

# Departments

## An Oldman Adventure

By Phillip Meintzer

The last time I had stepped foot in a canoe was more than 17 years ago. It was the spring of 2005, and I was a sprightly fourteen-year-old, going on an overnight canoe trip as part of the outdoor education program at John Ware junior high school. Since then, I haven't had much experience on the water other than my time conducting research on-board commercial fishing boats in Newfoundland and Labrador during graduate school. So, when I was invited by AWA's board president Jim Campbell to join him and his long-time friend Bob Patterson on one of their summer paddling trips, I jumped at the opportunity to get back out on the water.

Since joining AWA as a conservation specialist in May of 2021, in the middle of the ongoing pandemic, I haven't had many opportunities to get out and onto the land in the areas under my purview. I feel that this kind of firsthand experience is necessary to develop a genuine understanding of the issues facing Alberta's wilderness and to ensure that I am adequately equipped to stand up for these wild spaces in the work that is asked of me. Using this trip as an example, I wondered how anyone could claim to adequately represent Alberta's waterways and stand up for water conservation without having spent any meaningful time out on the land and experiencing the situation firsthand. This trip would provide me with an opportunity to get out of the office (and home office) for a few days and give me the chance to inspect the health of at least one river in southern Alberta to hopefully aid my work with AWA.

Our plan was to set off from the Oldman River Provincial Recreation Area (PRA) outside of Fort Macleod on the morning of Monday, July 11. We intended to travel the distance from Fort Macleod to Lethbridge over the course of two to three days depending on river conditions, and cover a total distance of approximately 100 kilometres. From the information available, this section of the Oldman River seemed to be relatively under-paddled, or at least



*Bob Patterson paddles solo along the Oldman River outside of Fort Macleod on the morning of Monday July 11. The water was relatively clear and higher than expected water levels made for easy paddling. Photo © P. Meintzer.*

under-documented, which gave our trip an element of genuine adventure into uncharted territory — at least for our party of three. We departed from Calgary on the afternoon of Sunday, July 10 to camp overnight at the Oldman PRA, which would allow us to get on the water early the next morning before the heat of midday.

As part of AWA's Adventures for Wilderness initiative, this adventure was organized for several important reasons. First, to get a close up look at the state of one of southern Alberta's iconic watersheds — a watershed that is facing threats from numerous land-use pressures in the region. Second, as a fundraiser for AWA's ongoing work to protect Alberta's rivers, healthy aquatic ecosystems, and reliable sources of clean drinking water. And finally, as a celebration of Jim's 70th birthday. Jim wanted to mark this special occasion by encouraging family and friends to donate to AWA in support of wilderness and wildlife conservation in Alberta.

Our group was greeted by the sound of birdsong under a cloudless sky on Monday morning as we woke ourselves up, packed our campsite, enjoyed a quick breakfast, and prepared the boats for our adventure. The clear sky made for a beautiful morning but served as a signal for the relentless heat and sunshine we would have to endure during our day on the water. After loading our two canoes with all of our gear, the three of us set off on our journey towards Lethbridge to explore this reach of the Oldman River.

The water level and flow of the river were better than we had anticipated, which made for quick and hazard-free paddling for most of our trip. The better-than-expected water levels also meant that we were able to cover more distance than we had planned for, cutting our travel time from three days to two. The trip ended up covering roughly 92 kilometres in total — split between 57 on Monday, and the final 35 on Tuesday. We only encountered two patches of river on the second day that gave us any sort of trouble, as we had to navigate larger standing waves obscured by the glare of the sun, but otherwise it was smooth sailing as we made our way towards Lethbridge. Under cloudless skies and amid the warmest stretch of weather we have experienced so far this summer, the conditions couldn't have been much better for two days on the water.

Having grown up in Calgary and spent many summers travelling across the southern portion of our province, I had naively assumed that I had a good understanding of the landscapes that covered this region of Alberta. I didn't realize just how wrong I was. When you're driving along the highways, all you can see — for the most part — is the endless expanse of agriculture. Fields upon fields of irrigated croplands devoid of any native biodiversity that once occupied this area. But as soon as you get on the river, down into the canyons below the fields of canola, you come to realize everything that's missing from the remainder of the landscape. You find the last refuge of that missing

biodiversity. Surrounded by impressive cliff faces with lush riparian areas, we saw plenty of wildlife. Among them were three moose (a mother with two calves), two coyotes (one swimming), numerous pelicans, threatened bank swallows and their nesting sites, bald eagles, two beavers, and a few ospreys — one even caught a fish right in front of our canoes.

