

# Alberta Wilderness Association

## Annual Report

### 2022-2023



Alberta Wilderness Association

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# President's Message

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Once again, I am pleased to have this opportunity to communicate with all of you, and offer my sincere thanks for your steadfast support of the Alberta Wilderness Association. It is your voices and your financial support that ensure AWA is a credible and stable advocate for Alberta's wildlife and wild places.

What a year of transitions it has been. Of course, we are all grateful to have emerged from pandemic restrictions that now allow us to resume in-person activities such as our Tuesday Talks program at the Hillhurst Cottage School. With regret however we said farewell to long time staff members Sean Nichols and Carolyn Campbell. Sean, who held multiple roles with AWA has moved on to new challenges, and Carolyn fulfilled her long-stated decision to retire to have more time for personal activities. Very fortunately, both will retain an affiliation with the AWA community so their extensive knowledge will still be available to the team in years to come.

Special congratulations are due to Debborah Donnelly who has now completed her first year as Executive Director. The first year in such roles is almost always the most challenging and Debborah has been superlative in these twelve months. Her extensive experience in leadership, systems management, and communications have all been brought to bear to the immense benefit of AWA.

Our overall staff team has never been stronger than it is today. We are grateful for the continued presence of Devon Earl, Ruiping Luo, Phillip Meintzer and Lindsey Wallis. We have also welcomed new staff Loreen Ayuda (Bookkeeper), Kennedy Halvorson (Conservation Specialist), and Amy Tucker (Communications). Each of these individuals brings highly developed skills to their role with a deep commitment to the work of conservation.

I also want to thank every member of the AWA Board of Directors for their service to the organization. Their character and competence cannot be overstated. This creates a unique organizational strength from my perspective of decades in the non-profit world. It is a complete privilege and a pure pleasure to work alongside this group of remarkable individuals.

The mission of the AWA has never been more vital than it is in these times of accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss. The strength of our efforts is exemplified by the "Don't Mine McClelland" campaign that challenges the established order to consider at what point will we stop destroying vital natural habitat in pursuit of short-term profits. Mother Nature is losing patience with our species' inability to understand our own viability is at stake. AWA will continue to make the case that the time to act is now.

Once again, my deep gratitude to all our donors and supporters for your thoughtful and generous contributions. You can be certain they are deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

Jim Campbell  
President

# Executive Director's Message

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This year presented both challenges and opportunities for AWA. It isn't easy following in the footsteps of an Executive Director that had been here for 22 years. However, with a different skillset and experience I have been able to focus on some new areas and priorities for the organisation. My background in environmental communications fed into my vision to make *all* Albertans more aware of the work we are doing, and this meant hiring an outreach person dedicated to communicating our work. Amy Tucker joined us (from CBC North) in January and has been creating great video and written content to highlight our work. She is also taking over as the *Wild Lands Advocate* editor.

Our dedicated and long-serving Conservation Director, Carolyn Campbell, retired in June and we all feel her loss here in the office. She was immeasurably helpful in providing background information on the previous work done by AWA and being a mentor to the other conservation staff. I simply cannot express how much I appreciate her support and her continued volunteer access to the staff and myself when we have questions. She is a treasure. We wish her a healthy and happy retirement.

Our other conservation staff (Phillip Meintzer, Devon Earl and Ruiping Luo) have continued to develop their skills over the past year and are tackling ever larger and more complex issues. I am proud of the work they are all doing. They were joined by a new Conservation Specialist, Kennedy Halvorson, in June, who will be taking on a variety of files. She is already starting to produce excellent work.

Lindsey Wallis has been a force this year, taking on the primary responsibility for the Adventures for Wilderness (A4W) program as well as continuing as coordinator for the Great Plains Conservation Network (GPCN). She also skillfully organized our Casino fundraiser in late December. Thanks to everyone who participates in these programs.

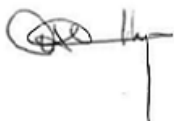
We also were sad to see both Sean Nichols, our program coordinator, and Randi Ducharme, our bookkeeper, leave AWA to pursue work elsewhere. We wish them both the best of luck in their future careers. We have hired a new Administration and Bookkeeping Specialist, Loreen Ayuda, who joined us in June. Welcome to our new staff!

I would be remiss if I didn't thank our Board of Directors. I have worked on, or with, many boards over the years, and the AWA Board is the best of the best. Your support has made my work so much easier and I'm grateful for all you do, often behind the scenes.

I also wish to thank our members, funders, volunteers, and supporters who have continued to support AWA during this transition. We could not do the work we do without all of you! AWA's voice is only as loud as you make it. Please consider asking friends or family members to join us and make our voice louder to industry and government to do better at protecting Alberta's wild water, wildlife, and wild spaces.

AWA's board members and staff have all made contributions to this Annual Report. The following pages highlight AWA's conservation, stewardship, and outreach efforts during AWA's 2022 - 2023 fiscal year.

Thank you,



Debborah Donnelly  
Executive Director



# Board and Staff

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## Board of Directors

President:	Jim Campbell, Calgary
First Vice-President:	Gail Docken, Edmonton
Second Vice-President:	Richard Secord, Edmonton
Secretary/Treasurer:	Chris Saunders, Calgary
Directors:	Frank Calder, Edmonton
	Brian Calliou, Bragg Creek
	Clint Docken, Bragg Creek
	Jamie Jack, Calgary
	Nathan Schmidt, Calgary
Director Emeritus:	Cliff Wallis, Calgary
	Vivian Pharis, Cochrane

AWA's Board of Directors is composed of dedicated volunteers with specific expertise and skill sets that support the needs of the organization and the staff. The board is a governance board supporting the staff to achieve priorities and goals for the association. Their strength helps achieve AWA's mission. The board recognizes the value of diversity and inclusiveness and works actively to improve the board's representativeness.

## Staff

Executive Director:	Deborah Donnelly, Lt(N) Ret, BSc, MA, PG Dip
Conservation Director:	Carolyn Campbell, BA, BEd, MA, MBA – <i>retired June 2023</i>
Conservation Specialists:	Phillip Meintzer, BSc, MSc
	Devon Earl, BSc, MSc
	Ruiping Luo, BSc, MSc
	Kennedy Halvorson, BSc, MES
Outreach & Communications Specialist:	Amy Tucker, BComm
A4W & GPCN Coordinator:	Lindsey Wallis
Admin & Bookkeeping Specialist:	Loreen Ayuda, BS Acc, MPA

AWA's staff complement is excellent and is supplemented by individuals from the board of directors who volunteer and provide tremendous support to AWA's research, advocacy, and outreach work. AWA's permanent staff members were supported by casual staff and volunteers throughout the year to assist with specific projects and outreach. New conservation staff have been mentored by our senior staff and board members.

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# Wild Spaces

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*"We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less traveled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth."*

*- Rachel Carson, **Silent Spring***

## Wild Alberta Map

"Wild Spaces" and "Areas of Concern" are terms AWA uses to refer to areas critical to achieving a network of protected landscapes in Alberta that represents Alberta's six Natural Regions. These areas and the networks they can create are the basis of our Wild Alberta map; the map constitutes AWA's strategic conservation vision.

The map has evolved through the years from hand-drawn "bubbles" to today's more refined version that uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to detail known critical values, such as Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs) on Alberta's landscapes.

The Wild Alberta map is complemented by [an interactive webmap](#). The interactive version depicts Alberta's Natural Regions, the percentage of each natural region currently protected, and the amounts of these regions that would be protected by formally adopting AWA's Areas of Concern. The maps encourage users, from government officials to engaged citizens to students, to browse through the Natural Regions, toggle the visibility of the Protected Areas and Areas of Concern, and learn more about Areas of Concern through linked webpages. Maps are among AWA's most effective educational tools.

*The late Dr. Herb Kariel, professor, geographer, and Board of Director emeritus never failed to remind us of the value of a map, no matter how simple. In 2017 he left AWA a significant bequest that we have invested in our mapping tools. We gratefully dedicate our mapping work to his memory.*



# Wild Alberta



## BOREAL REGION



The boreal forest is Canada's largest ecosystem, covering 58% of the country. Boreal old-growth forests and wetland ecosystems are vital for the habitat they provide for wildlife and their water filtration and carbon storage functions. More than 200 billion tonnes of carbon are stored in boreal trees, soils, water, and peat. There is much more to be learned about boreal wildlife including birds and waterfowl.

AWA is committed to maintaining healthy and intact forest ecosystems that will sustain biological diversity and viable wildlife populations, provide clean drinking water, and promote long-term economic opportunities. AWA supports responsible ecosystem-based forest management that does not compromise wildlife and wilderness values. AWA believes that the Boreal Forest Natural Region of Alberta requires thoughtful management that integrates the social and economic needs of the region within a framework that prioritizes conserving the ecological integrity for generations to come.

The responsibility for this region falls primarily under our Conservation Specialist, **Phillip Meintzer**.

### Bistcho

The Bistcho region in the northwestern corner of Alberta is a diverse subarctic wetland that is highly sensitive to human activities. Bistcho Lake is one of Alberta's largest lakes, supporting northern pike, walleye, and whitefish. The threatened Bistcho boreal woodland caribou population relies on this landscape and its connectivity to adjoining BC and NWT caribou ranges. Parts of Bistcho remain fairly intact wilderness while other areas have been fragmented by energy industry disturbance. According to the Alberta government, the Bistcho caribou range was 91% disturbed by human footprint as of late 2017, mostly from historic seismic line disturbance. Bistcho currently has no protected areas.

