



Prairie Crocus, *Pulsatilla nuttalliana*, Northwest of Bruderheim NA, 2021 04 18 (HTaube)

In this edition, we celebrate the success of one of SAPAA's members: BLESS. We also explore three natural areas in Central Alberta and examine one of Alberta's more unusual native species, Seneca Snakeroot.

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Editorial by Hubert Taube

Website Development. For the past two years renovation of our website has been the primary focus of the SAPAA Board, with the goal of transforming the former static site to a more dynamic one that allows frequent, maybe even continuous, updates and interaction with the readers. Initially, the emphasis was on the transformation of the description of our WAERNAHR sites to the new format, in an effort to assist in their continuing existence and their possible upgrading. This project is nearing completion, with nearly 80% of the sites fully updated and the rest in the final stages.

Connect & Read. We are now starting a new project which we have called "[Connect & Read](#)" and which will be a new page on our website. The purpose is to provide readers with background material of the sources used/ useful for the description of our sites; in particular, government sources that can be pursued further, and links to other, mostly Albertan organizations with which we have common interests in nature and environmental protection, in an effort to bring about closer, mutually beneficial relationships. As well, and maybe most important, it will include references to policy issues currently under discussion.

To illustrate the various categories, here are examples for each:

- Links to the [Land Reference Manual](#) which provides the government description of "Alberta Parks".
- Links to the websites of province wide organizations like Nature Alberta, CPAWS, AWA, but also to smaller local groups such as the JJ Collett Foundation (pending).
- Reference to [recent news conferences](#) dealing with expansion of Alberta's campground and trail system, given by the Minister Todd Loewen.

Stewardship Program on Hold. On another note, I'm sure most of you are aware that, for the last two years at least, Alberta Parks (in its various designations) was actively working with the Miistakis Institute of Calgary on the renewal of the Stewardship program. This effort was intensified last fall when two virtual workshops were held with existing and potential future stewards and the Miistakis Institute was commissioned to prepare a report outlining future directives for program renewal.

Miistakis Report. This report was completed by January and an excerpt of it was expected to be released in early March. We have since been notified that the report has become subject to review by Government, with the release date now being indefinite. As a result, in the near future, stewards will have to continue to rely on their own initiatives to work on conservation and stewardship of our Protected Areas.

BLESS Wins Prestigious Award

BLESS secretary, Dave Burkhart, kindly gave us permission to reprint the following from the December 2022 BLESS newsletter. SAPAA congratulates the award winners, Miles Constable and Pat Collins, exemplary stewards who show what can be achieved through long-time dedication to their chosen protected area. We also applaud the fact that St. Albert has recognized their dedication.



Queen Elizabeth II Medal Awards

On November 27th, Miles Constable and Pat Collins, two long-term members of BLESS, were presented with Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medals at a formal ceremony that occurred in Edmonton's Westin Hotel. These medals represent a fitting and well deserved Thank You from St Albert's City Council.

Miles Constable has been part of BLESS for 27 years and has served as President, Vice-President, and is currently BLESS's Treasurer. Miles oversaw the creation of a Breeding Bird Survey of Big Lake in 2003, received a grant to operate a water sampling program of Big Lake and its tributaries in 2006, and received a grant to set up the web camera on Big Lake in 2007. He was also instrumental in getting a grant and hiring a botanist to conduct a plant survey when Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park was newly formed. As Treasurer, he has been a key person in receiving private, provincial, and municipal grants that have funded BLESS's education program, and rebuilt both the Log Cabin and a viewing platform on Big Lake.

Pat Collins has been part of BLESS for 17 years and has served as President, a Member at Large, and is currently one of BLESS's Vice-Presidents. One of Pat's key achievements has been working on the committee that organizes the hiring of the coordinator for the BLESS Summer Nature Centre, which is a program that operates every summer and teaches young children about the natural environment. Pat is a very active steward of Big Lake, the Sturgeon River, and Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park, as well as a major participant in BLESS's fundraising activities. He most recently initiated and oversaw the design and installa-

tion of the tribute plaque for Bob Lane at the entrance to the BLESS platform.

Animal Guide to Lois Hole

Note that BLESS recently published an online guide: Animal Guide to Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park, Alberta, and are promising a print version soon. Anyone wishing to know more about BLESS or receive the newsletter can email info@bless.ab.ca.

Animal Guide

to Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park,
Alberta



Exploring Telfordville by Hubert Taube

[Telfordville Natural Area \(PNT, PA Site 455\)](#), is one of the many obscure, rarely visited sites located within a 100-km radius of Edmonton. Like [Thorsby NA \(PA Site 56\)](#), it is located on Strawberry Creek which runs through the western Alberta Parkland. Another Natural Area (two quarter-sections in size) goes by the name of [Strawberry Creek \(PA Site 242\)](#), about four miles west of the western edge of Pigeon Lake. However, it is not clear to me whether this area is actually in the Strawberry Creek watershed.

