

# Alberta Wilderness Association



Annual Report

2020-2021



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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 has been my privilege to serve as the President of the Board of Directors of the Alberta Wilderness Association for the past two years and what a ride it has been. A global pandemic was never part of our strategic plan!

I would be remiss if I did not begin this message with an acknowledgment of the decades of remarkable service to conservation by Christyann Olson who retired from the Executive Director position on June 30, 2021. We are truly fortunate that Christyann has continued on for these past months as "Senior Adviser" to ensure the smooth transition in the role to Ian Urquhart, long time editor of our Wildlands Advocate magazine. We are similarly grateful that Ian has stepped into the position with his encyclopedic knowledge of environmental issues in Alberta.

We also bid a fond farewell this year to Diane Mihalcheon, our long-serving administrative assistant and to conservation specialists Nissa Petterson and Grace Wark, while Carolyn Campbell and Sean Nichols remain with us as key staff members. They are joined by new hires: Devon Earl, Phillip Meintzer, and Lindsey Wallis. It is a measure of the strength of the organization that these transitions have transpired smoothly and AWA's standing in the community has perhaps never been higher.

AWA's financial position remains strong, thanks to your generous donations and our ever-prudent eye on expenses. You can be certain your support in all its forms is deeply appreciated. We are pleased to note that once again we have achieved a 5-Star rating by Charity Intelligence Canada, which places AWA among their "Top 100 Charities" in Canada.

Our Adventures for Wilderness program illustrates the qualities that make the AWA such an exceptionally robust enterprise. A4W continues to be a successful initiative that is well aligned with our values and is building relationships with those who share them. Thank you to all the Adventure Coordinators and participants who have so enthusiastically embraced this concept.

The year ahead is certain to present AWA with many new challenges but we remain optimistic that Albertans are becoming more deeply engaged with the importance of addressing environmental and conservation issues in order to have a world worth passing on to the next generations. Your continuing support will ensure that 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 Challenging, Rewarding Year

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AWA's 2020-21 fiscal year was challenging in many respects. For the first time in our 56 year history, we had to contend with a global pandemic. This demanded serious re-thinking and adjustments in our program delivery and our staff work environment. The year also presented AWA with important human resources challenges, with the departure of seasoned conservation specialists, administrative support personnel, and most notably AWA's Executive Director. And, as seems to be the perennial case in Alberta, our ambitions to better protect and defend Alberta's wild spaces were challenged by governments that have yet to appreciate sufficiently the many rewards healthy landscapes deliver.

Challenging as it was, AWA's year also was very rewarding. We rose to the challenges we faced. Those rewards may be seen most clearly in several policy announcements and in AWA's outreach activities. Coal and caribou – those are policy areas where AWA contributed significantly to important policy rewards.

The Grassy Mountain Joint Review Panel hearing stretched from late October to early December 2020. AWA was a full participant in that hearing. There AWA joined the Grassy Mountain Group, a group of landowners in the Crowsnest Pass who opposed Benga Mining's Grassy Mountain Coal Project, in a coalition opposing that project. In June 2021, the Joint Review Panel – acting as the decision maker for the Alberta Energy Regulator, categorically rejected the Grassy Mountain Coal Project. AWA takes some pride from the fact that the Alberta Energy Regulator commented favourably about our Coalition's contribution to its deliberations about and assessment of that project. In March AWA submitted a lengthy, detailed submission to Environment and Climate Change Canada Minister Jonathan Wilkinson urging him to designate the Tent Mountain Redevelopment Project for an impact assessment under federal legislation. Minister Wilkinson responded positively to this and other designation requests – Tent Mountain requires a federal impact assessment.

On caribou, our efforts contributed to a bittersweet reward – Parks Canada's recognition that a conservation breeding program is vital to the survival of caribou in Jasper National Park. It's bittersweet because it came after years of watching Jasper's caribou population slide to critically low levels. In acknowledging the necessity of captive breeding for Jasper caribou to have any hope of surviving on the land, AWA also insisted that Parks Canada must do more to limit human access into the backcountry.

If policy improvements are rewards, so too are AWA's outreach activities. These activities are vital both to our education mandate and to our efforts to nurture and grow the conservation community. The flagship of these efforts is AWA's Adventures for Wilderness Program. This program, as we detail later in this annual report, engaged hundreds of Albertans over the year. So too did our Talks program, highlighted as it was by three annual lectures, five virtual town halls focusing on exploiting coal along Alberta's Eastern Slopes, and the CoalChilla virtual concert. As the following sections illustrate, the 2020/21 year was one where AWA actively pursued our mission to protect wild spaces in all of Alberta's landscapes.

My experience during my first few months as your Executive Director underlined what a privilege it is to work with all of AWA's members and supporters on behalf of the landscapes and wildlife we value so highly.

*- Ian Urquhart, Executive Director*



# 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
	Cliff Wallis, Calgary
	Gail Docken, Edmonton
	Jamie Jack, Calgary
	Diandra Bruised Head, Standoff
	Nathan Schmidt, 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 value of diversity and inclusiveness and works actively to improve the board's representativeness.*

## Staff

Executive Director:	Christyann Olson, BN, MSc - <i>Retired July 1, 2021</i> Ian Urquhart, PhD - <i>July 1, 2021</i>
Conservation Director:	Ian Urquhart, PhD - <i>Resigned - January 1, 2021</i> Carolyn Campbell, BA, BEd, MA, MBA – <i>January 1, 2021</i>
Conservation Specialists:	Carolyn Campbell, BA, BEd, MA, MBA – <i>2007 – January 2021</i> Grace Wark, BSc – <i>Resigned May 2021</i> Nissa Petterson, BSc – <i>Resigned March 2021</i> Devon Earl, BSc, MSc – <i>Hired May 2021</i> Phillip Meintzer, BSc, MSc - <i>Hired May 2021</i>
Program Specialist:	Sean Nichols, BSc
Wild Lands Advocate Editor:	Ian Urquhart, PhD
Administrative Associate:	Diane Mihalcheon – <i>Retired June 2021 to work casual hours</i>
Book Keeper:	Kim Bilan - <i>Resigned April 2021</i>
Admin & Accounting Specialist:	Lindsey Wallis – <i>Hired May 2021</i>

*AWA's staff complement is excellent and is supplemented by individuals from the board of directors who volunteer and provide tremendous support to AWA's research, advocacy, and outreach work. AWA's permanent staff members were supported by casual staff throughout the year to assist with specific projects and outreach.*





# Conservation, Stewardship, Outreach, Strength and Capacity

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AWA's board members and staff have made contributions to this section of our Annual Report. The following sections highlight AWA's conservation, stewardship and outreach efforts from our 2020 - 2021 fiscal year. A section on AWA's organizational and financial capacity is included. The detail in this part of our Annual Report refers at times to AWA's historical activities to give greater context. This comprehensive approach to creating an historical record as AWA's annual report is a long-standing AWA tradition showing AWA members and supporters the work done, the progress made, the disappointments, and plans for the coming year.

# Contents

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President's Message .....	2
A Challenging, Rewarding Year.....	3
Board and Staff.....	4
Board of Directors .....	4
Staff .....	4
ADDENDUM	
Conservation, Stewardship, Outreach.....	9
CONSERVATION .....	9
Wild Spaces .....	10
Wild Alberta Map .....	10
AREAS AND ISSUES OF CONCERN .....	13
BOREAL REGION	
Primrose-Lakeland.....	14
McClelland Lake.....	14
Wood Buffalo National Park.....	15
Birch Wabasca .....	15
Hay-Zama.....	16
Peace River Valley .....	17
Bistcho .....	18
Chinchaga .....	18
Cache Creek Wolverine .....	19
Caribou Mountains.....	19
ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION	
Willmore Wilderness Park.....	21
Kakwa .....	22
Little Smoky .....	23
Bighorn .....	24
Trail Monitoring.....	24
Bighorn Historic Trail.....	25
South Ghost Wilderness Area - Ghost-Waiparous .....	26
Bow-Canmore Corridor .....	27
Kananaskis Country .....	27
Castle Wildland Park and Castle Provincial Park .....	28
Livingstone-Porcupine.....	28
PARKLAND REGION	
Waterton Parkland .....	30
Rumsey .....	30
Parkland Dunes.....	31



GRASSLANDS REGION

Middle Sand Hills ..... 32

Suffield National Wildlife Area ..... 33

Milk River-Sage Creek..... 33

Cypress Hills..... 34

Pakowki Lake ..... 34

Milk River Ridge..... 34

Milk River..... 35

Milk River Management Committee ..... 35

Prairie Conservation Forum..... 36

Grassland Restoration Forum..... 37

WATER

AEN Water Caucus..... 38

Bow River Reservoir Options Initiative..... 38

South Saskatchewan River Basin (SSRB) Irrigation Infrastructure Expansion Project..... 39

Athabasca River Integrated Watershed Management Plan..... 39

Special Areas Water Supply Project ..... 39

Wetlands ..... 39

Water for Life ..... 40

FORESTS

Fish and Forests Initiative..... 42

FSC Canada ..... 42

ENERGY

Conventional Oil and Gas ..... 43

Technical Advisory Committee Participation ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Renewable Energy ..... 44

Coal..... 45

WILDLIFE

Species at Risk ..... 49

Grizzly Bears ..... 50

Black Bears..... 51

Caribou ..... 51

Greater Sage-grouse..... 52

Wolves ..... 53

Game Farming ..... 53

Wild Boars ..... 57

Native Trout..... 57

DFO Cumulative Effects Public Engagement ..... 57

Wood and Plains Bison..... 58

Limber and Whitebark Pine..... 58

GOVERNMENT POLICY

Public Lands..... 60

Tax-recovery Lands..... 61

Protected Areas - Federal..... 61





Protected Areas - Provincial .....	62
Protected Areas Progress .....	62
Wild Spaces 2020 .....	63
Land-Use Framework .....	64
North Saskatchewan Regional Plan (NSRP) .....	64
Lower Athabasca Regional Plan (LARP) .....	65
Future Land Use Planning Regions .....	65
Biodiversity .....	65
Strengthening Ties with Indigenous Communities.....	65
Environmental Laws .....	66
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	
Temperate Grassland Conservation .....	67
Great Plains Conservation Network (GPCN).....	67
Transboundary Grasslands Partnership .....	68
OUTREACH	
Wild Lands Advocate .....	69
Online Presence.....	69
Social media.....	70
Talks.....	71
Adventures for Wilderness.....	72
Leave No Trace .....	73
STRENGTH AND CAPACITY	
Roger Creasey Wilderness Resource Centre .....	74
AWA's Cottage School .....	74
FINANCING WILDERNESS PROTECTION	
Review Engagement Report .....	75
Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Legacy Circle .....	76
Bequests .....	76
Wilderness and Wildlife Bequests.....	76
AWA's Wilderness and Wildlife Benefactors.....	77
Donations in Memoriam 2020 – 2021.....	78
Recognition for Outstanding Individuals.....	79
Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust .....	79
ANNUAL WILDERNESS AND WILDLIFE TRUST LECTURE AND AWARDS	
Wilderness Defenders Awards .....	81
Great Gray Owl Awards.....	81
HOPE FOR TOMORROW.....	82



# 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.

Since AWA was founded in 1965 we have devoted ourselves to understanding, caring, and helping. A healthy future for the natural world depends on creating a public and decision makers that understand the importance of wild spaces, that want to care for them, and that want to help preserve or restore them. Our challenge today is arguably greater than it has ever been. Today, phrases like the sixth extinction and ecological collapse have a currency, a legitimacy, and an urgency they lacked when AWA's founders sat around a kitchen table more than 55 years ago.

Perhaps a growing appreciation of the magnitude of the conservation crisis deserves some credit for some of the encouraging recent developments in Alberta public opinion. The public outrage over proposals to strip mine coal along the Eastern Slopes is a case in point. The public's strong opposition to this madness suggests that Albertans are warming to the types of arguments AWA has made for many years now. Without that opposition, without your voices on this and other conservation issues, our decision makers will continue with their "business as usual" policies.

This section testifies to AWA's consistent efforts to speak out on behalf of the voiceless in our politics and society – landscapes and wildlife. Those efforts could not have been made in the past, and may not be made strongly in the future, without your support. Thank you.



# Wild Spaces

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*“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*

## Wild Alberta Map

“Wild Spaces” and “Areas of Concern” are terms AWA uses to refer to areas critical to achieving a network of protected landscapes in Alberta that represents Alberta’s six Natural Regions. These areas and the networks they can create are the basis of our Wild Alberta map; the map constitutes AWA’s strategic conservation vision.

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 (ESAs) on Alberta’s landscapes.

The Wild Alberta map is complemented by an interactive webmap you can access here: [albertawilderness.ca/wild-alberta/](http://albertawilderness.ca/wild-alberta/). The interactive map depicts Alberta’s Natural Regions, the percentage of each natural region currently protected, and the amounts of these regions that would be protected by formally adopting AWA’s Areas of Concern. The maps encourage users, from government officials to engaged citizens to students, 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. Maps are among AWA’s most effective educational tools.

