

# SAPAA NEWS

Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association

"Stewards helping stewards"

No. 39, July 2021

Jack pine regrowth, *Pinus banksiana*, Opal Natural Area

## EDITORIAL:

Our articles from two active stewards in this issue reveal the incredible dedication it takes to maintain our natural areas through a partnership of provincial government and long term-invested stewards. Their stories reveal the difficulties they have faced and still face in the light of public attitudes in which natural areas are still considered waste lands, garbage dumps or recreational free-for-all instead of the life-giving, rare and precious ecosystems that they are. Our hats off to all stewards, including those who mentor the younger generations and young stewards themselves who are stepping forward to accept the challenge of protecting our natural areas. Contributor Richard DeSmet refers to the Neil Young song "Look at Mother Nature on the run in the 1970s." He asks how much more is this the case in 2021? And how much more without the efforts of the volunteer stewards of Alberta? Good questions!

- Patsy Cotterill

## ANNOUNCEMENTS:

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>

Please also be aware that the SAPAA Newsletter will no longer be snail-mailed to non-members, or those whose memberships have lapsed, after this issue.

Please contribute any reports, stories, and/or photos and issues or concerns about the area for which you are a steward. Articles and photos may be submitted to Judith Golub at [sapaanews21@gmail.com](mailto:sapaanews21@gmail.com)

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**Letter from Big Lake Environment Support Society (BLESS)** by Dave Burkhart, Secretary, BLESS

The Big Lake Environment Support Society is becoming a little long in the tooth. Founded in 1991 with a somewhat ambitious mandate to protect, preserve, promote and conserve the integrity, character and

biological diversity of Big Lake, the organization enters its 30th year with a record of mixed success.

We have seen change over the years at BLESS. The Big Lake wetlands became a Conservation Natural Area under the Alberta Government's Special Places initiative in 2000. About that same time, Big Lake was designated a Globally Significant site for congregatory species and waterfowl concentrations under Canadian Important Bird Areas criteria. In 2005, The Alberta Government promoted our natural area to the stature of provincial park and dubbed it "Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park", commemorating Alberta's 100th year as a province and in honour of the 15th Lieutenant Governor of Alberta.

These changes have, to a certain degree, benefited the natural area. They have also brought pressures to bear. About the time Big Lake became a provincial park, Edmonton leap-frogged to its extreme north west boundary with residential development along the south shore of the lake. The Edmonton Big Lake Area Structure Plan had sat dormant since 1990 but was suddenly reinvigorated by capital investment that will eventually put 28,000 human residents adjacent to the lake, not the least due to the allure of living alongside a provincial park. About the same time that Edmonton developers found the lake, growth pressures in St. Albert forced a new road through to the east of the natural area, a road that severed wildlife corridors, bringing traffic noise and new threats to birds and mammals trying to cope with ever diminishing habitat. That road has become the new battle ground for BLESS in St. Albert, a line in the sand to keep at bay recent industrial/commercial intrusions into natural areas proposed in the City's new Municipal Development Plan. St. Albert also has an annexation pending into upland areas to the north of Big Lake in Sturgeon County, the second annexation within little more than a decade which is poised to turn even more farmland that doubles as wildlife habitat into asphalt-covered streets to support residential, commercial and industrial development.

We've seen some return for the province taking over our natural area in 2005. Staff at Alberta Parks rolled out a park management plan in 2019 and the province purchased some badly needed upland habitat in 2014 that may also provide park amenities for people someday, if funding for such is ever forthcoming. Provincial park budgets throughout the province though have, year after year, failed to provide sufficient funding for infrastructure necessary to ensure the long-term viability of natural areas adequate to meet the needs of current and future generations.

Our natural area has been hit hard by the current pandemic. Never before has Big Lake experienced such a sudden and teeming increase in visitors as people transition from entertainment venues shut down by the virus, to alternative pleasures found in nature. New ad hoc trails within the natural area proliferate while formal trail mapping and demarcation efforts stall for want of resources. A growing public interest in bicycling is leaving two-wheel impacts on vegetation. Traditional wildlife movements shift as animals seek to avoid the influx of humans. We don't see the pressure lessening to any great extent now that greater numbers of people have experienced the benefits nature has to offer for our well-being as a species.

We are still pulling in the traces at BLESS but are going to need more significant involvement from local and provincial governments if our natural area is to retain its integrity, character and bio-diversity over the long haul. We are however optimistic that current public demand for nature experiences will manifest in political pressure that drives action to ensure sustainability. Hope springs eternal as we continue to embrace our mandate into the future.

