

SAPAA NEWS

Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association

"Stewards helping stewards"

No. 41, January 2022

Dave Ealey

Pincherry, *Prunus pensylvanica*, Bellis North Natural Area

Editorial by Patsy Cotterill

In this newsletter we feature the second instalment in our history of Alberta's protected areas series. Peter Lee provides invaluable historical perspective in his article as a former Alberta Parks insider. The enthusiasm of Wagner Natural Area volunteers he refers to was matched by Peter's own passionate support and boosterism for Wagner, which was under threat from road development in the early 1980s. Peter commissioned a survey of the rare orchid, bog adder's-mouth, *Malaxis paludosa*, and in short order his botanist produced an aerial map with a number of pin pricks on it. Thus, this diminutive, inconspicuous and hard-to-find little plant is widely credited with saving Wagner's eastern springs, where the road was to be located. Peter also commissioned photographer-biologists Cliff Wallis and Cleve Werschler to produce a slideshow with commentary with which to advertise the Natural Area more widely and garner local support. The slideshow involved two carousels to create the necessary "fade-in" of the slides, and was cumbersome to manipulate. Peter's colleague John Rintoul, who also had much to do with the creation of the popular Marl Pond Trail at Wagner, was, however, adept at it. Modern Powerpoint presentations are a dream by comparison! On a personal note, I can say that being associated with Wagner Natural Area and its stewards has been the most important nature experience of my life in Alberta.

Geoff Holroyd's article on Beaverhill Natural Area and the Beaverhill Bird Observatory is another success story that speaks for itself. It shows how much can be achieved by long-term dedicated stewardship, involving good leadership and a passionate group of volunteers.

In This Issue:

- SAPAA 2021 Annual General Meeting
- News from Alberta Environment and Parks
- History of Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves 1977-1994
- Beaverhill Natural Area
- A Walk on the Wild Side to Heatburg Natural Area – October 3, 2021
- Parkland Natural Area - Who Uses It?
- UCP's new Trails Act

SAPAA 2021 Annual General Meeting

The AGM was held on Saturday, 13 November 2021, conducted on Zoom, facilitated by CPAWS. Hubert Taube, President, gave an account of the reinvigoration of SAPAA during the last year: Five Board Meetings were held, three newsletters were published and a website renewal project was started and is ongoing, with nearly weekly work sessions to transform the site towards a more dynamic form which will allow more interaction between users.

Patsy Cotterill, Secretary/Treasurer reported that both the membership (about 20) and the financial situation (bank account at about \$700, sufficient to provide for one year of operation) are stable. A move to collect membership fees by the e-transfer method has been initiated (and is now available).

Frank Potter, now SAPAA's webmaster, has been the central figure in the direction of the website renovation process, with all Board members contributing substantially.

All current Board members have agreed to stand for another term and were elected by acclamation:

President: Hubert Taube

Treasurer/Secretary: Patsy Cotterill

Directors: Frank Potter, webmaster

Judith Golub, newsletter editor

Chris Smith, communications facilitator

Kristyn Mayner, GIS data collector and storymap developer.

Judging by the progress made in 2021 we can look forward to advances in all of SAPAA's "compass directions" (as enunciated by Frank in his presentation): documentation of existing sites, monitoring and reporting, stewardship initiatives and education of the public.

Thank you to everybody who participated in 2021 and here's to many more advances in 2022.

Happy New Year!

Membership Renewal

If you haven't yet renewed your membership in SAPAA or wish to join for the first time, the membership form is available at [Membership](#). It differs this year in that we are asking for an additional \$5.00 payment if you request a printed and mailed copy of your newsletter. Also new this year is that we have now enabled e-transfer as a payment option.

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News from Alberta Environment and Parks by Hubert Taube

Personnel News

Kevin Wirtanen, our long-term contact, has retired from Govt. at the end of October. At present it is uncertain whether his position will be refilled. Now, our principal contacts at AEP are: Andrea Debolt, Senior Manager, Operational Standards, AEP and Coral Grove, Volunteer Services Coordinator. I had phone contact with both of them in the recent past. Much of the following is the result of interactions with them.

