This edition outlines SAPAA updates including ongoing projects like the iNaturalist initiative, community outreach events, and the importance of site inspections for Alberta's natural areas. Upcoming events are listed. This Newsletter can be downloaded in pdf [LINK]

Prairie Crocus, Redwater River NA, April 2024, M. Mayes.

Editorial – SAPAA, A New Season

by Hubert Taube, Past-President SAPAA

The sandy soils Northeast of Edmonton are some of the first Natural Areas in the capital region that show signs of spring. A prairie crocus emerges early from this delicate and fragile ecosystem. Botanist Patsy Cotterill has shared her experience (and photos) of the sandhills in this edition's feature article.

Reporting on the AGM

Our most recent AGM was remotely held on November 29 last year. The principal business was election of a new Board. Congratulations, and thank you to these individuals who carry on with SAPAA's work. To learn more about them, their biographies are available on the Contact Us page.

- President and Webmaster: Frank Potter,
- Past-President: Hubert Taube,
- Secretary: Patsy Cotterill,
- Treasurer: Myrna Peters,
- General Directors: Tony Blake, David Fielder, Madeline Mayes and Tyler Norris.

The Future of SAPAA

Discussion of future directions of SAPAA was a central part of the AGM. The cost for a full fledged version of a SAPAA 2.0 plan was estimated at $25,000 to 75,000 per year. Given the cost, the members agreed to a toned-down version of SAPAA 2.0. The site inspection process will continue but with responsibilities and costs carried by the individual. More details are available via Newsletter #56 as well as the 2025 President's AGM Report.

iNaturalist Project

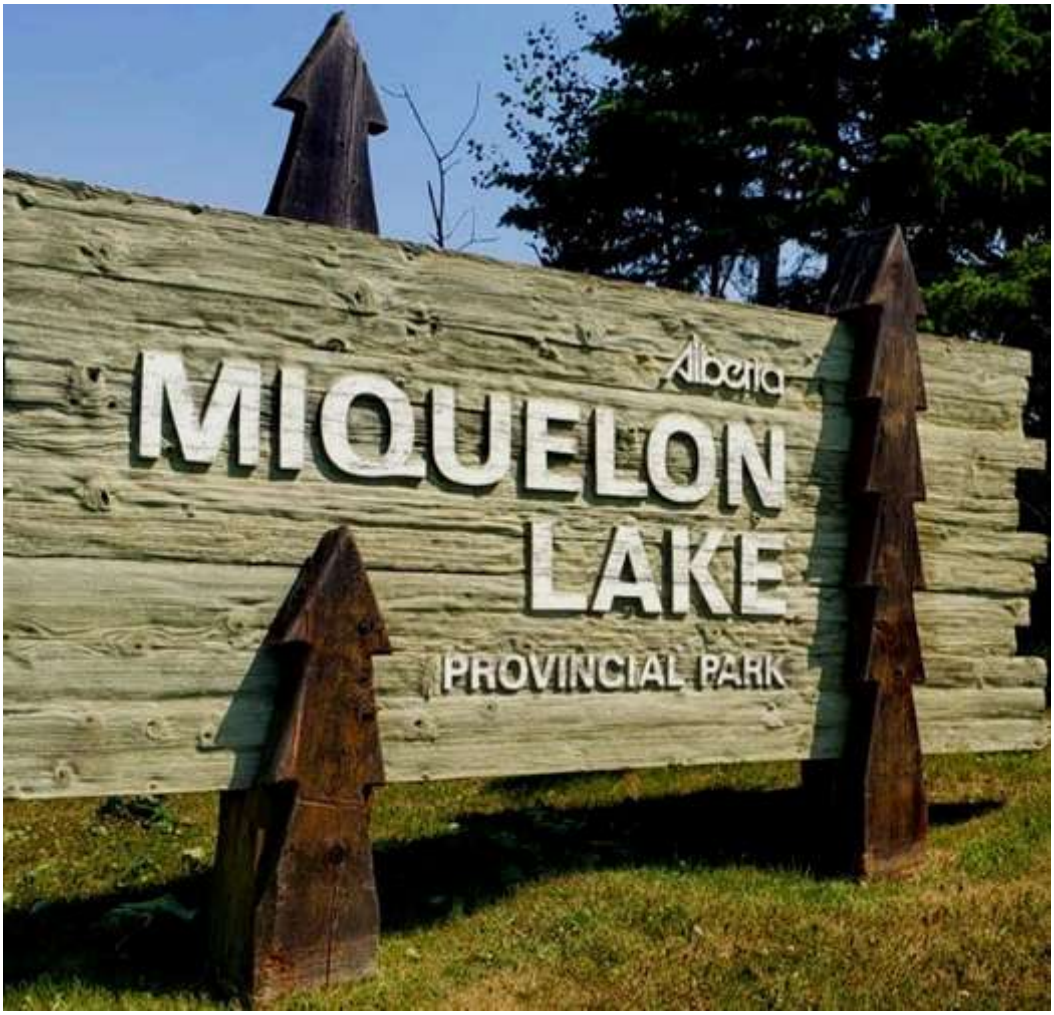
The iNaturalist project initiated last spring is nearing completion. All of the WAERNAHR
Protected Areas are now delineated on the iNat database. All observations recorded by iNat users will automatically be available as distribution records and should serve to document he biodiversity of our Protected Areas.

The links to the iNaturalist observation records have also been incorporated into the site descriptions on our website and are currently being reviewed in an overall update of the site. We encourage any natural areas visitors to record their observations on iNaturalist as well as submitting a Site Inspection Report to SAPAA.

Community Outreach

The following sessions are planned. All are free and open to SAPAA members save for the MLA session.

- SIR Dragon, March 19. A review of the Site Inspection Reporting application by individuals with deep knowledge of IT, environmental issues, and conducting inspections.
- Rural MLA Information Session, March 20. A chance for rural MLAs to learn about the Natural Areas in their backyard, their value and how they are being abused.
- Mt. Butte Field Trip, May 9.
- Fall Mini-Conference, September 12.



Miquelon Lake, location of SAPAA's September 2026 mini-Conference.

Field Season Around the Corner!

As I'm writing this, days are getting longer and warmer; so, the season for field trips is around the corner. Our first group trip is scheduled for May 9, to Mt Butte in central Alberta, a repeat of a very memorable trip we had in 2015. Further trips are in the planning stages.

Ideally, we would want to visit areas that are on the "First Ascent" list. If you want to suggest and possibly lead a trip to any site (First Ascent or otherwise), please email the President (Frank).

Further down the line we have begun to organize a "fall mini conference". So far, we envisage indoor presentations and local nature explorations. Keep the date in mind: it will be at the Miquelon Lake Visitor Centre on Saturday, September 12.

The Sand Dune Natural Areas

by Patsy Cotterill, Secretary

The retreating glaciers and strong winds have created an arc of sand dunes stretching from the Saskatchewan border to Grand Prairie. While this natural feature is perhaps more associated with the great deserts of the world (Sahara, Gobi), Canada too has active dunes and the largest of these are the Athabasca Sand Dunes. This feature article explores these unique areas of Central Alberta.

Read: The Sand Dune Natural Areas.

2026 – Site Inspection Status

Collecting information about the state of a Natural Area is a key activity of SAPAA. Historically, we were the eyes and ears of the government through their volunteer program. We continue to provide this role and communicate the information to our members, the government, and the public.

The following are changes to the Site Inspection Report (SIR) Process in 2026:

1. No Changes to the full Site Inspection Report. Other than changing the dates, the SIR form is unchanged from 2025. It is still based on Google Form technology.
2. Dropping the Simple SIR. Most members preferred the full form.
3. Beta Testing SIR SAPAA. Select SAPAA Members will be invited to test an online application. To learn more about this, attend the SIR Dragon – March 19, 2026 – 1200 pm session. As well as training sessions.

2025 Minister's Report

A student project is involved helping to write SAPAA's 2025 Minister's Report. Amongst other changes, it will include analysis from iNaturalist records. Stay tuned for a briefing and update!

