Alberta Fish and Game officers located three orphaned grizzly bear cubs after



their mother had been shot and killed by black bear hunters. The cubs were temporarily placed with the Calgary Zoo until a permanent residence could be found. During that time AWA along with fellow conservationists petitioned the provincial government to allow for the rehabilitation and ultimate release of the cubs in Alberta. AWA believes the rehabilitation of grizzly bears within Alberta should be allowed; neighboring jurisdictions like British Columbia's Northern Lights Society have demonstrated that it can be done successfully with "no post release conflicts or issues with any of the bears." As a threatened species with low reproductive rates, the survival of every individual bear is extremely important in stabilizing Alberta's grizzly bear population.

A comprehensive and well-funded BearSmart and Karelian Bear Dog program is needed to provide public education and help reduce the number of human-bear conflicts. These initiatives can have a tremendous impact on the successful recovery of grizzly bears. Stringent limits on the amount of motorized access into grizzly bear habitat would address the top reason for grizzly bear deaths and yet there seems to be no sense of urgency to take meaningful action on these positive solutions.

### Black Bears

Although black bears may seem abundant in Alberta, the only density study completed for the province was done in 1993 and estimated 40,000 bears. AWA believes it is possible that significant landscape and habitat changes in the years since that estimate could have influenced the black bear population and we likely have no real idea of how many black bears there are. Nevertheless management decisions are being made based on the 1993 estimates, now 27 years old, on a landscape where little has stayed the same. More transparent and scientific data is required to understand population numbers and track mortality and incidences of human-bear conflicts.

The Government of Alberta announced in the spring of 2018 after significant public pressure that the rehabilitation of orphaned black bear cubs would be permitted in Alberta. AWA welcomed this announcement and encouraged this measure to be expanded to other species, in particular threatened grizzly bears. Regrettably, other wildlife continue to be prohibited from rehabilitation efforts, including bighorn sheep, mountain goats, wolves, coyotes, black bear adults, and cougars.

We know black bears are experiencing an increase in human related mortalities. Over the span of the summer of 2020, a total of six black bears were killed in Banff National Park, four bears on the Trans-Canada Highway and Icefield Parkway, and one on the Canadian Pacific Railway. Although black bears are considered to be more resilient to human activity with higher density numbers and reproductive rates, AWA continues to advocate for a more thorough assessment of population numbers, the rehabilitation of orphaned black bear cubs, continual funding for the Alberta BearSmart programs, and implementing more specific measures for reducing bear attractants. AWA believes that the hunting practice of bear baiting is unethical, and advocates for its immediate end. Mandatory reporting of unlicensed harvest on private land must be instituted.

### Caribou

Woodland caribou are perfectly adapted to Alberta's boreal, foothills and mountain regions. They are important to Indigenous peoples, and are an indicator species for the intactness of their home ranges. However, their survival is threatened by cumulative industrial impacts that



fragment the older forests and wetlands they rely upon to avoid encounters with predators. AWA's vision is for naturally self-sustaining, connected populations of woodland caribou.

A draft Canada-Alberta Caribou Conservation Agreement was released for public comment in August 2019 and outlined some important timelines and commitments by Alberta to complete overdue, enforceable caribou range plans. AWA voiced concern that the absence of interim habitat protection measures makes it likely that critical habitat disturbance and caribou extirpation risk will continue to increase. This agreement had not been finalized as of August 2020.

AWA worked to advance collaborative agreements and on-the-ground actions to maintain and restore caribou habitat. These efforts are key to ensuring that our caribou populations survive and recover and that communities can also thrive. AWA participated in the Government of Alberta's three multi-sector task forces launched in November 2019. These MLA-chaired task forces were appointed to provide recommendations for sub-regional land-use plans, in sub-regions overlapping with caribou ranges in northeast, northwest, and west central Alberta. (See sections on [Primrose-Lakeland](#), [Bistcho](#) and [Kakwa](#) Areas of Concern for more details.)

In December 2019, our legal case concerning protection for boreal caribou habitat in northeastern Alberta was adjourned, pending further discussions between those of us who initiated the lawsuit and the federal government. Ecojustice, representing AWA, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, and David Suzuki Foundation, stated at the time that our group members were deeply concerned about the future of boreal caribou in northeast Alberta, where habitat destruction and fragmentation threatens their survival, and that we were encouraged by the opportunity for continued discussions with the federal environment minister.

In December 2019, AWA welcomed a finalized caribou conservation agreement between the federal government and Cold Lake First Nations. This is a positive step to enhance Cold Lake First Nations' capacity and leadership to recover woodland caribou within its traditional territory in northeast Alberta and northwest Saskatchewan. AWA has also profiled the four-party caribou conservation agreement between Saulteau First Nations, West Moberly First Nations, Canada and B.C that was finalized in February 2020. This agreement covers the "Central Group" of southern mountain caribou, including the Narraway population, whose range extends into Alberta. It recognizes Indigenous leadership in habitat stewardship, and includes land-use, funding and dispute resolution elements that are significantly stronger than the draft Canada-Alberta agreement.

### Greater Sage-grouse

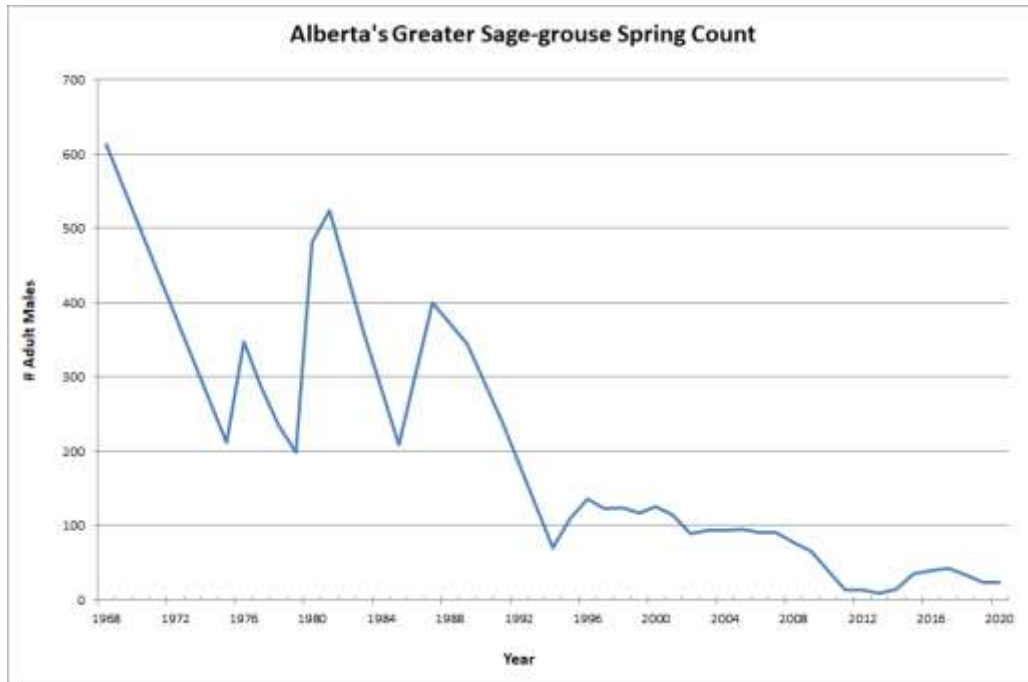
The long-term future of our grasslands, which provide habitat for greater sage-grouse as well as dozens of other federally and provincially listed species depends on the stewardship of many, not the least of which is the stewardship landowners and leaseholders practice. Just a few years ago, in the absence of any meaningful protection from the provincial and the federal governments, it seemed inevitable that greater sage-grouse would go extinct in Canada. In 1996 the estimate was 777 birds; by 2013 only 8 males were counted in Alberta. In 2013 AWA, the Wilderness Committee, Nature Saskatchewan and Grasslands Naturalists – represented by Ecojustice lawyers – successfully challenged the federal government to step up protections for the sage-grouse, resulting in the issuance of an Emergency Protection Order.





The protection order has resulted in an overall increase in populations: from 14 males in 2014, to 35 counted in 2015. The entire 2016 Canadian population of sage-grouse was estimated to be 340 birds, including 38 females imported from Montana in the spring of 2016.

Alberta's 2020 spring count yielded a stable count of only 24 males and the entire Alberta population estimate is 72.



Saskatchewan's sage-grouse counts numbered only 18 males in 2012. In 2019, Saskatchewan Environment reported only 2 active leks (mating grounds), both found in Grasslands National Park. At this time 16 males were counted, compared to 33 males in 2016.

Translocation to Alberta from Montana last occurred in 2019 and until Covid-19 pandemic restrictions are lifted, there are no border crossings permitted. Alberta Environment has continued with predator and habitat projects and the Calgary Zoo released birds that they are tracking. AWA believes lack of protected habitat is the more significant issue and we know costly rearing and release programs are no substitute for habitat. The news that the Orphan Well Association has plans to abandon and remove structures from 125 oil and gas sites this year (former LGX sites) is exciting. All of these wells are in the core sage-grouse range and we are optimistic about the immediate and longer term benefits this reclamation work will have to the local population.

AWA, represented by Ecojustice, planned to participate in legal action filed by the City of Medicine Hat and LGX Oil against the Emergency Protection Order. In July we learned that the applicants (Medicine Hat and LGX) apparently came to an agreement with the Government of Canada and the case was discontinued (terminated).





## Wolves

As top predators, wolves play a valuable role in keeping wild ecosystems healthy. AWA's goal is for the provincial government to take responsibility for managing Alberta's wolves in a science-based, responsible and transparent manner. Measured, effective, and humane approaches to wolf management are key.

The main focus of our 2019-2020 wolf work has been in relation to woodland caribou management. Caribou habitat fragmentation due to the combined impacts of extensive seismic lines, forestry clearcuts, and industrial infrastructure has robbed caribou of their ability to avoid overlap with wolves. AWA believes using the wolf cull to stabilize caribou populations while allowing caribou habitat to further deteriorate is an unethical band-aid measure. We remain concerned that this program will continue to be misused to justify further delays in urgently needed reductions of human-caused habitat disturbance in caribou ranges.