Review of Stewardship Program

Work on renewal of this program continues. Input is collected from the Miistakis survey (carried out in August 2021) and various past and present AEP officials. This includes the Office of the Chief Scientist which is in fact a sub-unit of AEP. A Strategy Report by this working group is now expected by the end of January 2022.

Current Stewardship Status

The WAERNAHR PAs consist of 3 Wilderness Areas, 15 Ecological Reserves, 138 Natural Areas and 2 Heritage Rangelands for a total of 158 sites. AEP has 74 Stewards (individuals and organizations) on their books. Most of them relate to WAERNAHR sites (with O/C status) with some exceptions such as Wildland Provincial Parks. However, some of the Stewards could be considered inactive, not fulfilling their stewardship obligations. As noted previously, Stewards' Inspection Reports are to be submitted to the central AEP office which will transmit them further to regional offices for potential action. The structural organization of the regional offices is currently under revision.

Inspection reports can be submitted as attachments to emails to AEP.ParkVolunteer@gov.ab.ca or by completing online forms at <https://albertaparks.ca/albertaparksca/about-us/alberta-parks-partnerships/volunteering/forms/site-inspection-form/>

Discrepancy between SAPAA Site Statistics and AEP Land Reference Manual

Some of our SAPAA members have noted differences between these two information sources; e.g. description of the Manly Corner NA (PNT) site. In general, the fate of several PAs which previously had PNT/CNT notation is uncertain. It will be a task of the SAPAA Board in the new year to bring clarity to this uncertainty. Ideally, an update on the Volunteer status of the various sites can also be achieved.

Trails Act

The impact of this Act, approved in early December, on Protected Areas remains unclear. In general, the Act addresses trails on Public Lands. Protected Areas fall under the designation of Crown Lands, but not Public Lands. But, by extension, the Act might, in practice, also be used to regulate developments on our PAs. This needs to be further investigated and evaluated.

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History of Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves 1977-1994 by Peter Lee (Biologist, Natural Areas program coordinator, Alberta Parks manager, World Wildlife Fund Canada Alberta Special Places coordinator, Executive Director of Global Forest Watch Canada, retired since 2015). With thanks to Lorna Allen, Senator Diane Griffin and Sandy Myers for reviewing drafts.

In the April 2021 newsletter issue of the Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association, Dr. Peter Achuff described the early history of Alberta's Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves from the late 1960s until 1977. This article covers the period from 1977 onward.

Dr. Peter Achuff was Natural Areas program coordinator from 1974 to 1977, Diane Griffin (now a Canadian Senator) from 1977 to 1986, and me, Peter Lee (now retired), from 1986 to 1994.

Dr. Peter Achuff, Natural Areas Program Coordinator 1974-1977

First, a disclosure: The most rewarding and inspirational summer job I ever had was in the mid-1970s when I was a field assistant under the tutelage of Dr. Achuff. What an experience! Our job was to survey existing and potential Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves throughout the province, including some of the biggest wild natural spaces remaining in the province such as Marguerite River sand dunes, Upper Oldman, Willmore, Livingstone Range and Porcupine Hills, Plateau Mountain, Caribou Mountains, Swan Hills, Cardinal Divide, Goose Mountain, and Kootenay Plains. The small sites we surveyed were fascinating for their rare species such as Wagner, their beauty (Coyote Lake, Canmore Flats, Crow Lake), or both, or they were fascinating small islands of wild nature surrounded by agricultural, transportation or industrial developments throughout the mostly settled area of the province.

Dr. Peter Achuff's tenure as Natural Areas program coordinator was key in setting the tone for the Natural Areas program. He is an ardent and rigorous field scientist. The first principles he set for running the program were hard work, science first, and field/inventory based.

Diane Griffin, Natural Areas Program Coordinator 1977-1986

Diane Griffin hailed from Prince Edward Island, where she had surveyed the biology of natural sites in PEI and had managed a similar natural areas program in that province. So, she immediately fit into her Alberta Natural Areas program coordinator role here. Diane continued with and built on the tone set by Dr. Achuff in important ways: she continued Dr. Achuff's all-important legacy of researching existing and potential new areas; she staffed up with the most incredibly dedicated people (Val Loewen, Lorna Allen, Joyce Gould, and then later John Rintoul and Sandy Myers); she strongly supported volunteers as Natural Areas stewards; and she successfully networked with people, both within government and externally. Diane was great to work with. She was tough, kind, knowledgeable and fun. Her staff remember one incident in the early 1980s when she came stomping down to the office floor in her cowboy boots and saying that she would kick the Assistant Deputy Minister's desk apart if they permitted grazing in Kennedy Coulee Ecological Reserve. She was a fierce defender of Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves.

