A publication of Alberta Conservation Association

25 YEARS

FALL/WINTER 2017

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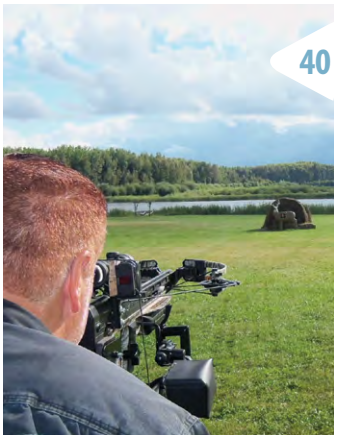

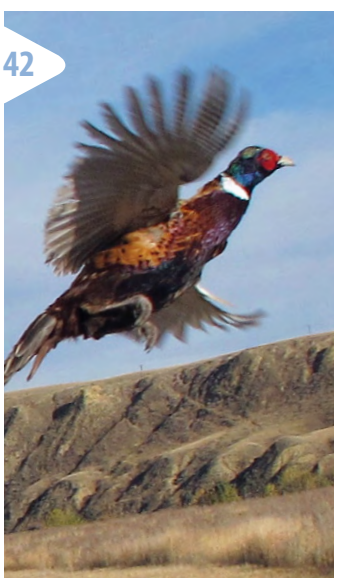

Alberta Conservation Association

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Alberta Conservation Association

Follow our work on:

Our Vision

An Alberta with an abundance and diversity of wildlife, fish and their habitats; where future generations continue to use, enjoy and value our rich outdoor heritage.

Our Mission

ACA conserves, protects and enhances fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for Albertans to enjoy, value and use.

photo: ACA, Britt Schmidt

From the President

It has been a great summer to get outdoors and enjoy everything our province has to offer. I'm not sure about the entire province, but certainly in the Edmonton area, we had more nice weekends for fishing than we have had in a decade. I spent time with my family out a Lac Ste. Anne and Wabamun Lake fishing for pike and walleye and I was even lucky enough to spend a day on both the North Saskatchewan and Athabasca rivers sampling the plentiful fishing opportunities our large rivers provide.

As this magazine is being released, we will be entering into the fall—my favorite time of year. Yes, it is hunting season, but I like the fall for more than just my opportunity to fill my freezer with wild protein. The fall brings with it cool, crisp mornings and warm, sunny days. It is also that time of year when we think "I am looking forward to winter." And then the reality of winter arrives and we long for summer again…it is the Alberta way!

This issue of *Conservation Magazine* celebrates our 20 years of conservation activities by highlighting our program areas. As you would expect, there has been a lot of change in our Wildlife, Fisheries, Land Management, and Communications Program areas over the past 20 years. Up until relatively recently, Communications wasn't even considered a program area, just simply support for the biologists who were doing the "real work." Turns out being able to communicate with our stakeholders is a vitally important part of conservation and our Communications Program has evolved with ACA to become an integral part of all of our conservation activities.

From a Wildlife Program perspective, there have been a lot of changes as well. Cameras have become a vital part of monitoring wildlife populations and those same cameras are used in our Fisheries Program to give us an idea of the amount of fishing pressure occurring on our stocked ponds.

Technology is changing how we do conservation and we are constantly testing new gadgets. Our Land Management team has been using drones to fly habitat surveys on our conservation sites over the past couple years. The high-quality images we get from our drones allows us to create a baseline habitat picture for each site, monitor changes in vegetation, and look for invasive weeds all from the comfort of a single location. Yes, as a biologist, I do have concerns that someday we won't need biologists anymore. I can see the day where my job is replaced by a teenager in her Mom's basement flying a drone remotely hundreds of kilometres away to look at habitat and count wildlife, with all the data automatically uploaded to the cloud. I have been assured by my own two teenagers that we are a few years away from that, so retirement for me won't be coming that quickly.

While we wait for that day to arrive, please have a read through this issue of *Conservation Magazine* and have a look at how far we have come in the past 20 years. Based on the success to date, it is clear that the future holds nothing but limitless possibilities.

Have a great fall, and remember, winter is coming.

Sincerely,

Todd Zimmerling
President and CEO
Alberta Conservation Association

Conservation Magazine

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workout
The latest from the field.


photo: Mike Jokinen

What Once Was Lost

It may come as sad news to some, but this was the final year of our popular wolverine project. After six years of live trapping, collaring, measuring, recording, and general wolverine chaos, the biologists who worked on this project certainly have some interesting stories to tell. Although it was strictly a scientific pursuit, the experiences and memories that resulted from this project cannot be quantified in any report.

As perhaps a final farewell, we leave you with one last story— the arduous quest of collecting a couple of dropped wolverine collars.

In northern Alberta, there are huge swaths of boreal forest that are sparsely lined with oil lease gravel roads that go from semi-driveable to a Mud Hero obstacle course overnight. When it was time to collect the collars, says Mike Jokinen, ACA Biologist, "The guys at the camp that maintain these roadways told us that they hadn't seen the roads this bad in all the years they've been working up there, since 1991."

On the way to collect M4's collar (wolverine nickname), they stayed the night at an oil camp as the roads were so bad they knew they wouldn't be able to get out until after the overnight freeze. The next day, progress was stalled by an unusually treacherous boreal forest—basically, watery obstacles with all the snow melt. With no other options, they called in a helicopter.

Where the Creeks Have **No Name**

We have recently acquired a brand-new conservation site, and what a location it is! Informally known as Edson Creek (until it is officially named), this new site is 157 acres and sits about 25 kilometres north of Edson. The purchase was made possible with court-ordered creative sentencing funds through the Department of Fisheries & Oceans with the aim of restoring and protecting riparian habitat in the McLeod River Drainage Basin.

The site boasts quality hunting and angling opportunities, but what makes it stand out is a sizeable tributary and lush valley that is a veritable highway for wildlife of both the terrestrial and aquatic varieties.

An electrofishing survey conducted just downstream of this officially unnamed waterway found a surprising number of species including burbot, mountain whitefish, brook stickleback, brook trout, longnose sucker, and slimy sculpin.

Beyond these common stream dwellers, there are rumours, and even government records, indicating artic grayling once swam here, a fish that is federally recognized as a *Species of Special Concern*. Aside from all of the immediate and tangible benefits of conserving this site, we can't help but be hopeful that we might once again see the flash of an artic grayling passing through.

New Fish for the **New** Fishery

It's not very often that we add a new fishery to Alberta. It's even more rare when we add a completely new species of fish to our stocking program! In light of this, the new Shell True North Pond is something certainly worth celebrating.

The pond is located inside the Shell True North Forest, a 1,700-acre forest north of Grande Prairie. This new pond has been years in the making and is a result of the Enhanced Fish Stocking – New Lakes project.

Increasing the diversity of fishing opportunities is something Alberta's anglers want, so this is a great step. Brook trout are a favourite among many anglers, with their spotted pattern and unique red belly, they are definitely a fish many anglers want to cross off their list. (ACA has stocked brook trout in nine other ponds across the province for even more opportunities.)

The potential risks to native fisheries are minimized since we use triploid stock—they are unable to reproduce. We will be stocking brook trout in this pond again and there might be an opportunity to aerate the pond in the coming years to enable overwintering and grow bigger fish.

Please make sure to consult the Alberta fisheries regulations for possession limits and other details.

www.albertaregulations.ca

The helicopter found a pretty convenient landing zone just one kilometre from the last GPS coordinates of the collar. Making the quick jaunt through the forest was no problem and the collar was retrieved.

Taking advantage of being airborne, they flew off to find another dropped collar. This time, no good landing site could be found. Setting down roughly four kilometres away from the collar and with the sun on its way down, they were given a strict timeline of 2.5 hours to make it there and back, nearly eight kilometres total.

Travelling in a straight line in a boreal forest is basically impossible. With mossy, uneven terrain, lots of spikey dead trees and a timeline that pretty much demands a running pace, it was going to be a slog.

Travel Velocity

Different parts of the same river will flow at varying speeds, sometimes dangerously fast and at others, pleasantly slow. A new fisheries project aims to find out what fish prefer. Do they spend more time hanging out in the fast-flowing sections or napping in the slow-moving parts?

Since we can't really ask the fish what speed of water they prefer, we have to be sneakier. Targeting mountain whitefish, biologists will catch and surgically implant a tiny radio frequency device. When winter comes, we will travel around in helicopters and snowmobiles and track the fish to their regular hangouts. Once found, a small hole will be drilled into the ice to measure the speed of the moving water at that particular spot.

After this has been done multiple times, we will start to get an idea about the flow velocity that the mountain whitefish prefer. With this information, we can determine the approximate threshold for the minimum amount of flow a river can have and still support the species.

The mission behind this project is to gather data to develop more informed water management plans.

That sounds pretty complex, but the simple reality is that we don't know all the intricacies of fish life. So when industry wants to use a local water source for its purposes, information like this that is crucial to ensure the environment can continue to produce healthy fish communities.

The Famous Festival Pheasants of Taber

For the seventh year in a row, pheasant hunters from all over North America will make the journey to southern Alberta for Canada's largest hunting festival. It truly is a success story: attracting around 800 men, women, and youth to the town of Taber for a week of hunting and conservation fun.

Not only do we release hundreds of the unforgettably polychromatic ring-necked pheasants onto the local landscape, we host a variety of other supplemental events during the week for extra fun. For example, the Novice Hunt allows those new to pheasant hunting to give it a try, culinary and scotch tasting events inspire creative cooking, educational talks provide intriguing information on habitat conservation, and the celebration dinner with silent auction cap things off.

Although most people get caught up in the hunting extravaganza, there are other reasons we host the festival: raising awareness about upland game bird habitat requirements and boosting landowner participation in habitat enhancement projects.

Sign up for the festival is in June and the event takes place in October. If you've missed out on this year's hunting, you're still welcome to participate in all the surrounding events.

To participate in the Taber Pheasant Festival, all hunters (including novice hunters) need to have completed the Alberta Hunter Education Training Course (aheia.com) and have a valid game bird licence and pheasant licence (albertarelm.com).

www.taberpheasantfestival.com

REPORT LAND ABUSE
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Habitat **Poacher** Busted

Until now, Report A Poacher was dedicated to stopping wildlife crimes, but the focus has recently shifted to include crimes against habitat. Fish & Wildlife officers can charge individuals found committing illegal activities that are considered land abuse such as driving OHVs on sensitive habitat, clearing trees, or dumping garbage. If you see someone doing these things, please collect as much information as possible and contact Report A Poacher.

For example, in February 2017, an individual pleaded guilty to two violations of operating an OHV on a closed trail in a protected area and failing to obey a lawful sign. Fish & Wildlife officers received a call from a sheep hunter who saw this individual drive into the Moosehorn area in Solomon Creek Wildland Provincial Park.

Although it took a bit of searching, officers eventually found the suspect and laid charges for this unauthorized travel. Protecting these locations is important as delicate alpine areas can be easily damaged by vehicles, impacting plants, soils, and water, which can take years to recover.

The courts decided on a penalty totalling $1,500.

Despite the conditions and exhaustion, the collar was retrieved and the evening was a celebratory one. For all the success the wolverine project has seen over the years, it's fair to say:

mission accomplished.

photos: ACA

A Work in Progress

► *by Ariana Tourneur*

Alberta Conservation Association has four Resource Programs: Wildlife, Fisheries, Land Management, and Communications (formally: "Information, Education, and Communications," but we don't like to stand on ceremony). All four Programs work together as a team to achieve our mission statement: ACA conserves, protects and enhances fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for Albertans to enjoy, value and use.

Managing different projects throughout the province over the last 20 years, from counting bears and conserving hundreds of thousands of acres of land to hosting Canada's largest hunting festival and aerating ponds to ensure angler success, we continue to strive towards our goal. This section of *Conservation Magazine* gives more detail on just how we do that.

Enjoy.

