



# Alberta Wilderness Association

Annual Report

2023 – 2024



Alberta Wilderness Association

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# President's Message

Dear Members and Supporters,

As I reflect on another year at the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA), I am filled with immense pride and gratitude for the remarkable strides we have made in conserving our province's invaluable wilderness. Despite the challenges presented, our commitment to protecting Alberta's diverse landscapes and wildlife remains unwavering.

This year, our dedicated team, volunteers, and supporters have worked tirelessly on various fronts. We have successfully advocated for the protection of critical habitats, ensuring that threatened species have safe havens to thrive. Our educational programs have reached new heights, inspiring a new generation of environmental stewards who understand the importance of preserving our natural heritage.

In addition to our ongoing conservation efforts, we have forged new partnerships and strengthened existing ones. Collaboration with Indigenous communities, government agencies, and other conservation organizations has been crucial in advancing our shared vision of a wild and healthy Alberta. Together, we have made significant progress in promoting sustainable practices and fostering a deeper connection between people and nature.

Our achievements would not have been possible without the generous support of our members, donors, and volunteers. Your dedication and passion fuel our mission, and for that, I extend my heartfelt thanks. As we look to the future, we remain committed to protecting Alberta's wild spaces and ensuring that they continue to be a source of inspiration and wonder for generations to come.

Thank you for standing with us in this vital work. Together, we can make a difference.

Sincerely,

Gail Docken

President

Alberta Wilderness Association

# Executive Director's Message

It has been another exciting year at AWA! We have tackled environmental issues, government processes, building maintenance and IT upgrades, as well as conducted extensive outreach. This has been a year of change and capacity building. Our communications have reached further and had resounding impact with significantly more media coverage on topics including McClelland Wetland, Alberta energy regulations, forestry management, and of course, the (in)famous new Grizzly bear hunt (to name a few). I am so proud of the work our team has accomplished!

Our hard-working conservation staff (Devon Earl, Ruiping Luo, Kennedy Halvorson, and Phillip Meintzer) have all tackled complex issues throughout the province and engaged with numerous stakeholders. They have written letters to government, numerous press releases, and provided content for developing online campaign materials as well as updates for our bi-weekly newsletter and our quarterly journal, the *Wild Lands Advocate (WLA)*.

Lindsey Wallis continued to manage the development of our Adventures for Wilderness (A4W) program as well as remaining as coordinator for the Great Plains Conservation Network (GPCN). She has engaged many new volunteer coordinators and provided a diverse selection of adventures this past year.

Amy Tucker updated the look and format of the WLA this year, as she has taken on the role of editor. She continues to work with the conservation staff to develop and share content and build our online and in-person outreach.

Our Administration and Bookkeeping Specialist, Loreen Ayuda, who started at the beginning of the audit season last year, has honed her skills on non-profit bookkeeping and has been actively engaged with many of our events.

I have genuinely enjoyed working with our Board of Directors, who continue to provide guidance and support when needed. I truly think their contributions are invaluable to the success of AWA.

Thanking our members, funders, volunteers, and supporters doesn't seem nearly enough. We honestly could not do the work we do without all of you! AWA's voice is only as loud as you make it!

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 2023 - 2024 fiscal year.

Thank you,

Deborah Donnelly  
Executive Director

# Board

Gail Docken, *President*  
Chris Saunders, *First Vice-President*  
Clint Docken, *Second Vice-President*  
Cliff Wallis, *Secretary/Treasurer*

## Directors:

Brian Calliou	Jim Campbell
Clint Docken	Nathan Schmidt
Frank Calder	Nicholas Godwin
Jamie Jack	Richard Secord
Vivian Pharis, <i>Director Emeritus</i>	

# Staff



**Debborah Donnelly**  
Executive Director



**Amy Tucker**  
Outreach & Comms.  
Specialist



**Lindsey Wallis**  
A4W & GPCN Coordinator



**Loreen Ayuda**  
Admin. & Bookkeeping  
Specialist

## Conservation Specialists



**Ruiping Luo**



**Phillip Meintzer**



**Devon Earl**



**Kennedy Halvorson**

# Highlights

Published 5 op-eds

Mobilized 1800+ letters to the government by members the public

Issued 22 news releases



Got 400+ people out into nature

Participated in 14 working group and committees

## THIS YEAR AWA

Penned 25+ letters to government



Was quoted in 140+ news articles by over 60 different media outlets

Gave 10+ presentations to the public

Hosted 8 experts for Talk Nights





# Wilderness

## Boreal

The boreal forest is Canada's largest ecosystem, covering 58% of Alberta. 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**.

## McClelland Lake Wetland Complex

McClelland Lake and its adjacent wetlands form an outstanding wetland complex at the northern edge of Alberta's oil 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.

### *"Don't Mine McClelland" Campaign*

In 2023, AWA [published a report](#) highlighting major concerns with Suncor's Operational Plan (OP) for the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex (MLWC). Suncor's plan poses a significant risk of irreversible damage to the unmined portion of the MLWC. Therefore, the OP should not have been approved by the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER). AWA submitted our report to the AER, which triggered a

Reconsideration Process for the AER's decision to approve the OP. Phase 1 of the Reconsideration Process was completed in July 2023.

AWA continued to publish various [communications pieces](#) (press releases, social media etc.) to keep the public informed about the McClelland issue in 2023 – 24. We also worked alongside other ENGO colleagues in preparation for Suncor CEO Rich Kruger's parliamentary hearings in front of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, which included the drafting of briefing notes and suggested questions for members of parliament on the committee. One of the MPs raised the issue of McClelland during the hearings, but Kruger deflected.

AWA organized a trip up to the McClelland area in early September 2023, which included a meeting and [interview with an Indigenous Elder](#) from Fort McKay First Nation who sits on Suncor's Sustainability Committee. During this trip, AWA staff did a flyover of the wetland complex to collect new aerial imagery for use in our communications, and an overnight paddling trip at McClelland Lake alongside AWA members and the Borealis Paddling Club based in Fort McMurray.



**Comms and Outreach specialist Amy Tucker photographs McClelland Lake Complex (left). Aerial views compliments of McMurray Aviation (right). Photos © P. Meintzer.**

On November 4, 2023, AWA's conservation specialist Phillip Meintzer [gave a presentation](#) to the public and AWA members in Edmonton on the McClelland issue and our Don't Mine McClelland Campaign. The talk was well attended in person and included an option for people to attend virtually via Zoom.

In late November 2023, the AER informed AWA that it would not be reconsidering its approval of Suncor's OP despite the concerning evidence highlighted in our report and other submissions. Discussions with Ecojustice, AWA's legal committee, and members from the Polluter Pay Federation, it was deemed that there were no more legal, regulatory, or policy avenues available for AWA to prevent the project from moving ahead (at this time). Since the AER's reconsideration decision, AWA has shifted its focus towards demanding changes to the AER and energy regulation in Alberta more broadly (see the Coalition for Responsible Energy section for more details below).

## Rocky Mountains 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**.

### Bighorn

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.

AWA staff took a trip to the Hummingbird trail network in AWA's Bighorn area of concern in September 2023 to check on the state of this motorized trail network. Following the release of [AWA's final report on the long-term Bighorn Recreation and Impact Monitoring Project](#) in July 2023, AWA presented the results of this study to the Government of Alberta staff planners, and to the government-led Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee. At these tables AWA provided evidence that the Hummingbird trail network is not sustainably sited and advocated for no motorized trail access in the Prime Protection Zone outlined in the Eastern Slopes Policy to protect these ecologically vital headwaters ecosystems.





**Conservation specialist Devon Earl and longtime AWA volunteer Heinz Unger survey extensive OHV damage in the Bighorn. Photo © D. Donnelly.**

## **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 Parks and Wilderness Society's Northern Alberta chapter \(CPAWS-NAB\)](#), [Alberta Native Plant Council](#), Whitehorse Wildland Provincial Park Stewards, and [Alberta Plantwatch](#).

In 2023-2024, AWA continued to participate in the Cardinal Divide Conservation Coalition (CDCC), which meets monthly.

In April 2024, AWA and CPAWS-NAB published a report on the [CDCC Bioblitz](#) which was hosted in July 2023. The report highlighted the incredible biodiversity in the area and the passion people have for their wild spaces, as well as the conservation issues that the area is facing. AWA gave a presentation



on the bioblitz results to Government of Alberta staff who are responsible for planning in the area in January 2024.



**Conservation-minded volunteers and organizations banded together for a bioblitz in the Cardinal Divide area to collect as many species observations as possible. Patsy Cotterill, pictured left, has been returning to this area for decades and led a small group of keen young people to learn about the area. Photos © A. Tucker.**

In July 2024, AWA conservation specialists Devon Earl and Kennedy Halvorson participated in a group tour of the Cheviot Mine provided by Elk Valley Resources to the CDCC members. The tour provided an opportunity to see the footprint of these open-pit coal mines and the process of reclaiming these areas. The tour will help AWA staff advocate for responsible management of human access on the mine site to protect the wildlife that rely on this area for habitat in upcoming government-led land use planning process.