## Game Farming

AWA supports living wildlife as part of our economy and we restrict this support to economies based on maintaining populations living wild in their natural habitats. AWA has opposed the domestication, privatization and commercialization of wildlife including on game farms since 1980 when Alberta's Wildlife Policy was rewritten to allow game farming. Chronic wasting disease (CWD), a pervasive and unstoppable prion disease, had spread from game farms to wild populations in southeastern Alberta by 1996. Since then, the growth of the disease has been exponential and continues to spread west.

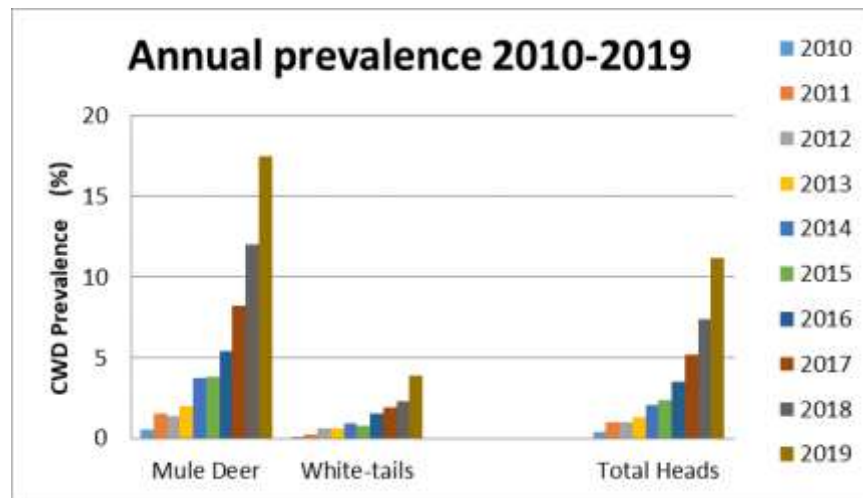
AWA has requested both federal and provincial leadership in confronting CWD and in eliminating the game farming industry in the province. Although there is no record of CWD jumping the species barrier to humans, AWA has long held that it will likely only be a matter of time. A similar prion disease, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), provides a cautionary tale on how human-animal contraction can have devastating consequences. In April 2017, preliminary findings from a study of long-term exposure of CWD to macaques conducted at the University of Calgary indicated that those that were fed deer meat eventually developed symptoms of the disease. Health Canada and province recommend "avoiding consumption of foods from known infected or any diseased animals."

Currently cervids are known to carry CWD in 6 countries worldwide, including in 27 USA states and two Canadian provinces. Of these, only the USA and Canada have CWD in both farmed and wild animals.

Fortunately, public awareness of the potential public health crisis is growing. In December of 2018, the Dene Nation raised concerns of the potential impacts that CWD would have, if spread to remaining caribou populations. Over 30 stakeholders and experts wrote to the federal government in the summer, warning of potential trade embargoes and health risks if the government fails to contain the disease, an action that received widespread media attention. The National Fishing and Hunting Collaborative (representing fish and game organizations across the country) urged the federal and provincial governments to take action to meaningfully tackle CWD, and has listed it as a top priority in the upcoming federal election.

In the 2019-2020 hunting season, over 10,000 heads were submitted for testing and of those, 11.2 percent tested positive for CWD, including 1,155 deer, three elk and two moose.





CWD prevalence in heads submitted for testing. Source: Government of Alberta

Newly-published findings from the Department of Veterinary Pathology, Western College of Veterinary Medicine, Saskatoon, by researcher Trent Bollinger and his large team, takes a comprehensive look at CWD in wild cervids. It shows Alberta with no current farm outbreaks, and 10 farms that have been closed and destocked due to CWD. Saskatchewan shows one current farm outbreak and at least 50 closed farms. The research also shows the impact of CWD on declining wild herd populations. In examining what are effective control mechanisms, it appears that managing “alternative food sources” would probably achieve the most effect, but would take a considerable coordinated province-wide approach, perhaps unachievable.

Alternative food sources include hay and grain stored on the ground and even bales set out for erosion control, along with salt block sites. Congregation is a primary way CWD spreads amongst cervids.

### Native Trout

Alberta is home to several different species of native trout that have adapted to thrive in the cold, clear streams and lakes of the Rocky Mountains and Foothills. While many of them once had large historical ranges reaching all the way to the prairies, native trout populations today occupy only a small fraction of that range in small, isolated patches.

The decline of native trout in Alberta indicates that our watersheds are not healthy and that land uses on surrounding landscapes need to be managed more carefully to ensure native trout populations persist in the future. AWA opposes several ongoing proposals we believe will harm native fish species. In general, forest management practices, management of motorized recreation, and protection of critical habitat all need to be improved greatly if native trout are to have a chance of recovering. No new development (e.g.: roads, trails, transmission lines, pipelines, well sites, buildings, fences, bridges) should be allowed in areas that are critical habitat. We also continue to be opposed to multiple coal mine proposals that could have severe impacts on threatened native fish. (See sections on [Grassy Mountain](#) and [Vista Coal Mine Phase II](#).)

While westslope cutthroat trout are the only species currently with legal habitat protection, other species including bull trout and Athabasca rainbow trout have recently been listed and will receive their own habitat protections in time. Therefore, it is important that the precautionary principle guide land use decisions affecting all threatened native fish species. AWA will continue



to raise awareness about the important connection between healthy water and abundant native trout.

### Athabasca Rainbow Trout

Athabasca Rainbow Trout were listed as *Endangered* under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) in August 2019. In June 2020, the federal government released a draft Recovery Strategy for this endangered species. AWA believes the draft Recovery Strategy does not contain the necessary level of legal habitat protection required to save the species and that all floodplains and headwaters watersheds containing Athabasca rainbow trout must be unconditionally protected with a Critical Habitat Order. In addition to immediate critical habitat protection, the Recovery Strategy must commit to the completion of an Action Plan and any necessary studies as quickly as possible, while simultaneously proceeding with actions that can support the recovery of Athabasca Rainbow Trout without delay. AWA will continue to advocate for swift recovery actions to save this endangered species.

### Bull Trout

In July 2015, AWA wrote to support a listing as *Threatened* for Saskatchewan-Nelson populations of bull trout under SARA. This listing occurred in August 2019. Also in August 2019, western Arctic populations of bull trout, which include populations in Alberta's Peace and Athabasca basins, were listed under SARA as *Species of Special Concern*. From 2015 to 2019, AWA participated in the development of a recovery plan and strategy for the species; as of July 2020, a provincial Recovery Plan has yet to be published.

In June 2020, the federal government released a draft Recovery Strategy for Alberta's Saskatchewan-Nelson populations of bull trout. AWA believes that the draft Recovery Strategy does not reflect best available evidence on the necessary level of legal critical habitat identification and protection required to save the species; at minimum, all floodplains and HUC 8 headwaters watersheds containing bull trout must be protected. More aggressive commitments to protect and restore watersheds must also be included in the Recovery Strategy, especially for precarious populations in the Oldman and Red Deer River basins.

### Westslope cutthroat trout

Westslope cutthroat trout, provincially and federally designated as *Threatened*, have been an ongoing priority for AWA conservation efforts. Now that a critical habitat order has been issued, protection and restoration of this species and its habitat must be effectively implemented.

In 2019, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada released a draft Action Plan for westslope cutthroat trout, which was finalized in December of that year. AWA believes the plan's new "bounding-box" approach to critical habitat will likely perpetuate further habitat destruction. The Action Plan is also lacking concrete commitments from DFO to routinely monitor and report on the status of all remaining westslope cutthroat trout populations, complete on-the-ground assessments, and create an immediate restoration plan for critical habitat

### Wood and Plains Bison

AWA's concern over the health of Alberta's wood and plains bison populations is longstanding. We strive to ensure that populations of wild bison – bison that have not been subject to gene introgression through hybridization with cattle – are recovered in Alberta.



Wood bison are truly impressive creatures, North America's largest native terrestrial mammal. AWA believes the recovery of wood bison is possible with the designation and protection of critical habitat, and the development of enforceable action plans that prioritize Indigenous management and food sovereignty. AWA believes that provincial measures on Alberta public lands are inadequate. Ronald Lake wood bison are designated as a Subject Animal under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*, which prohibits non-Indigenous hunting. Bison in Alberta's Bison Protection Area (the Hay-Zama population) are listed as *Endangered* under the *Wildlife Act*, with management strategies such as limited hunting draws to control population size and subsequent eastward expansion of the herd.

Under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), wood bison are listed as *Threatened*. The 2018 federal wood bison recovery strategy reported Alberta had about 20 percent of Canada's free ranging and disease-free wood bison, with the Hay-Zama population numbering 626, Ronald Lake at 200, and Wabasca at 30-40 animals. Alberta had about 85 percent of Canada's free-ranging diseased populations; that is, they have a significant incidence of bovine brucellosis and tuberculosis; there are roughly 3,360 animals in Wood Buffalo National Park and 200 at Wentzel Lake. Unfortunately, the recovery strategy omitted critical habitat identification for any wood bison populations, citing lack of information, and projected that critical habitat identification would take until 2023.

In August 2019, AWA met with provincial wildlife managers to express concerns about the most vulnerable wood bison populations. In late 2019 and early 2020, AWA publically urged the federal government not to approve Teck Resources' Frontier Oil Sands Mine due in part to the significant areas of the Ronald Lake bison range that the mine would destroy. In early February 2020, the federal environment minister issued a finding of Imminent Threats to Recovery of the Wabasca and Ronald Lake wood bison populations. The imminent threat cited for Wabasca was unregulated hunting, with less than 20 individuals remaining. This population remains in very grave danger of extirpation. The imminent threats to Ronald Lake bison were cited as contracting bovine diseases from Wood Buffalo National Park bison, and range loss from proposed industrial activities. With the decision in late February by Teck Resources to withdraw its proposed mine, Ronald Lake bison received a much-needed reprieve from their largest looming danger, but much more remains to be done to secure this population.