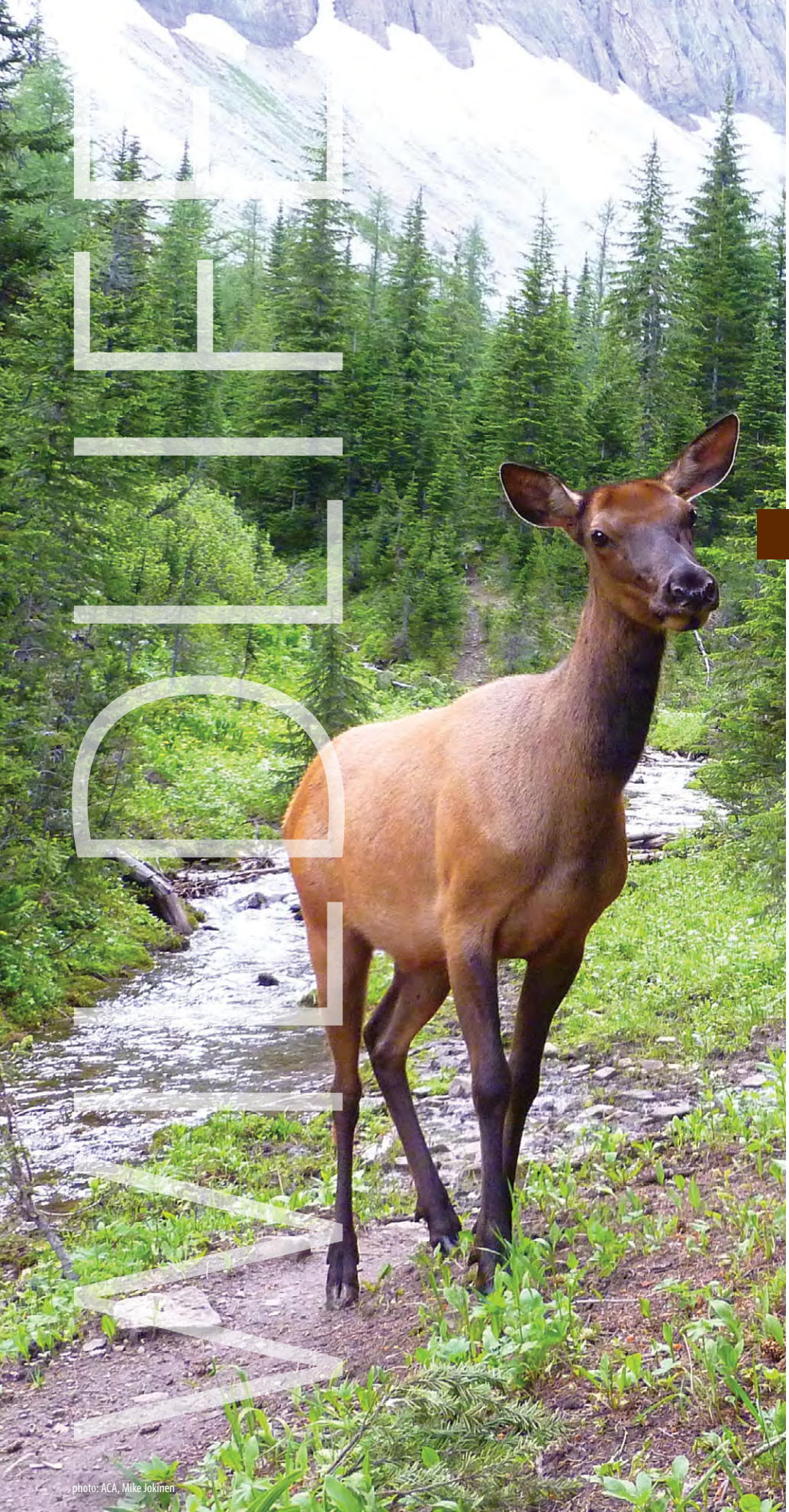


photo: ACA, Mike Jokinen

On Purpose

Whether your feet ache from running around all day, or your brain (and behind) is sore from being anchored to your desk, nothing tops the moment of escape—when you steal a gulp of fresh air and hear the sweet sound of birds chirping.

Stress status? Melted.

Wild spaces have a tendency to do that for us, plus a whole lot more: we're inextricably tied together, more or less enabling the biosphere to function. We depend on the wild for food, water, overall wellbeing, and cultural value. And when we truly value wildlife, people encourage their growth or management—which is what we must commit to if we want our future generations to enjoy just a piece of what we're lucky enough to have today.

That thought has been top of mind since ACA's wildlife team began dispersing across the province to do the big and little things for wildlife conservation 20 years ago. As our populations and subsequent needs continue to grow, how does ACA maintain the value of our work? Without this balance, conservation's importance would diminish.

Why you gotta be so complicated?

Sometimes the task seems near impossible, especially considering the unprecedented pressure on wildlife conservation today: climate change, industry delving deeper into the backcountry, agriculture, urban sprawl, and even increased lobbying from anti-hunters. Strong, scientific baseline information is vital in strategizing ways to plan for landscape change and the future. This long-term data also shows just how complex wildlife management can be.

"Conservation of wildlife and their habitat is not a simple thing, and everybody, whether they have biological training or not, always have their own idea of how it should be done in their particular corner of the world," says Todd Zimmerling, ACA President and CEO. "And that's ok, because there are different methods required for different situations in different locations. In the end, what is important is that habitat is conserved."

As many as we can

That thought should trump all, and is exactly why diverse groups have been able to successfully come together and make an impact. MULTISAR (Multiple Species at Risk) has been one of ACA's biggest collaborations since 2002, when ACA, the Government of Alberta, landowners, and Prairie Conservation Forum decided to focus on multiple species conservation—a departure from the norm of single species initiatives. The name also hints at the multiple partners that come together to conserve species at risk.

"It's a big collaborative approach," says Brad Downey, Project Lead and Biologist in ACA's Lethbridge office. The program is voluntary and driven by the producers, who after receiving their baseline assessment, choose what habitat enhancements they might make. Some have introduced upland watering sites and water wells; others have restored native grasslands and invested in wildlife-friendly fencing. MULTISAR has helped producers with riparian recovery and improved grazing lands to help bring back federally *Threatened* wildlife species like Sprague's pipit and chestnut-collared longspur.

Every effort revolves around habitat stewardship, while maintaining or even improving viable ranching operations.

It's not about choosing one over the other: we believe both farming and habitat can win out. The program monitors the habitats and also offers in-kind support or funding for projects (Environment and Climate Change Canada has provided funding over the majority of the program's lifespan).

Big partnership developments have recently brought in landowners, Canadian Cattlemen's Association, Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, Alberta Beef Producers (sits on the MULTISAR advisory board) and Cows and Fish. "The new partnerships see MULTISAR collaborating with producers on over 450,000 acres across the grasslands, establishing long-term relationships with these producers, and implementing 155 habitat enhancement projects on the ground," says Downey. Call it conservation right at the source.

Endangered (at risk) wildlife species: Greater sage grouse

photo: ACA, Mike Jokinen

Endangered (at risk) wildlife species: Swift fox

photo: ACA, Colin Starkevich

When we truly value wildlife, people encourage their growth or management—which is what we must commit to if we want our future generations to enjoy just a piece of what we're lucky enough to have today.

Farming a future

In recent years, ACA has shifted focus on the impact producers can make. "Hopefully we'll soon see ACA working on over a million acres of land directly with producers and farmers, implementing changes that benefit wildlife habitat as well as farm operations," says Layne Seward, Biologist in ACA's Lethbridge office. The Enchant Demo Farm project, a ten-year trial where we enhance habitats on a 1,340-acre operational farm north of Taber—without affecting the bottom line—could be only the beginning. We are evaluating approaches for re-establishing vibrant upland bird densities, working closely with the landowner and farmer leasing the land. "It makes sense to further collaborate with agriculture, as there are unlimited habitat opportunities working with agricultural producers," says Seward.

Shrub planting at Enchant Demo Farm
photo: ACA

It's in your backyard

Conservation at ground level has made major headway. In many places, wildlife managers have extremely limited resources to obtain the data they need, and a creative solution born out of need is "citizen science." Citizen scientists are volunteers who fill that gap, submitting their own scientific observations to biologists or managers. Farm-focused or city-centred, modern conservation can happen right where we live, work, and play.

For example, over the years, hundreds of Albertans have submitted valuable data through the Alberta Volunteer Amphibian Monitoring Program (AVAMP), informing and improving the theoretical models used by ACA's wildlife managers. "Participating in a citizen-science program like AVAMP is a great way to learn more about amphibians, introduce your family to nature, or simply give you a reason to get outside and connect with the natural world," says Kris Kendell, ACA Biologist and AVAMP Lead. "Whatever your motive, you can leave your mark on conservation through citizen science."

AVAMP has recently gone through a lengthy innovation period. "We are finishing up the last of the online features designed to support volunteers in all aspects of amphibian ID, monitoring tips, and data submission," says Kendell. Stay tuned—it'll be easier than ever to contribute something meaningful and be a stakeholder in the future of wildlife.

ab-conservation.com/avamp

Plains garter snake
photo: Rory McAlduff, AVAMP Publication: *Reptiles of Alberta*

Alberta Volunteer Amphibian Monitoring

When ungulates don't jump

Slowly and steadily, human encroachment has brought animals into conflict with people, and quite literally our things. In the case of pronghorn antelope, fences can be fatal.

The Pronghorn Resource Enhancement and Monitoring project goes beyond Alberta's borders into Saskatchewan and Montana. We follow the pronghorn, and it's no short jaunt! Some populations migrate 400 kilometres or more, trekking from their fawning grounds in the north to their winter range in the south and back again.

For all their phenomenal speed (100 km/h), pronghorn don't like to jump. Some pronghorn will walk for a kilometre or more, looking for a place to cross five- or six-stranded barbed wire fences. When they do finally squeeze under, the wire tears their hide, removes hair, and exposes them to the cold. And all those extra miles spent searching for a crossing add up during a long migration—often the difference between survival and starvation in the bitter cold.

When a problem spans major boundaries like this, groups often work independently and solutions can be disjointed or piecemeal. Not in this case: wildlife agencies in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Montana have collaborated in a whole new way. "This project is a unified vision of conservation between wildlife conservationists and management agencies," says Paul Jones, ACA Biologist and Project Lead. Since 2006 all of the wildlife agencies have met annually to focus on pronghorn, mule deer, and sage-grouse conservation—signing a Memorandum of Understanding called the Northern Sagebrush Steppe Initiative. It aims to conserve sagebrush-dependent species, no matter the borders they cross.

Back home, we partnered with the University of Calgary and Alberta Environment and Parks to pinpoint key areas where fences limit pronghorn movement, and shared this information with Alberta Fish & Game Association to guide their fence modification work (the Pronghorn Antelope Travel Corridor Enhancement Project). We also collaborate on an innovative companion project in central Montana with the University of Montana and the Nature Conservancy, designed to improve migration and movement patterns with fence modifications tested over a longer time frame.

Tech savvy

While partnerships are of the most value to us, the technology we rely on to collect data might come in second. Trail cams and drones allow us to unobtrusively get what we need. It was remote cameras that gave us the first-ever comprehensive glimpse into the lives of wolverines.

In 2011, ACA thought about determining the number of wolverines and their range in Alberta, and soon we had a balanced partnership between the University of Alberta and the Alberta Trappers' Association. The trappers' knowledge on animal behaviours and patterns and the extremely remote study areas made the difference in the success of the project. They provided the logistics of getting around and pinpointed where researchers needed to go.

It went like this: trappers sent ACA biologists images from cameras set up at remote bait stations. Biologists analyzed the photos to determine what site characteristics are associated with a higher probability of finding wolverines. Our bait stations (which inconspicuously snagged wolverine hair) and thousands of trail cam images helped reveal more about where these furbearers occur in the province, and what major factors influence their distribution. The team effort data collection also contributes to long-term conservation of perhaps the coolest species ever.

Pronghorn antelope with fence injury

photo: ACA, Paul Jones

Technology: Collars and trail cams

photo: ACA, Mike Jokinen

"We want to keep the doors open for hunters, educate people on the importance of habitat and the value of hunting and fishing too." -Brad Downey, ACA Biologist

Pheasants: not a phase

Though we love a day of work spent with the latest gadgets, nothing beats a day of hunting without any.

Pheasant hunting has historically been a favourite pastime for many people. For decades, southern Alberta was the place to hunt pheasants—entertainment icons like Bing Crosby and Bob Hope even made a trip. Talk about an economic boost! Hotels were full, the birds thrived…pheasantville was good.

Rich habitat, mild winters, and an active release program kept the ring-necked pheasant populations thriving from 1908 (when they were first introduced near Strathmore by recreationists) until the late '80s, when 27,000 hunters enjoyed the sport.

And then…nosedive. The decline was palpable, with pheasant hunting licences dipping to under 6,000 in 2010. Provincial budget changes saw fewer pheasants being released into the wild, and increasingly chilly winters made their survival difficult. But it was vanishing habitat that hit the birds the hardest. Farmers were able to increase output of their crops with new practices, and over time, unintentionally got rid of undisturbed areas full of native shrubs and grasses—primo pheasant zones.

"If the number of hunters continued to drop, we would lose pheasant hunting completely," says Todd Zimmerling, ACA President and CEO. "We couldn't let that happen." So ACA got on team pheasant. Building on the efforts of UBA, we talked to local landowners and ranchers about the benefits of maintaining upland game bird habitat, launched the Taber Pheasant Festival (inviting novice and expert hunters alike while showing locals the economic benefit of increased pheasant populations and how to maintain habitat on their own land), and ultimately took over the government's release program. (See "Phoenix Rising" on page 42 for the details.)

In 2016, almost 9,000 people hunted for pheasants in Alberta's grasslands, and many took advantage of 41 release sites. We're not where we used to be, but numbers are climbing steadily. We care most about engaging landowners, counties, and other conservation groups about current habitat issues. Permanent cover, shrub and cattail patches, and healthy riparian areas are not only essential for pheasants, but also improve the quality of our watersheds—benefitting dozens more species.


Adult male pheasant

photo: ACA, Jim Potter


Pheasant chick

photo: Michael Short

Don't let go

One of the reasons ACA was so fearful to see pheasant hunting dissipate is that for many families, pheasants were the introduction to a hunting career and start of a relationship with the great outdoors. Fewer pheasants mean more disconnect, particularly with younger generations.