## **Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve and Beehive Natural Area**

AWA is a volunteer steward of Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve and [Beehive Natural Area](#) through the Alberta Parks Stewards program. AWA staff took trips to Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve and Beehive Natural Area in August 2023, and prepared stewardship reports which were submitted to the government. These reports will help inform management actions to ensure the sustainability and ecological integrity of these important wilderness areas.

## **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 educate the public on the importance of prairie ecosystems and argue for the protection of the remaining native grassland and parkland regions.

**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.

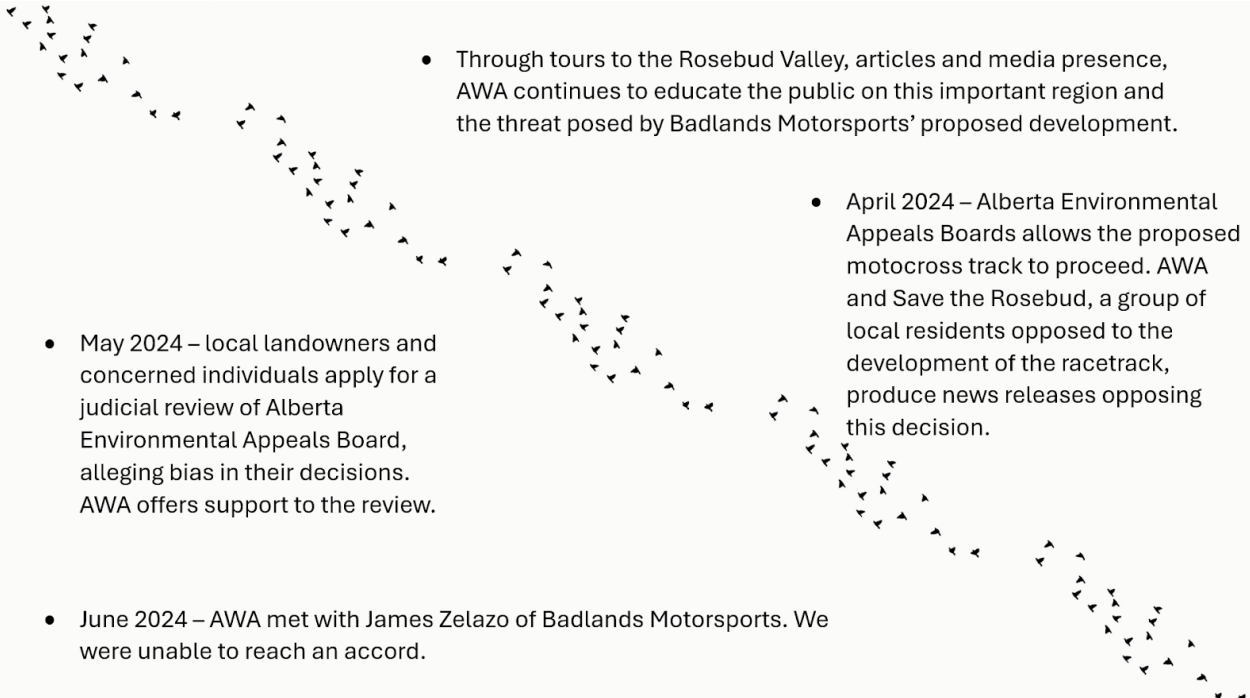
- [Prairie Conservation Forum](#) - member of State of the Prairie and Connecting corridors steering committees
- [Transboundary Grasslands Partnership](#) - Chair (2024-2025)
- [Great Plains Conservation Network](#) - member of steering committee

[Central Grasslands Roadmap](#) - member of Canada Working Group and involved in Canada-Mexico policy discussions.

## Rosebud Valley



AWA opposes [the development of a racetrack](#) in intact native grassland and within critical habitat for bank swallow.



- Through tours to the Rosebud Valley, articles and media presence, AWA continues to educate the public on this important region and the threat posed by Badlands Motorsports' proposed development.
- April 2024 – Alberta Environmental Appeals Boards allows the proposed motocross track to proceed. AWA and Save the Rosebud, a group of local residents opposed to the development of the racetrack, produce news releases opposing this decision.
- May 2024 – local landowners and concerned individuals apply for a judicial review of Alberta Environmental Appeals Board, alleging bias in their decisions. AWA offers support to the review.
- June 2024 – AWA met with James Zelazo of Badlands Motorsports. We were unable to reach an accord.

## Suffield

AWA's aim for Suffield is to [re-establish Indigenous access and connection to these lands](#). Since 2021, AWA and our colleagues at the Blackfoot Confederacy have been discussing this issue with the Base Command.

Indigenous nations travelled to CFB Suffield for a site visit in the fall of 2023. The visit inspired interest in additional trips, particularly in understanding the cultural artifacts on the land, although questions were also asked about allowing Indigenous ranchers to graze cattle. AWA met with representatives from the Blackfoot Confederacy and Nature Conservancy Canada (NCC) to discuss next steps.

In December AWA met with incoming Base Commander, LCol Joe Andrechek. The Base Commander stated that he would directly speak to the Indigenous nations on further communications, and asked AWA reach out to a liaison. AWA inquired about bison introduction. CFB Suffield is a sufficiently large landscape to re-introduce plains bison, with potential benefits for grassland health and biodiversity. While the Blackfoot Confederacy was in support, the Base Commander was strongly opposed.

AWA reached out to ECCC to ask about research on cultural artifacts in CFB Suffield. ECCC suggested the Indigenous nations would be able to apply for a permit. AWA has passed this information to Blackfoot Confederacy, offering our support to draft and submit a research proposal, although the final submission should come from an Indigenous nation. We are awaiting a response on this proposal.





- ❖ *Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Suffield contains some of the largest tracts of unconverted native prairie remaining in Canada and hosts several rare and endangered species. A National Wildlife Area has been established to protect the east portion of the base, and is currently jointly managed by the Department of National Defense (DND) and Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC).*
- ❖ *Indigenous connections to Suffield are evident in the many examples of Niitsitapi culture left on the base, such as tipi rings and medicine wheels.*

© D. Olson







## Bison



- ❖ Bison are a keystone species to the grasslands, shaping the ecosystem as they pass. Reintroducing bison has been linked to improved nutrient cycling, higher biodiversity, and stronger resiliency against drought.
- ❖ Bison are an important species for many Indigenous nations, culturally and spiritually, although also as a nutritious food source. With the signing of the Buffalo Treaty, Indigenous nations have voiced their support for returning bison to the landscape.

### Plains Bison

AWA supports returning bison to the land, where appropriate and as a way to restore degraded prairie ecosystems. To support reintroductions, we believe plains bison should be classified as wildlife in Alberta, rather than their current consideration as livestock.

AWA [wrote and signed a joint letter](#) in May 2024 requesting bison be listed as wildlife in Alberta, in collaboration with several other environmental organizations ([Southern Alberta Group for the Environment](#), Foothills Bison Restoration Society, Canadian Parks and Wildlife Society [Northern Alberta](#) and [Southern Alberta, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative](#) and [Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society](#)). The response received from the Minister did not promise support for bison to be considered wildlife, nor offer to speak with the interested parties on this issue.

To bring greater attention to this issue, AWA spoke with several bison experts and published an article in the Wild Lands Advocate, entitled [The Missing Megafauna: A Story of the American Bison](#). A news release on the joint letter and Minister's response was sent.

Throughout the year, periodic meetings with Alberta Fish and Wildlife Stewardship Branch allowed exchanges of information and updates on the status of plains bison in Alberta. AWA has also sought and spoken to allies, including with Indigenous nations, on this issue.

A Wild Buffalo Summit is being planned for December 2024, to discuss bison reintroduction, with the aim of having the Summit be Indigenous and rancher-led. The summit will focus on the question of how and where bison should be returned, and management.

## Wood Bison

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.

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

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 Ronald Lake Bison Herd (RLBH), including the sustainability of Indigenous traditional use and cultural connection to the herd.

The RLBH 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 2023-24, AWA's participation included support for the Board's newly formed Management Plan Working Group. This working group is intended to spearhead the development of the herd management plan by engaging with other Board committees to compile and draft content as needed.

The Management Plan Working Group developed a business case and subsequent request for proposals (RFP) to contract with a third-party consultant to conduct a policy analysis to be included in the management plan for the RLBH once completed. The purpose of this policy analysis is to assess

all of the relevant legislation, policies, and/or regulations that govern activities across the landscape which may impact Board activities and the management of the Ronald Lake herd. The business case was approved by the Board in October 2023. In early 2024, AWA supported the Government of Alberta with the RFP procurement process, which included a review of submitted proposals from environmental consulting firms, follow up interviews, and the selection of a successful applicant. The policy analysis is currently being conducted by the consultant and is anticipated for completion in the fall of 2024.

