



# A WILDLANDS ADVOCATE

THE ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION JOURNAL

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# C O N T E N T S

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**Cover Photo** “I had been further north that day with a photo tour group from Jasper and we timed our return to Jasper to head through the heart of the A la Pêche caribou territory at dusk. I had taken groups up there for five consecutive years hoping to find caribou without any luck, so this encounter in the fall of 2020 was really unexpected. We saw the big bull emerging from the trees on the side of the highway and quickly set up for a series of shots as it skirted the right-of-way and then eventually crossed the highway and disappeared into the boreal forest on the east side of the highway. It was a brief but thrilling experience!” – John E. Marriott



John E. Marriott

**Editorial Note** In planning our December issue, we had originally begun without a specific theme in mind. However, as these stories came together over the autumn months, a more cohesive through line began to emerge linking many of these articles together. Indigenous-led conservation plays a massive role in the protection of wilderness – both around the world and here in Alberta – and at least three of our articles in this issue touch on this concept in some form or another. From my trip up to Bistcho Lake with the Dene Tha' First Nation, to Gillian Steward's discussion of Aseniwuche Winewak Nation's push for federal support in protecting caribou herds, and finally Carolyn Campbell's article on the hopes for Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas in northeastern Alberta. Looking elsewhere, we have articles from AWA Staff on wolverines, Apetowun Creek, solar projects, a trip to Suffield National Wildlife Area, and December's UN Biodiversity Conference being held in Montreal (known as COP 15). To round out our final issue for 2022, we have tributes to many of our recent award recipients, an update on AWA financials from our new Executive Director Debborah Donnelly, and a thorough rundown of many of our successful Adventures for Wilderness which raised more than \$45,000 for AWA this year – including our incredibly well attended tour of Ricardo Ranch in southeast Calgary. I wish all our members, volunteers, and readers a happy and restful winter holidays, and I hope you enjoy reading this issue!



Phillip Meintzer  
AWA Conservation  
Specialist and  
Wildlands  
Advocate Editor

## ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

“Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action”

Dedicated to the conservation of wilderness and the completion of a protected areas network, **Alberta Wilderness Association** is a voice for the environment. Since 1965, AWA has inspired communities to care for Alberta's wild spaces through awareness and action. With a provincial office and library in Calgary, AWA has active members, volunteers, and sponsors throughout Alberta and beyond. AWA is a non-profit, federally registered, charitable society. Donations and financial support are greatly appreciated.

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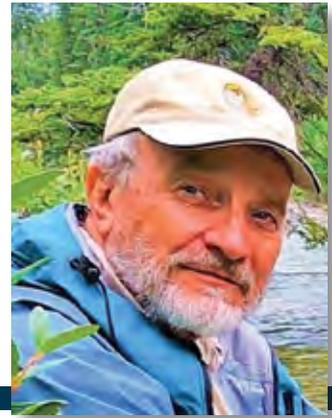
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# Op-Ed: Faltering Steps in Species Recovery

By Lorne Fitch, *P. Biol.*



**S**pecies at risk are those native plants, animals, and fish that are at risk of extirpation or extinction – most because of human action. In Alberta there are currently 41 species listed as *Threatened* or *Endangered* and more likely exist but have not yet been designated. At least five species are now missing from the Alberta landscape. To ensure that none of the current listed species at risk disappear, meaningful and immediate recovery actions are required.

To better understand species recovery as practised in Alberta, and Canada more broadly, consider the possibility of your house being on fire. Instead of the fire department immediately dousing the flames, they waste their time assessing the extent of the fire and whether it requires any action to begin with. A committee would then be assembled to debate the information gathered, and in the spirit of inclusiveness, even the arsonist receives an invitation. The relevant ministry would then assess the cost effectiveness of saving your home and any inconvenience their actions might accrue to your neighbours. This is just a small example of the bureaucracy of species recovery in this country based on my experience of participating in several species' recovery plans and waiting for real action. It leaves me outraged.

Like an ebb tide where water flows back to the ocean, caribou have steadily been pushed further and further north by habitats increasingly industrialized and fragmented in our busy Eastern Slopes. Declines in caribou populations were witnessed by Henry Stelfox in the Clearwater watershed in the 1930s. They were missing from most of the southern portion of the Eastern Slopes by the 1950s, and now the declines continue in

the northern extent of their ranges.

Issues with extensive, industrial-scale logging were noted in the early 1980s; a 1986 caribou restoration plan called for habitat protection, and a 1993 conservation strategy mentioned logging as the biggest threat to caribou survival. A recovery strategy was only completed in 2005, and the Government of Alberta chose not to follow the recommendation for a moratorium on land uses where caribou were known to be at immediate risk of extirpation. Some forty years later, we seem no closer to that essential rescue and the recognition it is a one-way tide in the case of caribou if we do not act now.

Fish species on the edge fare little better. Twenty-five years have passed since alarms first went off for Athabasca rainbow trout, 23 years for Westslope cutthroat trout, and 42 for bull trout.

Then there are plants, under-represented in the cauldrons of ecological catastrophe. Too few botanists, with too little time and money, struggle to identify, monitor, and assess risk. Charismatic megafauna, with large, plaintive eyes are the Cinderella species, commanding effort and resources. It's hard to relate to a plant – you can't look into its eyes. While it is probably true that few want to read about plants or insects, even in eloquent and urgent tones, we can't live without them. Yet both groups are in crisis because of climate change, habitat destruction, invasive species, and the overuse of agrochemicals.

The ponderous machinery of bureaucracy takes too long to set itself in motion. Multiple great wheels and levers and gears, once started, revolve with such a laborious, ponderous, and pained deliberation. When that work on the status of a species is finally

complete, with all its surety, firmness, and procedural completeness, then a recovery plan is initiated.

A recovery plan – however well-intentioned – does not, in and of itself, save a threatened species. It is the will, the intent, the resources, and the purposeful action of actually doing something that might have an effect. Ignoring the peril of a species and deciding not to follow evidence-based designations just to avoid a complex or costly response is a cop-out of our collective responsibility for the stewardship of our land and the species that make it their home.

When one adds up the procedural, bureaucratic, logistical, political, and economic steps and impediments it is a wonder anything ever gets done. Thankfully, a few dedicated individuals, working in spite of the system, struggle to implement recovery goals. Notable examples include Westslope cutthroat trout recovery in Banff National Park and bull trout habitat restoration in the Ram River watershed.

Beyond a few engaged conservationists, most of the public is blissfully unaware of species at risk. They might be more aware if there was recognition that species on the brink are a cautionary signal for our own survival. Give us a starlet's infidelities, the shopping channel, or the hockey series and we're all ears and eyes. Trivia takes precedent over tangible, superfluous over substance, and consumer crap over consequences. What will it take for you to be outraged?

*Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife Biologist, and a former Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary.*

# Guardians of the Territory: Dene Tha', Bistcho Lake, and Indigenous-led Conservation



By Phillip Meintzer, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

## **T**aking Things into Their Own Hands

The Dene Tha' First Nation (DTFN) are not waiting for Alberta's permission to start protecting their Traditional Territory according to Matt Munson, a Technician in the Lands Department with DTFN. The final version of the Bistcho Subregional Plan (SRP) was a massive disappointment in the eyes of Dene Tha' and Munson says that they "feel lied to and betrayed" by the actions of the Government of Alberta following the release of the final SRP. It is the opinion of the Dene Tha' that Alberta is not upholding their end of Treaty 8, and DTFN plan to charge on ahead to protect and conserve their own lands while various levels of government continue to delay on meaningful protections for the Bistcho Region.

Bistcho (known to the Dene Tha' as M'behcho) is located in Alberta's boreal region in the far northwest corner of the province and forms part of the Traditional Territory of the Dene Tha'. Bistcho Lake is the third largest lake that is completely within the borders of Alberta. The Bistcho region is important for many reasons both socio-culturally to the Dene Tha' as well as ecologically. It provides critical habitat for one of Alberta's threatened – and declining – woodland caribou populations, and the forests and peatlands store and sequester vast volumes of carbon, playing a crucial role in humanity's fight to minimize the harmful impacts of climate change. Bistcho is an incredible treasure for Alberta because it is still relatively remote with few permanent roads, and no all-season roads to the lake itself, which means limited

access for corporations who might seek to extract and exploit the intact natural landscape which makes Bistcho a place worthy of protecting.

From 2019 to 2021, Alberta Wilderness Association participated in the Government of Alberta's land-use planning process for the Bistcho subregion, alongside many others. The process was convened in November 2019 to ensure that activities permitted in the subregion will prioritize the recovery of woodland caribou. Under the joint Canada-Alberta Section 11 agreement for the conservation and recovery of the woodland caribou, Alberta is required to achieve and maintain a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed caribou habitat to improve their chances of recovery. Despite how remote Bistcho may seem from afar, currently only six percent of the Bistcho caribou range is considered undisturbed, thanks to the presence of legacy seismic lines, active or abandoned oil and gas wells, and forestry cut blocks. The final SRP is intended – in theory – to outline how the Bistcho region will reach that 65 percent undisturbed threshold for caribou recovery while still allowing for limited economic development and tourism, while also meeting the needs of local Indigenous communities.

During the SRP development process, Dene Tha' were hoping to see a commitment towards a process for developing some form of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (or IPCA) at Bistcho Lake and the surrounding area. An IPCA is a form of land protection where Indigenous laws, governance, and Traditional Knowledge systems shape how the land and ecosystems are protected and conserved. According to the Indigenous



*Bistcho Lake is the third largest lake entirely within the borders of Alberta and is part of the Traditional Territory of Dene Tha' First Nation. The remote location of Bistcho Lake in northwestern Alberta means that the area is relatively free from industrial development. Photo © P. Meintzer*

Circle of Experts (ICE) report, published in 2018, IPCAs need to be flexible to meet the specific needs of the Indigenous communities they serve, but all IPCAs typically share three essential elements. First, they are Indigenous-led. Second, they represent a long-term commitment to conservation. Lastly, they elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities.

Upon the release of the draft Bistcho SRP for public comments, AWA highlighted the glaring omission of a process towards an IPCA at Bistcho Lake, especially since it received consensus support from the entirety of the Bistcho Task Force – the group of stakeholders who participated in the planning process. The potential for oil, gas, and forestry around the lake is negligible, which means that protecting the lake is unlikely to have a noticeable economic impact and should have made protection a no brainer. AWA expressed that an IPCA would allow the Dene Tha' to assist with caribou conservation while pursuing their interests in landscape-level conservation, traditional uses, and sustainable economic activities. Given the Government of Canada's commitment to protecting 25 percent of our lands and oceans by 2025, IPCAs are an ideal candidate for expanding wilderness protections while also – hopefully – helping to advance efforts towards reconciliation on the part of settler-colonial governments. Yet the Government of Alberta seems to feel otherwise, as made evident by the published final subregional plan.

## A New Wave of Indigenous-Led Conservation

Matt Munson, in an interview with CBC following the release of the final plan in April 2022, said that Dene Tha' felt blindsided by the exclusion of any mention of an IPCA at Bistcho Lake or of a process that might eventually lead to one. The subregional plan outlines a diverse range of hypothetical activities on behalf of industry, such as potential new access roads and forestry cut blocks, but no mention of any possible Indigenous-led conservation initiatives. This is why DTFN are no longer looking for Alberta's approval to proceed with their own plans for

protecting Bistcho Lake and the surrounding area. Munson says that Bistcho is the last area in Dene Tha's Traditional Territory that hasn't been destroyed by settlement and development. Alberta's jurisdiction in the area is governed by Treaty 8, and the lake and surrounding area are the only place left for the government to honour their agreements. If Alberta doesn't uphold their side of Treaty 8, then Dene Tha' may no longer recognize Alberta's authority at the lake. This situation echoes the sentiment of First Nations across Canada who are taking it upon themselves to protect their traditional lands with greater urgency than government bureaucracy allows for.

In September 2021, the hereditary chiefs of the Gitanyow First Nation signed a unilateral declaration to protect 54,000 hectares of land and water of Gitanyow territory, and in November 2021, the Mamalilikulla First Nation unilaterally declared their own 10,416-hectare IPCA on their Traditional Territory just north of Vancouver Island. More recently, in June of 2022 the Kitsoo Xai'xais First Nation declared an Indigenous-led Marine Protected Area (or MPA) at Kitsoo Bay in the heart of their traditional lands for the purposes of community health, culture, and economy. Around the world, Indigenous lands occupy only 20 percent of the land, yet these communities steward

almost 80 percent of our remaining biodiversity. Indigenous-led conservation seems to be one of the best remaining tools that can prevent the destruction of wilderness at the hands of extractive capitalism and governments unwilling to interfere. The Dene Tha's ambitions for Bistcho Lake could provide another example within an Albertan context.

