A publication of Alberta Conservation Association

Spring/Summer 2024

Conservation

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Turkey Teamwork

Landholders Play a Key Role in Translocation

Big Trout

Lurking in ACA's Stocked Waters

Alberta's Mule Deer Puzzle

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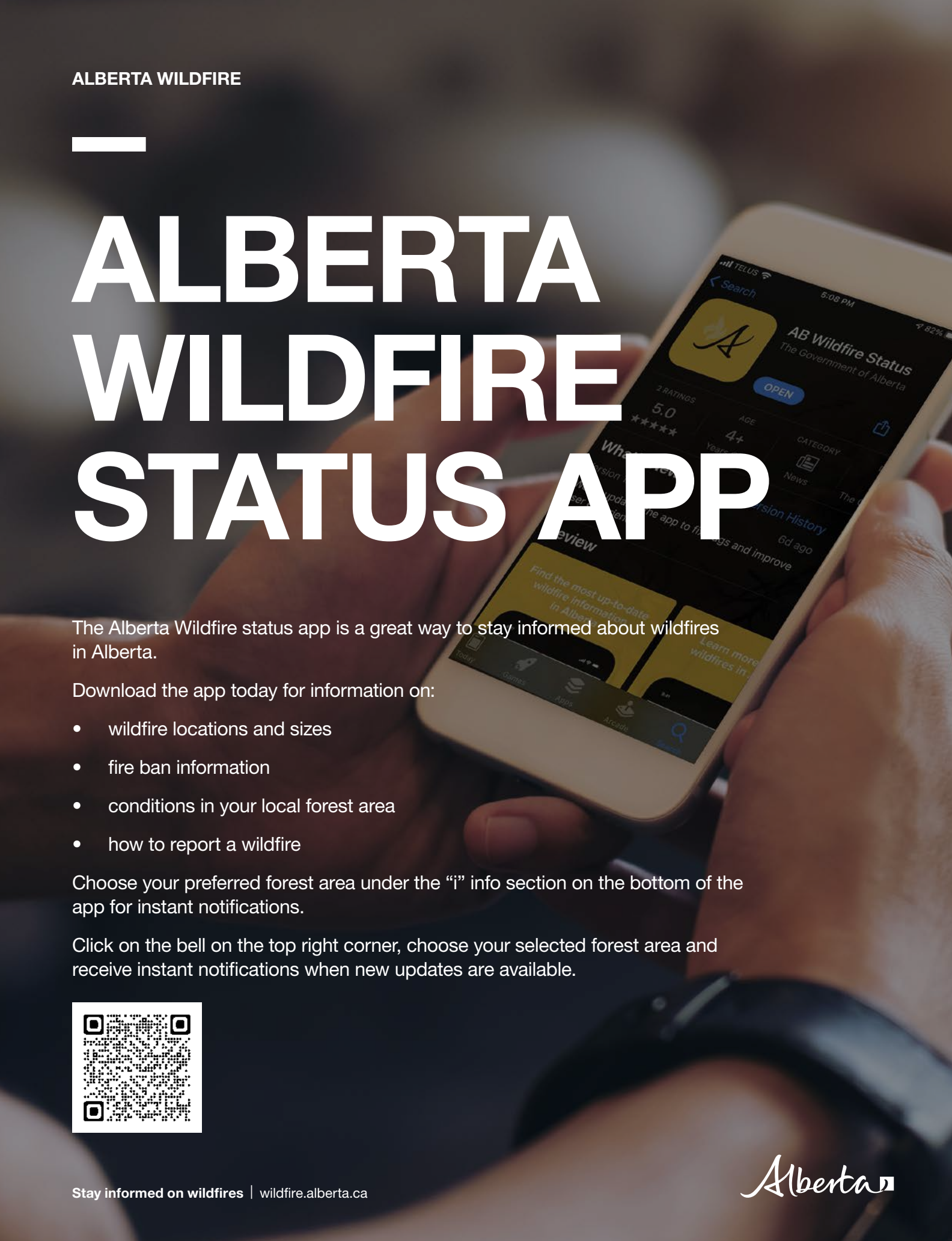

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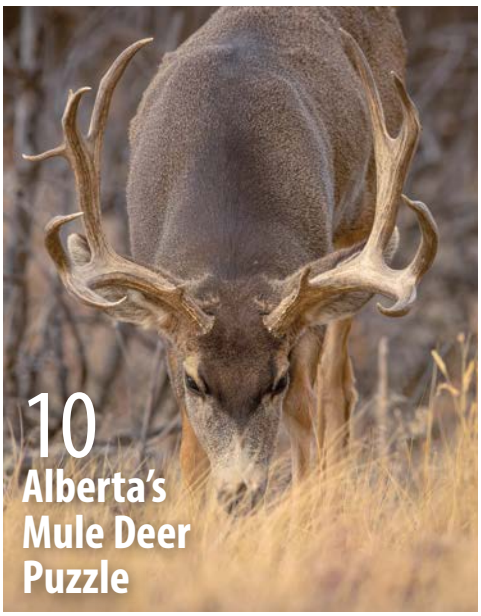

content

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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.

ACA staff translocating turkeys as part of ACA's Range Expansion of the Wild Turkey Project
photo: ACA, Colin Eyo

photo: ACA, Charmaine Brunes

From the President

Spring has sprung, so it is time for my yearly ritual of dusting off the snow goose decoys and getting the boat motor tuned up in anticipation of fishing to come. Spring is always a great time of year for outdoor enthusiasts. The geese are flying overhead in huge flocks, the turkeys are gobbling up a storm, and as the ice comes off, the fish start to feed in the shallows. What's not to like! This year of course, we have some concerns over how dry things have been. Most of the province is already under some kind of fire restriction, but let's hope we don't have a repeat of last year.

If you are like me, you are already making plans for where you'll be fishing on the May long-weekend. If you are looking for ideas, check out the articles in this issue of the magazine. In addition to the fishing possibilities, you can read about our efforts to enhance turkey populations in Alberta. As you might expect, landowners are the key! If you are interested in deer hunting, or just cool technology, then you may want to check out the article on the Wildlife Analytics Lab at Lethbridge College, or the work being done by the mule deer management advisory committee. There is a lot going on right now in Alberta and hopefully you will find that this issue of Conservation gives you a little taste of what you may want to get more involved with. Just make sure you leave yourself time to get out and enjoy the great opportunities we are lucky to have in this province.

Have a great summer.

Sincerely,

Todd Zimmerling, M.Sc., PhD, P.Biol.
President and CEO
Alberta Conservation Association

Conservation Magazine

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Photo Credits: Alberta Forestry and Parks, Alberta Outdoorsmen Magazine, Ken Bailey, Remington Bracher, Charmaine Brunes, Rhonda Eidick, Lance Engley, Colin Eyo, Brad Fenson, Marco Fontana, Jeff Forsyth, Government of Alberta, Todd Green, Cassandra Hewitt, Darren Jacknisky, Dave Jackson, Corey Jarvis, Devon Jerome, Tyler Johns, Mike Jokinen, Nicole Kimmel, Nikita Lebedynski, Lethbridge College, Amanda MacDonald, Neil MacPhearson, Joshua P. Martin, Perry McCormick, Matt Middlemiss, Crystal Morin, Stan Morin, Dan Mosier, Corey Rasmussen, Kelly Riehl, Lisa Roper, Ariana Tourneur, Trout Unlimited Canada, Wildlife Analytics Lab

Conservation Magazine

(ISSN 1488-6235) is the official biannual publication of Alberta Conservation Association.
Charitable Registration Number: 88994 6141 RR0001

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 41260556
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO:
101-9 Chippewa Road
Sherwood Park, Alberta T8A 6J7

Practice Makes **Burbot**

Underwater Popularity Contest

Alberta is home to 18 sport fish species, but anglers typically stick to catching the tried and true big four—northern pike, yellow perch, walleye, and rainbow trout. Why are these species so popular? And why are other species less popular?

To better understand, ACA is focussing on learning more about angling and harvesting opportunities for lower profile game species. Burbot and other less popular sport fish are finally getting their time to shine!

Burbot Camp

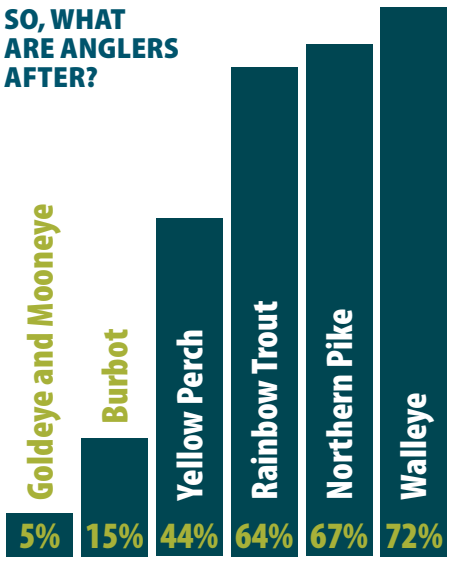
Of the less popular species, there is relatively little known about burbot. Between May and October 2023 we completed the field portion of a capture-mark-recapture for burbot at Musreau Lake; however, the analysis and reporting of it will be completed next fiscal.

photos: (top) Burbot; (bottom) ACA staff with capturing burbot
credit: ACA, Nikita Lebedynski

Alternative Species Angling Survey

Do anglers target goldeye, mooneye, and burbot? We asked nearly 3,000 respondents "why or why not?" in a recent survey. Understanding angler motivations helps us identify and enhance existing opportunities, like providing information on how to catch, clean, and cook less popular species.

SO, WHAT ARE ANGLERS AFTER?



Missed the survey, but keen on future opportunities to share your input? Subscribe to our newsletter!

#WINning

In partnership with Hunting for Tomorrow and the Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association (AHEIA), the Wildlife Identification Number (WIN) Card Reimbursement program is catching the attention of youth across the province. Designed to connect with new hunters upon their first WIN card purchase, this initiative sent out over 1,730 information packages to youth who completed AHEIA's hunter education course in 2022/2023. Remarkably, 332 youth returned the reimbursement form, eager to stay connected with ACA for ongoing hunting, fishing, trapping, and conservation updates.This project not only financially supports young hunters but also fosters lasting connections with ACA and its member groups, setting the stage for lifelong engagement with the conservation community.

credit: ACA

Let's Rock and **ROE**

Recreational Opportunity Enhancement

"This project may not have all the glitter and glamour, but it sure takes a centre stage!" says Jeff Forsyth, ACA senior biologist.

The Recreational Opportunity Enhancement (ROE) was established to enhance opportunities for fishing, hunting, and various non-consumptive activities, like hiking and photography. A big focus is improving access to Crown waterbodies for waterfowl hunters, and private lands for upland game bird and big game hunters.

When it comes to the latter, Forsyth recognizes the amount of time some landowners spend dealing with access requests and trespass issues from the public, "It can be astronomical!"

Covering 217,900 acres of private land across southern Alberta, this initiative majorly alleviates the landowner burden. "By helping them facilitate access, we not only foster hunter and angler recruitment but also sustain quality outdoor experiences by dispersing activities across the landscape," explains Forsyth.

The ROE toolbox is simple but effective—participants receive custom signage, maps, sign-in cards, and acknowledgment through project signs. Moving forward, efforts will concentrate on enhancing waterfowl hunting opportunities in key Edmonton regions and supporting landowners who provide access.

"We're always looking for opportunities to assist landowners who are generous enough to provide access to their lands for hunting, fishing, and other activities," says Forsyth. "Working together is the best way to make Alberta's outdoor opportunities even better."

photos:
(left) ROE signage and sign-in system
credit: ACA
(right) ROE participant property
credit: ACA, Jeff Forsyth

Get **Connected**

Partnerships with Purpose

In the heart of southern Alberta, a deeply collaborative effort is tackling habitat fragmentation head-on. The Connectivity Project brings together a mix of stakeholders—including irrigation districts, conservation groups, and agricultural producers—all sharing the common goals of improving water quality and restoring habitat connectivity.

According to Layne Seward, the project lead, Alberta Conservation Association's (ACA) partners are eager to roll up their sleeves and get to work. "Their enthusiasm and willingness to make changes drives us forward," he says. "Everyone is stepping up and making the future of wildlife habitat a shared responsibility."

It's impressive, considering the individuals ACA works with need to make a living or run a business. "I think we're successful because we realize this and adapt," says Seward. "We make sure enhancements are doable for landowners and fit well into their overall operation."

The project pinpoints unique challenges based on data collection, and then takes them on with adaptive management plans and on-the-ground action. Tactics have included exclusion fencing and habitat planting. ACA already works with several irrigation districts in southern Alberta, and Seward hopes the project will continue to expand and bring other irrigation districts on board. More partners would mean a larger area to make a difference on.

"One of the coolest parts of this project are the enduring partnerships between ACA and various organizations," says Seward. "Counties, fish and game associations, landowners…people are seeing the value in what we're doing and are eager to be a part of it."

photos: (left) Cattle grazing on partner site; (below) Riparian assessment on partner site
credit: ACA

Alberta's Mule Deer Puzzle

He is North America's deer of scenic mountains and foothills, of forsaken, rugged badlands, of windswept, delicate prairies and harsh, desolate brushlands.

– Valerius Geist (1990)

► *by Ken Bailey*

Mule deer have been an iconic resident of Alberta's landscapes since long before the first human inhabitants set foot here. Although mule deer were common, early Indigenous people were not particularly interested in them—preferring the bison, elk and moose that provided more and better meat and hides.

The first white man to see a mule deer in our province was likely Anthony Henday, when he explored the Battle River in 1754-55. David Thompson, meanwhile, relied heavily on mule deer during his infamous crossing of the Rocky Mountains in the early 1800s. As Alberta became more settled, mule deer became an important source of food and clothing, especially after the massive decline of bison and elk in the late 1800s. Nearly 150 years later, mule deer are in demand at a level not seen previously, and that's causing concern among wildlife managers and hunters alike.

Population Fluctuations

Populations of mule deer experience broad fluctuations, largely in response to periods of high harvest, habitat alteration, harsh winters, and drought. Currently, the population is estimated at 190,000 animals, a relatively high number when you consider that in the late 1960s and 70s the population was estimated to be as low as 60,000. They are one of Alberta's most sought after species by recreational hunters. In 2022, 95,784 hunters applied for the 11,756 available antlered mule deer special licences, and 42,280 applied for the 21,545 antlerless tags. This demand is responsible for the long draw wait times in some Wildlife Management Units (WMUs).

Despite the currently favourable population estimate, there are concerns in the hunting community that populations are in decline and that large, mature bucks are becoming increasingly scarce. Supporting that concern, it's acknowledged that—given the infrequency of aerial surveys on a broad scale—there's a large degree of uncertainty around the population estimate.