1986-1994

I was Natural Areas program coordinator from 1986 to 1994. At that time, the protected areas category - Natural Areas - was embedded in the Public Lands Act. We were housed in the Public Lands Division of Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife. Public Lands' staff and senior management were very supportive of the Natural Areas program and allowed staff much creative independence. We took good advantage of that independence and trust and worked hard to establish new Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves, and to develop the Volunteer Steward Program and Conservation Data Centre (now termed ACIMS, Alberta Conservation Information Management System).

Some staff left and other key staff were added during this period – Bill Richards, the Wildlife Technologist; Duke Hunter, the GIS Expert; Dragomir Vujnovic, the Wildlife Biologist.

New Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves

National and international conservation and wildlife initiatives that become political have provided key incentives for the province to establish, under legislation, new natural areas, parks and wildlife reserves. For example, 1987 was designated a *Year of Wildlife Conservation* in Canada by provincial and territorial wildlife ministers and their agencies. In Alberta, *Wildlife '87: Gaining Momentum* was spearheaded by Cam Finlay, a well-known Alberta naturalist. Natural Areas staff worked with Cam to make political hay while the sun shone. More than a dozen new Natural Areas and several Ecological



Reserves were designated during this period. New Natural Areas included Beaverhill Lake, Bilby, Butcher Lake, Halfmoon Lake, Kleskun Hill and Riverlot 56. The Natural Areas that still exist today total 1,238 km² and 138 sites. The Ecological Reserves that exist today total 268 km² and 15 sites. Most were established as a result of the *Wildlife '87* project, including Athabasca Dunes, Crow Lake, Goose Mountain, Hand Hills, Kennedy Coulee, Kootenay Plains, Plateau Mountain, Rumsey, Silver Valley, and Whitemud Falls.

The next best political opportunity to establish new sites as protected areas occurred when World Wildlife Fund Canada secured the commitment from national and provincial ministers parks and wildlife to protect Endangered Spaces in the early 1990s. In Alberta this was termed Special Places 2000. Although this initiative was very controversial and heavily criticized, many new protected areas were established in the 1990s as a direct result of this programme.

Volunteer Steward Program

The public volunteers of Wagner Natural Area were the initial inspiration for two key programs that staff developed in the 1980s. The first one was the Volunteer Steward Program. The rationale staff had for examining the potential of a volunteer program was a belief that members of the public who knew and loved specific Natural Areas were the best defenders of and advocates for these areas. This was important, as the legislation behind Natural Areas was (and still is) very weak as a legal protection mechanism. The Wagner folks – Barry and Beth Jenkins, Alice Hendry, Patsy Cotterill, Derek Johnson, Terry Thormin, Pat and Dick Clayton, Edgar T. Jones, Irl Miller - were heavily and passionately involved as volunteers in monitoring, inventorying, defending and enjoying Wagner Natural Area. The experiences of the Wagner volunteers, along with staff, formed the template for the development of the Volunteer Stewards Program. Once defined and publicized, many volunteers signed up as volunteer stewards over a short period of time. It was an incredibly dynamic program under the leadership of Sandy Myers, with volunteers being extremely active on their sites, with get-togethers such as annual learning conferences filled to overflowing, and with monitoring and species inventory reports coming in fast and furious.

Today, those staff who worked on the Volunteer Steward Program fondly remember many of the incredible volunteers in the 1980s and 1990s – members of the Wagner Natural Area Society, Jean Funk, Richard and Vera deSmet, Jack Collett, Eric and Doris Hopkins, Alison Dinwoodie, Elisabeth Beaubien, Dorothy Dickson, Myrna Pearman, Reg and Olive Gray, John Woitenko, Peter Sherrington, Des Allen, groups such as Alberta Wilderness Association, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, BLESS, Beaverhill Bird Observatory, Riverlot 56, and many others.