In January 2022, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) announced that the Dene Tha' First Nation (DTFN) were awarded funding through their Indigenous Habitat Participation Program (IHPP). AWA aided DTFN in the development of their proposal for DFO, and the goals of the project were to establish a baseline monitoring system for fish, and fish habitat within DTFN's Traditional Territory at Bistcho Lake. In the process of establishing data monitoring protocols, DTFN is planning to develop community-led tools and community engagement processes for both elders and youth, educators, school students, and other invited groups.

**As a result of this successful grant, AWA participated in a trip up to Bistcho Lake in September 2022, as part of a group of 17 scientists, academics, ENGO reps, government officials, and Dene Tha' community members.**

During this trip, AWA supported DTFN with their efforts at Indigenous-led conservation, by providing data collection support (from a Western Science perspective) while out in the field. The trip was a success, and data collected during fishing activities was provided to DTFN and uploaded to their custom mobile application. A [Wild Lands Advocate article](#) was published in the Winter 2022 issue of the magazine summarizing the trip in full.



Left – Bistcho Lake; Right – Northern Pike (*Esox lucius*). © P. Meintzer

## LARP Review

In September 2022, Alberta Environment and Protected Areas announced a public engagement process for input into the 10-Year Review of the **Lower Athabasca Regional Plan** (better known as LARP). Land use plans are intended to guide the direction of desired economic, environmental, and social objectives on a long-term basis in a manner that recognizes the cumulative impacts of human activities in each region.

The 10-Year Review of LARP was required under the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* (ALSA) and intended “to assess the ongoing relevancy and effectiveness of the existing plan in supporting the long-term vision for social and environmental needs in the region.”

AWA [submitted input into the LARP review process](#) through two different channels; through Alberta Environment and Protected Areas’ lengthy online public engagement survey, as well as in-person at an engagement session hosted by the Government of Alberta in Edmonton in December 2022.

Our feedback into the review process stated that a revised LARP should incorporate:

- A comprehensive reclamation strategy for oil sands tailings effluent;
- Diversified economic activities in the region that no longer prioritizes the oilsands, and that workers are supported in a just-transition into other forms of sustainable employment;
- The long-overdue Biodiversity Management Framework to which LARP had committed, with evidence-based limits, short-term and medium-term objectives, and specific timelines and adequate enforcement;
- New or expanded protected areas to limit industrial disturbance while conserving healthy ecosystems and native biodiversity;



- Land disturbance limits such as those included in the February 2021 approved Moose Lake Access Management Plan (AMP); and
- An investigation into whether LARPs implementation (since 2012) has improved the prospects for species at-risk in the region.

There is no guarantee that this 10-Year Review Process will trigger revisions to LARP, but we emphasized the need for LARP to be revised in our submissions.



Athabasca River, June 2010 © G. Lenz

### McClelland Lake Wetland Complex

McClelland Lake and its adjacent wetlands form an outstanding wetland complex at the northern edge of Alberta's tar sands mineable region, 90 km north of Fort McMurray. Its lake and wetlands are significant natural freshwater bodies along the Lower Athabasca River valley, a major North American migratory flyway. Many bird species stop there on route to the globally significant Peace-Athabasca Delta, others nest within the wetland complex. Its large groundwater-fed patterned fens are strikingly beautiful, featuring long rows of treed peat ridges separated by shallow water pools. It has some of the deepest peat soils in Alberta, formed over the millennia since the last glacial era. AWA's vision is for the entire 330 km<sup>2</sup> McClelland watershed to be designated as a Provincial Park, with its two patterned fens designated as Ecological Reserves.

The main threat to the McClelland Lake Wetlands Complex (MLWC) is from potential open pit mining of its upper area and its contributing watershed by Suncor's Fort Hills oil sands mine. To receive approval to mine the upper McClelland watershed, Suncor must demonstrate how it will maintain water levels, flows and chemistry in the unmined half of the McClelland patterned fen. In December 2021, Suncor submitted their Operational Plan for the sustainability of the non-mined portion of the MLWC to the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER). Suncor received AER's approval of their Operational Plan in September 2022. Ditching and draining in the MLWC is intended to begin in 2025.

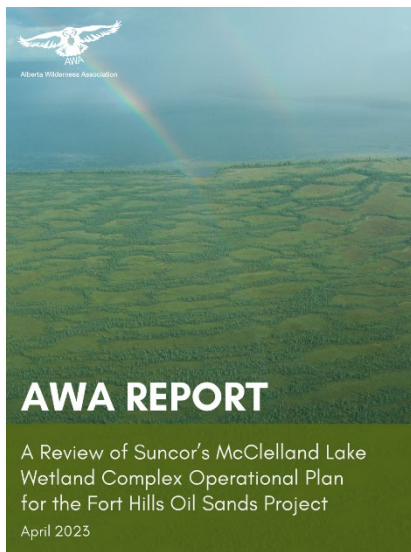


## Don't Mine McClelland Campaign

Over the summer of 2022, AWA contracted the services of Dr. Kelly Biagi (Brock University) and Dr. Lorna Harris (WCS Canada) to review Suncor's submitted Operational Plan (OP) for the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex (MLWC). This plan is supposed to demonstrate how Suncor can guarantee the protection of the unmined half of this internationally significant wetland complex from the expansion of its Fort Hills oilsands mine in northeast Alberta.



In April 2023, AWA [published our report](#) summarizing the findings of Dr. Harris' and Dr. Biagi's review. This report highlighted seven major concerns with Suncor's OP. The report shows that Suncor's plan poses a significant risk of irreversible damage to the unmined portion of the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex. Therefore, it should not have been approved by the AER, as the activities seem likely to violate the conditions set out by the 2002 EUB Decision Report and 2002/2015 Water Act approvals.



An advanced copy of this report was provided to the AER on March 31, 2023, alongside a request to reconsider and revoke their approval decision, pursuant to Section 42 of the *Responsible Energy Development Act*. Under this legislation, AER may, in its sole discretion, reconsider its decision and may confirm, vary, suspend, or revoke the decision.

Using this report, AWA developed and implemented our Don't Mine McClelland campaign to help raise public awareness about the ecological importance of McClelland as a natural area, why it's deserving of protection, and the risks posed by Suncor's planned expansion of their Fort Hills oil sands mine.

Campaign activities have included: coalition building with concerned citizens and other ENGOS, social media posts, and nearly 20 published news articles from the likes of Bob Weber (*The Canadian Press*), Drew Anderson (*The Narwhal*), Markham Hislop (*Energi Media*), Jeremy Appel (*The Orchard*), and Robert Tuttle (*BNN Bloomberg*).

AWA set up an [email template](#) on our website for concerned citizens to submit letters to the AER and Alberta's Minister of Energy, and to-date more than 400 letters have been sent. The submission of our report resulted in the AER opening a Reconsideration Process for its decision to approve Suncor's OP. Phase 1 of this Reconsideration Process began on May 8 and concluded on July 27, 2023, and encompassed multiple submissions from both AWA and Suncor.

AWA's final submission, delivered to the AER on June 9, 2023, contained compelling new information from three prominent wetland experts — Richard Lindsay, University of East London, U.K.; Dr. R.

Kelman Wieder, Villanova University Pennsylvania; and Dr. David Locky, MacEwan University, Alberta — following their review of Suncor’s plan.

In the opinion of these three experts, the approved Operational Plan contains many significant gaps, which pose a significant risk to the ecological diversity and function of the unmined wetland complex. This compelling new information, alongside the previously submitted report, should lead the AER to reconsider and revoke their approval of Suncor’s Operational Plan.

As of July 31, 2023, we are now waiting on the AER to review the submitted materials and make their determination on whether to proceed or not with Phase 2 of their Reconsideration Process. No timelines have been provided by the AER for this decision.

### **Ronald Lake Bison (‘Buffalo’) Herd Cooperative Management Board**

AWA’s vision is that wild bison are recovered in Alberta. Wood bison are North America’s largest land mammal. AWA believes wood bison recovery is possible by designating and protecting critical habitat in the original range of wood bison, by managing to prevent further disease transmission, and by prioritizing Indigenous co-management and food sovereignty. Of Canada’s nine free-ranging disease-free wood bison populations, the two at greatest risk of recovery are the Ronald Lake and Wabasca herds, both ranging over Alberta public lands south of Wood Buffalo National Park.

AWA continues to participate on the Cooperative Management Board for the Ronald Lake Bison (or “Buffalo”) Herd. The board is a multi-stakeholder entity that exists to advise Alberta’s Minister of Environment and Protected Areas on matters related to the long-term sustainability of the RLBH, including the sustainability of Indigenous traditional use and cultural connection to the herd.

The Ronald Lake Bison Herd is a genetically distinct population of wood bison comprising between 250 to 300 individuals and is important because it’s free from diseases which are common to other bison in northern Alberta – bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis.

In May 2023, AWA helped the Board with launching their Government of Alberta website, which will be used to host important public facing documents (e.g., annual work plans and annual reports) to ensure that the Board was meeting its stated goals of transparency. This was a crucial step towards ensuring the Board’s accountability as it works towards the creation of a management plan for the herd.



Wood bison, 2012 © C. Olson

AWA volunteered to participate in the Management Plan Working Group to help guide the development of the management plan for the herd. As part of this Management Plan Working Group, AWA took the lead in organizing a small team to plan and draft a business case for a third-party consultant to conduct a policy analysis for inclusion in the final RLBH CMB herd management plan.

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN AND FOOTHILLS



Boasting some of Alberta's most iconic landscapes, the Rockies are a critical source of drinking water for Canada's prairies, and home to wildlife including grizzly bears, native trout, and woodland caribou. AWA believes that the Rocky Mountains must be protected in order to sustain biological diversity and viable wildlife populations, provide clean drinking water across Canada, and support long-term economic and recreational opportunities.