Mule Deer Management Plan Advisory Committee

With some variations, mule deer have been managed under the direction of Alberta's 1989 Mule Deer Management Plan. In response to the clear need for the plan to be updated, Forestry and Parks Minister Todd Loewen convened a Mule Deer Management Plan Advisory Committee of appropriate stakeholders. Their task is to provide recommendations for consideration in updating the provincial plan, including recommended management objectives and supporting management strategies.

The challenge for the committee is that finding consensus is proving to be tougher than anticipated. As Kim Morton, Manager, Game and Trapping, Hunting and Fishing Branch advised, "We're facing several major issues that will impact how the Province ultimately elects to manage mule deer." These include:

- High demand for antlered hunting opportunities, resulting in long wait times in some WMUs, and related concerns about the allocation of those opportunities between recreational licences, landowner licences, and outfitted hunting allocations.
- Conflict with agricultural producers by way of crop and hay depredation.
- Potential impact of disease (e.g, chronic wasting disease [CWD]).

At its core, the management plan should reflect the public's desire to the greatest extent practical. To that end, in late 2023 Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) conducted a survey to collect public opinion on several key issues, with the intention that these could help inform the committee. Interestingly, of the 9,488 survey respondents, 13 percent had never harvested a mule deer, and 38 percent had taken one or none.

When asked about their level of satisfaction with antlered mule deer draw wait times, splitting the neutral responses evenly, 54 percent said they were somewhat or very satisfied, and 46 percent said they were somewhat or very dissatisfied. For all practical purposes, that's a saw-off.

As to their level of satisfaction with current harvest success rates, again splitting the neutral responses evenly, 70 percent indicated they were somewhat or very satisfied, while 30 percent replied that they were somewhat or very dissatisfied.

Respondents were asked about their willingness to wait longer to draw a tag if it would result in a 10 percent increase in harvest success on a mature buck. It was split pretty evenly between those willing to wait an extra year and those unwilling. Not surprisingly, further increasing the wait time saw increasing unwillingness.

Lastly, when asked about the most important factor in determining their overall satisfaction with Alberta's mule deer hunt, the number one response was, "Having an opportunity to harvest a mature buck."

In making their recommendations, the advisory committee must address a critical and overarching question, "Should we manage mule deer to maximize hunter opportunity, at the likely expense of numbers of large-antlered mature bucks, or should we manage for a more even distribution of all age classes, likely at the expense of numbers of tags available?"

The biological science is current and available to the committee members. Their dilemma, as is so often the case, rests on the social side of the equation—and ACA's survey didn't reveal a decided opinion on most issues.

"Managing wildlife strictly based on biology is easy," said Todd Zimmerling, President and CEO of ACA. "It's managing wildlife based on people, concerns, desires and perceptions that is always the hard part. Mule deer is no exception. It's going to take some hard work and compromise on all sides for us to get to a final product to show the general public, but I believe we will get there."

photos (this page): Credit Perry McCormick (bottom right); Ken Bailey (background)

You can't envy the job the advisory committee has in trying to balance the complimentary and competing interests of our hunting community. Beyond the difficulty of settling the increased hunting opportunities versus having more mature bucks on the landscape question, they must also consider concerns of growing hunter demand as our population increases, diminished access to private lands, the threat posed by CWD, crop depredation, the impact of periodic weather events, diminishing habitat, growing populations of predators, landowner harvest, outfitter harvest, Indigenous harvest rights, and insufficient population data.

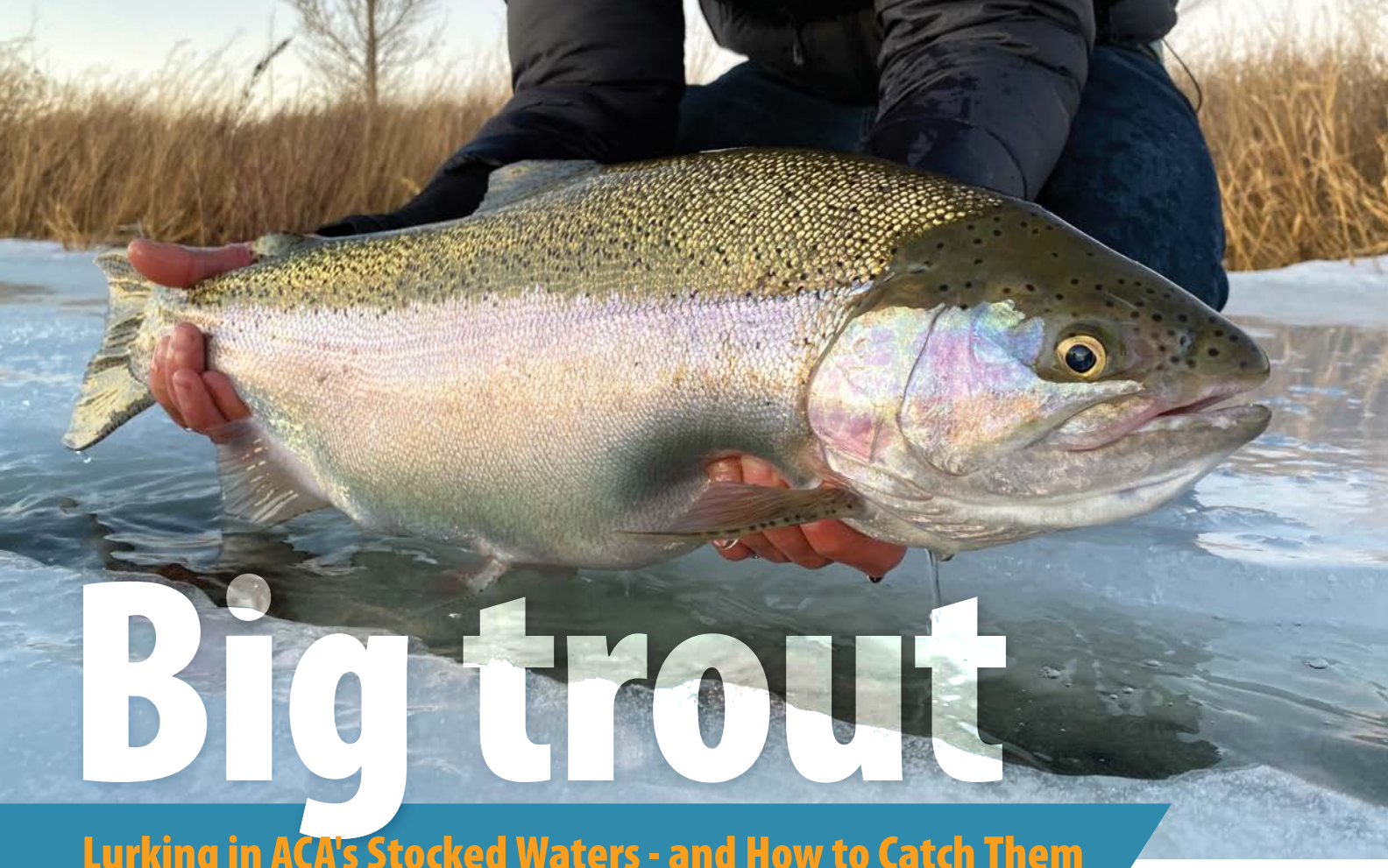
The issues are staggeringly complex, and undoubtedly they'll consider alternative management tools. Increased application fees, regulated wait times between successful draws, shorter season lengths, split seasons, and the potential for some WMUs to be managed for quality and others for quantity, are all potential management strategies.

Despite the challenges, committee members remain dedicated to the task at hand. Alberta Professional Outfitters Society (APOS) President and advisory committee member, Corey Jarvis, sums it up by saying, "I remain optimistic that we'll end up in a good place, that we'll have a mule deer management plan that will satisfy all stakeholders."

Once the draft is completed, the public will have the opportunity to review the updated management plan before it's formally endorsed and implemented.

The Results are In

Check out the Antlered Mule Deer Hunter Survey results online: www.ab-conservation.com/mule-deer-survey



Big trout

Lurking in ACA's Stocked Waters - and How to Catch Them

by Kelly Riehl

Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) conservation sites offer some amazing angling opportunities for every age and skill level, and help to spread out the angling efforts across the province and relieve some of the pressure on native sport fish populations.

These sites are stocked regularly to ensure quality angling and harvest opportunities are available. Stocked species typically include tiger trout, brown trout, and rainbow trout (not to be confused with the native Athabasca rainbow trout, which have a zero-possession limit).

photos: (top) A big rainbow trout caught and released in an ACA-stocked lake in 2022. A responsibly-made and marked livewell can help reduce stress of fish intended for release when ice fishing. credit: ACA, Kelly Riehl; (bottom) This monster rainbow trout fooled by a leech pattern before being safely released back into an ACA-stocked pond. credit: Devon Jerome

While many avid anglers wouldn't consider it possible to catch a 25-30+ inch trout in a stocked pond or lake, several ACA sites across the province produce them regularly. There have been multiple instances in southern Alberta where the largest rainbow trout (some exceeding 30 inches) registered with the Alberta Fish & Game Association (AFGA) for that year were caught in ACA-stocked waters. While some sites seem to have some big fish all the time, landing a big trout in others appears to be occasional or cyclical.

Big fish are out there

The possibility of getting lucky with a huge trout exists, but who needs luck when you set out to specifically target them. Half of the battle, arguably the hardest half, is knowing and/or believing that a true giant could be lurking in the waterbody you are fishing. Believe us, these monsters exist.

It's up to you—the angler—to figure out the where, the when, and the how. I'll help answer those questions, narrow the search, and stack the odds in your favour to make opportunity and preparation meet—without giving too much away. Success will require some out-of-the-box thinking, a good level of commitment, and likely some degree of failure. Asking yourself where to start is the best place to start.

Finding the big ones

A few key things to consider in your search:

Find out what big fish eat

Find sites that maintain and promote fast and consistent growth in sport fish, have overwintering potential, and feature productive water that generates high-value forage. While scuds and insects promote good growth year-round, having a solid base of forage fish species will often fast track healthy growth. If you're seeing big schools of quality baitfish like shiners, chubs, or fathead minnows, you may be in the right place.

Take chances and explore the lesser-known

Targeting big fish can be tricky, even more so at waterbodies with good access that are frequently visited by anglers. Remember, there are several stocked lakes and ponds that may be dismissed by anglers due to their low profile or small size. Investigating these overlooked fishing spots is a good way to stumble onto something special. Ask around and do some digging.

Look around

When scoping out a new lake, pay attention to what's around you. Watching for big fish rising may seem obvious, but nothing confirms their presence like seeing them with your own eyes. Check the shallows and near shore to see if you can spot big fish in the act of hunting. Using sonar and cameras are an effective way to identify the presence of the big trout—especially in deeper water or during winter months.

photo: A quality rainbow trout caught at an ACA-stocked lake in 2022.
credit: ACA, Kelly Riehl

photo: McVinnie Pond is a conservation site known for producing large trout over the years, like this massive 30.5-inch rainbow trout harvested in 2013.
credit: *Alberta Outdoorsmen Magazine*, with permission

Catching the big ones

Once big fish presence is confirmed or suspected, you are on to the second half of the battle—preparation, persistence, and trial and error.

Equipment considerations

These fish have survived to impressive sizes by avoiding capture, so assume that they will not be easily fooled. Pay extra attention to the small details and think well outside of the box. Fooling giants requires stealth, and landing them requires strength and finesse. You'll need to find the right balance of line, leader, and hardware. Going too heavy risks spooking fish, while going too light invites equipment failure. An 8-12 pound fluorocarbon leader is a decent place to start.

Be sneaky

Remaining undetected works to your advantage when trying to fool large, experienced trout. Their lateral lines can pick up movement in water, alerting them to splashy casting, paddling, or wading. Fish with strong survival instincts, and the experience to grow large in stocked lakes, will sense danger and likely avoid your presentation—so don't let them know you are there.

What to use and where to put it

Use what you see to "match the hatch." Find out what nutritious and available food sources would pack on the pounds and then try to realistically imitate those (baitfish, leeches, scuds, and dry flies). Change up the size of your lures, baits, or flies and adjust your retrieval speed. Ask yourself, if a giant fish was cruising in search of food, where would it look and how might it move around? Are there any weed corridors, structures, boulder gardens, or humps? Are there any places where baitfish tend to congregate?

Put in the time and be ready

Targeting a class of fish in a lake where very few large individuals may reside takes time, patience, and luck. One must accept that getting "skunked" may be a frequent outcome. Keep at it, and do not take failure personally. Keeping a cool head and maintaining focus is about the best one can do, because when the strike finally arrives and the drag starts peeling there will be no shortage of adrenaline and excitement!

Think twice before *'passing'* on a Public Lands Camping Pass

► *by Alberta Forestry and Parks*

Horse packers in Willmore Wilderness Park
credit: Alberta Forestry and Parks

More individuals and families are discovering the joy and challenges of camping. Frontcountry and backcountry campgrounds in provincial and national parks are well-maintained and offer plenty of amenities like washrooms, garbage bins, and bear-proof storage lockers. But there is something alluring about the rustic experiences and random camping opportunities on Alberta's public lands.

It's hard not to feel like you're missing out when your friends tell you about their secluded camping spot off the Forestry Trunk Road, or when you see people sleeping under the stars on public land in their roof-top tent.

In 2020, Albertans flocked to these public lands seeking secluded camping spots away from crowded public spaces. Increased pressure and use of public land created a need for more frequent repairs, as well as upgrades to trails and popular camping spots throughout the province.

The Public Lands Camping Pass was introduced in 2021 to respond to outdoor enthusiasts asking for increased education and enforcement in an effort to encourage sustainable use of public land. The goal was also to make sure public lands and recreation experiences remain accessible to all Albertans, and enjoyable by users at little to no cost. A pass is required for campers, backpackers, horsepackers, and other users 18 years and older who are planning to spend the night on public land within the pass area.

A Public Lands Camping Pass is not required to:

- **use public land during the day for recreational activities**
- **camp on public land outside of the camping pass area, or in an established campground where camping fees are already charged**
- **access public land for authorized work or volunteer duties**

The Public Lands Camping Pass has been in effect for over two years and has generated nearly $3.6 million.

The cost is $20 per person for a three-day pass, or $30 per person for an annual pass, with some exemptions.