Sandy Myers says “..... natural areas were a perfect category of protected area to encourage local involvement and buy in on the importance of conservation. They were close to local communities and hugely important on the local level and many on a provincial or even national level. They served as an outdoor educational classroom for local families and schools and places for low impact recreational activities. Volunteer stewards have fought for and helped protect our land bases, many of them for over 34 years, so that future generations will be able to share what we as a society often take for granted with little or no recognition. They do this simply for the love of the land base and nature. They are strong advocates for our protected areas. Many of the Stewards that joined in the early years of the program are still involved 33 years later. They are long-time dedicated and passionate people who truly care about protecting and preserving the lands they steward.”

The Volunteer Stewards Program still exists today, despite a lack of sufficient support from government.

Conservation Data Centre (Alberta Conservation Information Management System)

The second key program inspired by the Wagner Natural Area volunteers revolves around data. The species inventory reports from knowledgeable volunteers and from the work of leading Alberta naturalists and biologists, such as Cliff Wallis and Cleve Wershler, raised the issue of the need for a data management system for rare and endangered species and ecological communities. Natural Areas staff realized that without some way to organize the surge of new rare and endangered species inventory information, needed efficiencies on where to focus future efforts would be lost and many efforts duplicated, if not wasted, and important data lost. Before a rare or endangered species or ecological community can be protected, we needed to know how rare and endangered they are and where they occur in Alberta. So, we set up the first-in-Canada Conservation Data Centre patterned after those in the United States, now part of the [NatureServe Network](#). The Alberta centre is now termed ACIMS, [Alberta Conservation Information Management System](#). This program still exists today, despite a lack of staff and government support.

Natural Areas Program Ends After Being Transferred to Alberta Parks

In 1994 the Natural Areas category was transferred out of the *Public Lands Act* into the Alberta Parks legislation (now it is within the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act*). At that point, the

independent Natural Areas program ceased to exist, and staff were subsumed within the Alberta Parks bureaucracy and into new positions with new duties.

Where Do Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves Fit in Alberta's Protected Areas System?

The number of Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves and total area under these legislated categories are small compared to the rest of protected areas in Alberta.

	Number	Area (km ²)
Natural Areas	138	1,294
Ecological Reserves	15	268
Alberta Parks legislation (in addition to Natural Areas)	335	42,415
National Parks	5	63,375

One can quibble with the numbers and categories. For example, some ask whether the 204 Provincial Recreation Areas should be counted as protected areas, when many of these sites are only campgrounds, or parking areas, or heavily industrialized with oil and gas activities, or over-run with off-highway vehicles. And one can quibble whether other categories should be included in the rollup of protected areas, such as municipal parks or wildlife sanctuaries.

My point is that the Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves are small in number and small in total area when compared to the rest of protected areas in Alberta.

But if you love nature, Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves are biologically and ecologically fascinating. Most Natural Areas are in the settled portion of Alberta, where wild nature and wild habitat are few and far between, except for some wetlands and shallow lakes, river valleys and associated ravines, and remaining native prairie.

Protected Areas Systems Planning

It is hard to generalize about Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves when there is such a variety. In his article in the April 2021 newsletter issue of the Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association, Dr. Achuff described the early development of a systems plan regarding Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves.

There have also long been systems plans for National Parks and for Alberta's system of protected areas, in addition to Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves. National Parks protect natural environments representative of Canada's natural heritage. The goal is to establish a system of national parks that represents each of Canada's distinct natural regions. This system is just over 60% completed (<https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/plan>).

When the Natural Areas Program was transferred to Alberta Parks in 1994, the systems plan was imbedded within and superseded by the Alberta Parks systems plan. Individual protected areas are established to achieve one or a combination of environmental, social and economic benefits. The protected areas system is structured to reflect the province's environmental diversity. Current and future parks are evaluated and measured against both objectives - conservation and recreation. Conservation gap analysis is based on a scientific framework that uses a coarse filter/ fine filter approach. Recreation gaps are identified based on demand for nature-based recreation opportunities; and the ability to supply the necessary facilities and a viable landbase.

Where do Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves Fit in the History of the Establishment of Alberta's Protected Areas?