*The late 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 we have invested in our mapping tools. We gratefully dedicate our mapping work to his memory.*



# Wild Alberta



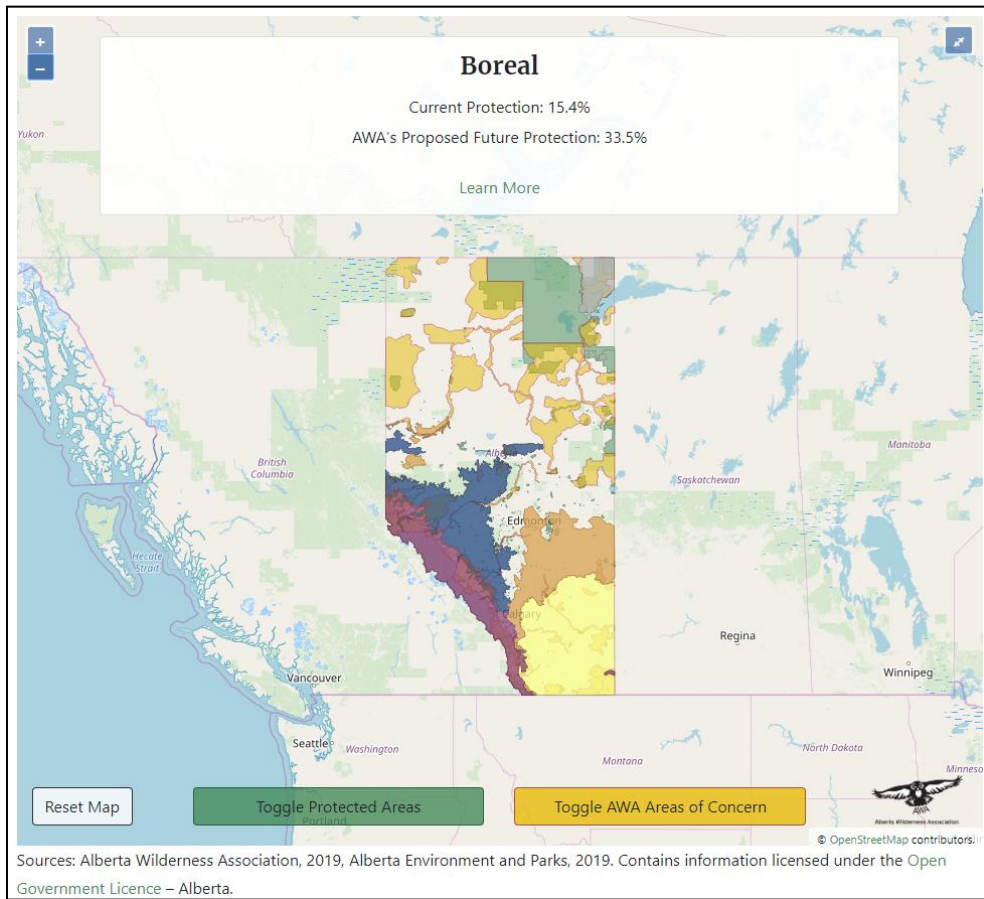
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*AWA's Wild Alberta Interactive Map - each of the natural regions may be selected and explored. The map details current levels of protection for each region and the additional protection AWA believes is needed to complete a sustainable network of protected 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 province. In 2018, Alberta reported that 15.4 percent of the Boreal Natural Region was protected. Seventy-seven percent of that protection is found within the 44,807 square kilometres of Wood Buffalo National Park. Protection is not evenly distributed amongst the eight boreal subregions and ranges from 93.8 percent protection of the Peace-Athabasca Delta Subregion to 1.5 percent of the Dry Mixedwood Subregion. Protecting AWA's proposed wild spaces within the boreal could bring the total to 33.5 percent. In December 2019 the federal government committed to conserve 25 percent of Canada's land by 2025, an increase from the "at least 17 percent protection by 2020 target" Canada set at the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2010. For its part, 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. Boreal old growth forests and wetland ecosystems are vital for the habitat they provide for wildlife and their water filtration and carbon storage functions. More than 200 billion tonnes of carbon are stored in boreal trees, soils, water and peat. There is much more to be learned about boreal wildlife including birds and waterfowl.

AWA is committed to maintaining healthy and intact forest ecosystems that will sustain biological diversity and viable wildlife populations, provide clean drinking water, and promote long-term economic opportunities. AWA supports responsible ecosystem-based forest management that does not compromise wildlife and wilderness values. AWA believes that the Boreal Forest Natural Region of Alberta requires thoughtful management that integrates the social and economic needs of the region within a framework that prioritizes conserving the ecological integrity for generations to come.

February 2021 saw the Alberta government announce two important advancements for northeast Alberta wildlife conservation and the exercise of Indigenous rights: the proposed expansion of the Kitaskino Nuwenëné Wildland Provincial Park and the approval of the precedent-setting Moose Lake Access Management Plan. They are discussed below in the the Birch Wabasca section.

In May 2021, following our participation in the Cold Lake caribou task force, AWA provided comments to Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) on the draft Cold Lake sub-regional land-use plan and the associated Caribou Habitat Recovery Analysis. A finalized sub-regional land-use plan is due by the end of December 2021.

The *Forests Amendment Act* came into force on May 1st, 2021. Updating the *Forests Act* (1971) the act was passed without opportunity for public or Indigenous Peoples consultation. Rather than reforms that would support forest ecosystems and inclusive forest management. AWA believes the 2021 update facilitates commercial interests.



## 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-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 the Alberta government launched in November 2019. In May 2021 we offered our comments on the draft Cold Lake sub-regional plan. AWA believes collaborative efforts are key to ensure threatened Cold Lake and Christina Lake woodland caribou populations survive and recover, and to ensure 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.

## 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 kilometres 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 on route 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 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 portion of the McClelland patterned fen. Suncor's proposal for an operational plan that will assure the sustainability of the unmined portion of the MLWC is due to be submitted to the AER by December 15, 2021.



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. AWA cites the lack of protection for the outstanding McClelland wetlands as evidence this is still far from the case.

### Wood Buffalo National Park

Wood Buffalo National Park, 80% 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 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.

In February 2021, the Government of Alberta announced a proposed significant expansion of the Kitaskino Nuwenëné Wildland Provincial Park, adding 143,800 hectares of land to nearly double the park's size. Stated goals for the park expansion are: help protect the landscape, watersheds and wildlife in the area, including bison and woodland caribou; support Indigenous Peoples' traditional activities, including the exercise of treaty rights; and creating recreation opportunities for Albertans.



The Government of Alberta announced final approval of the Moose Lake Access Management Plan in February 2021. This precedent-setting land-use plan, developed with the Fort McKay First Nation, applies to a 10-kilometre-wide Zone around the Gardiner and Namur Lake reserves of Fort McKay First Nation (the Moose Lake reserves), covering 100,000 hectares. Half of the Zone is on 'mixed use' public lands outside designated protected areas. The Plan recognizes that 'edge effects' to wildlife habitat extend 50 to 200 metres beyond industrial disturbance points and increases maximum limits of 'buffered' industrial disturbance in the Zone to 15% (it is currently 13.5%); it further allocates the allowed disturbance limit amongst the forestry, oil and gas and sand/gravel sectors. It commits to significant community-based monitoring, enhanced reclamation practices, and restoration of legacy seismic lines.

AWA applauds both announcements as important advances to inform management of critical habitat of species at risk, such as woodland caribou, native fish, and grasslands species and furthers the exercise of Indigenous rights and traditional land uses everywhere in Alberta.

### 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 previously productive oil and gas field that has been actively developed since the 1960s.

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 hold the oil and gas industry accountable for meeting 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 diverse stakeholders to 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 Alberta government'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 Alberta government 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 delta 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 kilometres upstream from the Dunvegan Bridge. This would create a 77 kilometre long headpond, flooding the 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 a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA). AHP also cited delays within their preliminary consultation phase because of the team's commitment to ensuring 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 the 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 the information exists, it is difficult to locate and given significant funding for such a project, AWA would like to dedicate resources to researching this important baseline.

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 while other areas have been fragmented by energy industry disturbance. According to the Alberta government, the Bistcho caribou range was 91% disturbed by human footprint as of late 2017, mostly from historic seismic line disturbance. Bistcho currently has no protected areas.

March 2021 saw the Government of Alberta issue the draft Bistcho Lake sub-regional caribou land use plan for public consultation. AWA has participated as a member of the Bistcho Lake Task Force since November 2019 and has studied the draft plan to determine if it responds appropriately to the Task Force recommendations. The Task Force was launched in November 2019 to advise the Alberta government on land-use planning at a local scale, including caribou recovery actions. AWA believes that the main focus of the plan must be to protect caribou in order to comply with federal law. Unfortunately economic development remains the cornerstone of the draft plan. AWA has provided comments to advise the government of deficiencies in the plan.

## 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 Alberta government, their home range is 97% disturbed by human footprint as of late 2017, mostly from historic seismic line disturbance. Despite the Alberta government'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 seeks 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 Alberta government 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.

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. The Government of Alberta established the Chinchaga caribou sub-regional task force in 2021 and AWA was selected, and agreed, to participate on this task force.



### Cache Creek Wolverine

Located east of Chinchaga in northwestern 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 protecting this wilderness is vital to conserving Alberta's northern wilderness given its high biological diversity in both plant and animal communities, in addition to its rich cultural history.

AWA has connections 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 group helps keep AWA more aware of current land-use practices and demands.

### Caribou Mountains

Caribou Mountains Wildland Park (5,910 km<sup>2</sup>) 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 are 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 hunters.

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 7 percent per year from 2007 to 2017 (according to the 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. This damages vegetation, soils, and the 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 2021, 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 an Alberta government-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.



*Vibrant boreal forest captured on an AWA field tour by Chris Wearmouth in 2008.*

## 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 seems to be a perennial 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, as the foundation underlying any future industrial, commercial or recreational developments in the park, is needed. 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 a draft management plan still hasn't been made public.

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 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, other industrial developments, and high impact motorized 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 is the current owner of this mine. The mine began operations mid 2018 and mining of the No. 8 mine surface operation is on-going although it was closed early in 2020 because of a decline in demand.

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 the environmental impacts of forestry operations in Weyerhaeuser's Forest Management Area which overlaps with the Kakwa region. We believe 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 Alberta government 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 Alberta government in March 2020. We believe the conifer clear-cut areas within caribou ranges authorized under the new plan will be intolerable for these endangered caribou. 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 Alberta government 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 Alberta government in November 2019. AWA believes collaborative efforts are key to ensure threatened Redrock Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou populations survive and recover, and to ensure 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 Conventional Oil and Gas section 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 trout fishery: some small creeks and rivers still support Athabasca rainbow trout and bull trout. Both species 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. This designation too has meant 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/Wilson 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 May 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 Alberta government 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 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 and the last data collected was at the end of the season in 2020. Findings since AWA's last cumulative report in 2012 are currently being analyzed and AWA anticipates the release of the final cumulative report in 2022. There is no doubt that the topography, soil, and vegetation of the region are not able to withstand motorized recreation.



## Bighorn Historic Trail

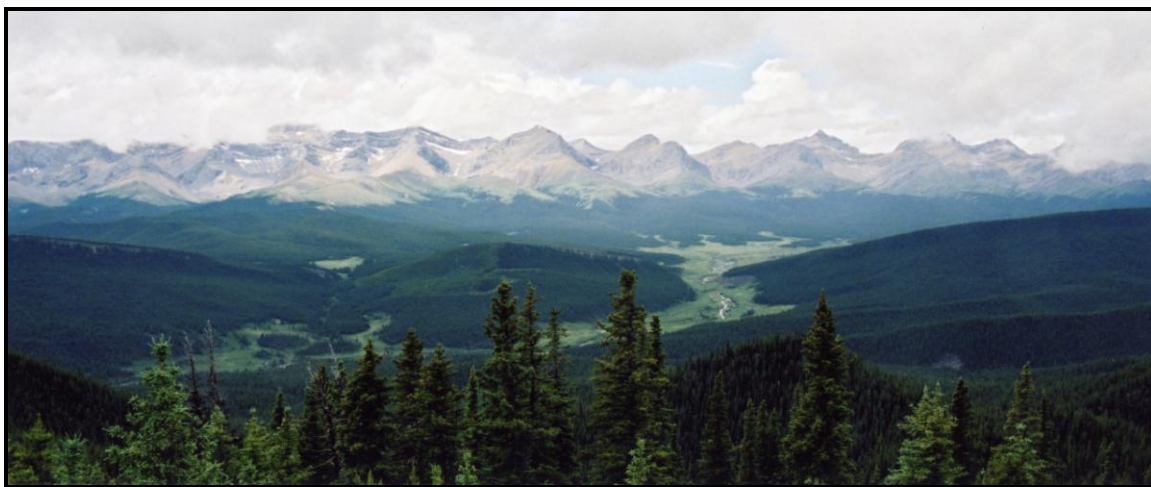
Between 1994 and 2020, AWA has worked to open and maintain the Historic Bighorn Trail between Crescent Falls on the Bighorn River and the Wapiabi, Blackstone and Chungo Gaps. To our knowledge AWA was the only equestrian group to sign up to maintain a provincial trail when the Forester responsible for the Nordegg, Rocky Mountain House area set up the “Adopt-a-Trail” program in 1994.

When AWA adopted this trail, 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 had been completed.

In the fall of 2017, 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.

We hope 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. All these years and all these strategies have been aimed at seeing better decision making for the area.



*Panorama of the front range as seen when emerging from the dark forested Bighorn Historic Trail to the open vistas and valleys below. ©C. Olson*

## 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*. OHV use is 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 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. Among many other areas in the Eastern Slopes headwaters, off-highway vehicle (OHV) use continues to pose a threat to riparian health and landscape integrity. AWA works with Stop Ghost Clearcut and the Ghost Watershed Alliance Society (GWAS) to increase awareness of unchecked OHV activity, illegal firearms and weapons discharge, irresponsible random camping, and a lack of enforcement that has become prevalent in the Ghost-Waiparous area.