Revenue from 2023 pass sales directly supported recreation on public land through:

- **Upgrades to public land trails and recreation infrastructure:**
  - Hiring four full-time and four seasonal field operations staff
  - Assessment of 840 km of existing trails and infrastructure, including 340 km of trails in the Highwood area of Kananaskis
  - Maintenance and repairs to over 65 km of trails, 18 bridges, two fences, an information kiosk, a washroom, and a gate
  - Construction of 160 metres of new trail and the installation of one bridge, three gates, four benches, and a hitching rail fence
  - Contracted services for maintenance and grading of McKinnon Flats Road
- **Improving experiences for public land users:**
  - Replacement of 250 wayfinding, regulatory, and educational signs on public land trails
  - Removal of 11,225 kg of garbage
  - Contracted services for maintenance of 21 washrooms and 36 garbage receptacles
- **Improving access to information and education for public land users:**
  - Hiring one full-time and five seasonal recreation engagement officers to deliver 5,760 hours of education to public land users
  - Printing and distribution of over 120,000 Public Land Use Zone maps
- **Enhancing enforcement efforts and promoting public safety through regular uniformed patrols.**

Learn more and purchase your Public Lands Camping Pass at www.Alberta.ca/CampingPass

Safe and sustainable trail systems and recreation areas on public lands will help Alberta families and visitors continue to enjoy the great outdoors. In the coming years, Albertans can expect to see continued investments and enhancements to recreation opportunities on public land.

Random campers on public land in the Bighorn backcountry
credit: Alberta Forestry and Parks

Alberta Public Land Trails Grant Program

The Alberta government has funding available for recreation organizations through the Alberta Public Land Trails Grant Program. This funding can be used to conduct local trail maintenance, improve user safety, promote healthy lifestyles, and contribute to local tourism.

The program launched in 2022 and in its first year allocated $1.18 million in funding to 15 recreation organizations to monitor, maintain and repair trails and infrastructure, conduct site rehabilitation and reclamation, and promote sustainable recreation through education and outreach.

Learn more about the program at www.alberta.ca/albertas-public-land-trails-grant-program

Backpacker camping on public land in Kananaskis
credit: Alberta Forestry and Parks

Alberta's Native Trout

Bull trout
credit: Trout Unlimited Canada

by Caitlyn Duncanson, Trout Unlimited Canada Conservation Crew Member, on behalf of the Alberta Native Trout Collaborative

When you go fishing in the beautiful streams of Alberta, what do you usually catch? What are you trying to catch? There's a good chance your answer is trout. There are six species of trout that you can catch in the province, however, only some of these are native species.

What's the difference between native trout and non-native trout?

Alberta is home to four native trout species—bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, Athabasca rainbow trout, and lake trout. These fish have evolved over millennia to fit perfectly into the province's stream ecosystems. Non-native trout evolved in environments elsewhere in the world, and were transported to completely new ecosystems by people. When a new species is introduced, the equilibrium of an ecosystem is disrupted, creating issues for native species.

Bull trout (top) and brook trout (bottom)
credit: Trout Unlimited Canada

How did the non-native trout get here?

Settlers brought non-native trout to Alberta to create a more interesting fishing experience. Brook trout are native to Eastern Canada and were brought to Alberta in 1903. Brown trout are originally from Europe, Asia, and parts of northern Africa, but were introduced to Alberta streams by European settlers in 1924. They celebrate their hundredth anniversary in Alberta this year!

Rainbow trout have a more complicated history in Alberta. Athabasca rainbow trout—found only in the Athabasca, Peace, and Liard river basins—are the only native strain of rainbow trout in Alberta. The rainbow trout in all other river basins in Alberta were introduced during trout stocking events in the early 1900s and are considered non-native fish. While they may appear identical, these different strains of rainbow trout have their own unique adaptations to the regions they came from. Similarly, while westslope cutthroat trout are native, non-native subspecies of cutthroat trout from other parts of western North America were also stocked in Alberta.

Purely from a fishing perspective, having angling opportunities for more types of trout may be positive. However, these non-native trout are thriving at the expense of Alberta's native trout populations.

Non-native trout compete with native trout for resources

Alberta's native trout species need cold, clean, complex, and connected streams to thrive. If any one piece of this puzzle is absent, trout populations can struggle. However, non-native trout don't have the same constraints. Native bull trout begin to overheat at water temperatures above 14°C, but non-native brook trout, which often occur in the same areas in Alberta, can tolerate up to 22°C. When water temperatures are too hot for bull trout but tolerable for brook trout, brook trout will quickly outcompete bull trout for food and resources. Over just one hot summer, brook trout can become the dominant trout species in a stream, driving out Alberta's precious provincial fish.

Lake trout (top) and brown trout (bottom)
credit: Trout Unlimited Canada

Non-native trout can hybridize with native trout

When two species are genetically similar, it is possible for them to interbreed. For example, donkeys and horses can interbreed to create mules. Similarly, non-native cutthroat and rainbow trout can interbreed with native westslope cutthroat trout to create hybrid cutthroat trout or "cutbows." Hybridized trout can have lower reproductive abilities than their parents, leading to less trout overall. Additionally, westslope cutthroat trout have special adaptations to cope with Alberta's everchanging landscape. When they interbreed with non-native trout, these adaptations are diluted or lost. This can weaken the ability for the population to persist in the face of disturbances like floods and drought.

Once a population of westslope cutthroat trout is hybridized, it is no longer considered native. Often, the only way to restore native trout to these areas is to eradicate all of the hybridized and non-native trout, and replace them with native trout from a nearby stream or restoration broodstock.

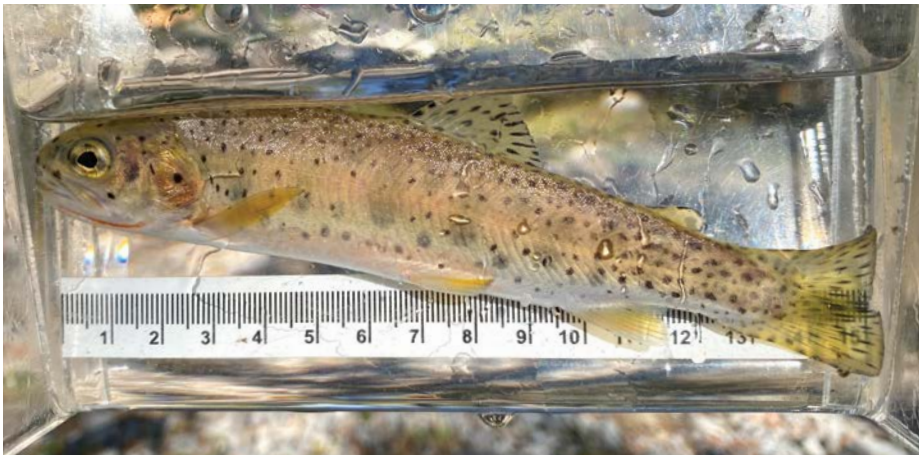
What can you do to help Alberta's native trout?

If you are an angler, it's important to be able to properly identify the fish you catch. Mistaking a native fish like a bull trout or a westslope cutthroat trout for a non-native fish like a brook trout or a rainbow trout cannot only be detrimental to the fish but could also get you into trouble with the law.

Educating yourself on which species are native, and learning how to identify them, reduces the accidental harvest of threatened species like westslope cutthroat trout, Athabasca rainbow trout, and bull trout. Fish identification guides and the Alberta Native Trout Collaborative website can help you to be sure that the fish you are catching are not threatened. The Northern Lights Fly Fishers Chapter of Trout Unlimited Canada has a great fish identification quiz on their website at nlft.org/fishid.

An easy way to remember the bull trout's unique features is, "No black, put it back." This means if you catch a trout that does not have any black spots or markings on its dorsal fin, it could be a threatened bull trout and should go back in the water. Cutthroat trout have a distinct red slash below their cheek, which is the easiest way to distinguish them from rainbow trout. All native fish should be handled with care, and all bull trout must be released back into the waterbody from which they came.

Not everyone is a fish ID expert, and that is OK! Whether you are an expert or still learning, the most important phrase you need to know is, "If you don't know, let it go."



Westslope cutthroat trout
credit: Trout Unlimited Canada

Get involved!

The Alberta Native Trout Collaborative is a group of partner organizations working together to advance native trout recovery in Alberta. Whether you are interested in attending a virtual workshop about native trout, or getting your hands dirty by rehabilitating habitat on the ground, check out albertanativetrout.com to learn more about how you can help ensure that native trout species persist in Albertan streams for generations to come.

Let the Feathers Fly

► *by Cassandra Hewitt*

Here we are wrapping up a successful first hunting season full of learning curves, emotions, and accomplishments. Looking back on the previous articles, I had finished my hunter education course, held my first gun in years, shot clays for the first time, and sparked my interest in hunting.

photo credit: ACA, Cassandra Hewitt

Group photo after the mentored Delta Waterfowl - Parkland Pintail's Chapter hunt.
photo credit: Neil MacPhearson

APRIL

Back in April 2023, I completed my Possession and Acquisition Licence (PAL) through the Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association (AHEIA). I felt it was important to be comfortable with the various actions and types of guns I could be exposed to. Len and his team made the course enjoyable, entertaining, educational, and fun—all the while maintaining and stressing the importance of safe firearms handling. This helped me deal with any fears, stresses, and anxieties I had.

SEPTEMBER

The great thing about the hunting community is that there are a lot of hunters with a lot of preferences on target species. You're sure to find hunters excited about sharing their passion for the species you're interested in.

My good friend, Daryl Oliver, who volunteers with the Parkland Pintail Chapter of Delta Waterfowl, was mentoring at the Chapter's free Waterfowl 101 course. I signed up and was ready to learn from those with a passion for feathers. Prior to the event, I completed the online learning course on the basics of waterfowl hunting, and got some background on Delta Waterfowl and what to expect.

In order to participate, we were required to buy our licences. Other than getting a fishing licence, I was at a loss of what to do to obtain the federal licence. Luckily, Daryl answered all my questions, and with his help I got through the process with ease.

The Waterfowl 101 day was set up amazingly well and done in a way that ensured new hunters were exposed to everything. We arrived at a member's farm where different stations were set up, had a chat about the chapter, Delta Waterfowl, and what to expect from the day. Later we split into groups with a mentor guiding us from station to station.

The stations went over a variety of skills and topics to assist with a successful waterfowl hunt:

- Discussions on waterfowl hunting, equipment, water hunting, field hunting, and ethics
- Blind and decoy placement
- Range estimation demonstrations
- Dog handling demonstration
- Hen house construction demonstration
- Bird processing
- Waterfowl cooking demonstration
- Firearm handling and safety
- Clay target shooting

Through raw emotion and insightful tips, Cassandra takes us along on her hunting journey in this limited series.

Afterwards, we were given the option to participate in a mentored hunt that day or return another day to hunt. I opted to go that night and we set out to a pre-scouted spot and got into the blind to start hunting. Unfortunately, I was unable to harvest. I didn't get a good shot in, but my mentors managed to get four geese and four ducks between them.

Now let's talk emotions. I've seen wildlife die before, whether it's roadkill or something my cat literally dragged in. It's sad, and it will always be somewhat sad. What I didn't expect was the wave of emotions seeing a mallard hen at my feet looking at me in her final moments. That was hard and I won't lie, I cried a little. And that's okay, it's normal. Will it stop me from hunting? No. In fact, it deepened the compassion and respect I have for these animals and the role they play in nature and the food chain.

Following this hunt, I was invited to experience waterfowl hunting through the mentorship of Todd and Linda Zimmerling. I went out one evening with them, and Todd taught me the decoy setup, and Linda went over setting up the blind. As I sat beside Linda, I was optimistic and had expectations to get my first harvest. Once again, that wasn't the case. But that's a part of hunting—some days you harvest, some days you don't—but any day outside is a good day.

The following day at the Zimmerling home, Todd went over processing and Linda supplied us with various goose snacks, including braised goose legs and cutlets. It was another great experience to be sure.

Since I was unsuccessful on my hunt, Todd asked if I wanted to accompany him and his family the following Saturday to try again. I sat next to Linda again, who took the time to give me pointers and set me up to successfully hit at least three geese. By then, my emotions were more pride than sadness. I was proud of doing what I had set out to do, hunt and harvest—and with everyone cheering me on, it was hard not to be happy about what I accomplished. I am forever grateful to Todd, Linda, and their family for allowing me to join them that day.

OCTOBER

I had the opportunity to participate in another waterfowl hunt, this time through the Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society (ACTWS), coordinated by my friend Remington Bracher. Among other things, the ACTWS, through Remington's leadership, aims to get students from behind their desks to out in the field learning to hunt and fish. I joined a group of students on a mentored hunt with Remington and Jason Silliker, who owns Canadian Premier Hunts and is an outfitter with the Alberta Professional Outfitters Society (APOS). They took five students from various hunting backgrounds, some who've never hunted before, and taught us a different kind of waterfowl hunting using layout (coffin) blinds.

Prior to this, I had been in A-frames which are reasonably easy to stand up in for a shot. In a layout blind, you're on your back with the blind shut on top of you (with mesh so you can see), and when it's called to "take the birds," you spring up into a sitting position and take your shot. This took a bit of getting used to—sitting up, getting my safety off, and taking a shot.

I was successful in taking one Canada goose. After the decoy spread and blinds were packed away, and spent shells collected, we all drove to Jason's house to clean the geese. In total, eight geese were harvested. Remington and Jason showed the group how to clean the birds, and everyone went to work. I even helped guide some of the students in processing their birds.

Success at The ACTWS mentored hunt.
photo credit: Remington Bracher

SEASON ONE IS IN THE BOOKS

From questioning whether or not to learn to hunt, coming out from behind my camera, and conquering my fears around firearms, I can confidently say that I am a hunter! I successfully harvested this season, I'm more confident in my skills and knowledge, and look forward to future hunts. It could be upland game birds or big game. What I do know is, thanks to the encouraging hunting community, I will find mentors no matter what I choose to hunt and will feel welcome in that space.

Between the flocks, snapped a photo of The ACTWS group while we waited for Jason's dog to retrieve the downed geese.
photo credit: ACA, Cassandra Hewitt

site seeing: Discover Reel Relaxation

ACA's Fisheries Access Site Management Project

► *by Marco Fantana*

Looking for a scenic fishing spot to spend the day? Or maybe a quick trip near town to get away for a couple hours? Do you seek solitude and tranquility? Or do you like to bring the kids along for an adventure afield? There are a myriad of ways to get out and enjoy fishing, but it can sometimes be tough to know where to find access to the angling opportunities the province has to offer. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) works hard to alleviate that by managing and maintaining publicly accessible fisheries access sites around the province—23 in fact, and we're working on developing more!

Whether you're looking to hike along the banks of a classic fly-fishing stream or prefer to sit back and relax on a dock, cast your line and let the fish do the rest, ACA has a diversity of sites to cater to your wishes! These include sites on two key streams and 21 stocked ponds and/or aerated lakes and reservoirs throughout the province.