We partnered with 4-H Alberta to reactivate a raise and release program that was discontinued more than 20 years ago—a chance to reconnect rural kids with the habitat needs of upland game birds and give them practical experience raising pheasants from day-old chicks into hens. In the summer of 2017, 107 kids raised 11,353 chicks and chose the ideal habitat to release their pheasants into for the best shot at survival.

Every decision made the last 20 years has been deliberate, informed, and with a good dose of passion. "We want to keep the doors open for hunters, educate people on the importance of habitat and the value of hunting and fishing too," says Downey. The more nature can provide for people, the more it will move up the priority list. And instead of tracking how little we lose, we will measure success by how much we can help nature deliver (stress relief included).

photo: ACA, Mike Jokinen

20 YEARS

Work With What You've Got

Nobody starts at zero. Find the good and make it better. No matter what you call it—fine-tuning, enhancing, improving—every little effort makes the difference.

We're certainly no zero, but in all truthfulness, Alberta's fishing opportunities are limited (we sit at ten times less than the national average). That's why "it's very important that ACA's fisheries program look at how we can make fishing better, and as accessible and available as possible," says Scott Seward, ACA Biologist in Peace River. Of course this is forever ruled by sustainability: meeting the needs of our lives right now (i.e., fishing for food and enjoyment) without compromising the ability of future generations to meet those needs too.

"What better service could ACA's fish program provide back to anglers, than that chance to land a fish that will make all your fishing buddies jealous?" -Brendan Ganton, ACA Biologist

Stocking memories

Over the last 20 years, ACA's Fisheries Program has aerated lakes and stocked ponds to keep Alberta's fish populations thriving and anglers happy. There are about 300,000 recreational anglers and 1,100 sport fishing waterbodies in Alberta. Eight hundred of those have natural fish populations and 300 are stocked fisheries (we stock 61 of these). Given there are only so many places to fish, we better make those ponds count!

In 1998, we began what has become our largest and longest-running fisheries project. Enhanced Fish Stocking (EFS) creates recreational angling opportunities in areas of the province where fishing opportunities are limited or simply don't exist. Throughout May and June, we stock catchable-sized (average size is 20 cm long) rainbow, brook, and brown trout into ponds, creating put-and-take fisheries where anglers can harvest up to five trout per day. We stock in only the settled area of the province (White Zone) and in waterbodies that typically winterkill, so we needn't worry about interaction with native fish. In 2016, we stocked 115,950 rainbow trout and 5,000 brown trout. Brook trout is a new addition for 2017 so anglers can enjoy even more variety in their fishing experience.

Big fish

Few things are more compelling to an angler than outstretched hands and those age-old words: "It was THIS big!" But big fish take time to grow. Says Brendan Ganton, ACA Biologist, "Fish can be subjected to critically low oxygen levels in many productive Alberta ponds, especially during winter months when ice and snow block out the sunlight needed for plants to make their own." For 20 years, the Aeration Program has been maintaining oxygen levels in key stocked fisheries so fish have a chance to survive our harsh winters. "They can experience an additional one or two (or more!) growing seasons, says Ganton. "What better service could ACA's fish program provide back to anglers, than that chance to land a fish that will make all your fishing buddies jealous?"

Survey says…

Successfully managing a fish population is like balancing your chequebook—before you make a big purchase, you check your available funds. Ganton explains that if you complete population assessments to estimate how many fish in a lake, then you know how many fish you have to "spend." But to avoid going bankrupt (i.e., collapsing your fishery), it helps to know how fast you're spending and what you've spent to date. "Creel surveys determine how many fish anglers harvest and release, and also can give us an idea of angling quality. That is, how long anglers have to fish to catch a fish," he says. Finally, it gives us an opportunity to learn about anglers' fishing methods, how far they travel, and how long they fish for. Some years we interview 1,000 plus anglers, with results feeding into the government's fisheries management plans or forming the basis for fishing regulation changes.

Close to home

Cultural significance, relaxation, adventure, sustenance, camaraderie, challenge, education, connecting to nature…most of us know why we should fish, but it's not always easy. While ACA manages a handful of stocked lakes close to municipalities (these are popular family destinations), it's something we want to expand. "If taking a kid fishing is too much work, parents will find other forms of entertainment. To be competitive with video games, soccer, hockey, music lessons...fisheries have to be close to home," says Seward. We're exploring ways to create fisheries near large urban centres through the Fish Stocking Expansion–New Lakes project.

Brown Trout
photo: ACA, Kevin Gardiner

Ironside Pond Aeration
photo: ACA

Kids Can Catch fishing event
photo: ACA, Colin Eyo

Cutthroat trout
photo: ACA, Kevin Gardiner

A-tten-tion!

Getting someone to try fishing is one thing; having him come back again and again is another. Recruiting and retaining anglers does matter, and in quite a far-reaching way: "If children aren't exposed to outdoor activities like fishing, they grow up not likely supporting it," says Seward. "If most people don't support outdoor activities then we lose our political voice. We then lose our ability to protect our hunting and fishing heritage and, perhaps, we even lose some of our greatest conservationists." To some, that might seem dramatic, but change can be gradual and go far before realization kicks in and it's too late. That's why each year we focus more and more of our communications on sharing the love of fishing, especially to Alberta's youth (through free events like Kids Can Catch, at tradeshows, and even interacting on social media).

Health is wealth

Angler satisfaction hinges on the health of fish populations, and much of our work focuses on monitoring and improving fish habitat. Years of landscape alterations—logging, off-highway vehicle use, stream crossings, oil and gas development, coal mining, roads, dam operations, and overfishing—have caused habitat turmoil. We're still learning some tough lessons as a province, but little by little, we're committing to undoing some past mistakes.

Cutthroat for a cutthroat

The majestic cutthroat trout is named not for a threatening personality, but for its luminous orange slash on the underside of its jaw. Can you believe that 100 years ago, cutthroat trout outnumbered Alberta's population?

"We are certainly not the only game in town, but the more I become involved, the more I think ACA can take a good share of credit for what is known about westslope cutthroat trout (WSCT) on the landscape in Alberta," says Jason Blackburn, Biologist in ACA's Lethbridge office. "Particularly in the Oldman River watershed, which represents 75 percent of the remaining pure populations of WSCT in Alberta. It's believed the fish now inhabit about five percent of their original distribution." Alberta Environment and Parks concluded that in all of the streams of the Bow and Oldman watersheds, where you could once easily spot a cutthroat, there are only about 51 genetically pure populations left.

Westslope cutthroat trout (WSCT), listed as *Threatened* federally in 2013, suffered these major declines because of habitat loss, overharvesting, and the introduction of non-native species. "However, with the Critical Habitat Order that was issued in 2015 by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, WSCT recovery is shifting into high gear now," explains Blackburn. "It seems rather sudden, but now ACA's work is pivotal to both WSCT recovery planning and the future survival of an iconic sport species."

Although the perception might be that recovery has stalled, the government has had to come up with creative and collaborative solutions, much of it being driven by ACA data and technical expertise. Re-introductions in the WSCT range are a strong possibility within the next few years.

In the meantime, ACA is developing a standardized barrier assessment protocol to examine the conservation potential of fish passage barriers to WSCT. This protocol ranks barriers according to their ability to reduce or prevent upstream fish invasion and hybridization risk. Barrier data is a critical component for future government recovery actions like management decisions, policy, and on-the-ground measures. Blackburn explains that the barrier protocol results will be directly consulted to determine where, when and what is done to expand the WSCT distribution. "It's a pretty exciting time and I think ACA will be a key player in WSCT recovery for the long haul."

"If children aren't exposed to outdoor activities like fishing, they grow up not likely supporting it. If most people don't support outdoor activities then we lose our political voice. We then lose our ability to protect our hunting and fishing heritage and, perhaps, we even lose some of our greatest conservationists." -Scott Seward, ACA Biologist

Take the bull by the…

There simply isn't another fish quite like our Provincial fish, the bull trout: "I once had a bull trout attack me," says Mike Rodtka, ACA Biologist in Rocky Mountain House (we can attest he's a credible source). "It tried biting my hand multiple times. Bull trout have even been documented with porcupine quills stuck in their snout!" Equate bull trout to the aquatic version of a grizzly bear—just as ferocious, only torpedo-shaped with fins and gills.

They historically had a huge geographic range, occupying the Peace, Athabasca, North Saskatchewan, Red Deer rivers, and Bow and Oldman watersheds. The reason they occupied such space? To hunt other fish of course.

Despite remaining top predators wherever they swim, the bull trout range has shrunk drastically. They are extremely sensitive to human disturbance, and are currently listed as *Threatened*. ACA has been at the forefront of their conservation since 1997, and over the years has gathered extensive inventory of bull trout abundance, distribution, size structure, and habitat use throughout the eastern slopes of Alberta (what we consider their native range). We still do this today.

Oil and gas and forestry industries use this data, as well as provincial and federal managers, to mitigate land uses that harm bull trout. Status evaluations at the provincial (Alberta Environment and Parks) and federal (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada and Department of Fisheries and Oceans) levels rely heavily on ACA's information. "Our data has resulted in culverts being replaced or removed, discovering previously unknown spawning streams, and increased regulatory protection on critical bull trout spawning habitats," says Rodtka. "Data is routinely requested by industry partners for incorporation into their land-use planning process."

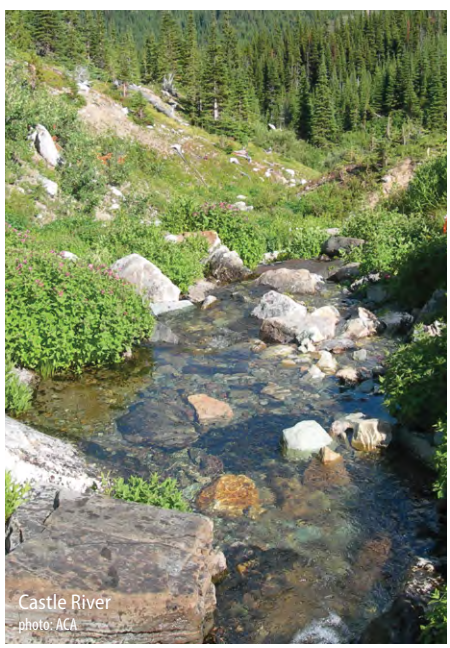
Bull trout have been the poster child for protection and conservation of Alberta's streams and rivers. A healthy bull trout population means a healthy watershed. They are fun to fish for (but never keep) and are legendary eaters—making them relatively easy to catch and big growers. But, a little advice: watch yourself!

Processes matter

When more than one group is able to shoulder responsibility together, results are that much bigger. "The Cooperative Fisheries Inventory Partnership was a program that provided basic but highly valuable fish and habitat information for the timber harvest planning process," says Paul Hvenegaard, ACA Regional Manager in Peace River. It wasn't complex but it was effective: fish and fish habitat data were collected and recorded on standardized stream inventory forms. Data on both the biological and physical characteristics were used to classify the stream, and enabled managers to assign habitat protection categories. Over the years several timber companies were directly involved and made more informed and responsible planning decisions.

If we compare to a 100 years ago, when fish were abundant and anglers seemingly had it all, it's a bag of mixed feelings considering fish have paid the price. But as we work we try to focus on, value, and enjoy what we have now. Spending all your time on what's in front of you isn't just pragmatic, it's also probably better than what you first realized. And what we've got—as anglers, conservationists, and Albertans—makes us pretty darn lucky.


Bull trout
photo: ACA


Castle River
photo: ACA

Taber Pheasant Festival
photo: ACA, Colin Eyo

Talk Science to Me

Null hypotheses, t-tests, statistical significance, control plots, and observer bias.

These are just a few biologists' favourite things. It's some pretty exhilarating, loaded lingo—in the science world. As for the rest of us?
Not so riveting or inspiring.

Technical minds

Twenty years ago, if you asked for an ACA biologist's thoughts about conservation, you would've heard a verbalized factsheet (if you were lucky enough, with accompanying graphs for a knockout blow!). You'd perhaps catch something about maintaining critical habitat or ensuring the proper management of a particular species of wildlife or fish, sprinkled with a bit of jargon and a lot of percentages.

"Biologists are not trained to think about communication: they are trained to assess, analyze, and report in a standardized manner that meets the requirements of the scientific community," says Todd Zimmerling, ACA President and CEO. No wonder that for decades, biologists didn't give a high level of attention to communicating with stakeholders and the general public, or "the people who are actually going to make conservation successful," asserts Zimmerling.

Don't get us wrong—scientists hold their own. They love to debate. Cutting through crap and getting to the truth of the matter is essentially their job description. They're fearless: investigating their curiosity and confronting realities for the betterment of everyone. But, communicating with the public is something else entirely.

Because the whole point—is to get people out there, making the connection between conservation and hunting/fishing for themselves.

Don't leave us cold

Alberta's population is fairly typical of most groups of people, in a modern world where busy lives revolve around work and family. So, when our biologists wanted to persuade them that they should be doing a and b (but not c) so that the wild species and places we all depend on can continue to thrive, the message was never actually heard. Right sentiment…but telling people how it goes can leave us cold. Is that really what science communication is about? Throwing it down in all its factual glory, hoping it will inform, change minds, and win people over to achieve more conservation for a brighter future?

