

SAPAA NEWS

Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association
"Stewards helping stewards"

No. 43, July 2022

Bellis Lake NA. Photo by Linda Kershaw

Steward Contributions Solicited

SAPAA is all about sharing stewards' experiences and awareness of our natural areas. We'd like to hear about your sites and would also be pleased to publish articles of your personal experiences. Submit to sapaanews21@gmail.com
Any or all of the following could be considered for inclusion in an article, as long or short as you wish:

- The location and accessibility.
- History of the area if known.
- Wildlife that may be found in the area - birds, mammals, insects, amphibians, etc.
- Plant communities - a general overview or specific plants of interest or rarity.
- What, if any, are the challenges and concerns - user abuse, fire, OHV use, infrastructure, etc.
- Unique features and/or importance and significance of your area.
- Photos with date and captions for illustration.

Errata: In issue #42, a photo caption in the Kootenay Plains article referred to the "Icefield Walk". It should have read "Icefall Walk". Mea culpa.

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"82 Parks, 82 Stories"... Editorial Comment by Patsy Cotterill

The summer issue of Alberta Wilderness Association's *Wildlands Advocate* magazine contains Sean Nichols' account of his July 2021 tour of the Protected Areas (PAs) that the Government originally proposed to close. By the end of the month he had completed – by bicycle – a marathon of 2,714 km, and had visited 82 of the 164 Parks, Provincial Recreation Areas (PRAs) and Natural Areas that the government planned to "delist." No small feat! His motive for doing it was his realization that he was familiar with very few of the PAs on the list; he later concluded that the same was true of the AEP managers who red-lined them! He took time to talk to visitors, and not surprisingly his on-the-ground reconnaissances led to some interesting insights.

Among his observations:

- That in using "under-use", by humans, as a rationale for closure, the government was ignoring the ecosystem/biodiversity value of these sites.



The reception party at Strathcona Science Provincial Park, the conclusion of the tour, on July 30, 2021.

- Local people overwhelmingly used many of these PAs and loved them.
- Government information about sites could be confusing, misleading and/or inaccurate. Clearly the AEP isn't clear about what's actually out there.

Noting that the government cancelled the delisting program in December 2021, Nichols poses the question: what is going to happen to PAs now? He predicts that many Natural Areas, with few or no facilities and seeing little human use, will remain as is. Popular Parks and PRAs will continue to see maintenance and investment. But what of those PAs that fall somewhere in between? Judging by what is already happening, deterioration seems to be the answer, with more littering and bad behaviour. He proposes that people champion these PAs, and keep the government aware of how much they are valued.

He concludes with a request for champions for all protected areas. I think this is what our stewards do, and I think we ought to call on the government to renew the provincial stewards' program and give it the support it needs. Rather than a government that closes down PAs, we need one that recognizes the value of this network of little wildernesses, for the protection of biodiversity and for the enlightenment of an Alberta populace that loves, protects and respects its natural heritage.

Of PAs: "They are all oases, areas of respite where the wilderness has the chance to establish a bulwark against the creeping industrialization of the entire province."

"... our Parks system ... a heritage passed to us by those who came before and who had the foresight to establish the Parks to begin with, and a heritage we can all commit to passing on to future generations."

Sean Nichols is a Program Specialist with the Alberta Wilderness Association. A full account of his odyssey can be found at www.AlbertaWilderness.ca/bike-a-thon

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Interaction with Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) by Hubert Taube

As mentioned in SAPAA Newsletters #40 (October 2021) and #42 (April 2022), AEP is conducting a review of the Government's Volunteer Stewardship Program, led by the Office of the Chief Scientist. This review has been ongoing for about a year now, starting off with a survey of existing Volunteer Stewards and now nearing completion as per my recent communications with Department personnel.

Right now, our principal contacts at AEP are:

- Andrea Debolt, Senior Manager, Operational Standards, Visitors Experience and Business Support Branch, Parks Operations Division and
- Coral Grove, Priority Issues Coordinator, Lands Delivery & Coordination, Lands Division (titles based on a recent Government Directory).