AWA believes ecosystem health must be prioritized above all else and recreation should be considered only where it can be accommodated sustainably. Security of our headwaters, watersheds, and natural ecosystems is vitally important for maintaining healthy communities and a healthy environment. 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.

### Bow-Canmore Corridor

The Bow-Canmore Corridor is a crucial and vulnerable internationally significant wildlife corridor, facilitating 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 the sustainability of wildlife populations. 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.

Development proposals by Three Sisters Mountain Village (TSMV) threatened to impact connectivity within the Bow Valley's wildlife corridors, including proposals for Three Sisters Village and to develop the Smith Creek Corridor. The unexpected provincial approval of TSMV's Smith Creek Wildlife Corridor led to outcry by scientists, community groups and environmental NGOs, who asserted that the approved corridor was too narrow and steep to accommodate wildlife movement. TSMV had two Area Structural Plans (ASPs) before Canmore Town Council, whose approval was needed for the developments to go ahead. In April 2021, Canmore Town Council rejected the Smith Creek ASP. The Three Sisters Village ASP was ultimately rejected after third-reading in May 2021. AWA will continue to monitor the situation and support colleagues working to conserve wildlife connectivity in the Bow Valley and the local Canmore residents speaking up against developments that would harm wildlife movement in the area.

### 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. AWA's long-term vision for Kananaskis is that protections are expanded for critical habitat and wildlife corridors, while also providing sustainable recreation opportunities. Industrial development on public lands must be managed in a way that respects and conserves the biodiversity, wildlife corridors and headwaters of Kananaskis Country.

The public lands camping pass and Kananaskis Country user fees were introduced in June 2021. AWA believes the Conservation Pass will reduce the availability of low-cost recreational opportunities for Albertans, and will act as a deterrent for visitors seeking out Alberta's wilderness. While there is a need in Kananaskis to invest in further conservation efforts, monitoring and enforcement of regulations, funding should come from the provincial budget and not rely upon a user-pay model. Applying user fees within the Kananaskis region may shift land use pressures to other nearby areas.

In December 2020, the Minister of Environment and Parks announced that all sites from the February 2020 *'Optimizing Alberta Parks'* decision would retain their protected area status. This was an important change in the government's approach which had previously intended to remove more than 164 parks, provincial recreation and natural areas from the Alberta Parks



system, fifty-three of which fell within Kananaskis Country. This decision followed the tireless efforts of Albertans to express their strong support for parks in Alberta.

In 2020, AWA continued to bring awareness to Fortress Mountain Holdings' (FMH) amended water license, the potential impacts to local hydrology and wildlife, and the damaging precedent this approval may set for other water licenses in the Bow River Basin. In 2019, FMH successfully amended their water license to divert and sell 50 million litres per year from a small unnamed tributary of Galatea Creek. AWA opposed this decision as the Bow River, of which Galatea Creek is a tributary, is already over-allocated at the expense of meeting in-stream environmental needs. As of 2022, Fortress, in partnership with a local brewing company, is now selling the water extracted from their leased lands, marketed as "Rök Glacier Water."

### Castle Wildland Park and Castle Provincial Park

After the September 2015 announcement of the Castle Parks, a great deal of committee work and consultation produced 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 OHV 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. AWA continued to raise public awareness of this issue in 2020 and 2021, and to encourage members of the public to write to the Minister of Environment and Parks to express their opinion on OHV trails in the Castle. The Minister is expected to make a decision on how motorized recreation in the Castle Parks will be managed in Fall 2021.

Over-grazing continues to be a concern in the Castle. In some cases, cattle have been left to graze too long, so that they decimate vegetation, including wildflowers that are valued by many visitors. Cattle that roam outside of their designated areas also threaten riparian health when they traverse streams, trampling riparian vegetation and increasing sedimentation in waterways. AWA met with Alberta Environment and Parks staff to discuss issues with fencing and cattle roaming outside of grassy areas. AWA continues to advocate for sustainable and responsible management of cattle in the Castle.

### Livingstone-Porcupine

AWA's goal is to ensure that the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills region is managed in a way that supports healthy watersheds and the area's unique biodiversity. Ongoing concerns for the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills include the cumulative effects of industrial land use (i.e. coal exploration and mining, forestry, roads, oil and gas) and high-intensity recreation within the headwaters of the Oldman River.

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.

Over the past year, the Castle-Livingstone-Porcupine Hills Recreation Advisory Group (CLPH RAG) has been the primary planning process for the Livingstone and Porcupine Hills PLUZs, Bob Creek Wildland Provincial Park, and Black Creek Heritage Rangeland. Following the work done by the Southern Alberta Recreation Advisory Group (SARAG), the CLPH RAG sought to implement the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills Recreation Management Plan and to consider recreational opportunities for the area.

A recommendations report was produced by the CLPH RAG and completed in February 2021. Given the diversity of representatives on the CLPH RAG and that it was not a consensus-based process, recommendations varied in their direction and alignment with conservation objectives. Alberta Environment and Parks planning staff and Minister Nixon will review the recommendations and we expect a decision from the Minister in Fall of 2022.

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. In May 2019, the Government of Alberta officially failed to meet this deadline. We're still waiting. The HSF is urgently needed to manage the increasing cumulative impacts of human footprint (including clearcuts and former coal mines) on the landscape.

The proposed Grassy Mountain Coal Mine, located within AWA's Livingstone-Porcupine Area of Concern, was rejected by the joint provincial-federal review panel in June 2021, following panel hearings that AWA participated in throughout 2020 (See section on Energy – Coal for further information.)



*AWA's Livingstone-Porcupine Area of Concern during a Fall 2020 field tour. 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 natural region containing the municipalities of Calgary, Red Deer and Edmonton and has extensive agricultural development. With only five 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 region lies just east of Waterton Lakes National Park, and represents the junction between two unique ecosystems; the Rocky Mountains and the Grasslands. The area is characterized by rough fescue grasslands and trembling aspen groves. Consisting of mostly private land, landowners in this region seek ways to minimize the impacts of development and conflicts with wildlife. 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.

### 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 to protect the 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 were 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. The absence of this plan could inevitably see the loss of Rumsey's 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. To date the management plan has not been made public.

### Parkland Dunes

With rolling hills of native grasses interspersed with lush aspen groves, peatlands, and vibrant wetlands, the Parkland Dunes constitute 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. The group monitors the implementation of the 1999 management plan approved 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 carrying capacity of the area in the near future.

In 2018, the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan (NSRP) Regional Advisory Council (RAC) Advice was finally released. AWA believes the conservation component of the Advice is inadequate and must be expanded. 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. This 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.



*One of two Wainwright Dunes Beaver Ponds,  
the largest beaver dam extends 100 metres. ©D. Olson*

## 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. There are few large, relatively undisturbed blocks of native grassland 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.

### 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. A news story suggesting the British Army may withdraw from training at CFB Suffield could give new opportunity for increased protection in this area. AWA will pursue the opportunity with the Department of National Defence and the Minister of the Environment.

### 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. 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 of 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 bear and wolf, 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 asked 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.

### 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 led 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 events are successful and help demonstrate how human land-use decisions impact wildlife and their migration. AWA volunteered during a re-fencing project in 2017.

### 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. The meeting here 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, 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 were 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 endangered greater sage-grouse.

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 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 its 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. It was a successful day, with beautiful weather and an opportunity to meet with the lease holder who helped the group understand grazing practices and the family's philosophy of stewarding 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 average 18 cubic metres per second at this time of year). This was a core part of the diversion system which redirected flows from the St. Mary's River to the Milk River. Since the collapse, the Milk River experienced natural flow levels of less than one cubic metre per second for the first time in 105 years. Repairs were completed in October and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation began diverting water to the Milk River.

## 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, 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 5 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. 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. 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 forum 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 preserving 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 staff sit on two PCF subcommittees, State of the Prairie and Connecting Corridors. 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.



## 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) in the 2019-2020 year. The forum began in 2006 as a 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. 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.



*Soapweed or (Yucca glauca Nuttall) part of the Agave Family can be found in southeastern Alberta grasslands. It is a rare chance to see in full bloom as shown in this photo. ©AWA Files*



## 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 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 orchid habitat is protected in the Narrows - ©C. Olson*

### AEN Water Caucus

AWA continues to chair the Alberta Environmental Network's Water Caucus, organizing its monthly calls and distributing the agenda and summary minutes for these meetings. In 2021, Water Caucus members continued to exchange information on various water issues across the province including coal mining and oil sands impacts on water, AEP's regulatory transformation, and the irrigation expansion project in the South Saskatchewan River Basin.

### Bow River Reservoir Options Initiative

In June 2021, AWA submitted a letter to AEP detailing our comments on the Bow River Reservoir Options Phase 2 Feasibility Study. AEP is investigating three reservoir options for flood mitigation along the Bow River upstream from Calgary. Upon reviewing the available information, AWA does not support the creation of new on-stream dam infrastructure as a strategy for flood mitigation for Calgary and the surrounding communities. We feel that better alternative flood mitigation strategies exist – through improving upstream land uses and limiting future commercial, industrial, agricultural, and residential developments within the ecologically





vital flood plain of the Bow River. Alternative flood mitigation measures were included in our letter, and we hope our concerns will be considered as part of this process.

#### South Saskatchewan River Basin (SSRB) Irrigation Infrastructure Expansion Project

In March 2021, AWA, along with several other ENGOs including Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE), Trout Unlimited Canada, and Bow Valley Naturalists submitted a letter to government ministers at both the provincial and federal levels outlining our shared concerns regarding the recently approved project to expand irrigation infrastructure in the SSRB. This project proposes to upgrade open canals into pipelines, to build new and expanded storage reservoirs, and to increase irrigation acres within eight irrigation districts in the SSRB. We are asking that this monumental project be subject to the necessary environmental assessments, regulatory review, and opportunities for public and indigenous consultation and input. Ongoing ENGO collaboration on this issue has continued over the course of the year.

#### Athabasca River Integrated Watershed Management Plan

AWA submitted a comment letter addressing the draft *Athabasca River Integrated Watershed Management Plan (IWMP)*, produced by the Athabasca Watershed Council (AWC) which was open for public feedback until June 30, 2021. AWA considers the IWMP to be an important strategic document that provides direction and a roadmap for future AWC-WPAC and partner activities. The recommendations we included would further strengthen this document through including more meaningful actions to protect the watershed for current and future generations.

#### Special Areas Water Supply Project

In the Red Deer River watershed, AWA continues to urge the Government of Alberta not to proceed with the Special Areas Water Supply Project (SAWSP). This project 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 financial costs to Albertans would exceed projected regional economic benefits by hundreds of millions of dollars. In August 2021, AWA reached out to Alberta Transportation and the Special Areas Board to inquire about the current status of the project. The Special Areas Board responded by saying that after reviewing the Engineering Confirmation study and the Environment Impact Assessment, the Special Areas Board moved not to advance further funding to the Special Areas Water Supply Project at this time. The Board decided not to submit the Environmental Impact Assessment to Alberta Environment and Parks for review.

## 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.

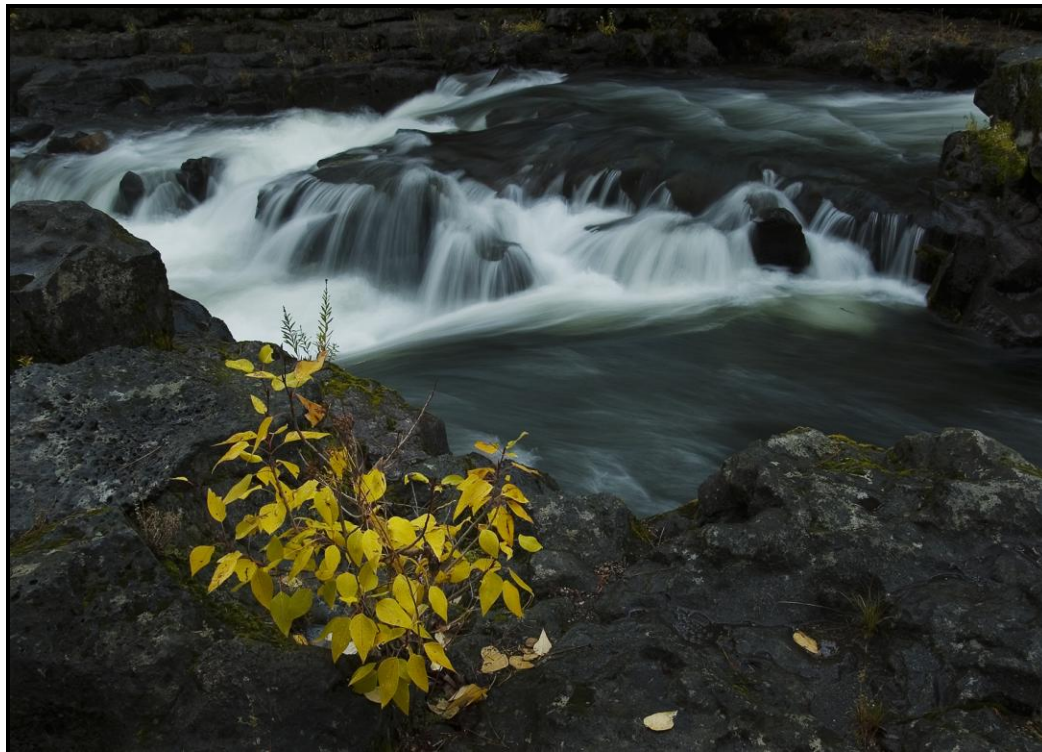
AWA staff participated in wetlands-related education and research events. These included a February 2020 wetlands research symposium; a Wetlands 101 course; and an April 2020 workshop on recent boreal ecosystem recovery and resilience research, including boreal peatlands reclamation challenges.

