



Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve Stewardship Trip

August 24, 2025

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As part of the AWA's Adventures for Wilderness program, we visited the Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve on August 24, 2025, with 10 members of the public who were interested in learning more about the unique ecosystem of Plateau Mountain and the endangered whitebark pines living there. Jodie Krakowski, from the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation of Canada, joined us to share what her organization is doing to help protect the whitebark pines in Alberta, and specifically their work on Plateau Mountain.



Jodi Krakowski showing the group the effects of rust on this whitebark pine.

Alberta. In particular, there is a blister rust that has been introduced, which causes the tree to die. The particular tree we were inspecting was infected with blister rust, and we could see the weeping orange blisters on the trunk. The rust will move down the trunk and eventually kill the tree.

Our trip began below the flat top of Plateau, where we learned about some of the features of the whitebark pine and how they work with the Clark's nutcracker for the benefit of both bird and tree. Unlike the limber pine (another endangered five-needled pine), the whitebark needs the nutcracker to break the cones in order to reproduce.

We wandered along the slope to find a mature whitebark pine tree. Here, we talked more specifically about the threats these trees face in



Blister rust on whitebark pine

Jodie talked about how her staff are looking for pines with no evidence of rust and collecting cones from these trees. The theory is that these trees may have resistance to the rust, and by cultivating the seeds, the entire population's resistance can also be bolstered. As we wove our way towards the flat upper part of the reserve, we stopped to find seedlings that the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation have planted. Unlike in commercial tree-planting operations where many trees are put in without regard to whether it is a good location to survive, the tree planters try to find spots where the whitebark will thrive. Often, they are tucked behind a rock or another tree to provide the seedling with shelter. We saw dozens of planted seedlings that seemed to be thriving, as well as some naturally occurring young whitebark pines. Glimmers of hope on our Eastern Slopes!



Jodi, pointing out a sheltered location where a whitebark pine seedling planted by her staff seems to be thriving.



Oil and gas infrastructure that was grandfathered in at the time of the creation of the Ecological Reserve.

We continued to the summit plateau, where we saw two cyclists along the old oil and gas road. They were the only other people we saw that day, which, being a weekend, is unusual for this part of Kananaskis. The heritage gas well is still there, and detritus from its construction still litters the plateau.



On this treeless expanse, the ground cover is a combination of dryas and numerous lichens. There were also quite a number of cheerful pink moss campion still in bloom. Fescue grasses were also present in some areas. Patches of *hedysarum* and *vaccinium scoparium* were abundant in the more forested areas of the ecological reserve. On the lower slopes, the forest is primarily spruce and subalpine fir. We did not observe any bighorn sheep, which have often been found on past monitoring trips.



Pollinators included bumblebees on the few late-blooming flowers. We saw numerous butterflies and plenty of *sedum lanceolatum*, an important food for the Rocky Mountain parnassian. We saw at least a half dozen of these high-altitude butterflies. Other butterfly species include Milbert's tortoiseshell, Mormon fritillary, sulphurs, and coppers. They were especially prevalent in the prolifically blooming asters on the edge of the reserve along the access road and near a rockpile. We heard a pika calling in the rockpile, and a few of our hawk-eyed participants got a brief glimpse of one. We saw a number of haystacks outside pika homes.

Birds that were seen included: boreal chickadee, golden eagle, red-tailed hawk, goshawk, least sandpiper, merlin, and horned lark. Perhaps the presence of so many raptors was the reason the pikas were so shy!

Overall, this Ecological Reserve is in very good condition, especially given its proximity to popular recreation areas and especially to areas with rampant and often detrimental OHV use.

Pikas hiding in the rock piles



Sedum lanceolatum, a favorite food of the Rocky Mountain parnassian