From the time of AWA's 1977 submission to the Eastern Slopes Hearings and publishing the *Eastern Slopes Wildlands* book, AWA has been dedicated to better protection of this region. Some parts of the Eastern Slopes have very little real protection, and our work is never done as political decisions change long-standing policies and protective measures with little regard for headwaters protection, vital wildlife habitat, and sustainable recreation.

This area falls primarily under the responsibility of Conservation Specialists, **Devon Earl**, and **Kennedy Halvorson**.

### Nationals Parks

As part of the Minister's Round Table on Parks Canada, AWA submitted a comment letter in February 2023 to the Minister Environment and Climate Change Canada detailing our views on issues of importance to the conservation and enjoyment of national heritage places in Canada. AWA's feedback provided recommendations related to maintaining and improving ecological corridors within and surrounding National Parks.

### Banff National Park

In February 2023, AWA submitted a comment letter to Parks Canada regarding the report prepared by the Expert Advisory Panel on Moving People Sustainably in the Banff Bow Valley. AWA supported the principles and mandate of this process but had some concerns that certain recommendations in the report, if implemented, could harm habitat connectivity and ecological integrity of Banff National Park, and that these recommendations do not align with the Banff Management Plan. These recommendations referred to new developments such as gondolas, mobility hubs, and a train, without analysis of whether new developments such as these will harm the environment. AWA has urged Parks Canada to consider ecological integrity as a first priority when considering how to move people sustainably throughout the park.



Liricon Capital Inc. has proposed to build a passenger train from the Calgary airport to Banff, including several stops along the way. AWA and other conservation organizations have questioned whether a train is the best solution to the problem of heavy vehicle traffic in Banff, especially given its likely impacts on wildlife movement and safety. Although the project does not have the green light yet, AWA continues to raise questions about the ecological impact of this proposal and advocate for an assessment of all possible alternatives to reduce vehicle congestion in Banff without compromising ecological values.

### Jasper National Park

In February 2023, the Canadian government formally announced their commitment to recover and repopulate woodland caribou herds in Jasper National Park through a conservation breeding program. AWA [provided comments](#) on the conservation breeding strategy proposal in September 2022. The breeding program would aim to introduce new animals into the herds as soon as 2025. AWA supports this difficult and invasive interim measure to keep wild caribou in Jasper National Park on the condition that precautionary habitat management actions be taken to support the recovery of Jasper caribou herds. Parks Canada must reduce harmful human access impacts in Tonquin, Brazeau, and Maligne caribou ranges to support successful caribou recovery. Along this vein, AWA supported Parks Canada's January 2023 decision to buy out two Tonquin Valley leases to help caribou survive. Without intervention, experts have concluded that the two remaining caribou herds in Jasper National Park are likely to become extirpated, following the path of the Maligne herd which was declared extirpated in 2020.

### Bighorn



The spectacular wilderness of the Bighorn backcountry © D. Earl

The creation and legislation of a Bighorn Wildland Park has been a high priority for AWA since the organization's earliest days in the 1960s. The Bighorn is a large and intact wilderness that retains its ecological integrity due to the absence of roads and industrialized access, yet it remains largely unprotected legislatively. The Bighorn Wildland consists of a 5,000 km<sup>2</sup> pristine wilderness area that



AWA proposes would be best protected as a Wildland Provincial Park. Within the Kiska/Wilson Public Land Use Zone (PLUZ) and adjacent public lands east of the Bighorn, AWA would support a number of land-use management strategies. These include the establishment of additional PLUZs where none exist and undertaking associated sub-regional planning initiatives. These regulations would establish motorized and non-motorized trail systems and manage industrial development to a high standard in appropriate areas while protecting critical bull trout spawning areas and other key conservation values.

In July 2023, AWA **released a final report** regarding the Bighorn Recreation and Impact Monitoring Project. The project was initiated in 2003 when access was officially granted to off-highway vehicle users in the Hummingbird Trail Network. Annual trail monitoring from 2004 to 2017 included quantification of damage events on trails (erosion, widening, rutting, braiding, and secondary trails) and traffic counts using automatic traffic sensors. The results of years of monitoring were compiled into the final Bighorn Backcountry report. The key findings from this project are:

1. Trail damage has increased significantly.
2. Water bodies were not adequately protected.
3. The particular topography, soil types, and plant communities found in the Bighorn are unable to support intensive motorized recreation.
4. Illegal use of trails was detected consistently.
5. Protection of ecological values in the Bighorn is the top management priority of Albertans.

The Bighorn Backcountry report was published on the AWA website, and a letter was sent to the Minister of Forestry and Parks summarizing the key results and recommendations and requesting a meeting to discuss the responsible management of the Bighorn Backcountry. A media release and newsletter blurb informed the media and public of AWA's report, and it was discussed live on CTV Calgary, CBC Radio Edmonton and CBC Radio Calgary.

Also, in AWA's Bighorn area of concern, Parks Canada applied to recognize Ya Ha Tinda Ranch as an *Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measure* (OECM). The working horse ranch, located 1.5 km outside of Banff National Park, is operated by Parks Canada and owned by the Government of Canada. The important grassland and montane habitats of Ya Ha Tinda Ranch are used extensively by overwintering elk that migrate from Jasper and Banff National Parks. Elk, bighorn sheep, mule and white-tail deer, and predators including wolves and bears benefit



Trail damage caused by OHVs on the Hummingbird Trail © D. Earl

from this largely undeveloped habitat that acts as a wildlife refuge. As part of Parks Canada's stakeholder engagement process, AWA [provided a comment letter](#) in support of the application.

## Cardinal Divide

AWA is a member of the **Cardinal Divide Conservation Coalition (CDCC)**, a group of biologists, botanists, park stewards, and environmental organizations that meets regularly to discuss and advance conservation of the Cardinal Divide region. The coalition also has members from the Canadian

**The coalition sends a letter to Teck** regarding access management of the Cheviot Coal Mine area.

- Area is important to maintain positive wildlife refuge in the mine site resulting from limited human access
- Intense off-highway vehicle access could negatively impact grizzly bears, bighorn sheep, and delicate alpine vegetation

**The coalition provides feedback on the Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) proposal for Whitehorse Wildland Provincial Park (WWPP).**

- WWPP was proposed as a KBA due in part to the presence of rare Porsild's bryum moss and two species of at-risk bats (little brown and northern myotis).

**The coalition hosts a BioBlitz in the WWPP and surrounding area** to connect the public with nature while generating useful scientific knowledge that will aid in conservation initiatives.

- 18 experts and 15 volunteers joined AWA and CPAWS-NAB staff from July 14-16 to record species observations using the iNaturalist application.



*Experts in species identification generously shared their knowledge with volunteers from the public. Photo credit: A. Tucker*



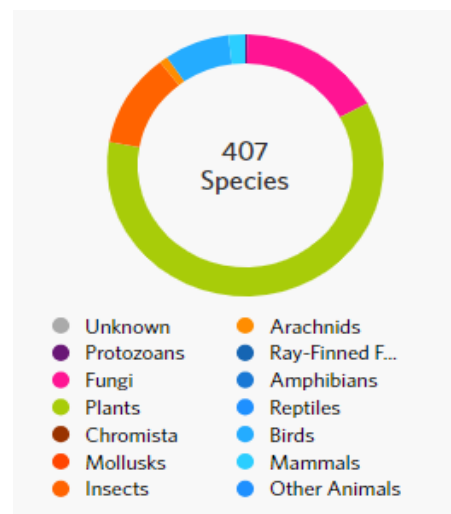
October 2022



November 2022



July 2023



*As of August 2023 1,664 observations were recorded from the BioBlitz, representing many different taxa. Graphic from [iNaturalist](#).*

Parks and Wilderness Society's Northern Alberta chapter (CPAWS-NAB), Alberta Native Plant Council, Whitehorse Wildland Provincial Park Stewards, and Plant watch Alberta.

## Kakwa

AWA's Kakwa Area of Concern overlaps with the most northerly portions of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, north of the Willmore Wilderness. It includes much of the Kakwa River and Narraway River watersheds, and the upper Wapiti River. The area is home to important wildlife populations, including threatened Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway southern mountain caribou, as well as mountain goats, bighorn sheep, bull trout and Arctic grayling. It includes the major wildlife corridor of Caw Ridge. Ten percent of the area is protected by the Kakwa Wildland Provincial Park, the rest is multi-use public lands with extensive habitat fragmentation from seismic lines, forestry clearcuts and oil and gas infrastructure. AWA's vision is for formal protection of Caw Ridge, and for Kakwa lands to be restored, protected and managed for biodiversity, climate-resilient watersheds, and the exercise of Indigenous rights, with compatible economic activities supporting these outcomes.

Conservation Initiatives:

- AWA engaged with Indigenous rights holders, and stakeholders to support ideas for a strong draft plan for species at risk recovery in Kakwa, including threatened caribou and fish.
- AWA met with the provincial government to support timely sub-regional plan completion per the Alberta-Canada caribou conservation agreement.

The Upper Smoky-Sheep Creek area, also known as E10, currently has no industrial forestry tenure but is facing pressure to be allocated for clearcuts. AWA has corresponded with the provincial government regarding our opposition to allocating E10 for forestry. These steep slopes have extensive mountain goat and bighorn sheep areas, core grizzly bear habitat, and partly overlap with threatened Redrock-Prairie Creek caribou range. Sheep Creek itself supports threatened bull trout and Arctic grayling, a species of special concern. AWA has advocated for this area to be protected for its exceptional biodiversity, to contribute to the exercise of Indigenous rights, and for compatible wilderness-based recreation.