### 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 Alberta government 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.

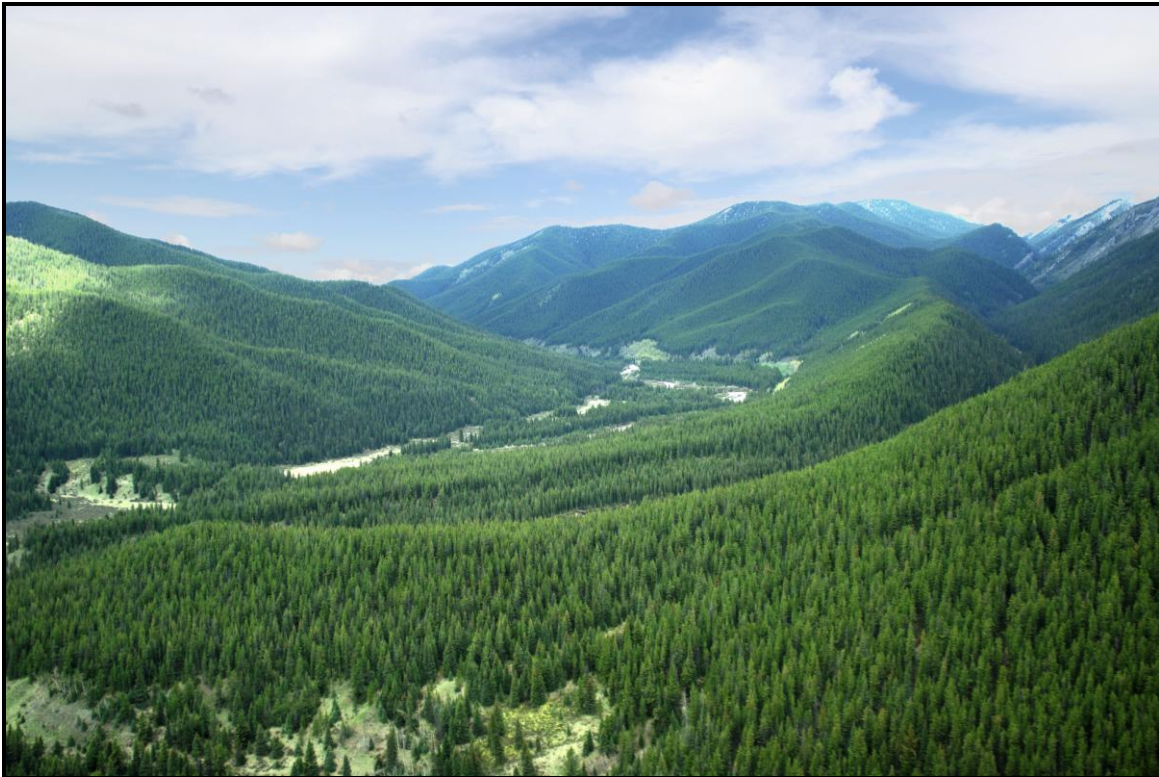


*"Water is the driving force of all nature." – Leonardo da Vinci A mesmerizing photo ©R. Rasmussen*

## 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.



*Vital ecosystems and habitat values must come first when making forest management planning decisions*  
©C. Olson

In 2020, Alberta Forestry announced several legal, regulatory and policy decisions which impact forest management in Alberta. These decisions increased access to timber and reduced regulatory barriers to harvest.

- 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.
- In October 2020, the Minister introduced the *Forests Amendment Act* to the legislature. The amendments to the Act included a preamble that mentions forest ecological values and climate change, followed by revisions to facilitate forest commercial interests. AWA believes

the *Forests Act* changes missed the opportunity for needed reforms to support forest ecosystems and transparent, inclusive forest management.

Spray Lake Sawmills, a major tenure holder on the southern Eastern Slopes, held ongoing consultations throughout 2020 as they developed their 10-year Detailed Forest Management Plan (DFMP). AWA made submissions throughout this consultation period. Our submissions included raising concerns surrounding westslope cutthroat trout habitat management and low in-stand retention rates.

In July 2021, the Government of Alberta entered into a new Forest Management Agreement (FMA) with Crowsnest Forest Products Ltd. (affiliated with Spray Lakes Sawmills) in the C5 Forest Management Unit west of Lethbridge. There was no public consultation prior to entering into this FMA. The Alberta Government news release states that the Castle Provincial Park will be excluded from the FMA, but says nothing about the Castle Wildland Provincial Park. AWA raised concerns that Alberta's forests continue to be managed on a timber-centric basis and that the privatization of forest management in the C5 area may be detrimental to ecosystem 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 ten years, AWA has facilitated 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. In 2020-2021, AWA hosted two videoconference forums (October 2020 and June 2021) addressing the legal gaps for westslope cutthroat trout protection on Alberta's Eastern Slopes and Trout Unlimited Canada's bringing back bull trout project in Tay River.

### 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 Director Cliff Wallis is also a Director on the Forest Stewardship Council (Canada) Board where he is one of two environmental chamber representatives.





## 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. AWA is 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

The Oil Sands Monitoring program (OSM) began in 2015 as a collaboration between the Governments of Canada and Alberta. It replaced the previous Joint Canada-Alberta Oil Sands Monitoring (JOSM) program that operated for three years beginning in 2012. The OSM program was created to monitor, evaluate, and report on the environmental impacts of oil sands development in the Oil Sands Region, to assess the risks of impacts, and to improve our understanding of the state of the environment in an open and transparent manner.

AWA has been involved in the OSM program since its inception (and the transition from JOSM) through participation as the sole ENGO representative on a number of Technical Advisory Committees (known as TACs). These committees are accountable for designing monitoring programs to address the priorities set out by the Oversight Committee. AWA currently participates on the wetlands monitoring and terrestrial biodiversity monitoring (TBM) TACs.

Throughout 2020- 2021, AWA participated in the annual work planning process to outline monitoring priorities for the 2021- 2022 program year. We were disappointed to see that the wetlands monitoring TAC only received 45% of their requested funding for the year, with TBM only receiving roughly two-thirds of the funds they had requested. One major concern with the funding decisions that was voiced across the OSM program is that the geospatial work plan was cut by 85%. This will result in negative consequences for the intended monitoring work to be conducted by other TACs – including wetlands and TBM.

The total funding available for the OSM program each year is \$50 million. This amount was negotiated with oil sands companies at the onset of the original JOSM program in 2012 and has never been increased. This means that it loses value each year due to inflation. It becomes more and more difficult to fund all the intended, and essential, research for each and every TAC within the program. AWA would like to see the total funding for OSM increased to ensure that all TAC needs are being satisfied to ensure for a robust monitoring program.

## 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 current 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 former government’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 11

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 would 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 Alberta 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 with legal representation from Docken LLP 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 and arranged to view the restoration work. In July 2020, AWA staff 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 electro-fishing 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, AWA visited and reviewed progress made. Fish that are confirmed as pure-strain Athabasca Rainbow trout were re-located to upper-Apetowun Creek. A fish passage barrier is in place to prevent those fish from migrating to the lower sections of the creek where they could mix with non-pure strain trout.

### Grassy Mountain Coal Mine Project

A significant conservation highlight of the 2020-2021 year was the decision in June 2021 by a Joint Review Panel to reject the Grassy Mountain Coal Project. Benga Mining Limited proposed to develop and operate an open-pit metallurgical coal mine just north of Blairmore in the Crowsnest Pass. This mine would have sprawled over nearly 1,600 hectares (nearly 16 square kilometres). It had 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 Grassy Mountain never receive regulatory approval.

At the end of October 2020, a federal-provincial review panel opened a public hearing into the Grassy Mountain Project. AWA participated in this hearing in coalition with the Grassy Mountain Group, a group of local landowners that opposed the project.

Richard Secord and Ifeoma Okoye, from the law firm Ackroyd LLP, represented AWA and the Grassy Mountain Group in this hearing. Our coalition offered expert reports on:

- 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;
- Socio-economic effects.

In June 2021 the Review Panel released its report on the project. As hearing commissioners of the Alberta Energy Regulator (in other words, as provincial decision makers) the panel rejected all of Benga Mining's mine applications.

The Panel wrote:

*"In our capacity as a panel of AER hearing commissioners, we find that the project's significant adverse environmental effects on surface water quality and westslope cutthroat trout and habitat outweigh the low to moderate positive economic impacts of the project. Therefore, we find that the project is not in the public interest."*

One month after this rejection Benga Mining along with the Piikani and Stoney Nakoda First Nations applied to the Alberta Court of Appeal for permission to appeal the Panel's decision. That hearing before a single justice from the Court of Appeal was likely to take place in November or December 2021.



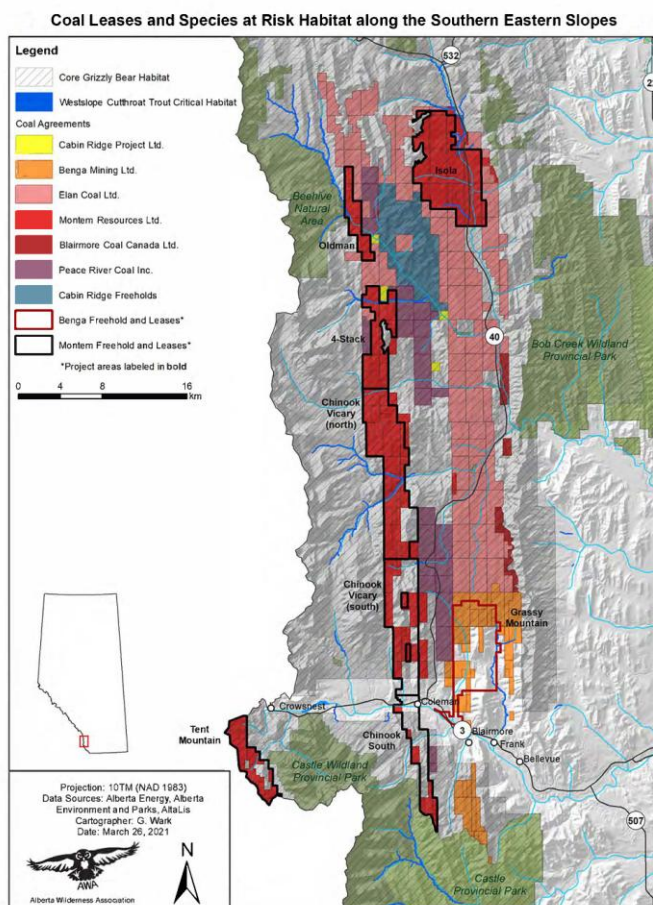
By refusing to grant the necessary provincial approvals under the *Coal Conservation Act* and other provincial laws there was no need for the federal government to take any action. Nonetheless, federal Environment and Climate Change Minister Jonathan Wilkinson announced that, in light of the Panel's report, he would not recommend the project's approval.

### Other Coal Policy Developments

At the federal level, AWA urged Minister Wilkinson to designate the Tent Mountain Mine Redevelopment Project for a federal impact assessment. He did that at the end of June 2021. The Minister also announced that all new metallurgical coal mining projects would be subject to an impact assessment under Canada's *Impact Assessment Act*.

Provincially, the firestorm that greeted the Alberta government's decision to rescind the 1976 Coal Policy led the government to backtrack. In February 2021 the government first reinstated the coal policy and then soon thereafter established a Coal Policy Committee to consult with Albertans and assist Minister Savage in developing what she called a "modern" coal policy. AWA was one of the first organizations to appear before the Coal Policy Committee where we made our argument that a modern coal policy should be a "no coal" policy.

Throughout the year AWA hosted coal Town Halls in order to create better awareness and mobilize Albertans about the many costs, and few benefits, that coal mining would bring to Alberta.





# 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*

Enacted 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 1980 Wildlife 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 this mandate is seriously outdated, and that Alberta needs an updated policy and accompanying regulations to 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*, so when urgent action is needed, AWA pushes for a more comprehensive provincial policy and legislation, and for the 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, are 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 are at constant vigil 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.

### Bank Swallows

In August 2021, AWA submitted a letter to Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) outlining our comments on the *Proposed Recovery Strategy for the Bank Swallow in Canada*. The Recovery Strategy was released by ECCC for public feedback between June 16<sup>th</sup> and September 14<sup>th</sup> 2021. Bank swallow populations in Canada have declined by 98% over the last 40-years and were classified as threatened on Schedule 1 by Canada's *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) in 2017. Under SARA, the competent federal ministers must prepare recovery strategies for listed species and this recovery strategy seeks to satisfy this statutory obligation by the Government of Canada. Our comment letter included some criticisms as well as many recommendations – including a list of potential habitats that were submitted by AWA members. We feel our comments – if considered favorably, would vastly improve the final strategy and we hope that our feedback is incorporated into the final document.