We want your experience to be easy, safe, and fun, so we strive to provide the day-use facilities that get you out to a site and into the type of angling you're looking for—whatever your age, background, or experience level. The more people that enjoy fishing at ACA sites, means more people with a passion for outdoor pursuits and who are dedicated to conserving the resource they love. We find these people keen to protect all the natural habitats they find ourselves appreciating along the way—and for us, it just makes good conservation sense.

Managing access sites is not without its challenges. We want the sites to be used as much as possible, and the more popular a site is the more work it is to keep clean and the amenities functioning. It's often said, "it takes a village." For us, that village is made up of our active conservation partners that help fund maintenance and repairs to infrastructure, and who contribute valuable volunteer time to work on site improvements.

Individuals and corporate groups also play an important role by participating as site stewards who help with ACA's management efforts. Whether it's an unfortunate act of vandalism or when mother nature wreaks havoc on a sign, a dock, or an outhouse, they're on site fixing things up to keep you fishing.

Since we've been around, ACA has dedicated considerable effort and funds to maintain access roads and parking lots, clean outhouses, empty garbage cans, and repair damaged signs and other day-use facilities at fisheries access sites. Recently, our focus has grown to include enhancing sites with new infrastructure to improve your fishing experience.

By securing external grant funding and through the generosity of our partners, we have recently installed floating docks, casting platforms, and other site amenities at a number of sites Even more exciting, we're actively pursuing new sites to develop access to. By working with the provincial government, local counties, and interested stakeholder groups, several priority waterbodies have been identified and are being assessed for their capacity to support new fisheries. With any luck, the right partners, and a lot of dedication, you'll soon be able to wet a line at what could be your new favourite site.

Waldron Falls
credit: ACA, Tyler Johns

Lee Lake
credit: ACA, Tyler Johns

Boulder Lake
credit: ACA, Marco Fontana

"The more people that enjoy fishing at ACA sites, means more people with a passion for outdoor pursuits and who are dedicated to conserving the resource they love."

Boulder Lake
credit: ACA, Marco Fontana

Waldron Falls
credit: ACA, Mike Jokinen

What are you waiting for?

Discover Guide

Check out the *Alberta Discover Guide* and find the fisheries access site you want to visit next!

Dollar Lakes
credit: ACA, Dave Jackson

Coulson
credit: ACA, Marco Fontana

Here are a few sites you may want to explore

Throughout the province, you'll find some terrific fisheries access sites to explore. If you're in Peace Country, **Dollar Lakes - Lake Aeration (C2-1)** is worth your attention. It was recently expanded to include access to the second lake, and the site at this 50-acre stocked and aerated trout fishery has all the amenities you could ask for—including a spacious parking area right off Highway 49, outhouses, garbage facilities, and a gravelled walking trail to a few floating docks.

If you're more central, you should add our newest site, **Boulder Lake - ACA Fish Stocking (E3-174)**, to your list of sites to visit. Just minutes from Red Deer, this access site has seen some major developments in the past couple of years. Along with a floating dock and several shoreline casting platforms to help get you closer to that fishy water, we've added a new access road and parking area, as well as an outhouse to make everyone's time spent here as comfortable as possible. With plans to further develop the day-use area to include a wheelchair-friendly path from the parking lot to the shore, this site really is a family destination worth stopping at. And, when you get tired chasing those stocked rainbows and tiger trout, there's more than 50 acres of natural forest surrounding to explore.

If you're after a quiet spot, the **Coulson (E3-168)** fisheries access site offers all the same day-use facilities and access the North Raven River—home to some truly epic wild brown trout.

If it's cutthroat trout you're after, head down Highway 22, just north of Lundbreck and you'll find **Waldron Falls (F3-38)**. This slightly more rustic site provides access to the spectacular Oldman River, where you can easily spend the entire day fishing from pool to pool in one of the most scenic parts of the province.

While in the same area, if you're looking for a site where you can launch that car topper, **Lee Lake (F3-21)** has a gravelled boat launch—making it a destination for dragging a fishing lure or fly while you're paddleboarding or kayaking.

Lee Lake
credit: ACA, Mike Jokinen

Darbee mentoring at Kids Can Catch Fort Saskatchewan event
credit: ACA, Charmaine Brunes

Paying it forward

Kids helping other kids experience the joy of fishing

Meet Darbee

My name is Darbee Morin, I am 15 years old and live on an acreage just outside Fort Saskatchewan. I currently attend Sturgeon Composite High, and spend most of my time preoccupied with sports and hanging out with friends. I enjoy both hunting and fishing. When I hunt it's usually up north in the Athabasca/Slave Lake area. I find myself most at home during summer fishing season. I love the fact that I can get a tan out on the lake while doing something I enjoy.

Darbee fishing at 13 years old
credit: Stan Morin

Kids Can Catch – Fort Saskatchewan

► *by Darbee Morin*

From day one, fishing has always been a part of my life. The second I could get my little hands on a fishing rod, I was out on the boat with my dad, eager to catch something. I can still remember the day I caught my first whitefish. We were at Floating Stone Lake, I was around five or six at the time, and out of nowhere I reeled in a fish I had never seen before! As you can probably imagine, I was pretty confused—even when my dad told me it was a whitefish—as my knowledge of fishing at that time didn't go much beyond perch, pike, and walleye.

Darbee at 3 years old
credit: Crystal Morin

As all anglers know, some days on the water come with really good luck, whereas other days you may not get anything—not even a nibble. Regardless of what was caught, the most important part of fishing for me is the quality time I get to spend with my dad. I've learned many useful skills, such as baiting a hook, identifying types of fish, learning to cast, to cleaning and cooking fish properly.

The environment of fishing—being on the water in the summer or on the ice during winter—is all about the experiences and memories that will last me and the people around me a lifetime. I can definitely say I have lost many items to the water, from sunglasses, hats, fishing rods, tackle, and so much more. As much as it sucked to lose these items, I now look back on these memories and laugh.

For the past two years, I've been volunteering at the Kids Can Catch event in Fort Saskatchewan. My role has been to walk around and offer help to any children/families that need assistance. It's a pretty fun experience, and I really enjoyed meeting everyone, and engaging with people and families at the event.

As a kid, I always participated in the Kids Can Catch events, so going from being a mentee to being a mentor was one of the important things that stood out to me the most. I would definitely say that the Fort Saskatchewan Fish and Game Association deserves tons of credit when it comes to my love of fishing as they would always host the best events—with prizes and trophies for everyone—which made fishing 1000x more fun for me as a kid.

After everything I've learned about fishing, the most important piece of advice I would give a beginning angler is to have patience, as learning takes time! Like everything in life, more skills come with more practice. Fishing is all about the experiences you have while learning along the way, so take your time and enjoy it!

Kids Can Catch – The Africa Centre

► *by Siara Engley*

I was thrilled when I was invited to mentor at the Kids Can Catch event for the Africa Centre on July 8, 2023. My dad works at Alberta Conservation Association (ACA), and he's been taking me fishing since I was a little kid—so you could say I grew up fishing. More importantly, I remember how amazing it was to catch my first fish, and I was excited to share that experience.

My dad and I left at the crack of dawn for the drive to Wabamun Lake. I love fishing so I didn't mind getting up so early. We helped set up the event for the 135 participants, climbed into the boats ACA rented, and had a quick safety meeting. Each boat had at least one mentor and a captain. Garret (another ACA employee) and I were the mentors on my boat, and my dad was the captain.

Our boat was the first to leave. We had three kids, all new anglers, and their father aboard. They couldn't wait to start fishing and asked lots of questions. Stopping near the shore, the boat barely moved in the still water. I kept busy baiting hooks with dead minnows, threading the hook through their bodies, just like I had been taught. Even though I'd done this many times before, I still felt a pang of guilt for the poor fish.

Garret picked up a fishing rod and demonstrated what to do while my dad delivered the instructions, "Hold the rod over the side of the boat. When you push the button the line will release into the water." And with a push of the button the line did exactly that.

"When the line starts to curl, it's sitting on the bottom. Now reel in the line a couple of times," my dad continued. "When you feel something tugging on the line, there's a fish on your hook. Reel it in, and either Garret, Siara, or I will take the hook out."

We handed out fishing rods and the kids dropped their hooks into the water enthusiastically—talking about all the fish they were going to catch, and what they would look like. Almost immediately, the fish started to bite. I loved watching everyone catching their first fish.

When one of the kids caught a fish, I would net it and grab my pliers and gently remove the hook from the walleye's mouth. Walleye are slimy fish, with sharp fins on their backs. The texture and fins made them difficult to handle. Sometimes we had three walleye on the boat at the same time and things got pretty chaotic. We used the bonking stick to put the fish "to sleep" before tagging and storing them in sealed plastic bags in the cooler.

The kids and parents were thrilled to keep their catch, and looked forward to cooking them for dinner. The parents took a lot of pictures!

Kids Can Catch Africa Centre event at Wabamun Lake
credit: ACA, Rhonda Eidick


Siara at Kids Can Catch Africa Centre event
credit: ACA, Lance Engley

Meet Siara

My name is Siara and I am 13 years old. I love to fish because I enjoy being outside in nature and seeing all the different kinds of fish. When I'm not fishing I like to read, fence, and write fiction stories.

Before long it was time to get our next group. It was a beautiful, hot day, so I knew the fish would be staying close to the lakebed in the cooler water. In our next group, almost none of the kids had ever been on a boat before, and were a little scared of the water. We assured them they would be safe wearing a life jacket, and that nothing in the water was going to eat them.

One little girl, around five years old, started crying when she saw a fish getting bonked—which made me recall similar feelings the first time I saw a fish get bonked. "Do you want to drive the boat?" asked my dad in an attempt to comfort her. She nodded and grabbed the steering wheel. The girl was really excited to drive, unaware that my dad was guiding the wheel the entire time and it proved to be just the distraction she needed.

We went out six times throughout the day. All of the kids were enthusiastic about keeping the fish they had caught. I was glad that everyone caught a fish because fishing can be unpredictable. Since we only had 50 tags for the event, we ran out by the time the last boat set out. While the kids were sad, we were able to cheer them up by letting them hold the fish.

The event ended at 4:00 p.m. and after some cleaning up we finally left for home. It was a long day, but worth it to see everyone catching fish. The kids had so much fun and I hope they will always remember their first fish as well as I remember mine. I'm happy I could be a part of this event, and would love to do it again.

Turkey Teamwork

Landholders Play a Key Role in Translocation

► *by Amanda Gill*

It's a crisp afternoon. The light snow has tapered off and the clouds have dissipated to reveal a clear blue sky and the sun reflecting off the snow-covered hills. It couldn't be a better winter day to be outdoors in southern Alberta. It was in this beautiful setting that I had the opportunity to participate in a wild turkey translocation release, an Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) project in its second year.

Merriam's turkeys were introduced in Alberta in 1962, with 21 turkeys translocated from South Dakota to the Cypress Hills area, with some relocated to the Porcupine Hills about ten years later. The population grew, but over the past 10-20 years it has declined.

ACA's Senior Scientist and Wildlife Program Manager, Dr. Doug Manzer, mentions that several factors have likely contributed to the decline. "The number of areas with viable groups of birds have decreased and become isolated from one another as some pockets have winked out, making it difficult for birds to find a mate." Doug adds, "Different from other Galliformes like grouse and pheasants, turkeys do not breed at one year old. It's only when they become two years old that both hens and toms become viable. The age structure of the population within each local area where they occur is vitally important—they have slower growth cycles when compared to other grouse-like birds."

To make matters more challenging, Manzer suggests that hens at this latitude may not begin laying until mid- to late-May. If mature males are harvested in early May before hens in that area are bred, it's likely there won't be many hens bred in the spring. Of the 183 wild turkeys translocated in winter 2024, only eight percent were toms old enough to breed this spring—that's only 15 toms!

ACA is trying to boost the population with pockets of 20-30 birds spread across the region, but "…we're often left with only one or two adult males to mate with all the hens in each area. If any of the males are taken before they breed with hens, then we'll see unbred hens again this spring. We don't have perfect information to say exactly what's happening," says Manzer. "…but the ratio of adult males to females is almost certainly a factor that's leading to low recruitment when aggregated across the region."

Where do you start when trying to detect population trends with a wild species? On a recent episode of ACA's Harvest Your Own podcast, Doug advised that, "Turkeys are fairly difficult to survey with any degree of accuracy." To get a better understanding, ACA has reached out to landholders from Longview to Cardston since 2021, asking them to report sightings of turkeys over the winter period. The region was divided into five zones, and ACA learned that numbers have declined markedly in four of the five zones over the past 20 years.

ACA has also reached out to the public, including those same landholders, to report sightings from July through October to gain a measure of annual recruitment. "The ratio of poults [young turkeys] per hen across the entire region has been below the threshold needed for recovery," says Manzer. "We're seeing pockets of hens that are geographically isolated from breeding aged males, and they're going through spring and summer without breeding."

One province over in B.C., the wild turkey population is considered abundant, with some turkeys wandering and staying in urban areas—roosting in backyard trees, pecking and scratching reflective surfaces on vehicles, and chasing citizens down the street! ACA reached out to B.C. to see if we could translocate wild turkeys to jump start the population in Alberta. They agreed, and in the winters of 2023 and 2024, ACA captured birds in southeastern B.C. where they were living within towns and residential areas.

These "problem" birds were released in southwestern Alberta, where annual translocations are aimed at increasing Alberta's population over the next eight to ten years. This is where the landholders are essential to the success of this project. Landholders need to be willing to have wild birds on their property and provide the means to feed them, especially in the winter. In talking with a landholder about their thoughts, I learned that their family has a history with wild turkeys that stretches back to the 1970s. When approached last year about participating in ACA's project, it was an easy decision. Turkeys were once common on ranches, and landholders are excited to see that again in Alberta.

ACA staff and landholders join in to safely release the turkeys. The birds only take a few seconds to spread their wings and go—and it's a large wingspan at that, up to 57 inches! Their thick plumage shifts with the light—iridescent emerald and bronze, rich chocolatey brown, and a scattering of white, black, and beige. Soon, all the birds are roosting high up in the trees.

Landholders make days like this possible, making a difference in conservation efforts. As Doug concludes, "We've had an overwhelmingly positive response from landholders, who are essential and have a vital role in this project." Working together towards a shared goal is what makes conservation so rewarding and will build up the population in Alberta for future hunting opportunities.

Get Involved

Are you an Alberta landholder interested in hosting translocated turkeys? Reach out to info@ab-conservation.com

Moving In

What can landholders expect with wild turkeys on their land?