## Little Smoky

The relatively wet, cool foothills forests of AWA's Little Smoky Area of Concern can serve as important climate change refugia for woodland caribou, native coldwater fish, and other forest species. Although the habitat is now highly fragmented due to intensive forestry and energy industry impacts, AWA's vision is that Little Smoky forests are restored to support thriving fish and wildlife populations, Indigenous rights, and compatible economic and recreation activities. We support significant Indigenous leadership and participation in the region's wildlife and habitat conservation.

- AWA supported the development of an effective Berland subregional land-use woodland caribou range plan through participation as a member of the Berland task force.
- Published three *Wild Lands Advocate* articles on Berland sub-regional planning issues by distinguished journalist Gillian Steward. These articles describe overall unmanaged cumulative land-use disturbance, spotlight forestry impacts with the Moon Creek proposed logging by West Fraser Hinton, and describe current Indigenous land-use challenges.

## Moon Creek

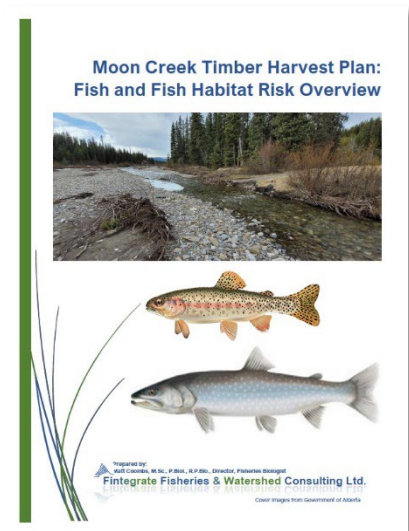
The 2021 Moon Creek Forest Harvest Plan from West Fraser Mills Ltd. (West Fraser) was approved in January 2022 for lands near Grande Cache, Alberta, and could impact species at risk and the habitat they rely on, including Threatened Mountain Caribou and Endangered Athabasca Rainbow Trout (ARTR).

ARTR are listed as Endangered under Canada's Species at Risk Act (SARA) and within the Moon Creek harvest plan area, all streams draining Moon and Fox creeks are listed as containing ARTR critical habitat necessary for the survival and recovery of the species.

In 2022, AWA contracted with Fintegrate Fisheries & Watershed Consulting Ltd. to assess West Fraser's Moon Creek Harvest Plan to highlight locations of concern where the impacts to ARTR could be greatest. Fintegrate conducted its assessment from November 2022 to February 2023. The [report](#) was completed in February 2023, and a copy of the final report was provided to West Fraser as well as Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) for their review and comment.

Based on this assessment, there was no indication that West Fraser's Moon Creek Forest Harvest Plan was designed to meet any specific protections for ARTR under federal legislation. West Fraser's plan only provides the provincial standard level of protection, and ARTR need enhanced protection to be conserved and recovered.

It is unclear if, or how, West Fraser has ensured that their proposed cut blocks, roads, and watercourse crossings will not cause harmful alteration, disruption, or destruction of critical habitat for ARTR within the Moon Creek and Fox Creek watersheds. The Moon Creek harvest plan cannot receive a SARA permit because riparian and instream ARTR Critical Habitat will be destroyed, which is prohibited by SARA.



**In April 2023, AWA met with West Fraser to discuss the report's findings. In June 2023, AWA met with DFO to discuss the report and to learn more about how DFO ensures that ARTR and their habitat are not harmed by forestry activities such as those described in West Fraser's Harvest Plan.**

West Fraser insists that their Harvest Plan was developed prior to the release of the Critical Habitat Order for ARTR released in March 2021, despite the Harvest Plan being submitted for approval in December 2021, nearly eight months later. According to West Fraser, their logging plans for the area are still on hold until the final Berland subregional plan is published, when West Fraser plans to revise and resubmit a new Harvest Plan considering both the Critical Habitat Order for ARTR as well as provisions for the conservation of caribou set out by the subregional plan.



## Forestry

For decades, AWA has advocated for a shift in the way that forests are managed in Alberta towards ecosystem-based management. This year, AWA continued to engage with the Government of Alberta to discuss issues and recommendations to improve forestry and ensure sustainable forest management. AWA opposed logging plans such as those in West Bragg Creek and the forests surrounding Horse Lake and Aura Creek, which are examples of recreation and ecological values being overlooked in forestry processes.

### Key Issues

The *Forests Act* and its regulations and policies operate on a sustained yield basis, which aims to sustain a constant level of timber on the landscape, rather than to sustain forest ecosystems. Some nominal environmental protections exist, but these are insufficient and often not based on any conservation science.

Indigenous rights holders and the public do not have **adequate opportunity to engage** with and understand forestry practices and impacts due to shortcomings in the legislation regarding participation and transparency.

Forest-dependent **species at risk** such as endangered native trout don't have adequate habitat protection such as large enough buffers for forestry activities around water bodies, so populations continue to decline.

Current forestry practices such as widespread industrial clearcutting and the use of glyphosate to suppress deciduous tree growth could contribute to **wildfire risk**.

### Recommendations

The *Forests Act* and regulations should be reformed to improve forest stewardship, participation, and transparency.

- **Ecological principles** such as connectivity, retaining complex habitats, limits on linear and spatial disturbance, watershed protection, protection of species at risk, and ecological boundaries should be **incorporated into the legislation**.

- Reform should require that **Indigenous people** and the **public** are **consulted** prior to important decisions being made, such as Forest Management Agreement renewal, setting or increasing annual allowable cut, rotation length, and the preparation of timber harvest plans.

- Relevant forest management planning information, including ecological implications of scenarios, should be **online for public review** before annual allowable cut, spatial harvest sequence and other key decisions are made.

- The public should have timely access to harvest maps and reports, Alberta Vegetation Inventory data, contraventions, audits and inspections, and reforestation and reclamation data.

**Operating ground rules** should be based on the best available **scientific evidence** and the **precautionary principle**. For example, the Alberta Timber Harvest Planning and Operating Ground Rules (OGRs) require only a minimum of 3-5 percent dispersed and island retention within harvest areas. Studies indicate that at least 10 percent structural retention is necessary for maintaining biodiversity of late-seral species.

**The spring of 2023 brought the worst wildfire season in recorded history to Alberta.** AWA worked to counter industry greenwashing and emphasized the increasing importance of responsible forest management in light of a changing climate, which is likely to result in more record-breaking wildfire seasons in the upcoming years. Industrial clearcutting and practices such as spraying glyphosate on regenerating forestry cutblocks could worsen the risk of wildfire in some areas, and this must be considered when planning for sustainable management of forests.

#### Forestry Initiatives:

- AWA **fought industry greenwashing** by signing on to a complaint to the Competition Bureau of Canada against the **Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)**. The Competition Bureau has launched an inquiry into the SFI due to this complaint about false and misleading claims regarding the sustainability of the SFI certification scheme. The SFI does not certify any sustainability outcomes, only requires that the certified company have followed a very discretionary process. The complaint was filed by EcoJustice on behalf of Greenpeace Canada, Wildlands League, David Suzuki Foundation, Wilderness Committee, Ecology Action Centre, Nature Nova Scotia, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, AWA, and a forestry professor from the University of Toronto.
- The **Fish & Forests Forum** is a gathering of experts and environmental non-governmental organizations that meets to discuss how to advance inclusive, ecosystem-based management of Alberta's forests. In the 2022-2023 fiscal year, AWA hosted two Fish & Forests Forums, which included presentations entitled "Sustaining Timber, Sustaining Rural Communities: Shared destiny or separate paths?" by Dr. John Parkins (Professor and Department Chair in the Department of Resource Economics and Environmental Sociology, University of Alberta) and "Sustainable Forest Stewardship: 10,000 Years of Circular Culture" by Todd Bailey (consultation director at Swan River First Nation).
- AWA participated in Alberta Pacific Forest Industries Inc. (Al-Pac) Landscape Advisory Group sub-committee. The sub-committee met to develop conservation area networks

recommendations within Al-Pac's Forest Management Agreement area in northeast Alberta.

- AWA participated in the fRI Water and Fish Activity Team, which involved brainstorming research initiatives, and providing feedback on research proposals.

- AWA conservation specialist Devon Earl attended an in-person conference on December 9th, 2022, regarding Boreal Ecosystem Recovery & Assessment.



A poorly recovering forest harvest area in the Ghost watershed.

© D. Earl

## Mining Case Studies at Red Deer River, Big Hill Springs, and Grande Mountain

### ***MINES ARE THE PITS:*** How AWA has pursued environmental protections through existing legal and regulatory frameworks



**RED DEER RIVER**

AWA submitted a statement in support of local residents' appeals to the Environmental Appeals Board to rescind the approval of a gravel pit within the 1:50 year flood plain of the river, highlighting concerns over the significant risk posed to water resources and fisheries in the area from the proposed mining activities.

AWA sent a notice of appeal to the Board following the approval to extract aggregate above the aquifer supplying the nationally significant springs, 800 m from the provincial park. AWA's request to rescind the decision cited concerns over the irreparable harm posed to this important, unique, and ecologically sensitive ecosystem.



**BIG HILL SPRINGS**



**GRANDE MOUNTAIN**

AWA wrote a statement of concern to the Alberta Energy Regulator over plans to mine metallurgical coal in the Eastern slopes. Proposed by Summit Coal Inc., Mine 14 will overlap important big horn sheep, grizzly bear, and mountain goat habitat. The environmental, economic, and societal risks posed by the mine prompted AWA to request AER to deny the project.



# PRAIRIES



Alberta's grasslands and parklands, together making up the prairie region, are some of the province's most heavily devastated and least protected ecosystems. Prairies provide habitat for one of the highest concentrations of Canada's species at risk and are acknowledged by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) as the most threatened ecoregion worldwide. AWA continues to argue for the protection of the remaining native grassland and parkland regions, and the vanishing species that call these areas home.