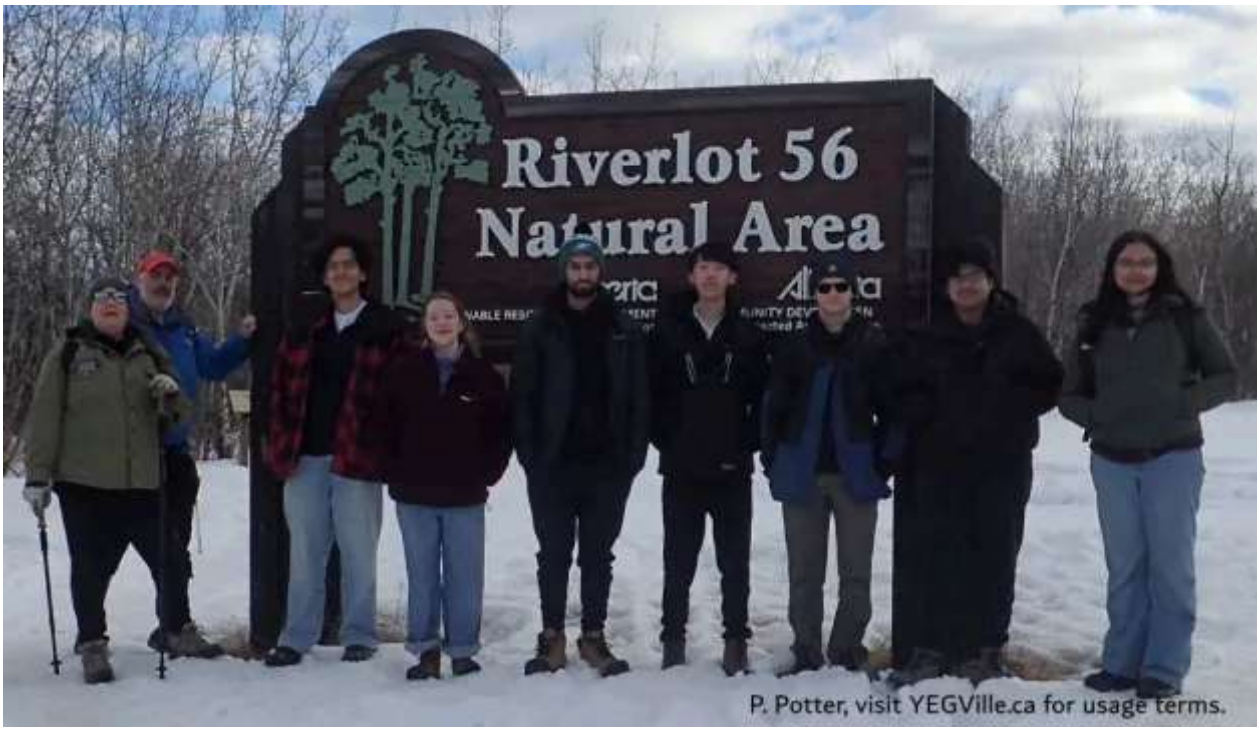
Student Projects (and Volunteer)

SAPAA is currently running (or has completed) the following student projects.

1. Rural MLA Engagement, Status: **Ongoing.** The constituents of Rural MLAs are a potential beneficiary of improved monitoring of protected areas. What are the value propositions for both audiences and how best to enlist their assistance in support of SAPAA?
2. SIR Web and Phone Application, Status: **Ongoing**. Replace the Google Form technology with an online database and web application. Implement an Android and iOS version as time and capacity permit.
3. 2026 Minister's Report, Status: **Ongoing**. SAPAA will provide to the responsible provincial Minister(s) a report on the state of Alberta's protected areas.
4. Nearby Resident Communication Kit, Status: **Completed**. How to communicate with nearby residents to encourage them to report on the site.

5. Deriving a Historical Naturalness Score using AI, Status: **Ongoing**. Evaluate how AI can estimate the naturalness score for historical SIRs.

Taking students out into a Natural Area is a great way for them to understand what we do and how it is done. On 2026-01-31, Riverlot 56 was visited again. Thank you to Myrna Peters who assisted with the trip.



Field trip group. 2026-01-31, Riverlot 56, P. Potter. Board members Myrna & Frank on the left.

Alberta Wilderness Association Plateau Mountain

The Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is the designated government Steward for Plateau Mountain ER. In a previous newsletter, SAPAA Newsletter No. 56, November 2025, we featured their visit to Beehive Natural Area. Thank you AWA for your ongoing support and reports! Now see Plateau Mtn ER, Adventures for Wilderness program, AWA.

— Top —

Plan for Parks

Patsy Cotterill has taken a deep dive into the recently released provincial Plan for Parks. Spoiler alert: more high level platitudes, accent on development, a paucity of details. Still, it beats a proposal to sell them off! Plan for Parks – SAPAA's Thoughts

— Top —

Editorial Team, Links and Resources at a Glance:

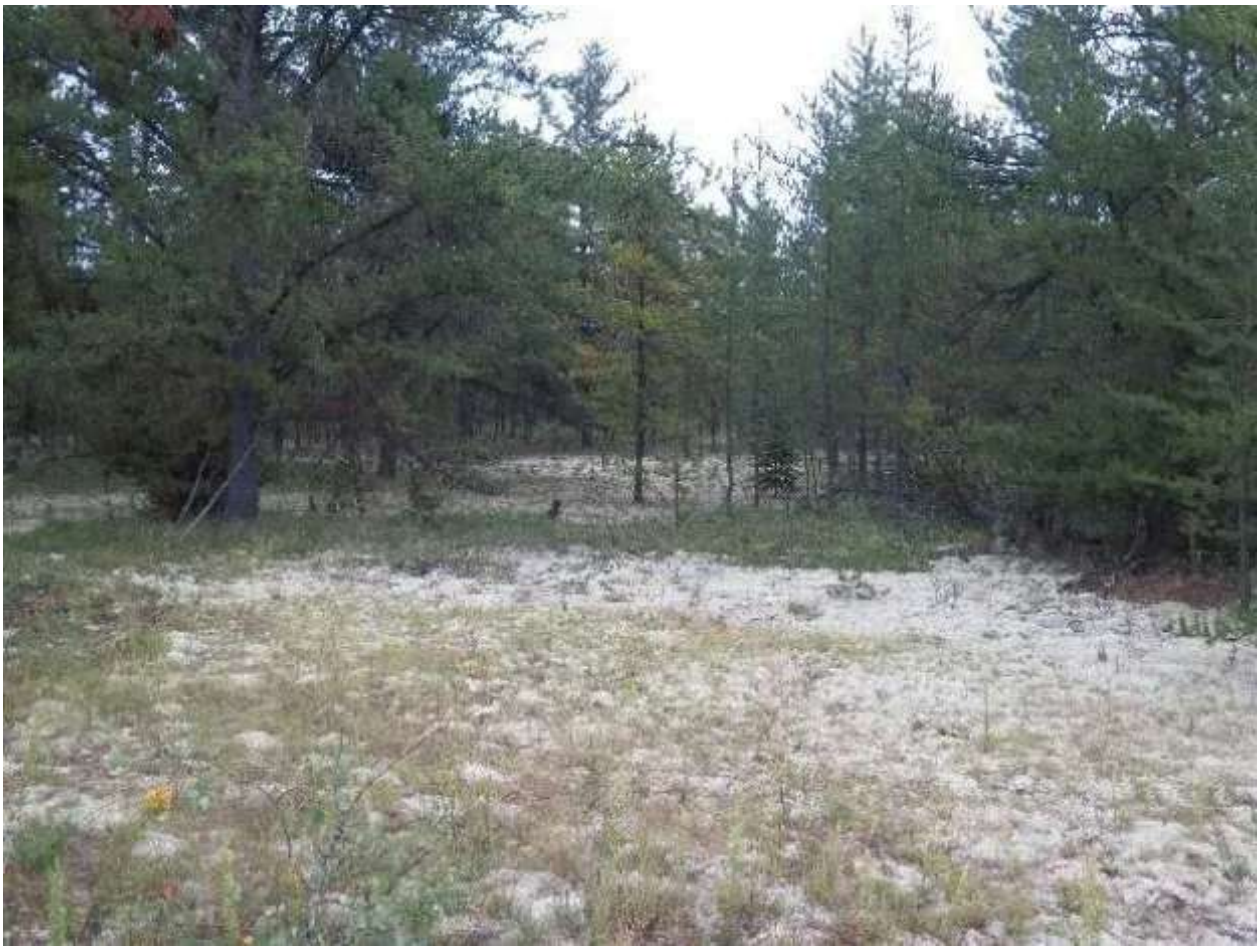
Editorial team: Patsy Cotterill, Frank Potter, Hubert Taube.

- List of Alberta's Protected Areas.
- Connect & Read.
- Online Steward Reporting form.
- New and Renewal of SAPAA Membership.
- SAPAA's FaceBook Group.
- Land Reference Manual | Alberta Parks.
- This Newsletter can be downloaded in pdf.

The Sand Dune Natural Areas

Return to SAPAA Newsletter No. 57, February 2026.

Sand dune fields in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba host unique ecosystems, dominated by jack pine forests and diverse vegetation. While some areas suffer from environmental degradation due to human activities, others maintain ecological integrity and serve as important habitats for wildlife. Community engagement and recreation opportunities are integral to these natural areas.



Typical plant community in a mature jack pine forest, with open understory of common bearberry, reindeer lichen and miscellaneous herbaceous species. Halfmoon Lake Natural Area. Photo: P. Cotterill

Sand Dunes in the Prairies – How Come?

There are over 120 sand dune fields in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, occurring in both the south, central and north of these Prairie Provinces.[1] Their low soil fertility and poor water-holding capacity means they cannot be cultivated and so they form oases of natural vegetation in areas surrounded by agriculture.

Most were formed from sand-bearing sediments carried by rivers issuing from the melting glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age around 11,000 years ago. As the rivers' currents slowed at lower elevations the heavy sand particles were deposited and then later blown into dune formations by strong winds blowing from the northwest and southeast across open, unvegetated, post-glacial landscapes.[1] Wind-blown dunes are referred to as aeolian.

A few dunes are still active today; their expanses of open sand are wind-blown causing them to move slowly across the landscape. The Athabasca Sand Dunes of Alberta and Saskatchewan are the largest active dunes in Canada.

Most dune fields have been stabilized and immobilized by vegetation, however. In southern Alberta the vegetation cover is mostly grass and shrubbery, but the more northern dune fields are forested with jack pine and aspen.