Scientifically guilty

In the early years, ACA was traditional like that in every sense, sharing information through annual reports, operating plans, and a periodic magazine. There were some hidden gems, but mostly the snooze fest didn't highlight our work in a relatable or fundamental way for the average person.

"It took some doing, but over time our biologists started to realize that ACA's Communication department is staffed by professionals, just like our Wildlife, Fisheries, and Land Programs are," remembers Zimmerling. In fact, it seems the broader biological community is realizing science will not solve conservation issues, communicating science—in ways you might not expect—will.

The new guys

Obviously the Communications team could ensure public reports looked pretty and professional, but they also could kick start a fundraising campaign to purchase particular habitat. They could make big industry players pay attention. As the trust level between our communicators and biologists grew, so did the understanding of our newfound potential.

"Today it is well recognized both within and outside ACA that our Communications group is top notch and vitally important to how we achieve conservation," says Zimmerling. We launched *Conservation Magazine*, created a conservation site guide so people can actually find and enjoy the places we conserve, developed an app and a website, incorporated various social media accounts to make daily connections in people's lives… even gave people that close-up biologist experience thanks to webcams that watch every move of peregrine falcons (and now, ferruginous hawks!). We reach hundreds of thousands of people on a yearly basis, and it's official: "ACA's biologists have accepted Communications as a program area that ensures the success of this organization and the conservation we achieve," says Zimmerling.

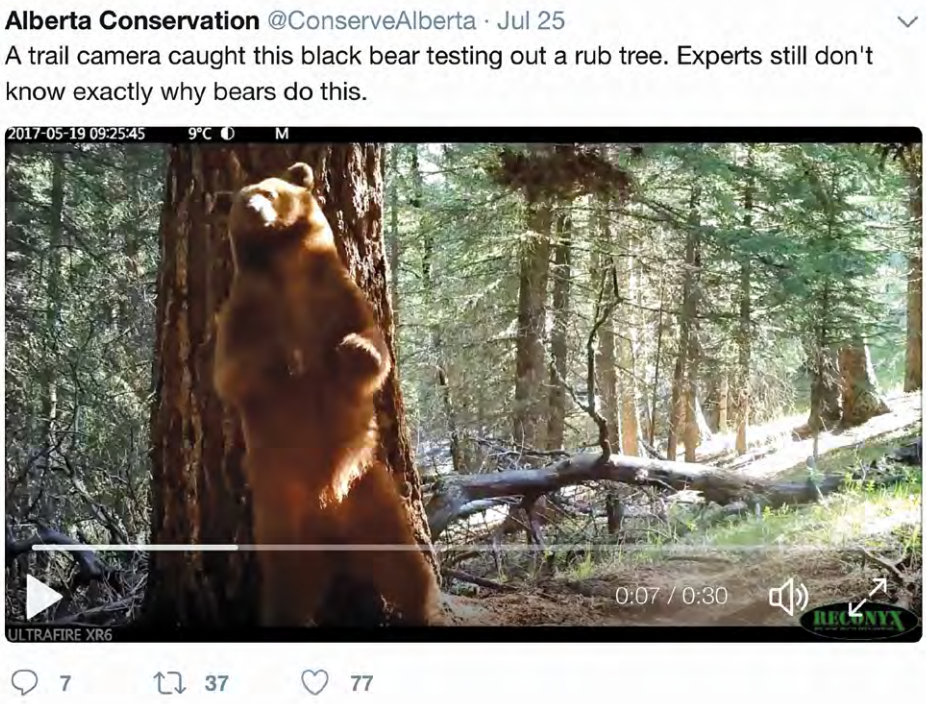
Biologists can learn new tricks

When scientists are equipped to communicate successfully—beyond their peers to broader, non-science-y audiences (truly, biologists appreciate our made-up words)—it builds support for their work and promotes understanding of its wider relevance to society. This means more informed decision-making at all levels, from government (like the recent federal critical habitat order for westslope cutthroat trout) to communities (helping introduce fishing, especially to more urban centers like Fort Saskatchewan's Fort Lion's Community Fish Pond) to individuals (for instance, John Ross, who chooses to incorporate daily techniques that improve habitats on his expansive, fifth-generation ranch in southern Alberta).

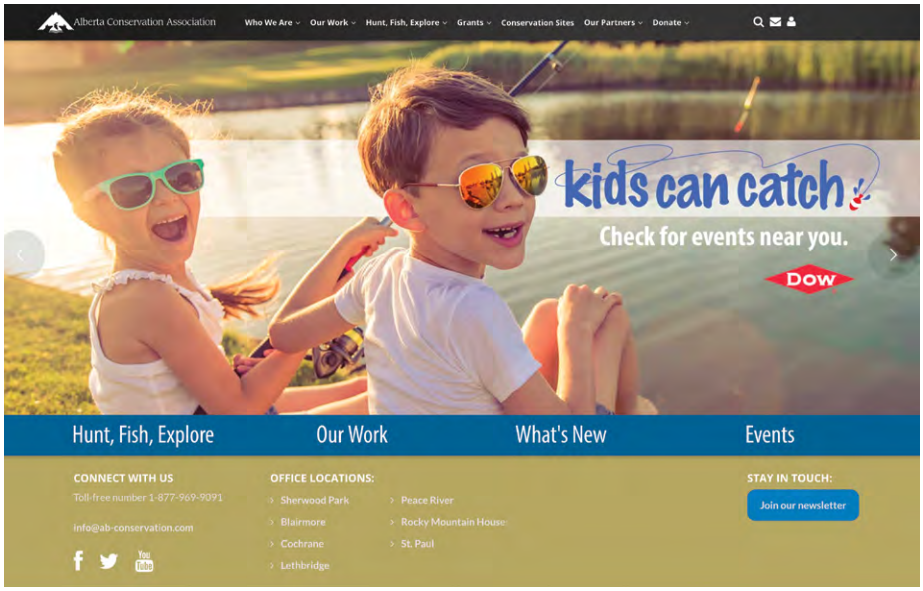
It also makes science accessible to audiences that are often excluded from the process of science. It becomes more diverse and inclusive. "The more ACA's Communications got directly involved in conservation issues, the more support we were getting from stakeholders, corporate sponsors, and the general public," says Zimmerling.

Campaigning and connections made over the years have triggered partnerships with all types of industry, many of which had no history of conservation initiatives. Today our partnerships are changing the game, responsible for directing $220 million towards the conservation of wildlife and fish and the habitat they need to thrive! To make powerhouses see—feel—how important conservation is, equals tidal waves of change.

Communicating well also ups the ante for people who already actively work for conservation. Every year we encourage grant applicants—to date, $15.4 million has been granted to conservation-related projects throughout the province. People heard our message and felt compelled enough to answer back.




Kids Can Catch Wabamun
photo: ACA, Colin Eyo



Talk, talk, talk, do

In the simplest terms, we share what we learn about wildlife, fish, and habitat. There are more stories to tell and new ways to tell them. Because the whole point—avoiding that "cold side" of science—is to get people out there, making the connection between conservation and hunting/fishing for themselves. So, in partnership with our member groups and tremendous local and corporate support, we began to ramp up outreach programs and events.

"One of the biggest changes at ACA, especially over the last five years, has been the substantial involvement in community events, whether we play a leading or supporting role," says Ken Kranrod, ACA Vice President. Kids Can Catch, with multiple dates across the province, introduces families to fishing and has seen over 10,000 participants to date! Many people catch their very first fish at these events—a small fish is a big deal. The Taber Pheasant Festival is another: over 4,000 hunters of all backgrounds have enjoyed pheasant hunting and learned about conserving ideal habitats for birds and a plethora of other species too. ACA's events and outreach programs are extremely popular and engage both seasoned hunters and anglers, as well as new audiences like youth, new Canadians, and people with urban backgrounds.

Feelin' the need

"People quickly remember or realize that spending the day outdoors with your family to bring home some fish or game birds is fundamentally a good thing to do," says Kranrod. Unlike presenting data only, which can come across as condescending, providing people with experiences shows we're here to listen. It's encouraging and empathetic, and people innately want to be a part of that.

As communicators, we've heard it before: our job is not to talk but to listen. It's more than just the facts; it's about who people are and the relationships we forge. "I think that success stems from the fact that these tangible activities resonate with people regardless of their personal background," adds Kranrod. "They remind us that fishing, hunting, and being outside is still an intrinsic and even necessary part of our so-called modern lives."

Contemporary conservation

Pick a project from any other resource program at ACA and conservation is often defined by being knee-deep in muskeg, sweat, and mosquitos. "It's getting boots in the mud or spending late hours in a lab, travelling thousands of kilometres in -40 winter tracking wolverines, or working with landowners to enhance spawning opportunities for world-class brown trout," says Don Myhre, ACA's Communications Manager. He explains that Communications keeps conservation relevant—and the lights on. "Communications is about using a different skill set to create awareness, engage audiences, and build relationships between stakeholders: the hunters, anglers, and trappers, education and research sectors, the public, and corporate partners." In other words, that's you, me, the people you know, and the people you will meet. The final say? It's up to us. Now that's inspiring.

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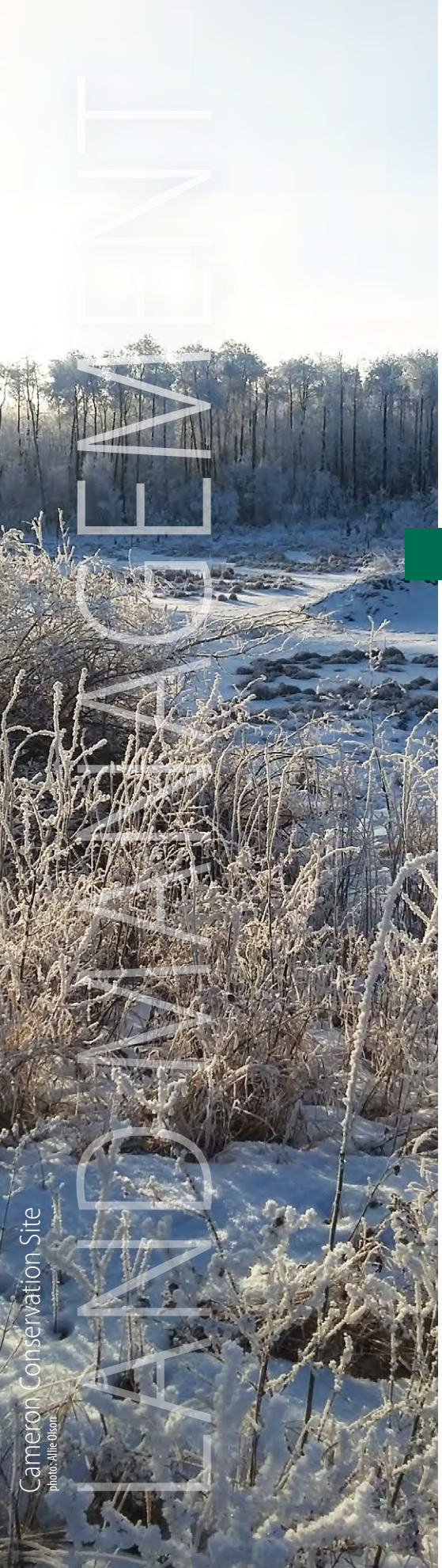
Reinwood Conservation Site

Map Grid C2: Site 107

photo: Garret McKen


ALBERTA CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION
20
YEARS
Wildlife · Land Management · Fisheries · Communications



Cameron Conservation Site
photo: Allie Olson

La La Land? Not a Chance.

ACA's land team routinely finds themselves walking over spectacular Alberta vistas, and sometimes, old sets of rules. Unlike its wildlife and fish counterparts (statistics and baseline data collection galore), the Land Management Program's processes aren't quite as quantifiable. Sure, we tally up the total number of acres conserved in Alberta and highlight that wherever people might look (we manage 210,000 acres of habitat if you're wondering). But that's merely a sliver of the whole story.

Stats aside please

If 20 years of land conservation had to be summed up in one word, that word might be "relationships". Success is not just about the numbers. In the complex game of conservation, science sometimes becomes secondary (oh the tragedy!) as we concentrate on growing credible, trustworthy, non-partisan relationships; connections built on capability and accountability.

"Relationships underpin much of what we do," says Stefanie Fenson, long-time Biologist with ACA. "Relationships with stakeholders, landowners, funding agencies, corporate partners, and our conservation partners all play a huge role in securement and management of our conservation sites. Trust is imperative." Adds Kevin Gardiner, Manager in ACA's Rocky Mountain House office: "We have built relationships with landowners by quite literally knocking on their doors, introducing ourselves to them, and learning we've got something in common." After a lot of introductions, ACA is now partnered with nearly 100 landowners to conserve habitat on private land totaling 328,000 plus acres. This is real conservation.