## Caribou

In October 2023, AWA, alongside ENGO colleagues at CPAWS Northern Alberta and [David Suzuki Foundation](#) drafted two letters on the issue of caribou in Alberta and persistent delays with meeting caribou conservation commitments. One [letter](#) was submitted to the Government of Alberta (Environment and Protected Areas – AEPA), and the other [letter](#) was submitted to the Government of Canada (Environment and Climate Change – ECCC).

Alberta did not convene any new caribou task forces as part of their subregional planning initiatives during this reporting period; however, AWA reviewed the Government of Alberta’s Berland caribou task force recommendations report when it was completed. With regards to previous task forces, AWA met with planners from the Government of Alberta who are leading the Wandering River subregional plan biodiversity working group. This meeting was organized so that AWA could receive an update with progress on the development of the draft subregional plan. Following this discussion, AWA provided comments on the working group’s “workbook,” which is intended to inform the development of the draft plan.

In October 2020, the provincial and federal governments signed the Agreement for the Conservation and Recovery of the Woodland Caribou in Alberta under Section 11 of Canada’s Species at Risk Act, which is more commonly referred to as the Section 11 Agreement.

AWA met with Michael Brewster, Director of Policy at ECCC with ENGO colleagues to discuss our joint letter outlining long-overdue commitments to caribou conservation. As a result of this meeting, ECCC committed to taking greater steps to hold the Government of Alberta accountable to its commitments under the Section 11 Agreement for the conservation of woodland caribou.

After more than three years, the Government of Alberta finally released its long overdue [first annual report](#) on the implementation of the Section 11 Agreement in late January 2024, outlining progress made under the agreement during the 2021 calendar year. AWA reviewed the annual report and put out a [press release](#) summarizing our assessment. Unfortunately, since this report only represents the



first year of data collected under the agreement, it was impossible to discern whether the Section 11 Agreement was improving conditions for caribou because we lacked current numbers to compare against.



**Caribou mother and calf graze near Amethyst Lake at the base of The Ramparts mountain range. Photo © L. Wallis.**

In April, AWA, CPAWS Northern Alberta, and the Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society [wrote](#) to Alberta's Minister of Environment and Protected Areas to raise significant concerns regarding the impacts of the 2023 wildfire season on at-risk caribou recovery progress, and the significant gaps in subregional planning it has highlighted. In 2023, wildfires burned 5.2 percent of preferred woodland caribou habitat across the province, including 12.7 percent of preferred habitat in the Bistcho range,



and 13.7 in the Caribou Mountains range. Following this letter, AWA and ENGO colleagues met with EPA Minister Rebecca Schulz to discuss the importance of including wildfire disturbance in the caribou range planning process, to ensure that Alberta meets the caribou habitat requirements outlined in the Section 11 report.

In May 2024, two important caribou reports were released by the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta respectively. AWA reviewed the latest [5-year progress report](#) on boreal caribou recovery published by ECCC, and the Government of Alberta's latest [annual implementation report](#) under the Section 11 Agreement which included data from 2022 and 2023. Following the review of both reports, AWA published two joint [press releases](#) with CPAWS Northern Alberta, David Suzuki Foundation, and [Mikisew Cree First Nation](#).

Between May and June 2024, AWA reviewed the Government of Alberta's draft regulatory details for the Bistcho Lake and Cold Lake subregional plans (SRPs), to better understand implications for caribou conservation. Following this review, AWA drafted and submitted a [joint-ENGO letter](#) to the Minister of Environment and Protected Areas commenting on the draft regulations in collaboration with CPAWS Northern Alberta, the Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society (ACTWS) and the [Pembina Institute](#).

In June 2024, AWA's Devon Earl sat on a panel about caribou conservation for World Caribou Day at the Edmonton Valley Zoo. The panel also included members from the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Northern Alberta and the Northern Forestry Centre.

## Feral Horses

AWA has had long standing involvement in the Government of Alberta-led [Feral Horse Advisory Committee](#). AWA continued to attend committee meetings where we advocate for ethical management of feral horses that considers the ecosystem as a whole and protects native species and their habitats.

## Greater Sage-Grouse

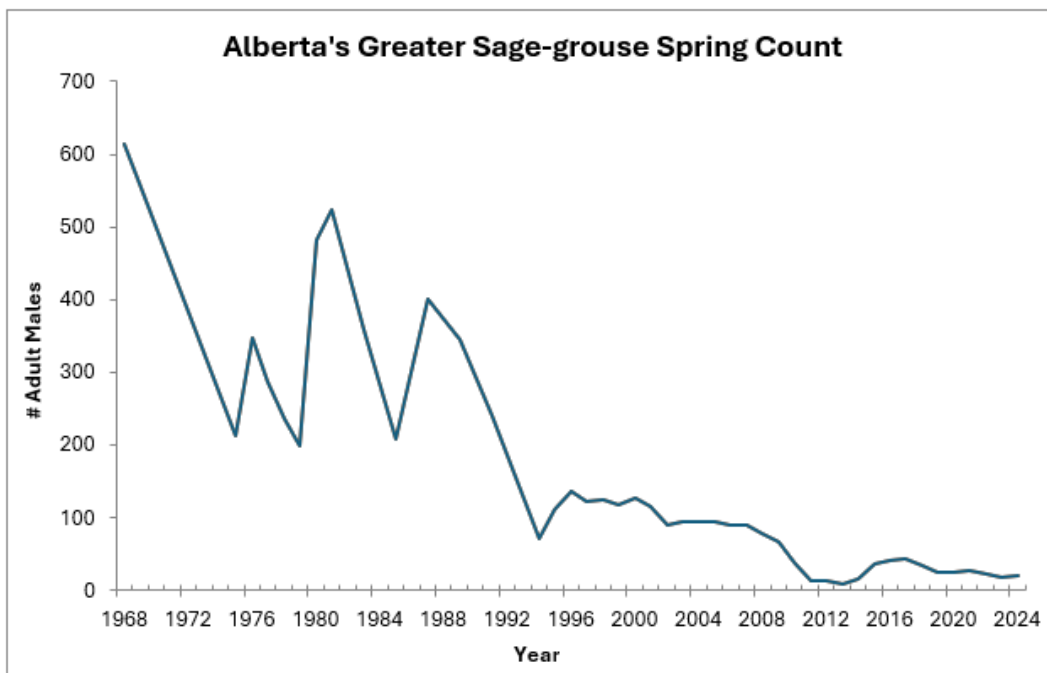
Sage-grouse have long been an important species for AWA and will continue to be a focus as populations are on the brink of extirpation. Although efforts have been made to recover the population, continued loss of habitat is still driving their decline. AWA aims to have stronger protection for sage-grouse habitat and urges for greater habitat restoration efforts to support population recovery.

- ❖ Greater sage-grouse are an iconic grassland species, best known for their mating dances during which the males will inflate and deflate their yellow throat sacs.



Outreach and education around greater sage-grouse and their decline continues. An [article](#) was published in the Wildlands Advocate on the inefficiency of legislation in protecting endangered species, and AWA has spoken with researchers, including the Toronto Metropolitan University.

After meetings with Minister Rebecca Schulz (Alberta Environment and Protected Areas) and Michael Brewster (Environment and Climate Change Policy Advisor) did not result in any meaningful government action or change, AWA continued to advocate for greater protections in sage-grouse range and increased efforts towards improving habitat.



Alberta released a report on the status of sage-grouse in February of 2024. AWA [emphasized the warning](#) that should be taken from the report, with populations showing no sign of recovery.

AWA reached out to Dr. Mark Boyce, University of Alberta, for an update and comments on greater sage-grouse numbers in Alberta. Counts were slightly higher this year, at 20 males, although populations are still doing poorly.

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

## Grizzly Bears

In July 2024, the Government of Alberta announced that members of the public would be able to hunt problem grizzly bears as part of a “network of wildlife management responders”. AWA sent out a [press release](#) and began a [letter-writing campaign](#) to oppose the policy changes, which we saw as a back-door way of reinstating the grizzly bear hunt. The grizzly hunt in Alberta was suspended in 2006 due to low grizzly bear numbers in the province, and since then there has been a small but vocal group of people interested in bringing the hunt back.



**Conservation specialist Ruiping Luo speaks to the press regarding the Alberta government’s decision to issue hunting permits for problem grizzly bears to members of the public. Photo © E. Collins/CBC.**

## Native Pollinators

Alberta's native pollinators coevolved with regional plants; together they are foundational to the function of ecosystems throughout the province. This year, they joined the iconic likes of caribou, bison, and sage-grouse as [AWA's newest wildlife species of concern](#).

A dedicated webpage was created detailing [threats](#) to native pollinators and the [actions](#) required to help address them. AWA will move forward advocating for better support for native pollinators from government and industry, including legislated protections that will address the high pathogen loads and disease spillover between pollinator populations, the continued loss and degradation of habitat, and the use and overreliance of agrochemicals. The need to protect, restore, and create high-quality pollinator habitat, support ecological integrity and connectivity, improve risk assessments on pesticides and reduce their use overall, and increase awareness of native pollinators and their main threats will be key themes in AWA's future work.