In December 2019, the Government of Alberta indicated it would create a Ronald Lake Bison Herd Cooperative Management Board. AWA was offered and accepted the opportunity to sit on this Board. The Board will provide advice relating to the sustainability of the herd, including sustainability of Indigenous traditional use of and connection to the herd. The projected start date for the Board to convene is February 2021.

Currently, plains bison do not have a provincial or federal status. In 2013 COSEWIC re-assessed the status of plains bison and confirmed the *Threatened* status the subspecies was accorded in COSEWIC's 2004 report. Paradoxically, the COSEWIC's *Threatened* designation has yet to see the plains bison receive any status under SARA. Also unlike the wood bison, the plains bison in Alberta is not classified as wildlife under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*. Instead, all plains bison are considered livestock.

In early 2017, a herd of 16 plains bison were "soft-released" into an enclosed pasture in Panther Valley, on the eastern edge of Banff National Park. By late July 2018, the plains bison herd was free-roaming, exploring the full 1,200 km<sup>2</sup> rehabilitation zone located in Banff's remote eastern



slopes. The provincial government created the Upper Red Deer River Special Bison Area in August 2018 to serve as a buffer area for free-roaming plains bison. Located approximately 60 km west of Sundre, the Upper Red Deer River Special Bison Area totals over 239 km<sup>2</sup>, fully encompassing the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch, allowing wildlife officers to protect and redirect bison that may have veered too far from home. In spring 2020, ten new bison calves were born into the herd; since 2017, the herd's numbers have nearly tripled.

AWA hopes that this provincial designation is the first step towards differentiating types of bison according to ownership. Instead of the geographical designation adopted by the province, the status of Plains Bison should depend on whether they are located on a commercial farm, a private conservation herd, or in the wild. This way, wild bison would get the protection that they desperately need to begin recovery in the wilderness. Such differentiation would also go some distance in implementing the desire of some Indigenous peoples to see the provincial government change the status of Plains Bison to wildlife.

### Limber and Whitebark Pine

Whitebark pine was added to the federal Species at Risk list as an *Endangered* species in June 2012. AWA has also worked towards having limber pine receive the same *Endangered* status under the federal law. COSEWIC gave limber pine *Endangered* status in 2014. Both species are listed as *Endangered* provincially under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*. A provincial recovery team has been established for both species. An Alberta Whitebark Pine Recovery Plan 2013-2018 was released in 2014 and an Alberta Limber Pine Recovery Plan 2014 - 2019 was released in the fall of 2014.

The Lake Louise resort in Banff National Park pled guilty in December 2017 to cutting down a stand of trees that included at least 39 whitebark pine. The Lake Louise Ski Area had faced two charges – one under the *Species at Risk Act*, the second under the *National Parks Act*. Provincial Court judge Heather Lamoureux subsequently fined the Ski Area \$2.1 million for its employees' "reckless" actions. AWA applauded Judge Lamoureux's decision and hoped the funds from this fine would be used towards Whitebark pine recovery efforts.

Whitebark pine trees take 30 to 50 years before they are able to reproduce and, when they do produce cones, they rely on Clark's Nutcracker birds to disperse and plant their seeds. Cornell's Lab of Ornithology calls them "evolutionary soul mates that help hold an ecosystem together." The long-lived, five-needle pines are native to high elevations, and are threatened by fire, climate change, and white pine blister rust. The blister rust is caused by a non-native fungus (*Cronartium ribicola*) introduced to North America around 1900. As the Cornell Lab's designation suggests, whitebark pine are crucial to the ecological composition of an area because they provide food and habitat for animals and help stabilize steep subalpine slopes.

The Grassy Mountain Coal Project represents an existential threat to this endangered species in southwestern Alberta. Benga Mining estimates that its 15 square kilometre open-pit coal mining operation will destroy 21,000 whitebark and 1,000 limber pine. The company proposes to plant three times the number of trees that it will remove from the landscape. Cliff Wallis, in his evidence for the Grassy Mountain Joint Review Panel, argued that Benga has underestimated the extent to which its strip mine will destroy critical whitebark pine habitat. Its mapping of whitebark pine distribution was incomplete. This project's threat to endangered species such as whitebark pine is an important reason why AWA opposes this coal project.



# Government Policy

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*"It is horrifying that we have to fight our own government to save the environment."  
— Ansel Adams*

## Public Lands

AWA has continuously advocated for a comprehensive public lands policy that is developed in a transparent and inclusive way to reflect all values Albertans have for public land. Unfortunately, the government of Alberta has shown no urgency in tackling this issue. AWA believes that, since these are “public” lands, Albertans should participate in their management. Developing a public lands policy would empower Albertans to become active agents of change. We should have the opportunity to address important issues such as access, sales and transfers, surface rights compensation from oil and gas operators to grazing lessees, and conservation. AWA opposes any further destruction or conversion of native habitat across all Natural Regions of Alberta on public lands for any development purpose. This includes the privatization or sale of public lands.

A July 2015 Alberta Auditor General Report criticized the Government of Alberta’s systems for managing grazing leases. For example, the government does not track lease transfers or the value of leases or the benefits, realized by grazing lease holders, including substantial monetary compensation obtained under the *Surface Rights Act*. In his November 2020 report the Auditor General reported that the Government of Alberta still had not acted on the Auditor General’s 2015 recommendation that Alberta Environment and Parks “clarify objectives, benefits and relevant performance measures.” AWA will continue to press the government to implement the Auditor General’s recommendations. We have met with civil servants responsible for policy and regulatory development. The glacial speed of the government’s response reinforces our belief that we must push the government on this issue.

The Recreational Access Regulation, originally enacted in 2003 under the *Public Lands Act*, was intended to clarify conditions for public access to grazing leases for recreational purposes. However, access issues have worsened. Despite requiring leaseholders to provide “reasonable access” under the regulation, numerous grazing leaseholders continue to prevent public access. The regulation expired in March 2017, and was renewed without full stakeholder or public consultation. A reformed public lands policy could address this issue.

Alongside our *Wild Spaces 2020 campaign*, AWA promotes our Public Lands video series, available on YouTube, to raise awareness of the issues facing public lands and to promote public involvement. There have been more than 1,200 views of the videos in that series.

Public land sales in the Peace River Country for conversion into agricultural land were mentioned as a possibility in the campaign leading up to the April 2019 provincial election. AWA remains adamantly opposed to this; all valuable wilderness areas need to reside in perpetuity within the public realm. AWA will continue to oppose the sale and conversion of public land for short term economic gain since maintaining the ecological integrity of public lands is incredibly important to the health and wealth of our communities.





In early spring 2020, AWA learned of an application to purchase a section of public land located near Taber, Alberta. AWA adamantly opposed this sale publicly alongside with many other conservation organizations, citing concerns in losing valuable native grasslands and habitat for species at risk. In the end it was sold. AWA believes that the sale of this parcel of public land violated the public trust and failed to uphold the guidelines under the SSRP to conserve native grasslands. The sale and conversion of public land for short term economic gain must not supersede maintaining the ecological integrity of public lands.

### Tax-recovery Lands

Tax-recovery lands are lands, mostly in southern Alberta, that were at one time privately owned. They were forfeited to the Government of Alberta as a result of drought and the Depression and the inability of their owners to pay taxes. Since 1930, the province has managed some of these lands as public land. Most of this land has been under grazing leases for decades. AWA believes the long-term interest of all Albertans is best served by retaining tax-recovery lands as a trust held by government for conservation purposes. However, despite enormous public opposition to sales of public lands the government disposed of most of its tax-recovery lands earlier this decade, with no opportunity for public input. The program transferred tax-recovery lands to municipalities and was completed in the spring of 2017. Sensitive tax-recovery lands on or near rivers, water bodies or coulees have been retained by the province as public land.

### Protected Areas - Federal

AWA uses the principle of *ecological integrity* – identified as the Minister’s first priority under the *National Parks Act* – as the primary condition to assess the activities of government agencies and private sector actors alike.

As Parks Canada renews the 10-year management plans for Alberta’s three mountain national parks, Banff, Jasper and Waterton Lakes, AWA has written to ensure that ecological integrity, visitor management and education are at the forefront of park management priorities. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, Parks Canada has placed a hold on management planning until staff resources are available. As the new management plans are set to take effect in 2021, AWA expects Parks Canada to produce draft management plans for comment before the end of 2020.

In Banff National Park, AWA spoke out against the tenor of a study exploring the possibility of instituting year round passenger rail service between Calgary and Banff. This was a study that, in AWA’s judgment, paid no attention to the impact this new service would have on wildlife in the Bow Valley.

In early-2020, Parks Canada rejected Liricon Capital’s proposal to build a gondola from the town of Banff to Norquay on the grounds that it did not adhere to the site guidelines for development and growth. Those guidelines stipulate that, in order to approve a gondola, the project would need to deliver “substantial environmental gain.” This decision didn’t see sufficient merit in the feasibility study the Miistakis Institute produced for Liricon, which concluded that closing the access road would deliver a potential environmental gain for grizzly bears and cougars, but ambiguous results for bighorn sheep. AWA supports Parks Canada’s decision to reject this proposal as it recognizes the vital point that there must be limits to development and growth in the National Park.



AWA believes that Banff has reached its carrying capacity; the days of more development and growth in Banff should be over if Parks Canada is genuinely committed to respecting the 2010 Banff Management Plan mandate to give “first priority to maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity.”

Our work related to [Wood Buffalo National Park](#) (WBNP) is outlined in the section on the Boreal.

### Protected Areas - Provincial

The Land Use Framework has been one of the primary mechanisms for achieving provincially protected areas. The process is slow and has essentially been stalled for years as management plans are developed for the areas where Regional Plans already exist. As of this year, Regional Plans have only been developed and approved for two of Alberta’s seven regions, the Lower Athabasca and South Saskatchewan, with the North Saskatchewan in Phase 2 of development. Alberta has a very long way to go to meet international protected area targets that are representative of the six landscape types in Alberta. AWA provides reasonable suggestions for protection, deferral of activities and alternative mechanisms for achieving conservation and protection, both within and outside of the Land Use Framework process.

