

AWA's Outreach and Community Work in 2021: Getting Active, Going on Adventures, Talking Coal, and Promoting the Principles of "Leave No Trace"

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The year 2021 has been a busy one for AWA; perhaps especially in the context of AWA's outreach and community programs. We have undertaken three major outreach programs this year, encompassing a total of 64 events, across which nearly 2,100 Albertans have participated in AWA's programming.

Our three main programs have been: the second year of our flagship *Adventures for Wilderness* program, inviting Albertans to go on wilderness adventures in their community, province and beyond; our Coal Town Hall series of online Zoom talks and concerts; and our Leave No Trace initiative, helping people learn to minimize their impact on wild spaces and the backcountry.

In addition, AWA was proud 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.

Finally, no outreach program in 2021 would be complete without incorporating electronic messaging. AWA counts over 5,000 subscribers to our electronic mailing lists and a total of over 10,000 followers on our various social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram).

If you would like to stay informed about AWA's ongoing work, we encourage you to sign up to receive electronic newsletters at <https://albertawilderness.ca/newsletter-signup/>. Or follow us on social media at @abwilderness (Twitter), @albertawildernessassociation (Instagram) and AlbertaWilderness (Facebook).

Nearly 400 Albertans Take Part in Adventures Across the Province as part of AWA's Adventures for Wilderness

We could not be more pleased at how our Adventures for Wilderness program is progressing. *Adventures for Wilderness* (A4W) is AWA's program to engage Albertans in wilderness conservation. We believe an Adventure can be anything from climbing a mountain, to walking by the river, to enjoying the beauty of nature in your own backyard. Now in its second year, this flagship outreach program has so far in 2021 seen nearly 400 Albertans take part in 36 Adventures across the province and beyond.

Many (27) of those Adventures have been group outings, with participants coming together to undertake a shared adventure. These have encompassed a wide range of activities open to all different fitness and experience levels. They have taken people everywhere from a spring crocus hunt on Calgary's urban Nose Hill Park to a demanding backcountry wilderness hike investigating areas in the Crowsnest Pass coveted by coal miners. Other outings included a family ice-skating day, a cross-country skiing trip, a kid-oriented educational outing exploring the natural history of the Cochrane Ranche, many front- and back-country hikes at all times of year, and a five-outing series of birding tours around different parks in the Calgary area.

Many of the group Adventures had an educational component. They included: a trip to explore dinosaur bonebeds in the Red Deer River valley; field trips to learn about issues

concerning abandoned oil well recovery and gravel mining concerns; a hugely informative trip to a part of the Ghost recovering from a 2020 forest fire, and a walking tour of Ordovician fossils found in the facades and foundations of several prominent Calgary buildings. And we would be remiss not to mention the "Jumpingpound and Hounds" hike offering everyone the opportunity to bring along their favourite four-legged friend!

Each one of these education Adventures, as well as several of the hikes, 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 more than indebted to the many experts who graciously donated their time and expertise to the A4W program: Karel Bergman, Gerry Bietz, Alistair Des Moulins, Edward A. Johnson Ph.D, Tako Koning, Wendell Koning, Dale Leckie, Wendy Ryan, Nathan Schmidt and Dr. François Therrien.

In addition to the group outings, several Adventures were structured to allow people to independently participate on a common adventure; especially important in these times of Covid. Some of them were online (Zoom) talks, but these also included: a stream and garbage cleanup Adventure; an opportunity to receive a bee nesting box and learn about Alberta's native pollinators; and an innovative Strava-based Adventure where participants competed to take part in as many winter Adventures over the course of a month as they could, sharing their stories, photos and results with each other over the Strava social media app.

