

SAPAA NEWS

Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association

"Stewards helping stewards"

No. 38, 2021

Fireweed, *Chamaenerion angustifolium*, Halfmoon Lake Natural Area

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

As we get the newsletter up and running again, we're asking for simple reports, stories and issues or concerns from stewards on the area for which they are responsible, and/or including a few photos to illustrate as per . We would like to have 1-2 feature articles, including on stewarded sites, or other protected areas, in each newsletter issue. The aim is to create more interest in, and support for, our Natural Areas amongst the general public.

Articles and photos may be submitted to Judith Golub at sapaanews21@gmail.com

In This Issue:

- Government of Alberta – The Story of Optimizing Alberta's Parks
- Trail Rehabilitation in the Nick of Time
- An Update on the Restructuring of SAPAA
- Early History of the Alberta Protected Areas System
- Pre-Spring Visit to Northwest of Bruderheim Natural Area

Government of Alberta – The Story of Optimizing Alberta's Parks by Chris Smith

The last year has been a turbulent time for Alberta's parks. In February 2020, the Government of Alberta announced its Optimizing Alberta Parks plan, which laid out several initiatives for Alberta Parks, including 164 parks for proposed removal from the system (out of a total of 473 parks), closing or partially closing 20 sites, and looking to implement additional park partnerships through prospective sale or transfer to municipalities, non-profits, or First Nations. Almost immediately after the announcement, there was a substantial public interest in this issue, heightened by the challenges presented by COVID-19 and the unprecedented usage of our parks and public lands this past summer.

As Albertans flocked to our parks and wild spaces, it raised questions about why the government was looking at removing and closing parks when it was clear there was a substantial demand for outdoor recreation, especially when the proposed cost savings (~\$5 million) were relatively small. Rural municipalities, outdoor recreation retailers, conservation organizations and concerned Albertans all had questions about what this would mean for our parks system. This led to calls for public consultations to be done to better inform the public on these changes and so that they in turn could provide their thoughts and concerns to the government on their parks plan.

On December 22, 2020, the Government of Alberta announced that all parks included in their February "Optimizing Alberta Parks" plan would now retain their current designations and associated protections. The announcement stated that "All sites will maintain their parks designations, regardless of whether they have confirmed an operational partnership. All sites will remain protected in law, and are

accessible to Albertans for recreation and enjoyment.” While the government’s Optimizing Alberta Parks plan is no longer moving forward, there is still risk that these areas could lose their protections, as legislative changes to Alberta’s parks system are expected under the province’s new Crown Land Vision coming up later this year.



Overall, this year has highlighted that citizens’ voices can be heard and make a difference. It was amazing to see Albertans from all walks of life speaking out in defence of our parks and protected spaces. Although there is more work to be done, the collective voices of the tens of thousands of people who put up signs, held protests, attended webinars, wrote their elected representatives, engaged the media and spoke to friends on this issue were heard.

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Trail Rehabilitation in the Nick of Time by Dave Ealey, President of Wagner Natural Area Society. Originally published in the September-December issue of “Friends of the Fen”, the Wagner Society newsletter. Reprinted with permission. Photo by author.



Pictured are some of the volunteers who helped to upgrade and spread out gravel along the south half of the Marl Pond Trail - Alan Hingston, Dave Ealey and Mike Jenkins.

We owe thanks to Alberta Parks for a prodigious pile of pea-sized pebbles plunked precisely on the first Thursday in November (5th).

Early on Friday (Nov. 6) the workers came prepared to do their chore. Ten volunteers, spread gravel along the trail from south of boardwalks to signpost 2 (about 350 m). Significant is that four of the volunteers were new. Unfortunately it had rained a little overnight and the volunteers faced a hard layer of frozen gravel encasing the precious grit.

Committed shovel and rake work, an estimated 135 wheelbarrows later, and the entire trail from the big marl pond south of the boardwalk all the way to signpost #2 at the edge of the open field was plastered. We hope the visitors appreciate the stabilized pathway. It will likely be easier to walk if we get a significant snowmelt this year. Saturday (Nov. 7) it snowed--it was officially winter; there is no way we could have done anything with the gravel in those conditions!!