### Protected Areas Progress

Alberta’s protected areas network includes five federally-protected National Parks (Banff, Jasper, Waterton, Wood Buffalo and Elk Island) as well as a number of different designations for provincially-protected areas. The Alberta *Land Reference Manual* provides data on the number and area of provincially protected areas, located in the table below. *Section 7 Land* is a classification describing designation of lands to be managed under the *Provincial Parks Act* that are not yet established as parks or recreation areas.

2020 marks the first instance in recent decades that Alberta has chosen to close, delist and deregulate a significant number of protected areas from Alberta Parks’ network. Alberta Environment and Parks announced the “Optimizing Alberta Parks” decision in March 2020, proposing to remove 164 sites (consisting of Provincial Recreation Areas, Provincial Parks and Natural Areas) from the Alberta Parks system, either transferring management to third-party operators or reverting sites to vacant public lands. AWA along with many conservation colleagues and individuals has raised the alarm on this plan, as it was made without any public consultation and will surely result in a loss of protection for local ecosystems and accessible recreation opportunities for Albertans. AWA continues to speak up for Alberta’s parks and protected areas as we need to be strengthening our protected areas network if we hope to do our part to sustain global biodiversity.



The following data comes from the Alberta Land Reference Manual, available at <http://www.albertaparks.ca/albertaparksca/library/land-reference-manual.aspx>.

Data for 2020 were calculated by AWA staff based on changes proposed by the “Optimizing Alberta Parks” decision. Without these changes the values for 2020 would have remained the same as in 2019.

Name	2020	2019	2018	2017	Hectares	Hectares	Hectares	Hectares
					2020	2019	2018	2017
Wilderness Areas	3	3	3	3	100,988.79	100,988.79	100,988.79	100,988.79
Ecological Reserves	15	15	15	15	26,843.34	26,843.34	26,843.34	26,843.34
Wildland Provincial Parks	34	34	33	33	3,333,386.29	3,333,386.29	3,171,506.29	1,811,117.59
Willmore Wilderness Park	1	1	1	1	459,671.04	459,671.04	459,671.04	459,671.04
Provincial Parks	65	76	76	77	245,336.81	246,797.89	246,797.89	246,864.92
Provincial Recreation Areas	60	204	204	203	79,670.86	88,602.86	88,602.86	87,692.69
Heritage Rangelands	2	2	2	2	12,010.47	12,010.47	12,010.47	12,010.47
Natural Areas	128	138	138	139	128,043.09	129,228.98	129,228.98	129,943.98
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>472</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>4,385,944.30</b>	<b>4,397,529.66</b>	<b>4,235,649.66</b>	<b>2,875,132.82</b>
Section 7 Land	10	10	10	10	1,450.51	1,450.51	1,450.51	1,450.51

## Wild Spaces 2020

The *Wild Spaces 2020* campaign was launched in September 2018 to ignite support and awareness for Alberta’s Wild Spaces. While the protection of Wild Spaces has been part of AWA’s vision for more than 55 years, the Wild Spaces 2020 campaign has been brought to life by the renewed conservation targets adopted by the federal and provincial governments. These conservation targets, called the *Aichi Targets*, were set in 2010 at the Convention for Biological Diversity in Aichi, Japan. In 2015, the federal government adopted Aichi Target 11 as Canada’s primary target (“Canada Target 1”). Canada Target 1 states that:

“By 2020, at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures.”

The goals of the Wild Spaces 2020 campaign highlighted AWA’s areas of concern across Alberta’s six Natural Regions, featuring current issues, increasing awareness of ecological, social and economic values, and ways members can support conservation. Emphasizing the imbalance in representative protection between Alberta’s Natural Regions was a major objective, alongside expressing the need for increased protection for particular regions including the Grasslands, Parkland, and Foothills Natural Regions where protection standards are lacking. The campaign involved a series of presentations and social media posts describing Wild Spaces, Canada Target 1, and the need for representative protection.



In the fall of 2018, AWA wrote the Premier and Minister of Environment and Parks describing the need for the Government of Alberta to develop plans for 17 percent protection. This was accompanied by the launch of the Wild Spaces 2020 public letter writing campaign, hosted through a Protected Areas webpage on AWA's website. From October 2018 to July 2019, the letter writing campaign received 231 submissions, in addition to 920 submissions specific to the Bighorn Country campaign. All submissions were directed to Alberta's Premier, Minister of the Environment and Parks, and local MLAs identified by the postal code of the sender. While we were pleased with the support from members and the public, we have come to accept that the value of form letter submissions to the government carries little, if any, weight. Personal letters, calls and emails will always bear significantly more weight with elected officials.

During the 2019-2020 fiscal year, the Government of Alberta withdrew from their position as a provincial partner on Canada Target 1 following the federal government's decision to increase Target 1 to 30 percent protection by 2030, with an interim target of 25 percent by 2025. Despite Alberta's withdrawal from the biodiversity targets, the province remains committed to 17 percent protection by 2021, as stated in the provincial budget documents from February 2020.

### Land-Use Framework

AWA has participated actively in the regional planning processes for the first three Land-Use Framework regions: the Lower Athabasca, South Saskatchewan and North Saskatchewan. The process appears to be on hold at this time. AWA members and supporters have been encouraged to participate at every opportunity in the process.

### South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP)

AWA provided input on the continued land-use planning processes in the SSRP. The Livingstone and Porcupine Hills Land Footprint Management Plan (LFMP) and Recreation Management Plan (RMP) were released in early 2018. Currently overdue for release are the Biodiversity Management Framework, which was expected in 2015, as well as the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills Human Spatial Footprint report, originally due within one year of the release of the LFMP's and RMP's (i.e.: May 2019). AWA believes these plans should establish strict and enforceable limits on land use and linear disturbances within the Livingstone and Porcupine Hills, as well as the South Saskatchewan Region broadly, in order to meet conservation targets.

The SSRP was amended in 2017 after Cabinet approved Orders-in-Council to establish the Castle Provincial Park and expand the Castle Wildland Provincial Park on January 20, 2017. In July 2019, with 132 km of trails remaining in the Castle Parks, the Government of Alberta decided to halt trail closures to reassess the suitability of OHV trails within the area. AWA will continue to support the enactment of the remaining SSRP conservation commitments through Orders in Council formalizing conservation boundaries, in addition to protecting critical westslope cutthroat trout habitat in the Castle Parks region by supporting the removal and reclamation of motorized trail systems.

During the past year, AWA has participated in the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills Recreation Advisory Group (RAG), in place to guide the implementation of the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills RMP. In late-2019, the RAG expanded its scope to include Bob Creek Wildland Provincial Park, Black Creek Heritage Rangeland and the two Castle Parks. AWA did not support the expanded



scope of the group, as it opened the door to changes to the existing management plans and the potential reintroduction of motorized use in the Castle Parks.

AWA seeks commitment from the provincial government to establish additional legislated conservation areas, with a priority focus for Grasslands Natural Subregions.

### **North Saskatchewan Regional Plan (NSRP)**

Work on the NSRP was started in 2014 but has been hampered by competing priorities within the provincial legislature and the change in the governing party in May 2015. With a change of government again in May 2019, it is unknown whether progress on the NSRP will be made.

A terms-of-reference document and a public workbook were released in 2014, with Phase I public and stakeholder consultation sessions being held and a Regional Advisory Council (NSRAC) being convened and subsequently an advice document drafted. AWA was actively involved with staff, board members, and volunteers attending more than half of the Phase I consultation sessions.

In May 2018, the provincial government finally released recommendations made by the NSRAC in 2014. AWA continues to have discussions with government members in support of increasing the network of protected areas in the North Saskatchewan Region, and expects to be heavily involved in providing feedback and engaging members in upcoming drafts of the NSRP.

### **Lower Athabasca Regional Plan (LARP)**

The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan (LARP) is still missing important elements to help maintain and restore biodiversity to uphold Alberta's international commitments to sustainable development. The LARP Review Panel's 2016 report upheld First Nations' submissions that LARP was not adequately managing cumulative impacts of development. AWA continues to seek the completion of overdue LARP regulatory tools such as sub-regional surface disturbance plans and meaningful biodiversity management frameworks, including for species of particular importance to Indigenous communities.

One opportunity to advance these goals this year is through our engagement on the Cold Lake sub-regional caribou task force. Another is our efforts to improve Alberta's wood bison habitat management. A third is our efforts with Indigenous and ENGO partners to seek follow-through on the elements of the Wood Buffalo National Park Action Plan, including seeking expansion of the Kitaskino Nuwenëné Wildland Provincial Park.

### **Future Land Use Planning Regions**

The next planning processes to commence are expected to be the Upper Peace Regional Plan (UPRP) and Upper Athabasca Regional Plan (UARP). However, the delays in meeting the plans created in the LARP and SSRP likely means planning for these areas is not going to happen in the near future.

### **Biodiversity**

Alberta has not upheld its important national and international commitments to maintain and restore its biological diversity, including upholding the 1995 Canadian Biodiversity Strategy. Alberta still lacks a provincial Biodiversity Strategy, which was supposed to inform Land Use Framework regional and sub-regional planning from the 2008 era onwards. AWA has consistently encouraged delivery on these commitments, and drawn attention to the evidence



that Alberta's biodiversity continues to decline under the cumulative impacts of our land-use decisions.

Collaborative sub-regional planning has potential to strengthen biodiversity management. AWA is participating in the province's three sub-regional multi-stakeholder caribou task forces. (See section on [Caribou](#) for more information.) In addition, AWA is strongly encouraging decisions in the Castle- Livingstone-Porcupine sub-regional access planning process to uphold science-based linear density thresholds to enable our threatened native fish to survive and recover. (See section on [Livingstone-Porcupine](#) for more details.)

### Strengthening Ties with Indigenous Communities

Each year, AWA staff seeks to further our understanding of the role that we play in reconciliation efforts. In our work, this takes the form of building and strengthening relationships with Indigenous communities and helping to elevate the voices and actions of our Indigenous colleagues. These efforts to learn and establish connections relate to all aspects of our work, in particular, the need for Canada to establish a system of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs).