Finally, some adventures featured "solo" ad-

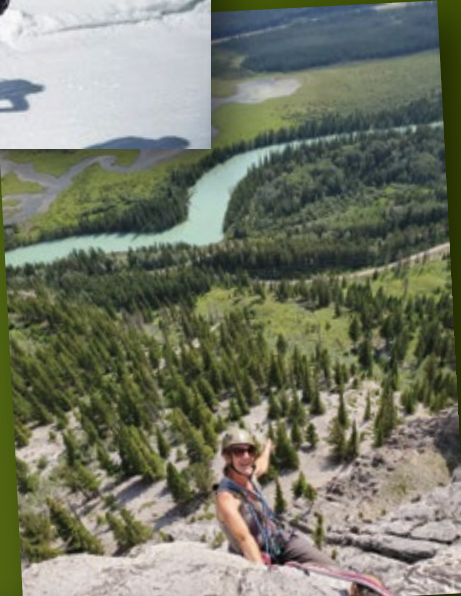


Cross-country skiing
the Mount Shark Loop
© J. JACK

Fun with a furry friend
on Jumpingpound
© K. VAN PERNIS



Celebrating a
40th birthday
in style!
© L. WALLIS



Combining stewardship with an
adventure on Plateau Mountain
© W. KING



Amazing Leave
No Trace volunteers
out collecting surveys



Performing garbage cleanup
as part of Leave No Trace
© N. SCHMIDT



Learning about Alberta's nature
and history at Cochrane Ranche
© M. O'REGAN



Finding crocuses on Nose Hill
© C. OLSON

venturers, with one (or two) people undertaking a personal challenge, raising funds, and sharing how it went. Jim Campbell and Bob Patterson circumnavigated the iconic Mount Rundle in a nonstop wilderness mountain bike marathon. Lindsey Wallis celebrated her 40th birthday by cycling 40km and doing 40 pitches of climbing, all in 40 hours. And yours truly spent a month on a cycling trip around Alberta visiting 82 – or half – of the parks that had been slated for closure under the government’s “Optimizing Parks” plan in 2020, before that plan was rescinded. (See also my article on the Great Alberta Parks Bike-a-Thon in the next issue of WLA.)

While much fun, education, and exploration was had, fundraising remains an important goal of the A4W program. Adventures and adventurers raise funds through registration fees, donations, and sponsorships (depending on the Adventure). Congratulations to Bob and Jim who have raised \$7,264 to date in sponsorships for their “Rundle Ride” Adventure, making them the top Adventure in 2012; Lindsey is next for her “40/40/40” Adventure, having raised \$5,701. Overall, as of the time of this writing, a little over \$41,000 has been raised for the protection of Alberta’s wild spaces via A4W 2021.

In addition to the experts named above, AWA would like to thank the many hike leaders and adventure coordinators who took on the job of making this year’s program so successful. I would particularly like to recognize Tako Koning who led four highly successful and well-attended adventures this year.

Of course, it is not only the adventure coordinators who have been repeat participants: no fewer than eighteen people have attended three or more adventures, with seven of these coming along four times! We consider this a true testament to the success and appeal this program is proving to have.

Stories, photos and videos from many of these adventures can be found on the A4W website at <https://adventuresforwilderness.ca/>. In addition, there are always upcoming Adventures on the calendar, for which anyone is welcome to sign up. We encourage you to visit the site to see what Adventure might tickle your fancy!

Finally, we are always looking for more ideas and people to lead new Adventures. If you have an idea or Adventure that you would like to undertake, please get in touch, either by email, or via the “Create an Adventure” form on the A4W site. We’d love to add your idea to our calendar.

Leading the Charge in the Fight Against Coal Mining

As much fun as it has been going on adventures around the province, the second arm of AWA’s outreach work in 2021 has had a much more serious component to it... but also one that has seen unprecedented results.

Since January, AWA has hosted a series of Town Hall meetings both to inform the public about coal mining in Alberta and to help coordinate and inform grassroots efforts to stop new coal mining projects. Each Town Hall has featured a panel of experts to discuss a specific facet of coal mines and the coal industry. Following presentations from the panel members, participants have had the opportunity to engage the panel, and each other, in an informed discussion.

While we once might have chosen to host such Town Hall events in person, COVID-19 forced us to move to an online format, with each event taking place over Zoom. This has truly been a boon, allowing us to expand the audience beyond those in the Calgary area, to residents of the Crowsnest Pass and other areas where coal mining was proposed to take place, across the province, and beyond. Concerned participants and panelists have been able to take part from places such as B.C., Ontario, the United States, Europe, and Australia.