### 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 governments and industry alike must take and support actions to reduce the threat that access poses to the grizzly population. 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. 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 was quietly posted on the Government of Alberta website in March 2021 (dated July 2020). The most recent population estimates of grizzly bears are not included in this plan, which contains little to no new research since 2016. The 2020 recovery plan also removed limits on the density of linear disturbance (including roads, trails, and seismic lines) that should be allowed in Grizzly habitat. Those linear density limits were included in the 2008 plan and based on scientific research. Instead, the 2020 recovery plan only places limits on active open roads. This was done despite concerns over this change that were raised in the review period following the release of the 2016 draft plan. The concerns are that all linear disturbance is likely to affect Grizzly Bear behaviour and survival, not only active roads.



Although estimates of Grizzly Bear populations have only been completed in some Bear Management Areas, the Minister of Environment and Parks insists that the population in the province is “thriving.” This language is premature and raises concerns that the Government of Alberta may push to restart the grizzly bear hunt, which was stopped in 2006. Human-bear conflict continues to be the highest cause of Grizzly Bear mortality in the province. 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. From 2008 to 2018, a total of 227 Grizzly Bear deaths were documented. Of those deaths, 208 of them were known to be human caused.

In addition to being important for ecological health, Grizzly Bears are a flagship species that allow us to regulate how the land is used for the betterment of other wildlife species and the ecosystem as a whole. These large carnivores are culturally and spiritually important to many Albertans and Indigenous people. Therefore, there is a lot of public support for protecting them. To protect Grizzly Bears, we must limit the amount of human development and motorized access within Grizzly habitat.

### Black Bears

The only black bear population estimate in Alberta was conducted in 1993 and estimated there were approximately 40,000 black bears in the province. Black bear management continues to operate based on this estimate, despite significant increases in disturbance and land use changes that may have altered the population significantly. More transparent and scientific data is required to understand population numbers and track mortality and incidences of human-bear conflicts.

In the spring of 2018, the Alberta Government announced that the rehabilitation of orphaned black bear cubs would be permitted. Significant pressure from the community made a difference with decision makers. AWA welcomed this announcement and encouraged this measure to be expanded to other species, in particular threatened grizzly bears. Regrettably, rehabilitation efforts for other wildlife including bighorn sheep, mountain goats, wolves, coyotes, black bear adults, and cougars continue to be prohibited.

With human related mortalities on the rise for this species, 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 wants its immediate end. Mandatory reporting of unlicensed harvest on private land must be instituted.

### Caribou

AWA’s vision is for self-sustaining, connected populations of Alberta’s woodland caribou. Woodland caribou rely upon older, relatively intact boreal and foothills forests and wetlands to avoid overlap with deer, moose, elk and their predators. Their survival is threatened by cumulative industrial impacts that fragment and destroy their habitat, leading to intolerable predation levels. Landscapes supporting caribou store significant water and carbon; they benefit many other wildlife species.

In October 2020, the Canadian and Albertan governments completed a joint woodland caribou conservation agreement. AWA believes that the 2019 lawsuit filed by Ecojustice lawyers, acting



on behalf of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, AWA and David Suzuki Foundation, was instrumental in strengthening the terms of this important agreement. Alberta has committed to meet evidence-based habitat goals and will provide public annual reports of its caribou populations and habitat conditions. Alberta has also committed to a detailed five-year schedule to finish enforceable sub-regional caribou range plans, to achieve minimum habitat requirements in the coming decades. We remain very concerned that the absence of federal interim habitat protection measures makes it likely that critical habitat disturbance and caribou extirpation risk will continue to increase. We have continued discussions with federal environment officials.

To support Alberta to develop strong caribou range plans, AWA continued this year to participate in three caribou sub-regional task forces chaired by government MLAs, composed of diverse rights holders and stakeholders. We worked hard to advance collaborative solutions for caribou recovery, Indigenous rights and communities. The Cold Lake and Bistcho Lake task force recommendations were published March 2021. At the same time, the provincial government released draft Cold Lake and Bistcho Lake sub-regional plans for public comment. AWA encouraged as much citizen participation as possible during the consultation period. These are precedent-setting, overdue plans for managing cumulative industrial land-use impacts over significant areas of Alberta public lands. The final plans for these two areas are due by the end of 2021. (See Primrose-Lakeland, Bistcho and Kakwa Areas of Concern sections for more details). Alberta has committed to start three more caribou sub-regional task forces in 2021. Our work this year in Jasper National Park was largely focused on improving the survival chances of its critically low caribou populations. Collaborating with other conservation partners, we spotlighted the urgent need for Parks Canada to reduce recreation pressures in caribou ranges and to evaluate and communicate publicly about conservation breeding options. AWA expressed strong support for Indigenous-led advances this year in caribou-related conservation, including:

- Alberta's March 2021 proposed expansion of the *Kitaskino Nuwenëné Wildland Park*, most of which is unprotected caribou habitat, achieved in large part by Indigenous communities' leadership;
- Alberta's February 2021 Moose Lake Access Management Plan, which overlaps with Red Earth caribou range, achieved due to the tenacity and vision of Fort McKay First Nation; and
- the concept of a Bistcho Lake area Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) led by the Dene Tha' First Nation, within the Bistcho caribou range.

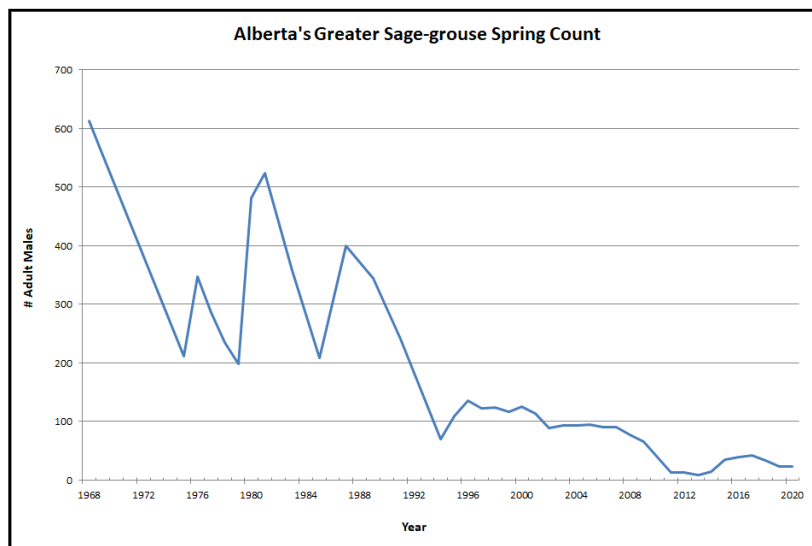
### Greater Sage-grouse

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 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 2021 lek survey counted 27 males (up slightly from 24 in 2020) and the provincial estimate for the entire population is 81 (up from 72 in 2020).



Saskatchewan's sage-grouse counts numbered only 18 males in 2012. Only two leks now remain in Saskatchewan, both found in Grasslands National Park. Parks Canada estimates that approximately 50 to 80 birds live in the National Park.

### Wolves

AWA's goal is for the provincial government to take responsibility for managing Alberta's wolves in a science-based, responsible and transparent manner, recognizing their value as a top predator. Measured, effective, and humane approaches to wolf management are key. Our work for protecting wolves is currently focused on improving woodland caribou range management. In Alberta caribou ranges, the impacts of clearcuts, seismic lines and industrial infrastructure have robbed caribou of their natural ability to avoid overlap with wolves. In Alberta's most disturbed caribou ranges, the dire measure of wolf culls can only be justified as a temporary, last resort measure combined with strong habitat protection and restoration. AWA seeks enforceable sub-regional land-use plans to greatly reduce industrial impacts that result in intolerable wolf predation pressure 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), the pervasive, unstoppable prion disease, spread from game farms to the wild 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

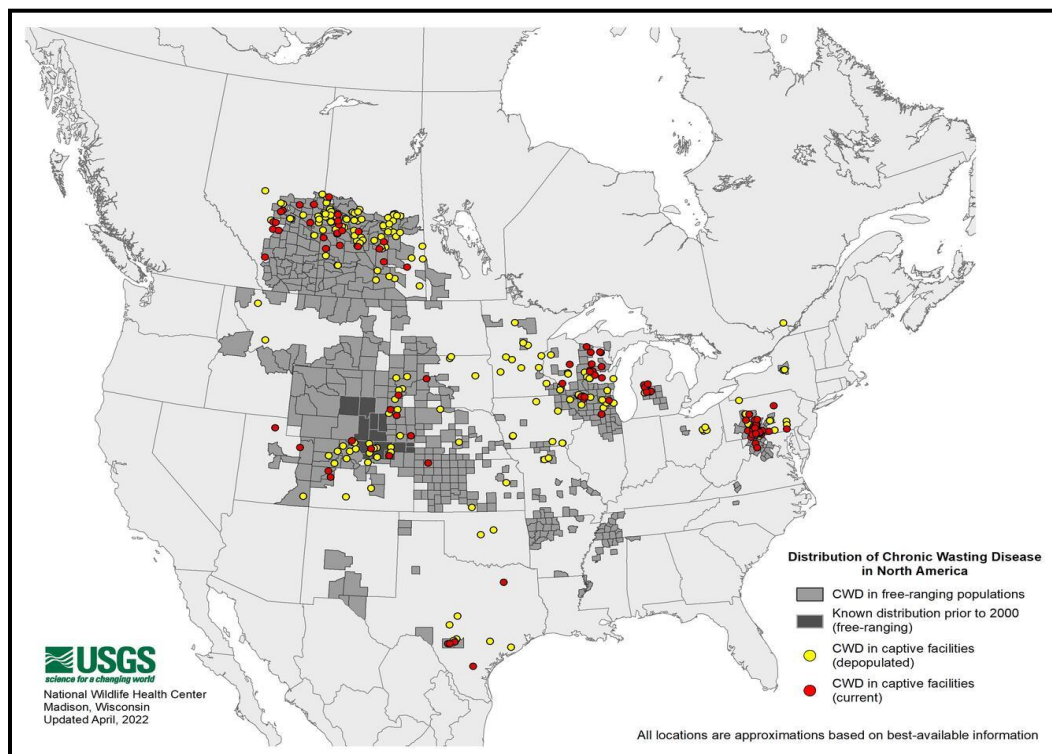




time. A similar prion disease, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), provides a cautionary tale on how human-animal contraction can have devastating consequences. In April 2017, preliminary findings from a study of long-term exposure of CWD to macaques conducted at the University of Calgary indicated 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 there are 27 US states and 2 provinces with CWD in cervids, and 6 countries in the world. Of these, only the US 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, which 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.

2021-2022 Alberta Government findings indicate the steady march of CWD towards the west in the province. As of the last analysis of hunter-returned deer heads, CWD is shown to have reached the foothills region in the south of the province, and looks like it will begin to reach the central foothills within the next year. The statement below is part of this year’s government report and it appears rather incredulous that pride seems to be taken for good surveillance as the disease marches steadily onwards, with no mention of any success at curtailment, much less eradication, or even of new attempts at curtailment. *“It is hard to believe we have been tracking this disease in wild deer in Alberta for over 20 years. Alberta began CWD hunter surveillance in 1998 and has one of the best continuous datasets documenting the occurrence and patterns of CWD in wild cervids, specifically in prairie / parkland ecosystems.”*

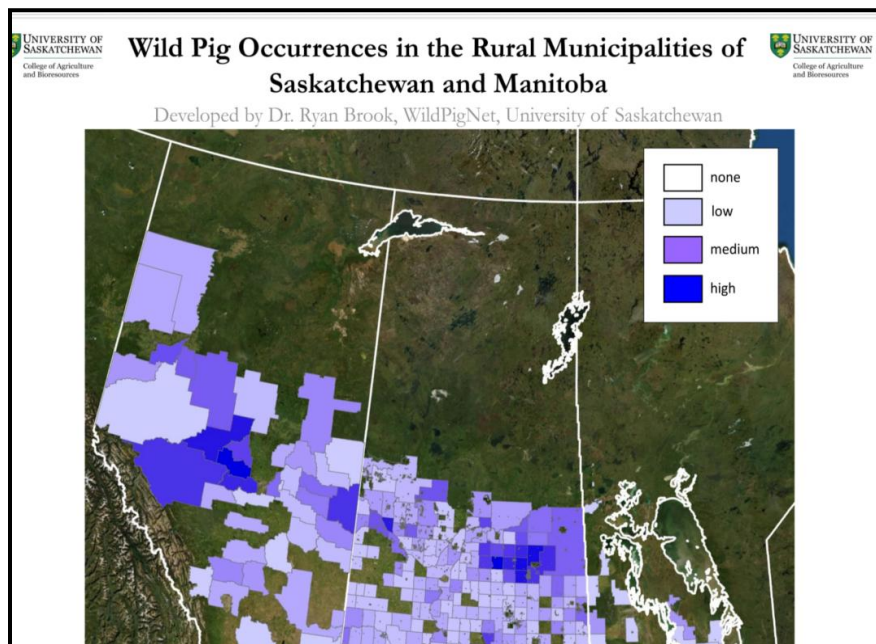


Recently published findings from the Department of Veterinary Pathology, WCVI, Saskatoon, by researcher Trent Bollinger and his large team, took a comprehensive look at CWD in wild cervids. It shows Alberta with no current farm outbreaks, and 10 farms that have been closed and destocked due to CWD. Saskatchewan 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 considerably 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.