This year, we were pleased to host a Tuesday Talk with guest speaker Diandra Bruised Head, the climate change coordinator with Kainai First Nation. During her talk, she emphasized the importance of Indigenous perspectives and voices in the climate change conservation and leading the way forward to climate resiliency. The Kainai have led a number of important projects in recent years including the creation of a traditional plant database, Youth Artists of Climate Change, the development of a Local Early Action Plan, and the creation of several short climate change participatory videos.

In 2020, Alberta Wilderness Association joined many others in condemning systemic racism in our society and saying that black lives, Indigenous lives and the lives of racialized communities matter. While we believe many of our values are universal, we need to bring greater diversity into our Association and the environmental movement. Recent events have caused us to re-examine ourselves, and we will aim to be more reflective of Alberta diversity in our composition, perspectives, thinking and values, the way we reach out, and the way we do things.

### Environmental Laws

In 2015, the federal government promised to restore Canada's environmental protections. In early 2018, the federal government put forward Bills C-68 (the *Fisheries Act*) and C-69, the latter comprising the *Impact Assessment Act*, *Canadian Energy Regulator Act*, and *Navigation Protection Act*. The *Fisheries Act* and *Bill C-69* received royal assent and become law in the summer of 2019. AWA will continue to follow both closely to see how they will be implemented in practice.

AWA's assessment of Bill C-69 is that it contains some positive amendments to the damaging changes made to the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* in 2012, such as better inclusion of the public and Indigenous Peoples in the assessment process and requiring decisions to consider both the positive and negative impacts of projects on the environment, the economy and society as a whole. However, the Act fails to deliver on its key promises, is still over reliant on Ministerial discretion and has even tighter timelines than previously.





A number of other policies and regulations also had to be updated in order to reflect the intent of the new Act. AWA was disappointed with the final Physical Activities Regulations, published in August of 2019, as they have exempted hydraulic fracturing, geothermal, and in-situ oil sands projects from requiring an impact assessment, and have increased thresholds for projects that do require assessments. For example, the previous regulations requires coal mines that produced over 3,000 tonnes per day to undertake an assessment; now coal mines must produce over 5,000 tonnes per day in order to require an assessment.

At the start of 2020, AWA received an update on new proposed regulations for coal effluent (see section on [Coal](#)), which we expect to be released for public comment in the fall of 2021.



*Whistling Pass, Banff National Park - photo © S. Nichols*



# International Cooperation

## Temperate Grassland Conservation

In an effort to increase the rate of progress in conserving and protecting temperate grasslands, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) World Commission on Protected Areas created the Grasslands Protected Areas Task Force, now a Specialist Group, in 1996. This Specialist Group launched the Temperate Grasslands Conservation Initiative (TGCI) in June 2008 at an International Grasslands Congress workshop in Hohhot, China in which AWA participated. The TGCI has described the state of the world's temperate grasslands and has supported various temperate grassland conservation initiatives. The mission of the TGCI is "To reverse the trend of biodiversity loss and degradation of temperate grasslands by promoting both the designation and special management of representative protected areas and the widespread use of sustainable management practices beyond protected area boundaries." This work continues to build on various international programs as well as the Hohhot Declaration of 2008 which states: "...temperate grasslands are critically endangered and urgent action is required to protect and maintain the many valuable ecological services they provide." The TGCI hopes to assist grassland conservation by educating and influencing decision-makers responsible for temperate grassland management and protection. The TGCI is in the process of being revitalized and AWA will continue to participate in TGCI discussions on an ad hoc basis.

## Great Plains Conservation Network (GPCN)



At 3.4 million km<sup>2</sup> (841 million acres), the Great Plains stretch from Canada into the United States of America and Mexico. The Great Plains Ecosystem is the largest grassland ecosystem in North America and one of the largest in the world. The vision is to establish an ocean of grass to support healthy wildlife populations and vibrant communities of people. GPCN participants have long contributed to four main foci – indigenous peoples, bison, prairie dogs and grassland birds.

Formerly known as the Northern Plains Conservation Network which published the ground-breaking "Ocean of Grass" and mapped intact grasslands of the northern plains, GPCN continues the mapping work in the southern plains and hopes to add Mexico soon. GPCN believes that broad-scale restoration of this landscape will affirm that society recognizes this necessity and is progressive enough to implement this

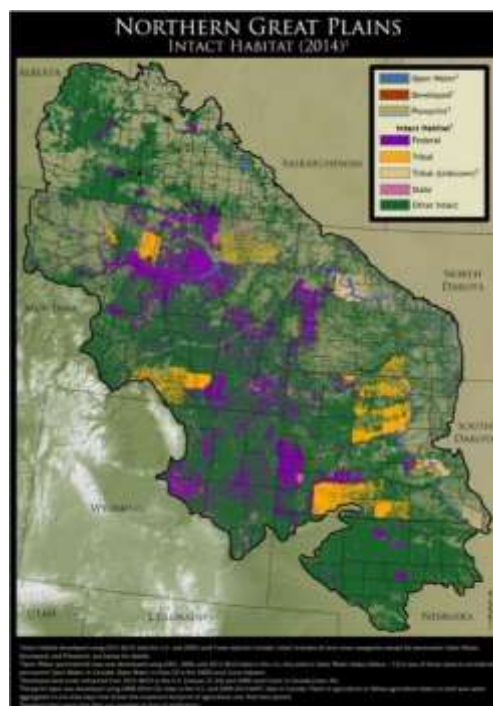
vision.

The network has participants from Mexico, the United States of America and Canada and the conservation footprint on the plains is growing. Two examples, the American Prairie Reserve, formed as a result of the vision, and the Southern Plains Land Trust, acquire land to help the vision become reality by reintroducing bison and conserving black-tailed prairie dogs and significant tracts of native grasslands.



Grassland conservation is being advanced as a key component of tri-lateral conservation discussions of Canada, Mexico, and the USA by GPCN participants, including AWA.

GPCN is comprised of dozens of conservation groups, tribal organizations, and individuals who have recognized the need to coordinate efforts on a scale that mirrors the area they seek to conserve. Within GPCN, science, public education, private sector initiatives, and advocacy are being employed to promote the GPCN vision and to enable and inspire participants by linking their efforts to support the vision. By employing new tools to support conservation work, and by adopting mechanisms that foster the exchange of ideas and coordination of action, GPCN hopes to restore North America's grasslands, and to ensure the continued survival and health of its wildlife, wildlands, and human societies.



The Iinii Initiative is moving forward and supporting efforts to bring bison back to tribal and First Nations lands in the northern plains and to help indigenous communities realize their vision for restoring healthy ecosystems and human communities.

Greater sage-grouse continue to be one of the issues at the forefront as the USA and Canada move forward with actions to protect this species throughout western North America.

Working with other GPCN participants, GPCN helped retain federal ownership of Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) Pastures in southwest Saskatchewan that are critical for species at risk recovery efforts in Canada, including sage-grouse. GPCN participants continue their work on securing federal protected area designation for Govenlock, Nashlyn, Reno and Battle Creek PFRA pastures and using grazing to manage these areas for endemic grassland birds and species at risk. All these areas had been in the process of being transferred back to the Government of Saskatchewan until conservation organizations across North America demanded that these pastures remain under federal jurisdiction with a conservation focus.

GPCN participants continue to champion protection and appropriate management of many grasslands in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan including the former Onefour Research Substation lands, former PFRA pastures and the proposed addition to the Twin River Heritage Rangeland on the Milk River Ridge. These grasslands are some of the most extensive and diverse on the northern glaciated plains and are home to dozens of federally and provincially listed species of concern. AWA, GPCN and others are concerned about the future protection and management of these lands now that they have been fully transferred to the Government of Alberta.

AWA Board member Cliff Wallis is the current Chair of the GPCN, and AWA hosts and maintains the website for the network at [www.plainsconservation.org](http://www.plainsconservation.org).





### Transboundary Grasslands Partnership

The Transboundary Grasslands Partnership works collaboratively to sustain healthy transboundary native biodiversity and the supporting grassland ecosystems and communities in Saskatchewan, Montana and Alberta. Connectivity and ecosystem services across the transboundary region are a priority. It is a means to connect people from Indigenous tribes and First Nations, governments, NGOs and the ranching community; and creates a forum for enhancing the health of native grasslands, creating opportunity to conserve native grasslands in the three jurisdictions. AWA is a member of the partnership and has participated in their annual workshops.



*McGuffin Lake, AWA's Primrose Lakeland Area of Concern Fall 2019 - photo © A. Davies*



# Outreach

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## Wild Lands Advocate

Wild Lands Advocate (WLA), published four times a year, is AWA's news journal. The WLA is a vital source of information and perspective on Alberta's wilderness and its conservation. Its information is crucial to informing public debate in Alberta and inspiring the people of this province to care about the health of our landscapes and ecosystems. WLA's importance here is heightened by the mainstream media's diminished dedication to reporting on provincial environmental issues.

The magazine offers news and information about AWA's past, current, and future work. Between its covers you will find stories of Wild Alberta, the people involved in its conservation, and the state of AWA's numerous conservation campaigns. Free to all members, the WLA delivers a very accessible, visually appealing, conservation message. AWA staff take the lead in shaping the content of WLA. Their contributions, plus those of skilled, thoughtful volunteers, create a product the Association is very proud of.

During the past year the features section of the magazine offered readers informed commentary on issues such as: biodiversity, federal environmental law reform, listing native Alberta fish under the *Species at Risk Act*, the Government of Alberta's tepid commitment to public participation, and establishing a right to roam in public lands. The June 2020 issue, in the editor's opinion, was one of the best issues of the magazine in the last decade. Your voices elevated the issue to that height. There you spoke out about the importance of the provincial parks system and how misguided the government was to try to shrink it. There you also enthused about several of the adventures AWA members have offered through our new *Adventures in Wilderness* program. Both themes illustrated well the health of the AWA community and your commitment to strengthen the community and the public good. Copies of the June issue were mailed to all of Alberta's MLAs. We hope your views and stories from that issue will inspire our elected leaders to privilege the natural world in their decision-making. The WLA alone is well- worth the cost of a membership in the Alberta Wilderness Association and a valuable outreach tool to engage and inspire people about wilderness and wildlife in Alberta.