Pollinators were the focus of multiple AWA-hosted talks this year, including graduate student Justine Doll's [Community Science Project](#) looking at the impacts of urbanization on plant-pollinator relationships and biologist Syd Canning's [The Buzz on Alberta Bumble Bees](#).







# Water and Land Use

## Energy

### Coalition for Responsible Energy (C4RE)

Following the AER's decision not to reconsider its approval of Suncor's flawed Operational Plan for the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex in November 2023, AWA has shifted its focus towards demanding changes to the way fossil fuel projects are regulated in Alberta more broadly.

AWA planned and organized a Town Hall event, titled: [Reconsidering the Alberta Energy Regulator \(AER\)](#), which took place on February 1, 2024. The intent of this event was to bring various groups together from across the province to discuss our shared concerns with the AER, and hopefully begin working on a strategy to force the changes needed to ensure proper energy regulation in the province. The Town Hall consisted of an all-day meeting for interested parties, and then an evening panel discussion with six panelists at the AWA office and online. The panel discussion was open to the public.



**Interested parties gathered for a roundtable meeting (left) followed by a public townhall (right) to discuss issues and concerns around energy regulation in Alberta at the AWA office. Photos © A. Tucker.**

Following the Town Hall event, AWA produced a "What We Heard" report, summarizing the topics of discussion from the event. This report was then shared back with Town Hall participants and was used to develop a series of joint demands for how we would like to see energy regulation reformed in Alberta. In April 2024, AWA coordinated with eight groups who participated in the Town Hall event to put out a [joint press release](#) announcing our new coalition for Alberta energy reform, alongside the list of our demands. The coalition adopted the name Coalition for Responsible Energy (C4RE).



AWA worked alongside colleagues at the Responsible Tailings Management Alliance (RTMA) to take these coalition demands and draft a letter to provincial NDP leadership candidates to ask that their campaign platforms include some consideration for reforming the Alberta Energy Regulator. This letter was also forwarded to all other Alberta MLAs.

AWA attended the AER's information session for environmental groups at the AER's head office in Calgary on March 26, 2024. The AER hosted this forum to help build awareness and understanding within the ENGO community about how the AER regulates environmental protection.

AWA has continued to facilitate coalition meetings as well as smaller working group meetings to carry out coalition tasks. To date, we have finalized the coalition name and draft logos, we have drafted a statement of intent that will serve as a guide for coalition activities and are currently developing our first campaign direction to be approved by coalition members in August 2024.

## Coal

AWA wrote five articles and newsletters providing information and updates to members on coal issues, highlights included:

- [Then they wrote it all down as the progress of man](#)
- [They'll dig for their coal till the land is forsaken ♪](#)
- [Why address concerns when you can delay, exclude, and suppress?](#)

AWA sent three statements of concern (SOC) on mining projects proposed in the Eastern Slopes by coal companies [CST Canada Coal Limited](#), [Northback Holdings Limited](#), [Summit Coal Inc.](#), highlighting negative impacts to species at risk and watersheds, recent incidents and safety concerns, and the projects' inconsistencies with existing legislation. The numerous SOCs submitted for Northback's application to explore Grassy Mountains coal deposits prompted the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) to plan a public hearing, in which [AWA requested to participate](#) in an interested expert/advisory role to present the latest peer-reviewed literature. The AER granted AWA permission to take part in the hearing as a limited participant, stating "the panel is interested in hearing the AWA's perspective on this matter". The public hearing will take place in late 2024 to early 2025.

AWA [wrote to the Premier and Minister of Energy and Minerals](#) and kicked off a [public letter-writing campaign](#) to express concerns over the influx of new coal project applications to the Alberta Energy Regulator, in spite of the existing moratorium on new coal exploration and developments in the Eastern Slopes. Using AWA's letter template, over 100 letters have been sent by concerned members of the public, requesting the government to honour the moratorium and abide by the

recommendations outlined by the Coal Policy Committee, and prioritize the integrity and long-term health of Alberta's environment.



**Backdropped by sensitive subalpine forests along the Eastern Slopes, heavy equipment works on the mammoth-task of coal mine reclamation. Photo © K. Halvorson.**

## **Metal Mining**

There has been a recent push to develop the minerals sector in Canada and with it comes the development of associated regulations at both the provincial and federal level. AWA supplied comments on the Government of Canada's [Let's Talk Federal Regulations: Critical Minerals](#) survey, participated in the AER's Rock-hosted Minerals Engagement session, and provided input to help inform the [Rock-Hosted Mineral Resource Development directive](#).

AWA emphasized that mineral development, particularly when justified as necessary for the transition to a green, net-zero society, must not come at the expense of the environment. This is not consistent

with sustainable development, as it is well established that the transition cannot be done without robust protections, conservation, and restoration of natural climate solutions, like boreal forests, peat wetlands, native prairies, healthy watersheds, etc. These ecosystems provide innumerable benefits, including but not limited to clean air and water, healthy soil, carbon sequestration, and food security, generally contributing to the overall health and well-being of people in Canada. Clear criteria and robust enforcement of environmental legislation and regulations at both the federal and provincial levels is necessary in the development of this sector.

## **Oil and Gas**

AWA worked with colleagues at Ecojustice and other ENGOs on multiple submissions related to oil and gas development in Alberta.

We submitted a [formal request](#) to the Alberta Energy Regulator asking for an environmental impact assessment to be conducted for the Pathways Alliance carbon capture and storage megaproject that's proposed for a large swathe of northeastern Alberta with a storage hub near Cold Lake.

AWA is in the process of applying for an investigation under CEPA to ECCC on the misreporting and/or underreporting of NPRI database pollutants at CNRL and Tamarack facilities in Alberta, as well as a petition the Commissioner on Environment and Sustainable Development on the same issue.

AWA worked with Keepers of the Water and Ecojustice on a [joint statement of concern \(SOC\)](#) for the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) regarding CNUL's Jackpine oilsands mine renewal applications – asking the AER to grant the Athabasca River basin legal personhood (i.e., to be considered directly and adversely affected).

We are preparing a submission to the AER regarding an upcoming Suncor/Fort Hills EPEA and Water Act 10-year renewal application.

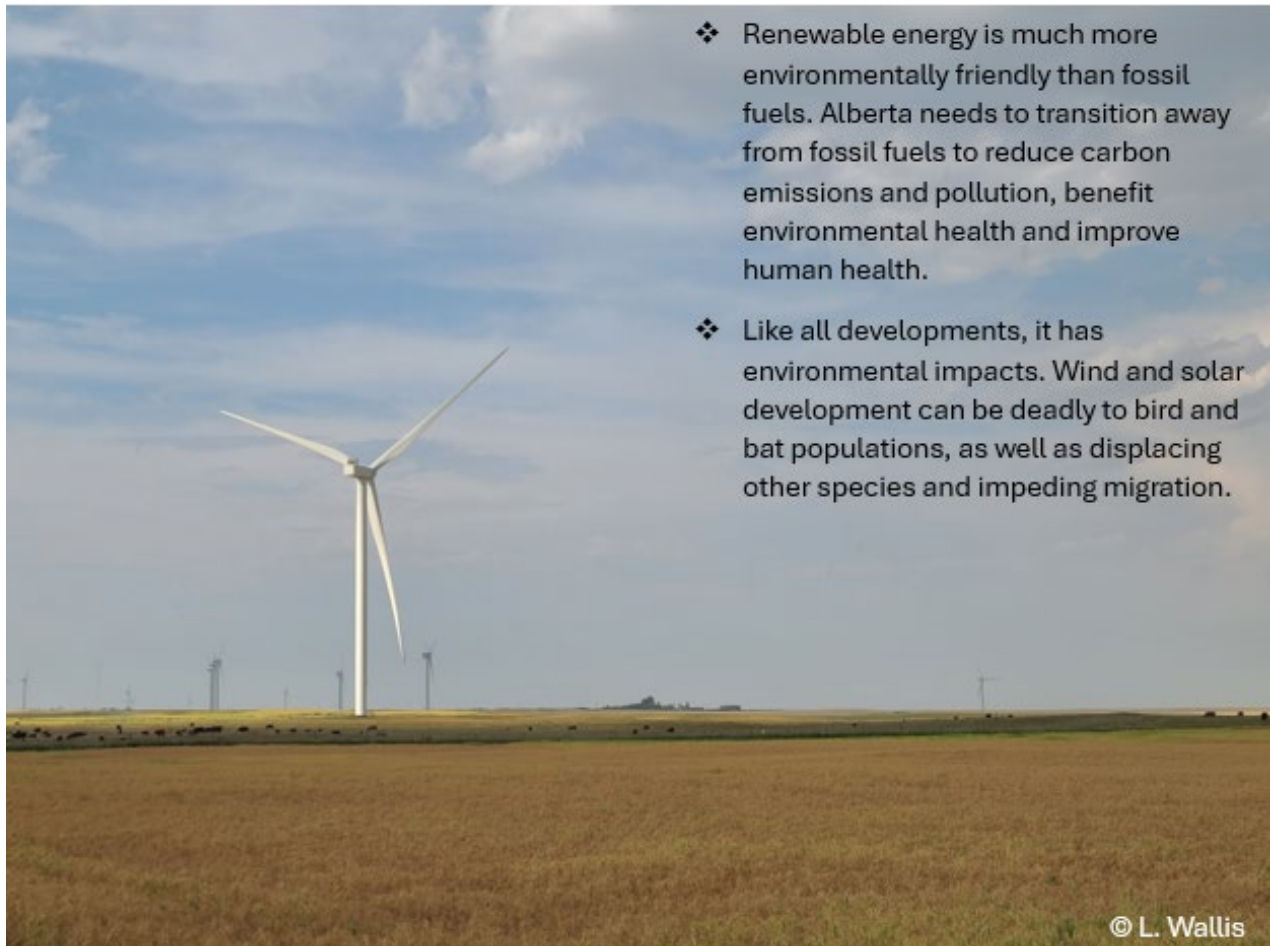
AWA provided general support for ENGO colleagues across Canada who were coordinating responses to the new federal Competition Act amendments which include anti-greenwashing legislation.