### Wild Boars

The three prairie provinces have become havens for wild boars since the advent of game farming around 1980. Game farmed Cervids were restricted to native species and were subject to some regulations like containment. Wild boars on the other hand, were brought into Alberta as livestock and were not subject to special regulations. Being smart and resilient animals, they soon escaped from many poorly secured farms and began establishing wild colonies. They are now documented in 28 Alberta counties. Belatedly, the Alberta Government decided to try to control these destructive creatures that are capable of spreading a variety of diseases. They are also large, dangerous animals to try to handle. The control method is to work with trappers and hunters through a bounty system that offers \$75.00 for each set of ears submitted. Wherever these animals have been released in the world and people have tried to control them, it has proved difficult to impossible. Alberta’s pilot runs for a year until March 31, 2023.

It gives AWA no pleasure to remind the Alberta Government that this organization vociferously opposed game farming and the introduction of wild boars way back in the 1980’s. Every adversity AWA predicted about farmed wildlife and the importing of wild pigs as “livestock” has, unfortunately, come true and their costs to taxpayers continues as a burden.



*While the title on this map from the University of Saskatchewan focuses on Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the incidence of Wild Boar in Alberta is clearly shown as well.*



## 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 having large historical ranges reaching all the way to the prairies, native trout populations currently occupy only a small fraction of that range in small, isolated patches. AWA's vision for Alberta's native cold water fish is for those populations to be recovered to self-sustaining levels. The decline of native trout in Alberta indicates that our watersheds are not healthy and that land uses on surrounding landscapes need to be considered more carefully to ensure native trout populations persist in the future. AWA has taken a stand on several ongoing proposals that 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 greatly improved 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 may damage critical habitat. We continue to oppose various coal mine proposals that could have severe impacts on threatened native fish (see "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 be applied to 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*

As of August 2019, Athabasca Rainbow Trout are listed as Endangered under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). Following the release of the federal Recovery Strategy in 2020, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) released a Critical Habitat Order for Athabasca River populations of Rainbow Trout in March of 2021. SARA prohibits the killing, harming, harassing, capturing and taking of extirpated, endangered or threatened aquatic species at risk – which now includes this species. Activities that destroy critical habitat are likely to kill, harm or harass individuals, therefore this Critical Habitat Order provides additional protection for Rainbow Trout.

The federal government's approach to recovery planning under SARA follows a two-staged approach, which includes the development of the Recovery Strategy to be followed by the completion of an Action Plan – containing the specific measures and activities that are necessary to meet recovery objectives. The Action Plan for Athabasca Rainbow Trout has yet to be completed as of September 2021 and AWA will continue to advocate for the timely release of this Action Plan and swift recovery actions to save this endangered species.

### *Bull Trout*

Saskatchewan-Nelson populations of Bull Trout were listed as Threatened under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) in August 2019. Following the release of the draft federal Recovery Strategy in June 2020, Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) distributed a questionnaire survey to help inform the creation of their provincial Bull Trout Recovery Plan in July 2020. AWA completed the survey and provided additional comments to complement the survey and help improve the content in the final Recovery Plan.

In March of 2021, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) released a Critical Habitat order for Saskatchewan-Nelson Rivers Populations of Bull Trout in Canada. SARA prohibits the killing,



harming, harassing, capturing and taking of extirpated, endangered or threatened aquatic species at risk – which now includes this species. Activities that destroy critical habitat are likely to kill, harm or harass individuals, therefore this Critical Habitat Order provides additional protection for this population of Bull Trout.

Nearly two years after being listed on SARA, AEP finally released a draft of their Alberta Bull Trout Recovery Plan, which was open for public engagement between May 11th and June 13th, 2021. The Recovery Plan ranks threats to bull trout recovery, and seeks to target conservation efforts where they are most needed. AWA submitted a letter to AEP outlining our many concerns and recommendations on the proposed plan, as we felt that it was lacking in many areas crucial for the protection and recovery of bull trout populations in Alberta. We hope to see our comments recognized in the final plan, which has not yet been released by AEP.

#### *Westslope cutthroat trout*

Westslope cutthroat trout are both provincially and federally designated as threatened and continue to be an ongoing priority for conservation efforts at AWA. A federal action plan was completed in December 2019 by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. This means that protection and restoration efforts for this species and its habitat must be implemented in a meaningful way.

During the Grassy Mountain Coal Project Joint Review Panel hearing AWA argued that the project's impact on westslope cutthroat trout was one powerful reason, among several, for rejecting the project. Such arguments were favourably received. In June, 2021 the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) denied Benga Mining Limited's application to proceed with this project. The adverse impacts on westslope cutthroat trout figured prominently in the AER's decision. So too did its adverse impacts on surface water quality. These negative impacts outweighed the low to moderate positive economic impacts of the project. The nature and magnitude of these effects are what drove the decision to deny the application, which AWA sees as a major triumph in the protection of this species.

#### *DFO Cumulative Effects Public Engagement:*

In May 2021, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) sought public input related to considering cumulative effects on fish and fish habitats to assist in the development of policy and guidance materials for the Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program (FFHPP). AWA reviewed the consultation paper provided by DFO and submitted a letter outlining a list of recommendations for how FFHPP should be considering cumulative effects to support program guidance and to meet its obligations under the Fisheries Act. Our recommendations included:

1. Strengthening the commitment to considering planned or reasonably foreseeable works, undertakings, or activities (WUAs) in cumulative effects analyses.
2. Conducting thorough baseline studies prior to the authorization of WUAs in or near fish habitat.
3. Using impact modelling tools to estimate the potential impacts of proposed WUAs.
4. Ensuring an adequate, transparent, and equitable consultation period before authorizing WUAs.
5. Considering the uneven impact that any WUAs in fish habitat could have on different stakeholder groups depending on their circumstances.



## Wood and Plains Bison

AWA's vision is that wild bison – that is, bison that have not been subject to hybridization with cattle – remain wild and are recovered in Alberta. Wood bison are North America's largest land mammal. AWA believes wood bison recovery is possible by designating and protecting critical habitat in the original range of wood bison, by managing to prevent further disease transmission, and by prioritizing Indigenous co-management and food sovereignty.

Of Canada's nine free-ranging disease-free wood bison populations, the two at greatest risk of recovery are the Ronald Lake and Wabasca herds, both ranging over Alberta public lands south of Wood Buffalo National Park. In 2021 AWA became an inaugural member of Alberta's Ronald Lake Bison Herd Cooperative Management Board. While Ronald Lake bison are now protected from non-Indigenous hunting, two large remaining threats are the risk of contracting diseases from bison in Wood Buffalo National Park and range loss from past and potential industrial activities. The Cooperative Management Board is in early stages and will advise Alberta on "matters related to the long-term sustainability of the Ronald Lake Bison Herd, including sustainability of the Indigenous traditional use of and cultural connection to the herd." In June 2021 Canada and Alberta issued a draft Conservation Agreement for the Wabasca and Ronald Lake Bison Herds for public comment. AWA supported the proposed active role for Indigenous Peoples in the conservation, recovery and management of the two herds. For Ronald Lake, we requested more stringent management of industrial leases and stronger commitments to secure and/or restore important habitat areas. For the Wabasca herd, we urged Alberta to promptly end unregulated hunting.

Unlike wood bison, Alberta plains bison are considered livestock; they lack wildlife status under Alberta's *Wildlife Act* and have no federal status either. AWA believes that the status of Plains Bison should depend on whether they are located on a commercial farm, a private conservation herd, or in the wild, rather than the current geographical designation adopted by the province. This way, wild plains bison would get protection they desperately need to begin recovery in the wilderness.

Plains bison are being recovered in a 1200 km<sup>2</sup> rehabilitation zone in Banff National Park's remote eastern slopes. The provincial government has designated an adjacent 239 km<sup>2</sup> Upper Red Deer River Special Bison Area in Panther Valley, where plains bison are treated as protected wildlife to be redirected into the Banff zone. AWA hopes that this provincial designation is the first step towards differentiating types of plains bison according to ownership.

## 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.

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 represented an existential threat to this endangered species in southwestern Alberta. Benga Mining estimated that its proposed 15 square kilometre open-pit coal mining operation would destroy 21,000 whitebark pine and 1,000 limber pine. The company proposed that it would plant three times the number of trees removed from the landscape. Cliff Wallis, in his evidence to the Grassy Mountain Joint Review Panel, argued that Benga underestimated the extent to which its strip mine will destroy critical whitebark pine habitat and its mapping of whitebark pine distribution was incomplete. This project's threat to endangered species such as whitebark pine was one of the important reasons why AWA opposed the project.



*Iconic Limber Pine grace the hillsides of the Whaleback, perhaps hundreds of years old, they are a safe haven for birds and animals and these trees help stabilize steep slopes ©AWA*

# 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

Public lands issues have been a priority for AWA since the organization was founded. 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 pressing 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 believe that we much tenaciously 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 significantly. Despite requiring leaseholders to provide “reasonable access” under the regulation, numerous grazing leaseholders continue to prevent unjustifiably public access. The regulation expired in March 2017, and was renewed without full stakeholder or public consultation. A reformed public lands policy should address this issue.

AWA promotes our Public Lands video series 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 provincial election campaign. 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 oriented organizations, citing concerns in losing valuable native grasslands and habitat for species at risk. 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, 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

Ecological integrity, identified as the first priority of the *National Parks Act*, is the condition AWA uses to assess the activities of government agencies and private sector actors alike. Therefore, AWA's long-term goal for Alberta's five National Parks is a management strategy that stresses the importance of wilderness areas, with the main objective being to support ecological integrity. A secondary objective of National Parks should be to nurture the connection between visitors and Alberta's wild spaces. However, this must be compatible with ecosystem function.

Actions to help support these long-term goals include participating in Parks Canada's management planning initiatives, including the 10-year Management Plans established for each of the National Parks, long-term management plans for species at risk (e.g. Jasper's Southern Mountain Caribou Herds), and other planning exercises to manage visitor use and transportation (e.g. Banff's People Moving Strategy, proposals to twin the Canada Pacific Rail line between Calgary and Banff).

AWA's short term goals are to ensure that the commercial development limits in the National Parks are upheld, that the ecological carrying capacity of sites within the National Parks are being respected, and that visitors are educated about respectful and sustainable use of National Park sites. AWA actions to meet these goals include responding to development proposals (e.g. Lake Louise draft Long-Range Plan and boundary adjustment, the proposed Norquay Gondola), responding to media requests on National Park use, and staying up-to-date with our ENGO colleagues about ongoing projects in the National Parks (e.g. Bow Valley Naturalists, CPAWS Southern Alberta Chapter).

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. The management planning process was temporarily paused in 2020, but resumed in 2021 with the release of the draft 2021-2030 Management Plans. AWA is encouraged by the ongoing focus on



ecological integrity, the further integration of Indigenous use, knowledge and language, and efforts to manage visitor use and transportation. We continue to caution against the further commercialization of National Park spaces and services, particularly in Banff and Jasper.

In early-2021, Banff National Park launched its “People Moving” Expert Advisory Panel, a group assembled to address the “sustainable movement of visitors in the Banff-Bow Valley.” AWA supports the principles and mandate of the process; especially those that will address maintaining connectivity, key habitats and biodiversity, managing cumulative effects, and acknowledging that innovative solutions are needed to manage visitor movement while limiting new infrastructure on undeveloped park lands. We also encourage Parks Canada and the Expert Advisory Panel to consider how visitor use management intersects with transportation planning, and how Parks Canada will improve wildlife movement in the Banff-Bow Valley.

The Bow Valley Parkway, a highway that runs parallel to Highway 1 between Lake Louise and Canmore in Banff National Park, was closed to motorized vehicles for much of 2020 and 2021 to support social distancing at the popular Johnston Canyon hiking trail. This closure provided an opportunity for people to cycle this route safely and supported wildlife populations. Parks Canada has proposed that the Bow Valley Parkway be closed to motorized traffic in the Spring and Fall months beginning in 2022, either seven days a week or only on weekends. AWA wrote to Parks Canada in support of closing of the Bow Valley Parkway seven days a week in the Spring and Fall to support wildlife such as bears and wolves and to encourage visitors to consider cycling instead of driving as part of their personal efforts to reduce carbon emissions. The Boreal section outlines our work related to Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP).

### Protected Areas - Provincial

The Land Use Framework has been one of the primary mechanisms for achieving provincially protected areas. As reported for a number of years, the process is slow and has essentially been stalled 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, 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 Act that are not yet established as parks or recreation areas.

After proposing, in March 2020, to close 20 provincial parks and recreation areas and delist a further 164, the Government of Alberta withdrew its proposal in December 2020. It was clear this reversal was due to the outcry from Albertans. AWA was prominent in protesting the proposal. 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 are from <http://www.albertaparks.ca/albertaparksca/library/land-reference-manual.aspx>. Each year AWA includes this chart as a matter of historical record and progress made. 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. The 2021 data is taken from the government website listed above. Data reflects increased hectares in some wildland provincial parks, provincial recreation areas and natural areas.

