

Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association (SAPAA)

NEWSLETTER NO. 18, SEPTEMBER 2007

UPCOMING EVENT

Annual General Meeting, Saturday, October 20th

Please join us at the Kerry Wood Nature Centre in Red Deer (see the attached sheet for the full program and map to the Centre) for our annual get-together, which includes presentations, our AGM, and a short field trip to blow the cobwebs away before we head home mid-afternoon.

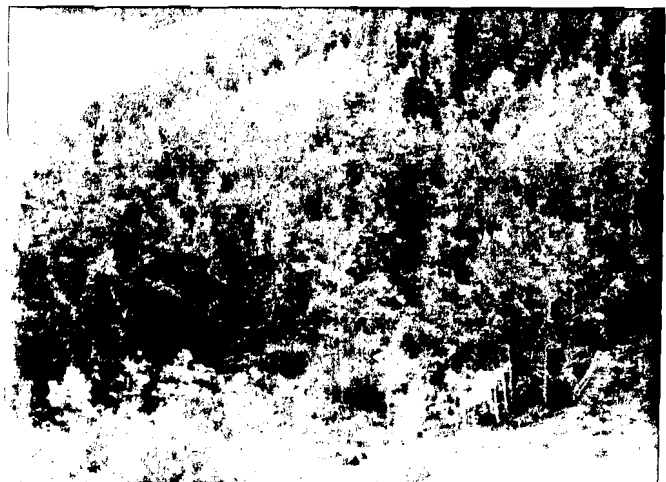
This year we are fortunate to have **Bill Werry**, the new Assistant Deputy Minister, of Parks, Conservation, Recreation and Sport in Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture, come out and provide us with his "fresh look" at Parks and Protected Areas. We are pleased to see that he is continuing the tradition of accessibility established by former ADM, John Kristensen, who retired this past spring. (Best wishes for a happy retirement, John.) Bill's academic background is science and he has 30 years of experience working in the public and not-for-profit sectors.

Also joining us again at the AGM will be **Rebecca Reeves**, ParksWatch Program Coordinator, CPAWS (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society), Northern Alberta Chapter. We enjoyed Rebecca's talk and enthusiasm immensely when she presented at our AGM a couple of years ago, and look forward to hearing about her work since then. She is the main author of a recently released CPAWS report entitled "The State of Alberta's Parks and Protected Areas: an analysis of the challenges and opportunities for ecological integrity," the theme of her presentation. Rebecca has a B.Sc. in Environmental and Conservation Sciences. She was the co-founder of the CPAWS Northern Alberta ParksWatch Program and has coordinated the program's research, outreach and fundraising efforts for over 2 years. To get a heads-up on the CPAWS report, check out their website at www.cpawsnab.org and click on "June 13, 2007, "Poor Parks..." in the right-hand column. After both talks there will be an opportunity for questions and lively discussion.

In this era of rampant development in Alberta, increasing concern about the sustainability of our resources such as water, and some surplus money in our government coffers, now more than ever the time is ripe to express our support for our protected areas and make our wishes known to government for their secure future. Please set aside this day to update yourselves on plans and prospects for our P/PA, and reaffirm your sense of commitment and community-of-interest with fellow Stewards!



Homeless? Leather grape fern (*Botrychium multifidum*) was successfully transplanted into Astotin Natural Area. Now it will have to find a new home. The grape ferns or moonworts include a number of rare species. Many occur on well-drained soils both in the lowlands and the mountains. *Photo: P.J. Côtteril*



View of trail at Big Hill Spring Provincial Park, July 2007. A group of enthusiastic volunteers gave the Park a thorough weeding this fall. *Photo: P.J. Côtteril*

"Non-intrusive activities" – A Definition (for consideration at the AGM)

Under SAPAA's bylaws, members are required to be in general agreement with the purposes of the Association. This includes promoting preservation, protection and restoration of the ecological integrity of Alberta's Protected Areas, and using these areas for educational, research and non-intrusive nature-oriented activities, compatible with each individual site. At SAPAA's last AGM (Oct 2006), the Board was directed to come up with a definition of 'non-intrusive activities,' so that stewards or potential stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas understand what is meant by this phrase.