As part of our ongoing interaction, I had a telephone conversation with Andrea (May 24) and an email exchange with Coral (June 21). One noteworthy action that has taken place is the transfer of the Stewardship Program from the Parks Operations Division to the Lands Division. What consequences this will have on the management of the Stewardship Program remains unclear. However, an announcement can be expected in the near future as per Coral's email of June 22: "*We have been working behind the scenes and communication about the program will be coming out shortly.*" Let's hope that this communication materializes soon since the current uncertainty in the AEP/SAPAA relationship is holding back SAPAA's future direction and our involvement in the conservation efforts for Alberta's Protected Areas.

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MEET A MEMBER CLUB - JJ Collett Natural Area Foundation by Marilyn Matsuoka. Photo credits as noted.

One of the best-kept secrets in Central Alberta... up until spring 2020 when our world changed and we saw a significant increase in visitor traffic! JJ Collett Natural Area is located not far off Highway 2, near the hamlet of Morningside. It consists of 635 acres, boasting over 18 km of maintained trails winding through a mosaic of shrublands, aspen groves, and stands of white spruce on shady hillsides.

JJ Collett is unique in that you can experience the boreal forest, foothills, parkland, and grasslands, all in one location. It is truly a special, family-friendly place that draws you in and charms you with its wildlife, wonderfully treed paths,

and diverse topography. Wetlands and grassy meadows are typical of the area, though you may be surprised to also come across sand dunes.

Each season highlights new wonders. Spring brings fresh aspen buds and wildflower blooms. Summer displays a wide range of vegetation including native grasses. Fall gives way to the vibrant, turning colours. And winter opens the snow-covered forest trails to a peaceful cross-country skiing experience.

Steeped in history and privately owned prior to 1974 by Jack Collett, the provincial government and the Alberta Wildlife Foundation jointly purchased the land in trust to be used for environmental education. In 1976, the site was designated the JJ Collett Natural Area in memory of John Joseph Collett, Jack's son, who studied forest technology and was devoted to the preservation of natural resources. John founded the original trails, which are still in use today.

In 1985, the JJ Collett Natural Area Foundation was formed, with a mandate to preserve the area and use this resource for environmental education. The Foundation's active group of volunteer directors maintains the area with the goals of preservation, protection, and instilling environmental values in the community. An endowment fund has been established for future sustainability.

After a two-year hiatus, we hope to bring the Foundation's Grade 6 environmental education program back to local area classrooms soon. Students learn about identifying plants, discuss environmental issues, and enjoy a field trip to visit the natural area.

We offer visitors guided educational walks in the spring and fall, often led by our resident expert and honorary director, Dr. Charles Bird, retired Professor of Botany. We are privileged to have his expertise, knowledge, and keen eye for spotting rare flora and fauna native to the area.

Mark Sunday, September 18, 2022 at 2 p.m. in your calendar — you're invited to join us for our annual Fall Walk. We will have guided tours identifying plants, wildlife, and all the sights of the autumn season. You may even witness a bird release by Medicine River Wildlife Centre.

For more information on the JJ Collett Natural Area Foundation, follow us on Facebook and visit our website: jjcollett.com. You will find a treasure trove of information on the rich history of the area, extensive species checklists and photos, and a map of the vast trail system. We also encourage you to check out opportunities to support the Natural Area Foundation in our mission to preserve a remnant of Central Alberta's beautiful landscape.

Marilyn Matsuoka is a Director with the JJ Collett Natural Area Foundation. A version of this article previously appeared in the Spring 2022 issue of Nature Alberta Magazine (naturealberta.ca/magazine). Reprinted with permission.



A glimpse of beautiful trails. Photo credits: R. Hemmingson.



Dr. Charles Bird during a spring walk. Photo credit: Vic Ayotte.

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Opal Natural Area in mid-June, 2022 by Patsy Cotterill. Photos by Manna Parseyan and Patsy Cotterill.