Although they are unsuitable for growing annual crops, they are put to various anthropogenic uses in Alberta. In the south this can be for grazing, or as reserves for military training (e.g., Wainwright and Suffield), while in the north sand dune terrain is exploited by the oil and gas and sand and gravel extraction industries as well as for outdoors recreation. All these uses have greater or lesser degrees of conflict with the ecological integrity of the natural ecosystems.

Natural Vegetation of the Northern Dune Fields

The sandy uplands of the dunes are typically covered by relatively open forests of jack pine with a low or subshrub understory of common bearberry and reindeer lichen, mixed with denser stands of aspen hosting a diverse floral community of medium-tall shrubs and a ground cover of herbaceous plants typical of dry woods.

The vegetation is characteristic and uniform, although diverse, over most of the uplands. However, the rolling topography of the dune fields guarantees that the sandy uplands are invariably associated with interdunal depressions in which water retention results in the development of more organic soils and different plant communities.

These lowlands vary in type and extent and contribute significantly to the biotic diversity of dune field terrain. They can be broad valleys filled with lakes or their associated drier marshes or shrubby meadows or moist deciduous forests, or peatlands with organic soil build-up supporting open sedge fens or dense forests of black spruce and tamarack.

In the Dry Mixedwood subregion of the Boreal Forest Region of Alberta a cluster of dune fields forms a bow-like arc extending from northeast of Edmonton in the area of Bruderheim, north through Redwater, Opal and Halfmoon Lake and

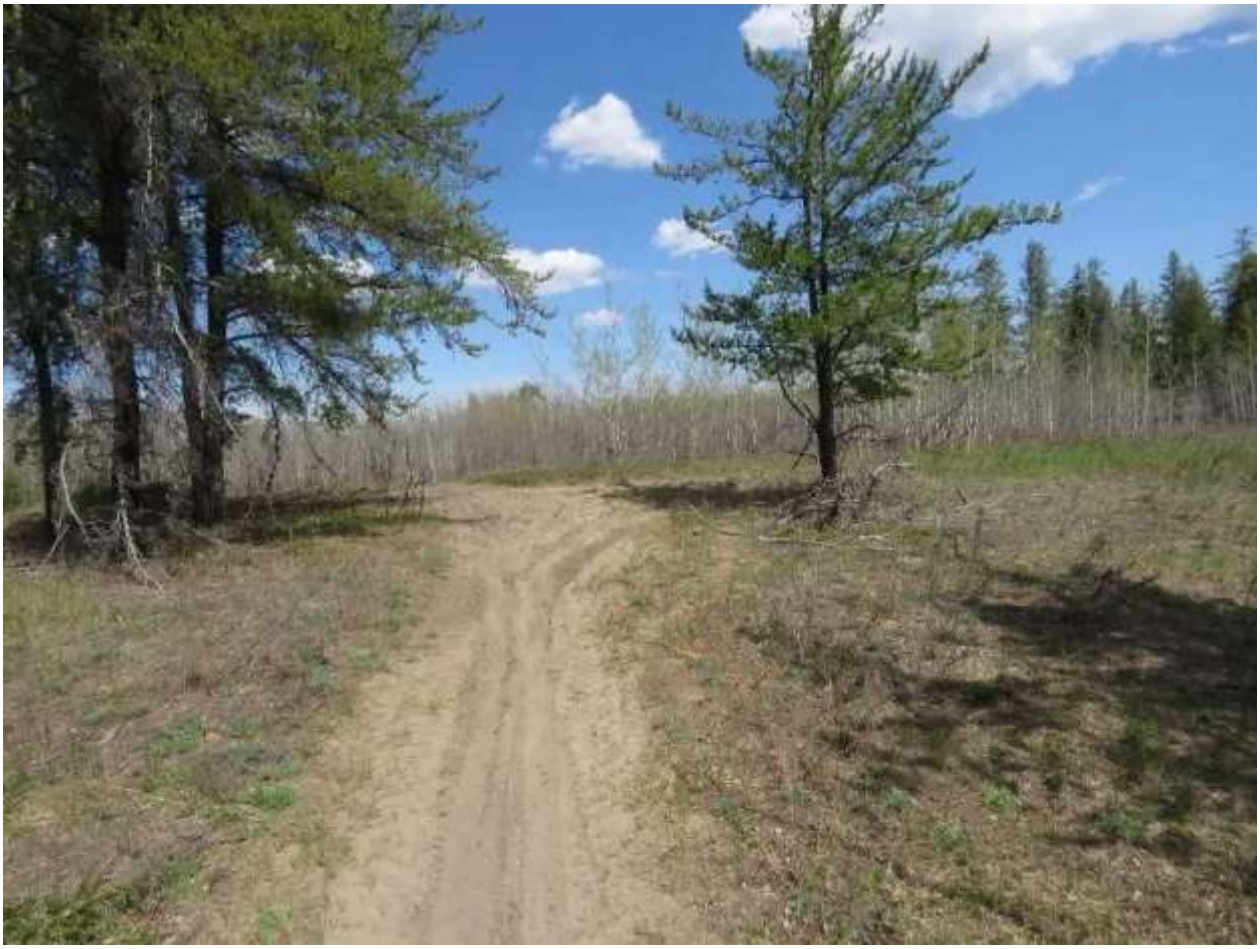
on to Clyde, Nestow and Tawatinaw, before curving westward to Holmes Crossing Sandhills Ecological Reserve and Fort Assiniboine Sandhills Wildland Park further northwest in the Central Mixedwood subregion.

The arc encompasses a number of Crown land sites protected as natural areas, which provide opportunities for people living in relatively local urban settlements such as Edmonton to experience nature. Farther north and west the Bear River-Wapiti Sand Dunes complex provides similar opportunities for the residents of Grand Prairie.

Sites are also visited for passive outdoor recreation such as hiking, horseback riding, snowshoeing or skiing, but motorized recreation using quads, dirt bikes or snowmobiles is arguably much more common. I think it is fair to say that most natural areas are underappreciated by the general public for experiencing nature and/or the outdoors, and they are also little used for educational purposes or research.

In terms of their value as functioning natural ecosystems and for wildlife habitat and movement, because many of these natural areas are small, consisting of a section (259 hectares or 640 acres) or less, this will depend on the amount of surrounding (unprotected) land left in a natural state. Given that these pockets of Crown land are amenable to human disturbance, it is arguable that they may offer less in the way of environmental protection than the surrounding land in private ownership as long as it remains in a natural state.

All naturally vegetated land could be under threat if Canada became more heavily populated and the demands on resources greater. A threat to natural areas that are adjacent to or surrounded by agriculture is the encroachment of weeds. The provincial government does not undertake ecological management of their natural area reserves.



ATV trail creating disturbance in land re-vegetating years after a forest fire. Northwest Bruderheim Natural Area. Photo: Hubert Taube.

The Problem of "Multi-use" Natural Areas

Since most sand and gravel operations take place outside designated natural areas, and oil and gas installations if they are present have a relatively small footprint, most of the problems of "multi-use" arise from all-terrain vehicle (ATV) traffic.

Well-spaced pine trees with low ground cover on sand means the ground is easily ripped up by machines to make a network of trails; the undulating topography which includes wet hollows provides exactly the kind of challenges the riders are looking for. On the other hand, where tracks through forested areas remain single, and ridership is limited, an ATV trail probably does not do too much ecological harm and does have the advantage of providing access to passive users.