AWA continues to support the Responsible Tailings Management Alliance on the issue of oil sands tailings and their impact to ecosystems and Indigenous communities in northern Alberta and downstream regions. This work included a submission from AWA providing feedback on ECCC's process to explore options for the management of oil sands tailings, as well as reviewing Kevin Timoney's draft manuscript (intended for publication in a scientific journal) on the AER and misreporting of oil sands tailings spills.



## Renewables

AWA supports renewable energy development, as long as it is appropriately sited. Renewable energy projects should be prioritized on sites with prior development, and not on sensitive habitat, native grasslands or in high biodiversity regions.



AWA submitted [comments](#) on the moratorium and inquiry into renewables energy development enforced by the Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC), emphasizing a need to respect native grassland and high biodiversity regions in siting projects.

Alberta announced new restrictions on renewable energy in February 2024, including the need to protect “pristine views.” AWA produced a [news release](#) stating these restrictions were not based on science or ecosystem needs, and were unfairly applied to only renewable energy when fossil fuels had a much greater impact.

AWA continues to monitor and comment on projects we are concerned about, such as the [Aira Solar project](#) which disrupts pronghorn migration routes, or the development of a battery storage system

in proximity to Frank Lake. We advocate for a just transition to renewable energy in Alberta, and that renewable energy projects are appropriately sited.

## Forestry

For decades, AWA has advocated for a shift in the way that forests are managed in Alberta towards ecosystem-based management. AWA has 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 forestry processes.



**Artist and AWA volunteer Carolyn Fisher (left) leads A4W participants in an artistic exercise (right), sketching biodiversity in the Upper Highwood and Loomis Creek area, including the threatened bull trout. Photos © D. Earl.**

In 2023-2024, AWA continued to oppose unsustainable logging plans in Alberta's Eastern Slopes. One of these plans is in the Upper Highwood area of Kananaskis, which is important headwaters habitat, contains critical habitat for at-risk native trout, and is an important area for recreation. AWA sent a letter opposing these logging plans to [Spray Lake Sawmills and Minister of Forestry and Parks Todd Loewen](#), as well as to [Fisheries and Oceans Canada](#). AWA also raised awareness about these logging plans through a press release, media interviews, website post, and [newsletter article](#).

AWA engaged with West Fraser (the company that acquired Spray Lake Sawmills) to oppose the plans and voice our concerns. AWA also attended the West Fraser open house in May 2024 in Cochrane to echo these concerns. In 2024, AWA hosted a public Q&A event with representatives from West Fraser, which gave AWA members and the public an opportunity to submit questions about West Fraser's

forest management planning and learn how to participate in the process and have their concerns heard.

Artist and AWA Volunteer Carolyn Fisher and Conservation Specialist Devon Earl [led a hike](#) as part of AWA's Adventures for Wilderness program in the Upper Highwood and Loomis Creek area, where logging is planned. The adventure was "hike Horse Lake and Aura Creek, which are examples of recreation and ecological values being overlooked in and draw" and gave participants an opportunity to explore their creative side while learning about the importance of headwaters and forest conservation. West Fraser's logging plans in the Upper Highwood are currently on hold.

## Fish & Forests Forum

The Fish & Forests Forum is a gathering of experts and environmental non-governmental organization representatives that meets to discuss how to advance inclusive, ecosystem-based management of Alberta's forests. In the 2023-2024 fiscal year, AWA hosted two Fish & Forests Forums, which included a presentation on forestry industry lobbying, and a discussion on wildfire mitigation.

## Wildfire

AWA was invited to provide input on the Alberta Wildfire Mitigation Strategy. AWA conservation specialist Devon Earl attended a formal engagement session with the Government of Alberta staff who will be drafting the strategy, and prepared and submitted written feedback to inform the strategy. This feedback was also sent to the Minister of Forestry and Parks Todd Loewen. AWA's feedback focused on ensuring that the ultimate strategy is evidence-based and driven by wildfire scientists and Indigenous knowledge-holders.

Following the wildfire in July that devastated Jasper townsite and national park, over 80 organizations, including AWA, [penned a letter](#) to provincial and federal leaders demanding decisive action on climate change, the primary factor increasing the frequency, severity, and unpredictability of natural disasters.

## Parks and Protected Areas

With a mandate dedicated to the conservation of wilderness and the completion of a protected areas network, encouraging engagement and participating in opportunities to shape how Alberta's parks and protected areas are managed is always a key priority for AWA. Through the use of action alerts, AWA was able to mobilize members to [speak up for Banff's ecosystems](#) and [be nature's voice in the new "Plan for Parks"](#).



As a national park town, Banff has a unique role to play in upholding the ecological integrity of Banff National Park. Members were encouraged to submit comments on the [Banff Railway Lands Area Redevelopment Plan \(ARP\)](#) and raise concerns about further expansion into an already constrained wildlife corridor, long timelines for habitat restoration, lack of near-term vehicle congestion solutions, and inclusion of a gondola terminal for a gondola system Parks Canada has deemed incompatible with Banff's ecosystems.

AWA participated in the Town's Focus Group for Environment Organizations, met with the mayor and town planners, and [presented at the public hearing](#) to provide detailed feedback to help inform the ARP. The ARP passed through its final readings in Town Council with some key amendments, including removing the gondola terminus and a commitment to move the rehabilitation and restoration work north of the railway tracks to the short-term phase of the plan.

With the expiry of the 2009-2019 Plan for Parks (P4P), the government of Alberta released a survey engaging Albertans in the development of the next ten-year plan. AWA noted to members that the language used in the engagement documents was worryingly anthropocentric, with little recognition of the need to protect and conserve ecological integrity and function. A [letter was sent](#) to both the Ministers of Environment and Protected Areas and Forestry and Parks to highlight this issue, and verbal and written feedback was provided to government staff to be included in the P4P engagement.

## Public Lands

AWA's vision is to have representative and connected protected areas across Alberta's ecotypes. We oppose the sale of Public Lands – these lands should be managed for the benefit of all Albertans in perpetuity.

AWA continued to oppose the sale of Public Lands and has been involved in public engagement sessions for MD Taber on Public Lands Management. A Minister Advisory Committee to discuss access to Public Lands was established, which AWA has been an active participant in.

AWA has suggested and commented on proposed [Key Biodiversity Areas](#), a national initiative to identify important and rare ecosystems or habitats.

Environmental Impact Assessments are required for large projects. Where possible, AWA has submitted comments during engagement sessions on projects such as with [Marquerite Lake Compressed Air Project](#) and [Black Bear Power Plant Project](#).

# Water

Water was a prominent topic in the Wild Lands Advocate this year with almost the entirety of the [Spring edition](#) released in March dedicated to exploring its role on the landscape. Over twenty articles and newsletters were authored for AWA’s membership to learn more on aquatic species, ecosystems, and threats in the province.

AWA made multiple new releases concerning water issues, including:

- [Athabasca River Basin seeks recognition of legal personhood in voicing concerns about the CNUL Jackpine oil sands mine](#)
- [Four Big Oil Companies Used 200 Billion Litres of Alberta’s Freshwater Last Year](#)
- [Alberta’s new drought committee excludes a voice for the environment](#)

Continuing on as chair of Alberta Environmental Network’s Water Caucus, AWA held monthly meetings with academics, lawyers, ENGOs, and others to share information on water issues in the province, including drought, irrigation expansion, tailings, and the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex.