The past decade has also established the bourgeoning capabilities of corporate partnerships. Ranging in industries from oil and gas, forestry, agribusiness, and outdoor retailers, from mom-and-pop shops to billion dollar corporations, ACA's partners have


Shell True North Forest: Tree Planting
photo: ACA, Garret McKen

helped secure $32.4 million worth of land across the province. That land equals habitat, and healthy habitat is everything for fish and wildlife. These partnerships are solid and trusting, yielding results we would never achieve alone. And just how can one quantify or collect data on something like that?

Partnership power

Twenty years later and it still doesn't get old: "That first moment—knowing the donation, securement, or partnership has gone through—each one is as exciting as the first," says Ed Kolodychuk, Senior Technician in ACA's Peace River office. He remembers the early stages of the Shell True North Forest near Grande Prairie. Once privately owned land used for grazing and hay production, 1,800 acres of northern boreal (almost 15 West Edmonton Malls!) was purchased using funds provided by Shell in 2011. Together we manage the area for biodiversity conservation and opportunities like hiking and birdwatching.

"Each parcel is another piece conserved, and what's even better is we all get to enjoy it," says Kolodychuk. Tree Canada later joined us to lead the planting of 70,000 trees on the site. In total, Shell has provided millions to conserve over 3,000 acres of key habitat in Alberta and create ten conservation sites.

Keep it real in the boreal

In 2003, we crafted a plan with Suncor Energy to conserve ecologically significant areas in the boreal forest. Six million dollars in, the Suncor Boreal Habitat Conservation Initiative (BHCI) has secured nearly 9,000 acres (39 conservation sites) for wildlife, fish, vegetation, and Albertans to enjoy.

It kicked off with a $200,000 grant to conserve 470 acres around Winagami Lake northwest of High Prairie. On a broader level, wildlife benefit from conserving ecosystems as a larger chunk, and this site is connected to the provincial park. Everything clicked; it looked like this partnership would work.

It did and more—the BHCI became an Emerald Awards finalist in 2013, recognized for being a collaborative leader when it comes to boreal conservation. Now a model for how ACA develops partnerships with other industries, it emphasizes that conservation is a long-term commitment and tag-team effort.

photo: ACA, Garret McKen

"In Alberta, development is a reality of life," says ACA President and CEO, Todd Zimmerling. "While some groups chose to fight development from the outside with protests and lawsuits, we find we can get more accomplished by working with industry and agriculture to lessen impacts, improve practices, and incorporate conservation into an altered landscape." Together we keep on keeping on—securing and managing habitat whenever and however we can.

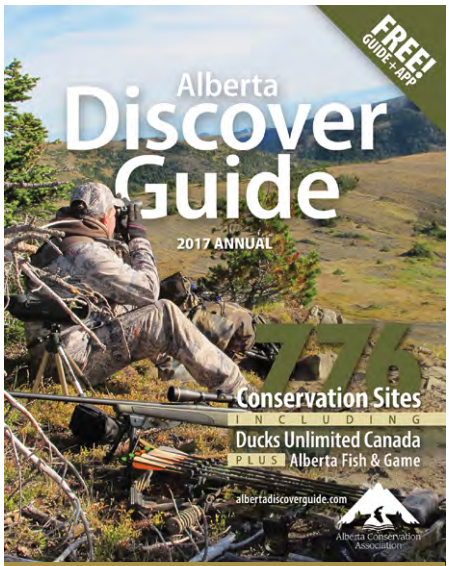
Don't guess, assess

Even though ACA's wildlife and fish programs might warrant more data collection or tangibility, that's not to say that success in land conservation doesn't hinge on explicit, actionable goals. Vague rhetoric doesn't produce results—and you certainly won't find any of that in the Silver Sage Habitat Conservation Strategies Reassessment.

Meticulous recording shows 65 species take advantage of the native prairie uplands, on-and-off wetlands and cropland on the Silver Sage site (south of Manyberries). You might see pronghorn or even sensitive species like the ferruginous hawk, Sprague's pipit, and greater sage-grouse. We recorded sharp-tailed grouse at 13 different spots, and there's a lek (dancing ground) just off the property. In fact, 19 different declining species have been documented in the area!

In partnership with the Government of Canada Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk, we recently expanded the Silver Sage Conservation Site from 2,051 acres to 2,371 acres, creating far greater landscape connectivity for the incredible array of wildlife. We're also enhancing habitat by restoring cropland back to native grassland.

That land equals habitat, and healthy habitat is everything for fish and wildlife. These partnerships are solid and trusting, yielding results we would never achieve alone.



Find more conservation sites

in the *Alberta Discover Guide,* online, and on the mobile app.

A piece for each

Habitat for wildlife and fish plus opportunities for outdoor recreation continues to be the guiding principles of our work. Conservation is the action of consuming natural resources with care, so they are ultimately plentiful for generations far into the future. "Land and habitat conservation is not preservation, but rather, an inclusive outlook on the various land uses across the landscape," explains Fenson. "Every year, Alberta's land base is under more pressure from population growth, industrial development, and urban sprawl. In my mind, the mission will continue to be about striking that balance between preservation and resource use, to truly achieve our conservation goals."

ACA's Fisheries Access Site Management brings the balance—a project delivered throughout the province so anglers can access key streams, stocked ponds, and lakes in a sustainable and responsible way. A pile of partners contribute so we can inspect, maintain, or improve 26 fisheries access sites—expanding parking lots, adding boat launches, or even making them wheelchair accessible. These sites, and all conservation sites for that matter, are for wildlife and you. ACA's *Alberta Discover Guide* (with a print, online, and app version) is a good reminder of the opportunities you can take advantage of.

Good science, better management

When you see Golden Ranches pop up on the *Alberta Discover Guide* app, it's worth your while to read on. But if you need to know only one thing about Golden Ranches, remember it's a big deal for some big (i.e., international) reasons.

In the heart of the Cooking Lake Moraine Natural Area (only 27 kilometres east of Edmonton), this 1,509-acre parcel has over eight kilometres of shoreline—a feast for the eyes of bird enthusiasts (you can see rare avian species, waterfowl, and other water birds staging on the lake during migration). It's in the thick of Provincial Environmentally Significant Areas (ESA), and also lies within a North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) targeted area (a habitat hotspot for migrating and nesting waterfowl). The North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) has pinpointed this area as an excellent breeding and staging area for globally significant concentrations of migratory waterfowl and shorebirds in the spring. To top all that off, Cooking Lake is in the Prairie Pothole Region of Canada, recognized internationally for its highly productive wetlands.

Nabbing this property with like-minded partners (Nature Conservancy of Canada, Alberta Fish & Game Association, and the Edmonton and Area Land Trust) has completely changed its future—without intervention, there was strong potential for residential development. The extensive contiguous habitat would've been lost. Instead, it's now managed as a low-impact visitor-use area with a broad range of biodiversity goals. The mixture of mature aspen forest and open grassland is habitat for white-tailed and mule deer, moose, red-tailed hawk, grouse, and a variety of small mammals and songbirds. And to think all of this is right next to over a million urbanites!

Don't stop there

There are many more successful land projects that have punctuated the last 20 years: North Raven River (i.e., Stauffer Creek) boasts excellent angling, and has seen cattle exclusion fencing improve riparian and instream habitat. There are now a parking lot and washroom facilities so the public can enjoy this riparian corridor. Another gem is the East Hays property, where cultivated land is morphing into richer habitat with 11,000 shrubs and 13 acres of wetland complexes added to ultimately benefit upland birds. In total, ACA has spent over 100,000 hours managing or maintaining conservation sites, directing $220 million towards habitat conservation, and planting nearly two million trees and shrubs…not that we're counting (we can't help ourselves).

As for the next twenty? "We will definitely be building more relationships—working with oil and gas and agriculture industries, producers, hunters and anglers, naturalists, and other stakeholders," says Fenson. The Land Management Program is nonconforming at times, but the past few years are just the beginning of finding its own niche that is proving to succeed. The power of partnerships is spreading conservation faster than ever before, making a real impact that eventually every person and wild thing can appreciate.

Our resource programs have a diverse and wide scope of work but working as a team, we're proud of what we have accomplished in the last 20 years. While the core of our work has remained consistent—conserving wildlife, fish, and their habitats—technology, our staff's commitment, and telling you, the stakeholders, about what we do, has made a difference.

As for the next twenty? Todd Zimmerling, President and CEO of ACA sums it up nicely: "Partnerships and collaboration. If we've learned anything, it's that conservation is a group effort."

Fishing the Raven River
photo: ACA, Colin Eyo


help us
buy a
river

Porter Conservation Site securement campaign

"On the Canadian map, there is no other region that offers what central Alberta does. Our collection of brown trout streams is unrivaled in stream kilometres, trout abundance, and top end sizes. It's seriously in conversations of global brown trout destinations. To have so many kilometres of publicly accessed brown trout streams is extremely unique. Of our collection of brown trout streams, the Raven River offers exceptional diversity of instream structure, hatches, and fishing opportunities. It's a personal favorite as Amelia and I love to sight-fish trout later in the season as we walk through the mixed forests and open farm fields.

But times are shifting. There is fragmentation of formerly larger farms into acreages. There is also fragmentation of the continuity of riparian habitat. While the situation isn't yet dire, lessons can be learned from other regions of Alberta and Canada where fragmentation leads to elimination of naturally flowing ecosystems and restoration efforts and campaigns are then needed. A project such as this not only ensures access to the Raven, more importantly it solidifies that habitat will be allowed to flow through its natural processes. That's extremely important to the longevity of our brown trout, Alberta's best fish news story. As the late Barry Mitchell told me several times, the only way to control what happens on a land base is to own it. And this is an excellent opportunity for the right organization to do exactly that, for the right reasons."

Dave Jensen

www.JensenFlyFishing.com

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photos: Dave Jensen

Conservation is top priority

► *by Janet Kanters*

To the average person, the idea of conserving natural resources while promoting hunting and fishing seem at odds. But to Alberta Fish & Game Association (AFGA), it is anything but.

"We feel fostering renewable resources is a good thing, and managing habitat, predator-prey relationships, and, of course, hunting and fishing are some of the best management tools possible," says Doug Butler, President of AFGA.

The association is a volunteer-based, not-for-profit charitable organization that advocates the common interests of ethical hunters, anglers, and outdoor enthusiasts dedicated to the responsible stewardship of Alberta's environment.

The group is a long-term advocate of sound management of natural resources, for well over 100 years. Active since 1908, today the association boasts over 25,000 members spread throughout the province.

A great example of AFGA's forward-thinking management is evident in the Wildlife Trust Fund. In 1983, AFGA realized that critical habitat was disappearing at a rapid rate in Alberta and they set out to create the Wildlife Trust Fund, the province's first land trust. Today, the Wildlife Trust Fund has grown to include over 100 properties across the province that encompasses over 50,000 acres of important wildlife and fish habitat. The Wildlife Trust Fund properties are found from the extreme southern reaches of the province all the way north to Manning.

Another prime example is the group's Antelope Corridor Enhancement program, which includes over 1,200 kilometres of restrictive fencing re-configured to wildlife-friendly standards. The program consists of replacing lower barbed-wire strands with smooth wire which is raised in height so antelope can more easily pass underneath without injury and move across the prairie during their seasonal migration.

The association's Operation Grassland Community program works directly with landholders to secure and enhance prairie wildlife habitats. These voluntary stewardship agreements currently encompass approximately 900,000 acres of land.

"Alberta hunters and fishermen are living their cultural heritage by hunting and fishing, but they're also unbelievably passionate about it," says Butler. "Conservation is very important to most outdoors people, more than actually harvesting something."

Getting all Albertans involved in conservation management is a priority with AFGA. As part of the Wildlife Trust Fund, they have teams of volunteers throughout Alberta that conduct a minimum of two inspections annually on the 100-plus conservation sites. This provides the benefit of ensuring that conservation lands are maintained, and affords an opportunity for people to enjoy the outdoors.

Youth involvement is key

The youth are our future, notes Butler, and AFGA helps today's youth to enjoy and manage the outdoors. Indeed, many of the AFGA member clubs have youth programming and hunter education courses. Youth are instructed on outdoor safety and ethics via these member clubs, as well as through AFGA youth camps held annually. Two camps for women-only are also held each summer.

"But we're not just working with kids and women, there's more to what we do," says Butler. "For instance, we're one of the big believers for more enforcement to try and stop poachers and stop destruction of our habitat.

"We're the voice of the Alberta outdoors person. We want to be the eyes on the ground for the government and for all the law-abiding anglers and hunters," he adds. "As long as you have management and regulations, you have to have enforcement, so we like to keep on top of everything we can."

On a broad scale, AFGA wants to ensure the survival of habitat and wildlife, and the opportunity for everyone in Alberta to enjoy it. To that end, they have five top priorities going forward, including a Fish and Wildlife division re-established in government; recognition of the value of public ownership of public lands; habitat protection and enhancement; access to public lands, including leased lands; and species-specific wildlife management.

"It all boils down to conservation and making sure our grandchildren and their grandchildren can enjoy what we're enjoying," says Butler. "And that they have the right— and I call it a right, it's more than a privilege—to enjoy our lands in perpetuity."

"Getting all Albertans involved in conservation management is a priority with AFGA."

