

Wilderness Defender Award Here Comes Mother Nature – Mary Kettenbach

By Cliff Wallis (with assistance from Mary and Ray Kettenbach)



Mary's father lived on a small farm in the Netherlands where they raised pigs and cattle, before most of her family went abroad to Minnesota. Born in Minnesota, Mary moved to Alberta at the age of two. The soils near Rosebud produced excellent crops so the family took over a farm and homesite on the edge of a prairie coulee. They practiced regenerative agriculture before it became a popular term.

Mary's dad loved the wide-open spaces and his love of the prairie rubbed off on Mary. She grew up in the Depression staying close to home with the coulees as her playground where they would ski, pick berries, and be intrigued by nature, especially wildflowers. Mary still knows where to go to find the prairie crocuses. She lived in the Rockyford-Rosebud area until retirement from farm life. Our paths crossed several times over the last four

decades, in part because of our shared knowledge and passion for protecting grasslands.

I had an inkling that Mary was special from the first time we met at Calgary Field Naturalists meetings in the 1980s. Mary would come with a friend all the way from Rockyford just to hear the latest nature talks. Mary was always keen to enjoy and understand the world whether wintering in California or enjoying time at home. That interest in nature transcended everything – always preferring a nature lecture or hike to other more typical snowbird activities like golf.

One of Mary's high school teachers at the Rosebud school was Ray Salt, the author of the first *Birds of Alberta* book. Ray played an outsized role in Mary's formative years. There was wild countryside along the Rosebud River with only one access between Rosebud and Beynon. The majestic ferruginous hawk along with other birds of prey were being banded by Ray in cliff nests on Mary's family property. Ray introduced his students to the wonder of birds and nature. Although only boys were allowed to handle and band the birds, Mary's sister was lowered down a cliff to see them banding peregrine falcons. Ray set up a feeding station where he was banding redpolls and a great many birds were observed in the sloughs.

Mary married her husband Frank and started raising their own family. It wasn't until the 1980s that environmental concerns really started to bubble around her with the advent of extensive oil and

gas development. Mary is most proud of her work to limit development in the last remaining native grasslands in the Rosebud-Rockyford area. Decalta Oil wanted to develop roads and drill wells close to Serviceberry Creek. The neighbouring Kenworthys and Kettenbachs objected. As a farm woman challenging the male-dominated energy



A February 2, 1981, Calgary Herald article in Bob Scammell's Outdoors: "Prodded by the energy crisis, oil companies have invaded, over the past five years, many of the smaller, wilder and quieter corners of Alberta . . . At first Mary Kettenbach was sick about the proposed incursion into a quiet corner of the family lands, then she got angry and decided to do something about it . . . 'This is a beautiful, quiet natural area. It means a lot to me; we have husbanded it over the years. I am a first-generation Canadian; I grew up in Rosebud, and the land along the creek looks like I always want to remember it'."

Photo © The Calgary Herald

companies in the early 1980s, she was a pioneer in this regard.

Mary wanted industry to do the right thing and avoid putting roads, wellsites and pipelines on native grassland and sensitive sites. The proposed well for the Kenworthy was denied as it was on a hillside, close to the Serviceberry Creek with a steady spring flowing nearby, and burrowing owls occupied nearby native grassland, long before their plight was recognized. Unfortunately, the other well, on Kettenbach lands, was allowed.

Even though she was unsuccessful on her land, it did not deter Mary from working on keeping oil and gas companies honest. In the early 2000s, Pan-Canadian planned to drill numerous wells with pipelines running across the Rosebud River and Serviceberry Creek with inadequate attention to protecting streams or native prairie. She wrote a letter to the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, the regulator of the day. Nova Gas had done biological studies, including fish, on Serviceberry Creek and provided Mary with the results. That gave Mary the ammunition needed to set expectations for the oil and gas companies that they couldn't push landowners around and started a hard-nosed negotiation with Pan-Canadian with Mary wearing her Mother Nature "hat".

Mary feels the laws and processes around energy development create a negative, adversarial environment that is not productive nor fully recognizing of landowner concerns and rights. Initially, little information was provided to landowners. When companies took the time to understand positions, that led to reasonable discussions.

Alberta Energy Company and Pan-Canadian became Encana which continued the project and Mary brought me in to assist. Even when it was five company representatives versus Mary, Encana didn't stand a chance. Mary knew her stuff and remained resolute and focused. In the end, Encana's public relations person said Mary cost them money, but her efforts helped keep the project off native grass and protect the water. Ultimately, Alberta codified the avoidance of native grassland in its



The Rosebud area is a hotspot for environmental activism and has always been a nexus for people interested in nature and protecting prairie valleys. A group of landowners continues to oppose a proposed racetrack in the Rosebud valley (Wildlands Advocate Fall 2021) and, in addition to putting their own lands in conservation easements, have started buying property along the Rosebud to add to the lands protected. There are wild areas where golden eagles nest despite their location in some of the most productive farmland in Alberta. Hats off to the many Albertans who share Mary's concern about protecting the prairie. It is good to know that her legacy will continue. Photo © C. Wallis

guidance for oil and gas development in the province.

Mary's successes don't stop with oil and gas. She helped ensure that Kneehill County would reject a golf course proposed in the picturesque and biodiverse Horseshoe Canyon near Drumheller. Her interests in prairie conservation weren't confined to her local area or to her younger years. At 86, Mary took the Greyhound bus every day from Strathmore to Calgary and once to Medicine Hat to attend hearings and make a presentation to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency-Alberta Energy and Utilities Board Joint Review Panel on Encana's proposal to drill over 1000 wells in the National Wildlife Area at Canadian Forces Base Suffield near Medicine Hat. Mary wrote political leaders to voice her concerns about the project. She schooled the panel and Encana on her understanding of the fine details of native seed mixes and the correct ones to use if wells were allowed to proceed.

Fortunately, with people like Mary expressing their concerns, along with many other individuals, and the great effort of the AWA and the Suffield base, Encana's proposals were rejected by the Panel and deemed inappropriate in the National Wildlife Area. Canada accepted their recommendation, and the National Wildlife Area remains protected from industrial activity today.

In the 1960s, before all the oil and gas, grassland, and stream protection issues took over a significant part of Mary's life, Mary was a leader with the Girl Guides of Canada. The phrase "Here Comes Mother Nature" was often heard when her Girl Guide pack saw Mary coming. She helped the girls earn their natural history/conservation badges. Back on the farm, Mary's kids recycled newspaper, cardboard, cans, and bottles; inspiring an overarching concern for the environment before it was trendy.

At 97, Mary is still going strong and writing a booklet on "Cowboys Before

the Fences” situated in the Rosebud – Rockyford area. She continues to define environmental citizenship and is “Mother Nature” to many. These days she is pressing a developer and Rockyview County to protect the wetlands near her seniors’ residence. Determined, curious,

and a joy to be around – Mary is a great defender of our grassland heritage and, above all, most appreciative of nature and people working to protect it. She certainly has had an impact on me, and I am pleased that the work of unsung heroes like Mary is being recognized. Her

thirst for knowledge, guiding efforts, and unrelenting ability to make a difference have helped make nature, especially the prairies, in Alberta a lot more respected, loved, and protected. Thank you Mary, and congratulations on your Wilderness Defender Award!