For Dene Tha' to begin reasserting their inherent sovereignty over their Traditional Territory at Bistcho Lake, they need to develop their own management plan for the region, which has included the establishment of the Guardians of the Territory (hereafter referred to as the Guardians) as a form of local compliance and stewardship body. The Guardians help to ensure that activities on the land are in-line with DTFN's goals and objectives – including boreal woodland habitat conservation and wildlife population recovery. A management plan and the Guardians program are two sides of the same coin for Indigenous-led conservation, as any effective management plan requires people-power to carry out the collection of baseline data for local ecosystems and to implement ongoing monitoring activities – both for conservation and territorial stewardship purposes. DTFN wants their data to be collected following established scientific methods while being informed by local Indigenous Traditional Knowledge



Matt Munson (pictured) is a Technician in the Lands Department with Dene Tha' First Nation. Matt and DTFN were disappointed that any mention of the possibility for an IPCA was left out of the final Bistcho subregional plan. Photo © P. Meintzer

provided by Dene Tha' community members to ensure that the management of Bistcho meets their needs. This initiative came to a head in September 2022, when a group of seventeen stakeholders comprising ten Dene Tha' community members and seven allies – myself included – made the trip to northwest Alberta to support DTFN in their efforts to protect Bistcho.

## The Journey to Bistcho

My trip north began with a three-hour bus ride from Calgary to Edmonton on the afternoon of Wednesday, September 14. Once in Edmonton, I joined up with Matt Munson (Dene name Yves Claus Didzena), the same technician from DTFN who had been critical of the Bistcho SRP and who coordinated the activities taking place at Bistcho Lake over the next seven days. Matt was accompanied by Jeremy Williams, an activist and documentary cinematographer from Powell River, BC, who had previously worked with Matt and DTFN on their original IPCA video following a previous trip to Bistcho in 2019. The three of us took turns driving along the eight-hour journey north to High Level on Thursday, where we were joined by the rest of the allies before embarking on our charter flight to the lake the following (Friday) morning. The group of

allies included me, Jeremy (Williams); Kecia Kerr – the Executive Director of CPAWS Northern Alberta, Gillian Chow-Fraser – the Boreal Program Manager with CPAWS Northern Alberta; Laura Golebiowski from the Government of Alberta's Indigenous Heritage Section of the Historic Resources Management Branch; Lauren Thompson – a fourth year PhD candidate from the University of Alberta; and Irene Fogarty – a PhD candidate from University College Dublin in Ireland. I enjoyed getting to know everyone in our group, but I found it especially nice to finally meet both Gillian and Kecia in person as I have worked with them fairly often over the past year and a half since I started my role with AWA.

All seven allies were participating in this trip through numerous projects that all intersect with (or support) Dene Tha's goals of Indigenous-led conservation at Bistcho. Jeremy's company – River Voices – was hired to film another short documentary film as a follow-up to the one produced in 2019. Kecia and Gillian have been involved with DTFN and Bistcho for many years, supporting the push for an IPCA and deploying an array of wildlife camera traps in the area to help monitor the movement of caribou. Laura was participating on behalf of the GoA to collect information on culturally important

sites to the Dene Tha', and Lauren was helping to collect water quality data as it relates to climate change, peatlands, thawing permafrost, and the release of mercury into the watershed. Irene's PhD project is focused on Indigenous Peoples' management of protected areas alongside federal and/or provincial authorities, while I was present on behalf of AWA through a grant from Fisheries and Oceans Canada that intended to improve DTFN's capacity to collect data on fish and fish habitat in their Traditional Territory. Matt somehow managed to bring all this important work together over the course of a single trip – an incredible feat of coordination on his part.

We departed from the CanWest airstrip in High Level on Friday, September 16. The flight from High Level to Bistcho Lake takes around 45 minutes, and as we climbed into the sky, we were treated to the beautiful changing fall colours of the boreal mixedwood forest spreading out across the landscape. From our cruising altitude, it became immediately evident just how widespread the issue of un-reclaimed seismic lines truly is. Seismic lines are narrow corridors cut into the forest for easier movement of survey equipment used in oil and gas exploration. On the flight to Bistcho, these corridors criss-cross the boreal forest whichever way you look and represent a significant reason why the subregion currently sits at only six percent for undisturbed caribou habitat. Seismic lines fragment the forest into a grid-like pattern, creating young (or seral) forest preferred by moose, while opening movement corridors for caribou predators such as wolves. Bistcho may seem remote when you look at a map of Alberta, but the footprint of industrial development is never far away.

## Getting Acquainted

The only permanently inhabited settlement at Bistcho Lake these days is a fly-in fishing and hunting lodge known as Tapawingo Lodge. The lodge has been owned and operated by husband-and-wife couple Steve and Debbie Overguard since 2006, and since their livelihood depends on visiting hunters and fishers, they both care deeply about protecting Bistcho Lake



*Seismic lines (pictured) are narrow corridors cut into the forest for the movement of survey equipment in oil and gas exploration. These features need to be reclaimed within caribou ranges for Alberta to meet the 65 percent undisturbed threshold for caribou recovery. Photo © P. Meintzer*

and the wildlife that calls it home. Tapawingo Lodge features a series of cabins with basic amenities (i.e., running water, gas-powered ovens, wood-burning stoves, limited WiFi internet etc.), and a large dock on the lake with more than ten small aluminum outboard motorboats for use by guests. Upon our arrival at the lodge, we organized ourselves into cabins – myself with Matt and Jeremy again – and immediately headed down to the dock for boat safety and lake orientation. After practicing our boat skills until we all felt comfortable navigating the water, we then spent the remainder of the daylight helping Jeremy capture some video footage for his documentary.

The following day was marked by the arrival of the Dene Tha' community members to Tapawingo Lodge. These eight Dene Tha' drummers were invited to participate in the trip to Bistcho Lake as a way to reconnect and bring drumming back to their traditional land, as well as to assist with any scientific data collection being conducted by the various allies, which could then be guided through their input of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge. This also formed part of the effort by DTFN to build out their Guardians program within their own community. This group included Roy Salopree, Joe and Gordon Pastion, Felix and Kyle (Sonny) Seniantha (Felix had actually traveled with us the day before), Thomas and Doyle Ahkimmachie, Floyd Apannah, and Lawrence Denechoan. Many of the community members who joined us have connections to Bistcho Lake, whether through their own personal experiences or through relatives and/or ancestors, while others had never stepped foot on their Traditional Territory until that day. For example, Roy had last visited Bistcho Lake in 2019 when the first IPCA documentary was filmed, while Lawrence told me that he hadn't visited in 25 years. Including Matt, this brought together seventeen partners – ten Dene Tha' and seven allies – to collaborate on this single trip.

After a quick round of introductions, the Dene Tha' moved into their lodgings and we all reconvened down at the lakeshore for a ceremonial prayer and tobacco offering for good luck, good health, and

for everyone's safety during our stay at Bistcho. The power of this ceremony was immediately evident as a fish leaped out of the water just as Roy had finished saying his words which seemed like a sign of good luck for the days ahead. The calmness of this spiritual moment served to contrast the rather comical chaos which was soon to ensue as we attempted to carry out our fieldwork.

## Fieldwork Peculiarities

As we learned later in the trip, there had been a slight miscommunication between the organizers and the community members regarding the overall intent of the trip. The drummers thought that they were only there to spend some time on the land, do some fishing, maybe some hunting, and to perform their drumming for the rest of the participants – rather than play an active role in the data collection that needed to take place. The remainder of the trip became a case of chasing the Dene Tha' community members around the lake and encouraging them to collaborate on each of the research projects being conducted by the group of seven allies. Most of the work got done in the end, but every deliverable might not have been executed exactly as outlined to our various funders.

Using my own experience as an example, after lunch on Sunday, September 18, it became evident that the DTFN community members were planning to imminently depart to do some fishing near a small island to the west known as Dog Island. Meanwhile another group consisting of the rest of the allies plus Matt, Thomas and Felix were planning to visit the camera traps that had been previously deployed by CPAWS (Gillian and Kecia) on the island closest to Tapawingo Lodge. The day was looking like my only opportunity to get out with the Dene Tha' to collect fishing data, so while the others got ready for their trip to the cameras, I quickly hurried down to the boats and joined Roy Salopree – the eldest of the community members – and we set off in pursuit of the community fishermen. Despite the mayhem, this day ended up being one of the real highlights of my trip to Bistcho as I got to spend an entire afternoon – almost six hours – alone in a boat with one of the community elders.

As someone who cares deeply about advancing reconciliation, I hope to avoid the same mistakes that have been made throughout our colonial history including those of parachute journalism. This means that I will refrain from sharing intimate details of my discussion with Dene Tha'



*I had the privilege of spending an afternoon on the water with Roy Salopree (pictured) as we followed other Dene Tha' community members and collected data while they fished. Roy shared his childhood memories of Bistcho with me, and we talked at length about his hopes for protecting the lake and the surrounding area. Photo © P. Meintzer*



Four northern pike (*Esox lucius*), locally known as jackfish, that were caught by Dene Tha' community members during our afternoon of fishing on Bistcho Lake. Photo © P. Meintzer

community members without their consent, while still trying my best to express the ideas that were shared during our conversations that week. I do not wish for any of the information shared with me to be used in a way which might exploit the Dene Tha' any further than they have already experienced at the hands of settler colonialism and extractive capitalism.

Roy and I discussed at length our shared hopes and dreams for the preservation of Bistcho's wilderness including the surrounding watershed. Roy expressed to me his sadness at the loss of Traditional Knowledge that would have once existed about the lake such as shared names for locations which would have aided navigation while traveling the area. He likened this to losing one's own place within the broader cultural history of the land. The discussion then touched on the idea of Dene Tha' Guardians who could collect data and conduct monitoring activities around the lake and surrounding area. He feels that we need to start collecting data for all parts of the lake and its ecosystem to better understand our current situation – what western science would refer to as establishing baselines. Roy insisted that the data be collected everywhere because maybe we will find important cultural areas. We need to understand the needs of every little tree, because to understand where a tree is

going helps tell us where we are going as well.

After about an hour of travel by boat, we finally caught up with the others at Dog Island and I was able to successfully identify (to species) and measure some fish between there and another spot known as Jackfish Point. The community members managed to catch 12 fish over the course of the afternoon – nine northern pike (*Esox lucius*), locally known as jackfish, and three walleye (*Sander vitreus*) known as pickerel. Roy also explained to me that the lake contains a few other species of fish which he called losh (burbot), whitefish, bluefish, and suckers which I assumed to be some form of sculpin. The data was then uploaded to Dene Tha's Survey123 mobile application which was designed for the specific purpose of collecting cultural and ecological data across their traditional lands. The mobile application uploads newly collected data into a database which you can then view as GPS points across a map of the landscape. The intent of the application is to give DTFN community members a chance to engage in a form of citizen-science, and to give them a sense of agency with collecting and reporting the data that is important to them.

### The Best Monday Ever

Following breakfast, the next morning, all 17 of us gathered in a small wooden

gazebo, centrally located within the cabins at Tapawingo lodge, for presentations by allies on their various projects and to foster a group discussion around the issue of protecting Bistcho Lake. This was the first time during the trip where allies had the opportunity to provide a clearer explanation of our work, and what specific data needed to be collected over the course of the trip. After each presentation, there was an opportunity for questions, and for the Dene Tha' drummers to provide their opinions or suggestions for the work being conducted. One concern that was shared by the community members was the need to educate others within the DTFN community on the issues facing Bistcho Lake – especially youth. They also felt that DTFN's Chief and Council need to be included in the planning and implementation of any initiatives for the protection or conservation of Bistcho Lake to ensure that there is buy-in and approval from those in leadership positions. There was a lengthy discussion about the hurdles to protecting Bistcho, including a seeming lack of interest from the Government of Alberta, the difficulty enforcing reclamation back to pristine conditions, and how settler-colonial laws – specifically those around resource ownership and development – can make progress seem impossible at times. Despite these concerns, the meeting ended with a collective sense of optimism for the future of Bistcho and the work being done by all parties, with both Roy and Gordon expressing their hopes to eventually rebuild a Dene Tha' community at Bistcho where people could live and support themselves again.

This sense of unity and optimism seemed to carry forward and permeate the remainder of our trip. I say this because on that very same afternoon, after we had spent the day visiting the Bistcho Indian Reservation, the community members spotted and killed a moose on their way back to Tapawingo Lodge. According to the drummers, this moose was a two-year old buck (or "yearling"), and the successful hunt signalled the start of an evening of celebrations on our final night together before the community members departed the following (Tuesday) afternoon. As



*Traveling upriver as our group departed the Bistcho Lake Indian Reservation back to Tapawingo Lodge on our final day together with both allies and community members. Photo © P. Meintzer*

someone who has never witnessed a moose kill before, I was surprised by how quickly and efficiently the community members were able to gut and clean the animal in preparation for cooking – less than an hour from first cut to barbeque. That evening I had the chance to sample both barbequed moose shoulder as well as boiled moose ribs (the ribs were far superior) and given the massive environmental footprint and animal cruelty issues associated with modern industrial farming, it felt good to eat wild-hunted meat by comparison.