- The best option for wild turkeys is to be translocated onto working ranches that feed cattle over winter. Turkeys will often stay in one area if they have access to daily feed.
- Turkeys can be sneaky, sometimes getting into green feed bales for an extra meal. Landholders may need to tarp those to keep the turkeys out.
- Turkeys like to roost in trees, especially large spruce and fir trees. Ideal host locations have mature conifers. Once turkeys find a tree they prefer for roosting, they may continue to use it through many generations year over year.
- Turkeys tend to move during the spring breeding season and could end up on your neighbours' land. Let them know there may be wild turkeys in the area.

photos (clockwise from top left): ACA, Mike Jokinen; ACA, Corey Rasmussen; ACA, Colin Eyo; ACA, Colin Eyo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The Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep was designated the official mammal of Alberta in 1989.

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► *by Brad Fenson*

The auctioneer's voice boomed through the microphone, "What will we get for the Alberta bighorn hunt in 2024? Where should we start the bidding, at $500,000?" You could sense the excitement in the room as the bidding started. When a new bid came in, the bid catchers yelled and raised arms on opposite sides of the banquet hall as adventure seekers tried to buy the permit. When the gavel slammed onto the podium, the unique hunt sold for US$320,000.

Bighorn sheep are recognized as a symbol of the wilderness and mountains. They are an indicator of a healthy ecosystem. The regal-looking bighorn ram is the official mammal of Alberta. North American wild sheep populations plummeted to alarming levels in the 1960s, leading to the formation of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep (FNAWS) in 1977. The non-profit's mission was to manage and restore wild sheep populations across the continent.

The organization started fundraising creatively, including raffles and auctions for special hunts. Many of these unique opportunities are generated by state or provincial governments and politicians, while others are through outfitters. Examples include the Governor's bighorn licence in Montana or a Minister's Special Licence (MSL) to hunt an animal like a bighorn sheep or elk in Alberta—with extended seasons or in areas where the hunt would be under special circumstances.

By the early 1990s, Governor's Special Licences in the U.S. started to sell for unbelievable amounts. The conservation community across sheep country marvelled at the funds raised and appreciated how the money went back to conservation and education. Efforts to restore sheep habitat and rebuild populations showed positive results. In 2008, FNAWS changed its name to Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) to reflect its broader focus on mountain ungulates worldwide.

The Alberta licences have raised more than $9 million for conservation in our province.

ALBERTA MINISTER'S SPECIAL LICENCES

In the early 1990s, Alberta outdoor enthusiasts and conservation-minded individuals and organizations could not help but notice what was happening with wild sheep populations across North America. I remember meeting with two different Alberta ministers responsible for fish and wildlife and discussing the potential to have an Alberta MSL. The café in the basement of the Alberta legislature was a gathering place for several meetings to present ideas to our politicians.

Fast-forward to 1995, and the Alberta Fish & Game Association (AFGA) prepared to announce the first made-in-Alberta MSL at its annual convention. Unfortunately, not everyone saw the value of the conservation and fundraising initiative. Attempting to launch the program led to leaked information and headlines in the Edmonton Journal accusing all involved of commercializing wildlife. The AFGA did not end up running the conservation and fundraising side of the opportunity. However, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) Canada quickly made it a reality.

HISTORY and CONSERVATION

The history lesson around the Alberta MSL is important, as there have been disagreements, fights, and controversies around the licences since day one. The Alberta licences have been auctioned and raffled for nearly three decades and have raised more than $9 million for conservation in our province. The special hunts and seasons have been so successful that new species have been added. The Government of Alberta makes the MSL program possible by donating special licences granted by the Minister of Forestry and Parks, currently the Honourable Todd Loewen.

What makes them SPECIAL

All MSLs are granted with two licences—one to auction in the U.S. and the other to be raffled off or awarded to Alberta residents. The decision was made early to mirror all licences to ensure Albertans always had a chance at the once-in-a-lifetime hunt opportunity.

There are currently MSLs for bighorn sheep, moose, elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and turkey. Over the years, the licences have produced incredible trophies that dominate record books. More importantly, they've generated millions of dollars to support those species, wildlife habitat, and biodiversity.

DELIVERY through the CONSERVATION COMMUNITY

Many Alberta conservation organizations have helped or administered the MSL over the years, including RMEF Canada (now defunct), the Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association (AHEIA), AFGA, WSF Alberta, Alberta Conservation Association (ACA), and the Alberta Professional Outfitters Association (APOS). The organization responsible for the program would work with WSF and attend its banquet to create hype for Alberta opportunities. The group would also administer a raffle in Alberta, governed by Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC; currently Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis agency), which has rules and regulations to follow for granting the raised funds to special projects. In recent years, some of the MSL hunts have been sold at other events—like the Western Hunting and Conservation Expo hosted by Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife and the Mule Deer Foundation—where they can generate the most funds possible.

Funds derived from selling MSLs at auction and through raffles are distributed to conservation and education programs in Alberta through a granting process historically led by a multi-stakeholder committee. Over the years, hundreds of projects have been supported by the MSL.

"A major positive of the MSL is showing how the funds go directly into conserving species and habitat for all Albertans. Maintaining bighorn sheep on the landscape is something all people want to see, and hunters ensure the species will remain in Alberta's mountains," said Todd Zimmerling, President and CEO of ACA. "Pronghorn antelope is another iconic species everyone enjoys seeing while on a trip through the southern reaches of our province. Funds from MSL support things like the Pronghorn Corridor Enhancement Program to ensure unique species have access to their habitats."

PASSION

There have been squabbles over the MSL and the funds raised since the initiative began. Watching the critics of the opportunities has been interesting, with some going from complete adversaries to using the funds and wanting to administer the program themselves. Whenever there have been organizational changes in administration, all others have watched with a guarded eye.

The squabbles have never been good for the MSL in the public eye, casting the program in a negative light in the media. Unfortunately, the benefits of the MSL have never received the same media attention as the obstacles.

There were a few years when the Alberta resident raffle for bighorn sheep saw a single individual purchase all or most of the tickets. It was a great fundraiser for the program, but not an equal opportunity for Alberta resident hunters as originally intended. The headlines read, "Alberta Minister's Special Licence Not So Special." Changes were made to limit sales on any given day, ensuring any Albertan could purchase a ticket. Hunters support the MSL and purchase tickets to fulfill a dream and to fund conservation. When one person purchases all the tickets, that opportunity is no longer available to all hunters.

Why are we discussing the MSL issues and tug-of-war within the hunting and conservation communities? The MSL has been the largest independent fundraiser for conservation in our province. Those watching and involved are passionate about the program and funds, and safeguard it like a child. This passion speaks volumes to the dedication of hunters and the conservation community to ensure the highest standards. Knowing the reasons behind a debate or change is a highlight that most people would not see. If only there was a way to promote the passion and avoid negative press, the general public would better understand just how special the MSL really is.

In 2022, licences were added for pronghorn antelope, moose, and turkey.

Above: Minister Todd Loewen with many of the board members of Alberta Wild Sheep and the winning bidder for the MSL.

credit: Corey Jarvis, APOS President

Left: Dan Mosier with the first Alberta turkey ever harvested on a MSL in 2023.

credit: Dan Mosier

MSL: Special in different ways, by different people, for different organizations

Applications are accepted for MSL funds, and over the years, a multi-organization granting committee was used to review and determine how funds would be disbursed. The auction and raffle proceeds have helped monitor bighorn sheep populations, fund hunter education manuals, research wildlife disease outbreaks, and fund university research, to name a few projects. Millions of dollars have been granted to organizations, programs, communities, educational institutions, and individuals. In most cases, the funds are leveraged to allow the MSL to have an even larger impact.

New approach to FUNDING

APOS has taken over the responsibility of selling the MSL auction licences stateside, having members who know and understand non-resident hunters and those looking for the ultimate adventure. It has proven to be a positive change that generates more funds.

"APOS is honoured to be part of the Minister's Special Licence program, administering it on behalf of our fellow hunting stakeholders and all Albertans. The MSL has an amazing legacy, and we are excited about its potential for the future," said Jeana Schuurman, Managing Director, APOS. "Since the MSL is a relatively predictable source of conservation revenue for the province, the hope is to focus on larger, longer-term projects that benefit wildlife and habitat. The MSL is also an opportunity for us to come together as hunting stakeholders to focus on the areas of agreement and common interest."

The MSL has been the largest independent fundraiser for conservation in our province.

APOS has also worked on changes to MSL grants, directing more funds to specific species that help raise the dollars, to long-term projects, and to tackle special projects and research.

Dr. Mark Boyce, professor of population ecology in the University of Alberta Department of Biological Sciences, has a long list of the types of projects and studies funded by MSL—including bighorn sheep, grizzly bears, elk, waterfowl, cougars, and more. Boyce said of the 15 projects with MSL funding over the past few years, "All of these projects were successful and resulted in many peer-reviewed publications. We have applications for work on bighorn movements relative to M.ovi and a new project on wild boar."

GOA news

Matt Besko, Executive Director, Hunting and Fishing Branch, feels the MSL is a very positive program. Besko says, "Lately, the revenues are higher and higher every year. In the past few years in Alberta, sheep and diversification into other species have given us promise, with non-resident hunters enjoying and embracing hunting in our province."

Besko feels the MSL licences are also good for resident hunters. The raffle sales are higher, with MSL now going through ACA. The biggest news for the MSL program is that sales will be done through AlbertaRELM. Alberta residents will soon be able to purchase MSL opportunities online, like any other hunting or fishing licences. Several benefits include not running funds through AGLC and utilizing an administrative organization, ACA, which is already set up to manage funds and grants. AlbertaRELM has over 400,000 Wildlife Identification Number (WIN) cardholders who will get information on the MSL hunts, generating more exposure to resident hunters and increasing the program's value.

Value ELEMENTS

Besko explained the three key elements to MSL, with the first being funds generated and commitment to conservation projects. In the past, project grants were focused on conservation and habitat. With a new committee established through APOS to grant funds, there will be a much more targeted use of revenues. Watch for multi-year projects, broader in scope, improving habitat or specific wildlife populations. The most important element, conservation funding, remains.

The second element is the opportunity to hunt MSL species with regular seasons. Wait times are increasing for resident hunting draws with unbelievably long terms. Some may take an entire lifetime to partake in a specific hunt. The MSL allows Alberta hunters to partake in the optimized hunts with an MSL draw through AlbertaRELM.

MSL Auction Revenue by Species (2018-2023)

converted to Canadian dollars

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Sheep	$150,000	180,000	165,000	$195,000	$235,000	$375,000
Moose	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	$16,000	$28,500
Turkey	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	$3,200	$3,000
Antelope	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	$6,100	$10,500
Elk	$21,000	$35,000	$19,000	$22,500	$27,000	$85,000
Mule Deer	$27,000	$32,000	$19,000	$35,500	$29,000	$230,000

Jimmy John's mule deer harvested under a Minister's Special Licence in 2023.

credit: Corey Jarvis, APOS President

Hundreds of conservation and education programs projects have been supported by the MSL.

The third element is to profile Alberta at home and around the world. The broad number of habitats—from prairie and parkland to boreal, foothills, and mountains—support species diversity that is globally unique with world-class game animals and genetics. Resident and non-resident hunters can hunt MSL species in Alberta with existing licences for purchase or limited entry draw.

It is important to recognize that GOA revenues are tied to core funding. However, as we heard from Boyce, MSL can augment and go beyond that, including research to understand how wildlife will benefit from projects and how to better regulate harvest.

New ADMINISTRATION and DELIVERY

Todd Zimmerling looks at the big picture of MSL, reminding everyone that the habitat enhancement completed through the unique opportunities to hunt individual species auctioned and raffled positively impact hunters and all Albertans from a species point of view. The special licences and raffles support those species, with few individuals ever getting them. There are guidelines for each MSL species, with funds going back directly to their management and conservation and a percentage going to overall conservation or education.

The FUTURE

The move to streamline the administration of the MSL, run the funds raised through resident draws with AlbertaRELM, and have funds flow back for granting—the same as with hunting and fishing licence levies—is significant. The administrative change would be a huge step to streamline the program with consistent delivery and granting of funds. Everyone involved in the MSL is committed to excellence, and the improvements will have a lasting impact on Alberta wildlife and the diverse habitats that can never be replaced.

How SPECIAL is an MSL?

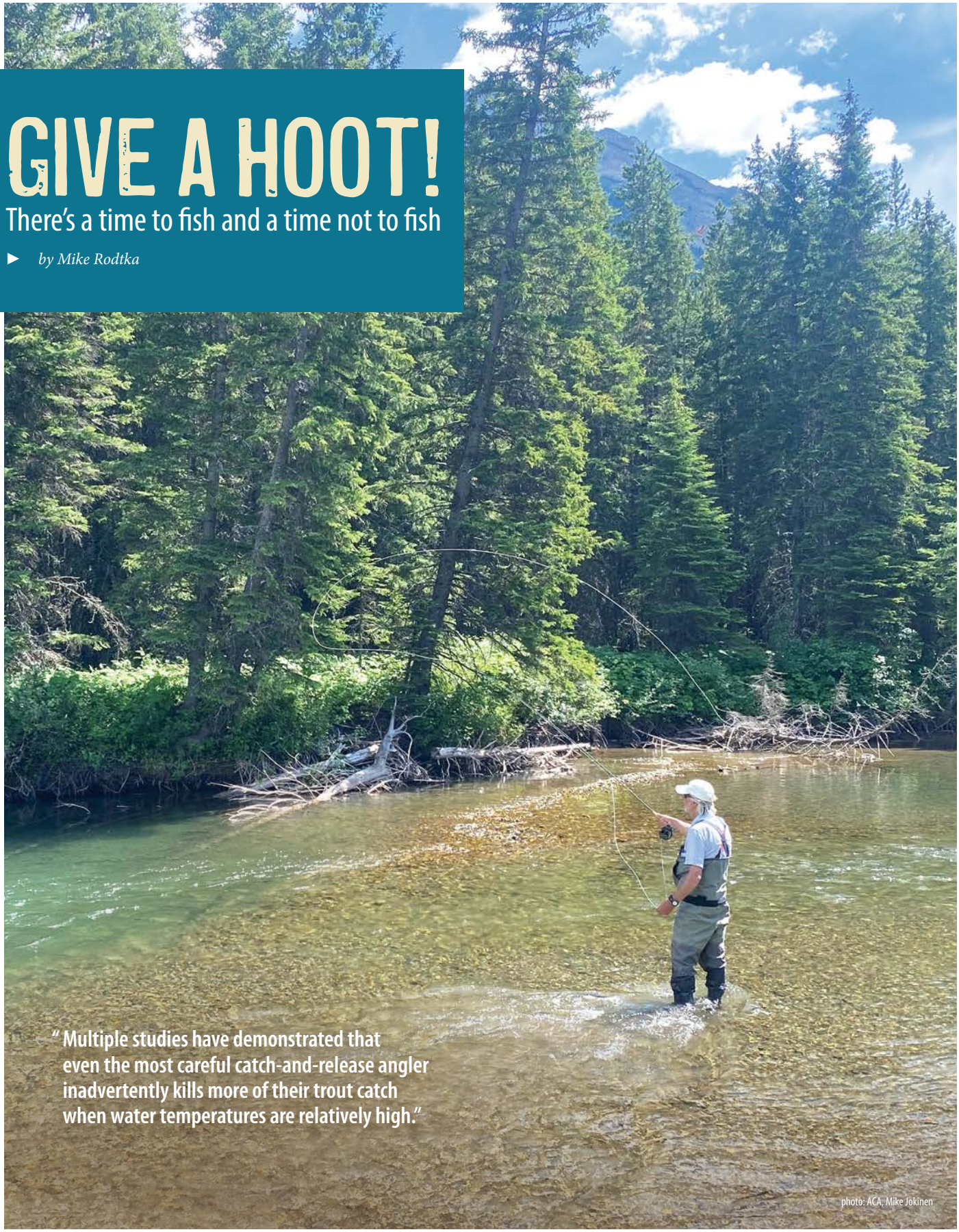
Restauranteur and businessman Jimmy John Liautaud from Illinois put the Alberta mule deer MSL on the map last year when he paid $250,000 for the licence. The Jimmy John's sandwich shop founder harvested a non-typical mule deer with his bow, scoring 273. The hunting community noted the event, which will likely change the bidding and revenue streams forever. Bighorn sheep and elk have always garnered the most attention, but all MSL licences are unique and valuable in their own right.