					Hectares	Hectares	Hectares	Hectares
Name	2021	2020	2019	2018	2021	2020	2019	2018
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	34	33	3,486,154.63	3,333,386.29	3,333,386.29	3,171,506.29
Willmore Wilderness Park	1	1	1	1	459,671,.04	459,671,.04	459,671.04	459,671.04
Provincial Parks	76	65	76	76	246,797.89	245,336.81	246,797.89	246,797.89
Provincial Recreation Areas	204	60	204	204	88,602.23	79,670.86	88,602.86	88,602.86
Heritage Rangelands	2	2	2	2	12,010.47	12,010.47	12,010.47	12,010.47
Natural Areas	138	128	138	138	129,378.98	128,043.09	129,228.98	129,228.98
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>472</b>	<b>4,550,447.37</b>	<b>4,385,944.30</b>	<b>4,397,529.66</b>	<b>4,235,649.66</b>
Section 7 Land	10	10	10	10	1450.51	1,450.51	1450.51	1450.51

## 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 was 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.”

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 provincial budget documents from February 2020.

AWA’s Wild Spaces 2020 campaign was completed in the 2020 calendar year. Despite the funding listed in the 2020 budget, the disappointing steps taken to reduce parks and protected areas throughout Alberta is frustrating and although the reduction has been reversed, the management of these previous closed areas is unknown. Privatization and provincial management objectives for increasing representative protected areas and meeting targets are unknown.





## 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 remains on hold in 2020-2021. AWA members and supporters have been encouraged to participate at every opportunity in the process.

### South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP)

AWA has 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, was due in within one year of the LFMP's and RMP's release (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 OHV 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.

Throughout 2020, AWA 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)

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 any 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 and Upper Athabasca Regional Plan. 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 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 believes that a meaningful Strategy would help Alberta to fulfill its important national and international commitments to maintain and restore its biological diversity, including upholding the 1995 Canadian Biodiversity Strategy. AWA continues to spotlight evidence that Alberta's biodiversity is declining under the cumulative impacts of our land-use decisions and to seek the best opportunities for change.

Collaborative sub-regional planning with rights holders and stakeholders to meet evidence-based environmental outcomes has enormous potential. AWA is participating in the province's three sub-regional caribou task forces (see Caribou section). Throughout 2020 AWA was also actively engaged in the Castle-Livingston-Porcupine sub-regional access planning process to uphold science-based linear density thresholds for threatened native fish (see Livingstone-Porcupine Area of Concern). Recommendations from the Livingstone-Porcupine Recreation Advisory Group (RAG) were forwarded to Minister Nixon for his consideration and action. AWA is very concerned, that the importance of biodiversity will not figure importantly in the Minister's ultimate actions.

## Strengthening Ties with Indigenous Communities

Each year, AWA staff seek 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).



In 2020, AWA 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.

AWA's Board of Directors includes newly elected board member Diandra Bruised Head from the Kainai Nation and the Board has committed to being more inclusive and representative.

## 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, containing the *Impact Assessment Act*, *Canadian Energy Regulator Act*, and the *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 were 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 assessment, and have increased thresholds for projects which do require assessment. For example, the previous regulations requires coal mines that produced over 3,000 tonnes a day to undertake an assessment; now coal mines must produce over 5,000 tonnes/day in order to require an assessment.

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



# International Cooperation

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## 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 square kilometres (841 million acres), the Great Plains stretches from Canada into Mexico and. It 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.

GPCN has participants from Mexico, the United States of America and Canada and 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. GPCN hopes to restore North America's grasslands, and to ensure the continued survival and health of its wildlife, wildlands, and human societies.

Working with other GPCN participants, GPCN helped retain federal ownership of PFRA Pastures in SW Saskatchewan that are critical for species at risk recovery efforts in Canada, including sage-grouse. GPCN participants continue to champion protection and appropriate management of many grasslands in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. These grasslands are some of the most extensive and diverse on the northern glaciated plains and they 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). In June of 2021, AWA's Accounting and Administrative Associate began including the duties and responsibilities of the GPCN Coordinator in her role.



## 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 Tribes/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.

## The Central Grasslands Roadmap



*“The Central Grasslands Roadmap is a collaborative guide to increase support for conservation of North America’s Central Grasslands, which span 500 million acres across Indigenous Lands, Canada, the United States and Mexico. By bringing together 8 diverse sectors and three countries, the Roadmap identifies common principles and shared priorities for the many people and organizations living and working on the Central Grasslands. The Roadmap will enable us to save what we have left, restore and improve what we can, and support biodiversity and resiliency across the landscape.”*

AWA has been part of the roadmap initiative, helping to bridge some of the efforts being made by other individual groups and encouraging cooperation and collaboration across the prairies. In 2022 an in-person Central Grasslands Roadmap conference is planned for all participants.



## Outreach

*Outreach to members, supporters and the general public  
is a primary function as AWA strives to meet its mission  
"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action by Inspiring People to Care".*

### Wild Lands Advocate

Wild Lands Advocate (WLA), published four times a year, is AWA's news journal and one of our main outreach tools. WLA offers news and information about AWA's past, current, and future work. Stories of Wild Alberta, the people involved in its conservation, and the state of AWA's numerous conservation campaigns are included. 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: grizzly bears, greater sage-grouse, Jasper caribou, wildlife corridors in the Bow Valley, public lands, restoring Apetowun Creek, events and developments pertaining to exploiting coal, and a range of First Nations dimensions (coal, bringing bison back to southern Alberta grasslands, and the proposal to establish an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area around Mbe'cho/Bistcho Lake). Our extensive coverage of issues like these engages and inspires people about wilderness and wildlife in Alberta.

### Online Presence

AWA contracts the services of Build Studio, a professional web development company, to provide support and maintenance for its public interface. AWA works to constantly update AlbertaWilderness.ca.

AWA has two primary websites:

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

and one single issue website:

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

AWA has used MailChimp's electronic newsletter service since 2018 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 – 168 subscribers

Alberta Wilderness Association – 2,545 subscribers

Adventures for Wilderness – 4,771 subscribers

Grassy Mountain – 223 subscribers



## Social media

AWA maintains a social media presence focused on three primary platforms: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. On each platform we maintain two accounts, one focusing on our conservation efforts and the other specific to our *Adventures for Wilderness (A4W)* outreach programs.

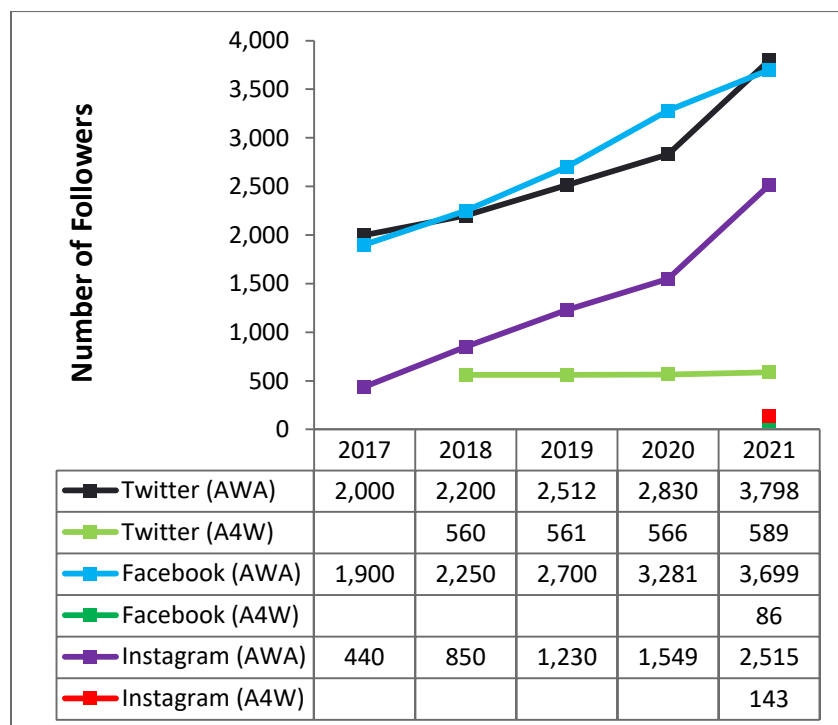
On Facebook, these accounts are @AlbertaWilderness and @Adventures4Wilderness.

On Instagram, these accounts are @AlbertaWildernessAssociation and @Adventures4Wild.

On Twitter, these accounts are @ABWilderness and @Adventures4Wild.

Throughout 2021 AWA has had ongoing campaigns on Twitter and Instagram promoting our Wild Spaces, Alberta Parks, our summer “Leave No Trace” initiative, and our events and A4W programs. A4W adventures and other AWA events, such as talks, lectures and Town Halls, are posted as events on Facebook. 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. Finally, AWA staff members have individual Twitter accounts that they use to promote their conservation work with an enhanced personal perspective.

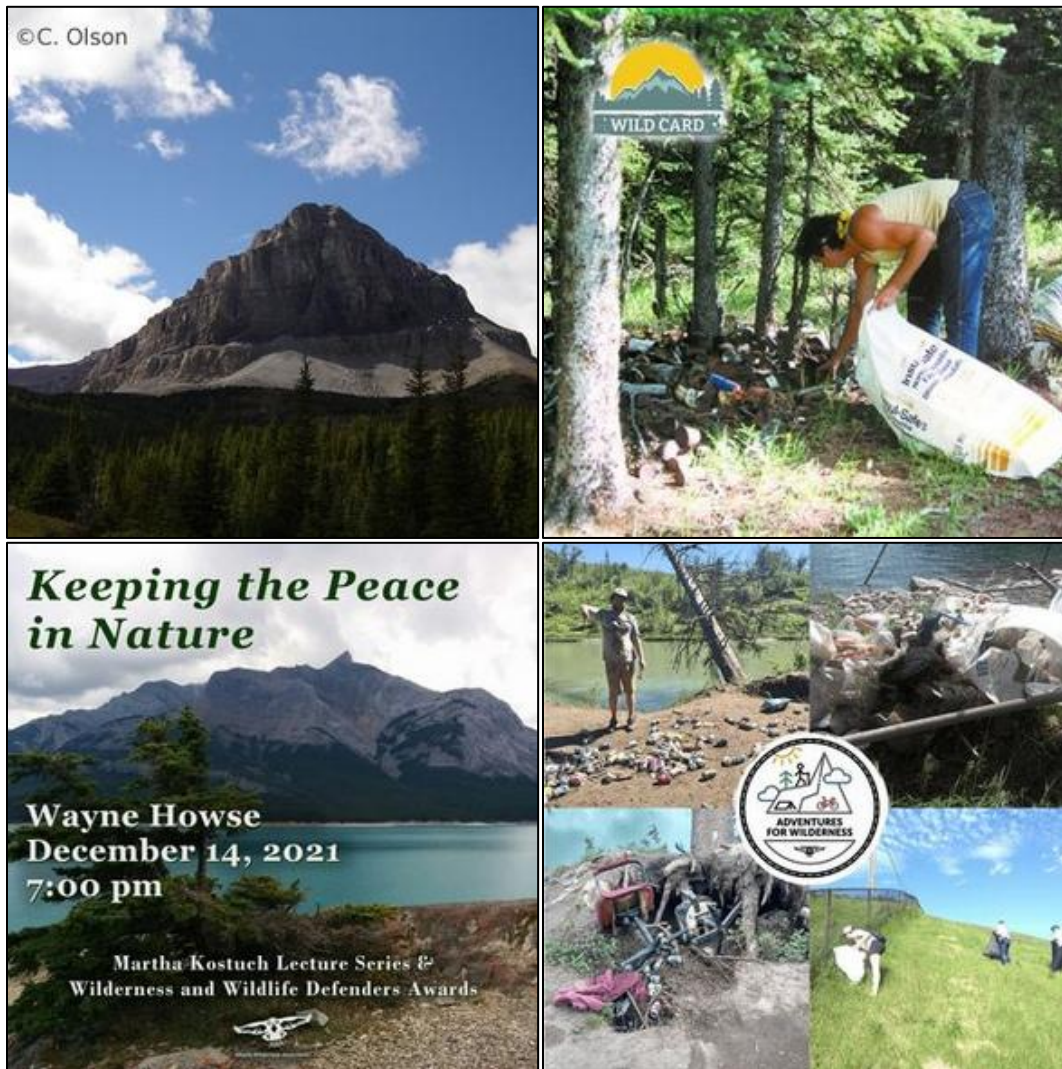
Engagement with these campaigns has been gratifying and these are proving an effective means of communication with an ever-growing audience. Social media is cost effective and an efficient way to develop brand recognition and increase AWA’s reach to interested and engaged people. It provides a digital platform for outreach and messaging of important news.



Staff have 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 from 2021:





*Clockwise from top-left: (1) Post highlighting the Beehive from our series on threatened Parks and Protected Areas; (2) Post promoting responsible backcountry use from our “Leave No Trace” series; (3) Post promoting an upcoming A4W Adventure; (4) Post promoting an Annual Lecture talk held over Zoom.*

## Talks

The COVID pandemic has required AWA to make major changes to how one of our signature offerings – AWA’s speaker series – was delivered. Instead of in-person sessions, AWA’s talks in were delivered via Zoom videoconferencing. During the year we offered four Town Hall meetings on coal. Each Town Hall featured several guest speakers whose remarks were followed by a question and answer session. In addition to these talks on coal, In addition to a number of Zoom talks given as part of our Adventures for Wilderness program, we also featured a presentation on the topic of the *Trails Act*. AWA was pleased to host an election debate for the federal riding of Calgary Confederation, as part of the “100 Debates on the Environment” project spearheaded by GreenPAC. Nearly 150 voters tuned in to hear candidates communicate their, and their parties’, environmental positions and policies.