Almost half of the 138 Natural Areas that exist today were legislated in 1971. Most of the rest were established because of Wildlife '87 (15 new sites) and Special Places 2000 (49 new sites). Most of the fifteen Ecological Reserves that exist today were established during or shortly after Wildlife '87.

Protected areas in Alberta had a long history before then. A small area of today's Banff National Park, established in 1887, was the first protected area in what 18 years later was to become the Province of Alberta. The incentive was to establish a European-type spa at the mineral hot springs. Banff was greatly enlarged over the following decades.

It wasn't until 1930, when Alberta was granted legal status for its natural resources with the passage of the *Alberta Natural Resources Act*, that provincial parks legislation was enacted, and additional sites established. By then, all five of today's national parks in Alberta were established. I am very thankful for this early federal legislation creating proportionally more area in national parks than in any other province and more area than all the combined provincially-protected areas.

The first eight provincial parks were established in 1932 – Aspen Beach, Gooseberry Lake, Park Lake, Sylvan Lake, Saskatoon Island, Lundbreck Falls, Ghost River, and Hommy. It wasn't until after WWII that more parks were established – 46 between 1951 and 1971. The Special Places 2000 initiative in the late 1980s and 1990s saw a large number of new protected areas established in legislation.

What Was the Significance of the Natural Areas Program?

The Natural Areas Program punched above its weight for a 25-year period in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.

It was a significant and successful program for many reasons, including: most of the sites were in the settled portion of the province and therefore close to a lot of people; the staff were extremely dedicated and talented; the program was science-based and field-oriented; the program was strongly supported by Alberta's protected areas organizations such as the Alberta Wilderness Association and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society; the program had a considerable degree of creative independence within the Public Lands Division; and the volunteer stewards were a powerhouse of knowledge, enthusiasm, and resolve.

The magic was there!

Beaverhill Natural Area by Geoff Holroyd, Chair, Beaverhill Bird Observatory



Located 10 km east of Tofield, the Beaverhill Natural Area is a diverse mixture of woodland, shrubland, grassland, wetlands, and lake crammed into one square mile of Crown land. The early successional forest of aspen and balsam poplar with a few scattered spruce was part of Beaverhill Lake in the last century. With the drying of the lake, the trees expanded, led by the willows marching into the receding shoreline. Several creeks feed into the lake. Amisk Creek is restricted by a weir, forming the adjoining Lister Lake. The rains of 2020 restored much of the lake, improving important bird habitat.

The Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO) did not initially start as steward of the Natural Area. Rather BBO started as a group of bird banders studying abundant songbirds in these diverse habitats. But when stewardship was offered, BBO jumped at the opportunity to expand its missions. One of the immediate effects, according to the local rancher, was a dramatic reduction in vandalism and OHV use of the Natural Area and adjacent leased grazing land. This benefit has continued for almost 40 years, a result of having staff on site from April to early November. As the steward, BBO has undertaken a number of projects in the Natural Area. We have repaired the perimeter fence, almost annually, removed interior barbed wire cross fencing and placed flags on other wires to reduce any risk of harm to wildlife. When the lakeshore receded we fenced the north boundary to keep cattle on their pastures, although intrusions by cattle are an on-going issue. We have installed numerous boxes for Tree Swallows, House Wrens, ducks, Saw-whet Owls and bats. In 2021, three of our larger bat houses held maternity colonies of Little Brown Bats, the culmination of five years of encouraging these bats to live in the early successional forest.

Visitors have also benefited from our efforts with enhanced access trails, metal gates instead of barbed wire gates, parking areas away from the curious rubbing of cattle, and mowing of trails several times a year to improve the ease of hiking in the lush vegetation. With signage provided by Alberta Parks we have made it very difficult for any visitor to get lost in the Natural Area. Trails named after birds make it easy to follow a route through the area and return to one's vehicle.

Our bird research activities and building are a magnet for curious public, keen to see birds in the hand as we band and measure birds. Watching evening owl banding has also been very popular, with up to 70 people turning up to experience the magic of owls appearing in our nets. Over 1,000 people visit the Natural Area and observatory each year.