The celebrations didn't stop after supper as the party eventually made its way back to the gazebo where we had the opportunity to participate in Dene Hand Games. Hand Games are a traditional Dene game where two teams line up kneeling across from each other – in this case five people per team. Each participant carries with them a small token or object like a pebble, and the objective of the game – at a very high level – is to hide your token in either your left or right hand while a “shooter” on the opposition team guesses where it's hidden. The game is played to the music of continuous drumming, which creates a dance-like, rhythmic, performative atmosphere. The score is kept using sticks which are exchanged as the shooter guesses which players and/or hands are hiding the tokens. I found it difficult to keep track of the diversity and combinations of hand signals used to designate who and/or which hands is being selected

by the shooter, but it kept me entertained as I struggled to learn through watching the others compete.

Hand Games can last for quite a long time, so at one point I decided to take a stroll down to the lake and admire the stars in the clear night sky. While we were there, Jupiter was clearly visible with the naked eye, and it was so bright that it even cast a reflection across the surface of the lake – like the moon sometimes does on a calm night. As I turned to head back to the lodge, I noticed the beginnings of the *auroa borealis* to the northeast of the lake. The northern lights had been visible a few nights earlier at around two o'clock in the morning, so most of us had missed them, and once the Hand Games had finished, most of the others had joined me down on the dock to watch the show. What happened next was one of the most incredible and also one of the most unbelievably cliché nature moments someone could ever imagine. Picture this – a clear starry night over the lake, the water dead calm reflecting the stars. Jupiter rising to the southeast with a dancing aurora to the north. There were around ten of us down on the dock, all watching in perfect silence, and suddenly an opera of wolf howling broke out across the lake. First from the northeast and in the direction of the aurora, and then two or three more groups of howls from the south and the west. I was so grateful to experience that moment with that group of people because – other than them – nobody will every

believe me when I tell them this story. I joked with everyone afterwards that this was the best Monday I have had in ages. It's experiences like this that remind me that we need to protect these places for so many reasons. For the clear night sky, for a space of genuine silence, for the wolves and the trees, and for people – us and future generations – to enjoy in perpetuity.

## **Forward Momentum**

Monday evening felt like the emotional climax of our trip to Bistcho, as the Dene Tha' community members departed on Tuesday while the rest of us rushed to complete the last of our deliverables. I spent most of the day providing boat assistance; in the morning with Lauren and Matt as they collected water quality samples near Dog Island and the Muskeg River, and in the evening to help Jeremy collect footage for the documentary while Matt deployed wildlife audio recording units in various locations. It was an emotional goodbye for everyone involved when the Dene Tha' had to depart from the lodge, as people took turns sharing their feelings of gratitude for each other and for this amazing experience we shared together. I feel incredibly grateful that I had the opportunity to learn from the Dene Tha' about Bistcho Lake and about their connection – both past and present – to the area. Wilderness places exist as more than just ecosystems and biodiversity. The land also serves an important socio-cultural purpose that connects

people like the DTFN to their ancestors and their history. I hope that I was able to express my gratitude during our goodbyes to one another and I hope that this article and my future actions help in some way to protect both the ecological and cultural values of Bistcho Lake.

I care a great deal about the work that I get to do as part of Alberta Wilderness Association. I know that the work we do to help protect and conserve Alberta's wilderness and biodiversity is important, and I am grateful that I get to do work that's in line with my own personal values. That being said, I feel like my experience at Bistcho might have been one of the few times in my relatively short career where I have felt such a strong emotional attachment to my work. My trip to Bistcho has left me with a stronger sense of obligation towards a specific place and supporting the people that call it home. The attachment I developed for Bistcho makes me feel like I have a stake in the struggle of the Dene Tha' because I want Bistcho to exist in a way so that all people and future generations may have the chance to experience the same joy that I did from that place.

Although I still hold out hope for a different future, if we are going to continue under this colonial regime of extractive capitalism, then Indigenous communities



*Experiencing the beauty of genuine wilderness places firsthand helps to create a sense of attachment to these wonderful places. At Bistcho we experienced the northern lights (pictured) on many occasions, and on one such night it was accompanied by a chorus of wolf howl around the lake. Photo © L. Thompson*

expressing their sovereignty over their traditional lands (and wildlife, foods, medicines, etc.) seems to be the most powerful tool to genuinely expand protections for wilderness. The experience I shared with the Dene Tha' helped to renew my own commitments to reconciliation and reinforces the need for the environmental movement to centre Indigenous voices, to support Indigenous sovereignty and Traditional livelihoods, and to fight for the protection of Treaty

Rights in all the work that we do. This trip was only the beginning of something greater that the Dene Tha' are hoping to build towards and I'm looking forward to supporting them in whatever way I can. I have been formally invited to return next year as an honorary Guardian, and as a Guardian I am now obligated to fulfill my duties to the land and to the Dene Tha'. I'm excited for what the future holds, because Indigenous-led conservation is our best way forward. 🐾



*The Guardians of the Territory. A group photo of everyone who was present during our time at Bistcho Lake, including Dene Tha' community members, allies, and Steve and Debbie from Tapawingo Lodge. Photo © River Voices Productions & J. Williams*

# Endangered Caribou are Just One Sign of a Deteriorating Environment



By Gillian Steward

One night last May a small car travelling on Highway 40 south of Grande Cache in west central Alberta collided with a big bull caribou and killed it. Roadkill is not unusual in Alberta, but Bruno wasn't just any animal. He was very familiar to Kenny Napier a member of a Caribou Patrol organized by the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation to monitor the busy Highway 40 during the annual migrations of the caribou population; warning traffic so that caribou can cross without being killed.

"You could go up to him within, I'm gonna say 20, 25, 30 feet from this animal," says Napier "and calmly talk to him and say, 'Come on Bruno. You know, you're not supposed to be here'. And without a word of a lie, he would look at you and basically shake his head. No. And he would continue to eat." Other members of the Caribou Patrol were so heartbroken by Bruno's death they put together an obituary and published it on their website.

For the 500 members of the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation (AWN) the decline of the caribou herds in this area means yet another blow to the landscape and wildlife that have sustained them for generations. At one time they hunted caribou for food, used their bones for utensils, and their skin for clothing. They don't hunt them anymore, haven't since the early 1970s, in order to prevent their complete disappearance from this region. But banning hunting hasn't stopped the decline; it has accelerated ever since the coal, petroleum, and forestry companies moved into this resource rich corner of the province.

Besides organizing the patrol, which is co-funded by industry and government,

AWN representatives have also participated in recent caribou task forces established by Alberta Environment and Parks. The task forces are a product of a 2020 agreement between the federal and Alberta governments that commits Alberta to establishing subregional land-use plans to enable caribou recovery by reducing human disturbance in their remaining ranges. The Berland sub-region includes the remaining home ranges of the migratory A La Peche caribou, the adjacent non-migratory Little Smoky caribou, and land northeast of those ranges.

The caribou habitat goals are spelled out

in the agreement – caribou ranges need to be a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed in order to give a herd a 60 percent chance of survival. Currently, the A La Peche winter range is 88 percent disturbed; the Little Smoky range is 99 percent disturbed. Not surprisingly, studies show more A La Peche caribou are staying in their summer ranges in the sub-alpine for the winter where avalanches and lack of food can take their toll. Recent estimates put the Little Smoky population at 110; the A La Peche population is at least 100.

The pact between Alberta and the federal government also commits Alberta



*A La Peche caribou bull and calf during autumn migration. Photo © J. Kranjec.*

to engagement with Indigenous peoples for the conservation, management, and recovery of woodland caribou. But the AWN feels their participation in the caribou task forces which include other Indigenous and Metis representatives, is unproductive and they are pulling out.

“Thirty years of AWN participating on industry panels and government panels where their traditional land-use information has been asked for, or their decision-making processes have been asked for, and not one single document has been reflected back into the policy at the end of the day,” says Jason Veness, AWN’s Resource Director, during an interview in his Grande Cache office. “So there’s a bit of skepticism. I wouldn’t say a bit, perhaps there’s a lot of skepticism, a little bit of cynicism, as to how far the community can actually go towards influencing decision and policy at this point.” Veness is a former senior advisor for Indigenous engagement with the Alberta Energy Regulator. “We’ve been made to focus in on the caribou at the expense of all the other values of the land that are also at significant risk,” Veness adds.

Carolyn Campbell AWA’s Conservation Director agrees that broad land values as well as caribou habitat need to be conserved. “Alberta is overdue in addressing the extensive cumulative impacts caused by settlements, industry and other human activities to its lands, waters and wildlife,” she says. Campbell points out that regional planning was promised under Alberta’s 2008 *Land Use Framework* but had halted by 2015 before reaching the Berland sub-region. In 2019, with federal/provincial discussions on a caribou pact well underway, Alberta re-committed to achieve and maintain naturally self-sustaining woodland caribou populations, and to set up more localized subregional planning. The Berland subregional planning process started in 2021.

### **Losing Control of their Home**

The Aseniwuche Winewak people have lived in the region for generations. Before the arrival of newcomers they were mostly

Cree and Stoney Nakoda. In the 1800s Iroquois, Ojibwe and Métis people from eastern Canada guided and supported fur traders as they headed west. When the group arrived in the area around what is now known as the Jasper Valley some Indigenous and Métis members of the crew decided to stay and live with the people who already called it home. Their territory was so remote that when various Indigenous groups and the Crown signed Treaty 8 in 1899, they were left out. That means that as far as the federal government is concerned, they don’t have First Nation or Treaty status.

All the land surrounding Grande Cache is public multi-use lands, recreational parks, or wilderness parks. Only Indigenous people are allowed to live on the Crown land in communities known as “cooperatives.” So, when industry moves in to clear cut a forest, carve out an open pit coal mine, or dig up a pipeline route, Indigenous people can be deeply affected.

According to Stephanie Leonard who works with Veness, AWN has only 12-18 percent of its Traditional Territory available to exercise its inherent rights. She has worked with the Caribou Patrol for five years but she’s ready to expand her horizons and fight for AWN’s right to take more control of their Traditional Territory by asserting inherent Indigenous rights which include self-government.

“So now it’s a chance to take what I’ve learned from caribou, apply it to everything in the land base and help AWN get to that stage where people will have to listen because they have no choice,” she says.

For Landon Delorme, an Indigenous knowledge holder and trapper with a trap line that was handed down to him by his father, the cumulative effects of industrial development are closing in on the land and the people who live there. So much caribou habitat has been disturbed or destroyed that wolves now find it easier to traverse clear cuts and seismic roads to prey on deer, elk, and caribou. In 2005 Alberta Environment and Parks initiated an annual winter program to save caribou by poisoning and aerial gunning wolves. Delorme went to 16 poison sites and described what he witnessed:

“First, they would herd a moose by

helicopter into a certain spot and then they would shoot it. The carcass was left on the ground and piles of snow laced with strychnine meat bait were shoveled in around it. As the wolves caught the scent of blood they gathered around the carcass,” Delorme said over coffee in Grande Cache. “But in a wolf pack there are alpha wolves, and they always get to eat first while the others wait. And while they waited, getting hungrier and hungrier, they started sniffing around the snow piles with the strychnine baits and eventually ate some and died. When the alpha wolves had finished eating, they were left with a much smaller pack.”

The strychnine affected more than the wolves; other animals and birds were also in danger of absorbing strychnine from the snow or a wolf carcass. And since Indigenous people and other locals hunt for game they could be in danger too. “The devastation is just stupid,” says Delorme. By 2016 1200 wolves had been culled and 250 other animals had been accidentally poisoned, according to government documents. The poisonings stopped two years ago but the aerial gunning continues. Dave Hervieux, senior wildlife biologist with Alberta Environment and Parks, managed the wolf reduction program. He says it is only a stop gap measure, but it has helped to halt the decline of the caribou herds.

### **Court Cases Advancing Indigenous Rights**

Recent court cases have affirmed that First Nations’ treaty rights – promises made to them when they ceded land to The Crown – must be recognized and honoured. This includes territory that a First Nation had been accustomed to using for traditional activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and cultural and spiritual practices that may be outside land allotted for a reserve.

In 2021 the British Columbia Supreme Court ruled that the B.C. government had unjustifiably infringed the treaty rights of Blueberry River First Nation (BRFN) in the northeast of the province through the cumulative effects of provincially-authorized industrial development, including the authorization of forestry and



*Landon Delorme, Indigenous knowledge holder, takes the author through his trapline area, handed down to him by his father.*  
Photo © Alberta Wilderness Association

petroleum projects over several decades. If fish are poisoned and wildlife habitat can no longer support wildlife, Indigenous peoples' right to hunt trap and fish in their Traditional Territory is breached. The court also declared that BRFN and the B.C. government must consult and negotiate to determine what mechanisms can be used to manage the cumulative impact of industrial development and how they can be enforced.

In 2022 Duncan's First Nation just across the B.C. border and also a signatory to Treaty 8, filed a lawsuit against the Alberta government that alleges the province has permitted so much activity and sold off so much Crown land that band members can only live their constitutionally guaranteed way of life with great difficulty.

Back in Grande Cache the AWN is studying those lawsuits closely because they recognize so much of the supporting evidence. But AWN doesn't have treaty status making it much more complicated for them to fight the impact of cumulative industrial development.