## Online Presence

AWA contracts the services of *Build Studio*, a professional web development company with usability expertise, to provide support and maintenance for its public interface. AWA works to constantly update our primary website at [AlbertaWilderness.ca](http://AlbertaWilderness.ca). A major investment in reorganizing the website layout and creating/updating webpages for all 55 Area of Concern was completed this year. As part of AWA's *Wild Spaces 2020* campaign (see *Protected Areas – Provincial* for more detail), AWA promoted its Areas of Concern and website content by highlighting the areas on our social media platforms and driving the public to accurate and informative materials on our website.

AWA has two primary websites:

[www.AlbertaWilderness.ca](http://www.AlbertaWilderness.ca) (major information and resource site)

[www.AdventuresforWilderness.ca](http://www.AdventuresforWilderness.ca) (formerly the Climb for Wilderness website)



and two single issue websites:

[www.NoMoreGrizzlies.com](http://www.NoMoreGrizzlies.com)

[www.Caribou4Ever.ca](http://www.Caribou4Ever.ca)

AWA transitioned our electronic newsletter service to *MailChimp* to deliver important messages to members, supporters and those who have self-selected to be on the lists. AWA adheres to the Canadian Anti-Spam Legislation. Our subscriber lists are:

Media – 205 subscribers

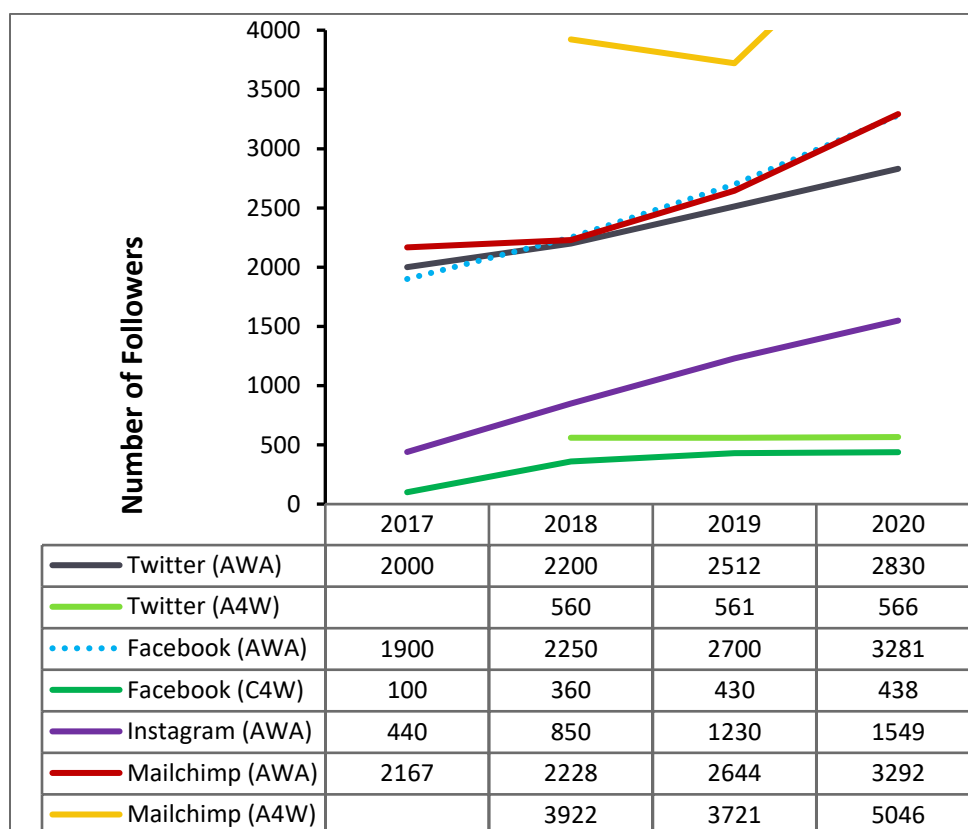
Alberta Wilderness Association – 3,324 subscribers

Adventures for Wilderness – 5,220 subscribers

## Social Media

AWA maintains a social media presence with two Facebook pages (users @AlbertaWilderness and @Adventures4Wild), one Instagram profile (@albertawildernessassociation) and two primary Twitter accounts (@ABWilderness and @Adventures4Wild) in addition to various Twitter accounts maintained by individual staff members.

Throughout the past year, AWA has worked on building our social media presence and has experienced the following trends on each platform. Note that the new Facebook page (@Adventures4Wild) is still in its first year and is not yet reflected in these trends.



Social media is cost effective and is an efficient way to develop brand recognition and increase AWA's reach to interested and engaged people. It provides a digital platform for outreach and messaging of important news. AWA's two major social media campaigns during the past year





have been *Wild Spaces 2020* and *Adventures for Wilderness*. “Feature Fridays” are routine posts where we shine a spotlight on timely *Wild Lands Advocate* articles. The AWA Facebook and Twitter accounts are also used to share news releases, events advertising and featured articles to help share relevant information on conservation in Alberta.

AWA Staff has spent significant time over the recent years refining AWA’s approach to social media. When posts address controversial topics, we found Facebook in particular attracted misinformation and at times personal attacks, for which we have developed protocols on how to respond.

Following are samples of some of our posts.



## Hikes

AWA’s hikes program has explored many valuable wilderness areas, and introduced and increased awareness for many Albertans on the importance of healthy and thriving ecosystems. AWA’s hike program is a crucial component of AWA’s outreach work that also facilitates and builds important community-based relationships within our Areas of Concern. This year AWA rolled our hikes programs into our major new Outreach Program, Adventures for Wilderness.



Many dedicated AWA volunteers took up the challenge to create an adventure that emphasized the natural values of the region visited while promoting the importance of healthy lifestyle choices for Albertans. (See section on [Adventures for Wilderness](#) for more details.)

## Talks

AWA's speaker series attracts audiences that add to the excellent presentations helping us create opportunities for people to learn more about AWA's work while discussing a broad range of conservation ideas and actions.

The 2019/2020 Calgary Talk season included:

- Dr. Susan Kutz: *Healthy Wildlife, Healthy People – Bridging Wildlife Systems to Monitor Arctic Wildlife Health*
- Nature Canada/The Nature of Things: *Grasslands: A Hidden Wilderness*
- Diandra Bruised Head: *Building Climate Change Resilience and Adaptation in the Kainai First Nation*
- Marcus Becker, ABMI: *Mammal Monitoring*
- Megan Evans: *Bees and Bee Box Building, Alberta Native Bee Council*
- University of Calgary Students: *Student Research Showcase (held online)*

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, talks that were slated for the spring in Edmonton were cancelled. We used the pandemic restrictions to rework our plans for a talks program realizing that using a virtual platform we could cover a much broader geographic audience. The changes have increased our commitment to ensure that wide diversity of speakers is represented in our programming. Our fall programming will include three outstanding individuals who will be given Alberta Wilderness Defenders awards and will deliver three Martha Kostuch Lectures.

## AWA after Hours

*AWA after Hours* is the newest event series hosted by AWA to facilitate community building and conversation around Alberta's wildlife and wilderness areas. The events are styled as "out after work" meetups, each featuring one of Alberta's iconic species or spaces to help spread awareness and support for wilderness protection. The events are primarily geared towards young adults, although all are welcome, and typically incorporate a short conservation "crash course" and activity (e.g. painting, sketching, or even wine tasting), while beer, wine and snacks are served. This year, we hosted one *AWA after Hours Watersheds, Wine & Cheese*, before pandemic restrictions forced the cancellation of subsequent presentations.

## Music for the Wild

AWA's Music for the Wild series combines a celebration of music and Alberta's wildlife and wild spaces. It aims to broaden AWA's community outreach and messaging by drawing in a demographic of the population that may not be familiar with AWA's work.

The 2019/2020 season marked the 12<sup>th</sup> year of the program:

- Oct 19: *Godfrey and Tod* with opening act *The Project*
- Nov 2: *Horizon Ridge* with opening act *The Collaborators*
- Feb 8: *Emily Triggs* with opening act *Lonni Robley*
- Mar. 7: *Heather Blush and The Uppercuts* with opening act *Key of H*

Each evening includes a short introduction to AWA and a story about a current conservation activity. These fun evenings have brought an appreciation of AWA's wilderness work to a wide-



ranging audience. AWA thanks our steadfast volunteers, George Campbell and Murray Little, for continuing to put together and run this fabulous series. Given the restrictions in place because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the fall 2020 program has been cancelled. After 12 years of dedicated volunteerism, George and Murray are stepping down to leave the way for a renewed program with other leaders when pandemic restrictions are lifted; we look forward to seeing whether this will be possible for fall 2021.

### Adventures for Wilderness

After 28 successful *Climb for Wilderness* events, AWA celebrated 55 years as an association with a new and exciting program – *Adventures for Wilderness* (A4W). We reinvented our previous event, *Climb for Wilderness*, to help inspire people to create adventures and learn more about wilderness and wildlife. We were pleased that we had former climbers, members and new supporters who created adventures that covered the province.

Unexpectedly to everyone, 2020 turned out to be a year filled with challenges, especially regarding the hosting of public events. AWA's A4W program was particularly well-situated to meeting these challenges, offering flexibility that would not have been possible with AWA's more traditional *Climb for Wilderness* and additional schedule of events.

Adventures for Wilderness adapts the underlying approach to outreach and fundraising used by the *Climb for Wilderness* – that participants may participate in an event and/or raise funds to support AWA through that event – and expands it to cover an ongoing schedule of smaller, self-contained events. In this way, even events that only have a small number of physical participants (which is to be expected in the context of a pandemic like Covid-19) can leverage networking effects to still attain recognition and fundraising goals for AWA.

Logistically, A4W is rooted in a website, hosted at [www.AdventuresForWilderness.ca](http://www.AdventuresForWilderness.ca). Potential *adventure coordinators* sign up to host an “adventure”; which is to say, an event related to AWA. AWA staff work with that coordinator to ensure the adventure is consistent with AWA's goals, and outreach and conservation objectives, and details of the adventure are posted to a dedicated sub-section of the above website, where participants may sign up and/or raise funds for that adventure. This is effected in coordination with outreach initiatives, e.g.: via social media and newsletters.