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**History of Halfmoon Lake Natural Area and its Stewardship** by Richard and Vera DeSmet *Photos by authors*

If the purpose is to recount the history of Halfmoon Lake Natural Area, it needs to be understood that it was never the goal of the people who charted that history to be provincial Natural Area Stewards. Their goal has always been, and still is, to be stewards of an ecologically viable natural area. Hundreds of people would eventually take part in making this goal a reality.

To start with, Vera DeSmet's Dad worked for the Alberta government department of Lands and Forests.





View from Lookout Point, Halfmoon Lake Natural Area  
Photo by Richard DeSmet, September 9, 2007

When the then premier of Alberta, Peter Lougheed, hatched a plan to identify undesignated parcels of crown land and present them to Albertans as a gift in Canada's centennial year, Vera's Dad was one of the people who compiled the list of lands to be considered. The Halfmoon Lake site was on that list.

Our family – Vera, myself and our three sons – were already invested in the Halfmoon Lake site years before it was designated a Natural Area by Order in Council in 1970 (portions of the site that were not included originally were officially included in the Order-

in-Council in May 1987). By the time the Volunteer Stewards Program came into being, we had already evaluated what would be needed in order for the Natural Area site to meet our goal. For decades, it had been a place where locals dumped their garbage and raced around on their ATVs.

During the first two summers of work, our family loaded out five tandem-truck boxes of trash. One item went back to the 1930s; it was a safe that was stolen from a bank in Thorhild. Other items ranged from soup cans to rusted out car bodies along with six plastic garbage bags full of spent shotgun casings.



DeSmet family bridge building late 1980s  
Halfmoon Lake Natural Area  
Photo by Vera DeSmet

The next task that we undertook was the development of 14 kms of hiking trail and two bridges, all the while communicating to locals the message that they were no longer to dump their garbage or engage in other destructive activities on the site.

When the Natural Areas Volunteer Steward Program came into being, we were the first to sign up. We cannot over-emphasize the help and guidance we received from the likes of Parks staff Peter Lee and Sandra Meyers. Were it not for their assistance, we would never have obtained a License of Occupation. Without the authority that this license gave us, we would never have been

able to accomplish many of the tasks we had taken on. Sandy Meyers prepared a Management Plan for Halfmoon Lake Natural Area which was approved in March 1988. In 1990 a Biophysical Report for the site was prepared by Lorna Allen, Sandy Meyers and other department staff.

With the site cleaned up, trails developed and bridges constructed, there was still a hole left to fill in the completion of our goal. At that time, the Halfmoon Lake Natural Area was in two parts, separated by 160 acres of Lafarge Canada property. For years, the people at Lafarge had ignored this property to the extent that when inquiries were made to lease the property, no one knew what property we were talking about. In order to purchase this property, we would need a considerable amount of help so a not-for-profit was formed, the Rainbow Equitation Society. A bingo license was acquired and then a casino license. Members of the Society worked these bingos and casinos for over two years before finally enough money was raised and, with the help of another not-for-profit, Pioneer Trail North Foundation, the Lafarge property was purchased. The addition of the Lafarge property connected the two parts of Halfmoon Lake Natural Area.

Since that time we, along with Rainbow Equitation Society and Pioneer Trail North Foundation, have

facilitated the purchase of an additional adjacent 320 acres by the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Today we, along with the Rainbow Equitation Society, steward 1600 acres of Natural Area and Nature Conservancy of Canada properties. Together, we look for opportunities to add to that land base. We feel that we have realized our goal to steward an ecologically viable natural area.

Robert Bateman wrote the foreward for NatureScape Alberta. In it he referenced a line in a Neil Young song: “Look at Mother Nature on the run in the 1970s”. How much more in 2021? And how much greater without the efforts of the volunteer stewards of Alberta?

Pioneer Trail North Foundation members have been volunteering as official stewards with the Provincial Natural Areas Program for over 35 years and have been recognized with Stewardship Excellence Awards. We are joined in stewardship with Rainbow Equitation Society and other community groups such as the Sturgeon Air Cadets. Now, the primary mission of Pioneer Trail North Foundation is:

- to provide land-based learning experiences for our youth and others
- to provide the land, tools and expertise needed for a wide range of land-based learning experiences
- to let nature do the hard work of passing on its knowledge to parent, to child; from teacher to student
- to fill people with land-based experiences that they will pass on to future generations

### Defining the ‘land-based learning experience’



The land-based learning experience is about bio-diversity, conservation and the eco-system. It is about being nurturing to both ourselves and those humans and non-humans with whom we share the land. It is about becoming directly involved with natural processes and becoming good stewards of nature. It is about melding tradition and knowledge with millennia of life wisdom. It is about learning, appreciating, marveling and studying. It is about inviting living creatures into our lives for the sheer pleasure of studying their behaviour. It is about pausing, connecting and examining. The land-based learning experience is about satisfying the basic human need to care, to be helpful and to make a difference. It is about acknowledging that we are

one link in an infinitely complex and finely-tuned natural system. It is about respect.