The Board is proposing the following definition of recreational 'non-intrusive activities' as "activities that can be sustained without impacting the biological diversity of an area, or impinging on the enjoyment of other minimal impact users". See also articles in newsletters # 14 (February, 2006) and # 16 (March, 2007) discussing the various points. This definition will therefore be brought forward at our AGM on Oct. 20 for discussion and clarification and could then be included in SAPAA's policies. This would not require a by-law change. You are encouraged to come to the meeting and take part in this discussion.

Our Parks and Protected Areas are facing increasing pressure from the rising population and new recreational demands. By promoting this sort of ecologically sensitive and respectful usage, with some necessary limitations from the carrying capacity of each site, it should be possible for a significant number of people to obtain an optimal experience, without destroying the conservation objective.

PAST EVENT

Annual Volunteer Stewards' Conference, Crimson Lake Provincial Park, 7-9th September, 2007

By Hubert Taube

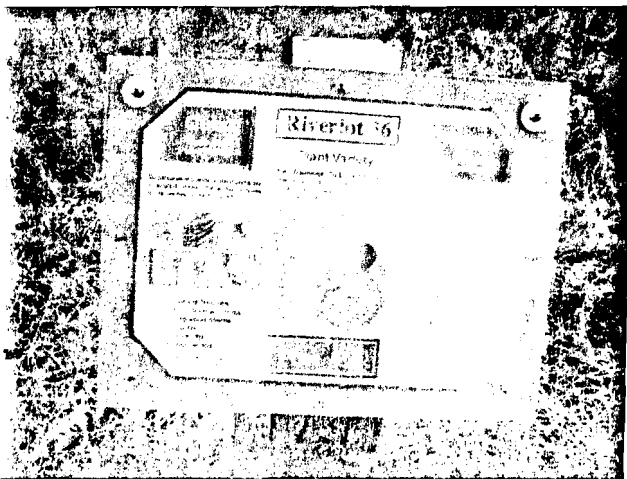
This year's Conference concentrated on celebration of the 75 years' existence of Alberta Provincial Parks. No seminars or expert talks were scheduled. Instead, stewards participated in a range of outdoor activities: hiking, canoeing, horseback riding and GPS usage. Opportunities for informal interaction between departmental staff (about 20) and Volunteer Stewards were also provided, of course.

The conference was attended by about 120 volunteers, approximately 20 of whom were Natural Areas Volunteer Stewards. The main event was the Annual Banquet, hosted by Doug Marvin, Head of Stewardship Services. VIPs in attendance were: Ty Lund, MLA, Rocky Mountain House, Bill Symko, Deputy Mayor, Rocky Mountain House and Bill Werry, (new) Assistant Deputy Minister, Parks, Conservation, Recreation and Sport Division.

Awards were presented by MLA Ty Lund. Of special interest to Volunteer Stewards:

Outstanding Individual Steward, Elmar Augart, Lloyd Creek Natural Area and Outstanding Steward Group, Beaverhill Bird Observatory Society, accepted by Chuck Priestley.

The banquet speech was delivered by Carey Booth, Head of Visitor Services, Fish Creek Provincial Park, and was entitled "75 Years of Provincial Parks - A Celebration." He provided a summary of the history of the approximately 520 P/PA sites, referring to the shift of emphasis from recreation to conservation. He stressed the importance of P/PAs for education, nature experiences and biological research. The presentation concluded with a picture show from about 20 different Provincial Parks.



Interpretive sign designed by Dan Stoker at Riverlot 56 Natural Area. Visit the area to see many more such innovative signs.

SAPAA Officers, 2005-2007

The following were elected by acclamation at the last AGM: **President – Peter Kershaw; V-P – Hubert Taube; Treasurer/Membership Secretary – Marilyn Shannon; Recording Secretary – Alison Dinwoodie; Directors: Jim Pratt, John Woltenko ((730) 459-0475, Tony Blake; Newsletter – Patsy Cotterill, Linda Kershaw.** Remember, new blood is always welcome!

Check out our Botany Sheet No. 4 on Rushes and Wood-rushes of Alberta!