"So, we've reached out to federal

officials to see how they're influencing the conversation. And I would say we're optimistic that there could be a federal process that helps caribou, but we shall see, we're a long way from hearing back from those federal forces as well," says Veness. One thing Veness knows for sure; AWN is tired of dealing with the Alberta government; they are tired of being referred to as "stakeholders" just like all the other parties seated around the Task Force table.

"It's outrageous and fundamentally demonstrates that there's no will. I don't think that it's been done out of a looseness. I think it is actually quite purposeful to put everybody into the same category. It fits a narrative that they need in order to demonstrate that they've gone through consultation. Yeah, those task forces are something else," Veness adds. For Veness the task forces are focused on getting consensus even though consensus is not the same as consent as far as AWN is concerned.

Caribou recovery became a vehicle for opening up more comprehensive

land-use issues, Veness says. And to his surprise he has found that industry players are just as frustrated with the government processes as AWN. "Some of those companies value the jurisdiction of AWN. It may be easier to work with them than government," he adds.

There is no question that the decline of the caribou herds in this part of Alberta can be attributed to the decline of the natural habitat that sustains them. The old-growth forests are where they can find tree and ground lichens, their main source of nutrition in the winter months. Those thick older forests are not hospitable to moose or deer, and they also keep away predators such as wolves.

For the AWN the decline of the caribou is but another sign of the deterioration of the natural world. That's why a Berland land-use plan that addresses environmental concerns and Indigenous rights is so important. The longer it is delayed the harder it will be for the caribou to recover and for Indigenous peoples to protect what has been and is still their home. 🌲

# A Visit to Suffield National Wildlife Area

By Ruiping Luo, AWA Conservation Specialist



In August, standing outside in the sweltering heat, I had a rare glimpse of how the prairies might have looked hundreds of years ago, uncultivated, and vast. Suffield National Wildlife Area (NWA) is one of the largest remaining tracts of uncultivated grassland in Canada's prairies. Stretching over 45,836 hectares, the area's sensitive ecosystems have long been recognized and protected, although the NWA was only formally established in 2003. Due to its position within Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Suffield, the NWA is managed by both the Department of National Defence (DND) and Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC).

In March, AWA sent a letter to the

Ministers of Defence and Environment and Climate Change Canada. We had heard about a possible withdrawal of British troops from the area and hoped this opportunity could be used to enhance conservation in the NWA. Although we were told not to expect any real changes regarding military land use at the base, the Base Commander was eager to open communications around Suffield. Which is why, on a warm summer morning, I made the three-hour trip from Calgary to Suffield with Christyann Olson, AWA's acting Executive Director at the time.

We were treated to a tour of the NWA, led by two biologists, Drew Taylor and Amy Moores. Also accompanying

us was Base Commander Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Burke, along with several other important military and support staff. Before leaving, we were reminded that CFB Suffield is an active military base, and we were briefed on the risks associated with any military area. Then we climbed into the base-provided trucks – because anything smaller would have difficulty driving on the rough roads – and we set off.

The first stop of the tour was a grazing dugout, positioned in one of thirteen pastures that had been managed by the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) before they were dissolved in 2013. These pastures continue to operate at Suffield NWA, managed with fences that separate individual pastures. The fencing is vital to controlling grazing and producing a range of intensities, which in turn provides a range of habitats for species with different needs. Being able to produce a patchwork with areas that contain low vegetation height and density while other areas are allowed to grow without interference, encourages a greater diversity of species to settle in the area.

The water in the dugout was calm. A nearly perfect image of the blue sky above was reflected on the surface, broken only by ripples as tiny invertebrates moved across the still water. Tall green reeds and shorter yellow grasses surrounded it. In the grass and on the water were dozens of small northern leopard frogs and Great Plains toads. The sensitive riparian habitat was protected with solid wooden fence posts and four strands of wire: three barbed, and the bottom one smooth to allow wildlife movement. Thin metal



Northern leopard frog hidden in the grass at Suffield NWA. Northern leopard frogs and Great Plains toads were abundant in the protected riparian area and show the success of the area in protecting these semi-aquatic species. Photo © C. Olson.

spikes lined the fence posts, acting as a deterrent to any perching predators, and further protecting the small frog haven.

Our second stop was much drier. Climbing up a hill, picking our way past scraggly patches of grass and sagebrush, we were introduced to stabilized sand dunes. Sand dunes, unlike most environments, are not covered in vegetation. There are bare patches and shifting sands, and in fact, several species, including Ord's kangaroo rat and gold-edged gem moths, make their habitat in active sand dunes. Sand dunes can be stabilized by changes in moisture, fire or grazing. To reactivate sand dunes requires careful prescribed burning and manual methods, but DND, ECCC and Alberta Environment and Parks are working on restoring this habitat and relocating the endangered Ord's kangaroo rat to areas where they have a greater chance of surviving and recovering.

Our third stop took us to a field of brittle yellow grass overlooking a green river valley, and to the Ellis Medicine Wheel. Medicine Wheels are acknowledged as an important Indigenous symbol and are proof of the historical presence of Indigenous people in the Suffield area. This site was only one of several archaeological sites found throughout CFB Suffield, and efforts are in place to protect these sites.

The nearby river valley is important for another reason. Snake hibernacula, where most snakes shelter in the winter, line the river valley. In the NWA, surveys found five species of snakes: the more common bullsnake and prairie rattlesnake, and the less frequently observed plains hognose snake, plains garter snake, and wandering garter snake. When snakes emerge from their hibernacula, they travel further onto land, crossing roads where they risk being run over. To protect the snakes, seasonal speed reductions were introduced, and industrial access was moved west to avoid snake paths.

Our final stop for the day was at Hogsback, a high point overlooking the Suffield training area. From there, we could see far across to the distant horizon, our view unimpeded by trees or buildings. The sky above was a



*Stabilized sand dunes in the grasslands region at Suffield NWA. Sand dunes become stabilized with changes in fire, moisture or grazing, and vegetation becomes overgrown. Stabilization of sand dunes is a threat to the species that rely on active sand dunes, including the endangered Ord's kangaroo rat and gold-edged gem moths. Photo © C. Olson.*

cloudless blue, the sun shining bright, while below us the grassland expanse spread out in all directions.

There, we gathered to hear about military managed lands, which studies showed contain some of the highest biodiversity of any land managed federally. Military lands are often large, continuous tracts with limited development. In addition, they have regular disturbances that generally produce a range of environments, and so attract species with different habitat preferences. For instance, at CFB Suffield, the land outside the NWA experiences high fire frequency, while the area inside the NWA has a much lower fire frequency. These two distinct fire frequencies attract different species, improving biodiversity.

Still, other projects can and have been used to further boost biodiversity at CFB Suffield. We were shown the result of an investigation into wildlife-friendly fencing, the most effective to allow for wildlife crossings, and we were told that all new fencing would feature wildlife-friendly barb-free bottom wire. Another

project is the ECCC and Calgary Zoo's burrowing owl head-starting project, which takes owlets and raises them in captivity, thus reducing the mortality rate as owlets, and reintroduces them into the wild as first-year adults. These projects have been deemed successful overall, and, along with other projects like the relocation of Ord's kangaroo rat, work together to help recover species at risk.

Suffield NWA, along with the entire Range and Training Area, is one of the last shelters for many grassland species. As more and more native prairie is lost, grassland species are being pushed into smaller and smaller spaces, until eventually, they have nowhere left to run. Places like Suffield offer hope. They prove that these species are still present on the landscape, and prove that our actions can help struggling populations. This is why land management at Suffield is important, and why AWA is continuing discussions on the future of Suffield NWA, and the roles DND, ECCC, AWA and our Indigenous colleagues can play in conservation. 🐾

# Class Barriers to Wilderness

By Phillip Meintzer, *AWA Conservation Specialist*



**H**umanity's footprint on the landscape comes in many forms, whether through resource extraction, migration, settlements, agriculture, recreation, tourism or the networks of roads, power lines, and pipelines (collectively known as linear disturbance) which connect all of these activities together. Our growing population, combined with an economic system focused solely on increasing profits to the detriment of all else, means that our footprint continues to expand across the landscape. The proliferation of human development has meant that our truly genuine wilderness spaces are shrinking or have disappeared entirely, and the few that remain are becoming ever more remote or inaccessible to the majority of the public who are concentrated in urban centres.

Environmental and/or conservation organizations such as AWA seek to protect and conserve our remaining wilderness areas by promoting awareness and encouraging action in others. We seek to halt and reverse losses to wilderness and biodiversity in the hopes that current and future generations will be able to enjoy the benefits of nature for nature's sake, rather than solely as resources destined for extraction and the production of wealth. However, I think that some of us who work within western, settler-colonial, environmental organizations can often overlook one very important aspect of wilderness conservation, the question of who is granted access to the wilderness spaces we seek to protect? The marginalization of our wilderness areas combined with the marginalization of certain segments

of the working class means that natural areas can often become inaccessible to certain demographic groups who could – and rightly should – benefit from them just as much as anyone else.

So much of our remaining wilderness in Alberta is scattered across the province and/or confined to remote areas that are less accessible to the corporations who benefit from resource extraction, or where development is explicitly restricted. On one hand, this remoteness provides a benefit to those ecosystems and the species that rely on them, because they are granted an isolated refuge or paradise away from the onslaught of capital. However, the isolated nature of these places also creates many barriers to entry for those who cannot afford the time and equipment necessary to get out to those areas for leisure. Being hard to reach is a benefit for conservation, but it also limits opportunities for people to recreate in those areas and experience the beauty of undisturbed (or less disturbed) wilderness.

If we use back-country hiking as an example, there are so many requirements before a person even begins their adventure, including, but not limited to: acquiring the necessary equipment, preparation and training to survive potentially hostile environments, transportation to and from the trailhead (i.e., automobiles and fuel costs), and being granted extended time away from work to allow for lengthy outdoor pursuits. All of these requirements have costs associated with them, whether financial costs necessary to purchase or rent equipment, or the cost of lost income while taking time off work. Borrowing equipment, carpooling, and resource

sharing is one way to reduce the burden of these hurdles, however that also necessitates being part of a community that has outdoor experience and/or access to these resources as a group, which isn't the case for everyone. If back-country hiking isn't your forte, other activities aren't much easier or cheaper on the wallet. Cycling, mountain-biking, sailing, climbing, skiing, fishing, paddling, camping and a whole host of other outdoor activities are just as costly if not more expensive than just simply going for a walk in the woods.

One way to avoid the heavy costs of participation is for people to make use of inner-city, or near-city parks, but that's only if you happen to live in a municipality which prioritizes these types of spaces. In Calgary, we are quite fortunate that we have Fish Creek Provincial Park, Weaselhead Flats, Griffith Woods, and Nose Hill Park within our city limits, but their mere presence doesn't guarantee their accessibility to all Calgary residents. Communities neighbouring these urban wilderness spaces often have more expensive real estate for those looking to live nearby, making it difficult for people with lower incomes to access these parks without adequate transportation. It's also worth noting that Calgary's urban sprawl continues to put pressure on wilderness areas bordering our city as new communities are developed without a second thought given to native ecosystems and biodiversity – as we are seeing with Ricardo Ranch. This only serves to highlight how our cities have failed adequately to integrate natural spaces into urban planning and development. Given the tremendous

health benefits – both physical and mental – of time spent in nature, our cities and those who shape them should do a better job at providing access to nature for people from all walks of life.

It can be extremely difficult to convince people of the benefits of time spent in nature without providing them with first hand experiences that don't come at a cost to their income and therefore quality of life. A sense of attachment to a specific place can help people to truly understand all that we could possibly lose. Having the time, money, and freedom to get outdoors has unfortunately become a privilege for the relatively wealthy in our society, a luxury that many of us take for granted. Without a firsthand experience with nature, how can we – as environmental activists – hope to convince others of the importance of our actions? How can we expect working people to dedicate their time, energy, and money towards protecting the environment when they are often too busy fighting for their own survival and trying to make ends meet? Wilderness access and conservation should not be restricted solely to middle-class suburbanites who can afford it.

Bringing this back to a local context, there has been much debate over the rollout of the Kananaskis Conservation Pass (also known as the K-Country Pass) in recent months. The pass was introduced by the Government of Alberta in the Spring of 2021, with the stated intent of shifting the financing of provincial parks onto user fees rather than taxpayers. AWA spoke out against the introduction of this pass because it creates a barrier to those with less disposable income, as we believe that all Albertans should have equal access to our province's wild spaces – that's part of the reason public lands exist in the first place. The current provincial opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) stated in June 2022, that they intend to remove the K-Country Pass if elected in the upcoming provincial election. According to party leader Rachel Notley, the NDP intends to fund provincial parks from general tax revenue as done previously so that parks are available to “all Albertans regardless of the money they have.” On the surface, this reversal seems like it would be a

positive shift for Albertans who intend to visit Kananaskis on a regular basis. However, the removal of the conservation fee still fails to address the other barriers we have discussed such as transportation, equipment and time away from work. The fee becomes essentially meaningless if someone has no way to get out to Kananaskis and experience the region.