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An Update on the Restructuring of SAPAA by Hubert Taube, President

The last two years have seen reduced activity by SAPAA. Several reasons can be cited for this state of affairs:

- uncertainty in policies of the current government re management of provincially Protected Areas,
- lack of activity in the provincial Volunteer Stewardship Program, and
- generally reduced interaction due to concern about the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizing and holding our 2020 AGM (actually held on January 23, 2021) brought new life to our organization. Our principal objectives, to some extent intertwined, remain the same:

- protection of the natural environment
- environmental education of the public
- communication between stewards.

Our activities have languished over the years in tune with the low-functioning of the government’s Volunteer Stewards Program, but at our AGM this year we decided to try a new approach in the conduct of our affairs. Originally, when SAPAA was established in 2001, all SAPAA members were

provincial government-appointed stewards of provincial Protected Areas, largely Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves. However, SAPAA's by-laws have always stated that associated memberships are available to interested people/organizations outside of government appointment, as long as they don't conflict with our prime goal of environmental protection.

We are now trying to increase our numbers (thereby fulfilling our prime directives) by reaching out to environmental naturalists and conservationists outside of the government program. To achieve this we are proposing to create two additional categories of members:

- "stewards" - individuals who may adopt a particular PA, visit it regularly and report on the conditions of this particular site, and
- "general members" who more generally wish to visit a larger number of PAs, report on them and promote their conservation.

Stewardship could take a wide variety of forms such as:

- essentially passive monitoring
- conducting field trips and surveys
- planning and carrying out maintenance activities at our sites
- influencing government decisions in the development of new approaches to parks operations and policies, and
- in general, acting as advocates for environmental conservation.

Emphasis will be placed on SAPAA's traditional Protected Areas, classified as Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Wildland Provincial Parks, as defined by the WAERNAHR and the Provincial Parks Acts. We might also consider covering natural areas designated by various biodiversity programs such as IBA (Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas) and KBA (Key Biodiversity Areas).

Our main goal for the near term will be more frequent publishing of newsletters (such as this), posting materials more frequently on our website, especially under the Protected Areas Information tab and, of course, reaching out to the general naturalist community for feedback and to solicit membership in our organization.

The SAPAA Board has been strengthened at our last AGM by the election of two new members.

It now consists of the following:

Hubert Taube, President

Patsy Cotterill, Secretary (with additional membership and treasury duties)

Chris Smith, General Director, responsible for virtual communications

Judith Golub, General Director, with principal duties of newsletter production

Frank Potter, General Director.

We encourage members to step forward, to participate in our affairs and thus reduce the load on the existing board members. We are also keen to receive your feedback on the restructuring of SAPAA and stewardship opportunities.

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Early History of the Alberta Protected Areas System by Peter Achuff

At the request of President Hubert Taube, Peter Achuff has provided an account (slightly edited here) of the history of Alberta's natural areas and ecological reserves from the late 1960s until 1977, writing in the first person and from personal knowledge.

Beginnings of the Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves System

Alberta's system of natural areas and ecological reserves system sprang from three sources: Centennial Natural Areas, the International Biological Program (IBP), and natural areas that were created by Orders in Council (OCs).

Centennial Natural Areas Committee. As part of activities around the 1967 Centennial of Canada, the Alberta Government, Department of Lands and Forests formed a Natural Areas Committee to select areas of public land containing significant/special natural features and to ensure their protection and



Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve

management. Committee members included representatives from the Lands Division, Alberta Forest Service, Provincial Parks, and Fish and Wildlife Division. By 1968, the committee had selected a number of candidate areas and was developing legislative proposals for protection and management. I don't remember all of the candidate areas but, as I recall, they included at least Plateau Mountain, Kootenay Plains, Goose Mountain, Kleskun Hill, and Red Rock Coulee. These areas were selected on the basis of both biological and physical features. The information about the natural features of these areas came largely from Lands and Forests field staff.