## Adventures for Wilderness

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to challenge holding in-person events, AWA's *Adventures for Wilderness* program (A4W) celebrated its second year of proving itself well-suited to meet and adapt to this challenge. Launched in 2020 A4W is a framework to help inspire people to create adventures and learn more about wilderness and wildlife. The program adapts the underlying approach used by AWA's former keystone outreach event, the Climb for Wilderness so that participants may participate in an event and raise funds to support AWA through that event. It expands the approach 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.

A4W is rooted in a website, hosted at [www.adventuresforwilderness.ca](http://www.adventuresforwilderness.ca). Potential *adventure coordinators* sign up to host an "adventure". AWA staff work with that coordinator to ensure the adventure is consistent with AWA's goals and outreach and conservation objectives. Details of the adventure are posted to a dedicated sub-section of the above website where participants may sign up and raise funds for that adventure. Adventures are promoted via social media and newsletters.

Many of this year's adventures were group outings with participants coming together to undertake a shared adventure. These have encompassed a wide range of activities open to all fitness and experience levels. They ranged from a walks in Calgary's urban Nose Hill Park to a demanding backcountry wilderness hike investigating areas in the Crowsnest Pass coveted by coal miners, with many activities, ski trips, snowshoe outings, and hikes in between.

The A4W program is well-suited to include an educational component in each Adventure. Examples of these included lectures held over zoom and field trips to learn about issues such as abandoned oil well recovery, gravel mining concerns, or nature's recovery from a forest fire (the 2020 fire in the Ghost). Most Adventures have had an expert present to give guest lectures and or explanations of the many sites and items of interest found in the course of the Adventure. AWA is indebted to the many experts who graciously donate their time and expertise to the A4W program.

Some adventures featured "solo" adventurers, with one or two people undertaking a personal challenge, raising funds, and sharing their progress. Many of these Adventures include some form of exploring areas of great interest to AWA and our supporters. Reports from those Adventures naturally integrate into AWA's communication and outreach efforts. For example, Sean Nichols personal cycling Adventure took him to visit 82 of the parks that were slated for closure under the government's "Optimizing Parks" plan before that plan was rescinded in December 2020. Reports from that trip on both traditional and social media reached beyond AWA's traditional audience and informed a broader cross-section of Canadians about concerns relating to Alberta's public lands and protected areas.

In summary, 36 Adventures were offered with 21 unique coordinators, and 370 participants. The Adventures included 435 sponsors and raised \$41,194. While the last few years, and COVID-19, have undoubtedly presented AWA with some challenges the success of the Adventures program is inspiring. AWA plans to continue this program with additional planned Adventures including a resumption of stair-climbing events, when social norms allow. AWA is enthusiastic about the future of A4W, and its entire outreach program.



## Leave No Trace

The number of Albertans using our province’s wild spaces for recreation has increased significantly. These increased numbers of people brought with them an increased impact on a landscape only marginally prepared for it. The downside has manifested itself as increased litter and other waste, increased erosion as people travel and camp off-trail, increased disturbance of wildlife, and increased incidence of unsafe fires and other practices.

In response, AWA, with the financial support of the Calgary Foundation, launched a *Leave No Trace* initiative in the summer of 2021 to remind and educate backcountry visitors about the importance and principles of leaving no trace while in Alberta’s natural spaces. Throughout the summer, AWA delivered an outreach program based on seven principles of *Leave No Trace* to help visitors mitigate their impacts on parks and wilderness areas. Those seven principles are:

1. Dispose of waste properly
2. Plan ahead and prepare
3. Travel and camp on durable surfaces
4. Leave what you find
5. Minimize campfire impacts
6. Respect wildlife
7. Be considerate of your fellow visitors

The program incorporated social media engagement, website engagement, volunteers initiating conversations at trailheads, and a short survey of users to help understand backgrounds, level of experience and expertise, preparedness and motivation to *Leave No Trace*. With a core of dedicated volunteers we were able to conduct a successful campaign and reach some important conclusions. These volunteers engaged with the public on 20 different occasions throughout August and September of 2021, at 11 different locations. Volunteers at trailheads and in campgrounds encouraged *Leave No Trace* behaviours and surveyed 223 users. The locations included urban parks in Calgary and Red Deer, several trailheads in Kananaskis Country, various locations in the Ghost and along the TransAlta Road, and various wetlands and natural areas in Central and Southern Alberta, including the Red Deer River valley. Engagement on social media produced 57,000 total impressions (views) and 2,233 total engagements (likes, comments, re-tweets, etc.) during the six weeks of the social media campaign.

In addition to surveying visitors, volunteers handed out “Wild Cards” listing resources and reminders about the seven *Leave No Trace* principles. We also displayed large-format posters containing the same information at trail heads and handed out compostable garbage bags for people to pack out their trash.





# 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, benefit concerts, casino fundraising, and Adventures for Wilderness. In 2020 - 2021 AWA had 82 active volunteers.

## Roger Creasey Wilderness Resource Centre

Wilderness Resource Centre archiving and cataloguing is ongoing. Development and growth of the Electronic Wilderness Resource Centre (EWRC) has continued. Our objective to have top of the line technology and storage capacity, is in place.

Identifying and removing duplicate files/images on EWRC-M is an ongoing long-term effort as is work on the media library, when resources allow, we will add tags, metadata and comments so 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 is 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.

## AWA's Cottage School

AWA's Cottage School is a major asset and normally the building is filled with meetings, events, and people. The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have meant we have minimized the presence of staff in the office and for the most part have been working remotely. We look forward to welcoming friends and colleagues back to the office when the COVID-19 pandemic has passed. During the 2020-2021 year, restoration work on the hardwood floors was completed as part of the repairs needed following the hot water tank flood of March 2020.



## Financing Wilderness Protection

Funds received from donations by members, supporters and fundraising efforts are vital to the health of AWA, these contributions provided 83% of our total revenue (2019-2020 - 73%)

Granting agencies in this year included Aqueduct Foundation, Alberta Government Recreation and Physical Activity Division, Canada Helps, United Nations Association in Canada, United Nations Association Green Corp, Canada Gives, 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. AWA qualified for the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy as our revenues fell sufficiently to meet the requirements for the subsidy. 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 five star rating**. This is significant recognition for AWA. AWA is one of the top 100 rated charities in Canada. Only eight environmental charities were included in the top 100 list; of the eight environmental charities AWA was one of only two provincial organizations recognized there.

AWA devoted 70% (2019-2020 - 71%) of its cash expenditures to wilderness stewardship, conservation, and outreach. 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% (2019-2020 14%) 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 6,279 (2020 – 6,106) individuals; representing 227 (2020 – 212) communities in Alberta. AWA has more than 500 supporters from across Canada and around the world. 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

### Bequests

Bequests make a significant difference to our long-term security and our ability to plan for the future. For those interested in planning a gift for AWA there is a section on our website dedicated to ways to give with information about AWA that will be needed for your will.

## 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  
Robert Bartlett 2020  
Annemarie Marriner 2021



## Lifetime Giving

AWA recognizes all donors and the lifetime giving and commitment they make to the association. All those donors who 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. 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*

Ian Ross  
 Herbert Kariel  
 Bruce and Eveline Goodall  
 John Maude and Susan Quinn  
 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 between \$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  
 Doris Davy  
 John and Barbara Poole  
 Peter Campbell  
 Sarah Leete  
 Darryl Hay  
 Ronald Sagert  
 Glen Stenabaugh



## Memorial Tributes

Memorial tributes made by family and friends mean a great deal. AWA is honoured to receive donations that honour the memory of those who have gone before and will always be remembered.

### Donations in Memoriam 2020 – 2021

Belton Copp 1930-2011  
 Chris Havard 1944-2015  
 Bill Laidlaw 1936-2020  
 Elizabeth Nicholls  
 Barbara Lynne Collister 1953-2021  
 Jackie Eason  
 Kenneth Bunn  
 May Bunn  
 Barry Emes 1945-2021  
 Roxie Neale 1922-2021  
 Charles Miller 1921-2009  
 William John Todd 1931-2020  
 Derrick Gilbertson 1988-2020  
 Brian Volkens 1951-2021  
 Joanne Dunford 1921-2009  
 Mel Dunford 1924-2008  
 Weslyn Mather 1945-2015  
 Ray Sloan 1941-1996  
 Elizabeth Scout 1949-2020  
 Gus Yaki 1932-2020  
 Ian Ross 1959-2003  
 Roger Creasey 1953-2012  
 Margaret Main 1935-2020  
 Ann Savage 1929-2020  
 Richard Guy 1916-2020  
 Harry Taylor 1941-2020  
 Mary S Lore 1921-2019  
 Sharon Henderson 1943-2018  
 Muriel Beckett 1924-2020  
 Nancy Allison 1941-2020  
 Gerrit Brolsma 1935-2020  
 Greg Johnston 1951-2020  
 Murielle Carlson 1960-2020  
 PK (Paul) Anderson 1927-2014  
 John Clarence Duffy 1941-2021





## 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:

Jill Seaton	Andre Pires
Kevin Van Tighem	Leslie Simpson
Elsie Miyagishima	Doug Simpson
Madison McGinnis	Maureen Bush
Peggy Holroyd	Ron Echlin
Peter Duck	Lindy Barron
Barbara Buchmann	Allison Wiggins
Linda Duncan	Leo McGoldrick
Abigail Hadden	Julie Bain
Alexander Blair	Grassy Mountain
Lois & Dick Haskayne	Brian Cooke
Kitty & Bruce Dunn	Meredith Wilkes
Jennifer Graham-Wedel	Jamie and Hannah
Kristin Jackins	Jordan Mathias Pocock
Isabelle Bauer	Walter Retzer
Donna Stevenson	Christyann Olson
Linda Svaling	Katrina Mueller
Peter Sherrington	Nathan Schmidt
Laura Hughes	

## 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.

The fund balance has grown over time and is a tribute to numerous small donations from concerned individuals. At the end of July 2021, the balance is \$30,913 (2020 – \$28,039). The endowment fund's annual distribution \$1,195 (2020 – \$1,167) 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 there was a change that 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 honoured her legacy and her memory by naming our annual lecture the Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture.

In contrast to previous years, in the 2020-21 fiscal year AWA offered our member and the public three Martha Kostuch Lectures. Kevin Van Tighem, naturalist, writer, and former Superintendent of Banff National Park, delivered the first lecture. In that lecture he invited his audience to tell stories that challenge the dominant narrative in Alberta. That narrative is one where the land is simply a bundle of resources for industry to exploit. There are many more stories to be told about the land. Those stories are ones stressing our connection to nature and to imagining the contribution that healthy landscapes may make to healthy livelihoods

In AWA's second lecture, Linda Duncan, the long-serving Member of Parliament for Edmonton-Strathcona, reflected on her career in and out of politics. It is a career distinguished by her work on behalf of strengthening environmental protection in Canada and abroad. Linda is very much an environmental pioneer. She founded Alberta’s Environmental Law Centre; she led the enforcement unit in Environment Canada when that unit was born; she helped to establish environmental law enforcement systems in developing countries; in Parliament she sponsored private members’ bills on establishing an environmental bill of rights.

Finally, Chief James Ahnassay of the Dene Tha’ First Nation concluded the series with a conversation with AWA’s Cliff Wallis. Conserving traditional Dene Tha’ lands in northwest Alberta has been a foundation of Chief Ahnassay’s work for his community. The creation of the Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Provincial Park in 1999 is one significant accomplishment of that work and the partnership between AWA and the Dene Tha’. Looking ahead Chief Ahnassay hopes for and works toward the creation of the Mbe’cho/Bistcho Lake Indigenous Protected Conservation Area.



## 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. In 2020 - 2021 over the course of three videoconference events, the award was presented to Chief James Ahnassay, Linda Duncan, and Kevin Van Tighem. At the end of the year 2021 the award was presented to AWA's retiring and long-serving Executive Director, Christyann Olson, and to retired public lands defender and RCMP officer, Wayne Howse.

Christyann Olson has long been associated with AWA, in fact, it has been a 50 year association, with her late husband, Ray Sloan being an early president and Christyann having assumed many early roles in establishing the AWA. After a long career in health service, Christyann left that behind and was able to be drafted onto the board of the AWA in the late 1990's. Her talents for organizing and working with people became more and more obvious until AWA's board asked her to assume the Executive Directorship in 2000. It was supposed to be an interim appointment, but it lasted 21 years and the AWA will be forever grateful for her dedication and skills.

Wayne Howse began his life in North Central Alberta, on a Metis Settlement where he learned many land and farm-based skills. As a school boy, he was treated to the opportunity to accompany RCMP officers on their rounds and their job appealed to him so much that he joined the force right after high school. Wayne never lost his interest in the land and during his long career with the RCMP, always gravitated towards land protection where he was known for his ability to quietly enforce as well as educate when infractions occurred or bad behavior was evident. Wayne is part of an important heritage family - with his great grandfather (several times over) being the Howse that Howse Mountain and Howse Pass are named for.

## 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 made over several years. The 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 received the award in 2011. Paul Sutherland and Nuno Fragoso were awarded the Great Gray Owl in 2013. In 2014 we recognized Heather Crone. Bob Blaxley accepted our award in 2015 and in 2016 Heinz Unger was recognized as AWA's Great Gray Owl. In 2017 we honoured Kevin Mihalcheon and in the fall of 2018 we recognized George Campbell and Murray Little for their dedication to the Music for the Wild Program. In 2021 we honoured Chris Saunders with the prestigious Great Gray Owl Award. his untiring support and volunteerism sets a standard equalled by the three women who inspired this award.



## 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*