Discussions around access to wilderness also need to address the intentional harm that's been done to Canada's (and the world's) Indigenous Peoples, who lived both on and with the land in relative harmony for millennia until the arrival of European settlers. These communities have faced successive attempts at genocide under the guise of assimilation, and have been denied access to many of their traditional lands to the benefit of multi-national corporations and the colonial nation-states that enable their destructive operations. If we are going to recognize the rights of all people to access wilderness, we have to include those who traditionally occupied these lands and who rely on it for both subsistence and socio-cultural practices. It's paramount to the survival of these communities and to conservation efforts more broadly.

Colonial conceptions of wilderness have perpetuated the false idea that humanity is somehow separate from – rather than an integral component of – nature. We play a key role in the global ecosystem, and the actions of settlers have created a significant imbalance wherever colonization has occurred. Life under exploitative capitalism has created a scenario where working people feel a desire or need to escape from civilization, to get away from the city and back into the wilderness during our brief moments of free time. But if our capitalist society is so great to begin with then why is it something that elicits a desire for escape?

There is a growing body of scientific evidence supporting the notion that time spent in nature is good for both our physical and mental wellbeing. A study published in 2016 by Chong, Ikei, and Miyazaki summarized the physiological benefits of nature therapy. Nature therapy is a set of practices which are intended to achieve preventative medical effects

through exposure to wilderness (or other natural stimuli). Individuals who are feeling stressed or anxious have been shown to relax during and following exposure to nature. This state of relaxation then elicits improved immune system function in the participant, which helps to prevent illness and/or disease. Therefore, nature therapy is a powerful form of preventative medicine which promotes health through exposure to natural environments. From this information, we can assume that wilderness experiences could benefit the health of society at large, but only if nature is made accessible to all people. If time spent in nature is only accessible to those with certain resources (i.e., free time, wealth, knowledge of the area etc.), then those health benefits become just another luxury afforded to some people and not to others. We need to understand wilderness access as an issue of equity.

Backcountry activities have become normalized as outdoor leisure pursuits where people have an opportunity to reconnect with the natural world and better understand our place within it. Unfortunately, these natural spaces are often inaccessible due to their remote location or costs associated with access, which creates a barrier to those without sufficient resources. This has resulted in a situation where outdoor pursuits are more often a privilege for the affluent, rather than a right that's guaranteed to everyone. Resource extraction has pushed our wilderness spaces to the margins for the production of wealth, which means that the wealthy are now better able to access wilderness than others. AWA believes that the environmental movement and organizations within this movement – ourselves included – need to remain cognizant of this class barrier in all of the work that we do. We need to ensure that those who have been (and continue to be) most marginalized by our society are recognized and centred in our conservation efforts so that wilderness not only persists, but persists in a more equitable manner than is often the case. Wilderness is for everybody. 🌲



# CUB REPORTER



**By Abigail Hadden**

*Abigail Hadden is a grade 8 student who lives in Calgary. She enjoys walks with her dog, Poppy. Some of her favourite activities are reading and exploring forests. She hopes that as time goes by and she has her own family, there will still be forests to enjoy and hidden waterfalls to find.*

## Snow Angels

**S**now angels. We know them as the patterns we make when we fall into the snow. But snow angels in the wilderness are quite different. They are little signs from animals that let us know they were there. Birds like magpies, when they land in the fresh snow, brush their wings, and take off leaving beautiful snow angels. On walks through wetlands in my community, or in Bowmont Park, and when I go hiking with my family, I often see tracks that remind me of how important safe places for wildlife are. Whether it is mice, bobcats, deer, bears, or rabbits. It's good to know that these animals are around.

Geese and ducks probably make snow angels too, but I haven't seen them. What I have seen is how important healthy rivers are. They provide drinking water for us and provide homes for all kinds of wildlife including fish, bugs and waterfowl. In the winter, the rivers might be the only open water and a walk along the river can reveal hundreds of geese and ducks. While these water-loving birds are relaxing by the river, you can hear them chatting with each other. As the day goes on, the birds will get hungry and they start to get really loud as they discuss what, how and when they are going to get their food. Eventually, they decide it is time to go and, right before your eyes, a huge flock of geese or ducks lift off over your head into the sky. Later, when the sun is setting, all the birds come back to the river in large groups they make themselves comfy in their temporary homes for the

night. Even though it will be dark, the conversations of the ducks and geese can be heard throughout the night.

Natural areas and wildlife need angels, like us, to care. Decision makers help

area. In that case, decision makers that represent citizens are the ones we rely on to make informed choices that consider the environment and not only the economy.

I also spent some time with Councillor Spencer, from Calgary's Ward 12, to learn about the process for developing places like Ricardo Ranch. We talked about how important archaeology and environmental impacts are when planning new developments, as well as the economy. I know now that it takes many years for decisions about new communities to be finalized. I wanted to let him



*Snow angels - rabbit tracks in the evening light let us know that they have visited.*

protect natural environments and habitats. Advocates, like Nathan Schmidt, who speak up for conservation are angels in their own way. I was fortunate to go on a hike with Nathan to Ricardo Ranch where he was helping people learn about the plan to develop that important wetland



*While I was exploring Ricardo Ranch with Nathan, I noticed the ducks enjoying the rapids along the Bow River.*

know that it is important to me that the environment and climate change are being considered along with our economy and historical resources. I think it is an important responsibility for everyone to let our elected representatives know the issues we care about.

There are amazing people like Nathan making a difference everywhere. Whether we are young or old, we can also make a difference by taking care and learning about wildlife and ways to protect their habitat. Even the magpies join in with their beautiful snow angels. 

# Wilderness Watch

## Restoration Efforts at Apetowun Creek

Reconstruction efforts at Apetowun Creek near Hinton are now complete following the devastating flood of coal mining wastewater which was released following a tailings pond collapse in October 2013 at the Obed Mountain coal mine. The restoration project – led by a team from Hatfield Consultants – began in 2018, following a legal settlement against Prairie Mines and Royalty who pleaded guilty in June 2017 to two counts of violating Canada's *Fisheries Act*.

The project components include the remediation of 4.4 kilometres of aquatic and riparian habitat within the impacted portion of Apetowun Creek downstream of the tailings pond failure, the construction of a barrier to fish passage in the upper portion of the watershed, the relocation of genetically pure Athabasca rainbow trout above that barrier, and 10 years of ongoing monitoring to assess the effectiveness of the remediation work.

AWA conducted site visits to Apetowun Creek in both 2020 and 2021 to observe and report on the restoration efforts, and we recently checked in with the team at Hatfield Consultants for an update on their progress since our visit last year.

Stream remediation activities were completed shortly after AWA's last visit in September 2021. During that visit, we had the opportunity to observe electro-fishing efforts to recapture genetically pure Athabasca rainbow trout which would then be reintroduced to their new home above the fish passage barrier. The barrier is intended to provide a dedicated refuge habitat for at-risk populations of native Athabasca rainbow trout and prevent competition and hybridization with non-native trout species. The original intent was to capture and relocate 50 breeding pairs of mature adult fish (i.e., 100 fish in total), however only 77 fish were successfully moved in 2021. Following consultations with both Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Alberta Environment

and Parks, it was decided that 77 fish would be sufficient for remediation purposes, and the recapture component is now completed.

The next step in the restoration project is the implementation of the Long-Term Monitoring Program which requires 10 years of ongoing aquatic (and overwintering) habitat assessments, spring spawning surveys, fish community surveys, benthic invertebrate monitoring, and water quality assessments.

2021 was the first year of post-remediation aquatic habitat assessments, which is necessary to establish post-remediation baseline conditions, against which to compare newly collected data in subsequent years of monitoring. Establishing baselines is necessary for long-term monitoring in order to understand the effectiveness of the restoration work and to assess the recovery of the ecosystem. Future monitoring will help determine whether the 77 relocated Athabasca rainbow trout is a suitable size to support a self-sustaining population, but the Hatfield team are confident that the remediation of Apetowun Creek has improved fish habitat characteristics such as reducing direct sun exposure, increasing cover, minimizing barriers to fish movement, and re-establishing riparian vegetation.

From our discussion with Hatfield, the activities conducted in 2022 have included a spring spawning survey, an assessment of the benthic invertebrate community – the primary food source for Athabasca rainbow trout – as well as a fish community survey. The results of these monitoring activities are still being analyzed and are to be published in Hatfield's Annual Report, which is expected sometime in early 2023.

- By Phillip Meintzer



During AWA's site visit in September 2021, we were given a tour of the reconstruction efforts at various sections of Apetowun Creek that had been washed out by the coal mine spill, including the creation of artificial stream banks (pictured). Reconstruction efforts are now complete. Photo © P. Meintzer

## Wolverines in Alberta: A History of Data Deficiency

The elusive wolverine (*Gulo gulo*) is unlikely to be an animal that you've come across on your hikes or camping trips, unless you're very lucky. While its Albertan range spans the boreal, mountains, and foothills (and historically the entirety of the province), these carnivores of the weasel family live in extremely low densities and tend to avoid human encounters. Globally, wolverines are a circumboreal species, meaning that they are found around the globe in northern boreal and mountainous areas, though their range has decreased all over the world



Wolverines are shy and elusive creatures. They are the largest member in the weasel family. Photo © Y. Jyske (Wikimedia Commons)

since the 1900s. Fisher et al. (2022) identify landscape change, climate change, and overharvesting as major stressors to wolverine populations – another example of the massive impact that human activities are having on our shared natural environment. Despite this research, and the lack of detailed knowledge about wolverine numbers, wolverine trapping is still allowed, and is regulated under the *Wildlife Act*. Unfortunately, no government action is being taken to protect this species due to what the government describes as a “data deficiency”.

Landscape change represents a major threat to many valued wildlife species and wolverines are no exception. Human development in the form of logging, roads, settlements, oil and gas, mining, and recreational trails have carved up the areas that used to be remote and

therefore good habitat for wolverines. Research shows that wolverine populations decline with increasing linear disturbance (roads, trails, and seismic lines), and that wolverines are three times more likely to co-occur with coyotes when linear features are present in higher density. This important research by Chow-Fraser et al. (2021) indicates that linear features could be giving coyotes a competitive edge in these habitats. This doesn't mean that coyotes and wolverines are coming in direct conflict with one another (i.e., directly fighting), but rather that these species are forced into competing for the same resources across a limited

area. If coyotes consume the food that wolverines need to survive, this can reduce wolverines' survival and reproductive success, together referred to as their fitness. This is an example of how changes to the landscape by humans can have unexpected consequences for wildlife that we wouldn't even realize without conducting research.

Another human-caused consequence for our planet is climate change, which is also a concern for wolverine populations. Snow appears to be an important part of what makes an area good habitat for wolverines, particularly for denning females. Although there is still much more to learn about wolverine denning behaviour because of their elusive nature, they have been observed to den in snowbanks. As the climate warms, it follows that there will be less snow on the landscape,

particularly because the climate warms in northern regions much faster than the global average. As such, wolverines may have a harder time finding suitable denning sites to raise their young as the global average temperatures continue to climb. Wolverines have a naturally low reproductive rate and high mortality rate early in life, meaning that they are particularly vulnerable even under ideal circumstances. The cumulative effects of landscape change, hunting, and climate change is tipping the odds of survival against wolverines.

As far back as 1996, wolverines were on Alberta's “Blue list” of species to consider for designation as threatened under the *Wildlife Act*. However, little has been done by the government to assess population status and trends and ensure the protection of this impressive species. Even though the most recent Alberta population estimate from over 20 years ago is estimated at below 1000 breeding individuals, wolverines are listed as “data deficient” under the *Wildlife Act*, and continue to be harvested outside of protected areas. The best available data indicates that overharvesting is a threat to wolverines in Canada, specifically in BC (this trend was not observed in Alberta, but much of the available data used in this study were from Alberta's national parks where trapping is not allowed; Mowat et al. 2019).

Although Alberta considers wolverines to be “data deficient”, it would be wise to list wolverines as a threatened species under Alberta's *Wildlife Act* based on the precautionary principle. The best available research indicates that wolverine populations have declined and are likely to continue declining unless actions are taken to protect them. More effort should be put into monitoring our provincial wolverine population, and in the meantime, we should act based on the information that we do have, rather than allow the situation to get worse. Better to act now rather than wait until it is too late and watch another incredible species become extirpated due to the actions (or inaction) of people.