International Biological Program. The IBP was a 10-year (1964-1974) program of coordinated scientific research on the "biological basis of productivity and human welfare [including] the conservation and growth of natural resources for human benefit." Canadian participation was coordinated by the Canadian Committee for the IBP, under the auspices of the National Research Council, and involved many university and government scientists. The program had a number of themes/working groups, one of which was the Conservation of Terrestrial Ecosystems (CT), which was directed nationally by scientists at the University of Alberta, and was endorsed by the Canadian Council of Resource Ministers and the Canadian Institute of Forestry.

The primary objective of the CT program was to develop a system of ecological reserves that would conserve both typical and special features (e.g., rare, fragile, endangered, best example) in areas suitable for scientific research, including recovery from modification. This included both scientific and educational activities.

The main activity of IBP-CT in Canada, which ran from 1967 until 1974, was to develop a list of proposed ecological reserves based on standardised survey and assessment techniques. The province was divided into a system of natural regions (which eventually developed into the current Natural Regions and Subregions classification), each with a number of academic and governmental scientists who selected candidate areas and surveyed them, often in conjunction with provincial government field staff. The information for each candidate ecological reserve was summarised in a standardised report format. Working groups in each province/territory prepared reports on candidate areas which were consolidated nationally and then sent to an IBP international data centre in England. Thus, the information was gathered according to rigorous scientific standards and, similarly, selection was based on scientific evidence, considering both representation of typical features as well as special features. Among the areas proposed by the Alberta IBP-CT program were Beehive, Crow Lake, and Twin River. The commonality of objectives of the two groups, one governmental and the other non-governmental, led the Natural Areas Committee in 1969 (as I recall) to invite someone from the Alberta IBP-CT working group to liaise with the Natural Areas Committee and participate in its regular meetings to share information and coordinate activities. This led to the proposed Centennial Natural Areas being surveyed with the IBP-CT protocols and the adoption by the Natural Areas Committee of the broader IBP-CT objectives as part of a natural areas system for Alberta.

A second part of the IBP-CT effort was to develop model legislation for establishing, protecting and managing ecological reserves. The Natural Areas Committee used this model in its work and many of the concepts in the Alberta Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas, and Heritage Rangelands Act (2006) reflect this model legislation.

OC Natural Areas. In 1971, just prior to a provincial election, the Government of Alberta established a large number of (possibly close to 100?) natural areas by Order in Council under the Public Lands Act (OC 454/71). These areas were primarily located from a bit north of Edmonton to south of Calgary. I don't know the exact criteria used to select these areas, but all were Crown Land without a current disposition (e.g., grazing lease, sand and gravel permits) and many had a protective notation in the Public Lands records, having been noted by Public Lands inspectors as being worthy of conservation protection because of special features, sensitivity to erosion or commercial use, and/or use by local people for informal recreation activities. The Bruderheim and Redwater areas were part of this group.

Initial information on these areas was often limited and, as described below, further resource survey work was done to enable evaluation of these areas as part of a provincial system of protected areas. Some remained as natural areas, others moved to another status, such as provincial parks, Kananaskis Country or other protected areas. Some were released from candidate natural area status if they were considered not necessary for the provincial system.



P. Cotterill, August 2012

Clyde Fen is a Natural Area under Protective Notation, which means that it doesn't have the full protection of an OC Natural Area. Part of it has been sold off to private ownership and conversion to pasture, resulting in the loss of a large portion of a pitcher plant population, and an access road to a sand extraction operation bisects the original fen. Nevertheless the fen has survived and is stewarded by the Alberta Native Plant Council under the leadership of Derek Johnson. It is regularly visited for May Count and orchid surveys.