As Warren Buffet has said, "The price is what you pay, but the value is what you get."

GIVE A HOOT!

There's a time to fish and a time not to fish

► *by Mike Rodtka*



"Multiple studies have demonstrated that even the most careful catch-and-release angler inadvertently kills more of their trout catch when water temperatures are relatively high."

photo: ACA, Mike Jokinen

Readers that grew up in the 1970s may remember a cute cartoon owl named Woodsy from the United States Forest Service. Woodsy could be heard encouraging kids to, "Give a hoot! Don't pollute." This is still great advice, but may need an update for the new millennia. It's time to talk about hoot owl angling restrictions.

Time of Day Angling Restrictions

If you like to fish east slopes rivers and streams in southern Alberta, there's a new angling regulation you should be aware of. Alberta fisheries managers now have rules in place to rapidly implement time of day angling restrictions when stream conditions warrant.

The restrictions are designed to protect trout and other coldwater sport fish that are stressed when rivers and streams are unusually low and warm. If water temperature and stream flow thresholds are met, angling is not permitted from 2:00 p.m. to midnight (14:00 to 24:00) in waters covered by the restriction.

Although new to Albertans, time of day restrictions, often referred to as "hoot owl" restrictions, have been around much longer elsewhere in North America. The intent is to protect already stressed trout from the additional stress of being caught and released by anglers when daily water temperatures are at their warmest.

Multiple studies have demonstrated that even the most careful catch-and-release angler inadvertently kills more of their trout catch when water temperatures are relatively high. Most jurisdictions have settled on a threshold water temperature somewhere near the 20°C target set by the Province. A noteworthy aspect of Alberta's approach is that it considers angler displacement. East slopes streams are naturally cooler in their headwaters than at lower elevations in summer, but it's often the lower reaches that are most productive and heavily fished.

Basing the geographical extent of hoot owl restrictions on water temperature alone risks simply displacing anglers from warmer low elevation reaches to cooler headwater reaches—which also happen to be prime habitat for native cutthroat and bull trout.

To protect these at-risk species, the Province applies the regulation relatively broadly, helping ensure a restriction implemented downstream does not just shift angling effort to areas where the water may be cooler, but where conservation concerns are even greater.

Introduced in the spring of 2023, anglers did not have long to wait before the new regulation was implemented. Last summer was a scorcher and by the end of July restrictions were in place for essentially all flowing waters in southwestern Alberta. As restrictions are not lifted until conditions reliably improve, they remained in place until mid-August. Government enforcement staff reported that angler compliance with the new regulation overall was good.

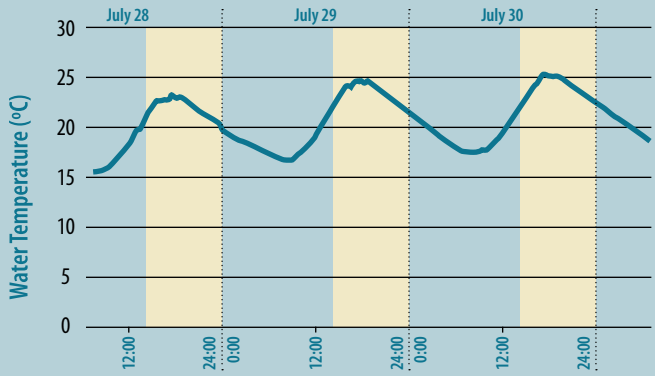
This was encouraging because striking the right balance between maintaining angling opportunities and reducing fish mortality can be challenging. What threshold values are appropriate? How and where are thresholds assessed? How big of an area is impacted by the restriction and for how long? These are not simple questions and there is plenty of room for opinions to differ.

Surprisingly little formal evaluation of similar restrictions elsewhere has occurred to date. Thankfully, the one thing everyone does agree on is that our trout fisheries are precious and need to be sustained for future generations to enjoy.

For up-to-date information on Alberta's time of day angling restrictions, see the latest *Alberta Guide to Sportfishing Regulations* and the My Wild Alberta Fishing Advisories, Corrections and Closures webpage.

"The restrictions are designed to protect trout and other coldwater sport fish which are stressed when rivers and streams are unusually low and warm."

Daily fluctuation (July 28 – 30, 2004) of water temperature in Stimson Creek a tributary to the Highwood River in the Bow River watershed. Shading indicates the period of the day in which a time of day angling closure would be in effect (14:00 to 24:00 hrs).



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

On the origin of the nickname "hoot owl" restrictions.

It seems logical that any rule that promotes activity during the dead of night and early morning would be associated with owls, but that's not where the story ends. Although it's prudent to view origin stories skeptically, apparently the "hoot owl" term was coined in the western U.S. by the logging industry. It seems they encouraged tree harvest operations during morning hours (when owls hoot) to avoid the higher fire risk during the drier hours of the day.

Whatever its origin, the term appears to have stuck with anglers—although most official communications on the subject use the more precise, but much less charming, "time of day" descriptor.

Hunters, I'm Your Ally

► *by Ariana Tourneur*

There's no camouflage in my closet.

Numbness hasn't overtaken my lower half from spending endless hours in a tree stand.

And I've definitely never taken a settling breath, zeroed in on an animal, and squeezed the trigger.

To be honest, the lack of experience made me feel like I wasn't doing enough.

As early as elementary, my classmates would dedicate after-school hours to their hunter education course and excitedly recount hunting expeditions with their families. Hailing from non-hunters, this world felt unfamiliar and unattainable—but back then, I was okay with that. My family's cattle ranch and the responsibilities that came with it provided the outdoor fix I craved.

It wasn't until later, when I landed a full-time gig with Alberta Conservation Association (ACA), that I started to prod at my lack of firsthand hunting experience. Surrounded by bonafide hunters, ethical and patient in their quests with a willingness to teach, I felt this would be it. My moment to embrace hunting. To learn, to spend time in the field, to finally make the big switch—from non-hunter to hunter.

My career encouraged me to accompany others on hunts, release pheasants, try an impressive myriad of mouthwatering wild game, open up our farmland to hunters, and become immersed in Alberta's hunting culture and its captivating stories. Yet, the timing was never right. The nudges were aplenty, but they didn't compound enough to push me over the edge. Instead, guilt intensified and lingered. I believed wholeheartedly in hunting and everything it stood for, but deep down, I knew I wasn't going to harvest an animal myself.

At a friend's feedlot. Understanding all food sources is important to our family.
credit: Ariana Tourneur

credit: Matt Middlemiss

In my experiences, hunters are the most ethical, responsible, and generous people I've ever met.

credit: Lisa Roper

credit: Matt Middlemiss

Trail camera footage: About a dozen hunters frequent our farmland, and are always quick to share their trail cam finds.
credit: Matt Middlemiss


credit: Matt Middlemiss


credit: ACA

And now?

I don't think I ever will.

With this newfound acceptance, my guilt disappeared in a poof. Everything shifted, and it was all because of a short conversation with a profound aftermath.

I was with friends and a few people I didn't know well. The subject of deer hunting came up. Not everyone shared the same perspective, and someone said they couldn't wrap their mind around killing something you care about. Before I even realized it, the words were spilling out of my mouth. From my time with hunters, I knew some truths. I had to share them.

Hunters acknowledge the complexity of hunting. I said that while recognizing the potential for suffering, they find deep satisfaction in sourcing their own meat and the subsequent rituals of handling the animal with empathy and gratitude. They take full responsibility for their choice to hunt.

Maybe, in my own way, I am a hunter. I just don't carry a gun or bow like you might; I carry words.

Still, hunters often put in hours and hours of commitment with no harvest. I told this person that the loudest hunters, showing off massive antlers and killing without apparent compassion, don't represent the majority. In my experiences, hunters are the most ethical, responsible, and generous people I've ever met.

The last thing I mentioned was that hunters have incomparable connections to nature. They were the first to realize our natural resources aren't limitless and that we must take action for future generations. It was a real turning point for conservation, and hunters are the reason why a lot of wildlife hunted today are thriving.

I don't think this individual will take up hunting any day soon, but they did say, "I never thought of it that way."

Admittedly, this one conversation didn't spark a revolution. Active participation in hunting will always have the most impact, but we should keep in mind that representation in all circles of society can carry just as much weight. This representation can come from a non-hunter. Maybe, in some circles, it's even better if the person *is* a non-hunter.

I consider myself lucky—many non-hunters have never been exposed to positive hunting role models like I have. Without positive influence, and in an era of social media, it's easy to believe misconceptions. We know hunters should take responsibility for shaping perceptions, but why can't non-hunters too? Together, our voices are louder. Together, we have a better shot at changing the way hunting is perceived, turning a negative conversation driven by anti-hunters into a positive one led by us.

In a time when fewer people understand or support hunting, advocating for this way of life is vital. Who knows who we might influence, or perhaps who might even take up hunting because of a bridge we extended. By speaking up about hunting and sharing positive experiences, we can inspire others to see hunting in a new light. Maybe, in my own way, I am a hunter. I just don't carry a gun or bow like you might; I carry words.

Though I may never grasp the nuanced emotions tied to making a kill, I deeply value hearing hunters' stories and seeing their dedication firsthand. I welcome trusted hunters onto my land to act as diligent stewards, gratefully enjoy the benefits of their efforts (elk steaks are my favourite!), and in return, advocate for respectful hunting whenever I can. It's a small gesture, but when echoed by more people like me, contributes to greater acceptance and flourishing outdoor opportunities—for everyone.

From Open-heart to **Open Season**

One Hunter's Journey to Recovery

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Yeah, I feel great."

The room fell silent and neither of us spoke. I had been through enough ultrasounds to know the technicians only ask you that question when they see something they don't like, and you probably won't either. I didn't need the results to know what came next—the aortic valve they put in eight years earlier needed to be replaced.

photos: Reaching the summit of the first ridge on opening day in the GHOST PLUZ outside Cochrane, AB. (above); My reminder of the mule deer buck at 20 yards following a perfect stalk. The sickly appearance of the buck led me to pass on it, despite it being my last chance at a successful harvest. (bottom right)

► *article and photos by Joshua P. Martin*

Over the following days, I processed my feelings and the implications of another open-heart surgery. I was flooded with emotion and thoughts typical of someone facing their mortality head-on—like how I was too young to die—and worrying about my wife and young girls. Once I was done feeling sorry for myself, and rationalized the relative risk, I quickly realized what was really at stake—hunting season!

Recovering from open-heart surgery is no easy task. Anyone who has been through one knows it can take up to a year to feel "normal." I didn't have a year though. I would have two months to get back in hunting-ready condition for the opener. As a primarily public land hunter, finding game for me is physical. When my last season ended with no meat to show for countless days away from home, I assured my wife I would do better next time around and was training and shooting my bow regularly in the off-season. I had also been listening to podcasts, reading books, and looking for all the tips and tricks possible to give me an edge. The damaged valve was putting all that hard work at risk.

A month-and-a-half later, I woke up from my second valve replacement in less than a decade. In the days and weeks that followed, I lost weight, struggled to breathe, and was physically weak. Once I got through the worst of it and other priorities were getting attention, like spending time with my family, I started to train again. One of the first things I did was reduce the draw weight of my bow as much as it would allow, to about 48 pounds. I then took my first shot in months. Hearing the crack of the bowstring was instantly therapeutic and, to my surprise, I felt no pain. It was now early July, and I was finally healed.

From then on, the plan was simple—shoot ten arrows and exercise 30 minutes daily until the opener. It didn't matter whether the 30 minutes was filled with running, rowing, weights, or hiking, so long as it was physical. On my first run, if you can call it that, it took me 18 minutes to do the 1.4 kilometre block around my house, a pace of 13 minutes per kilometre. I finished the workout with some calisthenics and was absolutely destroyed. Two months later I was running five kilometres on a six-minute pace and back to my draw weight of 70 pounds. On the opener, I hiked 11 kilometres with a full pack, and was in the best shape of my life.

Gratitude is a powerful motivator and that season I hunted harder than I ever had before. When I loaded up my tent trailer for one last weekend of hunting, I had already spent well over 20 days stalking through grazing leases, conservation sites, and the backcountry. All I needed was my hard work and preparation to meet up with Lady Luck.

As I left the truck on my last hunt, the weather and wind were perfect, and I felt good about my chances. Minutes later, I spotted a mule deer buck in the distance. I quickly scanned the area and figured, based on his direction of travel and pace, I could go unseen and cut him off on the other side of a small rise between us to get a shot. Once in position, I relocated him slowly grazing his way towards me. As he turned broadside, I drew my bow back, anchored, and lined up my 20-yard pin with his vitals. Then I hesitated.

As he came into focus through my peep, I immediately noticed how prominent his scapula and ribs were. Thoughts of chronic wasting disease (CWD), especially common in southeast Alberta, or some other ailment raced through my mind. I slowly let off my draw, stood

photos: Shot grouping at 40 yards at the AHEIA archery range in De Winton, AB (top); Statistics from my last run prior to opening day showing how far I had come during recovery (right)

up, traded my bow for my phone and, as he glanced over at me indifferently, snapped a few photos. It was likely my last chance for a successful harvest and he would be the first buck I ever passed on, so I wanted the photos to look back on when I second-guessed the decision. After spending a few minutes together in silence, he took one last bite, bounced off and disappeared into a coulee.