Many of this year's adventures have taken the form of real-world events similar to those historically undertaken by AWA: typically hikes or wilderness outings in the association's areas of concern, with a strong education component. However *Adventures for Wilderness* has given AWA the flexibility to expand this into less-traditional outreach and fundraising events; these have included for example a wilderness photography competition, an online musical concert, a trivia contest, and more. Some of the events undertaken have been smaller events (in terms of physical participation) but have focused on publicizing the event as a fulcrum for raising funds: examples of this latter have included an ice-fishing adventure raising awareness about Alberta's threatened aquatic species, an initiative to help a blind wilderness enthusiast climb a mountain, and a wilderness outing raising awareness about the wildland provincial parks in the Castle. Yet other non-traditional “events” have covered such ground as building and distributing bee boxes, and inviting participants to engage in garbage cleanup, or other stewardship efforts, in an area that is meaningful to those participants.



A summary of A4W participation statistics follows. It should be noted that the breadth and diversity of initiatives falling under the A4W umbrella means that these statistics may not be meaningfully comparable to those derived from AWA's past event schedules, especially considering reduced public willingness to participate due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Number of Adventures	28
Number of Unique Coordinators	30
Number of Participants	456
Mean Participants/Adventure	16.3
Number of Sponsors	655
Mean Sponsors/Adventure	23.4
Total Funds Raised	\$ 56,991.60
Average Funds Raised/Adventure	\$ 2,035.41

By default, each adventure was given a fundraising target of \$2,000. While some adventures ended up raising more, and some less, the final total ended up exceeding this target. By this measure alone, the A4W initiative can be considered a clear success.

While the overall number of participants and funds raised did not end up matching the number AWA would expect to receive from the Climb for Wilderness in a "normal" year, it needs to be noted that this year was not normal; and had AWA planned to hold the C4W as usual, these numbers would have been zero. By this measure as well, it is worth considering Adventures for Wilderness to be a success.

This may especially be considered the case when taking into account that A4W is reaching a potentially different audience with its related outreach initiatives. The participant list for the Climb for Wilderness has been relatively static over the last several years; changing things up in this manner allows AWA to grow beyond that base.

2020 and Covid-19 have undoubtedly presented AWA with some unique challenges. That the adventures program has demonstrated a mechanism for the association to hold successful events even in these circumstances augurs well for the future. AWA has ongoing plans to continue this program into 2021 and the future, with additional planned adventures already on the schedule. These include a resumption of stair-climbing events, to help attract past Climb for Wilderness participants, when social norms allow. AWA is enthusiastic about the future of A4W, and its entire outreach program.

Represented by the blue pins in the above map, the 28 adventures in the first year of the Adventures for Wilderness program took place in all parts of southern and central Alberta. 2021 will see AWA focus on hosting adventures in areas farther north and east.







*Despite unexpectedly freezing temperatures these hardy adventurers launched the Adventures for Wilderness Program with an overnight Friends Fish-A-Thon where they caught one excellent fish and they also completed some monitoring as part of a Lake Management Society program.*



# Strength and Capacity

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Our members and supporters, people, are the force and means of the Alberta Wilderness Association. They are of utmost importance and throughout the province and around the World they are our eyes on wilderness areas in their regions. We depend on local contacts informing AWA staff of potential or active threats to Alberta's wild places and providing us with local information that may otherwise be inaccessible to us. There is no more important role for AWA than to ensure that our members and the public at large are informed on wilderness issues in a way that motivates people and inspires positive action to defend wild lands and wildlife.

We constantly evaluate operations, develop capacity, and reorganize based on strategic directions and conservation priorities. AWA is nimble in applying its resources; it renews its efforts with updated strategies and tactics to meet its mission. AWA is determined to continue to play a leadership role, build community partnerships, and focus on our grassroots connections.

Volunteers are crucial to our success. Volunteers help with on the ground protection of wilderness, office assistance, office and garden maintenance, and organization of and participation in events such as talks and hikes, benefit concerts, casino fundraising, Adventures for Wilderness, and the Wild West Saloon. AWA has 82 active volunteers at the time of writing this report (102 in 2019); Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have impacted volunteer engagement.

## Roger Creasey Wilderness Resource Centre

Wilderness Resource Centre archiving and cataloguing is ongoing. Our on-line catalogue database is partially developed, while development and growth of the Electronic Wilderness Resource Centre (EWRC) continues. Our objective to have top of the line technology and storage capacity is in place.

Identifying and removing duplicate files/images in our electronic media archive, EWRC-M, is an ongoing long-term effort as is work on the media library. We routinely add tags, metadata and comments to the categorization of files to assist when looking for a specific item.

We are routinely filing in the EWRC, building our collection and the historical records of wilderness in Alberta. We have routine external back up of the EWRC and paper filing has become minimal as we have made a significant transition to electronic filing and storage. The electronic system facilitates ease of sharing and secure storage. The physical library is maintained by our volunteer librarian Linda Javeri and our electronic library upgrades are maintained by staff.

We were pleased to assist the Prairie Conservation Forum build its archive this year and we digitized their records and have provided storage for their most significant historical records in the library.

## AWA's Cottage School

AWA's Cottage School is a major asset and while the year began with the building filled with meetings, events, and people, once the first wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic restrictions came





into place, everything changed. Staff members have been away from the building for the most part with the exception of the Executive Director who has been in every week at least every other day. As the restrictions lifted in the summer, administrative staff has been in for reduced hours on four days of the week.

Regrettably one Monday night in early April, the hot water heater located on the top floor rusted through and flooded all night long until it was discovered the following morning. The resulting damage was significant, requiring weeks of drying and some restoration. The hardwood floors have been saved, but there is some work needed to help with excessively noisy floorboards and some surface refinishing. With the exception of the deductible payment, insurance covered the cost of the repairs. General maintenance and upkeep for the building is ongoing and we look forward to welcoming friends and colleagues back when the Covid-19 pandemic has passed.



*An Adventure for Wilderness exploring Dry Island Buffalo Jump – people like these explore and learn and the stories they tell help inspire others to know why protecting our wild spaces is so important.*



## FINANCING WILDERNESS PROTECTION

Funds received from donations by members, supporters and fundraising efforts are vital to the health of AWA. Even as our major fundraising event, the Climb for Wilderness, was transformed into a new outreach program, Adventures for Wilderness, and the Covid-19 pandemic impacted donor gifts from March through July, donor gifts and fundraising still provided 70 percent of our total revenue (77 in 2018-2019).

Granting agencies in this year included Stenabaugh Foundation, Government of Alberta Recreation and Physical Activity Division, a *Canada Helps* anonymous donor, United Nations Association in Canada, United Nations Association Canada Green Corps, Canada Gives, Edmonton Community Foundation, The Calgary Foundation and the following Calgary Foundation funds: J.N. Fyvie Family Fund, A. Lawrence Berry Family Fund, Pelzer Family Fund, James Kerr Estate Fund, Valerie and Bryce Nolan Fund, Chris and Peter Todd Fund, and Sadee Family Fund and the Edmonton Community Foundation. AWA qualified for the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy as our revenues fell sufficiently to meet the requirements for the subsidy. Funding generated through events came from our Wild West Saloon in the fall. Shell Canada and Jones and Salt provided cash sponsorships for the Wild West Saloon. A more detailed presentation thanking our corporate supporters who largely provide in-kind support is listed on our website under the About Us / Supporters section (<https://albertawilderness.ca/about-us/supporters/>). Fundraising and gifts from donors allow AWA to be financially independent and free to speak out for wilderness protection without risk of compromise as a result of funding considerations.

An achievement we are very proud of came from a review of our operations by Charity Intelligence, a Canadian watchdog for charities. They have given AWA an **A and a four star rating**. This is significant recognition for AWA; one of the top 100 rated charities in Canada. AWA was one of only two provincial organizations given this recognition.

AWA devoted 70 percent of its cash expenditures to wilderness stewardship, conservation, and outreach (73 in 2018-2019). This includes funding the Alberta Wilderness Resource Centre. Development costs include expenses incurred in developing our core values, and creating broader awareness of the association and its mandate, "Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action." This category includes the cost of seeking more members and supporters as well as applying for grants. General and Administrative costs of 15 percent (17 in 2018-2019) continue to represent an efficient and carefully managed association, supported significantly by volunteerism.

Our voting membership has grown in the past year and stands at 6,106 individuals (5,947 in 2019); representing 212 communities in Alberta (208 in 2019), in addition to national and international members. We seek and welcome new members and supporters on an ongoing basis.

### Review Engagement Report

AWA engages Roberts and Company Professional Accountants LLP to conduct a review of AWA's financial statements each year. Their Review Engagement Report states that nothing has come to their attention that causes them to believe the financial statements are not, in all material respects, in accordance with Canadian accounting standards for not-for-profit organizations. AWA's financial statements are posted on our website.



## Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Legacy Circle

AWA is dedicated to securing a more deliberate long-term approach to funding security. The elements that are required are in place and in time will provide AWA with a healthy reserve fund. The past three years have been more difficult in terms of donation amounts and sponsorship opportunities. In addition donations tend to be seasonal but we have sufficient reserve to help with the months when there is a decrease in cash flow and manage well.

## Bequests

It is the Board of Directors' hope that individuals, members, and supporters will make a bequest in their will naming a gift to AWA. Bequests make a significant difference to our long-term security and our ability to plan for the future. We have prepared an information sheet, readily available on our website to assist those interested in planning a gift for AWA.