The Halfmoon Lake Natural Area is the basis for achieving these educational goals of Pioneer Trail North Foundation and the recreational goals of Rainbow Equitation Society, as well as the shared goal of inspiring future generations of stewards.

*Note:* Halfmoon Lake Natural Area is in the County of Thorhild, and the Dry Mixedwood Natural Subregion of the Boreal Forest Natural Region. Its special features are its jack pine forests on sandy soils and its access to the interesting south shoreline of Halfmoon Lake.

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### Big Island in southwest Edmonton – a Provincial Park? by Hubert Taube, President



The regulated status of Big Island, a floodplain on the western shore of the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton’s southwest, dubbed “island” because it is partly isolated from a steep landward embankment by an old oxbow channel, is uncertain. A 68-hectare parcel owned by the Province, it was promised to Edmontonians as a provincial park during the last election. Currently, three parties are negotiating the fate of the area: the Province, the City of Edmonton,



which is dictating the terms of the environmental assessment, and the original landowner, the Enoch Cree Nation, which would like to see at least part of the land dedicated to Indigenous cultural uses.

Some groups and individuals, including the Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition and some local landowners, fear that a provincial park classification will give too much licence for recreational use and infrastructure, more than the area, which includes river shore, mature balsam poplar forest, wetlands, and marshes surrounding the channel, can stand. The site will need considerable rehabilitation, such as removal of weeds and demarcation of appropriate trails, and some basic infrastructure, before opening to the public, slated (unrealistically) for 2022.

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### **Report on Ministik Bird Sanctuary, June 2021** by Jerry Shaw

I have been walking the main trail in the Ministik Bird Sanctuary (MBS), to Williams Lake and Knull lake, this past summer and winter with a companion. This trail is open to the public from the University gate on Twp Rd 510. (Access is also available off Range Rd 204-205. At about 9.6 km you quit driving south by turning right (or west). Then you go 1.6 km. At this point the road ends at a T. You turn south and drive about 0.2 km and park at the roadside. You walk through the gate to MBS. It is well labelled. Cell phone connection is intermittent due to weather and terrain variation.) This latter portion of the trail is about 13 km back to Twp Rd 510. It is hiked by members of the Waskahegan Trail Hikers Association of which I am a member, and used in the winter by snowmobilers and skiers.

Sections of the MBS are open to bow and rifle hunters of deer and moose during late autumn. The Sanctuary also offers many canoeable lakes and obviously used trails, but they are not well marked or maintained on the land.

In late 2020 I found a bait station and camera pointed at a bait station in the woods near the beaver lodge end of Knull Lake which I reported to the government official responsible for MBS. Bait station and camera were removed before the first snowfall that year. At the entrance for walkers from Twp Rd 510 on December 5 of this year motorists parked on the newly paved 510 Rd received tickets and a warning for safety reasons. About the same time the authorities created a winter parking lot on the south side of Twp Rd 510 about 1 km east of the MBS gate.

Because of the rainy season of 2019 the trail at the east end of Knull Lake was flooded, which permitted the beavers to harvest about 30 large poplar trees. This high-water condition remained in 2020.

The flora is typical of aspen parkland and low boreal, and is covered in several good guide books. I am making observations on semi-parasitic plants such as yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) and the red paintbrush (*Castilleja miniata*). Our wildlife sightings have included a young moose and a beautiful flotilla of pelicans circling over the Wat Lake area.

Safety and convenience for hikers could be greatly increased if the trails and lakes were signposted and these names were included on maps, such as the OpenStreetMap for trails that GAIA GPS has developed. The trails into Wat Lake are also in need of removal of downed trees; nevertheless, I was finally able to walk into Wat Lake on June 13 guided by my trusty Brunton Compass.



*A working beaver pond behind their dam. Think Muddy Waters music!*



L. A typical trail structure to make walking into the Berg Stopover easier.

R. Old fire tower about halfway from Knull Lake to the Twp. Road 510 gate for the main MBS trail.

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**Dwarf mistletoe in Northwest Bruderheim Natural Area** by Patsy Cotterill. Photos by Neil S.Harris.

Neil Harris took these photos of dwarf mistletoe (*Arceuthobium americanum*) in flower on jack pine in Northwest Bruderheim Natural Area in April this year. Dwarf mistletoe is parasitic on the trunks and branches of pine trees, causing excessive growth called witches' broom, and financial losses to the North American forestry industry.

The yellowish, much branched stems that emerge from the tree bear minute, scale-like leaves and small flowers with males and females on separate plants. The fruit is bluish with a white bloom and berry-like; it splits explosively due to the build-up of hydrostatic pressure, hurling the single seed a considerable distance to where it may stick to another branch or tree.