-Doug Butler, AFGA President

Doug Butler

AFGA conservation priorities

A Fish and Wildlife division re-established in government

Recognition of the value of public ownership of public lands

Habitat protection and enhancement

Ensure access to public lands, including leased lands

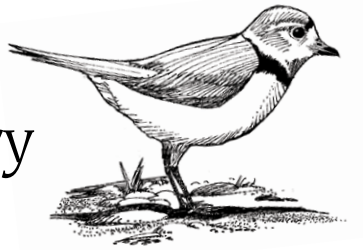
Species-specific wildlife management

www.afga.org

Wild Rose Conservation Site
Partners: ACA, AFGA, EC, NCC

photo: Kristen Rumbolt Miller

Bring 'em Back
The road to recovery



► *by Sue Peters*

For 20 years, Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) has been putting species at risk on the road to recovery through our involvement with the Alberta Wildlife Status Report series—one of ACA's longest-running projects. These reports start the formal status assessment process, and ultimately lead to recovery actions for species that are at risk of being lost from Alberta.

In 1996, Alberta and other provinces and territories indicated their support for the national Accord for the Protection of Species at Risk. It was the perfect time for ACA to step in as a champion for species at risk, and Alberta's hunters and anglers to step up to the long-held role of being the first conservationists. We partnered with the provincial government to produce the Alberta Wildlife Status Report series. Each status report became a comprehensive source of information on selected species at risk for assessing status in our province and guiding management or recovery of the species. And this report series has been diversifying ACA's palette of projects ever since.

A smorgasbord of species at risk are featured in over seventy different Alberta Wildlife Status Reports in the 20 years since ACA and the Alberta government co-produced the first report. The species have ranged in size from the tiny yucca moth to the more conspicuous grizzly bear, with names from spiderwort to stonecat. Some hop, while others fly, walk, slither, or swim. Some don't move at all (plants!). For each species, these reports are the beginning of a long journey in which they get to play the starring role.

Which species are the best candidates for an Alberta Wildlife Status Report? On the surface, this would seem like a tough decision, considering that Alberta has 587 species of amphibians, mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish, plus about 3,500 species of plants and fungi, and thousands of invertebrates. But for many of these species, we barely know more than their name (if that). With the goal of conducting a provincial status assessment and recovering a species, we need to know about a species' biology, habitat requirements, and population trends in Alberta. Of those species, we only consider species that have "red flags"—cause for concern, such as a declining population, shrinking habitat, or a looming threat.

These concerns are all too familiar to Alberta biologists who noticed declining numbers of small shorebirds called piping plovers in the 1980s and 1990s, prompting the very first Alberta Wildlife Status Report. In 2000, the status of the piping plover was assessed as Endangered using information in this report, and efforts to increase their population intensified. This became one of ACA's most sustained and cooperative efforts on behalf of a species at risk in Alberta. Conservation efforts more than doubled the population over the next ten years. However, the best intentions of biologists can be trumped by nature; high water levels have reduced the available habitat during the past few years, leading to significant population drops again. This shows that many variables play a part in the recovery of a species. Biologists still need to keep a watchful eye on Alberta's piping plover population.

Sometimes status reports are updated so they can shine the spotlight on a species whose population has improved in Alberta, thanks to recovery actions and changes in management of the species spurred by a status assessment. The trumpeter swan is a great example. In 2014, the updated trumpeter swan status report and subsequent status re-assessment moved them off the list of *Threatened* species in the *Wildlife Act*. After years of peregrine falcon and swift fox reintroduction efforts, maybe one day soon we'll be updating these species' status reports, to hopefully show that they are no longer at risk.

With over 70 different species featured in Alberta Wildlife Status Reports, you might wonder how many reports will be written. This is a project we wish was no longer relevant or necessary. Ignorance is bliss. But when watchful landowners notice songbirds missing in the spring, or anglers notice a previously abundant fish is missing from a stream or lake, biologists need to look carefully at the population data that have been collected over many years. If the information isn't there, biologists will get their boots dirty and collect the information needed to assess the species' status in our province. This is the first step in ensuring we have the information we need to write an Alberta Wildlife Status Report, and get the species on the road to recovery!

Pronghorn Xing

Tracking the migration

► *by Paul Jones*

Ever thought about taking a trip to Africa to watch one of the last great migrations? Millions of zebras, wildebeests, and elephants migrate in search of water and grass as the seasons change, walking over 800 kilometres in the process. Without having to travel halfway around the world, you can see one of the longest migrations made in North America right here in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Every fall and spring, pronghorn antelope migrate amid summer and winter ranges between Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Montana. They might not migrate in the large herds seen in Africa, but they move exceptionally long distances. A study conducted between Alberta Conservation Association (ACA), University of Calgary, and Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) provides insight into the movement capabilities of pronghorn. For example: P3, a female collared in December 2003 near Manyberries, Alberta, travelled over 400 kilometres from her winter range. Starting from the Manyberries area in March, heading north across the vast openness of CFB Suffield, then east into Saskatchewan near Kindersley, she returned to her fawning range in Alberta in May. When her collar finally dropped off in December of 2004, she had travelled over 800 kilometres in one year. P3's yearly movement distance equates to a round-trip walk from Edmonton to Fort McMurray.

P3's yearly movement was not without its own obstacles though. It included crossing the South Saskatchewan River once and the Red Deer River twice, 12 major highway crossings, and at least 745 fence crossings. The Trans-Canada Highway east of Medicine Hat was likely the greatest obstacle. It not only included negotiating four lanes of fast-moving traffic, but she had to cross a fence on either side of the highway, plus the CP railway on the north side of the highway. Her movement pattern at this obstacle clearly demonstrated the challenge as P3 spent three days moving back and forth along the fence line on the south side of the highway before she felt comfortable enough to cross and continue her trek north.

It's not just pronghorn in Alberta completing annual spring and fall migrations. From his work in the Northern Sagebrush Steppe (NSS) of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Montana, Dr. Andrew Jakes discovered that pronghorn in these jurisdictions are connected through annual migrations. "Pronghorn in the NSS make annual seasonal migrations averaging over 100 kilometres in the fall and 150 kilometres in the spring," he says. "It's not just the Alberta pronghorn that have to deal with obstacles during their migrations, pronghorn in Saskatchewan also have to cross the Trans-Canada highway as they move between more northern summer ranges and winter ranges to the south."

Dotting the Is and Xing the Ts

Miistakis Institute has teamed up with ACA, AEP, Alberta Transportation, Saskatchewan Environment, and Saskatchewan Government Insurance to launch "Pronghorn Xing" in the fall of 2017. Pronghorn Xing is a conservation program that engages volunteers to collect data where wildlife are seen crossing, adjacent, or dead along highways. The information provided will be used to help validate the location of migration pinch points along highways in the Medicine Hat and Swift Current areas.

The intended outcome is "to build scientific knowledge and public support for developing and implementing strategies to ensure safe movement of [all ungulates] as they try to negotiate the highway network in the Canadian portion of the Northern Great Plains," says Tracy Lee with the Miistakis Institute. "Identifying where ungulates are crossing or attempting to cross the highways will enable us to identify pinch points and develop mitigation strategies, to not only help wildlife cross highways, but also protect motorists from potential wildlife–vehicle collisions."

Pronghorn Xing is developing an app and an online mapping tool to report observations of pronghorn, deer, elk, etc. within the defined study area. The app is easy to use and enables participants to start and end a driving route, reporting any wildlife observations as they go.

To a herd of pronghorn, an 800-kilometre journey gets a little longer and more dangerous every time they cross a highway, train track, or fence. As conservationists and scientists (and volunteer citizen scientists), we want to make that trek as easy as possible to ensure that the great pronghorn migration will continue to be a natural marvel of Alberta's prairies.

PronghornXing

We need your help to document where you see pronghorn and other wildlife species along highways!

FALL 2017 Download and start using the free **Pronghorn Xing app** on iOS or Android.

Start mapping where you see ungulates. If you are unable to use your cell phone (perhaps because you are driving), keep track of where, when, and what you saw then visit the program online at **pronghorncrossing.org** to map your information.

Friendly **Forest Fire**

Assessing the benefits seven years later

► *by Corey Rasmussen*

In 2009, the Upper North Saskatchewan prescribed fire blackened thousands of hectares of mountain slopes between Whirlpool Point and Banff National Park along the David Thompson Corridor, Highway 11. Designed and carried out by a team of professionals from the-then Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD), Parks Canada, and Alberta Conservation Association, this fire was ignited in an area where fire has been actively supressed and human caused forest clearing is minimal.

Soon after the burn, our 2010 Conservation Magazine article "Out of the Ashes… How Fires Transform our Forests" vividly described the process, intent, and consequences of the planned burn. For a variety of reasons, it was anticipated that prescribed fire would add diversity, contributing to the creation of a vegetative and habitat mosaic mimicking natural disturbance. These changes would enhance wintering range for species including bighorn sheep, elk, and deer. From 2005 to 2015, ACA carried out a rigorous habitat monitoring program to quantify pre- and post-burn conditions in six sampling areas within the planned burn expanse. This monitoring program was designed to see if prescribed burning is actually a good treatment option.

Data collection and subsequent analysis focused on various measurements at three different levels: landscape, ecosystem, and species. Landscape level objectives were evaluated for the Cline River sub-basin (a portion of the larger North Saskatchewan River watershed) in which the burn took place. In addition, ecosystem and species objectives were assessed immediately within the burn area.

photo: ACA

photo: ACA

The Upper North Saskatchewan River prescribed fire is in fact helping to work towards a more diverse and healthier landscape, providing greater wildlife winter habitat opportunities.


photo: ACA, Corey Rasmussen

Landscape Level Analyses

At the landscape level, the study focused on forest age distribution and disturbance rates. Various wildlife species depend upon having a diverse landscape of young to mature forest as well as open areas. Before the fire, the Cline River watershed was largely covered by mature conifer (evergreen) trees, which generally lack diversity due to the shade they provide (not much grows beneath). Post-burn we'd hoped to see increased area of younger forest stands that generally exhibit greater diversity beneficial to wildlife. We even had the understanding that further treatments would be needed to realize goals at the Cline River sub-basin level, but we found many of our goals are already being met for a 10-year span (2004–2014)! Mature forest goals for lower-mid and upper slope mature forest goals were six to 39 percent and six to 20percent respectively. With mature forests still dominating lower-mid (40 percent) to upper (55 percent) slopes more treatments are deemed necessary. Also of note, meadows within the sub-basin also require further attention as forest encroachment is choking out these important open feeding areas.

Ecosystem Level Analyses

At the ecosystem level, we wanted to see how this prescribed fire mimicked natural fire in event size and number of events. We found that this fire consisted of two definable events (4,223 ha and 612 ha in size) and were comparable to similar-sized historic natural burns for burned and unburned portions. Aside from looking natural, a naturalized and irregular burn pattern, as achieved with this fire, is beneficial to wildlife as it provides both security and forest edge favoured by foraging wildlife.

Species Level Analyses

To identify success at the species level, some indicators we looked for included access to, various forage types including grass, forbs (small flowering plants), and shrubs. Access for sheep was assessed based upon direction of slope of treatment area. South and southwest facing slopes—exhibited by good portions of study area—receive greatest wind and sun so offer greatest winter forage availability. For elk and mule deer, distance from treatment to thermal cover (generally unburned portions) was determined as open foraging areas within proximity to cover are favoured. Overall, we found that the fire had indeed improved forage access for sheep, elk, and mule deer.

Two other important species level components in evaluating quality winter habitat are forage abundance and predator avoidance. Forage abundance is determined using cover estimates and dry weights of grass and forbs collected during ground surveys. It appears grass forage targets within the lower to mid-slope were met for elk and mule deer and are trending upwards for sheep. Forb abundance appears variable throughout the study area and has only increased slightly. Overall data suggests more burning may be required to achieve grass and forb abundance targets. Bighorn sheep strategy for predator avoidance is having a certain degree of visibility and proximity to steep slopes. Elk in the mountains like to forage in open areas near forest cover where they can escape from predators. It was determined that targets for this objective were met for bighorn sheep and elk as well. Other habitat related variables not covered in this article were assessed in the analysis, but require further attention prior to presentation.

What It All Means

Considering interpreted results to date, the Upper North Saskatchewan River prescribed fire is in fact helping to work towards a more diverse and healthier landscape, providing greater wildlife winter habitat opportunities. This prescribed fire was a great testament to being able to safely use fire as an effective tool to achieve habitat enhancement goals.

We've all learned about the negatives of forest fires—and there are many. But forest fires, professionally set and monitored, can have numerous positives too. Learn more at the site located approximately 170 km west of Rocky Mountain House on the David Thompson Highway, at the head of the Landslide Lake trail. Colourful interpretive signs can be found to guide you through eastern portions of the burn.


photo: ACA, Corey Rasmussen

What's the Difference
Between a Wildfire and Prescribed Fire?

Wildfire, either human-caused or natural, begins and perpetuates after ignition, continuing from an unplanned point until a combination of weather, natural obstruction, or firefighting effort extinguish the flames. Depending upon conditions, wildfire can have devastating results. Prescribed fire, by it's sheer nature, allows for those implementing it to control, to some extent, the timing, burn rate, intensity, perimeter, and severity of a fire. The decision to ignite is not taken lightly. It requires careful scrutiny of various factors including temperature, relative humidity, winds, fuel loads, and human infrastructure.