Developing and Implementing a System Plan

In early 1973, I was hired by the national IBP-CT program to coordinate completion of the reports on the proposed ecological reserves from each province/territory and, consequently, I became the IBP-CT representative at Alberta Natural Areas Committee meetings. The committee was working on two main issues: the policy and structure for a comprehensive provincial system (natural areas, ecological reserves, etc.) and legislative changes needed to implement the policy (establish, protect and manage areas appropriately).

Because of a growing workload, the committee decided a full-time position was needed and in June 1974 I began as the first Alberta natural areas coordinator/manager. With IBP-CT efforts ending formally in early 1974, Alberta scientists formed the Alberta Ecological Survey to continue work toward IBP-CT objectives. Similar groups were formed in other jurisdictions and the Canadian Council on Ecological Areas was formed to coordinate efforts across Canada.

The proposed policy/system developed by the Natural Areas Committee included:

1. *Ecological Reserves* of three types:

- Major Ecological Reserve (areas containing examples of most, if not all, ecosystem types representative of a biogeographical subregion)
- Supplementary Ecological Reserve (one or more ecosystem types commonly occurring in the subregion but not present in a Major Ecological Reserve)
- Special Ecological Reserve (containing exceptional features, biological or geological).

These categories were later consolidated into one type: Ecological Reserve.

2. *Natural Areas* of two types

- Recreational Natural Area (sensitive or scenic public land or natural features maintained in a natural state for conservation, nature appreciation, and/or low intensity outdoor recreation)
- Educational Natural Area (areas of public land for environmental education use that are easily accessible throughout the province and maintained in a natural condition).

Educational Natural Areas were added to the system in conjunction with the activities of the Alberta Government Environmental Education Committee, which had membership from the Department of Lands and Forests, Environment, Education, Advanced Education, and the Provincial Museum. Broadly, the role of Alberta Lands and Forests was to provide suitable public land areas and the others were to develop and deliver curriculum and educational activities. Support for environmental education was later essentially withdrawn and the two types of natural area were combined into just one, as reflected in the current Alberta Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas, and Heritage Rangelands Act.

The candidate areas from the three sources cited above comprised more than 200 areas (if I remember correctly). Many of the OC Natural Areas lacked a sufficient survey of natural features, which was needed to evaluate their suitability for playing a role in the proposed province-wide system. The Alberta Ecological Survey obtained funding for field surveys and, in conjunction with the Natural Areas Committee over several summers in the mid-1970s, developed basic information on both OC Natural Areas and other candidate areas, especially in remote parts of the province that had not been surveyed by the IBP-CT efforts. These included, for example, Caribou Mountains, Athabasca Dunes, Bob Creek and Cardinal River Divide. As survey information was obtained, areas were evaluated with the result that some were retained and others released from consideration as natural areas or ecological reserves.

So, the areas were selected based on solid scientific information about their natural features and considering their role in a comprehensive provincial system, reflecting the objectives and concepts that are in the current Alberta Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas, and Heritage Rangelands Act.

When I left the natural areas program in 1977, this survey and selection process was still on-going. I was followed in the coordinator/manager position by Diane Griffin, who is now a Senator in Ottawa from PEI, and then by Peter Lee, who has left the government but still lives in Edmonton.

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Peter L. Achuff was the first Alberta Natural Areas program coordinator from 1974-1977. He worked as a botanist and conservation biologist over the past 40 years for both federal and provincial agencies and as a consultant, mainly in western and northern North America but also in Asia. He has worked in several national parks in western Canada and carried out project assignments in the Arctic. Currently, he is a Scientist Emeritus with Parks Canada, primarily involved with species at risk and rare plant conservation.

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We plan to continue the history of Alberta's Protected Areas with the reminiscences of other actors who played key roles in it in future issues of the newsletter.

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Pre-Spring Visit to Northwest of Bruderheim Natural Area: A Pictorial Essay

by Hubert Taube. Photos by author.



On Thursday, 2021 03 18, I visited “my” Natural Area with Frank Potter (pictured), our newest SAPAA member and board director. As it turned out it was an exceptional early spring day with cloudless blue skies and temperatures reaching 15°C when we toured this 40-year-old Natural Area, dominated by jackpines and fortunately no longer threatened by “de-listment.”