The mistletoes are a fascinating group of plants, well adapted to their arboreal and parasitic existence, and many species have a symbiotic relationship with birds that aid in their dispersal.



Dwarf mistletoe on jack pine tree.



Male flowers.





Developing fruit on a female plant.



Witches' broom on young jack pine caused by dwarf mistletoe.

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### **The Purple Invasion of Riverlot 56** by Kathleen Mpulubusi, BSc. All photos by author.

Riverlot 56 is a protected Natural Area along Poundmaker Road on the north boundary of St. Albert. It is one of the original parcels of land subdivided during the 1900's into narrow rectangular strips so that everyone had access to the Sturgeon River. The area has mature aspen forest with open ridges and a low stream bed area which makes for diverse plants and animals. It is a wonderful area to take a forest walk and see many of the common plant species that grow in the aspen forest.

But walking along the trails and in the forest clearings one notices an invader plant moving in. It's a tall plant with attractive bee-loving mauve to purple flowers, growing along the trail edges, in the open meadow and along the higher open ridges, but an invader nevertheless. Field scabious, *Knautia arvensis*, is one of the latest escapees from greenhouses and gardens that is now finding the woodland of Riverlot 56 to its liking. Field scabious is classed as a *Noxious Weed* in the Alberta Weed Control Act. Noxious weeds must be controlled so that their growth or spread is minimized.



Purple scabious flower; bee on purple scabious.

Field scabious likes open areas, pastures and rangelands. A single plant can produce up to 2000 seeds that fall around the parent plant and remain viable for many years. Once it is established it is hard to control and has a deep taproot which makes it hard to pull. The plant is well established growing into the large hay meadow along Poundmaker Road and is found in the ditches as well. However, field scabious is also moving into the aspen forest along the trail edges and can be found along the northern fence line at the opposite side of the Natural Area from the meadow. Along the trail edges, it is competing with the native asters, meadow rue and other plants that also grow there. One plant in particular, low milkweed, *Asclepias ovalifolia*, also grows on the open high ridge line. Milkweed is not particularly common in the Edmonton area, only growing in a few separate areas. Milkweed is famously the food source for monarch butterflies but other butterflies, moths and other insects also utilize it. Field scabious is aggressively establishing itself alongside the milkweed and could easily overtake it.

Field scabious, along with Himalayan balsam, creeping bellflower and purple loosestrife, joins a long list of plants once sold as garden plants from greenhouses that have escaped and established themselves in natural areas causing major disturbances to our native plants. All the more reason to grow our beautiful native plants instead.



Field scabious in the meadow and growing along the west boundary fence.



L. Low milkweed, *Asclepias ovalifolia*.

R. Low milkweed patch being invaded by field scabious.

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### SAPAA Storymap

We are pleased to present this online storymap of Alberta's Parks and Protected Areas. Created as a capstone project by Kristyn Mayner, this storymap came to fruition as an attempt to describe and illustrate the various types of legislation and protective notations that designate parks and protected areas within Alberta. If you have ever wondered what differentiates an Ecological Reserve from a Natural Area, as an example, this storymap aims to provide an easy-to-digest description of these differences while also allowing you to interact with the maps to see satellite imagery, legal boundaries and access roads to each location. SAPAA stewards have been closely involved in monitoring and reporting on many of these sites for decades. Others may be little-known or way off the beaten track. We encourage our members to follow the link and explore the maps provided, you may find that there are more places to explore in your area than you ever expected. General restrictions around access and use of each protected area are also noted in the storymap: <https://arcg.is/19r1q8>

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### Governmental Review of Provincial Steward Program

AB Parks with the help of the Mistakiis Institute is conducting a survey of existing Volunteer Stewards in order to assess the the future of the program. SAPAA encourages any individual Steward or member of a Steward organization to respond. If you are an official Steward and did not receive the survey notice please contact Coral Grove at [AEP.ParkVolunteer@gov.ab.ca](mailto:AEP.ParkVolunteer@gov.ab.ca) in order to have your say.



All survey responses are to be completed and submitted by **Friday, July 23, 2021**.

Survey Link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/JLX9YBD>

**Coming soon**.... our new tech team, Frank Potter and Kristyn Mayner, under the guidance of president Hubert Taube, are working on a new and exciting website that we hope will modernize our communications and further inspire our work as stewards... Stay tuned!

For more information on SAPAA and Protected Areas, please visit our website at [www.sapaastewards.com](http://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.

### **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.

Summer is here, and we wish you all good stewarding!  
We welcome your feedback at [sapaanews21@gmail.com](mailto:sapaanews21@gmail.com)



View looking west from the trail on Plateau Mountain, Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve, June 23, 2021. Photo by Manna Parseyan