Outdoors

A Year of Adventures for Wilderness

The sun was warm, and the wind ruffled our hair as two dozen of us stood on the edge of the coulee overlooking the Rosebud River, about an hour north of Calgary, Alberta. It was early July, and everyone was here on an Adventure for Wilderness to understand just what made this place so special. A prairie falcon perched on an outcrop below us and, as we began to make our way into the coulee, a bull moose was flushed from a stand of aspen and disappeared over the coulee rim.

Our group had just come from a couple of kilometres upstream, where bank swallows darted in and out of their homes on a steep riverbank. Just a few hundred metres from that spot, a racetrack may soon disturb the idyllic surroundings — but not if the folks at Save the Rosebud have anything to say about it. We heard from biologists inventorying species in the area and learned about how, thanks to bat monitoring, an important wintering area was discovered. The adventurers were graciously hosted by neighbouring landowners, who work to keep habitat in this valley intact and fiercely oppose the racetrack. It is one thing to read about an issue in the news, but quite a different one to stand on the ground, smell the warmed earth, and see with your own eyes the beauty of a place. Speaking to people after this adventure, it had a profound effect on them. Walking the land connected them to this place more than words on a page ever could.

And that's just what the Adventures for Wilderness program aims to do — connect people to Wild Alberta in meaningful ways. Sometimes it is just getting out on the land to smell the heady scent of subalpine fir and feel the mountain breeze in our hair. Things that fill the soul and give us the strength to continue to fight for them. Sometimes our volunteer experts show us new ways to look at places and understand more about the creatures and plants that call them home. And sometimes, like in Rosebud, we learn about threats that face these special places and what we, as individuals, can do to help.

Last year, our Adventures program was



spectacular; we connected over 400 participants with Wild Alberta. We explored dunes near Wainwright, rambled along ridges on the Eastern Slopes, and revelled in the riot of wildflowers blanketing the Milk River Ridge. We learned about pollinators and birds, beavers and geology. Some places we visited, like the Rosebud, are under threat. Artist Carolyn Fisher and AWA conservation specialist Devon Earl took folks for a day of art and education in the upper Highwood which, thanks to thousands of folks pushing back against industry, has a brief reprieve from the logging that was planned for the past two winters.

We also journeyed to places where degradation and destruction have already run rampant. More than 50 folks showed up in mid-March to the Oldman Reservoir. They heard stories of communities having to dredge and pump the river bottom or truck water in because of severe drought conditions and wanted to learn more. It was like a punch to the gut to see hundreds of metres of mud stretching along the valley bottom of what used to be a clear, vibrant river, home to many native trout. We only witnessed a dirty trickle of water wending its way through a deeply eroded channel in the parched, cracked reservoir. Despite this, we learned about its history, and

Kirby England ferries adventurers across part of a beaver pond as they learned first-hand the importance of this misunderstood rodent to our watersheds. **Photo © L. Wallis**



drew strength from the fight against the dam. Local biologists shared their knowledge about what must happen in the future to support healthy rivers for people and wildlife.

It is such a pleasure to share the fantastic work that other individuals and organizations are doing to protect Wild Alberta. AWA partners with numerous organizations to help amplify their messages, and our adventures were led by almost two dozen knowledgeable volunteer coordinators. We learned about beaver coexistence projects, how conservation easements protect private land, and how volunteers are working to save native fish from irrigation canals.

This year's adventure calendar is filling up join us on an Adventure for Wilderness, or help us celebrate AWA's 60th anniversary by answering the question, "What's your 60?" and create your own nature-based challenge around the number 60. It can be done anywhere in the province and can be whatever speaks most to YOU. The only limit is your imagination! On top of connecting with nature however you can, it's also a concrete way you can support conservation.

Learn more about joining the challenge on our website, where you can also sponsor other participants who have committed to goals like 60 nature walks, writing 60 nature haikus, or taking 60 photos of flowers. There are also people hiking, biking or skiing 60 trails, visiting 60 parks, writing 60 letters to government officials or planting 60 native plants on their properties. We can't wait to find out what's YOUR 60?

-Lindsey Wallis