On June 16th, 2022, Manna Parseyan and I visited the eastern half-section of Opal Natural Area in Thorhild County, some hour-and-a-half's drive north of Edmonton (especially if you miss the turnoff!). We used Google Maps to arrive at a small staging area marked with the traditional yellow natural area sign. We were fortunate in choosing a good day in the middle of a rainy June! We met only one other person – an environmental consultant who was using the NA to access some wetlands on private property, prior to sand and gravel extraction activities. In other words, we had the area to ourselves, a great privilege these days. Hearteningly, I have to say, there was little evidence of human presence: no tracks, no infrastructure and few weeds. We picked up a small amount of shotgun ammunition (hunting is permitted), that's all.

Opal Natural Area has to be understood in terms of its fire history; a massive fire went through the Opal area in May of 2010. What confronts you when you enter from the south-east corner is a landscape in various stages of regeneration. This is no mature jack pine forest with widely spaced, heavily-limbed decadent trees, often deformed by the witches' broom of dwarf mistletoe infestation. No, this a youthful ecosystem, attesting to the importance of fire in forest regeneration. On the sandy uplands are great banks of young, healthy-looking jack pines, 1-3 metres high,

with erect leaders reaching aspiringly for the sky. Near the depressional areas, aspen is the leading colonizer, abundantly leafy and green in youth. In the more open areas, which have perhaps been subject to a secondary disturbance post-fire, the ground is being colonized by a herbaceous flora typical of these sandy nature reserves north-east of

Edmonton. Here western plains sagewort, *Artemisia campestris* (our subspecies is *pacifica*), is extraordinarily abundant, obviously good colonizer of these sandy soils. Tufts of northern rice grass (*Piptatheropsis pungens*) are more numerous than I have ever seen them, and mostly past flowering, as are the duster-like fruiting heads of prairie crocus (*Pulsatilla nuttalliana*). Grey-green tufts of poverty oatgrass (*Danthonia spicata*) were also abundant. Scattered throughout, as mnemonics of mortality, are the blackened trunks of standing dead trees or bleached logs, the latter making excellent places to rest and eat a picnic lunch!



Regeneration of jack pine forest after a fire (2010). Open, sandy ground is colonized by moss, lichen, suckering shrubs such as chokecherry and various herbaceous plants. In the middle ground are jack pine saplings with an understory of velvet-leaf blueberry. In the background, possibly enclosing a moist hollow, colonization is by aspen.



The living and the dead. Burnt timber and regrowth of jack pine.

We were able to distinguish four or five distinct plant communities. The dry uplands are variously forested with close-set jack pine, some with a well-developed undershrub community of saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), velvet-leaf blueberry (*Vaccinium myrtilloides*), rock cranberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) and forbs characteristic of dry forests, and more open, sparsely vegetated areas. One open hollow, clearly a catchment for moisture, is vegetated entirely by velvet-leaf blueberry, which particularly seems to like moist areas on sandy soils. Other low-lying areas are occupied by aspen forest. One wetland community we checked out consists of an open meadow of marsh reedgrass (*Calamagrostis canadensis*), surrounded by aspen forest with a small fringe of river alder (*Alnus incana* var. *tenuifolia*), allowing us to add a new suite of moist woods/wetland species to our list. Another moist hollow we entered consists entirely of Alaskan birch (*Betula neoalaskana*) with an understory of Labrador tea (*Rhododendron groenlandicum*), in flower, Canada bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*) and woodland horsetail (*Equisetum sylvaticum*). Some low parts of the trail contain standing water, where the ground has been saturated for long enough to allow wetland species such as small-fruited bulrush (*Scirpus microcarpus*) and marsh grasses to establish. Of the five species of sedge (*Carex*) that we identified, all but one are sandy soil species, and of these all but hay sedge (*Carex siccata*) stake out their territorial claim as flat rosettes or close tufts. Hay sedge, by contrast, spreads by rhizomes, sometimes forming dense patches in open ground but often interspersing itself amid other vegetation.