- By Devon Earl

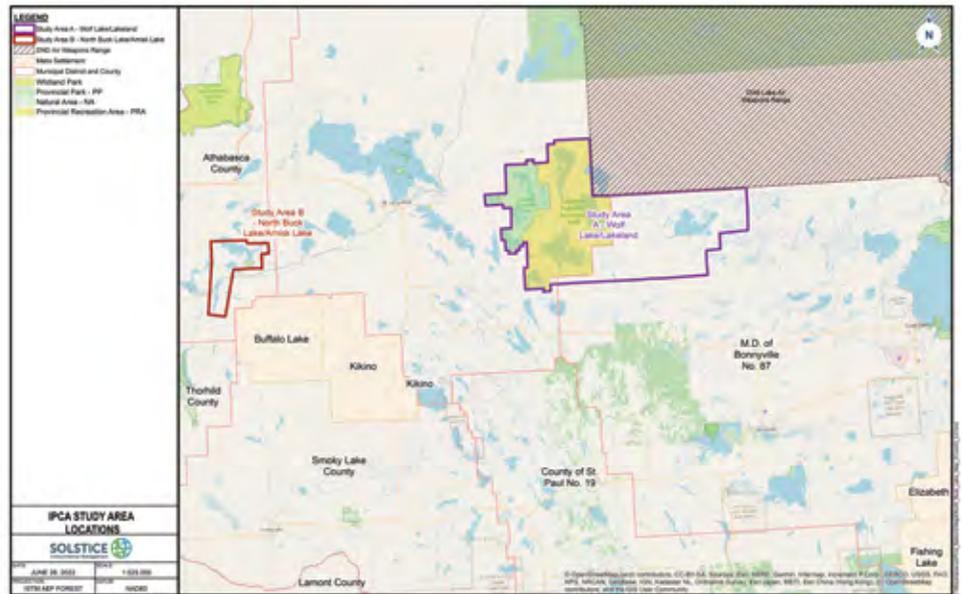
## Metis Settlements Explore Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas

AWA strongly supports an initiative by the Metis Settlements General Council (MSGC) to examine the feasibility of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) in two areas of northeast Alberta. The eight Settlements chose Wolf Lake/Lakeland and North Buck Lake as their two IPCA “study areas” because of their cultural, spiritual and ecological significance (see Map).

MSGC describes IPCAs as “areas of land and water where indigenous peoples and governments have long-term commitment to protection, conservation and management.” MSGC has gathered information on historic and current land uses and ecological values in these study areas. It has drafted a vision and objectives for protecting Indigenous rights, lands and waters through a potential phase-in of IPCA governance and stewardship options. It is currently engaging with other Indigenous rights holders and with stakeholders including AWA to obtain their perspectives.

The Wolf Lake/Lakeland study area overlaps with AWA’s Primrose-Lakeland Area of Concern. As part of AWA’s conservation activities I have canoed, backpacked and hiked in Lakeland, and I knew generally of Indigenous peoples’ use of the area. However, I was unaware that Touchwood Lake and Wolf Lake were the sites of two of Alberta’s original 12 Metis Settlements, established under a 1938 law. Both settlements were dissolved unilaterally by the Alberta government: Touchwood Lake settlement was dissolved in 1940, and Wolf Lake settlement in 1960. The families living there had to leave and settle elsewhere.

AWA strongly supports IPCA governance over the entire Wolf Lake/Lakeland study area. Its mixedwood forests and extensive lakes, rivers and wetlands provide exceptional habitat for boreal wildlife and fisheries. There are outstanding opportunities for carefully managed low-impact recreation, compatible with ecological values and the exercise of Indigenous rights. The study area includes the important existing protected areas of Lakeland Provincial Park and Lakeland Provincial Recreation Area. It



AWA strongly supports the initiative of the Metis Settlements General Council to investigate IPCAs to help protect Indigenous rights, waters and wildlife habitat in these two study areas in northeast Alberta. Map courtesy of Metis Settlements General Council.

also extends east across the Sand River valley and around Wolf Lake, both of which are ‘Environmentally Significant Areas’ of provincial significance. The Sand River valley and Wolf Lake area are now zoned as multi-use public lands, and face extensive oil, gas and oil sands industrialization pressures.

Wolf Lake/Lakeland is in Alberta’s Cold Lake sub-region. The IPCA initiative aligns well with a recommendation adopted by consensus within the Alberta government-appointed Cold Lake Task Force in 2020. Task Force recommendation #10 states: “Through the sub-region planning process, identify areas that are valuable to Indigenous people for proposed conservation areas, that show long term commitments to conservation and support that [sic] practice of traditional uses.” Alberta finalized a Cold Lake subregional land-use plan in April 2022. AWA has expressed concern that the Cold Lake plan shows very little firm commitment to deliver on Indigenous land-use priorities. A Wolf Lake/Lakeland IPCA could be one measure to help fill this gap.

MSGC’s North Buck Lake/Amisk Lake study area is west of the Cold Lake sub-region, near the northwest boundary of the Buffalo Lake Metis Settlement. Cultural values of this study area include homestead-camp areas pre-dating Metis Settlement establishment, as well as traditional fishing, hunting, trapping and medicinal plant and

berry harvesting areas. There are parcels of private and public lands within this study area, and lease-holdings for oil and gas and grazing. AWA is supportive of IPCA governance extending over parcels of land in this study area that the Metis Settlements may propose as most appropriate and significant.

We look forward to the next steps of this important Metis Settlements initiative.

- By Carolyn Campbell

## Nations Gather in Montreal to Discuss the Global Biodiversity Crisis

From December 7 to 19, the United Nations Conference on Biodiversity, including the fifteenth Conference of the Parties (better known as COP15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), will be held in Montreal. This Conference will gather government officials and other representatives from around the world to address the protection of species and ecosystems.

Biodiversity is crucial to healthy ecosystems and the essential ecosystem services that support all life on our planet. A range of species is needed to produce fertile soils, to filter toxins from air and water, regulate pests and diseases, and buffer against natural disasters. Unfortunately, biodiversity is declining

at an unprecedented rate. In 2019, the International Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) released its Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 report which emphasized this decline and warned that species extinction rates were accelerating at an alarming rate. This is the situation that COP15 hopes to rectify.

The *Convention on Biological Diversity*, first adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, was an international agreement for the “conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources.” It has been ratified by 196 nations, and encourages cooperation between nations to conserve threatened species, establish protected areas and manage important biological resources. CBD further encourages support for developing countries towards biodiversity goals, and the preservation and sharing of Indigenous knowledge. The Conference of the Parties is the governing body of CBD and meets every two years.

The 2022 conference is not unique in attempting to establish a framework for biodiversity. In 2010, COP10 introduced the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, presenting five strategic goals and twenty targets around addressing biodiversity loss, promoting sustainable use, protecting ecosystems and species, sharing biodiversity benefits, and implementing conservation efforts. Canada responded by producing a set of national targets, including protection for 17 percent of terrestrial and 10 percent of marine areas to align with the international target. In 2015, Alberta showed leadership in co-chairing the Pathway to Canada Target 1 process and promising that 17 percent of lands in Alberta would be protected by 2020.

However, by 2019, not a single Aichi Biodiversity Target had been met globally. Canada, although managing considerable progress towards protected areas, struggled to meet the remaining targets. Alberta, despite the earlier enthusiasm, had protected only 15 percent of lands as of 2020. These protected areas are

not representative of Alberta’s diverse natural landscapes, with the foothills, parkland, and grassland severely underrepresented. With each year that protection and conservation is delayed, recovering biodiversity will only become more difficult.

The *Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework* – a new set of guidelines for biodiversity, is expected to be adopted at COP15. Alberta and Canada need to take this opportunity to implement changes that emphasize conservation, protect sensitive habitats and halt further biodiversity loss. With the recent decline in many species worldwide, preventing further biodiversity loss is more important now than ever.

Some important steps for Alberta to take to protect biodiversity are to complete land-use planning and increase provincially protected areas. Effective land-use planning includes cumulative effects assessments and science-based limits on human footprint and development to preserve ecosystem values. The land-use planning process in Alberta is far behind schedule, with only two out of seven regional plans completed since the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* was established in 2009. Completing the remaining five regional plans and the more focused subregional plans beneath them needs to be prioritized. As well, Alberta should commit to increasing protected areas; a good first step would be to finalize the protection of areas such as the Twin River Natural Heritage Rangeland expansion that was approved in the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan, and to reintroduce a measure for “protected and conserved areas” back into the Government of Alberta Business Plan Standards. Alberta should also expand conservation measures to ensure the protection of species-at-risk including greater sage-grouse, woodland caribou, and native trout. Along with the commitments made at the upcoming UN Conference on Biodiversity, these may be the first steps towards finally halting and reversing biodiversity loss.

- By Ruiping Luo and Devon Earl

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## **AFPA Report Raises Concerns Over Unsustainable Forest Management**

For decades, AWA has called out Alberta Forestry for their outdated and poor forest management laws, policies, and practices. We recently received a 2020 report prepared by the Alberta Forest Products Association (AFPA; a non-profit that represents the Alberta forestry industry) that intensifies our concerns that forest management in this province is still heading in the wrong direction.

Rather than adapting to “modern” ideas about ecological sustainability, the Alberta forestry industry seems to desperately hang on to this outdated concept of sustained yield (where the amount of timber on the landscape stays the same over time), and uses greenwashing language to convince the public that we are world leaders in sustainable forest management – despite evidence otherwise. I say “modern” because the current definition of sustainable forest management, coined at the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe, was developed in 1993. This near-30-year-old definition takes into account forests as ecosystems with a vast suite of values, not solely as a resource to be extracted. Alberta still has a long way to go before they can claim – with any validity – that forest management prioritizes and protects ecosystem values.

The report, entitled “*Investigating Innovative Ways to Improve and Enhance the Forest Resources in Alberta*” was prepared to provide recommendations to former Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Devin Dreeshen about how “to increase wood supply from Crown land, without jeopardizing sustainability.” The very concerning recommendations in this report, including allocating more unsustainable annual allowable cut, logging in protected areas, and implementing intensive forest management, would certainly exacerbate existing issues of unsustainable forest management.

The report claims that to increase

timber supply, some harvesting could occur in protected areas to address forest “health risks” and as a post-event recovery treatment, but that this would be “challenging due to social expectations.” Our concerns about parks and protected areas being opened up to logging have been made worse by the recent re-shuffling of ministries that puts the *Provincial Parks Act* and the *Willmore Wilderness Park Act* in the same ministry as Forestry and Tourism, rather than the ministry of Environment and Protected

Areas. This comes on top of comments by new Premier Danielle Smith that forestry could be used to open up parks to off-highway vehicles (OHVs).

Logging is incompatible with the intent of parks, which are maintained for conservation, outdoor recreation, and for lasting protection for the benefit of present and future generations. Logging harms both the ecological and aesthetic value of parks, thus decreasing their recreational value. If measures are taken to reduce risks from natural disturbance in parks and

protected areas, these should be separate from goals to increase timber supply. Risk reduction strategies such as prescribed or traditional burning should be considered first due to their ecological benefits that logging does not emulate.

AWA has written to Minister Todd Loewen regarding these and other concerns, and we hope to meet with him to discuss how Alberta can move towards true sustainable forest management.

- By Devon Earl

## Foothills Solar Project Threatens Frank Lake Wildlife

Frank Lake is a wetland complex located roughly 50 kilometres southeast of Calgary, and is currently under threat from a new solar energy development. Designated an Important Bird Area (IBA), Frank Lake has received international recognition for its significance to nesting and migrating birds. Canada’s Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas Program (IBA Canada) has called Frank Lake “the most important area in southeastern Alberta for breeding waterbirds” and it is globally significant for migrating and nesting waterbirds, and for hosting important waterfowl species. Thousands of swans, ducks and shorebirds have been observed staging at the lake during spring and fall migrations, and several at-risk species have been sighted, including bank swallow, Sprague’s pipit, horned grebe and ferruginous hawk. An abundance of bird and wildlife activity has been recorded in the area, and it has become a popular area for birders, photographers, and other recreational users to visit.

In late 2021, Elemental Energy – a renewable energy company based in Vancouver, BC – proposed their Foothills Solar project, a 150 megawatt (MW) solar development that is intended to span 1600 acres. The project is to the northeast of Frank Lake, barely 1000 metres from the shores of the lake at its closest point, and within the boundaries of the IBA. While AWA supports the development of responsible renewable energy development, we advocate for these projects to occur

in already developed areas, and we are concerned that the siting of this project will threaten the bird populations and biodiversity of Frank Lake.

Every year, thousands of bird deaths occur due to the development of solar energy projects. These deaths often occur from birds colliding with solar panels and transmission lines. Waterfowl, birds that spend most of their time near water, may be especially attracted to solar panels due to the “lake effect”, a hypothesis that suggests birds mistake solar panels for water and attempt to land, leading to collisions, stranding, and death. Solar panels can also displace birds from preferred habitat or degrade habitat quality by changing the microclimate and hydrology of the region, and can disrupt migratory flight paths when placed near stopover or staging areas. The location of the solar development project within Frank Lake IBA poses a significant risk to the bird populations that frequent the area.

In June, Elemental Energy submitted their proposal for the project to the Alberta Utilities Commission. Responding to the proposal, concerned landowners and community members formed the Frank Lake Concerned Citizens (FLCC) group to record their opposition to this project. AWA is participating in the proceeding as a member of FLCC, and several other groups, including Canadian Wildlife Service, Calgary Field Naturalists Society and Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Southern Alberta, have also filed statements expressing concerns with the proposed development. A petition started to oppose the project has since gained over 2500 signatures. A hearing has been scheduled for January 2023. The hearing will provide a limited opportunity to express opposition to the project and present evidence and will allow the AUC to make the appropriate decision.

