

## In memoriam

### Karsten Heuer, 1968-2024

November 5, 2024 saw the passing of Albertan environmental icon, explorer and all-around nice guy Karsten Heuer. For all of those who met Karsten, or followed his astonishing adventures, he will be terribly missed.

Born and raised in Calgary, Karsten studied at the University of Calgary before moving to Banff, where he became a wildlife biologist for Parks Canada. In more recent times, in this role he helped lead the reintroduction of wild bison to Banff National Park. But it was his work as an environmental adventurer that Karsten first became renowned.

In the early days of the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, wildlife connectivity was an issue that was increasingly being talked about, spurred on by new studies that were beginning to uncover the huge distances travelled by wildlife in the Rockies. A wolf radio collared in Kananaskis Country travelled south to the northern United States; another wandered from the United States to the southern Yukon. There was clearly a growing realisation of the need for conservation on a much bigger, landscape scale. But what did this actually look like on the ground?

Where most of us would be content to continue to wonder, Karsten decided to strap on his boots (and his skis) and go find out. In 1998, he embarked upon a 3,400-kilometre hike between Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming and Watson Lake in the Yukon. His 2002 book, *Walking the Big Wild* described his 18-month journey along the spine of the Rocky Mountains, assessing the connectedness of the beautiful ecosystems through which he passed. Overall, his vision was of a huge landscape that was still worth protecting.

If that wasn't intrepid enough, in his 2006 book *Being Caribou*, Karsten and his partner, filmmaker Leanne Allison set out to follow the migration of the Porcupine caribou herd from its Yukon winter range to its endangered Alaskan calving grounds in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Leanne's film about their epic five-month journey ([https://www.nfb.ca/film/being\\_caribou/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/being_caribou/))

is an astonishing window into the determination of the pair of them to highlight just what was at stake if the Arctic Wildlife refuge were to be opened to oil and gas development.

Leanne's next film, *Finding Farley* describes their 2009 canoe trip across Canada, from the Rocky Mountains to the east coast, following in the footsteps of another Canadian literary giant, Farley Mowatt. Her film won the Grand Prize at the 2009 Banff Film Festival

Karsten was always generous with his time and was happy to give readings from his books to Alberta Wilderness Association audiences on several occasions.

Karsten's death was as uncompromising as his life: suffering from a rare and terminal neurological disease, he chose a medical-assisted death at his own time of choosing. It is hard to think of a better definition of a life well lived. Karsten touched the lives of more people than he ever realised, and his legacy will live on.

*-Nigel Douglas*