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OUR PARKS AND PROTECTED AREAS?

By Alison Dinwoodie

Do you want to know what is happening in your Parks and Protected Areas?

– Join SAPAA and find out!

Do you want to have a voice at the table when Parks policies are being discussed? – Join SAPAA and support our efforts on your behalf!

SAPAA's Board of Directors usually meets with Parks and Protected Areas (P/PA) personnel every year to discuss matters of importance to Stewards and P/PA in general. The following are some notes from the Board's meeting on May 30th this year with P/PA officials, as well as from further conversations I had with them at the recent Volunteer Stewards Conference at Crimson Lake on 7-9th September.

Future of Parks and Protected Areas?

The Strategic Direction for Parks document (the Plan), which was presented at the Stewards Conference in Lac La Biche last year, is still making its rounds. Various stakeholders, including representatives from the OHV organizations, attended a meeting with the planning team of P/PA to discuss the Plan. We were somewhat miffed to learn that SAPAA had apparently not been invited to represent the Stewards, but then we discovered that this was the result of miscommunication rather than neglect. Better communication from officials to Stewards is required to avoid such misunderstandings in the future.

The general direction of Parks policy is to address Premier Stelmach's mandate for parks: "to accommodate population growth and improve quality of life opportunities." Talking to P/PA people at the Stewards Conference, they all kept assuring me that conservation/preservation is the most important objective for Parks, and this reflects public opinion: several polls back this up, it's not just stewards' pleas! I suggested that if public recreation is being promoted it should be towards more low-impact, sustainable activities. In addition to all Parks' pretty publicity pictures, they need more public education to highlight what are unacceptable activities (e.g., pictures of OHVs ripping up the land, analogous to Parks Canada's pictures of bears in camp coolers!). As we heard earlier this year, more money has been given to Parks which, laudably, has been directed towards refurbishing a number of the key Provincial Parks. The general feeling of Parks staff is that things are slowly turning their way and they feel more optimistic about the future than for some time.

(This is no doubt why, apart from the fact that this is the Parks' 75th anniversary, they felt that celebration should be the theme of the fall Stewards' conference.)

Some good news is the recent announcement of the creation of two new parks in the Drayton Valley area, Eagle Point Provincial Park and Blue Rapids Provincial Recreation Area. These parks include four Natural Areas (NAs): N. Saskatchewan, Drayton Valley, Pembina Field and Washout Saskatchewan, plus extra crown land, which means that the lands in the former NAs will now receive a higher degree of protection (and better management of OHVs).

However, the bad news is that we may see more trade-offs that will involve losses like the unfortunate ceding of the Astotin and North of Bruderheim Natural Areas to the "Industrial Heartland" development northeast of Edmonton. The proposal is to exchange these lands for additions of land to protected areas elsewhere, if the traded land is of greater ecological and economic value (see bottom of page 4). The long-term position will be to consider whether the exchange is of greater benefit to the public than maintaining small isolated islands (regardless of their unique ecology?). Parks' rationale is to look at bigger-picture, more coherent units of protection, e.g., the Red Deer River and the N. Saskatchewan River (which is being nominated as a Heritage River). Hence our advice to **Stewards who wish to hang on to their Natural Area is: make sure you have strong local support, as well as support from the municipality and your MLA, for your NA, particularly if it is only designated by a Protective Notation (PNT) and not by Order-in-Council.** We wish that Stewards could be better informed about the status of their Natural Areas and their likely future – well ahead of the press releases, for instance!

Management of P/PA

In a major change, Parks have signed a **Memorandum of Understanding** with the Sustainable Resource Development Department such that Parks will take the lead in management of P/PA on public lands, although all parties are supposed to

continue working together. The MOU still has to go through the (slow!) process of legal ratification. There is concern as to how this will work out in practice for Stewards, particularly until more new staff are trained. Stewards should make sure that their concerns are brought to the attention of these new land managers. (You may wish to find out about who these people are yourselves, as rarely do Stewards hear from the administrators in this regard.)