We explored small areas around three of the well sites: one in the northeast section (a well I call E4) and two in the southwest sections (called QQ1 and QQ2 by me).

Most of the landscape was still covered by patches of melting snow. Tracks of coyotes, deer, and moose were abundant throughout; there were also some signs of human foot traffic (snowshoes). Tracks of motorized recreational traffic were evident on all rights-of-way for powerlines, pipelines, seismic lines as well as on some tracks originally used as horse trails.

Essentially, this means there has been little change over the last 20 years, except that disturbance by ATV traffic is increasing, particularly on the former horse trails.



Jackpine, dead and surviving the 2009 fire, side-by-side.



Character tree, reminder of the past.



New life (12-year-old jackpine) in front of the deceased old-timer.



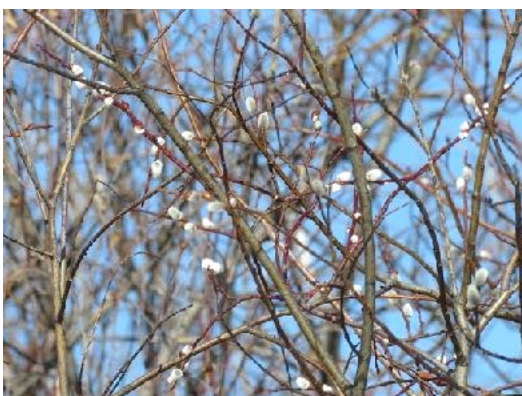
L. Stand of young jackpine.



R. Aspen, white spruce and tamarack in a low-lying area.



Green alder, *Alnus alnobetula*, old and new reproductive structures.



Left and centre: Bursting willow catkins, most likely of pussy willow, *Salix discolor*. Right: bishop's-cap, *Mitella nuda*, an evergreen herb of the forest floor.

Mission Statement:

SAPAA is a group of volunteer stewards whose objectives are:

- To provide a forum for stewards to share information and provide assistance to Protected Areas.
- To promote the preservation, protection and restoration of ecological integrity in Alberta's Protected Areas.
- To promote the use of Protected Areas for non-intrusive educational, research and recreational activities.
- To ensure that stewards' concerns are heard by government and by the public, particularly with regard to legislation and management policies for Protected Areas.

For more information on SAPAA and Protected Areas, please visit our website at

www.sapaastewards.com

For example, for more information on Clyde Fen Natural Area, go to the Protected Areas Information tab, then to Natural Areas and click on the blue link.

A membership form is also available on the website.

If you are interested in becoming a member:

- * SAPAA's newsletter keeps you informed about current information that is pertinent to Volunteer Stewards in all of Alberta's Natural Areas.
- * As a SAPAA member, you will have opportunities to get together with other stewards and explore different Natural Areas on field trips.
- * You can enjoy opportunities to hear and discuss topics of interest to stewards. At annual conferences, speakers have addressed pertinent topics such as how to make the most of Natural Areas, how to complete valuable inventories, and who is responsible for dealing with management concerns such as off-highway vehicle access. SAPAA has been fortunate in obtaining excellent speakers, including the Assistant Deputy Minister in charge of Parks & Protected Areas. Most importantly, stewards have time to discuss problems and find solutions.
- * SAPAA helps to ensure that your voice is heard. Members of the executive have met with Ministers and senior public servants. They have provided input on the Stewards Program and manual and on the draft Strategic Plan for Parks and Protected Areas.

Many thanks to those people who have renewed their membership fees this year. Please consider doing so if you haven't already. The membership application form can be found here:

<http://www.sapaastewards.com/HomePageFiles/SAPAAMembership.pdf>

Spring is on the way, and we wish you all good stewarding!

We welcome your feedback at sapaanews21@gmail.com



Beavers doing what beavers do best! Bilby Natural Area

J. Golub