- By Ruiping Luo



*Solar energy development is on the rise, with open areas in the grassland and parkland regions often most at-risk of development. These projects are important for reducing carbon emissions, but must be conducted in a way that minimizes the impact to sensitive wildlife and landscapes. Photo © R. Luo*

# Departments

## AWA's Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture with Richard Thomas – If You're Not Outraged, You're Not Paying Attention

By Nigel Douglas

AWA's Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture returned on November 18, with an inspiring, at times sobering, presentation by environmental activist, and long-time friend of AWA, Dr. Richard Thomas. Richard has never been a person to hold back when something needs to be said, and it was good to see that he has not changed. He jumped straight into his presentation with some scene-setting realities, including that:

- Our species is wholly dependent on the ecosystem services provided by a fully functioning biosphere; and
- Humanity is facing a self-induced existential crisis whose key components are climate change, biodiversity loss, overpopulation, and pollution.

"We have had a collective failure to face up to unpleasant realities," he said, a theme that he returned to throughout his lecture.

### Alberta

Richard talked about his experiences working as an environmental activist in Alberta; "in terms of environmental politics, a very surreal place." He referred to the value-laden terms used by industry and government in Alberta. Creating protected areas is called 'sterilising the land'; clearcutting forests is 'harvesting'; draining wetlands is 'improving the land'; old growth forest is 'overmature.' "It is very important for environmentalists not to adopt industry language, which suggests you tacitly support their practices," he stressed.

Richard discussed the Alberta government's 1988 decision – "with zero democratic input" – to sign away 15 percent of the province in two huge Forest Management Agreements to Japanese-owned pulp mills, Daishowa and Alberta Pacific. "There were large protests in Alberta,

the like of which have not been seen since," he remembered.

Then in 1992 he started work as Lakeland District planner for Alberta Parks. "I expected to be battling the oil industry and Alberta Pacific in defence of Lakeland," he says ruefully, "whereas I was battling their proxies. The main enemies of Lakeland were the province's own departments of Energy and Forestry."

From 1995 to 98, Richard was under contract with Alberta Parks as part of the Special Places 2000 initiative, looking for the best candidate Protected Areas in the Foothills and Boreal Forest Natural Regions. In an attempt to address "inter-generational amnesia," or "shifting baseline syndrome," Richard put together a series of aerial time-lapse photos for the Swan Hills between 1949-1991, which have since been used time and time again to demonstrate the cumulative effects of multiple disturbances on the same landscape over time.

Richard's report on the Boreal Forest attracted considerable media attention at the time. Looking for "genuine wilderness" across this vast region (using the definition in the American *Wilderness Act*), he found that less than nine percent of the entire Natural Region remained as genuine wilderness. Richard's uncanny knack of distilling a complex situation into a newsworthy message was amply demonstrated when the media leapt on his finding that, between 1949-1994, the percentage of forest loss was higher in the aspen forest of Alberta's dry mixed-wood Subregion, than it was in the Amazon.

In 2002, AWA asked Richard to be its representative and to participate in the Energy Utility Board hearings into a True North Energy (TNE) proposal to create a tar-sands mine, the Fort Hills project. McClelland Fen, part of McClelland Lake Wetland Complex, "one of the most spectacular in Canada if not in the world," would be effectively destroyed. TNE claimed, with an astonishing lack of

evidence, that turning half of McClelland Fen into a tar-sands pit would still allow the other half to function normally. His participation in the hearings was another eye-opener for Richard, and he described his main findings:

- The outcome of the hearings was a foregone conclusion; "it was pre-decided," he remembered. "TNE had spent \$150 million just getting to the hearing."
- EUB was a "captured regulator." As Kevin Taft later wrote in his book *Oil's Deep State*, "Alberta is a place where the oil industry has captured such a swath of institutions for so long that democracy itself has become fossilised."
- Except for surface water and aquifers EUB had no interest in environmental conservation; it was not part of their mandate. "Conservation to the EUB meant mining every last teaspoon full of tar-sands."

"Destroying McClelland Fen is an absolute crime," said Richard, the emotion still raw in his voice.

### The Future?

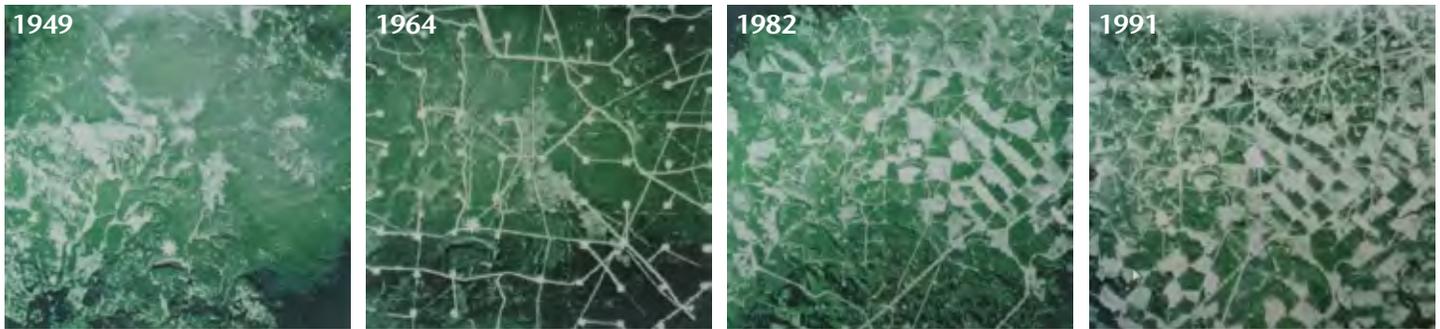
When talking about what the future holds, Richard did not sugar-coat his message. "Humanity is facing an existential crisis," he stated. At the heart of this crisis is clash of value systems. "We need a vast amount of reform to our political, economic and agricultural systems."

- **Political:** The main qualification to be a successful politician, Richard believes is "the ability to raise funds and to win a popularity contest." He added that "the vast majority of politicians are ecologically illiterate."
- **Economic:** "Our Economic system is ecologically unsustainable," said Richard, going on to quote George Monbiot: "What mainstream economists call progress, ecologists call planetary ruin."
- **Agricultural:** Our industrial agricultural system is also unsustainable ecologically. "We have to make the transition from animal agriculture to plant-based food

production,” he emphasised. Richard finished with a cautionary message to environmental activists, at a

time when it is so easy to feel overwhelmed. “We’ve got to stand up to the people who are driving these crises,” he said but at the

same time it is important to “take care of yourself too!”



A slide from Richard’s lecture showing an aerial time series of human disturbance in the Swan Hills area between 1949 and 1991. Photo © R. Thomas, Poster © J. Sherman

## 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!

## Great Gray Owl Award Tako Koning – A Lifetime Commitment to Learning and Teaching

By Chris Saunders



*Tako Koning (pictured) is the latest recipient of AWA's Great Gray Owl Award for exceptional volunteer service.*

Tako Koning is the recipient of the Great Grey Owl Award for 2022. The Great Grey Owl is the award AWA uses to recognize an exceptional volunteer for their service over a period of years. Tako is a worthy recipient. He has been a valuable contributor to AWA's Adventures for Wilderness program since its inception. Over the three years that the Adventures for Wilderness program has existed, Tako has led numerous Adventures which have drawn on his deep knowledge and enthusiasm for geology, and his concern about environmental damage.

I visited Tako at his home in Calgary to find out more about him. Although now in his early seventies, Tako's desire to learn and offer his knowledge to others is undiminished. Much of this stems from his passion for geology and his experiences while working in Africa for a large part of his career.

Tako was four years old when his parents emigrated to Edmonton from the Netherlands. Growing up in the North Saskatchewan River valley, he

was fascinated by the nature and, in particular, the geology, around him. In fact, he had decided he wanted to be a geologist by the age of twelve and saw geology as a way to expand his horizons and see the world. This led to a degree in geology at the University of Alberta and later a degree in economics from the University of Calgary. His first job was working as a wellsite geologist on the offshore drilling rigs on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. A move to Calgary for a job with an international oil company followed and then transfers to foreign postings. With his wife Henrietta, he lived and worked for seven years in Indonesia, followed by three years in Nigeria and twenty years in Angola, the last thirteen years of which were as an independent consultant. In 2015 Tako and Henrietta returned to Calgary and Tako now works as a geologist on a semi-retired basis.

In Nigeria Tako and Henrietta joined the Nigerian Field Society which gave them a means of seeing some of the countryside with expatriates and Nigerians, in the relative safety of an organized group. It turned out to be an excellent way to learn about the country's culture and landscape. Tako also started giving presentations on geology and resource economics to university students in Lagos and other cities which allowed him to pass on his knowledge and experience to those starting in the profession.

In Angola, after the end of the long and terrible civil war in 2002, Tako and Henrietta formed the Angolan Field Group, based on their positive experiences in Nigeria. They took parties into the countryside to visit interesting geological and wildlife locations along with historical sites in the capital city of Luanda. The experience of leading field trips in Angola was very different from Alberta because one of the legacies of the civil war was the

millions of still-live land mines scattered across the landscape. A very real and dangerous issue. Tako also volunteered in several community assistance projects in Angola including the creation of the Angola Mosquito Nets project to combat malaria, drilling drinking water wells in northern Angola near the Congo and coordinating the shipment of used geological books and journals from Canada to universities in Angola and Nigeria.

Although now retired from fulltime work, Tako is still active as a professional geologist and remains an active contributor to his profession. In the past four decades, he has written over 200 abstracts, articles and papers for professional journals, conferences, and symposiums worldwide. For the past five years he has volunteered as a member of the board of directors of the Calgary Justice Film Festival. In addition, Tako leads field trips for AWA, the Alberta Paleontological Society and the Canadian Society of Petroleum Geologists. Each of these trips has had an environmental, geological or paleontological emphasis depending on the sponsoring organization.

For AWA, Tako has developed three Adventures to date:

1. Cochrane North - ice, glaciers, gravel, and oil
2. Southern Alberta - orphan oil and gas wells and foothills geology
3. Downtown and Inner-city Calgary - discovering 450-million-year-old Ordovician Fossils in buildings clad with Tyndall Stone

Tako said that because he enjoyed organizing and participating in field trips in Africa, it was logical for him to carry on his return to Alberta as an active coordinator with AWA's Adventures for Wilderness program. AWA is proud that Tako is one of its volunteers and he is a deserving recipient of its Great Grey Owl Award. Thank you Tako and congratulations!

# How Many Bucks Does it Take?



By **Deborah Donnelly**, *AWA Executive Director*

As the new Executive Director of Alberta Wilderness Association, I must first give thanks to Christyann Olson, who not only built AWA into what it is today but has shared her experience with me since I picked up the reins in August of this year. Secondly, I wish to thank our volunteer Board of Directors for their unwavering support and kind attention to my many queries. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to our excellent staff who have steadfastly continued their amazing work during this period of transition.

My biggest sense of gratitude however goes to you, our members and volunteers, our funders and supporters, for selecting

AWA to be the recipient of your time and donations. We could not do the vitally important work that we do without your generosity. Seventy percent of AWA's revenues in 2021-2022 came from general donations from you and others like you. It is incredible to me that the people of Alberta are so committed to supporting our efforts to protect this province's natural heritage and biodiversity.

It is not just me who thinks that AWA is doing incredible work. Our impressive track record as a charity is supported by the rating given to us by Charity Intelligence Canada (CI). Once again AWA is included in CI's list of the Top 100 charities in

Canada, and we have achieved a 5-star rating – the highest available rating from CI. We are one of only ten environmental charities to be included in the Top 100.

I am looking forward to the challenges the new year will bring, the opportunity to share with you about the work we are doing and getting to meet more of you on one of our Adventures for Wilderness, or through our talks or public outreach events. Feel free to contact me if you wish to discuss our work.

I sincerely thank you for being a supporter of AWA!