Dispositions that were previously under Forestry, Lands and Wildlife will now be under P/PA. The Public Lands Act still provides the authority for P/PA, but P/PA needs to stand up to the energy industry, in particular. However, I was assured that Parks will maintain a strong position at the current provincial Land Use Framework discussions and not just be a passive observer as in the past. P/PA will need all the support Stewards can give them to maintain their mandate of primary protection! OHV activity in particular remains a major problem. Parks staff, and other managers, share our concern. SAPAA emphasised again the need for stronger legislation – signs can be too easily ignored by thoughtless users. Legislation is apparently being worked on (slowly!), but it can take at least two years for even minor amendments to pass. Enforcement and penalties must be adequate for legislation to be effective.

Stewardship Program

Doug Marvin, Head of Stewardship Services, has been looking at a new direction for the Stewardship program. We had hoped there would be more information available on this at the Conference, but there was none, not even any general discussion. (Our constant theme is better and more timely communication!)

Doug did discuss with us in the summer what we considered the *barriers* and *benefits* for Stewards of the Stewards Program. Barriers include the lack of back-up dealing with abusers, legislation and enforcement, coordination with other staff/departments, and communication, particularly with action responses to Stewards' reports. Staff admitted that sometimes it was difficult to get information from other departments, when personnel are constantly changing.

through the (slow!) process of legal ratification.

The major benefit for Stewards was identified as the opportunity to focus their interest on a particular area, and so gain greater knowledge and appreciation for it, particularly over time. Another benefit is assisting in its long-term conservation, working with government officials and having some input into site management. This used to be much more the case in the past, when Stewards felt they were treated more as partners with value placed on their in-depth knowledge, and less as unpaid workers.

Communication (and the Stewards Conference)

Communication is mentioned frequently as a significant factor in the success, or otherwise, of Stewardship activities. The recent P/PA's "Volunteer Conference to Celebrate our Volunteers and the 75th Anniversary of P/PA" was successful as just that. (See also Hubert Taube's notes on the meeting.) We all celebrated a very pleasant weekend at Crimson Lake Provincial Park, September 7-9th, consisting of outdoor activities, entertainment and a visit to the nearby Parks Canada Rocky Mountain Historical Site. Also included was accommodation at the Pioneer Lodge and excellent food – and all for free! Stewards were recognized with presentations and speeches, and Parks were honoured in a fine presentation by Carey Booth.

Nevertheless, these Conferences are the one time in the year when P/PA staff have an opportunity to present and discuss their policies to Stewards, discuss site management issues, and help in problem-solving. Also, interesting and useful sessions are usually presented. This year, these opportunities were lacking, which means a two-year gap before they will arise again – too long to keep up with the rapid pace of developments. This may explain the poor turnout of the Stewards, and the absence of a number of active 'regulars.' About one-fifth of the participants were Stewards of P/PA (less than 10 % of all Stewards?). I found myself repeating the need for better communication when I was talking with the various Parks personnel there, but I was also trying, I hope, to suggest a few potential solutions.

Loss of Astotin and part of North of Bruderheim Natural Areas

On May 29th this year P/PA staff called a meeting in Fort Saskatchewan to announce formally to the Fort Saskatchewan Naturalist Society (FSNS), the Stewards of Astotin Natural Area, and other interested parties, that the Government of Alberta is considering a proposal to cede this natural area and approximately half of North of Bruderheim Natural Area to private interests for development in the "Industrial Heartland" area northeast of Fort Saskatchewan. According to Doug Bowes, Manager, Parks Service, Policy and Land Use Planning, this would involve an exchange of approximately 800 acres of land (mostly sandy soils with jackpine forest and poor fens) for 2026 acres "of greater ecological significance and greater economic value," which would be added to other prime natural and protected provincial parks areas in the region. Bowes says that if the Government decides to proceed with this land exchange, its intent would be to close the deal by the end of this calendar year.

Clearly, such a move would be in line with the government's policy of expanding existing natural areas for greater protection of biodiversity, but one cannot help wondering how much value the government places on its sandy Natural Areas north and northeast of Edmonton, especially given the fact that several have been ravaged by fires in recent years, are popular with OHV'ers and already have little legal protection. Condolences to the FSNA on their loss, after 15 years of stewardship!