Access to Thorsby and Telfordville NAs. Both sites are one quarter-section in size. While Thorsby NA is completely surrounded by private land, and therefore difficult to access, Telfordville is somewhat more easily reached. On the Leduc County Subdivision map it is simply shown as Crown Land. Its northeast corner can be reached by following Highways 39 and 622 and finally turning south on Range Road 24 for 1.6 km.

OHV Disturbances. Another approach might be following the Range Road 24 right-of-way from the south in order to reach the southeast corner of the NA. However, this approach has proved unsuitable because of heavy-duty surface disturbance by OHV traffic.

Steep Descents. In my exploration of the Natural Area from the northeast corner on 25th August 2022, I initially followed the extension of Range Road 24, essentially a double-track trail for a total of about 500 m. The first part is a steep descent into the valley; as a matter of fact, after about 50 m I encountered a very severe washout that would be unnavigable for OHVs. Ultimately, I ended up in the bottomlands at a very tight bend of Strawberry Creek, surrounded by steep exposed bentonite cliffs. At the creek bend, surface erosion is evident due to illegal stream crossing by OHVs.



Creek Valley, NE Corner of NA, Telfordville, 2022-08-25
(H.Taube)

Typical Parkland Vegetation. The landscape is dominated by typical parkland vegetation: overstory of aspen forest with understory of beaked hazelnut, except on the well-drained slopes which are covered by typical spruce forest.



Creek Valley with Bentonite Cliffs in Background, Telfordville, 2022-08-25 (H.Taube)

Privileged Solitude. The photographs illustrate some of the varied scenes I encountered during the outing.

Overall, I feel privileged that here in Alberta we still have many tracts of land with few impacts from civilization and where you can encounter nature in solitude.



Peaceful Streambed and Shore, Telfordville, 2022-08-25
(H.Taube)



Poplar-dominated Forest, Telfordville, 2022-08-25 (H.Taube)

Chedderville and Butcher Creek Natural Areas by Patsy Cotterill



Rich floodplain forest of white spruce and poplars, with a diverse understory, close to the Clearwater River, Chedderville Natural Area, 2022.06.27 (P. Cotterill)

Chedderville

On June 27th, 2022 Manna Parseyan and I made a short stop at the western OC portion of the [Chedderville Natural Area \(PA Site 130\)](#), about 10 km north of the village of Caroline, en route for a longer stay in Kananaskis Country. We had navigated using Google Maps and in the absence of the yellow government natural areas signs weren't entirely sure we were in the Natural Area. However, a local dog walker, returning up a cart track from the river, assured us that we were. Our detour proved worthwhile. It's a lovely spot, with forested floodplains with rich understory vegetation straddling the Clearwater River for some 200 hectares (500 acres) of reserved land, and it was in full flower on this midsummer day.

Clearwater River. The Clearwater is very much a mountain river, its grey, sediment-laden (and mis-named) waters betraying its glacial origin; in the vicinity of Chedderville it is braided, with shallow, swift-flowing channels and gravel bars, and its shores are forested with tall, dark spruce and colonies of balsam poplar. The Clearwater joins the North Saskatchewan River at the Rocky Mountain House National Historic site some 30 km to the north.

A Calciphile Flora. Much of the plant composition in the forest indicates soil with a high calcium content, such as sparrow's-egg lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium passerinum*), round-leaved orchid (*Galearis rotundifolia*), frog orchid (*Coeloglossum viride*) and the lovely white camas (*Anticlea elegans*). However, two plants particularly caught my attention: bristle-leaf sedge (*Carex eburnea*) with its clumps of very fine leaves on the forest floor, and northern hedysarum (*Hedysarum boreale* var. *boreale*) in the more open, gravelly areas. Bristle-leaf sedge occurs along rivers mostly in the mountains, but it is also found in a few spots along the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton, where likewise northern hedysarum can sometimes be spotted. (And there is a stable population in Terwillegar Park in Edmonton.) Both are reminders of the mountain origins of the North Saskatchewan.

Lots of Birds. While I compiled a quick species list of vascular plants (nearly 80 species within an hour) Manna was kept busy photographing flowers and recording birds, the latter including Blue-headed and Red-eyed Vireos, Cassin's and Purple Finches, Boreal Chickadee and Tennessee Warbler.



Clearwater River as viewed from Chedderville Natural Area, with northern hedysarum in flower in the foreground-2022.06.27-(M. Parseyan)

Butcher Creek

On June 30th, on our way back from Kananaskis Country, Manna and I took a detour off Highway 22, heading east along Township Road 587 towards Bowden, and called in at [Butcher Creek Natural Area \(Site 269\)](#). It encompasses some 206 ha of a forested floodplain of the Red Deer River and is a popular destination for naturalists and outdoors types from the Red Deer area.