**Ruiping Luo** is the Conservation Specialist primarily responsible for AWA's work in this region.

## Collaborations

AWA participates as a member of several groups working throughout Alberta, Canada, and North America to restore grassland ecosystems and the recovery of prairie species.



### Great Plains Conservation Network

**Great Plains Conservation Network** (GPCN; collaboration across North America to restore and maintain the Great Plains)

AWA hosts the GPCN coordinator position, responsible for biweekly newsletters, meeting planning, webinar presentations and website updates. AWA attends monthly meetings for the steering committee, directing mapping and reintroduction projects.

AWA participates in the Canada working group of CGR to share information on grasslands conservation, funding sources and projects, and was on the panel presented by CGR at the Prairie Conservation and Endangered Species Forum held in February 2023.



**Central Grasslands Roadmap** (CGR; collaboration across sectors and across North America)



**Prairie Conservation Forum** (PCF; Alberta organization aimed at achieving Alberta's Prairie Conservation Action Plan)

AWA is working on the Connecting Corridors and State of the Prairie committees to understand and identify important prairie landscapes for protection. In collaboration with the University of Toronto, ABMI, and Miistakis Institute, PCF is organizing a workshop on locating the most important corridors for wildlife movement and connectivity. PCF is also aiming to produce a follow-up report on the loss of prairie habitat for release early next year.

AWA is participating as a member of TGP to facilitate knowledge sharing and build inter-provincial and international networks. TGP is hosting a workshop, to be held in Swift Current, to discuss recent advances in grasslands conservation, and working on a database of contacts in prairie conservation.



**Transboundary Grasslands Partnership** (TGP; collaboration between Alberta, Saskatchewan and Montana)

## Irrigation Expansion

AWA continues to participate in the ongoing coalition of environmental interests who are concerned about the largest expansion of irrigation infrastructure in Alberta's history – the Alberta Irrigation Modernization Program. The project represents an investment of nearly \$1 billion dollars, and proposes to upgrade open irrigation canals to pipelines, as well as the construction of new and expanded reservoirs.

In November 2021, this ENGO coalition sent a request to the federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Stephen Guilbeault, asking for a federal impact assessment to be conducted for three reservoir projects proceeding as part of this irrigation expansion. On June 29, 2022, we received a response from Minister Guilbeault saying that our request for a federal impact assessment of the Chin Reservoir had been denied. The response was accompanied by a report stating that the Minister's decision had been in part based on the alleged sufficiency of Alberta's provincial environmental



Irrigation pivot © L. Fitch & C. Bradley

assessment process and other legislative processes for addressing the potential adverse effects of this expansion project.

In November 2022, the proposed Terms of Reference (PTOR) for the Chin Reservoir expansion project was released for public comment by the St. Mary irrigation District, as part of Alberta's provincial environmental assessment process. **AWA provided comments on the Chin Reservoir PTOR which were submitted to Alberta Environment and Protected Areas in December 2022.** The concerns that we expressed in our letter included how cumulative effects were being considered, Alberta's inability to meet existing Water Conservation Objectives in the SSRB, the inclusion of flawed climate change assumptions, and insufficient socio-economic considerations.

The final Terms of Reference for the Chin Reservoir expansion project have not been released. The PTOR for the other two proposed reservoir projects (Snake Lake and Deadhorse Coulee) have also not been released for comment.

AWA continues to monitor any developments related to the potential expansion of irrigation infrastructure within the Red Deer River basin. In April 2021, the Municipal District of Acadia, the Special Areas Board, the Canada Infrastructure Bank, and Alberta Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development commenced a joint study to assess the feasibility of an irrigation system for agriculture across MD Acadia and the Special Areas region of Alberta using water from the Red Deer River.

In August 2022, this feasibility report was released by WaterSMART Solutions Ltd. AWA received a copy of this report and reviewed it to better understand what environmental considerations had been included. Previous assessments noted that irrigation in the region would have considerable environmental impacts and described the project as a poor financial investment. This is the reason why we were so concerned when we learned that a new study had been conducted.

The 2022 WaterSMART feasibility study was considerably less detailed than the previous assessments conducted in 2018/19, especially when it came to assessing potential environmental impacts. The report finds that it is feasible to develop up to 108,000 acres of irrigated land in the project area across previously cultivated farmland at an estimated cost of \$1.3 billion. The study recommended proceeding with the next phase of work such as the acquisition of a water license, as well as optimizing the project design to make the project more attractive to investment. In December 2022, it was announced that this project would be moving forward.

### Rosebud Valley

AWA continues to support the Rosebud community in their opposition to building of a large racetrack in this beautiful river valley as they await the court's decision on revoking the water license needed to begin construction. The Rosebud Valley is an area of ecological significance, providing important habitat for several at-risk and rare species, and the building of a racetrack would harm this



No race track sign in the Rosebud © C. Olson



sensitive river valley. AWA collaborated with local landowners who led a tour of the area, to showcase its exceptional biodiversity and importance, and educate on the importance of the Rosebud Valley.

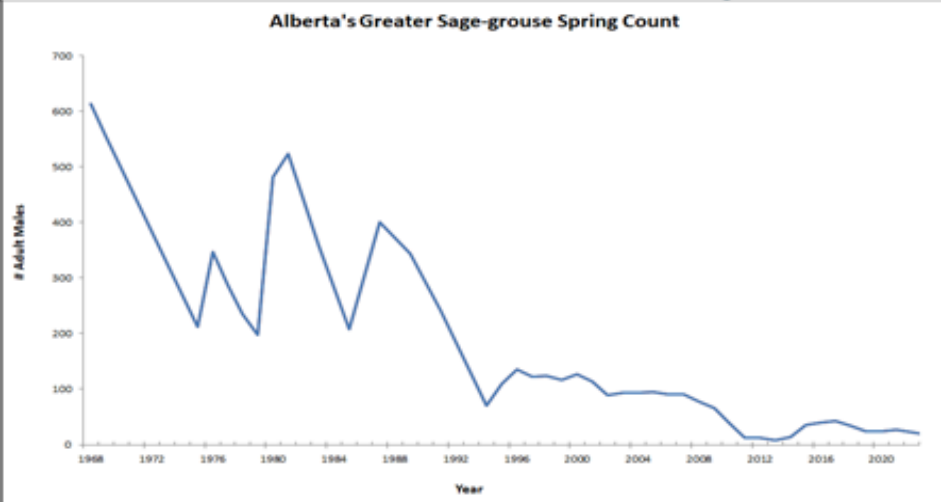
## Greater Sage-Grouse



Sage-grouse, a species found only in North America, are rapidly declining in Alberta.

Alberta's greater sage-grouse population is on the brink of extirpation, with only 18 males remaining in the province. Several efforts have been made to recover the species, including remediation of habitat, translocation of birds, and habitat improvement measures. Despite this work, sage-grouse remain under high threat, with recent helium development beginning to encroach on vulnerable habitat.

Sage-grouse populations have shown declines of over 90 percent since counts began in the 1960s. These populations have not recovered.



AWA has written to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), Stephen Guilbeault, and Alberta's Minister of Environment and Protected Areas (AEPA), Rebecca Schulz. We have met with the Director of Policy for ECCC and with Minister Schulz, receiving slight assurances that work is ongoing for sage-grouse restoration efforts. We urge greater protection of sage-grouse inhabited lands. Sage-grouse are especially sensitive to oil and gas or helium developments, and these must be limited to allow this declining species any chance at recovery. We have also asked for the provincial recovery strategy to be reviewed and updated, with stronger protections for greater sage-grouse.

In addition to asking for greater protection, AWA is providing education on greater sage-grouse, independently and in collaboration with media and other environmental groups. We are asking members to support us by writing to the government about the crisis sage-grouse face in Alberta.

More on sage-grouse conservation can be found [here](#).

## CFB Suffield and National Wildlife Area

The Suffield National Wildlife Area (NWA), designated as a federally protected wildlife refuge in 2003, lies within CFB Suffield and is one of the last six remaining large blocks of native grasslands left in the glaciated northern plains. The NWA comprises 458 km<sup>2</sup> of rare unbroken prairie, containing several landscapes of national significance including sand hills, ancient glacial coulees, and the stunning South Saskatchewan River valley. Home to more than 1,100 species of higher plants and animals, the NWA is a haven for at least 94 species of concern, 18 of which are federally listed species at risk. It also contains numerous historical sites including medicine wheels, bison kill sites, and stone cairns. Many of the area's dinosaur remains and fossilized trees remain unclassified.



