

2021 Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture and Wilderness and Wildlife Defender Awards: Wayne Howse

By Nigel Douglas

On December 14, AWA recognized (semi-) retired RCMP officer Wayne Howse with one of two 2021 Wilderness and Wildlife Defenders Awards, in recognition of his “steadfast dedication in protecting public lands and wildlife, while both on and off duty.”

As part of this award, AWA were delighted to invite Wayne to deliver the second of 2021’s annual lectures. Unfortunately, due to covid regulations, Wayne was unable to deliver his lecture in the traditional manner, and so once again his audience were obliged to listen in via Zoom. But participants were treated to some fascinating insights into Wayne’s 36 years as a full-time RCMP officer in Alberta, BC, and the Yukon.

Wayne grew up with his five younger brothers on a farm on the Buffalo Lake Metis Settlement, two hours north of Edmonton. He grew up hunting and fishing and, as he put it “being at one with wildlife.”

His Albertan roots go back a long way, as far as great, great, great grandfather Joseph Howse who came to Canada on a ship and eventually made his way to Rocky Mountain House, where he worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company. “He was a very good friend of David Thompson, even though Thompson was with the Northwest Trading Co.,” said Wayne. “Joseph Howse attempted to cross into BC through Howse Pass and was turned away by the Peigans who did not want that pass opened. So he had to go down through the Athabasca Pass.” In 1810 David Thompson named Howse Pass after his good friend.

“Joseph Howse ended up marrying a Cree lady,” continued Wayne. “They had several children and one was named Jane Howse.” Jane married Sam Livingston who was “quite a famous person in the Calgary area.” He built a

home along the Bow River and ended up selling it to the Northwest Mounted Police. “If you go into the Heritage Park, Sam Livingstone and Jane Howse’s house is still standing,” Wayne pointed out.

As well as Howse Pass, Joseph’s name is commemorated in Howse Peak, west of the Icefields Parkway, on the continental divide between Alberta and British Columbia. In 2015, Wayne’s son and his father-in-law climbed Howse Peak, the first Howse ever to stand atop of the 3,295-metre Howse Peak. “It’s quite a feat,” said Wayne proudly, “it’s very treacherous.”

As Wayne moved on to describe his time working with the RCMP out of Rocky Mountain House, it is easy to see from where his son got his love of the outdoors and his sense of adventure.

After school, Wayne initially planned to work as a conservation officer. But his head was turned by the RCMP’s program of “ride-alongs” for prospective teenage recruits and, “after riding round with them for six months or so I chose to join the RCMP.” Starting work in Regina, he worked in various places before eventually making his way back to Rocky Mountain House.

In Rocky, it didn’t take him long to notice the changes that had been wrought on his beloved backcountry by a combination of disposable income and lack of enforcement. “Being an Albertan who’s lived next to public lands, when I arrived in Rocky Mountain House I felt that it was brutal,” he said. “Back home I’d noticed that a lot of the berry patches that we used to pick as children, a lot of it was destroyed by off-highway vehicles. I noticed a lot of off-highway vehicle (OHV) damage to the creek beds; it was a free-for-all.” Rather than just bemoaning the deterioration of the places he loved, Wayne decided it was time to get involved. “From that point on I wanted to learn as much as I could about public lands. I decided I had to do my part in trying to preserve the backcountry.”

For Wayne, it began with education.

“I tried to educate a lot of the people by passing out pamphlets, saying the rules – stay out of our waterways, stay out of our fish streams.” And then, if the education didn’t work, it was time for enforcement: “If they didn’t listen, they would suffer the consequences in court.”

Though a lot of Wayne’s education work was carried out in his own time, he hoped that, eventually, for every owner of a registered vehicle, the government would send a booklet much like the hunting and fishing regulations. “I believed that was one way that would really help everybody understand what’s going on,” he said. Unfortunately, he is still waiting.

Wayne went on to give a few examples of his experiences enforcing regulations in the backcountry. “It can be quite hectic and quite crazy,” he said in his understated way.

One example was a persistent pattern of OHV abuse in Swan Creek, going back over a number of years. “I reviewed about a hundred videos of people driving in and out of Swan Creek, right on the east side of Swan Lake,” he recalled. “It’s a major spawning ground for seven or eight different species of fish.” As a result of viewing these videos Wayne was able to identify one prominent driver. “As a result of all the info we had we were able to obtain a search warrant and we went down to a location near Beiseker and seized the GoPros (vehicle cameras) and the computers, seized a \$10,000 quad.” The individual was charged with several counts under the *Water Act* and the *Public Lands Act*. “He didn’t really care about the land or what he had been doing,” said Wayne. “He wouldn’t cooperate or give a statement, which is his right, but we had overwhelming evidence.”

In the end, it went to court and the individual pleaded guilty. “He ended up losing his \$10,000 quad which was forfeited to the crown, and he also received a fine,” remembered Wayne. “I was able to follow up and find a second individual and he was also fined.”

Wayne also recalled another incident

with a somewhat more positive outcome. “I found an individual driving in a creek bed up by Lawrence Creek, northwest of Rocky,” Wayne told his audience. “I found him right in the creek washing his quad off, so I ended up charging him.” At first the person was not impressed: “he was quite argumentative, when I initially charged him and he did not realise the magnitude of what he was doing.” But as he came to appreciate the implications of his actions, he began to come around. “He came to me after all this was over and he apologised and said he was going to pass it on to all his friends and family to stay out of the creeks,” said Wayne. “I was very pleased with that outcome.”

Wayne was asked by lecture host, AWA Director Vivian Pharis, if he had noticed any recent improvements in the state of public lands in the backcountry. “There is some change but I don’t feel there is enough change yet,” he replied. “I’ve still encountered the rowdiness of a lot of the people in the backcountry, I’ve noticed a lot of the creek beds are still being driven into, it’s fairly obvious with all of the tracks going into and out of the water.” He agreed that the North Saskatchewan planning process “does not seem to be working.”

Of course, not all OHV users are taking part in the abuse. “I know there are OHV users who are upset with the ones who continue to abuse the land and they have reported them,” he continued. “However, you can report all you want, but if you don’t have enough enforcement officers in the backcountry the abuse will continue. A lot of the money the government spends could be spent wisely on having people protect public lands; I’d love to see more officers back there.”

On an encouraging note, Wayne did point out how well the different agencies now work to promote better practices on public lands. “In Rocky Mountain House, on a May long weekend, there are four or five agencies working together, fire fighters, search and rescue, the Rocky town police and peace officers too. For one week it’s

great, having all these people, but for the rest of the time we struggle.”

Though he retired in March 2018, Wayne re-hired with the RCMP as a reservist, and continues to work part-time, filling in as required. “It’s been a great opportunity to travel round Alberta,” he pointed out, “and work in a lot of special places, like Turner Valley, Jasper and Banff and Waterton,

even up into the Manning and Fairview areas. It’s been a lot of fun working in these locations and I’ve been able to see so much of the country.”

Despite some hair-raising experiences, Wayne retains a resolutely optimistic view of human nature: “I’ve noticed things don’t really change from one area to the other, but there are a lot of good people throughout the province.”



Wilderness and Wildlife Defender award recipient Wayne Howse.

Save the Date and Join Us!



Wilderness Association

Annual General Meeting of Alberta

**November 19th, 2022
10:00 am**

**AWA Cottage School Building
455 – 12 ST NW., Calgary, AB**

Video conference attendance will also be available.
Registration required and will be available online in November.