The rest of that day was more of the same—a few close calls and an unfilled tag in my pocket. After everything I had overcome, success still eluded me. Or did it? I spent the long drive home from that hunting trip replaying the season in my mind—the mistakes, missed opportunities, and that sickly-looking buck. While non-hunters primarily associate hunting with death and "grip and grins," any hunter will tell you their smile is a reflection of the experience and everything leading up to the shot, not the kill itself. Considering where I started only a few months prior, perhaps it was a successful season after all.

To this day, I find myself pulling up the picture of that buck, reliving the moment and wishing I had released my arrow. However, more often than not, I'm content with the decision and thankful for the journey that brought us together in that field. I like to think that, like me, he recovered from whatever was ailing him and he's still roaming the coulees each fall. Our paths might even cross again, though for his sake, it would be best they don't. My health and marriage will not survive another season that ends with an empty freezer.

Success in Alberta's Growing Battle Against Invasive Phragmites

► *by Paige Kuczmarski & Nicole Kimmel*

Invasive species are the second greatest threat to biodiversity worldwide, after habitat loss. They threaten ecosystems, disrupt native flora and fauna, and cause long-term environmental damage. The invasive *Phragmites australis* subsp. *australis*, or common reed, has been encroaching rapidly in Alberta, alarming land managers and authorities.

Conventional warfare tactics are no match for dense stands that increase sedimentation and disrupt the flow and availability of water in wetlands, transportation rights-of-way, and stormwater management ponds. Infestations can become so thick that the impenetrable stands are able to dominate wetlands within a few years—reducing habitat for fish, wildlife, and native plants.

credit: Government of Alberta

credit: Nicole Kimmel

The dry, dormant stalks of Phragmites present a safety concern in the fall as they can burn very hot and fast, creating a fire hazard for surrounding communities and property owners. Complicating matters is a native counterpart, *Phragmites australis* subsp. *americanus* which is difficult to differentiate from the invasive Phragmites and often requires DNA analysis to confirm subspecies. The key visual differences are:

Native

- stems reddish or purplish tone round fungal spots on stems
- leaves more yellow
- ligule width is wider 0.4-1.0mm
- leaf sheath easily removed and can fall off stem
- seedhead is sparse
- less robust stands, more scattered, and up to 6.5 feet tall

Invasive

- stems dull green-tan colour fungal spots never found on stems
- leaves appear bluish
- ligule width is narrow 0.1-0.4mm
- leaf sheaths difficult to remove from stems
- seedhead is dense
- large and thick stands up to 20 feet tall


credit: Nicole Kimmel

The battle against this invasive plant began in 2016 after it was first detected near Brooks. However, a recent surge in reported locations, especially in 2023, has sparked a positive turn in the fight against this invasive.

The success of any invasive species management program often hinges on the dedication of individual soldiers. In this case, Kallum McDonald, a Strathcona County employee, emerged in the fight against invasive Phragmites. Recognizing the severity of the issue, McDonald undertook training to identify Phragmites stands accurately. Equipped with this knowledge, he began diligently collecting samples during his work hours and in his free time, traversing Alberta to locate and document suspect stands. In one summer, he alone reported 24 locations to the provincial Aquatic Invasive Species Specialist through the free EDDMapS (Early Detection and Distribution Mapping System) app to initiate a rapid response.

In the era of digital solutions, the use of technology with the EDDMapS app is a secret weapon in the battle against Phragmites. Albertans can submit observations of invasive species directly from their smartphones to provide real-time tracking of occurrences. Identification information can be found on the app, which helps in early detection. All reports are uploaded to EDDMapS and sent directly to elite verifiers for review and then added to the provincial distribution maps, enabling more precise and targeted responses by land managers.

The invasive Phragmites tolerate salty and alkaline conditions and thrive in wet disturbed sites like ditches, highway margins, pipeline corridors, and other natural wetlands. It is able to reproduce both by seed, easily dispersed by wind, and through rhizome (root) and shoot fragments. One significant breakthrough in the battle against Phragmites occurred when it was discovered that the majority of the reported locations were within rights-of-way managed by Alberta Transportation and Economic Corridors. Recognizing the importance of collaboration, connections were made that have proved fruitful, resulting in increased coordination and joint initiatives to curb the spread of Phragmites.

Another significant development in the fight against Phragmites came from persistent efforts to engage Canadian National Railway (CN). Continuous pressure led to the hiring of a full-time vegetation management person based in Alberta. This dedicated professional is now focused on implementing proactive measures to control and mitigate the spread of invasive Phragmites along CN rail lines. The move marks a positive step in corporate responsibility towards environmental conservation.

Alberta's battle against invasive Phragmites has seen significant progress thanks to the efforts of individuals like Kallum McDonald and collaborative initiatives with key allies. The increased number of reported locations in 2023 prompted a more concerted response, leading to successful response networks. The integration of technology through EDDMapS further strengthens the overall strategy for the continued preservation of Alberta's diverse ecosystems.


credit: Todd Green

The Knife, the Deer, *and* the Student

► *by Dr. Lee Foote*

As my father's buck® knife slid smoothly down the hindquarter between fat and muscle on the large doe's quiet and stiffening carcass—and the glistening hidden world of silver tendons and muted carmine muscle came to light—a familiar and profound feeling came over me as furred wildness was converted to useful product at the edge of this heritage blade. I could feel my father's gentle instruction from 60 years ago. He was my unspoken mentor.

But this setting was distractingly different because I had a class of 14 university students silently peering over my shoulder, trying to make sense of something they had never seen. Once I had demonstrated the leg-skinning technique, it was time to be an engaged instructor and ask, "Would anyone else like to assume the skinning duties?" I wasn't really expecting much, but then a small woman named Amanda with pigtails pinned to the top of her head and an oversized Helly Hansen coat stepped forward and put out her hand for the knife.

I passed Pa's knife over as she knelt in the snow and deftly started releasing the hide from the front knees and peeling it down the legs—so far, so good. When I looked at her face however, I saw tears streaming down over an implacable expression. Embarrassingly, I went "all guy n' stuff" taking a patronizing approach and blurting out something like, "It's OK, it's meat, she died quickly and mostly painlessly, blah, blah, blah…" my discomfort with her discomfort on display for the whole class to see.

Then Amanda set the knife down on the white fat cap of the brisket, wiped her eyes with her jacket sleeve, looked up at me and quietly said, "My grandpa would have loved this and I really, really miss him." It seems the tears were not for the deer, which she was adroitly breaking down to larder, but for the fall ritual of helping the grandfather who raised her in butchering the family's elk, moose, or deer in their urban backyard. Amanda got it. She held dearly to a deeper meaning of hunting, butchering, sharing, and family. She relished being in community with a loved one, a tradition, a glorious animal, and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, respect, skill, and appreciation.

For 15 years straight I had achieved my goal of mentoring at least one new hunter into the sport each year, and yes, I understand why some disagree with the use of the word "sport" for hunting, but that is another essay. Amanda was part of a university course I taught for a decade entitled "Utilization of Wildlife Resources." The first weekend of each hunting season, my cadre of hunting friends made sure there was a cleanly shot deer or moose on the snow in my backyard for this very class. Before pulling back the tarp to begin the knife work, I would always discuss respect for the animal and I stress that while improper or disrespectful treatment may not hurt an inert carcass, I felt sure it would diminish us.

We examined the many remarkable physical adaptations deer possess, the seven external scent glands, hoof configuration and function, night vision eyes, long protective eyelashes, hide thickness around the body, colouration, hair configuration, and more. The students found mysteries explained in the doe's reproductive tract—it was virtually identical to that of my female students! They got to feel the various roughened textures of well-washed swatches of the four stomach chambers (rumen, reticulum, omasum, and abomasum) and think about their function. They learned how tooth-wear was related to determining the age of the animal (she was 3.5 years old), and they gained an appreciation for various cuts of meat.

As students lifted loins, ribs, hams, shoulders, and stew meat, the portions were vacuum-sealed into plastic bags and labelled for freezing. More than once some student looked at the packages of trimmed meat and commented with incredulity, "It looks just like meat in the store!" Duhhh!

Because this was November in Alberta, and typically cold, we always set up a firepit nearby for hand warming with chairs for sitting around. Deviously, I would always reserve some tender cubes of venison tenderloin—cut across the grain and painted with peppery olive oil—and drape them on long skewers over the coals. This was almost an unfair move because what university student can resist the sizzle and smell of free food? Can you say, "bait and hook"? I also sent every student home with a venison sampler, some cooking advice, and a request to report back on their meal success.

I could almost see the light bulbs going on during that three-hour lab as the students internalized the connection of sun-browse-deer-hunter-meat-food—as well as a knowledge transfer, idea exchange, and a sense of shared community in an honourable endeavour.

It occurs to me that the students often teach the teacher too. Thank you Amanda for your gift of recollection and holding onto the wisdom and legacy of your grandfather. You reminded me that there is an unspoken ingredient in the best hunts—love.

Why Go Fishing – Is it ***Really*** for the Fish?

► *by Peter S. Little*

Including kids and seniors, who don't need a fishing licence, up to 350,000 of us go fishing in Alberta each year. According to the federal government's latest Survey on Recreational Fishing, Albertans average 18 days a year on the water, primarily fishing for walleye, pike, and rainbow trout. Some prefer mountain streams, others spring creeks, and still others prefer Alberta's ponds and lakes, 240+ of which are stocked with fish by the provincial government or the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA).

Based on Conference Board of Canada reporting, Alberta anglers spend about $1.6 billion dollars a year to go fishing. That's $4,570 per angler, an amount that could buy you about 1,050 walleye or 1,650 rainbow trout fillets at the grocery store—far more than you would likely catch and keep in the average 18 fishing days per year.

Travel Alberta and ACA's 2023 Angling Preference Survey suggests we're particularly fortunate in Alberta. Respondents, especially non-residents interestingly, see our province as a top fishing destination with a comparatively high variety of fish and year-round angling available to everyone.

But despite all the time, effort, and money we put into going fishing, we release most of what we catch! That same federal survey tells us that in Alberta, more than in any other province, most of the fish caught are released—91 of every 100 it claims. That may be partly due to provincially regulated catch limits, but it suggests that, although catching a fish or two adds to the pleasure of angling, we don't primarily go fishing to bring fish home for the freezer.

Maybe Henry David Thoreau, well-known angler, naturalist, and philosopher got it right 175 years ago when he wrote, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after."

Researchers across the world have been looking at what it is that attracts us to recreational angling. Some mention the challenge of outwitting the fish, presenting the right fly or lure at the right depth and with the right degree of motion. All report on the obvious and very real social, mental, and physical health benefits of being out in the fresh air—usually in a calm environment and 'at-one' with nature, watching a fly or bobber, or casually trolling—distracted only by the occasional bird, beaver, or muskrat.

Survey respondents mostly mentioned relaxation, contemplation, finding peace, stress relief, clarity of mind, and just plain 'fun.'

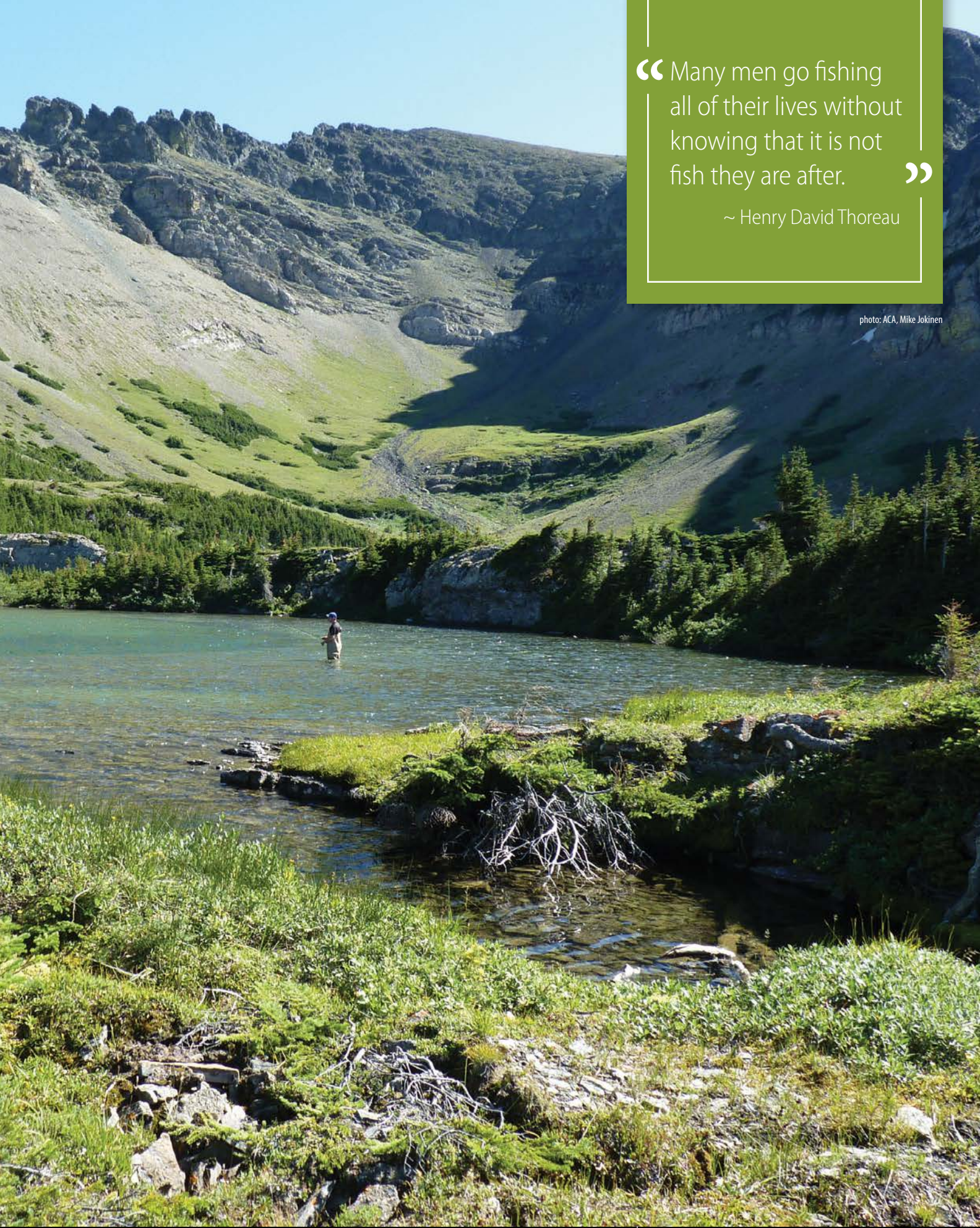
photo: ACA, Charmaine Brunes

Duane Radford, well-known Alberta author and former fishery biologist, conducted a study back in 1975 on the factors influencing the enjoyment of a fishing trip and found that "elements of the natural environment (beautiful scenery, clear water, wildlife, and solitude) are more important to anglers than catching big fish or large numbers of fish." Are those the things that we're really after, not fish fillets? There's strong evidence that eating fish is good for the heart and blood vessels, but the physical and mental benefits of fishing are good for your health too, no matter what your age. This is especially true for young folk. Kids are spending less time outdoors now than they were a few years ago. Wen, Kite et al. reported in their study that many 10-12-year-olds "spend less than half an hour a day playing outside after school, and 43% spend more than two hours a day using electronic media." Recreational researchers are encouraging all of us, where and when possible, to replace some of the time spent with a screen—watching TV, playing video games, using a computer, checking a cell phone—with getting outdoors, especially where there's water.