With the pandemic in full swing in 2020 we closed the observatory to visiting public, with reduced staff only conducting bird surveys and other basic monitoring as our building was replaced. Regardless, the number of people who visited the Natural Area increased dramatically. Access involves crossing a trail through a cattle pasture, which became heavily rutted and braided as a result of the heavy summer rains and extra traffic in spring 2020. With funding from

Alberta Conservation Association, we spread four truckloads of gravel in the ruts, which helped with the most damaged portions, but more work will be needed in the future. This will be an ongoing expensive task that has fallen on BBO, regardless of whether the traffic is related to us or not; photographers, hikers and dog walkers are also common users of the area.

With our new Education and Research Centre and growing public support the bird observatory, with over 900 members, is well positioned to continue its role as steward of the Beaverhill NA, a site important to birds and increasingly to humans as well!



Education and Research Centre:

Downstairs is a large display room for hosting public and bird banding events, and a second kitchen room. Upstairs is one large room with staff office desks and screen with projector to host groups for talks. The free standing 80' tower hosts cell and wifi boosters, and two MOTUS receiving antennae. The building is powered with a state of the art TESLA solar system.

Funding came from many sources, but there were no capital grants from any level of government. Basically it derived from generous donors and judicious financial management while also employing 3.5 FTE, and from creating a \$300,000 endowment fund with Edmonton Community Foundation all in the past six years.

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A Walk on the Wild Side to Heatburg Natural Area – October 3, 2021 by Claudia Lipski, citizen steward.

Heatburg Natural Area is a bit of a hidden gem, in that there is no public access to the site other than the Red Deer River. It lies along the north shore in the Great Bend of the Red Deer River, in Lacombe County, near Content Bridge. The landforms are badlands-type features, upland aspen forest, and mixed grass-sedge on the river flats. My visit this autumn did not disappoint at all, as the deciduous trees were in full golden dress, the sky was a glorious blue, the river winds along the south border of the protected area and the air was crisp and cool, which made for a splendid hike.



Hot and tired tootsies, with a view to the east from the west hilltop.

This was my first visit to the Heatburg Natural Area as a citizen steward. I had explored here in the past, and had brought the Nature Alberta Board of Directors here on a field trip in September 2010. We had then accessed the site with canoes.

My round trip this time, was a 9 km jaunt along the shore of the Red Deer River, and another 3 km within the natural area. Access via the river banks was only possible because the river was very low and I was able to traverse the mud and rocks of the shoreline. The going was tough, but it was a beautiful autumn day and well worth the six hour excursion, as my photos will attest. It was an adventure! Next time, I will take more water, a change of socks and hiking poles. A person does not always have to go to the mountains to challenge themselves with mountainous terrain. Welcome to Red Deer River's topography!

My access point to the property was at its southwest corner along the river, which had electric fencing down to the water. There was a sharp contrast of the grazed side and the side that was left in its natural state. I was pleased to see that the cattle respected the electric fencing. There was no evidence of them having crossed any of the electric fencing by the river nor in the uplands, where about 15 acres were being used as pasture. The centre portion of the 78.1 acres has a road leading to a Rahr Malting water station, but other than that, appears to have been left in its natural state for this year. The designation of Heatburg Natural Area lies within the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas, and Heritage Rangelands Act.

While I was researching the history of Heatburg Natural Area, I spoke to a number of government departments. The fact that cattle are being grazed on two portions of the Heatburg Natural Area has prompted an investigation by the District Conservation Officer for Environmental Enforcement. There will be a visit to Heatburg Natural Area to assess



Evidence of cattle grazing within the Heatburg Natural Area boundary.

the grazing situation. Apparently, charges were filed in 2016 following evidence of unauthorized grazing. Heatburg Natural Area had previously been managed by Alberta Parks but now is administered by Lands Division, which would record the dispositions of land use such as grazing.

It was on March 15, 1971, that this property received its special designation by an Order of Council. Prior to that it was vacant public land under the Government of Alberta. Because of its badlands topography, it was deemed a site worthy of preserving for the people of Alberta. Activities presently permitted are overnight camping, hiking, bird watching and hunting.

The views from the uplands at the east and west boundary were amazing this autumn! I look forward to the views in the winter and again as the greenery awakens in the spring.