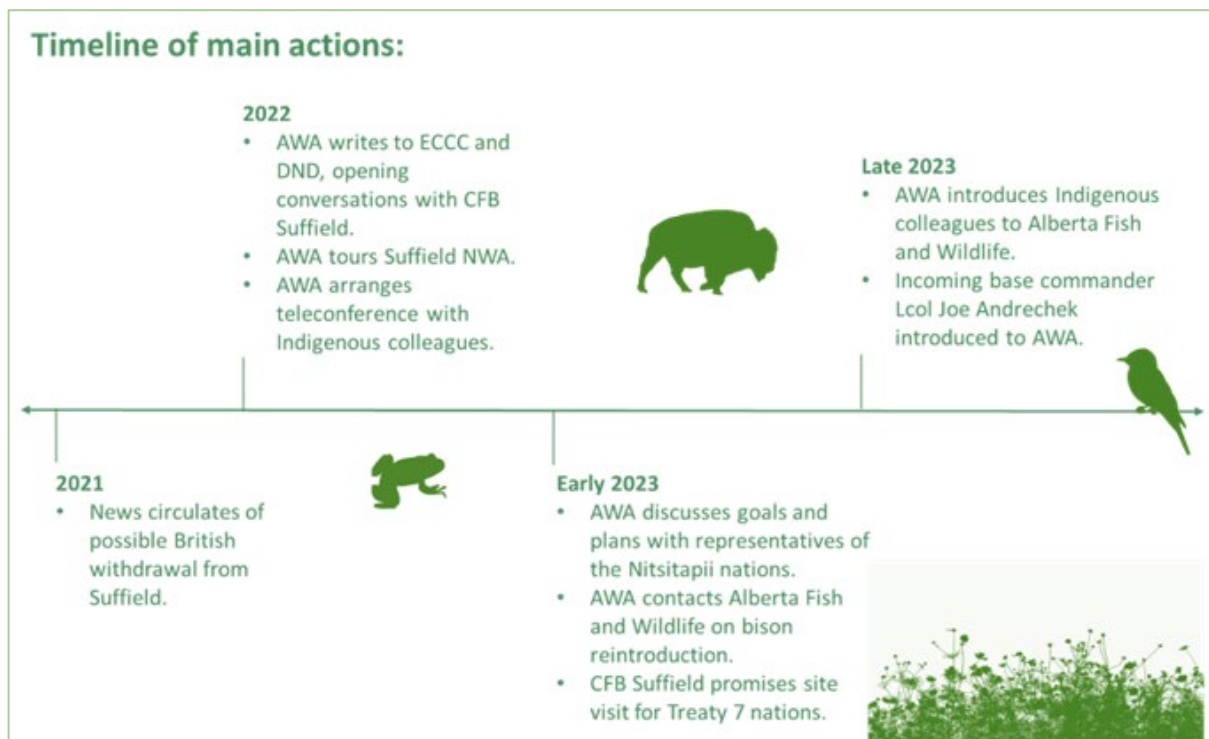
Suffield is an important area for biodiversity and Indigenous cultural history. AWA aims to work with the base to establish Indigenous connections and conservation. © D. Olson

AWA has asked the federal government for a management plan for the NWA for almost a decade. While it has been promised many times, there have been no public consultations and no significant movement to release a draft plan for public review. Such a plan offers the best hope that a science-based approach to wildlife protection and management will be implemented with a reasonable measure of public involvement.

Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Suffield contains one of the largest unconverted tracts of grassland remaining in the Canadian prairies and provides valuable habitat for a range of endangered and rare grassland species. A 45,836-hectare National Wildlife Area has been established on the east of the military base. Suffield also holds tremendous value to Canada's Indigenous Peoples, evident in the tipi rings, medicine wheels, and other examples of Niitsitapi culture found on the base. AWA aims to establish Indigenous access and consider bison reintroduction to the large grassland landscape through collaboration with the military base, Indigenous colleagues, and other sectors.

**In early 2022, in response to news of a possible withdrawal of British Military Forces from CFB Suffield, AWA wrote to the Ministers of National Defence and Environment and Climate Change Canada, emphasizing the importance of Suffield for biodiversity and Indigenous culture. This letter helped open conversations with CFB Suffield's base commander at the time, Lt.-Col. Stephen Burke, on conservation efforts at Suffield, and the possibility of Indigenous involvement.**

We also reached out to our Indigenous allies in the Blackfoot Confederacy, and have been in discussion with the Kainai, Siksika and Piikani nations. They have expressed support for advancing reconciliation through access to traditional lands on the base and would be interested in bison returning to the landscape. A second site visit, following an initial visit in 2022 by AWA staff, is being considered for the fall of 2023, which will formally invite all Treaty 7 Indigenous nations to CFB Suffield.



Plains bison are not recognized as wildlife in Alberta and are instead classified as livestock. The classification presents a challenge to reintroduction since bison lack protections away from designated areas. **AWA believes plains bison should be considered wildlife** and have written to Alberta’s Minister of Environment and Protected Areas to ask for reclassification. We are in contact with Alberta Environment and Protected Areas to consider the feasibility of bison reintroduction at CFB Suffield.

AWA’s Briefing Note on Suffield can be found [here](#) and an article on the importance of Suffield for biodiversity is available [here](#).

## GOVERNMENT



### National Biodiversity Strategy

AWA is participating in consultations on Canada’s National Biodiversity. Following the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15) in December 2022, Canada committed to the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#). As a part of this commitment, Canada is revising our National Biodiversity Strategy to halt and reverse biodiversity loss.

AWA supports Canada's efforts to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. In the biodiversity strategy, we would like to see:

- Clear, transparent, and measurable goals. Targets and actions should be science-based. Audits are needed to measure progress, and audit reports should be publicly available.
- Focus on protection of high biodiversity landscapes. Habitat loss is one of the greatest causes of species decline and many of these landscapes are difficult to restore. Protection of these landscapes is vital to halting biodiversity loss. Restoration of disturbed landscapes should also be a priority.
- Broad land-use planning that prioritizes biodiversity is needed, and consider cumulative effects are strongly needed. These plans must be consistent and enforced at all levels of government.
- The biodiversity strategy should build on successful initiatives, particularly at the local level with ranchers, producers, municipalities, and industry. Policy and tools already existing, such as provisions in the Species at Risk Act and species conservation agreements, may be used as needed to hold provinces to account.
- While Canada has made progress in Indigenous reconciliation, there is a need to continue this work by including Indigenous stewardship and knowledge into biodiversity actions.

### Nature on the Hill



Nature on the Hill delegates from across the country gathered in Ottawa with a common goal to support the protection of the environment in Canada.

As part of Nature Canada's annual Nature on the Hill event, conservation specialist Devon Earl travelled to Ottawa in March 2023 to meet with federal government officials about the protection of Canadian lands and species. AWA called upon the federal government to uphold its COP15 commitments by protecting federally endangered species in Alberta such as the woodland caribou and sage grouse, and support more Indigenous-led conservation initiatives such as the 2022 [ACFN-](#)



[MCFN Tâdzié-Sagow Atihk Stewardship Plan](#) for Richardson, Red Earth, East Side of the Athabasca River and West Side of the Athabasca River caribou ranges.

## Fish and Wildlife

In September 2022, AWA [opposed a new directive](#) under the *Provincial Parks Act* that allows food baits for black bear hunting, and off-leash hunting dogs to chase cougars, in protected areas where hunting is already permitted for those species. These practices were already permitted outside of protected areas; however, AWA believes that they should not be extended into Wildland Provincial Parks, and in the Provincial Parks and Provincial Recreation Areas where hunting is already permitted.



Left - The national biodiversity strategy is an opportunity to help struggling populations, such as that of the boreal chorus frog © N. Pink; Right - Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are an iconic species in Alberta that require sound management to maintain healthy populations. © D. Earl

In February 2023, Alberta's Fish and Wildlife capacity and staff were split between three separate ministries, without public consultation or notice. Fishing and hunting allocations went to the Ministry of Forestry, Parks and Tourism (now Forestry and Parks); fish hatcheries management went to the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation; and fish and wildlife species at risk decisions were left behind in the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas. AWA [spoke out about these changes](#) because dividing governmental capacity and responsibilities over fish and wildlife compromises the protection of Alberta's valued fish and wildlife.

## Public Lands

AWA opposes the sale of Public Lands (lands managed by the federal or provincial government), especially lands that contain native habitats or sensitive landscapes. Sales often lack public consultation, and information on land sales is not publicly available. We reached out to Alberta's Public Lands Disposition Management to understand where these sales are occurring. Public Lands should be managed for the benefit of all Albertans, and decisions about public lands



Public lands, such as this parcel in Taber, should not have been sold without public consultation. AWA advocates for a transparent Public Lands Management Plan © AWA

management should be transparent and involve public engagement. AWA continues to ask for a more transparent Public Lands management plan.

## ENERGY



### Coal

Although there is still a moratorium on new coal mining exploration and development in the Eastern Slopes, AWA has advocated for this ban to be enshrined in the legislation due to coal mining's unacceptable impacts on water and species at risk, and because Albertans have made it clear that they do not want to see coal development in the Eastern Slopes.



Suncor oilsands upgrader near the Athabasca River, 2019. © G. Lenz

Despite the coal mining moratorium, Summit's Mine 14 in the Grande Cache area is one of the "advanced projects" that slipped through the cracks and was allowed to advance through the regulatory process. AWA has spoken out in opposition of this project moving forward due to its likely impacts on water and wildlife such as bighorn sheep, grizzly bears, and woodland caribou.

Two unreported coal wastewater releases into the Smoky River by CST Canada Coal Ltd. from its Grande Cache mine operations resulted in AWA calling upon the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) to strengthen

regulatory oversight of coal and oil sands mining industries in Alberta. The AER and Alberta Government are responsible for ensuring that industrial development in Alberta is carried out responsibly, not harming the environment or human health. AWA is also concerned about weak provincial mine reclamation requirements, including a lack of timely progressive reclamation deadlines, and a lack of transparency around operators' cleanup cost estimates. As part of Alberta's current review of its Mine Financial Security Program, AWA believes Alberta must require mine operators to post full financial security with government, equal to the transparent, credible costs of their existing reclamation obligations.

Montem Resources acquired the historic Tent Mountain mine in 2016 with plans to redevelop the metallurgical coal mine. In 2023, Montem withdrew its Tent Mountain Redevelopment project application and instead hopes to develop a renewable energy complex in the same area. While AWA

prefers the renewable energy complex to the coal mine redevelopment, we are wary of siting industry in alpine areas.

## Oil Sands

In August 2022, AWA made the decision to resign from the Oil Sands Monitoring (OSM) Program. Our decision to resign was due to persistent concerns regarding issues we saw as hampering the effectiveness of the program at meeting its stated objectives. These issues were raised on numerous occasions over the past few years with personnel at various levels within the OSM Program hierarchy. Despite our repeated attempts to highlight these problems, we were disappointed with the lack of progress and urgency shown by OSM leadership with regards to remedying these issues within reasonable timeframes. As a result, we did not see that our ongoing participation in the program would be a valuable expenditure of AWA's limited resources and capacity.