## **Wilderness and Wildlife Requests**

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  
Stanley Rosenbaum 2022  
Ross Murray 2022

## **Donations in Memoriam 2021 – 2022**

Bruce Anderson 1954 - 2022  
Anna Hordern Dahonick 1988 - 2022  
Morgan Dyck 1955 - 2022  
Thomas Franks 1926 - 2022  
Barry Hertz 1949 - 2022  
William (Dick) Jull 1931 - 2022  
Bryan Klatt 1972 - 2022  
Barb Collister 1953 - 2021  
John Clarence Duffy 1941 - 2021  
Jackie Eason 1931 - 2021  
Barry Emes 1945 - 2021  
Jean Gaucher 1940 - 2021  
Andy Hill 1948 - 2021  
Dale Morasch 1958 - 2021  
Roxie Neale 1922 - 2021  
Richard Pharis 1937 - 2018  
Weslyn Mather 1945 - 2015  
Paul K Anderson 1927 - 2014  
Sharon Tranter 1940 - 2013  
Charles A. Miller 1921 - 2009  
Joanne Dunford 1921 - 2009  
Mel Dunford 1924 - 2008

Ray Sloan 1941 - 1996  
Kenneth and Mary Bunn  
Brian and Cindy Luini  
David Manzer  
Murray Manzer  
Elizabeth Nicholls  
Gursharn Mann  
Our family and friends who have gone before

## **Recognition for Outstanding Individuals**

Adam Thorhaug  
Ainsley  
Barbara Naden  
Jack Siferd  
Bonnyville Medical Clinic  
Caroline  
Charlie Myles  
Christian-Wowk Family  
Christyann Olson  
Clyde Corser  
Eric  
Gavin White  
Isabelle Bauer  
Joseph Spowart  
Julia Casorso  
Karel Jambor

Kari  
Karli Gourley  
Ethan Gourley  
Katrina Muller  
Nathan Schmidt  
Kevin and Joy Smith  
Madeleine Patton  
Mathais Pocock  
Maureen Bush  
Michael Savilow  
Michael Tourond  
Pat Mahaffey  
Paul Kozhimannil  
Peep and Nut  
Phillip Turnbull  
Richard Johnson  
Salim Abboud  
Shona  
Thomas Oakley  
Trevor Meador

# Adventures for Wilderness



## The Cochrane North Field Trip – Ice, Glaciers, Gravel, and Oil

By Tako Koning



One of the first of AWA's Adventures for Wilderness events which I attended was in 2019. Vivian Pharis led a group of attendees into the valley of Bighill Creek to see the environmental monitoring which the Bighill Creek Preservation Society was carrying out along the creek. I was amazed to discover that in the heart of Cochrane was a beautiful, heavily treed, deeply incised natural and intact valley with housing developments perched along its top. This led me to explore the area further and to developing a field trip that I have now led several times for the AWA.

Bighill Creek valley is a glacial melt water channel. Thick glaciers of up to a mile of accumulated ice, covered most of Alberta until 13,000 years ago. During an event known as the Holocene glacial retreat – although the reason is not fully understood – the glaciers suddenly melted away and the resulting massive volumes of runoff water eroded deep channels into the surface and subsurface of the landscape. The 25-kilometre-long Bighill Creek valley begins in the Lochend area and continues down to Big Hill Spring Provincial Park and then into Cochrane where it finally merges with the Bow River. In my field trips we traverse this valley a few times to appreciate the morphology of the valley, the associated wetlands and their abundant waterfowl.

When glaciation began some 100,000 years ago, the ice flowed southwards

pushing along enormous amounts of gravel. Consequently, in the Cochrane area, a great quantity of gravel lies just below the surface. As I explored the Bighill Creek valley, I learned of plans to develop a huge gravel mine within 800 metres of the western boundary of Big Hill Spring Provincial Park. This gravel mine will be upstream from the park. My field trip includes a viewpoint from where we can see the location of the proposed gravel mine and its proximity to the park. I explain that the spring in the park is highly unusual since it is a thermal spring which has a constant temperature of about 6°C. The spring continuously flows even in the depths of winter when air temperatures drop to as low as -40°C. The spring is also very unusual since it has high concentrations of calcium carbonate that have formed beautiful limestone columns – known as tufa formations – within the park.

I have five decades of experience as a geologist both in Canada and overseas developing subsurface reservoirs containing oil, gas, and water. I tell field trip attendees that based on my experience and knowledge this gravel mine could affect the hydrogeology of this area, or in simpler terms, the plumbing in the subsurface could become damaged and affect the spring. The gravel mine could go as deep as 30 metres, creating a pit almost equal



*Tako Koning provides an explanation of various features – both natural and industrial – across the landscape to attendees on one of his Cochrane North Adventures for Wilderness.*  
Photo © T. Koning

in depth to that of a 10-storey building. The extraction of gravel from this mine will be carried out for up to 40 years. It is unlikely that the removal of so much gravel and the associated noise from heavy machinery, gravel crushing, transportation, and dust will not have any negative impacts on the nearby park. Surely a better alternative would be not only to preserve this beautiful, relatively untouched area for our children, grandchildren, and future generations, but also to significantly expand the park's boundaries in all directions. I suggest to the field trip's attendees that we ought to recommend this park expansion to our government.

Our field trip then visits other nearby locations where hydraulic fracturing for oil is taking place. These "frac pads" have as many as seven pump jacks in one area. I explain the technology of fracking to the participants, and that the wells in these frac pads are drilled multi-directionally and horizontally for up to three kilometres. In some cases, these frac pads are constructed very close to acreages and houses. If there had been greater dialogue between the oil companies, affected residents, and the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) prior to their construction, these frac pads could have been much better placed. As someone with a history of work in the oil industry, I recognize how Albertans have benefitted from oil and gas revenue, but I also express to attendees that the burning of oil, gas and coal contributes to global climate change and that Canada and the rest of the world must develop more sustainable forms of energy to avoid harmful impacts.

This adventure gives AWA supporters a chance to better understand this unique landscape and its geological position in southern Alberta. It also helps our supporters to see firsthand just how close the footprint of industrial activity encroaches on our communities and our wilderness spaces.

## Ricardo Ranch: When Urban Sprawl and Conservation Collide

By Nathaniel Schmidt and Lindsey Wallis



It started with a tweet. Well, a series of tweets from AWA board member Nathaniel Schmidt about a small piece of land along the Bow River. What looks to be just an orange polygon on a city map is a plan for the creation of three new far-flung suburban communities on the outskirts of the city. We are frequently sold the narrative that these lands at the edge of town are blank slates just waiting to be developed so that they can become useful – as homes, gathering places, and community hubs. But the reality is that this area, known as Ricardo Ranch, is already all of those things.

As Nathaniel found out when he went to visit the site, it is currently a healthy, functioning riparian ecosystem. Birds gather along shallow stream beds to splash and drink. Great blue herons survey the land below from tall cottonwood trees, while red-tailed

hawks circle high above. Bees and other pollinators buzz in the sunshine across swatches of native prairie dotted with wildflowers. Songbirds flit through dense willows gracing the spring-fed wetlands. This place is alive and flourishing.

It turns out there were a lot of other Calgarians concerned about the threat to Ricardo Ranch as well. Nathaniel's tweet went viral, and then the media began to call. It was clear that people cared about what was going on at the outskirts of their city. Being able to see and experience this area with his own eyes had made such a difference to how Nathaniel thought about these new areas of development. He wanted to share that enlightenment with others.

So early on a Saturday morning in September, more than 70 folks gathered to see this place for themselves. In addition to the many concerned Calgarians, we had several people representing local conservation organizations supporting us. Katie Morrison from CPAWS Southern Alberta, Joan Lawrence from Calgary Climate Hub, and Bill Morrison and Simone Lee from Calgary River Valleys took time from their weekends to join us. There were journalists present to help tell this story about citizens standing up against sprawl in their city. Chris Manderson, a retired city parks biologist was on hand to give folks some insight into how the city plans and executes these development plans and the value of natural areas in cities. Ward 12 councillor Evan Spencer also attended. He seemed keen to learn more about this part of his

ward and hear from the citizens present.

Unfortunately, the council vote to start the development process by removing the growth management overlay from the area was pushed through the week before the event at a late-night meeting. This was despite a recommendation that council wait until budget deliberations in November to decide. But, armed with information about the importance of Ricardo Ranch's wetlands and prairie ecosystems, these concerned citizens will be able to engage in the next steps of this development. We are also hopeful that Councillor Spencer (who voted at the meeting to allow development to move forward) has a new perspective after his visit to Ricardo Ranch and speaking with the many knowledgeable and concerned folks present. As the councillor for the area, he could be a strong ally as this proposal moves forward if he chooses to be.

AWA's involvement in the fight to save Ricardo Ranch represents one of the first times we have been directly involved in municipal-level advocacy. This is important because growing populations mean that more and more of us live in cities, and the way that we build them has an impact on how we begin to tackle issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Cities designed with climate change and biodiversity in mind are crucial to ensure that we reach reduce our emissions and meet our climate targets. Increasing city-edge development through proposed projects like Ricardo Ranch works against Calgary's own stated climate goals and our declaration of a climate emergency.

Calgary has lost 90 percent of its wetlands along the Bow River which means Ricardo Ranch is an opportunity to preserve a vital climate asset for all Albertans. Every loss of an intact ecosystem, regardless of where it is located is one step backward in our fight against climate change. The next step for Ricardo Ranch will be for the developer to submit a Land-Use Outline Plan, at which time there will be the opportunity for more public engagement. To find out more and to be added to the mailing list for public engagement opportunities email [lwallis@abwild.ca](mailto:lwallis@abwild.ca).



*We were impressed that more than 70 people turned up to support our tour of the proposed site of the Ricardo Ranch developments in southeast Calgary. It is encouraging to know that so many people are concerned about the intersection of municipal and wilderness conservation issues. Photo © L. Wallis*

## Adventures for Wilderness – Summer 2022 Roundup

By Lindsey Wallis



Beavers and bears and bones, oh my! The second half of this year's Adventure for Wilderness season was full of discovery. From ways to stay safe in bear country, to how beavers can help fight climate change, to discovering dinosaur bones and exploring new (to us) parts of Wild Alberta, our volunteer co-ordinators did not disappoint.

The Adventures for Wilderness program has been running for three years now and embraces two core principals of AWA's motto "Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action". We are so grateful to our volunteer co-ordinators for stepping up and taking action to organize, lead and fundraise for an Adventure. This program would not be a success without the hours they put in and their willingness to share their knowledge from a wide variety of backgrounds – from geology, to biology, to art, and public policy.

They say you won't protect what you don't love. This year's adventures have taken us to new parts of the province and even areas within our city that we didn't know about or fully appreciate. In addition to raising awareness about these places, our generous volunteers have armed participants with the knowledge they need to be stronger advocates for the wild places they already love or have just discovered.

This year's Great Grey Owl recipient, Tako Koning, shared his knowledge of geology and fossils with folks on adventures ranging from city explorations to tours near Cochrane and around Southern Alberta. In addition to describing geological processes that took place millions of years ago to create these formations, participants also learned about current issues taking place in these areas and how they can take action. AWA Conservation

Specialist Ruiping Luo joined Tako in late August for a trip to Frank Lake, where she shared information about a proposed solar farm near this internationally recognized Important Bird Area.

Another valued volunteer coordinator, Heinz Unger, led several adventures in the Ghost. An often-overlooked area, rife with OHV misuse and irresponsible logging, Heinz shared a few hidden gems and shared his extensive knowledge of the area's history and landmarks. The Sand Hills, Horse Lake, Black Rock Mountain, and Meadow Creek are all incredibly beautiful and also contain intact, productive ecosystems amidst a landscape scarred by poor management.

On the hottest day of the year (record-breaking), Heinz, Tako and a few hardy souls headed to White Rock Coulee. The group discovered dinosaur bones and enjoyed the impressive geology amongst the hoodoos and water-worn coulees. The banks of the South Saskatchewan River provided tall cottonwoods for a respite from the heat, and a chance to cool off in the river itself.

One of our most successful fundraising adventures was Jim Campbell and Bob Patterson's annual "Don't Let the Old Man In." This year, fittingly, it took place on the Oldman River and raised almost \$7,000. AWA Conservation Specialist Phillip Meintzer joined them. They revelled in the beauty and wildlife along this somewhat rarely travelled stretch of river, but a large agriculture and irrigation footprint led the trio to ask, "How do we reconcile all the competing demands on this vibrant but vulnerable eco-system?"

September brought the fall Equinox and a

chance to connect with nature through art. Led by artist Barbara Amos, participants used natural materials to create ephemeral works of art in the forest. Earlier that month bear biologist Sarah Elmeligi took folks on a bear-themed adventure in Banff. The group learned amazing things about bruins (did you know they can turn amino acids into muscle during hibernation to prevent muscle atrophy?), as well as ways to safely recreate in bear country.

In mid-September an adventure to Ricardo Ranch brought out scores of citizens to learn more about the importance of the area and stand against urban sprawl. You can read more about this adventure on page 30 of this issue.

Our final adventure for the season was a collaboration with the Elbow River Watershed Partnership. Despite being postponed a week due to heavy snowfall it was well-attended. Kathryn Hull and Ann Sullivan led two different tours around the West Bragg Creek area. Kathryn shared some great insights into the lives of beavers and why they are so integral to our ability to adapt to climate change.

As we wind down the 2022 Adventure season, all of us at AWA would like to say an enormous THANK YOU! To our volunteer coordinators who are so generous with their time and knowledge, our sponsors, especially long-time supporter Gord's Running Store, and also to all those who joined or donated to adventures this year. Do you have an idea for an adventure? Share a wild place special to you or push your limits and fundraise for a great cause! Reach out to us at [a4w@abwild.ca](mailto:a4w@abwild.ca).

Happy adventuring!



Participants on Chris Saunders' adventure to Tryst Lake were treated to a visit by a resident hoary marmot and a profusion of wildflowers including forget-me-not, valerian, fleabane and many chalice flowers. Photo © C. Saunders



Alberta Wilderness Association

# TREAD LIGHTLY

In an effort to reduce AWA's environmental footprint, we are asking our members to notify us if you are interested in switching to the digital-only version of the Wild Lands Advocate.

Photo © P. Meintzer

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