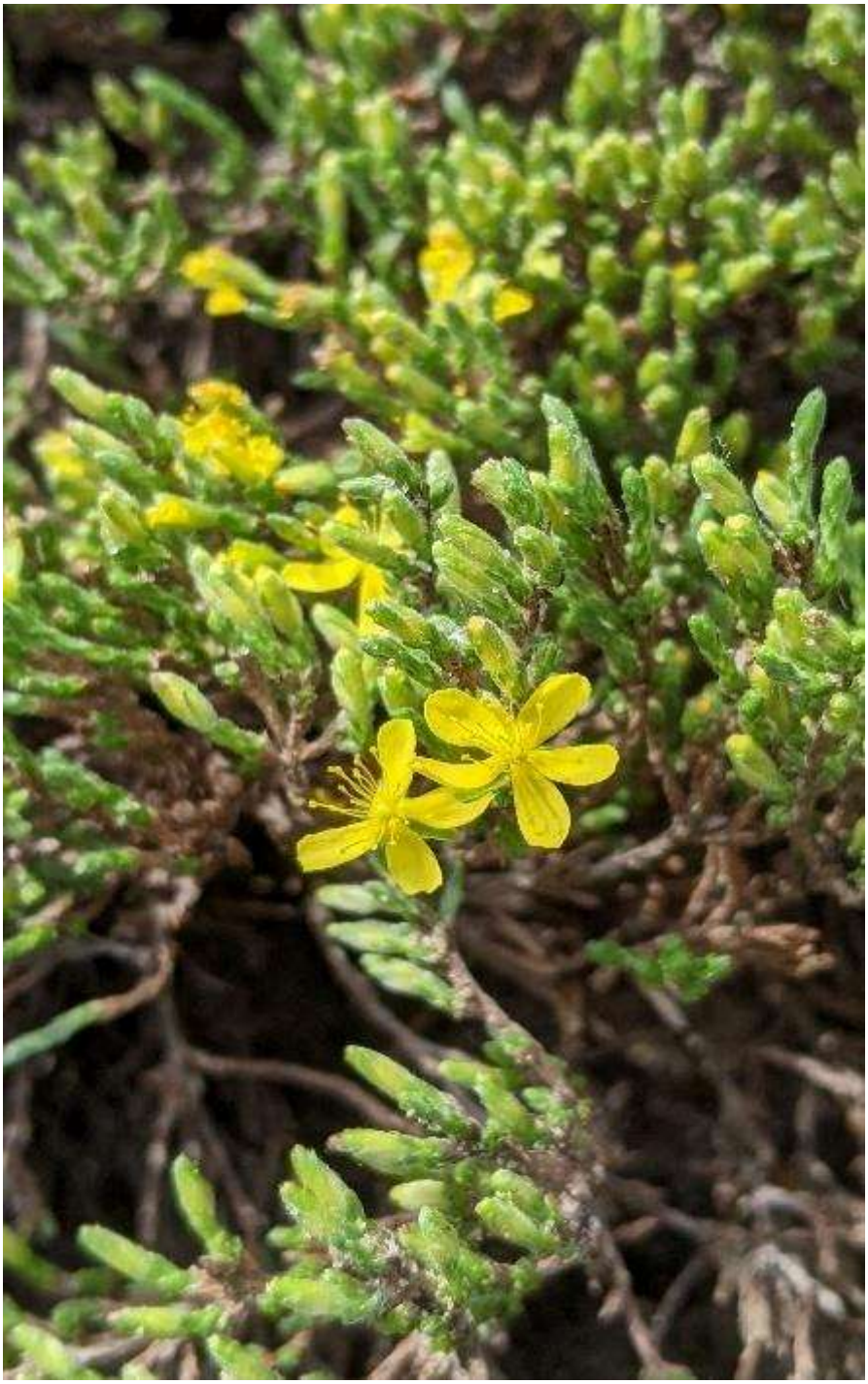
Close to the settled areas ATV use has often been excessive and has been the bane of any citizen stewards appointed by the provincial government when it began its Volunteer Steward Program in 1987. (Stewards' mandate has largely been to protect the ecological integrity of their areas and their value for nature-based enjoyment.) In some cases, it has been a headache for provincial and municipal governments as well.

Where considerable environmental degradation occurs and it proves impossible to control, it can be an incentive for the government to disestablish (i.e., end protective reservation of) these areas.

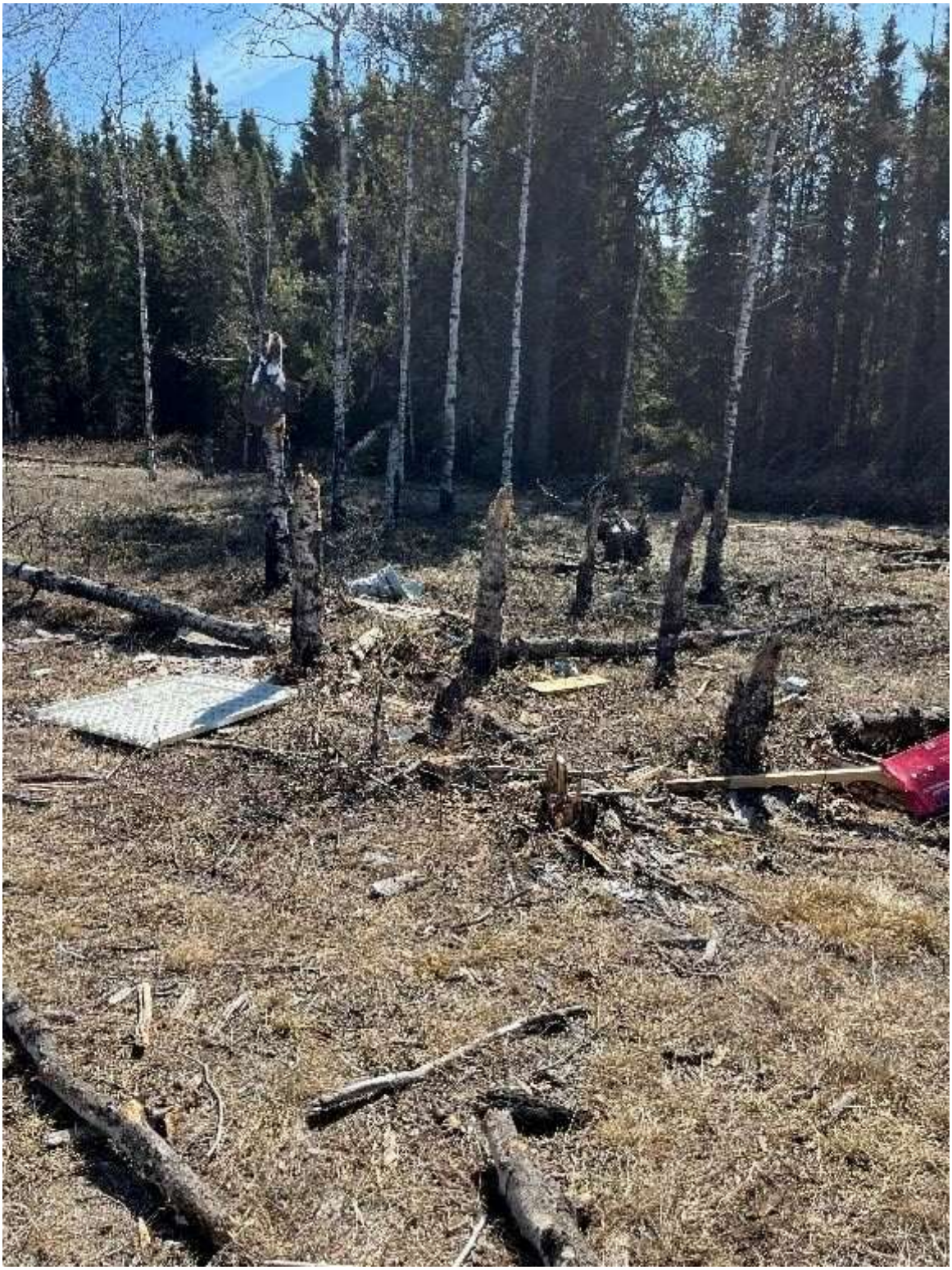
Bad News for Nature: Natural Areas “Downgraded” to PRAs

Redwater Natural Area, some 2223 hectares of rolling sandy terrain covered in jack pine forest, was established in 1971 and disestablished as a natural area in 2012, becoming a Provincial Recreation Area dedicated entirely to ATV activity. This happened despite the valiant efforts of the Friends of Redwater Natural Area Society to contain ATV impact, and likely before the government realized the effect of the growing popularity of motorized recreation and the need to provide for it with separate facilities.

Redwater River Natural Area, also established in 1971, a mere crow’s flight away to the northwest and only a quarter section in size, might have made up for some of its neighbour’s sacrifice of natural terrain, but this too has been chewed up by ATVs. Black spruce trees in its wet depressions do double duty as targets for shooting practice. Nevertheless, Redwater River retains its status as a natural area and has a large population of sand heather (*Hudsonia tomentosa*), a low, hairy subshrub typical of bare sands but not extremely common. Large tracts of spruce forest to its southeast would suggest that nature is better protected outside this natural area than in.



Sand heather (Hudsonia tomentosa) in flower in Opal Natural Area. Photo: Manna Parseyan.



Destruction associated with target practice at Redwater River Natural Area. Photo: P Cotterill.

Destruction associated with target practice at Redwater River Natural Area. Photo: P Cotterill.

Astotin Natural Area, southwest of the Bruderheims, was disestablished and purchased as part of an Industrial Heartland development in 2007, a painful ending for the Fort Saskatchewan Naturalist Society after 15 years of stewardship.

North of Bruderheim Natural Area was established in 1963 on typical dune land due south across the North Saskatchewan River from Redwater Natural Area and close to where the Redwater River empties into it. It was converted to a provincial recreation area in 2012, and now occupies over 442 hectares of land given over entirely to ATV use. The government's rationale was that such a re-designation would allow greater control through regulation. No naturalist sets foot in it now; walking is almost impossible in the rutted open sand of the trails and the sight of the deeply gouged banks of Beaverhill Creek where ATVers cross is a particular form of torture!

Better News: Natural Areas that Have Kept their Status

Several natural areas within the "arc" have, however, retained enough unspoilt habitat to be of interest to naturalists and hikers. Prospective visitors to these sites are advised to first check the appropriate page on the SAPAA website for basic information. (Go to Protected Areas – List of Protected Areas and scroll down.)

Be sure to check for any iNaturalist records that are listed for that site. This will give suggestions on what to look out for in terms of plants and animals, and possibly encourage you to add your own observations after a visit. As well, the iNaturalist map showing the boundary of the natural area and the pin-drop records provide a useful geographic orientation and outlines of the trails. Using the website invitation, you also have an opportunity to submit an "inspection report" of your visit if you wish.