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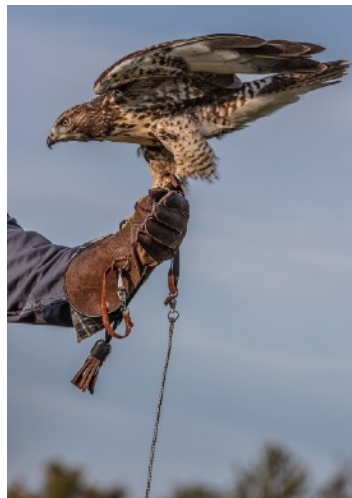
Parkland Natural Area - Who Uses It? By Helen Trefry

It is a privilege to be living across from the Parkland Natural Area, where I have been monitoring activities since 1997. The Fort Saskatchewan Naturalist Society is the official Steward but proximity places me in the Director's chair. Located about 50 km east of Edmonton in the Cooking Lake Moraine, Parkland NA is shared between Beaver and Strathcona Counties. One of its special features is the presence of the rare shield fern (*Dryopteris cristata*). The main limitation to enjoying this 260-hectare property has always been access. When I obtained the binder from Alberta Environment about the Parkland NA, it said it was "easily accessible" and activities listed included "hiking and jogging". That seemed improbable given the dozen or more beaver ponds lacing the area with multiple drainages and channels between them, unless one had wings! I subsequently learned that the area was once home to many quad trails that were later limited by some fencing. As a result the only remaining obvious "trail" was a gas pipeline running across the full width on the north end. However, it became clear that this did not stop people from using the area and while we stewards often focus on the rare plants and animals of Natural Areas, the majority of other users are not so inclined.

Use of Parkland NA is tied to the cycle of the water levels in the area. In dry years quadders would routinely return to using the pipeline, often clearing deadfall for smoother access and then intentionally trying to sink their machines in the wetlands. Fortunately, talking to them about the Water Act (It's illegal to drive through permanent water bodies) and about how this activity is damaging this protected area has, for the most part, eliminated this activity. The wetter years of 1998 and 2021 especially limited quad movement as the beavers created sink holes and felled huge trees as barriers.

Hunters are seasonally some of the most common users, even in wet years (they are a hardy lot), targeting big game, waterfowl and Ruffed Grouse. I eventually discovered a network of their 'private' trails throughout the area, some flagged and leading to hunting blinds and even a small hunting cabin on the southwestern edge of the NA (since removed). More recently, hawkers have begun using the area for hunting snowshoe hares, focusing on the post-gun-

hunting season. I have accompanied hawkers on their difficult journey through the underbrush, flushing hares and trying to keep pace with their hawk as it moves from tree to tree. At times a wild Goshawk will be drawn to the action, watching to take advantage of the hares moving.



Left: Hunting blind (photo: Helen Trefry)

Right: Red-tailed Hawk (photo: Murray Fetzko)

Parkland is also used for shooting practice, usually in open wetland meadows, where I have found their targets and shells. After hearing shooting on multiple occasions, including once while I was walking in the area, I repeatedly reported concerns to both Parks and the RCMP about the proximity of shooters to the adjacent subdivision and to my own home. I was told the activity was not illegal. However, in 2020, to my delight the east end was posted with “No Target Shooting” signs.

Unfortunately, the west end remained unsigned, and in late August of this year, shooting was still a regular sound. This was the case on the morning that a fire occurred deep in the NA. The fire burned for several days and to access it Strathcona County bulldozed a major trail/road about 10 m wide and 1 km long into the core of the NA. When Linda Kershaw and I explored the road a few weeks later, we found shotgun shells and cigarette butts in the area where the fire had occurred. While speculative, it is difficult to think that the shooting, cigarettes and fire were unrelated. Firefighters told me they were bewildered as to what could have caused a fire so deep in this large tract of forest. It was so far from the road and there had been no lightning. Unfortunately, the bladed road resulted in considerable surface disturbance and the felling of many large trees. Also, it offered a new entry point for quadders. Strathcona County subsequently covered much of the passageway with dead trees to discourage motorized access. I will be watching to see if that indeed works.

Bird watchers and photographers are commonly seen on the bordering roads, which offer good vantage points to numerous wetlands. Over the decades, I have also seen people geo-caching, hiking, snowshoeing, camping (one survivalist included), skating, and skidooring in the NA. When the pipeline was new there was even horse riding. One time the RCMP had to search the area for a fleeing suspect! Despite the many users and sometimes abusers, the lack of good trails is a limitation to extensive wanderings.