The five Town Hall evenings had the following discussion topics:

- Coal and Health (February)
- Coal and Economics (March)
- Coal and Communities (May)
- Environmental Regulation of Coal in Alberta (June)
- An End of Summer Round-up and Look Ahead (September)

Following the fourth Town Hall in June, AWA was especially excited to be able to offer a particularly special, and unique oppor-

tunity to members of the public. Thirty-two years ago, AWA hosted a benefit concert in Maycroft in support of the Friends of the Oldman River, a group opposing the construction of the Oldman Dam. This year, we were able to reprise that role, and host “Coal Chilla” – an online concert featuring Corb Lund, Sid Marty, John Wort Hannam, Over The Moon, The Traveling Mabels, Bradley Bischoff, Kevin Van Tighem and other performers. The online event ran for a week in late June with proceeds supporting AWA and the Livingstone Landowners Group in our shared fight against coal mining.

We think our research/advocacy and the opposition of many others generated positive results. In June the Grassy Mountain Joint Review Panel, acting as a decision maker for the Alberta government, flatly rejected Benga Mining’s Grassy Mountain project. AWA, through our skilled counsel and superb experts, had intervened against this project. Three other federal decisions stand out in this campaign against metallurgical coal mining in the Rockies and Foothills. Environment and Climate Change Canada Minister Wilkinson decided that the Tent Mountain project must undergo a federal impact assessment. He also announced an important new policy: All new proposed metallurgical coal projects must undergo similar assessments. Finally, on August 6th Minister Wilkinson reiterated the Alberta Energy Regulator’s Grassy Mountain decision. The Grassy Mountain Coal Project was “likely to cause significant adverse environmental effects,” that “those effects [were] not justified in the circumstances” and Ottawa would not grant the federal permissions needed for the project to proceed.

Decisions such as these, so rare in Alberta’s history, provide welcome confirmation that AWA’s outreach and conservation work on issues such as this one may indeed provide positive policy results.

Every one of the Town Halls hosted throughout 2021 was open to the public and was well-attended. The cumulative number of registrants across all six online Coal-related events totaled slightly over 1,300 people.

Learning to Minimize Impacts in the Face of Higher Numbers of Backcountry Visitors

It will come as no surprise that Albertans' leisure preferences have changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Gone (or at least on hold) are the days of a mass exodus abroad of travelers during the school holidays. Instead, we have seen many people opt for vacations closer to home, often into our province's wild spaces.

Welcome though it may be to see an increased appreciation for this natural heritage, increased numbers of people bring with them an increased impact on a landscape only marginally prepared for it. Often this impact comes in the form of 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 this summer to remind and educate backcountry visitors about the importance and principles of leaving no trace while in Alberta's natural spaces.

Indeed, AWA is not new to this form of outreach: we have often worked in the past on litter clean-up projects and related educational initiatives. Throughout the summer of 2021, AWA reprised this role, delivering 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 findings.

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.

Notable findings from the survey indicated that while most people were familiar with the concept of *Leave No Trace*, a reminder could often be helpful and make the difference between trash being packed out or not. Also, even a little impact is often a lot: in Alberta's pristine wilderness it doesn't take a lot of trash or trail damage to impact negatively the experience. And, of course, *Leave No Trace* is both a

personal and public responsibility: while users recognized proper behaviour on the trail is a personal responsibility, they suggested that public support for communications and the infrastructure for trash collection and removal is necessary.

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 (and perhaps pick up any litter they might encounter along the trails).

A Satisfying Year, and Looking Ahead to More

Between AWA's *Adventures for Wilderness*, our coal Town Halls, our *Leave No Trace* initiative, our election debate, and our many communications via electronic newsletter and social media, we are happy with the level of engagement we have maintained with our member and supporter base, especially in these trying times.

Between A4W fundraising and other outreach-related funds AWA has raised over \$60,000 so far throughout 2021. Such generous support will benefit our conservation efforts around the province.

We are always looking for new ways to include members of the public in our work, and are open to any ideas that our members and supporters can provide. We especially welcome you on any remaining *Adventures* this year and all of our programs in 2022 and beyond! 🌲