Northwest of Bruderheim Natural Area

Legally established in 2007 but faithfully monitored and stewarded by former SAPAA President Hubert Taube since 1989, this is one of the closer natural areas to Edmonton and consists of two half-sections (259 hectares). It was formerly joined by a quarter-section which was later taken out of reservation although it has not since been developed. The natural area has an industrial footprint and its proximity to urban areas is probably the reason it has been rather heavily disturbed by ATV riders who exploit the pre-existing rights-of-way for powerlines, pipelines and oil and gas installations as well as old horse trails. To this can be added disturbance from occasional timber-harvesting and camping.

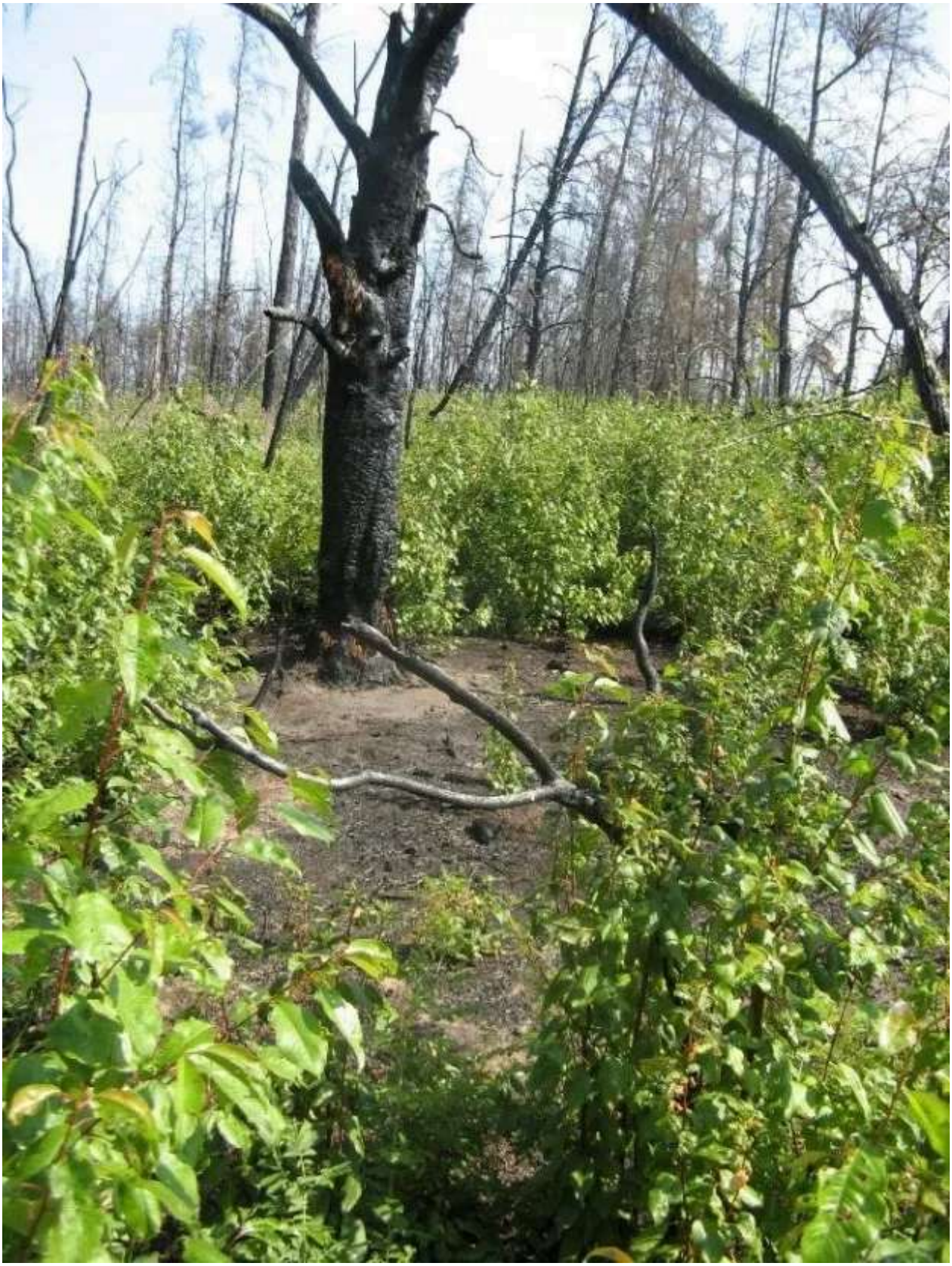
Nevertheless, the site remains a home to native vegetation and wildlife and in June 2024 it hosted a bioblitz. Nature specialists including birders, botanists and entomologists (studying ants, bees, beetles and butterflies) shared observations and expertise and recorded species. Biodiversity is high, with deciduous aspen stands as well as jackpine on the sandy uplands and dense treed fens with black spruce and peat mosses, and open marshes, in the hollows.

A fire that went through the area in 2009 provided a good opportunity to observe plant succession and changes in vegetation composition in the years following the burn. Seedling jack pines sprung up in the footprints of their dead, blackened parents, and the suckering pin-cherry, a shrub that likes well-drained soils, temporarily became a dominant ground cover.

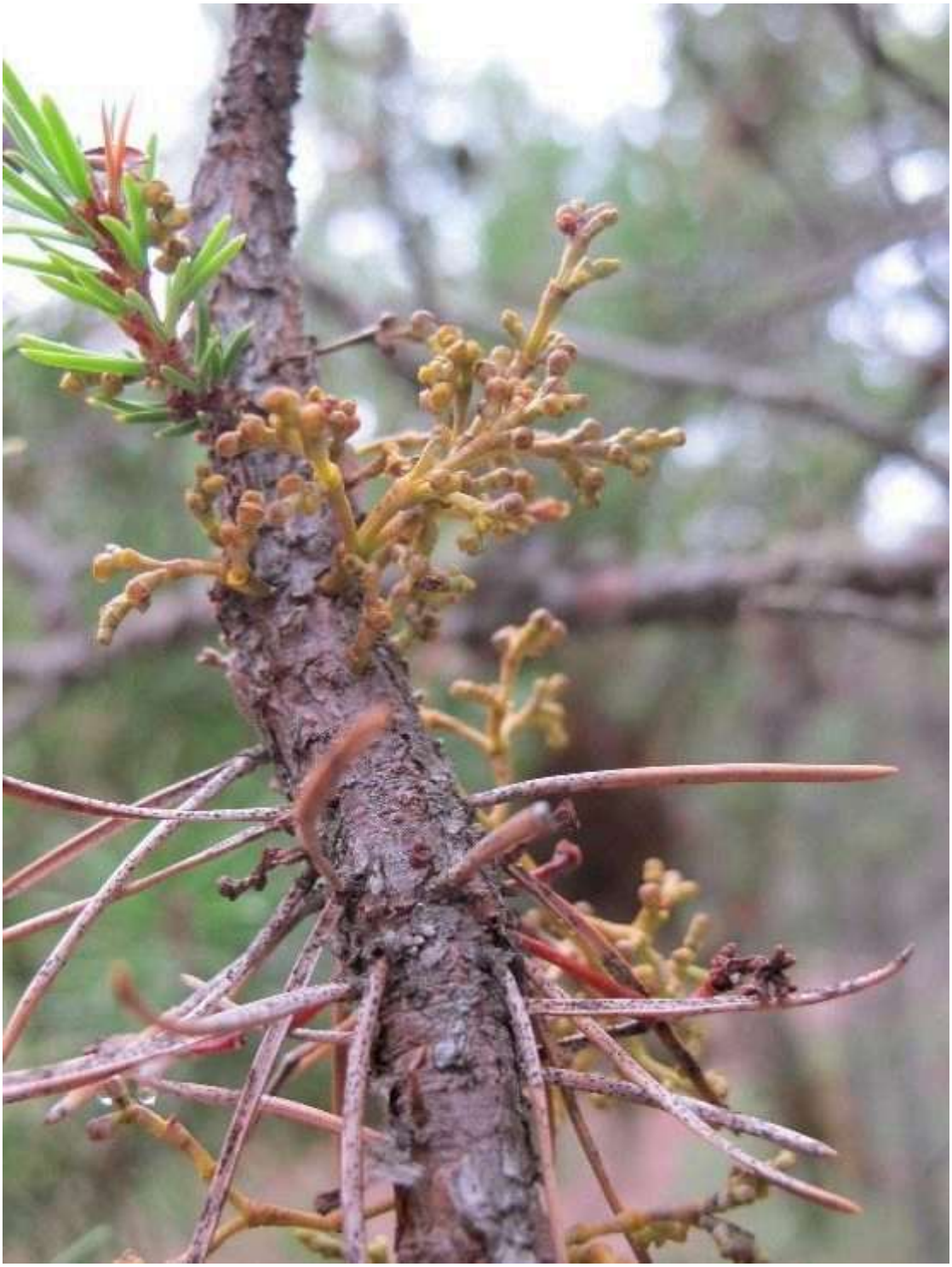
A rather rare sedge that is associated with fire, *Carex houghtoniana*, also became temporarily abundant. Fire is an important means of natural regeneration in these dry forests, and provides opportunities for early successional or open

habitat species to thrive. Without human interference many sites will return to their original mature condition or some version of it after a burn. Jack pine seeds readily germinate in the now nutrient-rich soil provided moisture conditions are right.