## Wilderness and Wildlife Bequests

Daphne M. Smith 1980  
 Dr. James Birkett Cragg 1997  
 Anna Nowick 1999  
 Myrtle Muriel Koch 2001  
 Ian Ross 2003  
 Dorothy Barry 2003  
 William Mayer 2004  
 Diane Hughes 2005  
 Harold deVries 2009  
 Ann Roberts 2009  
 Richard Collier 2013  
 Harriet Ruth Mowat 2016  
 Kim Bennett 2016  
 Carol A. Haines - 2017  
 Wendy Williams – 2017  
 Herbert G. Kariel - 2017  
 Ted Davy - 2018  
 Richard Pharis - 2018  
 Del Lavallee - 2019  
 Meyer Estate - 2019  
 Doris Davy - 2019  
 Helen Dixon - 2020



## Lifetime Giving

AWA recognizes all donors and the lifetime giving and commitment they make to the association. All those donors who make a commitment to AWA and have cumulative gifts greater than \$20,000 are recognized on a plaque initiated for AWA's 45th anniversary. They are recognized as Wilderness and Wildlife Benefactors.

In this AWA's 55th Anniversary year, a new plaque recognizing donors with lifetime cumulative gifts greater than \$55,000 has been added to our donor recognition wall.

## AWA's Wilderness and Wildlife Benefactors

### *Benefactors with Lifetime Gifts of more than \$55,000*

Bruce and Eveline Goodall  
 Laura Jackson  
 Chris and Ken Havard  
 Richard and Vivian Pharis  
 Chris and Jennifer Saunders  
 Rosemary Nation  
 Joe Vipond and Family  
 Christyann Olson  
 Cliff and Terry Wallis  
 Dorothy Berry and The Berndt Family  
 Mary Kettenbach  
 Michael Bloomfield  
 Anonymous

### *Benefactors with Lifetime Gifts \$20,000 - \$55,000*

Lorne Fitch  
 Clint and Julie Docken  
 Anthony and Liz Fricke  
 David and Cathy Mayhood  
 Donna Hammerlindl  
 Diane and Kevin Mihalcheon  
 Linda and Yusuf Javeri  
 Glen and Lois Mumey  
 Richard and Carol Secord  
 Alan and Madeleine Ernst  
 David and Vikki Reid  
 Anonymous



## Memorial Tributes

Memorial tributes made by family and friends remember those we have lost and contribute to AWA's strength. AWA remembers them here in our Annual Report and in our hearts. The list below reflects recent losses and in some cases, a memory of those who made an impact on our lives and are missed years later.

### Donations in Memoriam 2019 – 2020

Roger Creasey 1953-2012	Wilbur Tripp 1931-2020
Claire Falls 1952-2019	Margaret Hougan 1932-2020
Paul Potapoff 1922-2019	P.K. Anderson 2014
R. David Petterson 1948-2014	Wilfred & Brenda McQuaid
Orval Pall 1951-1986	Barry Fellows 1956-2020
Dale McRae 1929-2019	Calvin McLaren 1970-2020
John Glenn Robinson 1940-2019	Margaret Main 1935-2020
Glen Warnke 1954-2019	Murielle Carlson 1960-2020
Sally McLean 1954-2019	Gus Yaki 1932-2020
Charles A. Miller 1921-2009	Greg Johnston 1951-2020
Joan Dunford 2009	Gerrit Brolsma 1935-2020
Mel Dunford 2008	Nancy Allison 1941-2020
Raymond Sloan 1996	Harry Taylor 1941-2020
Weslyn Mather 2015	Richard Guy 1916-2020
David & Murray Manzer	Emma McPhail
Helen Dixon 1920-2019	Earla Rudd
Charlie Russell 1942-2018	Ron Prokosch
Jim Burton 1960-2020	Murray Vines
Bill Laidlaw 1936-2020	Ann Savage 1929-2020
David Eriksson 2019	Betsy Nicholls
David Pritchard 2019	Russell Wells 1926-2020
Jasmine and Aliyah 2019	Sharon Henderson 1943-2018
Christina Havard 1944-2015	Mary S. Lore 1921-2019



## Recognition for Outstanding Individuals

AWA is honoured to receive throughout the year donations from friends and families made in honour of someone who was recognized for something outstanding they achieved or a difference they made. This year we received donations as tributes to the following:

Johanna Buchman-Duck  
 Cleve Wershler  
 Bruno Canadien  
 Cliff Wallis  
 Sebastian and Milo Brennan  
 Jennifer Graham  
 Marion Rogers  
 Esther Kienholz  
 Blair Porter  
 Lindsay and Alex  
 Gus Yaki  
 Aileen Pelzer  
 Laurence Marks  
 Leo McGoldrick  
 Mark Jackson  
 Yaro Horacheck  
 Carolyn Peterson  
 Will Cunningham  
 Jill Seaton  
 Kevin Van Tighem  
 Madison McGinnis  
 Linda Duncan  
 Peter Duck  
 Barbara Buchmann  
 Peggy Holroyd  
 Abigail Hadden

## Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust

Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust is a permanent endowment fund for Alberta's wilderness and in time it can become an integral part of wilderness for tomorrow. We hope the fund will grow over the generations to come and that years from today, the fund will continue to provide for the care and protection of Alberta's natural landscapes.

The Trust began in 1986 as a memorial fund established as a tribute to biologist Orval Pall. Throughout the years, families seeking to remember their own loved ones have found solace and strength in devoting resources to the memorial fund, which was dedicated to support the protection of wilderness in Alberta. On the fifteenth anniversary of the fund, AWA established the Trust as an endowment fund with the Calgary Foundation in order to help support the long-term sustainability of the Association. In time, the Trust will support wilderness programs and





research that contribute to the protection, understanding, and appreciation of wilderness, wild waters, and wildlife in Alberta.

The fund balance has not grown significantly but is a tribute to numerous small donations from concerned individuals. Today the balance is \$28,494 (\$28,788 in 2019). The endowment fund's annual distribution of \$1,167 (\$1,075 in 2019) is dedicated to covering the costs of the Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture and the Wilderness Defender Awards.

### Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust Guest Lecture

Each year in November, AWA hosts the Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture, given by a renowned guest speaker. Sponsored by the Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust, the Annual Lecture is an opportunity to present the ideas of researchers, writers or those active in a field related to conservation of wilderness or wildlife. The lecture is meant to challenge AWA as well as to inform those attending. AWA presents these lectures in pursuit of its mission "Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action."

Martha Kostuch was considered an expert in consensus-based decision making and her work helped join groups that traditionally might not have worked together. She sought ways to make the system work so we could move forward. Kostuch was a "feisty, fine woman, who never hesitated to speak her mind." When she recognized things weren't right, she would fight very hard, tirelessly, to make sure that there was a change and that it would be better for all of us. Kostuch, who died April 23, 2008, was a national leader, an Alberta Wilderness Defender and a woman who leaves a vital legacy. AWA has honoured her legacy and her memory by naming our annual lecture the Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture.

Dr. Mark Boyce delivered the 2019 Kostuch lecture. Mark is a Professor of Ecology at the University of Alberta where he holds the Alberta Conservation Association Chair in Fisheries and Wildlife. Mark's expertise in population ecology has made a very explicit contribution to wildlife policy in Canada. For example, his court testimony on the need to protect greater sage-grouse habitat helped convince the federal government to issue an emergency protection order in late 2013.

Much of Mark's speech was devoted to describing the ecological research that he and his students have published. The conclusions of some of that research are dire. The place of greater sage-grouse on the landscape remains very tenuous. The emergency protection order has helped to make petroleum exploitation more sensitive to the needs of sage-grouse but it still remains probably the most endangered species of bird in Canada. Mark admonished that wouldn't be surprised to see sage-grouse disappear from Alberta's landscape by as early as 2021... next year. More positive news was reported with respect to Alberta's wolverine population. Looking ahead, Mark was optimistic that a current theme of his research lab – studying carbon sequestration in our grasslands and parklands natural regions – could inspire public policy that would be a win-win for cattle production and climate change mitigation.

### Wilderness Defenders Awards

The Alberta Wilderness Defenders Awards are dedicated to individuals who have particularly inspired us with their love of Alberta's wild lands, wildlife and wild water, and their efforts and achievements for conservation. AWA presents annual awards, to recognize such individuals.



These individuals have recognized that Alberta's wilderness is among the most pristine in the world and cannot be taken for granted. They know that our wild places are the source of our health, wealth, and quality of life and that we must take an active role in their conservation. This year, the award was presented to Jill and Basil Seaton, and to Dr. Mark Boyce.

Through their long history of activism the Seatons personify wilderness conservation. The Seatons settled in Jasper in the early 1990s. Until Basil's death in 2011 Jill and Basil were instrumental to the actions and successes of the Jasper Environmental Association. Their passion and diligence, attributes Jill continues to bring to her ongoing work at the JEA, helped to make the JEA the most authoritative conservation voice in Jasper National Park. Dr. Mark Boyce was also the Annual Lecturer and notes on his contributions are made in the preceding section.

### Great Gray Owl Awards

Like the great gray owl, with unending patience and dedication to purpose, these individuals work in quiet wisdom to conserve wilderness habitat and wild creatures. Our success is a reflection of the enduring commitment they have made to Alberta Wilderness Association.

2010 marked the launch of AWA's *Great Gray Owl Award*. Inspired in particular by three outstanding women and the significant contribution they have made over the past several years, this award will be presented annually as individuals meet the high standard of volunteerism, dedication and commitment of these inaugural award winners. Anne Fabris, Linda Javeri and Margaret Main were the 2010 recipients of the award. Ed Hergott, tireless supporter of our outreach program and events, received the award in 2011. Paul Sutherland and Nuno Fragoso were awarded the Great Gray Owl in 2013 and in 2014 we recognized Heather Crone. Bob Blaxley accepted our award in 2015 and in 2016 we were honoured to present the award to Heinz Unger. In 2017 we honoured longstanding and dedicated volunteer Kevin Mihalcheon and in the fall of 2018 we recognized George Campbell and Murray Little for their untiring dedication and 10 years of service presenting the Music for the Wild Program. No subsequent Great Gray Owl awards have yet been presented.



### *Hope for Tomorrow*

*Above all is the absolute certainty that we care and we will take a stand and we will have hope for tomorrow because people care and know the sanctuary and peace found in wild spaces and wild things. AWA is an association built on hope and I am so privileged to have known and to have been part of that hope!  
– Christyann Olson*



*Great Horned Owl: Alberta’s Provincial bird and the symbol of AWA’s strengths and qualities of wisdom, higher knowledge and guardians of our wild spaces. Photo © C. Olson*