Treed fen with black spruce and balsam poplar at the entrance to Butcher Creek Natural Area-2022.06.30
-(P. Cotterill)

Another Calciphile Flora. We didn't have time to reach the river but followed a cart track for a little way, first through a very wet, spruce swamp with lots of willow to a more upland open meadow. The flora was of the calcium-loving type, indicating the influence of the river, and typical of forested fens interspersed with open areas in the boreal west. However, what we did not predict was a population of Seneca snakeroot (*Polygala senega*) in flower in the open meadow. This is an intriguing plant with strong cultural connections (see the profile of this species below).



Open floodplain in Butcher Creek Natural Area, showing Seneca snakeroot plants-2022.06.30-(P.Cotterill)

We are indeed fortunate in Alberta to have relatively easy access to habitats of such rich diversity provided one is willing to venture a little off the beaten track, and are grateful for the foresight that went into setting aside these natural areas.



A Seneca snakeroot plant in flower in a meadow in Butcher Creek Natural Area-2022.06.30
(P. Cotterill)

Plant Profile: Seneca Snakeroot

Seneca snakeroot (*Polygala senega*), is a perennial herb with a few, erect, unbranched stems growing 15-30 cm tall from a woody crown. The stems bear small white flowers towards the tip in a congested spike 1.5-4 cm long. The obvious part of the flower is formed of two wing-like, petaloid sepals 2-3 mm long, and three smaller, outer sepals. They surround three petals joined in a greenish tube, one of which is keeled, with a crest, and eight small stamens. The two-chambered ovary develops into a round capsule which splits lengthwise to release two hairy black seeds.

Plant Profile, continued...

The Root has Medicinal Value. The plant's claim to fame, that is, its significance for humans, however, is its long, twisted, dark brown taproot which contains a cocktail of compounds with pharmaceutical properties.

Where is it Found? The species is native to North America and is widely distributed across the Canadian Provinces and east-central U.S., although it varies in abundance throughout its range. Although it is considered to be currently in general decline, its conservation status is rated secure (S4) in the Prairie Provinces and Ontario. **Cultural Significance.** Indigenous peoples have used the root for a variety of medicinal purposes. One source suggests that the Seneca Indians used it to treat snakebite because of the root's resemblance to the tail of a rattlesnake, an idea that is reminiscent of the ancient Western herbalists' "Doctrine of Signatures". According to this, a plant part's resemblance to a human organ was thought to indicate its value for treatment of diseases of that organ.

Harvesting. Wild harvesting of the root for export to the U.S., Europe and Japan also takes place, mainly in Manitoba and Saskatchewan: the saponin content is responsible for its main commercial use as an expectorant. Cultivation is being practiced, although the plant's growth to a harvestable size is slow.



Close-up of Seneca Snakeroot plant from an Edmonton-area location-2009.07.05-(P. Cotterill)

Conservation. It is likely that habitat loss due to agriculture and settlement is more a cause of Seneca snakeroot's current decline than harvesting. It seems safest in rocky, limestone areas that are not subject to grazing or other agricultural development. In my experience its habitat is a little difficult to pin down. I have found it mainly in open, grassy areas, usually close to rivers, where the soil is likely high in calcium. Where it does occur it is often abundant, forming distinct populations. Perhaps, then, I shouldn't have been surprised to see it at Butcher Creek growing on a calcareous river floodplain. I conclude that Natural Areas such as Butcher Creek can thus be important in preserving populations of this species.

If you have Seneca snakeroot in your Natural Area it is worth taking some time to appreciate it: consider examining its unusual flower structure with a hand lens and perhaps monitoring the welfare of its populations as a citizen science project.

Fringed Milkwort. Seneca snakeroot has one relative in Alberta in the same family (the milkwort family, Polygalaceae). Fringed milkwort (*Polygala paucifolia*) has few, larger, pink flowers and is very rare, occurring only in the vicinity of Fort McMurray.

Calling all Stewards...

We are on the cusp of another field season, and as usual we invite our stewards to submit material for our newsletters. We are asking for reports on natural areas, accounts of experiences and anecdotes, notices of events and field trips, indeed anything that may be of interest to fellow stewards.

Editorial team: Patsy Cotterill, Frank Potter, Hubert Taube

Links and Resources at a Glance:

- [SAPAA Website: sapaastewards.com](http://sapaastewards.com).
- [List of Alberta's Protected Areas](#).
- [Connect & Read](#).
- [New and Renewal of SAPAA Membership](#).
- [Online Steward Reporting form](#).
- [SAPAA's FaceBook Group](#).
- [Land Reference Manual | Alberta Parks](#).
- View this Newsletter online: [SAPAA Newsletter No. 46, April 2023](#). Comments welcome!