AWA continues to monitor for the timely release of the OSM Program's State of the Environment Reports. The last annual report for the OSM Program was published in September 2019. That's nearly four years since the OSM Program last provided a comprehensive update for decision-makers and the public on the findings of important monitoring in Alberta's oil sands region. State of the Environment reporting was identified as a key program deliverable in previous years. However, the reports are still yet to be released at the time of writing. Continued delays with the release of the SoE Reports means that the results gained from collected monitoring data and subsequent analyses are not being reported to decision-makers or the public in a timely and transparent manner. This means that those in decision-making roles are left without the knowledge needed to inform any relevant policy decisions.

AWA continues to participate in the Responsible Tailings Management Alliance (RTMA). The RTMA is a coalition of concerned parties from across the environmental sector – including both individuals and organizations – focusing on the issue of oil sands tailings and the imminent proposal for the release of tailings effluent into the Athabasca River. The RTMA is intended to serve as an information sharing hub, where participants can collaborate to strategize and mobilize in a cohesive manner on tailings issues.

The RTMA seeks to ensure that tailings and tailings reclamation are managed in a more responsible manner that meets specific criteria such as (but not limited to) industry covering the costs of reclamation and remediation, respecting the rights of downstream Indigenous communities, incorporating Indigenous traditional knowledge into tailings management, and limiting the creation of new tailings ponds until a scientifically proven approach for reclamation has been determined. Partner organizations in the RTMA include Keepers of the Water, Environmental Defence Canada, CPAWS Northern Alberta, Alberta Environmental Network, and the Council of Canadians.



## Renewables



AWA supports renewable energy development, although they should be sited appropriately, to not cause damage to sensitive habitats and wildlife. © R. Luo

There is an urgent need to transition to renewable energy, and Alberta is a prime location for wind and solar power. However, these projects should not be located in areas of high biodiversity or sensitive landscapes, where they would cause further environmental harm. While AWA actively supports the development of renewable energy, these developments must proceed in a fashion respecting and promoting the health of Alberta's wildlife and landscapes.

In 2021, a large renewables project was proposed in Frank Lake Important Bird Area. Frank Lake is a valuable wetland in southern Alberta for migrating and breeding birds. The placement of a large solar farm within the boundaries of the Important Bird Area would have threatened the wildlife, especially water-associated birds, which are known to be injured or killed from crashing into solar panels and transmission lines. **Working with the Frank Lake Concerned Citizens group, a group of local landowners, AWA wrote to oppose the project. A hearing to decide if the project would be allowed to proceed was held in January 2023. In April 2023, the project was rejected by Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) for environmental reasons.** AWA continues to monitor and oppose new renewable energy projects that may be harmful to sensitive areas.

## OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS



*Outreach to members, supporters and the public is a primary function as  
AWA strives to meet its mission,  
"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action by Inspiring People to Care."*

### Wild Horizons

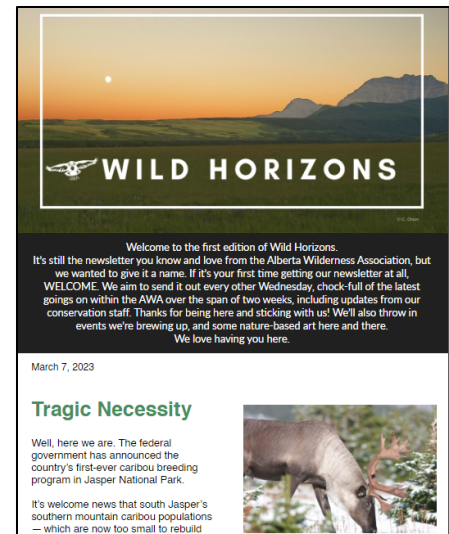
This is AWA's newest outreach tool. The newsletter, created using MailChimp, began in March 2023. While AWA put out a newsletter on an ad hoc basis previously, *Wild Horizons* has become a biweekly newsletter, written in a conversational tone, and highlighting the latest on environmental issues in the province, along with direct updates from staff, especially around in-the-news topics.



It also serves as a reminder to subscribers and members about AWA's upcoming events and hikes, and showcases when the association has been in the news. AWA also uses MailChimp to distribute news releases to media and to send out a separate newsletter for the *Adventures for Wilderness* program. AWA adheres to the Canadian Anti-Spam Legislation.

## Wild Lands Advocate

*Wild Lands Advocate* (WLA) is AWA's quarterly journal comprising feature articles about the work staff is doing and updates on various files. It includes stories of wild Alberta, the people involved in its conservation, and the state of AWA's



numerous conservation campaigns. It is free to all members. AWA staff take the lead in shaping its content. Their contributions, plus those of skilled, thoughtful volunteers, create a product the association is very proud of.

The winter, spring and fall issues saw staff Conservation Specialist Phillip Meintzer fill the position of AWA's WLA editor. The last two issues were shadowed by Outreach and Communications Specialist Amy Tucker, who will be taking on the editor role starting with the Autumn 2023 issue.

## Online Presence

AWA contracts the services of [Build Studio](#), a professional web development company, to provide support and maintenance for its public website interface. AWA works to constantly update

## SUBSCRIBERS:



AlbertaWilderness.ca. AWA has two additional websites: [www.adventuresforwilderness.ca](http://www.adventuresforwilderness.ca) to highlight our outdoor education program and [www.caribou4ever.ca](http://www.caribou4ever.ca) to highlight a collaborative campaign on caribou.

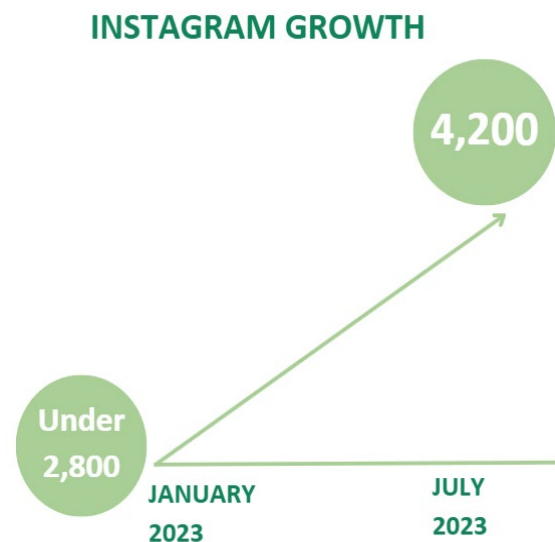
## Social media

AWA maintains a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. On each platform we maintain two accounts, one focusing on our conservation efforts and the other specific to our *Adventures for Wilderness* (A4W) outreach programs. In 2022, we created a corporate page on LinkedIn for AWA, and we share job posts as well as event listings.

For both our outreach- and issues-based messaging, we have found that engagement on Instagram is often the most productive and leads to best returns, thus there has been an increased focus on this particular platform over the past number of years. At the same time, when posts address controversial topics, we found Facebook in particular attracted misinformation and at times personal attacks, for which we have developed protocols on how to respond.

Since February 2023, the outreach and communication specialist has collaborated with conservation staff to create more frequent social media posts, particularly for Instagram. These posts aim to be accessible and educational glimpses into the work we do and conservation issues affecting Albertans. They also highlight WLA articles, upcoming events, collaborations with other organizations, and relevant news stories. AWA has also been using new ways to communicate over Instagram, including an increased use of the reels feature and including posts with conservation or environmentally-themed humour. Since early 2023, the number of followers and engaged accounts have grown substantially.

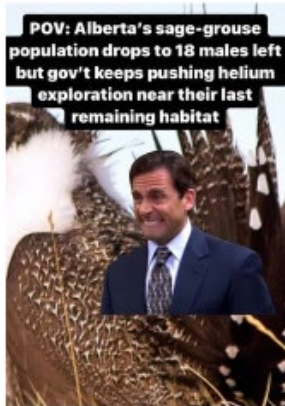
**For example, from May to July alone, the account grew by over 1,000 followers, and the number of accounts reached was up by 2,948 percent compared to earlier that year.**



AWA's Twitter (now "X") account shares similar content to Instagram, and shares news articles and work by other organizations. AWA staff members have individual Twitter accounts that they use to promote their conservation work with an enhanced personal perspective.

Engagement with these campaigns has been gratifying and these are proving an effective means of communication with an ever-growing audience. Social media is cost effective and an efficient way to develop brand recognition and increase AWA's reach to interested and engaged people. It provides a digital platform for outreach and messaging of important news.

## TOP INSTAGRAM POST



244,000

Accounts reached

18,990

Likes

1,410

Shares

Finally, AWA uses YouTube to post recordings of talk events, and to promote our latest campaigns. This year saw a particular emphasis on McClelland Lake Wetland Complex. We used the paid promotion feature on YouTube to highlight one of the MLWC videos. This garnered over 7,300 views and helped us increase the public's awareness of the special area.

## Talks/Events

AWA aims to host events of all types throughout the year and throughout the province. Over the past year, we held **10 events**, including a trivia night at CRAFT Beer Market in downtown Calgary, which saw around 40 people, mostly under 40 who were not members of AWA previously. In the spring, AWA co-hosted an election forum with our partners at CPAWS Northern and Southern Alberta chapters, and Nature Alberta. We also hosted a book and musical performance by Sid Marty and a book talk by Wes Olsen, among other events.