As in other sites, surviving elderly jack pine trees in Northwest of Bruderheim demonstrate infection with witch's broom, an unnatural proliferation of branches caused by the parasitic plant dwarf mistletoe.



Pin cherry proliferating a year after the 2009 burn in Northwest of Bruderheim Natural Area. Photo: P. Cotterill.

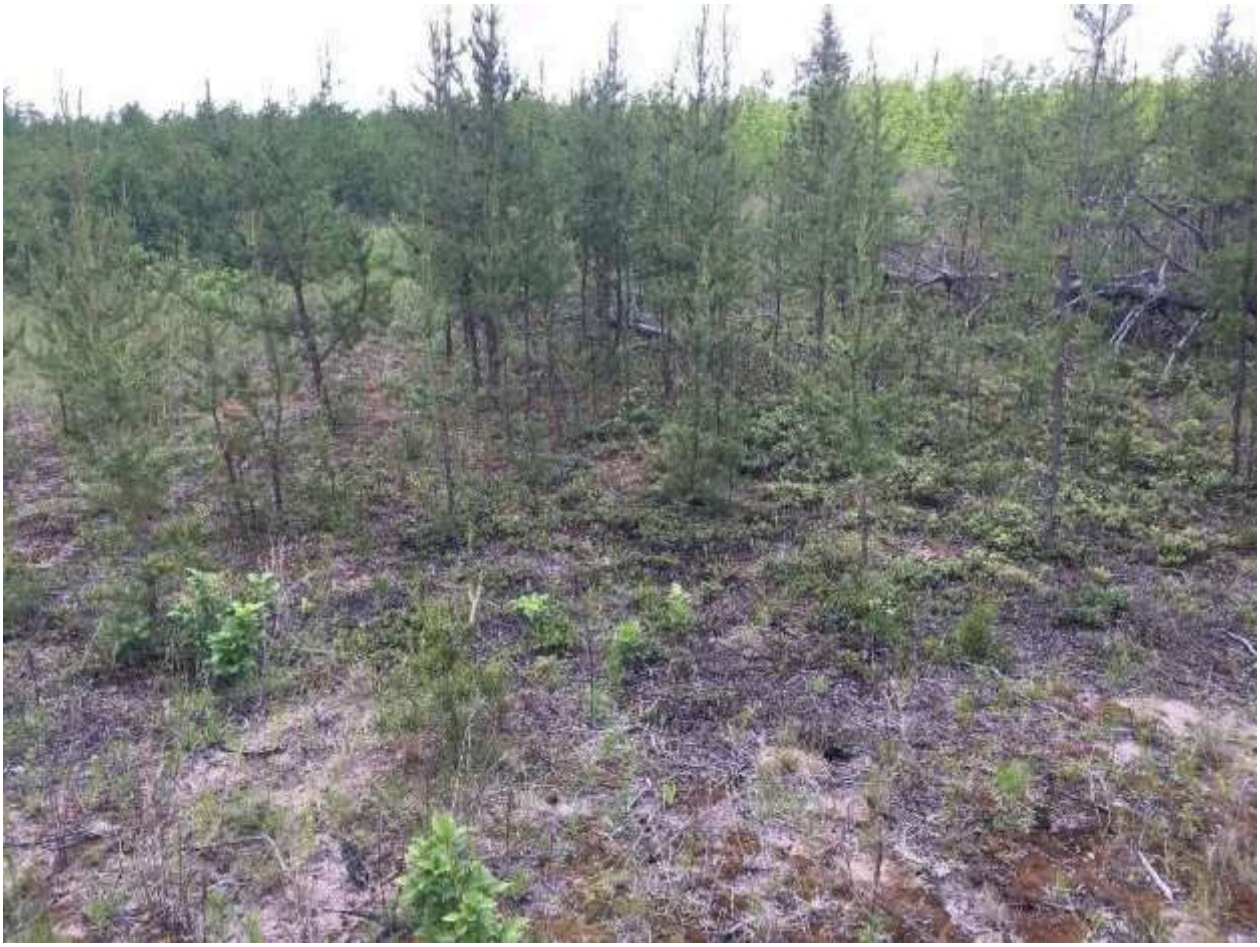


Fruits forming on female plant of lodgepole pine dwarf mistletoe parasitic on the branches of jack pine in Halfmoon Lake Natural Area. Photo: P. Cotterill.

Opal Natural Area

This site consists of two parcels of land, one east and one west, for a total of 371 hectares, both west of the hamlet of Opal, and with differing protective status (OC and PNT portions, see the SAPAA webpage), although the actual extent of natural sandy terrain is much larger.

The eastern portion is the easier segment to access from the road, and is the only site listed on the Alberta government's Parks Information and Facilities website. A fire went through part of the area a decade and a half ago, resulting in dense patches of jack pine abutting areas of relatively open sand that are being colonized with copious amounts of field wormwood, junegrass, bearded wheatgrass, northern ricegrass and sticky goldenrod among other herbaceous pioneers. A gently undulating, northwest-trending trail, ill-defined at first, passes through low-lying areas of swamps and denser forest as well as upland ridges.



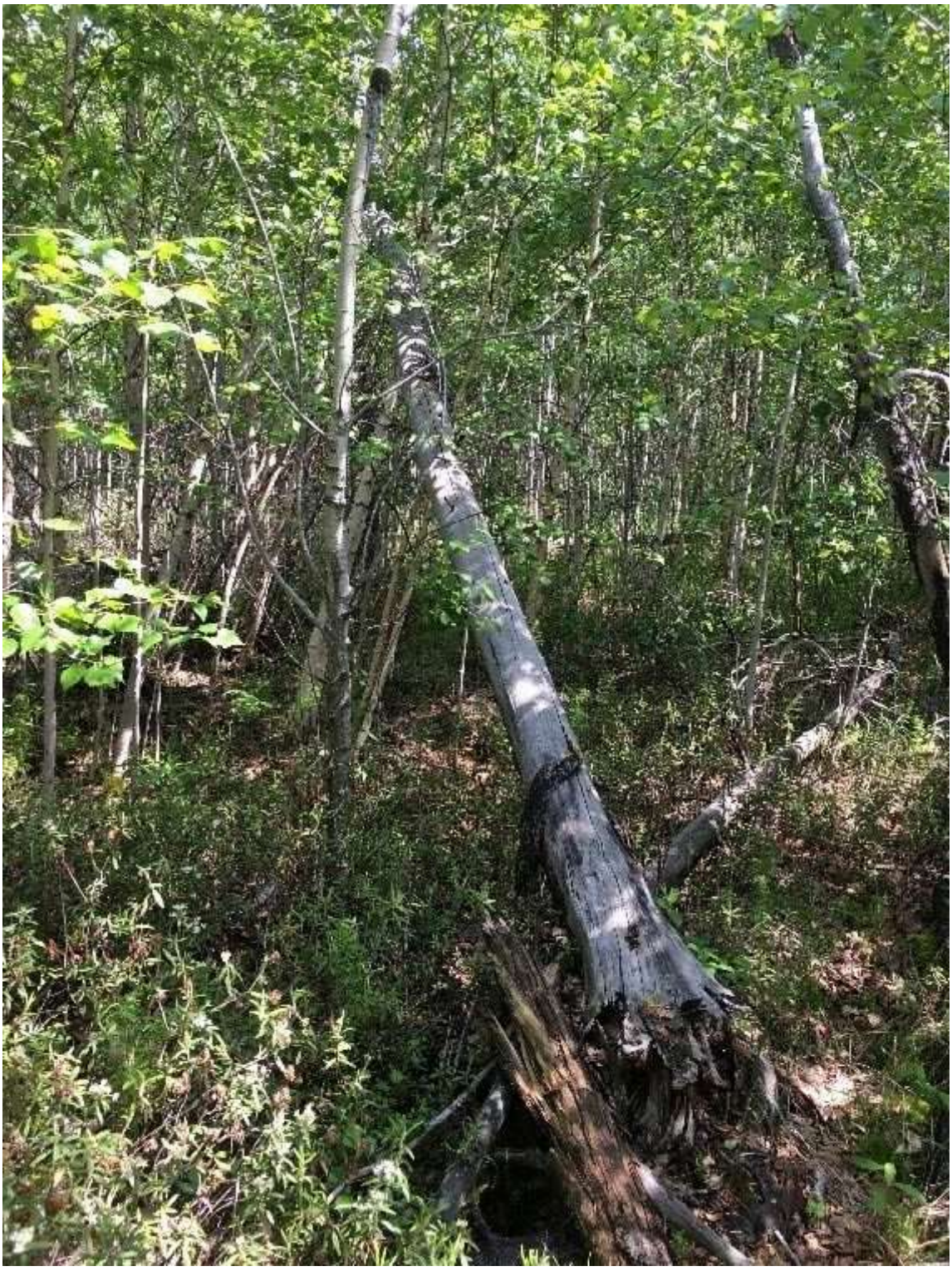
An area denuded by fire more than a decade ago regenerating with jack pine, deciduous shrubs, herbs and moss on a sandy plateau in Opal Natural Area (OC,East). The deciduous forest in the background is in a lowland area.

An area denuded by fire more than a decade ago regenerating with jack pine, deciduous shrubs, herbs and moss on a sandy plateau in Opal Natural Area (OC,East). The deciduous forest in the background is in a lowland area.