The swimming coyote was a spectacular sight, as I couldn't tell what we were looking at from a distance. Initially the creature looked like just some misshapen mass that was bobbing its way across the stream. Was it a small bird, a beaver, or just a piece of debris? Once it successfully crossed the width of the river, it climbed out of the water and revealed itself in its true form, and characteristically shook itself dry from the morning swim. Having not noticed us during the crossing, it was startled by our two canoes floating past, and what happened next left me awestruck. The coyote was standing next to a vertical cliff face that I would guess was anywhere from six to eight feet tall, and upon being spooked by us onlookers, it scaled the cliff face quickly and with greater ease than I had assumed possible for a member of the canine family. An impressive and unexpected feat of agility.

One of the struggles you encounter when paddling a stretch of river with very little up-to-date information about the route is that finding an overnight campsite can be difficult. Much of the land bordering the length of the river is privately owned or part of an Indigenous reservation. This means that unless there are dedicated public campgrounds along the river, the only available option for camping is to look for an island with the appropriate topography that comfortably allows for the setup of tents. There was mention of a campsite near the hamlet of Monarch, roughly halfway between Fort Macleod and Lethbridge by way of the

river, but this was from an older guidebook and no campsite was found as we passed through the hamlet. I think we lucked out though, because instead of spending the night in a public campground, we managed to successfully find an idyllic spot to setup camp for the night on an island near the confluence of the Belly River and the Oldman. The site was a pristine sandy beach, with slow moving, clear blue water that invited us to stay put and swim. After seven and a half hours of paddling in the July heat, cooling (and cleaning) off in the river was too hard to pass up.

Thinking back to the original purpose of the trip — at least from my perspective as a conservation specialist — the three of us were pleasantly surprised with the quality and the quantity of the water for this time of year. Jim and Bob have plenty of experience paddling in different watersheds from over the years, and they had anticipated the water levels being much lower and murkier than turned out to be the case. It's hard to pinpoint the reason for this without looking at the conditions along the entire length of the river upstream from Fort Macleod including the Oldman dam and reservoir. We assumed it must have been a combination of late snow in the mountains this spring and the heavier rainfall experienced across the prairies over the past month.

If this adventure was intended to raise awareness for the precarious state of Alberta's rivers, the favourable conditions we experienced helped to shroud the dire reality of the situation. We still need to recognize that climate change will make "good" years increasingly less likely as we bounce between the extremes of intense flooding and drought. Also, just because the water conditions seemed ideal for a two-day paddle along the river, it doesn't necessarily mean that the quantity and/or quality of the water in-stream is sufficient

for meeting the needs of aquatic and riparian ecosystems. Without testing the water it's impossible to understand the state of nutrient loading from agricultural runoff or the presence of other contaminants from human activities that find their way into the watercourse. However, on the second day of paddling, we did notice the stark contrast in water quality between the Oldman River and the Saint Mary River as they merged just outside of Lethbridge. After paddling for a day and a half along relatively clear blue waters, the Saint Mary's looked more like what Jim and Bob had been expecting of our paddle, introducing murky, nearly opaque brown water into the Oldman at the outskirts of the city.

The second day of paddling passed much quicker than the first, finishing just south of Lethbridge where we pulled out along the shore at Popson Park. As with many outdoor activities, logistics are crucial to success (and safety). Thanks to longtime friend of AWA and Lethbridge resident Lorne Fitch, we connected with Kirby England, a professional biologist and environmental science instructor at Lethbridge College. Kirby generously volunteered his time, gas, and expertise to help transport us and all our gear from Lethbridge back to our cars at Fort Macleod with complimentary (and cold) beers to boot! We are grateful to both him and Lorne for their assistance and I look forward to future opportunities to connect with Kirby as it relates to the fish and water files at AWA.

This adventure was organized as a celebration of AWA President Jim Campbells 70th birthday and to raise awareness for water conservation issues in southern Alberta watersheds. Bob, Jim, and I all felt that the trip was a success, and it made us curious why more people don't paddle this portion of the river more often. Maybe we lucked out with our stream conditions and on any other year — or even later in the summer — the route would be less pleasant under drier conditions? I'm not sure. Through this adventure, we successfully raised more than \$6,000 to support AWA's ongoing efforts to advocate on behalf of Alberta's rivers and aquatic ecosystems, and I hope that we can use this money to help ensure that future generations can experience this section of the Oldman River in the same manner we were fortunate enough to experience — with clean water and healthy flows.



*We camped overnight on a sandy beach near the confluence of the Belly and Oldman Rivers. The water near the campsite was clean and slow moving, and much less murky than we had expected before setting out on our trip, which made it ideal for cooling off from the summer heat. Photo © P. Meintzer.*