## Adventures for Wilderness (A4W)

Adventures for Wilderness is [Alberta Wilderness Association](#)'s annual program to engage Albertans in wilderness conservation. We believe an adventure can be anything from climbing a mountain to walking by the river, to enjoying the beauty of nature in your own backyard. Each adventure is created by people who care about wilderness and wildlife, who volunteer their time and expertise to share with adventure participants. Our adventures cover many areas within the province.

This year, we saw trips to places like the Wainwright Dunes and the Sturgeon River, to the Eastern Slopes, the badlands of the Rosebud Valley and down to the Oldman River and Milk River Ridge. We also had individuals who took on adventures to fundraise for AWA. Jim Campbell and Bob Patterson hiked across Canada's highest maintained trail and Karina Eustace-Wallis summited eight mountains before she turned eight. Between them they raised more than \$15,000, and Karina appeared on the CBC Eyeopener.

### Quick Stats:







## FINANCING WILDERNESS PROTECTION



Funds received from donations by members, supporters and fundraising efforts are vital to the health of AWA, these contributions provided **88%** of our total revenue (2021-2022 - 83%).

Granting agencies in this fiscal year included Alberta Government Recreation and Physical Activity Division, Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, Alberta Native Plant Council, and the following Calgary Foundation Funds: **Perlette Fund, Scott Daniel Seaman Memorial Fund, A. Lawrence Berry Family Environment Fund, Povey Family Flow Through Fund, Pelzer Family Flow Through Fund, Pelzer Family Fund, Robert and Jennifer Sadée Fund, and the D&W Richardson Charitable Prospective Fund.** We also received funding from the **K Foundation, McWilliams Family Foundation, Stenabaugh Foundation, Patrick E. Fuller Foundation, and the Goodall Fund.**



Fundraising and gifts from donors allow AWA to be financially independent and free to speak out for wilderness protection without risk of compromise because of funding considerations.

An achievement we are very proud of came from a review of our operations by [Charity Intelligence](#), a Canadian watchdog for charities. They have given AWA an **A+ and a five-star rating**. This is significant recognition for AWA. AWA is one of the top 100 rated charities in Canada. Only ten environmental charities were included in the top 100 list; of the ten environmental charities AWA was one of only three provincial organizations recognized.

AWA again devoted 72% (2021-2022 - 72%) of its cash expenditures to wilderness stewardship, conservation, and outreach. Development costs include expenses incurred in developing our core values and creating broader awareness of the association and its mandate, “Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action.” This category includes the cost of seeking more members and supporters as well as applying for grants. General and Administrative costs of 13% (2021-2022 14%) continue to represent an efficient and carefully managed association, supported significantly by volunteerism.

## Membership

Our voting membership stands at 6,135 (2022 – 6,067) individuals; representing 227 (2022 – 225) communities in Alberta. AWA has more than 570 supporters from across Canada and around the world. We seek and welcome new members and supporters on an ongoing basis.

## Volunteers

We had more than **70** volunteers work with us over the past year, and conservatively recorded over **1180** hours of their support.



**Thank you to everyone who contributes to our work.**



## Audit

AWA engages Roberts and Company Professional Accountants LLP to conduct a review of AWA's financial statements each year. Their Review Engagement Report states that nothing has come to their attention that causes them to believe the financial statements are not, in all material respects, in accordance with Canadian accounting standards for not-for-profit organizations. AWA's financial statements are posted on our website.

## Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Legacy Circle

### Bequests

Bequests make a significant difference to our long-term security and our ability to plan for the future. For those interested in planning a gift for AWA there is a section on our website dedicated to ways to give, with information about AWA that will be needed for your will. We are grateful for these donations.

### Wilderness and Wildlife Bequests



## Lifetime Giving

AWA recognizes all donors and the lifetime giving and commitment they make to the association. All those donors who have cumulative gifts greater than \$20,000 are recognized on a plaque initiated for AWA's 45th anniversary. They are recognized as Wilderness and Wildlife Benefactors. A new plaque recognizing donors with lifetime cumulative gifts greater than \$55,000 has been added to our donor recognition wall.

### AWA's Wilderness and Wildlife Benefactors

#### Benefactors with **Lifetime Gifts of more than \$55,000**

Ian Ross  
Herbert Kariel  
Bruce and Eveline Goodall  
John Maude and Susan Quinn  
Laura Jackson  
Chris and Ken Havard  
Richard and Vivian Pharis  
Chris and Jennifer Saunders  
Rosemary Nation  
Joe Vipond and Family  
Cliff and Terry Wallis  
Christyann Olson  
Dorothy Berry and The Berndt Family  
Mary Kettenbach  
Michael Bloomfield  
Donna Hammerlindl  
Anonymous

#### Benefactors with **Lifetime Gifts between \$20,000 and \$55,000**

Lorne Fitch	John and Barbara Poole
Clint and Julie Docken	Peter Campbell
Anthony and Liz Fricke	Sarah Leete
David and Cathy Mayhood	Darryl Hay
Diane and Kevin Mihalcheon	Ronald Sagert
Linda and Yusuf Javeri	Glen Stenabaugh
Glen and Lois Mumey	Catherine Fuller
Richard and Carol Secord	Cyndi Smith
Alan and Madeleine Ernst	Jim Campbell
David and Vikki Reid	Wendy and Richard Clark
Doris Davy	Anonymous

## Memorial Tributes

Memorial tributes made by family and friends mean a great deal. AWA is honoured to receive donations that honour the memory of those who have gone before and will always be remembered.



### Donations in Memoriam 2022–2023



### Donations in Honour 2022-2023

AWA is honoured to receive throughout the year donations from friends and families made in honour of someone who was recognized for something outstanding they achieved or a difference they made. This year we received donations as tributes to the following:





## Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust

Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust is a permanent endowment fund for Alberta's wilderness, established in 1986 as a memorial fund as a tribute to biologist **Orval Pall**. Throughout the years, families seeking to remember their own loved ones have found solace and strength in devoting resources to the memorial fund. On the fifteenth anniversary of the fund, AWA established the Trust as an endowment fund with the Calgary Foundation to help support the long-term sustainability of the Association. In time, the Trust will support wilderness programs and research that contribute to the protection, understanding, and appreciation of wilderness, wild waters, and wildlife.

The fund balance has grown over time and is a tribute to numerous small donations from concerned individuals. The endowment fund's annual distribution \$1,472 (2022 – \$1,470) is dedicated to covering the costs of the Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture and the Wilderness Defender Awards.

## Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust Guest Lecture

Each year in November, AWA hosts the **Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture**, given by a renowned guest speaker. Sponsored by the Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust, the Annual Lecture is an opportunity to present the ideas of researchers, writers or those active in a field related to conservation of wilderness or wildlife.

Martha Kostuch was considered an expert in consensus-based decision making and her work helped join groups that traditionally might not have worked together. She sought ways to make the system work so we could move forward. Kostuch, who died April 23, 2008, was a national leader, an Alberta Wilderness Defender and a woman who leaves a vital legacy. AWA honoured her legacy and her memory by naming our annual lecture the Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture.

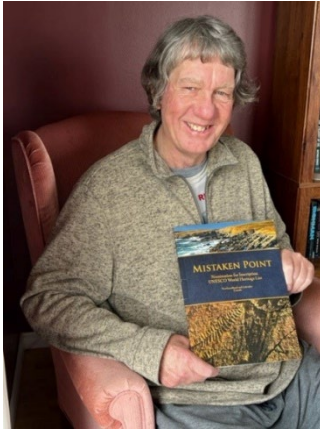
**Richard Thomas** gave the Martha Kostuch Lecture on November 18, 2022, via Zoom from his home in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland. The topic of his lecture was "If You're Not Outraged, You're Not Paying Attention". The lecture is available on our [YouTube channel](#).

## ANNUAL AWARDS



## Wilderness Defenders Awards

The Alberta Wilderness Defenders Awards are dedicated to individuals who have particularly inspired us with their love of Alberta's wild lands, wildlife and wild water, and their efforts and achievements for conservation. AWA presents annual awards, to recognize such individuals.



In **2022-2023** via an in-person and videoconference event, the award was presented to **Richard Thomas** and **Mary Kettenbach**.

Richard Thomas has long been associated with AWA, dating back to the 1980s. He self-published a booklet *Making Connections: Alberta's Neotropical Migratory Birds*, that was subsequently reprinted by AWA, and used extensively to try and defend the boreal forest from massive clearcutting by large foreign-owned pulp mills which had been invited by the government into the province starting in 1989. He also actively advocated against the proposed dam on the Oldman River. Even after he moved to Newfoundland, he continued his work in

conservation and was instrumental in getting Forgotten Point Ecological Reserve recognized and made into a World Heritage Site.

Mary Kettenbach is known by her local Girl Guide troop as "Mother Nature" and is a long-time Defender of Wild Alberta. At the age of 86, Mary took the bus from her home in Strathmore to Medicine Hat to make presentations on Encana's proposal to drill over 1000 wells in the Suffield National Wildlife Area. Even today, in her nineties, she is working to ensure wetlands near her home are protected.



## Great Gray Owl Awards

Like the great gray owl, with unending patience and dedication to purpose, the individuals who are recipients of this award work in quiet wisdom to conserve wilderness habitat and wild creatures. Our success reflects the enduring commitment they have made to Alberta Wilderness Association.

2010 marked the launch of AWA's *Great Gray Owl Award*. The award is presented annually as individuals meet the high standard of volunteerism, dedication, and commitment of the inaugural award winners.

**Tako Koning** was the 2022 recipient of the Great Gray Owl Award, for his ever-positive promotion of AWA and enthusiasm sharing his knowledge on numerous exploits each year as part of the Adventures for Wilderness program. We appreciate all you do for AWA.



Tako speaking about the geology at Nose Hill, Spring 2023.

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# Alberta Wilderness Association

Annual Report 2022-2023