Describing a nature walk in Opal on July 9, 1993 in the *Edmonton Journal*, well-known Edmonton naturalists Joy and Cam Finlay recorded seeing 17 species of butterfly, one species better than insect guru John Acorn had seen on the previous day! More recent records, logged in iNaturalist, show the Natural Area continues to be a great site for insect life.

The area showed no signs of ATV tracks during visits to the site in June and August 2022, courtesy, apparently, of the Peaskie Mineral Inc. operation to the northeast which restricts access to ATVs. Non-native (weedy) vegetation is often refreshingly absent from many of these dune fields, as weeds require moister, more fertile soils, but at one spot along the

trail a berm had been constructed. Significantly, the disturbance was associated with a patch of the invasive grass, smooth brome. Monitoring to see if it is encroaching further and if so, removing it, might make a good citizen science project!

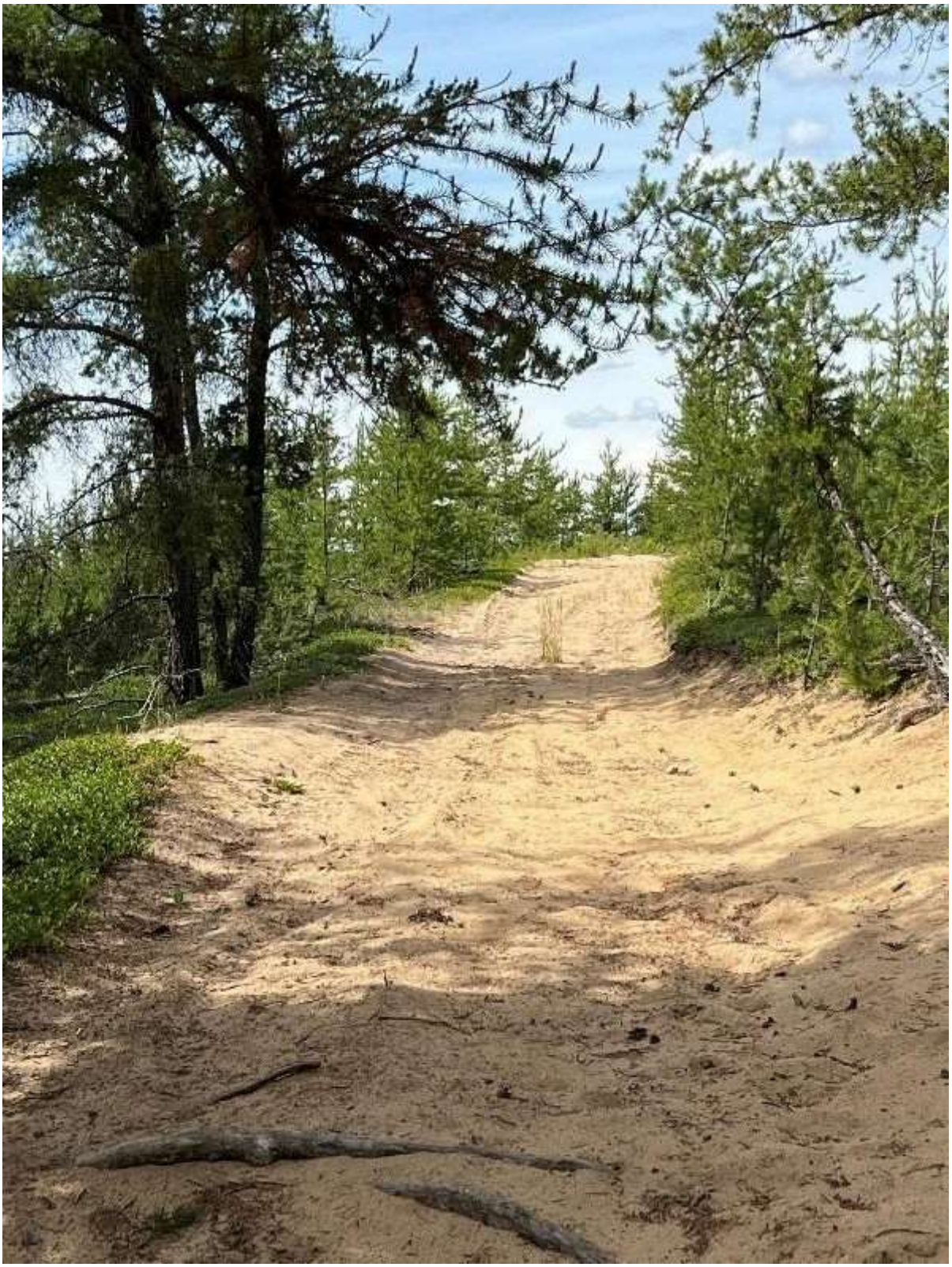


Dune depression in Opal Natural Area (OC, East) forested with a stand of paper birch and with an understory of Labrador tea. Photo: P. Cotterill.

Opal West, located west of the eastern segments, is contiguous by natural terrain but not by land ownership or trails. It requires more off-road navigation to access, but is well worth a visit. For the OC portion, an oil and gas installation site

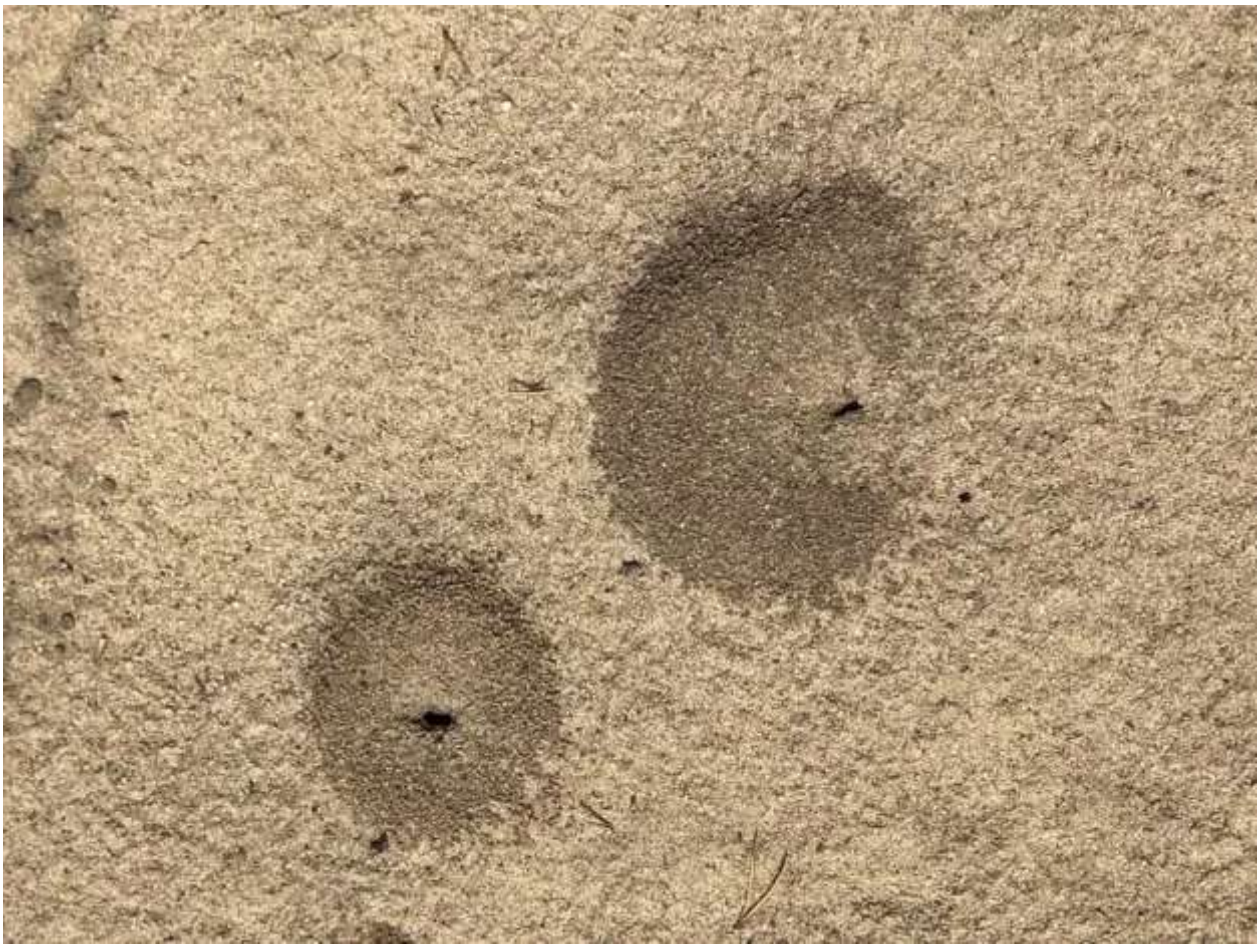
provides convenient parking for access to the trail that follows a sand ridge north.

The elevation affords excellent views of expansive valleys on either side that are heavily forested with deciduous trees and give the visitor a welcome reassurance that there is still some wildness left in the settled zone of Alberta. A wetland at the base of the ridge is a marked contrast in ecosystem: its flora consists of marsh reedgrass dotted with occasional paper birch, dwarf birch and balsam willow along with some ground-hugging cloudberry, all typical of poor fens verging on bogs.