L. Sand heather, (*Hudsonia tomentosa*), forms extensive patches in a certain area of the Natural Area. This plant belongs in the rockrose family (Cistaceae) Good to see! R. Sand heather in flower.

Birds were singing, even if they were not keen on revealing themselves: warblers, Ovenbird, White-throated Sparrow, American Robin and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Manna glimpsed a Savannah Sparrow and we watched a Great Blue Heron fly overhead. Moose and deer prints were discernible in the soft sand. We were puzzled by a large number of low, bushy jack pine saplings close to the entrance, and wondered if jack pine can regenerate with sprouts from the stumps. But the literature says not, and we can only attribute their shrub-like appearance to browsing by deer and Snowshoe Hares.

Being botanists, we walked a short distance over a long time. However, according to the online literature, Opal Natural Area contains a 13-km looped trail, suitable for hiking, birding and observing the flora.

A later visit to Opal is, of course, necessary, to clear up some of the dubious identifications, mainly of pre-flowering goldenrods (*Solidago* species), and perhaps to sample some blueberries (still only at the flower stage in mid-June). We recorded over 90 species of vascular plant, and could probably add a dozen more with a subsequent exploration. Finally, a big thank-you to a former Alberta Government that set aside this natural area, when sand is such a valued commercial commodity. With the aid of infrequent wildfires, long may Opal NA flourish!

Note: A comprehensive species list for Opal NA is being developed and will be posted on the website in due course.

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The Future of Protected Areas in our Province - From the June 25 CPAWS Northern Alberta newsletter.

What does it mean to have 'protected' areas? What role do parks and recreational areas have in reaching international 30% by 2030 protection targets? Where could protected areas in Alberta be expanded? These are only a few questions CPAWS explores in their newest blog 'Getting to Know Protected Areas in Alberta' in response to *CPAWS National's Roadmap to 2030* report. There are many places and areas in Alberta that are very valuable for conservation and contain irreplaceable habitat. The *CPAWS National Road Map to 2030* report shows that even though there are few current initiatives by government there is an abundance of valuable natural areas that if protected would safeguard our diverse landscape that supports wildlife, and nature that we all love. [Read More](#)

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So – Why Do We Need a Website? By Frank Potter

This is the first of a series of blogs which walk even the most cyber-phobic user through SAPAA's website. SAPAA has had an online presence since its inception 10+ years ago to help Alberta's Protected Areas. But first, what is the role and reason for SAPAA having a website? A website may seem obvious but understanding the role it plays in SAPAA's mission is less so. The site does at least three things: Educate and Communicate; Collaborate and Share Knowledge; Report and Monitor. [Read more.](#)

Frank Potter is the SAPAA Website Coordinator.

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Field Trip to Clyde Fen - Sunday, August 7 Join the Alberta Native Plant Council Stewards of Clyde Fen Candidate Natural Area for an excursion! Located minutes outside of Clyde, Alberta, the Fen is one of four natural areas stewarded by the ANPC. Our aim this trip is to look for late flowering species and non-vascular species to update our plant species list, manage weeds, and have fun! The day will entail a meander through an aspen stand, a shrubby fen, and a pine stand. If anyone is up for difficult walking, the day could also entail a visit to a shallow open water that hasn't been visited in +5 years. Bring rubber boots, pack a lunch, and be prepared to spend a better part of the day there.

Meet at **9:00 am on Sunday August 7** at the Percy Page Centre in Edmonton, Alberta. Carpooling is an option with those who are comfortable doing so. COVID-19 measures are recommended and do not participate if you are feeling unwell. Please RVSP to anpc.clydefen@gmail.com; however, last-minute deciders are welcome.

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Watch out for more Natural Area profiles in coming issues, and don't forget to send in your own stories of site visits. Have a great summer.

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.

Please send compliments, concerns and complaints to sapaanews21@gmail.com
To unsubscribe, or subscribe, email sapaanews21@gmail.com



Cladonia lichens are an important feature of nutrient-poor sandy soils, growing either on soil or in association with wood. Opal Natural Area, June 2022. Photo by Patsy Cotterill.