Avid, Not Nuts

► *by Kelley Stark*

As a non-profit organization in the field of conservation, we meet our contacts from all over Alberta in all different ways. Gord Dawson works for Inter Pipeline Ltd as the Manager of Business Development Petrochemicals. Inter Pipeline was integral in the purchase of the new Report A Poacher trailer, which is how we got to know Gord, learning that he is an avid hunter and fly fisherman who provides a lot of instruction and mentorship to anyone interested in those activities.

Gord wasn't always a business man; he grew up on a farm then worked in the forestry industry. Despite his first career choice, he got away from hunting and fishing. It wasn't until moving to Calgary and working in a different industry that hunting and fishing became important in his life again.

ACA: How did you come back to hunting and angling?

Gord: It all started with my wife, Michelle, buying me a gift certificate to participate in a fly fishing camp. It was like the flood gates opened because I bought numerous rods, vests, flies, reels, all the paraphernalia that goes along with fly fishing and I would fish every day. I've taken the same boot camp three times; I'm obviously a very slow student. I really went crazy on freshwater fly fishing and then I discovered the world of salt water fly fishing. If Michelle and I go on vacation in the winter time, more often than not, we're salt water fly fishing. Don't tell her this, but I think she's even better than me: she's more patient and is better at casting. It's nice to see a sport where women and children—everyone—is involved.

ACA: What about hunting?

Gord: As a youth, I hunted and fished every day. One day, I found Silver Willow [Sporting Club] online and thought it sounded like fun. I hadn't shot a gun in, literally, decades. I convinced a friend of mine with a PAL to shoot a round of sporting clays and soon I'd moved on to skeet. And then another turning point in my life was when my friend introduced me to shooting upland game birds over a dog. Watching a dog work was just as much fun, or even more fun than hunting. Michelle and I went to an AHEIA Wise Awards Dinner and bought a dog.

ACA: You bought a dog at a dinner? How has that worked out?

Gord: He is an excellent dog. And then I bought a library full of dog-training books to teach him how to hunt. I stopped buying books when I read "all you're trying to do when you're training a hunting dog is manipulate or work with five percent of what the dog does; 95 percent of what the dog does is all instinct." I would argue that the dog [his name is Mack] has taught me more about hunting than I've taught the dog.

ACA: Do you hunt anything else?

Gord: I'm an avid upland bird hunter, and now, an avid—I have to use the word "avid" because it sounds better than nuts—waterfowl hunter too. I had to buy a special garden shed just to store my decoys. I have quite a reputation of going overboard in my hobbies. I'm very fortunate to live and work in a place where I can spend so much time on them.

ACA: Where does mentorship fit in?

Gord: I see it as part of my duty to introduce youth or adults new to hunting or fishing, assuming they want to be introduced. I have a lot of equipment that I'm always willing to share. I'm also one of the handful of people in Canada who have registered to be instructors for skeet shooting. Often for AHEIA, I introduce gun safety and tips on how to make their shooting the greatest probability of success of breaking the target. I rely upon mechanical skills and good mechanics more than eyesight. I've also made every mistake known, so that really helps.

Every day I wake up is a fantastic day. It gives me a chance to go hunting or fishing. I wake up with a smile on my face; I couldn't be happier.

Gord Dawson, Inter Pipeline Ltd

the Great ACCESSIBLE Outdoors

by Karen D. Crowdis

Pursuing outdoor activities with a disability can be intimidating. Hunting may seem like an impossible dream considering terrain, weather, and retrieving harvested animals. Whether a condition from birth or caused by an accident, a disability is not necessarily a barrier. With the right planning, hunting absolutely is a sport for the disabled.

Alberta's variety of locales and species make it a great place for accessible hunting. Many established natural areas offer hunting already; a bit of work could make them more accessible. In terms of licencing, provincial safety requirements are the same for all hunters. New hunters must take a hunter education course, which would not have to be repeated following a disabling injury.

"There is no legal restriction on disability hunting in Alberta. Everyone needs to meet the educational component and complete a firearms safety course. However, a person may hunt without it when accompanied by someone with the firearms course," notes Dave Paplawski, Provincial Coordinator of Conservation Education with Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association (AHEIA).

ONLINE RESOURCES

Hunting and Outdoor Areas—*Alberta Discover Guide*
albertadiscoverguide.com

306 disabled hunters Public Group | Facebook
facebook.com

Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association (AHEIA)
aheia.com

Be Adaptive Disabled Hunting and Fishing Equipment
beadaptive.com

Alberta Hunting Regulations
albertaregulations.ca/huntingregs

Disabled Hunters – Buckmasters
buckmasters.com/resources/disabled-hunters

Bobbie Cherepuschak knew early on that he preferred being outdoors from time on the family farm. Growing up he heard hunting stories from his dad's friends, which piqued his interest. Born with spina bifida, Cherepuschak has used a wheelchair his entire life. His supportive family joined right in when he expressed an interest in hunting.

"Our neighbour was a hunter safety instructor," shares Cherepuschak. "We approached him for information on what to do and then we all signed up for the course. In 2001, I took my first hunting trip." Since then, he has set up the Facebook page "306 Disabled Hunting" and is working his dream job at Cabela's in Regina.


Bobbie Cherepuschak

Sam Halabi was an avid outdoorsman, bow hunter, and Conservation Officer with Alberta Environment and Parks, where he still works. He bow hunted deer, bear, and sheep. Although well versed in tree-stand safety, one fateful day he didn't harness in. Working alone and bent over for a long time on an old stand, Halabi lost his balance when he stood up. Falling out and landing on his neck left him permanently paralyzed.

"I knew I was in trouble; I couldn't move as soon as I fell," recalls Halabi. "I went 15 years without hunting. Getting back outdoors was scary; I had lost hope that I could get out there."

Support of family and friends makes a significant difference in getting outdoors. One of the biggest challenges Halabi faced was "getting through the 'used to' thoughts to get to the 'look what I can still do' thoughts."

"It's one of the toughest things to do, but ask for help," says Halabi. "It is surprising how many people are willing to help you get out there."

"My family, my friends, and our neighbour all offered help and support, making it a reality for me," recalls Cherepuschak.

Paplawski adds: "The key is to find a mentor who will help at the level they are at. Within Alberta there are many opportunities to get out there. Fishing derbies and camps offered by AHEIA get disabled people participating in outdoor activities."

In addition to the internal desire, hunting with a disability necessitates some ingenuity. Depending on the nature of the disability, specialized equipment is becoming more available to facilitate hunting, fishing, hiking, and climbing.

Before ordering any equipment, Halabi suggests "plan ahead and have an occupational therapist involved to make recommendations based on individual, specific needs."

Being a hunter takes more than courses and gear. Successfully harvesting any game requires the common hunter characteristic—patience.

Cherepuschak found nothing to hunt in his first two years. "I felt unsuccessful. Then in 2003, a friend offered to take me out and I got a deer. As soon as I saw the deer drop, I was hooked." He says his first mule deer was most memorable because he was accompanied by the person who got him started.

According to Halabi, patience, being committed, and putting time into it are important to success. "I spent the whole fall sitting in a blind, enjoying the challenge of being out there," he says. "With the very first deer after 15 years away, it all came back to me. The reality of 'hey, I can do this' was overwhelming."

Yet, the greatest benefit of accessible hunting or any outdoor pursuit may not have anything to do with harvesting game.

"Living with a disability, alone time is hard to get," observes Halabi. "Being away with my own thoughts gives another purpose to get out there."

Cherepuschak notes it's about "getting out there, just enjoying it, and forgetting about other things in my life. It is so peaceful out there."

Outdoor experiences are cathartic in many ways. Paplawski encourages people without disabilities to "take someone out with them if the opportunity presents itself and for people with a disability, find the mentor to take you out at your level. Do not think it can't be done."

"Anyone can do it, you just need the will," adds Halabi.

"Put your mind to it, you can do anything," agrees Cherepuschak.

Any outdoor activity requires planning. A disability simply requires addressing additional logistics to make it happen. For any hunter, success comes from committing and sticking with it. For disabled hunters, the long-term benefits of these pursuits go far deeper than a freezer full of meat.


photo: Janice Edkins
Sam Halabi

It's about "getting out there, just enjoying it, and forgetting about other things in my life. It is so peaceful out there."

-Bobbie Cherepuschak

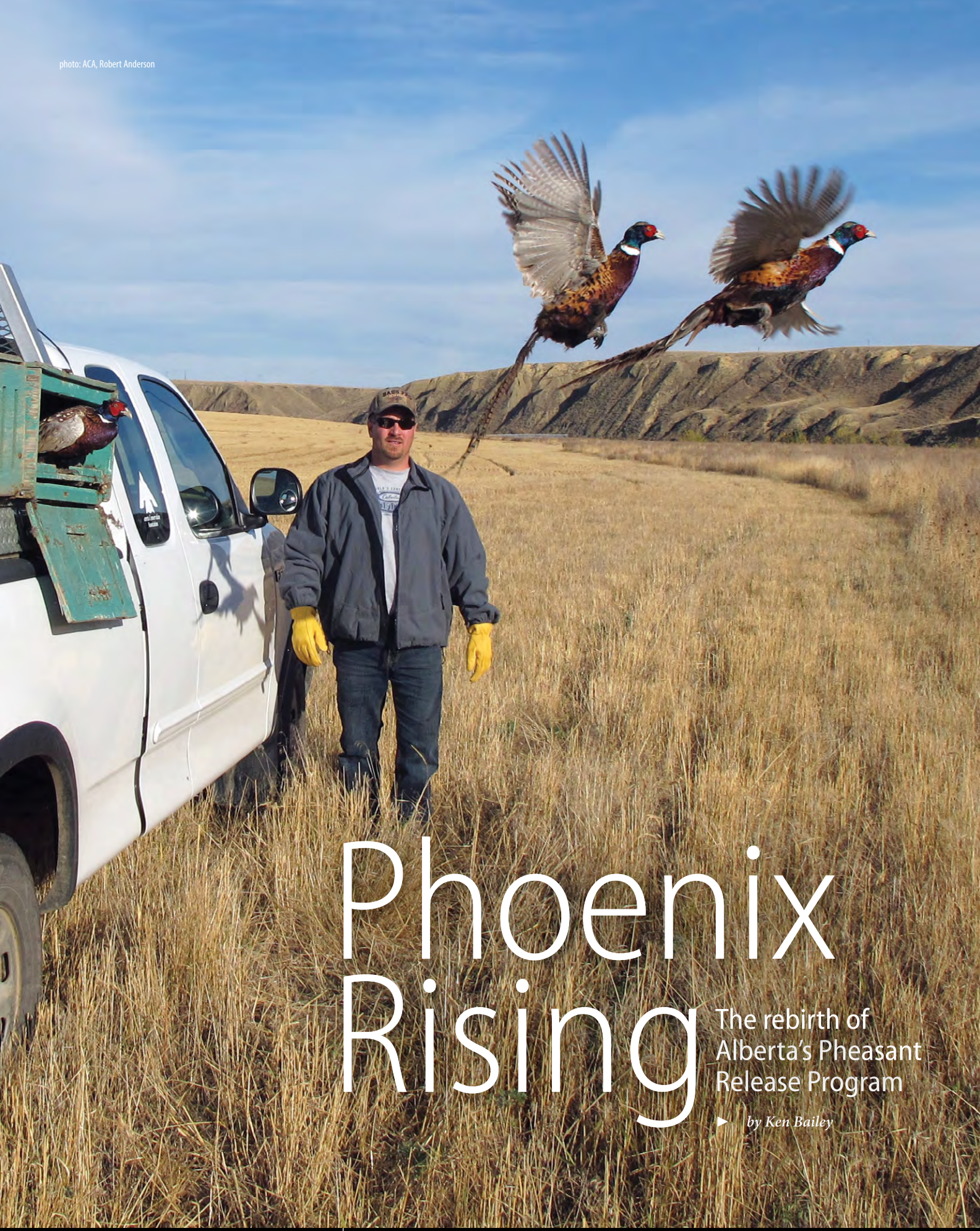


photo: ACA, Robert Anderson

Phoenix Rising

The rebirth of Alberta's Pheasant Release Program

by Ken Bailey

In 2016, Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) released 26,000 pheasant roosters, 8,510 hens, and provided 17,000 day-old chicks to be raised and subsequently released by 4-H members, landowners, scout troops, and other supporting groups. Looking to the future, plans include increasing both the total number of birds released and the number of release properties. By any measure, Albertans are reaping the benefits of a healthy and successful pheasant release program. But the future of this program wasn't always so bright. In fact, just a few short years ago the entire program was in danger of being lost forever.

In May 2010, 50 individuals gathered at cattleman and oil executive, Stan Grad's ranch. The assembly included academics, conservation NGO representatives, and sporting enthusiasts from among the Calgary business community. They attended to talk about Alberta's pheasant release program, with clear signals in the wind that, in the midst of cost-tightening measures, the 65-year-old release program might come to an end.