Trail along sandy ridge at Opal Natural Area (OC, West), showing jack pine vegetation along the flanks. Photo: P. Cotterill.

ATV tracks were present along the trail but there were no deep ruts, suggesting perhaps only light local traffic; of greater interest were the animal tracks and the abundant pit traps of antlions (family Myrmeleonidae).



The pit traps of the larvae of antlions (family Myrmeleontidae) on the sandy trail at Opal Natural Area (OC, West). Photo: P. Cotterill.

The Opal area has long been popular with naturalists; it is a favourite venue of the Edmonton Nature Club for birding trips, in particular to look for owls. As shown by iNaturalist records, the summer of 2025 proved to be rewarding for naturalists who visited both the OC and PNT sections of Opal Natural Area, resulting in observations of grasshoppers, butterflies and moths as well as plants and fungi. (Note that the iNaturalist lists are separate for the OC and PN portions, but clicking on the OC or PNT web page in SAPAA's Protected Areas list opens an identical page for Opal Natural Area as a whole.)

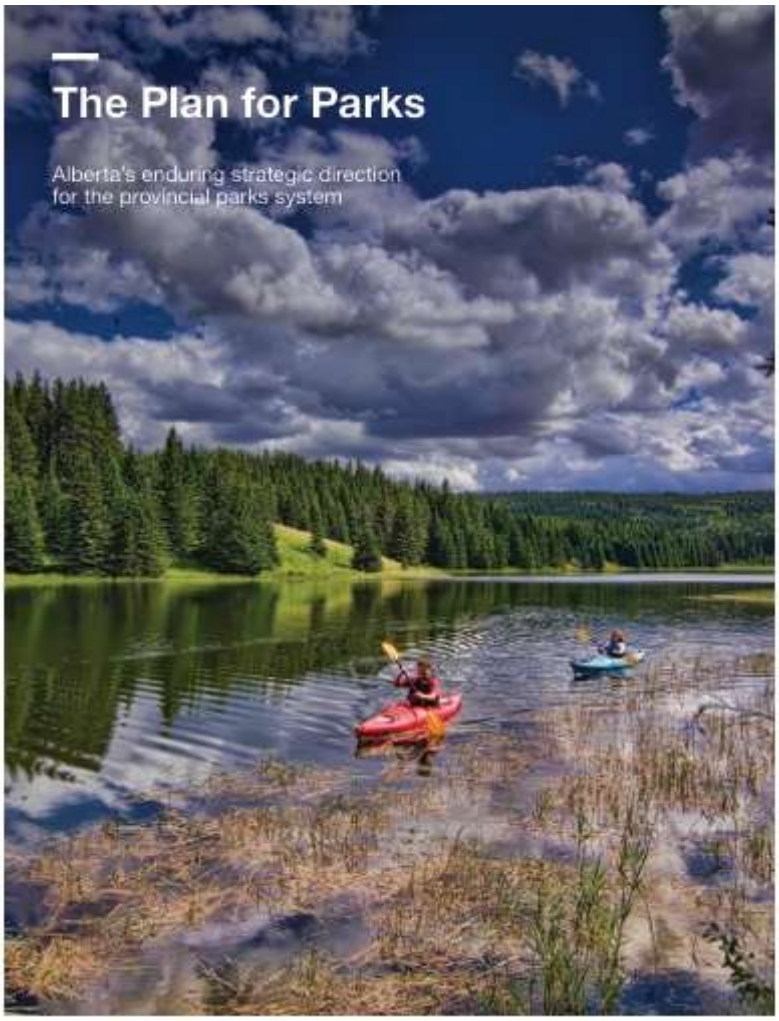
A second article in a subsequent newsletter will highlight a few more popular natural areas in the cluster north of Edmonton.

Reference

1. Natural Resources Canada. January 2001. Sand Dune and Climate Change Studies in the Prairie Provinces. Geological Survey of Canada, Ottawa.
2. SAPAA website pages for Northwest of Bruderheim and Opal Natural Areas.
3. Redwater Provincial Recreation Area: https://www.albertaparks.ca/parks/central/redwater-pra/

Plan for Parks – SAPAA's Thoughts

Alberta's updated Plan for Parks aims to enhance conservation and recreation on provincial lands, focusing on collaboration with various stakeholders. While it emphasizes parks for public enjoyment, there are concerns about the lack of detail on conservation efforts and the role of the Crown Land Recreation and Conservation Strategy, which prioritizes development over true conservation.



Alberta's Plan for Parks, released in January 2026

by Patsy Cotterill

Alberta's new Plan for Parks, released in January 2026, is an update of the previous plan of 2009. It covers only those public lands that fall under the jurisdiction of the *Provincial Parks Act*, i.e., Provincial Parks, Wildland Parks and Provincial Recreation Areas, not other types of Crown land, including other Protected Areas. Hence, we must judge it as conservation-minded Albertans rather than as its being of direct relevance to SAPAA.

An Improvement over De-listing (a very low bar)

The Plan does at least suggest that the government is prepared to accept its responsibility for administering parks and maintaining the provincial natural legacy they represent, a far cry from the proposal to de-list parks and protected areas of a few years ago, although increased collaboration with various partners, non-profits, municipalities and Indigenous peoples is also an envisioned part of the plan.

High Level, Low Details

It is difficult for the lay person to evaluate a high-level plan such as this which serves more to indicate government direction and thinking rather than what might be implemented and appear on the ground. However, my impression is that there is a heavy emphasis on the "parks for people" concept while conservation is considered important, not for ecosystems for their own sake, but more as it ensures a good nature experience for people.

There are proposals to create new parks and expanding existing parks, but particularly in high-use or under-served locations, an acknowledgment of the pressures created by Alberta's growing population rather than a conservation need. There is a nod to conserve under-represented or threatened ecosystems, but no detail on how this might be done, except possibly by appropriate management, for example, of fires, invasive species, and by undertaking research.

More Details, Please

Some statements in the Plan beg for further clarification such as "*Integrate provincial park system*" needs with landscape level planning initiatives where applicable, such as Land Use Framework (LUF) regional and sub-regional planning." My understanding is that the Land Use Framework Plans, once a widely publicized process involving much stakeholder collaboration, are in permanent pause, so how is this to be achieved? The LUF plans were also supposed to be the means for creating new conservation areas.

One cannot quarrel with a stated goal to "collaborate across governments to evaluate cumulative effects within parks and across the broader Crown land interface" and this might have some relevance to SAPAA. Yet what is meant by the goal to "Integrate the Alberta Parks and Protected Areas Management Effectiveness Program" with the Plan. Who knew of such a program? Could this have any pertinence to Natural Areas?

See CPAWS

To get an expert opinion on the Plan I deferred to the CPAWS website entry. CPAWS North and South chapters express concern generally that conservation is not a priority and query the government's intent in modernizing the *Provincial Parks Act.*

They draw attention in particular to the Crown Land Recreation and Conservation Strategy (also dated January 2026), which is intended to complement the Plan for Parks. They criticize its "broad language", lack of emphasis on public engagement and Indigenous co-management, and an approach that would promote development and activities that run counter to conservation.

Recreation as Far as the CPAWS can See

Indeed, it takes only a brief glance at the Strategy to realize it is all about recreation and a desire to "create economic benefits from recreation," echoing the direction of the Ministry of Forestry and Parks since its inception. It does not disguise the fact that the Strategy aims to be all things to all people: "Alberta's government will continue to support responsible development, enhanced conservation of our natural spaces, as well as opportunities for deliberate investment and strategic growth."

A complement to the Plan for Parks or a major influencer? It is interesting that none of the illustrations in the document depict "nature-based" recreation, such as bird-watching or botanizing or dark-sky viewing!

SAPAA Linkages

What is the significance of all this for SAPAA's interests? Note that the Crown Land Recreation and Conservation Strategy refers to all Crown land, that is, lands covered under the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas, and Heritage Rangelands Act* and the *Willmore Wilderness Act*, and lands falling under the *Public Lands Act*, as well as the parks under the *Provincial Parks Act* covered by the Plan for Parks. It is, therefore potentially of greater interest to SAPAA.

The Strategy's stated goals are to enable diverse outdoor recreational opportunities; sustain environment and ecological function; and empower and enable partnerships. In contrast, as well as aligning with these goals, the Parks Plan bears the brunt of conserving Alberta's natural and cultural legacy and providing "nature-based experience."

SAPAA Asks…

Could Natural Areas be given a higher profile under the Strategy to provide nature-based experience and could we expect better access and overall management to those sites that offer such possibilities? Could sites currently under Protective Notation (PNT) be upgraded to a higher level of conservation?

With the initiative to consider reinstating the Volunteer Steward Program falling through, and little sign of government recognition of the value of natural areas frequented by naturalists, evidence for this is lacking. The best we can hope for is benign government neglect of these areas, even as SAPAA promotes their value. Reviewing and updating the *WAERNAHR Act* and its regulations could help to strengthen the conservation strategy for these areas.

References

- Crown Land Recreation and Conservation Strategy, 2026.
- Alberta Plan for Parks, 2026.
- Alberta Parks, January 28, 2026. Plan for Parks.
    - New Plan For Parks Released | CPAWS, Feb. 2, 2026