**AWA’s Roger Creasey Memorial Library became an impromptu sound stage when conservation specialists Phillip Meintzer (left) and Devon Earl (middle) sat down to talk on Michael Bartz’s (right) *In Over my Head Podcast*. Photos © K. Halvorson.**

Conservation specialists were featured on multiple water-related podcast episodes, highlighting the role of land management plays in maintaining a healthy watersheds on [In Over My Head’s \*The Old Man\*](#)

[Watershed series](#), and scrutinizing the province's water usage, particularly during times of drought on [The Climate Lens' Alberta's Water Wars](#).

After attending the Department of Fisheries and Oceans information session on their *Framework to Identifying Fish and Fish Habitat Restoration Priorities in the East Slopes* AWA provided comments on the government's strategy, emphasizing that while restoration is important, protecting existing aquatic habitats from harm is essential. These comments were reflected in DFO's *What We heard Interim Engagement Report (2023-2024)*. AWA was also a participant in the Calgary River Valleys Project Workshop and Advancing Natural Infrastructure Forum.

## Gravel Mining

Following AWA's notice to appeal the approval permitting aggregate extraction 800 m from Big Hill Springs Provincial Park, above the aquifer supplying the nationally significant springs, AWA issued the following news release: [Gravel Mine Approval Threatens Big Hill Springs](#).

Participation in regulatory processes, including that of the Environmental Appeals Board (EAB), requires demonstration that one is genuinely interested and directly, adversely affected by the decision in question. AWA provided [an initial submission](#) arguing our participation was necessary as the potential adverse impacts of expanding aggregate mining operations jeopardize the region's watershed and ecosystem health, directly impacting AWA's ability to fulfill our mandate, including how we use the area for education and recreation. [AWA's rebuttal letter](#) following the proponent's response expanded on this submission, re-asserting our interest as distinct and emphasizing the need to be granted standing in the appeals process.

## Irrigation Expansion

Irrigation expansion should not be considered without a thorough investigation of the environmental impacts. Expansion should not occur on native grassland ecosystems, including flooding of native grasslands for reservoirs.

In December 2023, AWA [wrote](#) to express concerns over the expansion of Snake Lake Reservoir and to comment on the Environmental Impact Assessment Terms of Reference. Snake Lake Reservoir is one of several reservoirs proposed for expansion. The expansion would flood a region that is primarily native grassland. Some of these comments were incorporated into the [Final Terms of Reference](#).

AWA continues to monitor irrigation expansion projects and share updates with our members through our Wildlands Advocate, Wild Horizons newsletter and media outlets.



In collaboration with other environmental organizations and interested individuals, AWA discusses concerns around irrigation and river health in Alberta within a monthly working group. This group has sought information on the proposed irrigation expansions, protested the lack of transparency and delays to information requests, written to request protection of native prairie, spoken with Alberta government officials over drought responses and hydrology modelling.

❖ Irrigation expansion has been proposed as a method of improving drought resiliency in agriculture and increasing yield. However, irrigation can be damaging to river ecosystems, alter nearby plant communities, degrade soils and displace wildlife.

❖ The Irrigation Modernization program, funded by nearly \$1 billion from the Alberta Government and the Canada Infrastructure Bank, promises a “historic” irrigation expansion in the South Saskatchewan River Basin. Other irrigation projects have also been proposed in the Special Areas, a region for which previous irrigation proposals had been dismissed as likely to fail. These projects would further stress our already overdrawn rivers and destroy native prairie.

© C. Olson





# Environmental Policy

## Biodiversity

Alberta's biodiversity is in crisis. Each year, more habitat is destroyed, degraded or fragmented. Many species are declining, and even when formally listed as at-risk, few show signs of recovery. Alberta lacks a dedicated Endangered Species Act. Instead, at-risk species are managed under the *Wildlife Act*, which has few requirements to protect listed species. In 2022, Canada committed to the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework, which sets targets on halting and reversing biodiversity loss. As of October 2024, Alberta has not signed a biodiversity agreement.

AWA [submitted comments](#) on Canada's *2030 National Biodiversity Strategy* at the start of 2024. While AWA was glad to see the acknowledgement that protection is a priority, we suggested protection of high biodiversity regions, purpose of restoration and prioritization of environmental values over short-term economic gain should be strengthened. Many of our comments were not incorporated in the final Strategy.

In July, Canada released a [2030 Nature Strategy](#) and the [Nature Accountability Bill](#). This Framework sets ambitious targets, although there are still barriers to implementation, including a lack of cooperation from provinces such as Alberta. AWA is working with Nature Canada to urge provinces, like Alberta, to commit to achieving biodiversity targets and producing a provincial biodiversity strategy that aligns with federal and international commitments.

Following concerns submitted to AWA about grazing and recreational activity management, AWA is planning a bioblitz at Cypress Hills to better understand the biodiversity and ecology of the region.

## Nature on the Hill

From April 29 to May 2, 2024, AWA traveled to Ottawa to participate in Nature Canada's flagship lobbying event known as [Nature on the Hill](#). Lobbying efforts for Nature on the Hill 2024 focused on the release of a national biodiversity strategy and accompanying nature accountability legislation. AWA's Phillip Meintzer met with three federal members of parliament during his visit to Ottawa to advocate for a biodiversity strategy that was inclusive, fully funded, and included consequences for missed commitments. AWA also met virtually with a representative from the Prime Minister's Office following the event to discuss the biodiversity strategy. A [Wild Lands Advocate article](#) was published in the Summer 2024 issue which shares some of the highlights of the event.





**Participants of Nature Canada’s annual Nature on the Hill event pose in front of parliament. Spot conservation specialist Phillip Meintzer standing tall centre back. Photo © Nature Canada.**

## Species at risk

AWA finds that current protections for endangered and at-risk species are not enough to prevent population declines. Alberta needs stronger protections for endangered populations, beginning with a dedicated Endangered Species Act. We ask for the development of a provincial biodiversity strategy with clear and actionable items to protect species at risk.

AWA is involved in recommending and commenting on species-at-risk decisions, including federal listing of at-risk species under the *Species at Risk Act*, and federal and provincial recovery strategies and management plans. The Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada sought input to inform the Cabinet’s decision on whether to add, reclassify or remove 13 species on the federal List of Wildlife Species at Risk, Schedule 1 of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). AWA supplied comments for all species found within Alberta, including the [small-flowered sand-verbena \(\*Tripterocalyx micranthus\*\)](#), [eastern red bat \(\*Lasiurus borealis\*\)](#), [hoary bat \(\*Lasiurus cinereus\*\)](#) and [silver-haired bat \(\*Lasionycteris noctivagans\*\)](#).

## Climate Change

AWA followed along with announcements and developments that came out of the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (or COP28) in Dubai. We released an AWA newsletter segment that discussed Canada’s announcements related to climate change (e.g., loss and damages fund contributions, new draft methane regs, oil & gas emissions cap framework), and how Alberta’s participation at COP28 was shamed on the international stage for resisting climate progress.







# 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.”***

This year we collaborated with multiple influencing Albertans and Canadians both in person and over our social media accounts.

Geneva L Haley, of [Pastureland Art](#) and [Pasture Tattoo](#), helped us establish art for new merchandise including t-shirts and glow-in-the-dark stickers. Geneva is an artist based on Treaty 7 Territory. She splits her time between tattooing and working in her studio, Pastureland where she makes paintings, illustrations, and textile designs. She has a following of over 19k followers on Instagram and regularly reposts and amplifies our work.

We worked with well-known wildlife photographer John Marriott, founder of [Exposed Wildlife Conservancy](#) to help spread the word on grizzly bears. Together, we raised awareness about the grizzly bear hunt, with the help of his large social media following.

[UNA Pizza and Wine](#), a popular restaurant with a handful of locations between Calgary and Edmonton, featured AWA as a community partner for one whole month. A portion of their profits from their featured pizza was donated to AWA in April.



**Winning shots from AWA’s 2024 Photo Contest. On the left is the winner of the people’s choice category: *Coyote in the snow* by Bryce Horne. On the right, the top Staff Pick: *Swift Fox* by Kyle Matthew.**

We also ran a [photo contest](#) where local photographers throughout Alberta submitted their finest work (over 70 submissions). The benefit was at least twofold: AWA’s media gallery was topped up as

all submissions are now part of our library collection and contest entrants spread the word to their friends and family to vote for their photos driving hundreds of people to our website (there were over 700 votes) who previously had not known about AWA.

This year AWA connected with more than 200 youth, through school visits, youth groups, a summer camp at the Hillhurst Community Association, as well as with those that joined their parents on AWA's Adventures for Wilderness program.

## 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.

We often receive comments from participants on how actually visiting a place gives them a better understanding of it and the challenges it faces. Each year we strive to use the Adventure program to bring *awareness* of these special places to the public and inspire people to *act* to defend them.



Our adventures this year covered many areas and highlighted different ecosystems within the province, as well as current threats to these Wild Places. Some examples included our trip to the Rosebud, where a proposed racetrack threatens the biodiversity in the river valley, an art walk along the Highwood River to bring attention to an area set to be logged this winter, a trip to see first-hand

how beaver dams do a better job than human-built dams at storing water and increasing biodiversity, and many more.