In the aftermath of that meeting, six individuals agreed to lead efforts to find a way to keep a release program alive in Alberta and, with it, our province's 100-year-old legacy of pheasants and pheasant hunting. Without a release program to supplement naturally-reproducing populations of birds that are at the northern vestige of suitable climatic and habitat conditions, pheasant hunting would disappear in Alberta and the existence of the iconic bird itself would be threatened. To give themselves an identity, the group revived a decades old, though then stagnant, organization, Upland Birds Alberta (UBA). Directly as a result of the contributions of this small but determined group, the pheasant release program today is growing markedly under the leadership of ACA, and our pheasant hunting future is as bright as a fresh-flushed rooster.

Don Douglas, Stan Grad, Jimmy Miles, Quincy Smith, Tim Swinton, and Bill Turnbull are the unsung heroes who deserve the lion's share of credit for saving the program. But success did not come easily. Recognizing they needed additional data to make a stronger business case for retaining the release program, UBA commissioned an economic impact study defining the benefits of pheasant hunting to Alberta's economy, particularly for rural communities.

In year two of their efforts, the government advised that if the release program was to continue, UBA would have to provide the management oversight; government no longer had the available manpower resources required. UBA agreed and continued to make the case for supporting the program, not just to the Alberta government but also through building partnerships with counties, tourism organizations, towns, and conservation NGOs.

All of these activities took resources, both human and financial, and when others might have thrown up their hands in despair, UBA's leadership simply dug deeper. When the financial requirements exceeded what was available through their personal contributions and grants, they hosted a private dinner and fundraising function attended by a select handful of conservation-minded philanthropists, raising enough capital to keep their efforts alive.

Stan Grad, Upland Birds Alberta
photo: Ken Bailey, Alberta Professional Outfitters Society

Perhaps the most challenging hurdle arose in year three, when the pheasant hatchery in Brooks, Alberta was no longer able to produce the pheasants required to sustain the program. With no local alternative available that could supply the quantity of pheasants required, UBA went south of the border, where they landed on Bill MacFarlane and MacFarlane's Pheasants, the largest pheasant breeder in North America. Bill and his team had experience bringing pheasants into Canada, and what could have been the death knell for the program proved to be little more than a hiccup. With the support of several Alberta volunteers and contractors, the release program went on as scheduled with barely a feather ruffled.

Throughout the three years that UBA endeavoured to save the release program, they remained in continual discussion with government, making the case that the program needed a permanent home—they never envisioned themselves as anything more than placeholders for the release program. They advocated from the onset that ACA was the best choice. ACA and the government reached agreement in 2014 that the release program management would be provided by ACA from that point forward. The program has never looked back: growing in size, scope, and efficiency with every year.

Today, most of Alberta's outdoors community have little or no knowledge that our pheasant release program was resurrected from the very brink of elimination by such a small group of committed individuals. If you appreciate the opportunity provided by today's release program, enjoy attending a pheasant festival, or are provided chick pheasants to raise under ACA's leadership, it is thanks to the near-anonymous few who ensured that pheasants would remain a vital part of Alberta's landscape. Consider the words of cultural anthropologist and author Margaret Mead,

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

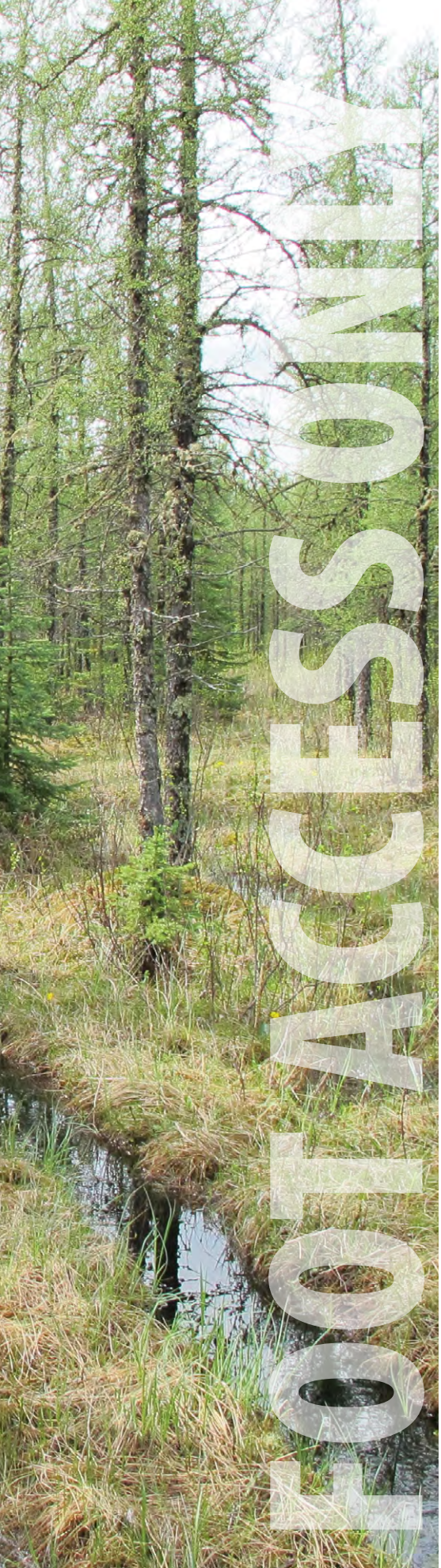
For those looking for a place to ride, the Recreation and Public Use section of the Alberta Environment and Parks website, which includes Recreation on Public Land and Public Land Use Zones sections, is a good resource along with the Alberta Off-highway Vehicle Association and other provincial and local associations and clubs.

www.aep.alberta.ca

Starting Off on the Right Foot

by Stephen Nadworny

photos: ACA, Marco Fontana



The 2017 *Alberta Discover Guide* lists over 750 conservation sites for outdoor recreation including hunting, angling, hiking, and foraging. Conserving wildlife and fish habitats, while still making sure that people have fun outdoors can be a delicate balance.

One tool that is often essential to achieving that balance is allowing access only by foot.

Access information is provided on signage at conservation sites and in the "Restrictions" section of every conservation site listed in the guide.

I choose to access site on foot for many reasons. Hiking allows me to take in sights, sounds, and smells I might otherwise miss with alternative modes of transportation. It gives me time to decompress and enjoy natural features, reminding me why I became a biologist. For me, the risk of injury is minimal with hiking which may be due to the relatively slow rate of speed and the fact that I've been doing it for most of my life. And although it may not be the quickest, hiking is good exercise and allows me to take routes that would otherwise not be an option. Finally, not only is hiking a low impact exercise, it also has a low impact on the landscape. For ACA, the foot-access-only approach is key.

I will say that I've also spent many enjoyable hours, and a few unpleasant ones, using off highway vehicles (OHVs) for work and recreation in other locations. There is no doubt OHVs are a useful tool or toy for accessing more remote spots and spending time outdoors. However, like most activities, riding comes with pros and cons. On the positive side, they are a useful form of transportation for increasing efficiency when road conditions are too muddy for the average truck, your destination is far from the road, or you need to haul a lot of gear. All this and more from machines that can be loaded into a pick-up truck or onto a utility trailer. Reflecting on my time spent using OHVs, my mind is drawn to wildlife sightings and beautiful vistas in remote locations.

But there are negatives too. One of the costs of riding is the impact on trail condition and maintenance. It is surprising to see how easily new trails are established and how long their marks remain. Riding can damage native vegetation and disturb areas with soft, wet soils often making large mud holes. Low spots in the trail collect water and tend to grow in size until they are too deep and rutted to ride through resulting in wider trails or a braid of trails as riders go around the mud holes.

In upland areas, where the trail climbs a grassy hillside, a well-beaten path is easily identified at a distance, usually including two tracks of exposed cobbles. Frequent trail use on higher ground can compact the soil, and prevent water from soaking in, which inhibits root growth, resulting in a further reduction or complete loss of native vegetation from the trail. No amount of effort seems to keep the mud holes and ruts from growing or the rocks from showing.

The growth and survival of vegetation packed down on the trail in winter can also be negatively impacted and, if snow cover is too thin, soil can be disturbed and exposed shrubs and saplings can be physically damaged. As bare ground develops on slopes, soil erosion increases siltation in nearby wetlands and streams. Soil disturbance and loss of native vegetation also increases the risk of invasive weed introduction and spread caused by OHVs which have many hard-to-clean places for seeds to collect.

In very dry conditions, OHVs have the potential to cause fires by igniting dry vegetation that comes in contact with hot engines and exhaust systems or emitting sparks when the spark arrestor is not functioning properly. All of this can reduce the quality of habitat and impact the wildlife dependent on it. So good trail planning and management combined with responsible riding are key to reducing impacts to wildlife habitat. We take a foot-access-only approach to the conservation sites we manage, further reducing the impacts of recreation on wildlife habitat.

Although I haven't stopped riding where permitted, I have become more conscientious about where and how I ride. As a result, I definitely wear out more hiking boots than OHV tires.

Semi-facts and Conservation

► *Dr. Lee Foote*

Where do we learn about conservation? On TV nature shows? Chat rooms? Social media? At the bar? These sources are all rife with personal interpretation I call semi-factual. Here is an example: "We can do whatever we want to the earth today and natural forces will 'correct' it". That is, if you are patient for oh…2-3 billion years as the earth's crust converts to magma and later spews forth as a volcanic lava. What if we want to hear Song Sparrows singing in the willows and caribou clicking through the boreal forest TODAY? This conservation-thing… who can we believe? What is true? Why does it matter? Too often, semi-facts favor a tiny special interest group at the expense of society. Education is your friend though.

Aldo Leopold wrote "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds." The losses of the past weigh on conservationists, anglers, birdwatchers, mountain bikers, hunters, canoeists, and equestrians. In Alberta, 70 percent of our prairie wetlands have been drained or filled; the wild bison herds are essentially gone; much land is off limits, our boreal is a giant tic-tac-toe board of cut lines and roads and few rivers remain un-dammed. Where does it end? We don't want to end up as crowded, de-forested, and polluted as Holland, Madagascar, or Dominican Republic, so we need groups who act on reliable, evidence-based information. When hard data is lacking, we rely on careful judgement experience and wisdom from a spectrum of trusted elders; our conservation champions.

As a whole, the ACA board of directors voice represents one of those conservation champions. For the last 20 years, ACA has been steered by a board of eight leading organizations of resource users, four regional volunteers, and two academics. All are listed inside the cover page of this magazine representing a collection of 300 years of experience. Each group brings their own passionate take on conserving natural values in Alberta and together, they provide a good filter for semi-facts. The board works with senior ACA staff and Alberta Government to steward and direct precious and rare conservation dollars. Those funds come almost exclusively from a combination of donations and hunter/angler licence fees and are treated very carefully.

Albertans benefit from partaking of the ACA education programs and publically accessible natural areas. Outdoors people thrive on natural area use; their favorite lake, forest, or grassland; their education on environmental opportunities; and outdoor recreation with rod, gun, quad, binoculars, canoes, or cameras.

Sometimes it is hard to get motivated to do what is good for us, like getting a good dose of outdoors, yet, the ACA board and staff continue pushing public use and involvement. ACA contributes to land use policies; carbon capture, wetland conservation, species diversity, and sustainable human use. Certainly, there are tradeoffs and as a society, we sometimes have to make hard decisions to plow grasslands, harvest trees, and build houses. We get that. However, there are also opportunities to protect precious pristine areas, return altered lands to healthier near-natural conditions, reclaim wetlands, and produce wildlife for human enjoyment. We make these decisions with careful consideration of repeatable, bias-controlled and well-researched information, not on subjective hunches. ACA supports scientific research through three major grants; with an endowed chair in wildlife conservation; and highly trained ACA staff. The extremely experienced and informed board members further strengthen ACA's strategic plan and major funding decisions. The board discussion and debate before spending scarce conservation dollars is taken very seriously and the range of perspectives yields a healthy system of checks and balances. The board makes their decisions based on giving Albertans the best bang for their buck (as well as the best bucks for their bang!). We guarantee the board to be free of impulsive decisions, careless spending, or reckless stewardship based on semi-facts. The lands and programs overseen by ACA are in excellent hands for the public to enjoy… so get out there and enjoy them!

photo: ACA, Colin Eyo

Hooked

Kids Can Catch introduces the whole family to fishing and kids and adults alike are invited to come out and drop a line at events across Alberta. None of these events would be possible without the program sponsor, Dow Chemical Canada, and all of the project partners.

This year, hooking kids on fishing has caught national recognition with a Recreational Fisheries Award from Fisheries and Oceans Canada. The award recognizes the Kids Can Catch program for the opportunities it gives families to experience fishing.

"Hats off to conservation organizations like Alberta Fish & Game Association, Trout Unlimited, Edmonton Trout Fishing Club, and Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association, and to the many community groups and corporate sponsors. Thanks to these committed organizers and fishing mentors, thousands of kids and their families have been able to get out fishing at Kids Can Catch." Todd Zimmerling, President and CEO of Alberta Conservation Association.

Program Sponsor: Dow Chemical Canada

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