



## Featured Art | *Beneath the Prairie* by artist Neil Dawson.

At McKinnon Flats, the Bow River cuts down and reveals the past. Sketch from a great guided walk with AWA's Adventures for Wilderness program and a botanist looking at pollinators 4.5"x6.5" gouache on paper.

# *Notes from the Field: An Adventure in McKinnon Flats*

**By Kennedy Halvorson**

*"Is this a protected area?"*

*It's a good question. Driving south down your average, non-descript Alberta range road, McKinnon Flats emerges out of nowhere. Seemingly endless cropland suddenly splits, carved into a lush river valley by the mighty Bow. The area is beautiful and relatively unknown; artist and adventure co-lead Kay Fleming grew up nearby and relates that it's well-frequented by locals as a spot to hike, fish, float, and just generally relax. Saskatoon bushes also border the banks, and at this time of year, their berries are plentiful and ripe.*

*With ample snacks along the route, participants were led through cottonwood stands onto a prairie path. Researcher and reclamation biologist Justine Doll, the hike's other lead, pointed out various native plants as the group wound its way up to a bluff of hoodoos.*

*Petals of wild bergamot, better known as bee balm, were distributed for sampling – their flavour minty, spicy, and refreshing all at once. Along with the leaves, they can be brewed into a lovely tea. Stems of yarrow were collected and passed around for smelling; their small, white umbrella of flowers sweet and soapy, a scent that apparently is unpleasant for biting insects. As a natural insect repellent, Justine spoke of tucking the plant in open pockets and behind her ears to ward off mosquitoes and flies during field seasons.*

*While native plants were aplenty, the area was not without its share of invasive species. Introduced during colonization, many garden escapees were likely first planted because of their natural benefits — Justine pointed to the*

*yellow button-like flowers of common tansy, prized as an insecticide in Europe. In Alberta, it is classified as a noxious weed, as it outcompetes native species, disrupts ecosystem function, and is toxic to animals and humans. Eco-conscious gardeners seeking for the look and function of tansy would be better to plant native goldenrod species alongside yarrow. The added bonus? The pollinators love them.*

*Beetles, bee flies, and syrphid flies were soaking up the full sun at McKinnon Flats, easy to spot throughout the blooms. Based on their low abundance, the plus thirty-degree weather must've been as much of a challenge for the native bees and butterflies as it was for participants; frequent stops and water breaks were paramount on this adventure, and the caution well-worth the reward.*

*Justine and Kay led the participants to a breathtaking view. Backed by tall grasses and prickly pear cacti, hoodoo-lined cliffs overlooked the river valley, sparkling in the mid-day heat. Which prompted the question, is this a protected area? At the time, no one knew. AWA staff mused it could be a provincial recreation area, as anglers, swimmers, beachgoers, and other hikers were also all out enjoying the day, but the lack of Alberta Parks' signage suggested not.*

*McKinnon Flats is public land, owned collectively by all who reside in Alberta. It's a great example of why AWA advocates against the sale and privatization of public land; although it has no official designation as a protected area, it is rich in both biodiversity and recreation opportunities, providing a refuge for humans and wildlife alike.*