A4W continues to partner with other organizations to amplify each others' messages. This year they included [Bighill Creek Preservation Society](#), [Save the Rosebud](#), [Elbow River Watershed Partnership](#), [Alberta Bat Community Program](#), [Glenbow Ranch Park Foundation](#), and [Trout Trust](#).

This year's adventures received significant media coverage, from eight-year-old fundraiser Karina Eustace-Wallis appearing on CBC Radio's The Eyeopener, to TV coverage of our Big Hill Springs Adventure, radio coverage of our crocus hunt, and an article in the Cochrane Eagle featuring our Cochrane North Field Trip.



## **AWA Talk Nights**

AWA aims to host [events](#) of all types throughout the year and throughout the province. We've held 10 Tuesday Talk nights, which most recently included Lorne Fitch's book talk and a presentation by The



Trout Trust. AWA also participated in a few panel events, including Caribou Day at the Edmonton Zoo, hosted the AER town hall, ran a book sale and more.

## Tabling Events

In total, we held 11 tabling events, including the annual Search and Rescue anniversary event, the Seniors for Climate Action event at Calgary city hall, and participated for the first time at Open Farm Days via Chatsworth Farm in Vermillion.

## Book Club

AWA began a book club this year, inviting interested participants into our office on a quarterly basis to read both fiction and non-fiction books with an environmental focus. Books featured in this year's book club included Suzanne Simard's Finding the Mother Tree, Laline Paull's The Bees, Ziya Tong's The Reality Bubble, and Sharman Apt Russell's Diary of a Citizen Scientist.



## News and Publications

### Media

Since November 2023, our conservation specialists issued 20 news releases gaining significant media traction; AWA has been mentioned or quoted in over 140 news articles by over 60 different media outlets in the last year, including CBC, CTV, Global News, National Observer, The Globe and Mail, The Narwhal, and The Tyee.

### Wild Horizons

Our AWA biweekly newsletter, [Wild Horizons](#), has continued to go out to subscribers resulting in 30 total emails sent since November 2023 until Oct. 1 2024. The newsletter began in March 2023, taking over the ad hoc newsletter approach used in previous years. It's written in a conversational tone, and highlights the latest 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.

Our AWA mailing list continues to grow, from 2,750 to 3,311. We continue to encourage new email signups at all of our events, through our social channels and in the Wild Lands Advocate. In May, our newsletter platform switched from MailChimp to ConstantContact, a sister tool of our new database platform DonorPerfect. Meanwhile, AWA continues to use MailChimp to distribute a separate newsletter for the Adventures for Wilderness program. AWA adheres to the Canadian Anti-Spam Legislation.

## Wild Lands Advocate

The [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 resource the association is very proud of.

The look and feel of the WLA was updated this year to find a better balance between stunning wilderness visuals and important environmental information, with the ultimate goal of improving reader enjoyment, all courtesy of AWA's communication and outreach specialist Amy Tucker.

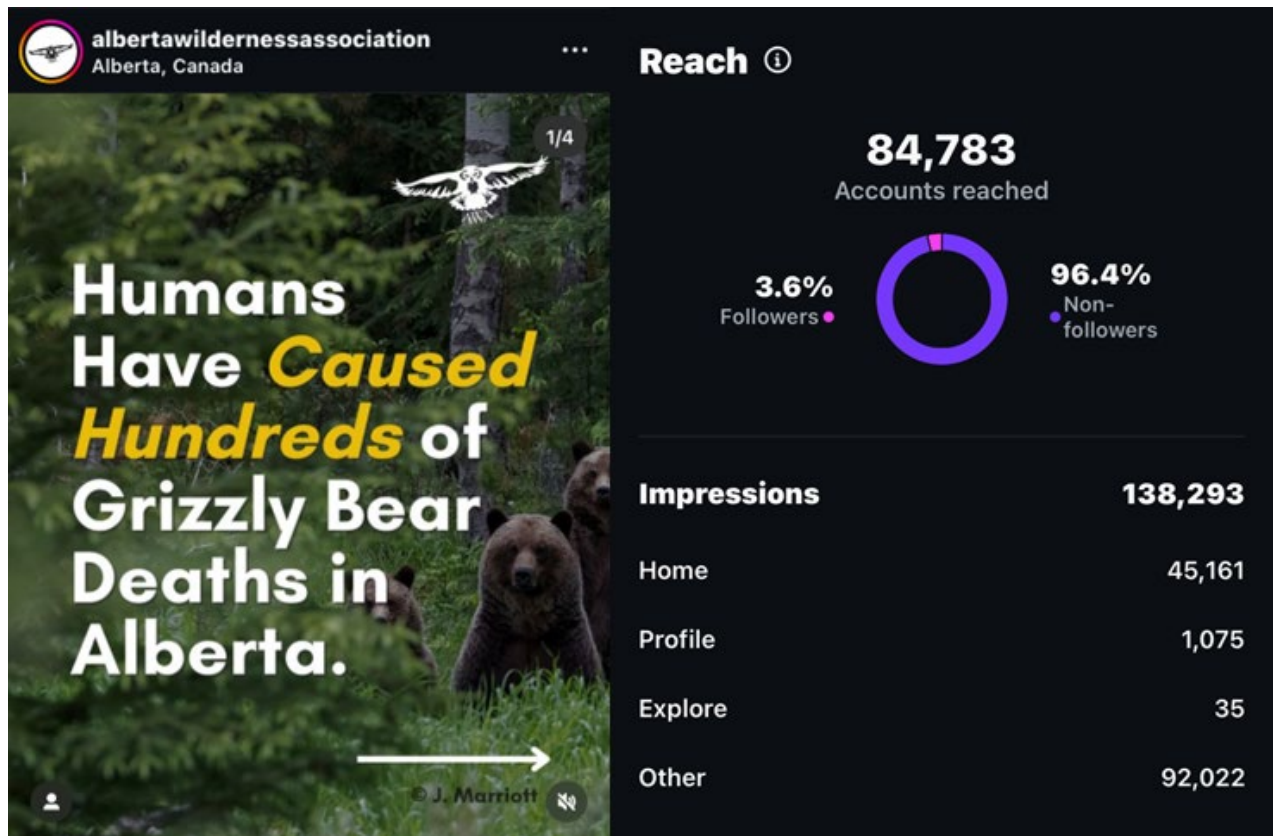


## Social Media

AWA maintains a social media presence on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [X \(formerly known as Twitter\)](#). 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. Since February 2023, the outreach and communication specialist has collaborated with conservation staff to create more frequent social media posts.



AWA has continued to reach new audiences using social media, particularly Instagram, which was heavily focused on once again. Since last year, our following has jumped by about 2,000 followers, going from 4,400 in October 2023 to 6,316 in October 2024. We've continued to make an impact on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, and we've continued to explore new platforms, particularly on [Threads](#) and [BlueSky](#).



AWA's audience continues to expand, with our most viewed post reaching almost 85,000 individual accounts. Screenshots © A. Tucker.







## Funding

Funds received from donations by members, supporters and fundraising efforts are vital to the health of AWA, these contributions provided **84%** of our total revenue.

Granting agencies in this fiscal year included Alberta Government Recreation and Physical Activity Division, Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, Alberta Native Plant Council, and several Calgary Foundation Funds: **Perlette Fund, A. Lawrence Berry Family Environment Fund, Povey Family Flow Through Fund, Pelzer Family Flow Through Fund, Robert and Jennifer Sadée Fund,** and the **D&W Richardson Charitable Prospective Fund.** We also received funding from the **McWilliams Family 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 devoted 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. Administrative costs of 28% continue to represent an efficient and carefully managed association, supported significantly by volunteerism.

## Financing Wilderness Protection

### Membership

Our voting membership stands at 6266 (2023 – 6,135) individuals, representing over 200 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, and we held several membership drives this year. Our goal for 2024-2025 will be to increase our membership by a further 100.

## Volunteers

We've had a consistent level of new volunteer sign ups this past year. Since December 2023 we've had 55 new applications. AWA has created a new e-mailing newsletter list to help manage volunteers. The newsletter gives a brief update of the happenings at AWA and a list of upcoming opportunities. Each opportunity is linked to a sign-up form so people can pick and choose which events they can help us with. This so far has been a great success — within a day of sending out the first volunteer newsletter, all six available volunteer slots were spoken for. We had more than 105 volunteers (70 in 2022-2023) work with us over the past year, and conservatively recorded over 1230 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 very grateful for these thoughtful donations.