Fortunately, the area is large enough to support carnivores, including reported sightings of fishers and a cougar with young. Some signage and fencing would help to limit motorized vehicles, but meanwhile I continue to enjoy the diverse natural environment that Parkland NA offers.



A consumed porcupine, surrounded by Fisher tracks (photo Helen Trefry).



Left: Regrowth on a burned hillside between the bladed trail and a sedge wetland (photo Linda Kershaw).

Right: Cigarette butts and shotgun shell casings side-by-side beside the burn site (photo Linda Kershaw).



Bladed trail/road created by fire fighters, regrowth and debris at site (photo Linda Kershaw).

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UCP's new Trails Act

The provincial government's new Trails Act, Bill 79, passed third reading on December 7 and, with the exception of a section on a Trails Management Plan deferred until May 1, 2022, takes effect immediately.

The government maintains that it will result in improved trail maintenance and accessibility by giving more responsibility to non-government user groups, and better protection for the environment as a whole with designated trails and better enforcement.

However, the Act has been criticized by environmental non-government organizations for a number of reasons, in particular that the statute itself lacks substance and leaves too much to the discretion of the minister and to regulations formulated by the government, described as "excessive use of delegated lawmaking power."

Another problem for environmental integrity is that despite the excessive number of existing trails in the Eastern Slopes there is no commitment to close down any of the unintended trails. The Act has been introduced in "the absence of a regional planning framework or limits on cumulative impacts."

For more information, see:

https://www.google.com/search?q=trails+act&rlz=1C1CHBD_enCA860CA860&oq=Trails+Act&aqs=chrome.0.0i512l9.6277j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-

<https://elc.ab.ca/on-the-wrong-path-the-proposed-trails-act-needs-changes-to-ensure-trail-management-reflects-science/>

<https://ablawg.ca/2021/11/08/alberta-heads-the-wrong-direction-with-bill-79-the-proposed-trails-act/>

<https://naturealberta.ca/trails-act-an-act-of-pure-fantasy/>

ENGOs will be keeping close watch on how the Act plays out. SAPAA invites readers to express their opinions to the Minister of the Environment, the Hon. Jason Nixon, at aep.minister@gov.ab.ca, and to their MLA.

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Steward Contributions Solicited

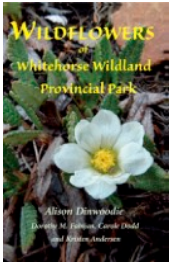
Our current target is to produce four newsletters a year as we are developing a website that will include dynamic posts as well as static pages of information. For these to succeed we need a continual supply of stewards' contributions as text and photos. SAPAA is all about sharing stewards' experiences. We want to hear about your sites, their natural history and their challenges, what insights you have gained as a steward, what you have done in the way of infrastructure building, trails, education of the public, interactions with the Provincial Government, etc. We want gleanings from your submitted reports, indeed, anything you think the wider steward public could benefit from knowing. We'd also be pleased to publish blogs of your personal experiences on the website also. Please submit your contributions to sapaanews21@gmail.com

Editorial committee: Hubert Taube, Judith Golub, Patsy Cotterill

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Notices:

Free Lifetime Membership with Nature Alberta is available to all SAPAA members. To sign up, [click here](#) and fill in the sign up form. As a Nature Alberta Member, you are adding your voice in championing Alberta's natural environment, will receive regular ENews updates (one every month or two, and you can unsubscribe at any time), and will receive a discount code for our online store. If you have any questions, please email Steph at info@naturealberta.ca or call 780-427-8124.



Wildflowers of Whitehorse Wildland Park - This book is now available for purchase at the Wildbird General Store, 4712 - 99 Street, Edmonton.

The Big Lake Environment Support Society's third quarter newsletter is available on line at: <http://bless.ab.ca/Newsletter/September2021.pdf>

We welcome your feedback at sapaanews21@gmail.com

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 them.
- 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.



Manna Parseyan

Open fen view - lots of *Carex aquatilis*, water sedge and *C. prairea*, prairie sedge. Welch Creek Natural Area