### Wilderness and Wildlife Bequests



Daphne M. Smith 1980  
Dr. James Birkett Cragg 1997  
Anna Nowick 1999  
Myrtle Muriel Koch 2001  
Ian Ross 2003  
Dorothy Barry 2003  
William Mayer 2004  
Diane Hughes 2005  
Harold deVries 2009  
Ann Roberts 2009  
Richard Collier 2013  
Harriet Ruth Mowat 2016  
Kim Bennett 2016  
Carol A. Haines 2017  
Wendy Williams 2017  
Herbert G. Kariel 2017  
Ted Davy 2018  
Richard Pharis 2018  
Del Lavallee 2019  
Meyer Estate 2019  
Doris Davy 2019  
Helen Dixon 2020  
Robert Bartlett 2020  
Annemarie Marriner 2021  
Stanley Daniel Rosenbaum 2022  
Ross Murray 2022  
Frances Eileen Kitchingham 2023  
Patricia E. Jackson 2023  
Stephen Douglas Fuller 2023

#### *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 Giving between \$20,000 and \$55,000**

Clint and Julie Docken  
Anthony and Liz Fricke  
David and Cathy Mayhood  
Diane and Kevin Mihalcheon  
Linda and Yusuf Javeri  
Glen and Lois Mumey  
Richard and Carol Secord  
Alan and Madeleine Ernst  
David and Vikki Reid  
Doris Davy  
John and Barbara Poole  
Peter Campbell  
Sarah Leets  
Ronald Sagert  
Glen Stenabaugh

Catherine Fuller  
Cyndi Smith  
Jim Campbell  
Wendy and Richard Clark  
The Schad Foundation  
Carolyn and George Campbell  
James Prescott  
Roni Kraut  
Hobbes and Mortimer Foundation  
Jackson Power  
Tako and Henrietta Koning  
Sally Issenman  
Team Telus Cares  
Flanagan Foundation  
Anonymous

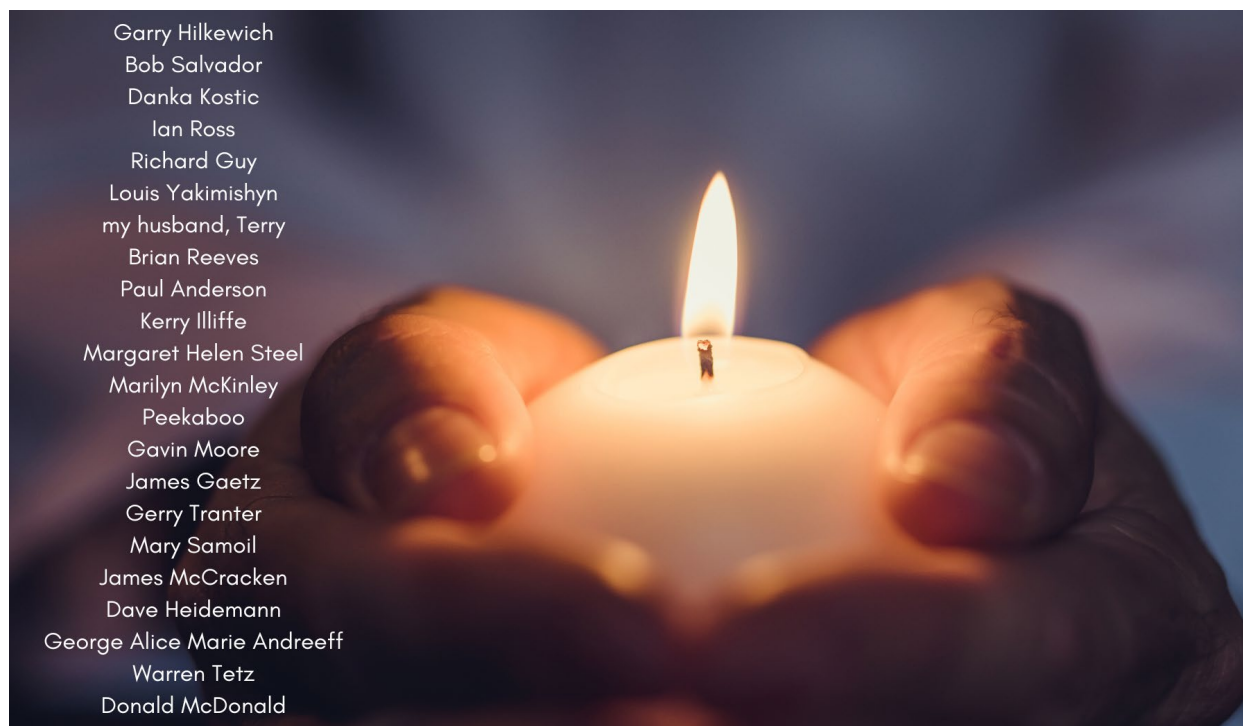
### Benefactors with **Lifetime Gifts of more than \$55,000**

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  
McCuaig Desrochers, LLP  
Lorne Fitch  
Darryl Hay  
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 2023–2024



Garry Hilkewich  
Bob Salvador  
Danka Kostic  
Ian Ross  
Richard Guy  
Louis Yakimishyn  
my husband, Terry  
Brian Reeves  
Paul Anderson  
Kerry Illiffe  
Margaret Helen Steel  
Marilyn McKinley  
Peekaboo  
Gavin Moore  
James Gaetz  
Gerry Tranter  
Mary Samoil  
James McCracken  
Dave Heidemann  
George Alice Marie Andreeff  
Warren Tetz  
Donald McDonald

### Donations in Honour 2023-2024

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:



Louis  
Karina Eustace  
Edwin Mattheis  
Betsy Nicholls  
Tim & Fred  
Isabelle Bauer  
Devon Earl  
Lorne Fitch  
Bob Patterson  
Chris & Julieta  
Katharine Meynhardt  
Simon Wedel  
Matthew Curan  
Bob & Al Rolfe  
Andre & Rajani

Greg, Brenda, Lindsay & Cory  
Kara Rowley  
Donna Barker  
Sherry  
Chris Gerein  
Barb Caldwell  
Spencer Taubner  
Megan Pearson  
Mary Kettenbach  
Margaret Steel  
Laleen & Robert  
Erin Vansplaker  
Pat Mahaffey  
Leo McGoldrick  
Karina



## Hillhurst Cottage School

AWA invested in foundation repairs this past year including the regrading of our parking lot. This was in response to the leaking that had been occurring into our basement. This was a significant undertaking that required permissions from the heritage departments of the province and the city and confirmation by a structural engineer on the process and undertaking. We engaged KW Developments and Design as our contractor. We were grateful to receive a reimbursement of a good portion of the cost via grants from the Government of Alberta and the City of Calgary.

## 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 \$1,495 (2023 – \$1,472) 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.

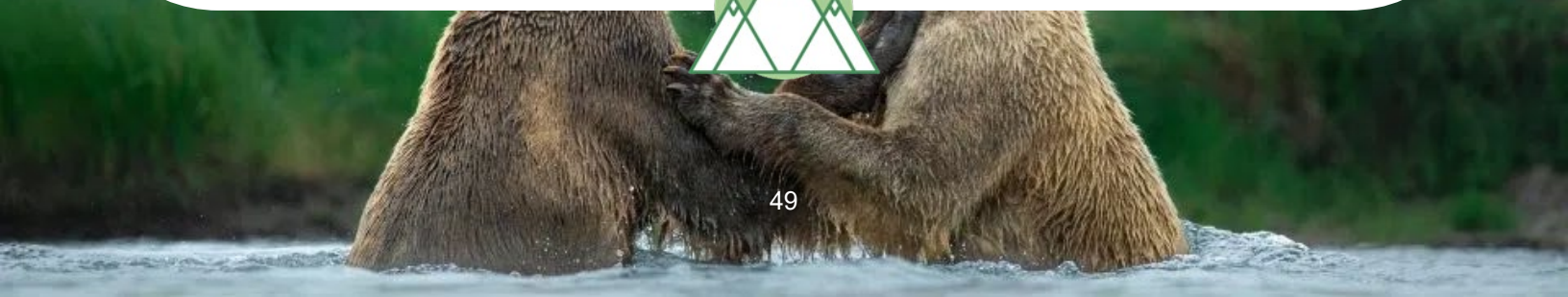
Martha Kostuch was considered an expert in consensus-based decision making and her work helped join groups that traditionally might not have worked together. She sought ways to make the system work so we could move forward. Kostuch, who died April 23, 2008, was a national leader, an Alberta Wilderness 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.

**Dr. Leroy Little Bear** gave the Martha Kostuch Lecture on November 17, 2023, in person at the AWA office. The topic of his lecture was "The Impact of the Anthropocene on the Ecology of Traditional Alberta Lands". The lecture is available on our [YouTube channel](#).





**Dr. Leroy Little Bear presents to members, friends and family at AWA's annual lecture. Photo © K. Halvorson.**



# Awards

## Alberta 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.



Diane Pachal



Dr. Leroy Little Bear



Mike Judd

## 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. The award is presented annually as individuals meet the high standard of volunteerism, dedication, and commitment of the inaugural award winners. Our success reflects the enduring commitment they have made to Alberta Wilderness Association.



Gail Docken



Nathaniel Schmidt

# Sponsors and Funders



# THANK YOU!





**Alberta Wilderness Association**