Obviously, water is essential for fish and fishing, but the research tells us that it also provides significant benefits to the angler. When we're near water we breathe in negative ions, more so when that water is in motion. The National Library of Medicine reports evidence "that negative ions could: help regulate sleep patterns and mood; reduce stress, boost immune system function; increase metabolism of carbs and fats, and kill or inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria, viruses, and mold species." Does that perhaps factor into our desire to go fishing even though we may not be consciously aware of it?

Country music singers seem to agree. Andy Griffith, for example, in his 'Fishin' Hole' song, sings "We may not get a bite all day, but don't you rush away. What a great place to rest your bones and mighty fine for skippin' stones. You'll feel fresh as a lemonade, a-settin' in the shade." It's not the fish that got him singing, just the very act of "going fishin'!" Award-winning fishing author, John Gierach, sums it up with some sound advice, "the solution to any problem—work, love, money, whatever—is to go fishing, and the worse the problem, the longer the trip should be."

Seems to me that there are plenty of reasons to hang the "Gone Fishin'" sign on your door or make it an automatic email response. You could bring home a fish dinner if you'd like (and if regulations allow of course) but, as Thoreau, researchers, country singers, and others suggest, money and time spent fishing are well worth it, even if the fish aren't biting!



> “Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.”
>
> ~ Henry David Thoreau

photo: ACA, Mike Jokinen

Getting to the **Root** of **The Tooth**

Lethbridge Wildlife Analytics Lab

► *by Susan Hagan*

Kelsey Gourlie was moose hunting with her family when a bull came out grunting. Following their successful hunt, there was some speculation about his age as he was big, but not a monster. Kelsey thought maybe he was four, her dad figured six or seven, and then Kelsey said, "I know a guy who can tell me exactly how old he is."

Gourlie took a moose tooth to her colleague and former instructor for cementum analysis, and was surprised that he turned out to be 9.5 years old "We thought the population out there was really young which can be concerning," said Gourlie "To know there was an almost ten-year-old bull walking around is great."

The instructor who analyzed the moose tooth, Dr. Everett Hanna, led the effort to launch the Wildlife Analytics Lab (WAL) at Lethbridge College in 2023. As the only cementum analysis lab in Canada—and the only revenue-neutral lab of its kind in the world—it can estimate an animal's age, and even its reproductive history, by studying teeth.

photo: Scientific Lead, Dr. Everett Hanna, looking at a slide with stained sections.
Credit: Lethbridge College

The whole tooth and nothing but the tooth

"Any species with teeth deposits a mineral called cementum around their root tips and every year you get another ring added to the picture," says Gourlie, the WAL's lead technician. In most ungulates, analysis works best on bottom front incisors because they are easier to extract, have a consistent eruption pattern, and have straighter roots which make them easier to slice.

Once in the lab, technicians decalcify the teeth, making them become bendable and easier to slice. "It's like a rubber band, you can bend it in half," says Gourlie. "It's really weird, not something that you would ever expect to see." The tooth is then embedded in wax, sliced thinner than paper, mounted on a slide, stained, and viewed under a microscope where the rings in the cementum tell the story. "That's how it speaks to us," she continued. "It tells us how old it is by showing us these rings we're able to see after processing."

Dr. Hanna added that cementum analysis has been studied extensively and they have tested accuracy using known-age samples from multiple species. The aging method is considered greater than 95 percent accurate, or within one year of the actual age.

Teeth fill gaps in knowledge

Cementum analysis on wildlife teeth is vital to conservation, and of benefit to hunters and naturalists curious about a skull they found; forensic investigators who require an animal's age for regulation harvest purposes; and biologists who manage populations.

"Maybe you're a biologist and you need to know the demographic of the population you've been tasked with managing, or how it's changing in the face of a different harvest regime, climate change, habitat shifts, or more likely all those things at once," Hanna says.

Cementum analysis can also help biologists with disease management, notably Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in ungulates. The hypothesis is that there will be fewer older bucks as they die off, but without cementum analysis you can only see that one is old and another is young. "Processing mule deer teeth, for instance, can help show demographic shifts in populations with greater precision," Hanna says. Bear teeth reveal even more. For instance, in a sow, they can show each year she lactated—typically every second year in black bears—which would indicate a live birth.

For more information go to:
lethbridgecollege.ca/wildlife-analytics-lab

Additional Facts

- WAL expects to analyze thousands if not tens of thousands of wildlife teeth each year from across the country and throughout the world. Results are usually available in a few months.
- Cementum analysis can be conducted on almost anything with teeth, including rattlesnakes. Exceptions are sharks and crocodiles, which lose and regrow teeth regularly.
- Adult teeth in wildlife erupt in known stages, which technicians account for when analyzing.
- If you get a tooth from an animal that has ingested a tetracycline biomarker—bait put out by a biologist—it leaves an imprint on their cementum. Biologists may put out the biomarker to distribute vaccines (e.g., rabies) or for population studies. With some sleuthing, you can find out that animal's migration patterns by tracking down where the biomarker was set and where the skull was found.
- Alberta Professional Outfitters Society (APOS) donated $145,000 through its Wildlife Management Fund to the lab in funding and equipment.

"Targeted questions can be answered that lead into different management tactics," Hanna says. WAL handles teeth in large batches of blind samples for unbiased results, but a few known cases are unforgettable. Hanna recalls a black bear harvested from around Athabasca, which they determined was 23 years old. "That was incredible. It was so old that its teeth were just nubbins, and its sagittal crest (on top of its head) was bent over," says Hanna, who first learned cementum analysis as a student in the early 2000s.

Curiosity fuels his team and high on his wish list is a good dataset of wild elk teeth because cows become almost invincible after a decade of evading hunters and highways, according to a recent University of Alberta study.

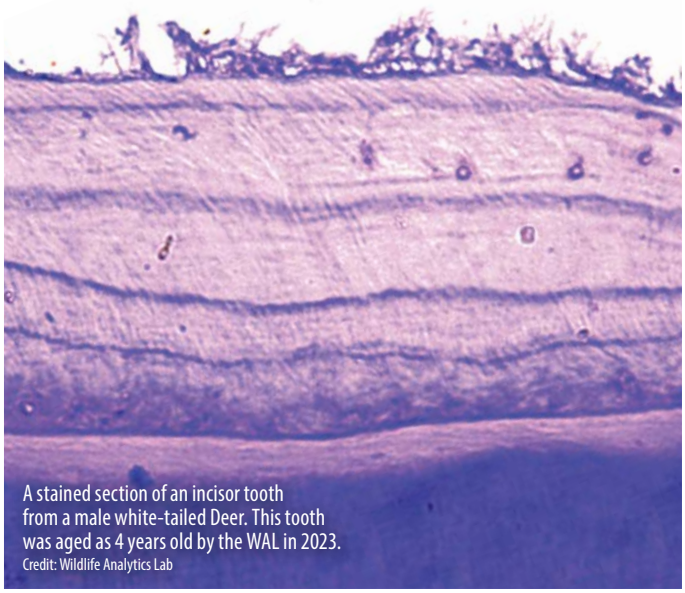
"That's why entire herds of elk follow the lead cow—because of that invincibility, if you will," said Hanna. "Of course, they won't live forever—their teeth will eventually be sampled, and I'd like to see a really old cow elk in our lab." By the way, one of the oldest known elk found in Pennsylvania lived to be 32.

Biting off what they can chew

Cementum analysis works on almost any animal with teeth, aside from sharks and crocodiles, which lose and regrow their teeth regularly. While WAL mostly deals with elk, moose, deer, sheep, caribou, and bison, they also commonly see mountain goats, bears, cougars, wolves, and coyotes. They are even looking at salvaging teeth from roadkill rattlesnakes in southern Alberta, and there's potential to study other species at risk.

While Hanna and Gourlie want to grow WAL with care, future applications are full of potential. They've spoken with paleontology researchers who want to use modern species to develop a correlation to anthropological data. That doesn't mean they can age a T-Rex—samples need to be within a few hundred years old—but they can apply the data of known extant species.

The lab is also training the next generation of conservation professionals. Students get to use the cutting-edge technology, and a group of student lab techs are paid to work part-time in the lab while studying at college. Because the lab is revenue neutral, meaning fees go back into operations, customers can get price breaks if they're willing to share data with students for applied projects.



A stained section of an incisor tooth from a male white-tailed Deer. This tooth was aged as 4 years old by the WAL in 2023.
Credit: Wildlife Analytics Lab

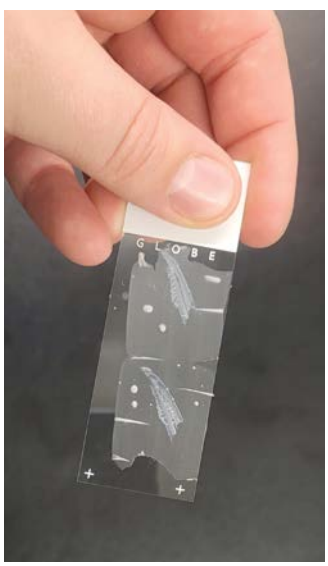


photo (left): Root tip sections from an Elk central incisor before stain.
Credit: Wildlife Analytics Lab

photo (right) Two extracted mule deer central incisors ready for decalcification.
Credit: Wildlife Analytics Lab

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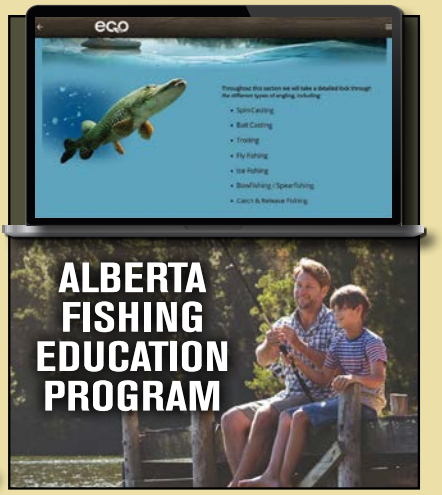

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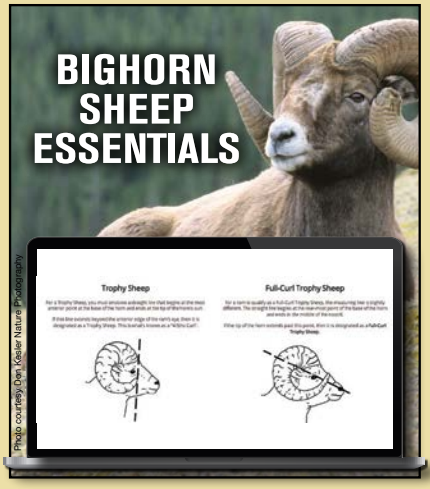
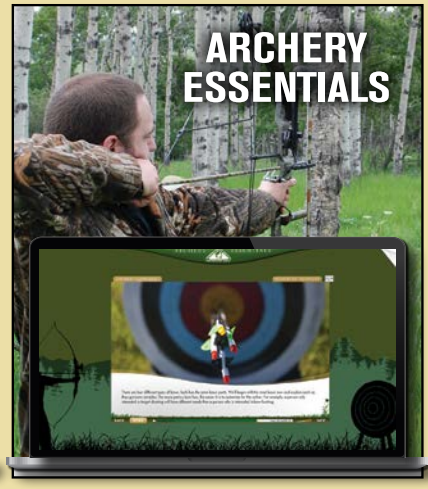
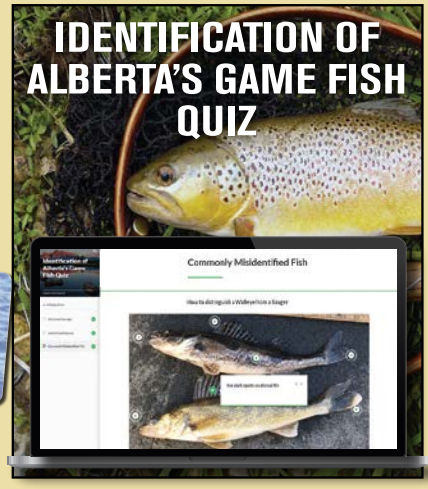
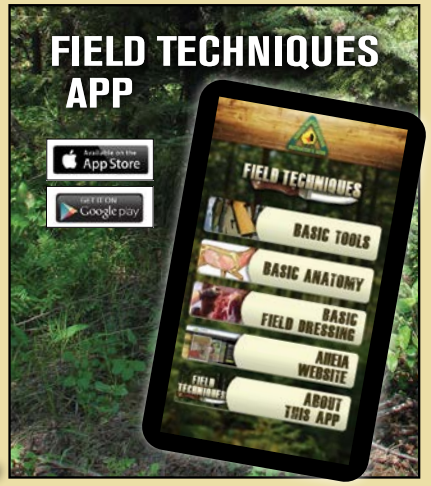








In 2023, Fish and wildlife officers were able to solve several cases with help from the public.

Here is one of those cases.

SOLVED CASE: SOUTH OF STANDARD

An investigation led by Alberta Fish and Wildlife Enforcement Services has concluded resulting in $5,500 in fines for harvesting mule deer outside of a valid WMU.

On November 26, 2022, Fish and Wildlife Enforcement Services received a Report-A-Poacher call from an individual who observed two males loading two deer into a truck in a field south of Standard, Alberta, and appeared to not have tagged them. Calgary Fish and Wildlife Officer (FWO) Mark RAYMENT responded to the location, and approximately one hour after the initial call, contacted four males in a dark Dodge Ram pickup truck driving through a field on the west side of Highway 56, south of Township Road 250.

FWO RAYMENT conducted a compliance inspection and learned that one subject had killed two antlerless mule deer that afternoon on a property in Wildlife Management Unit (WMU) 156. FWO RAYMENT also learned that a different subject killed one antlerless mule deer that afternoon on the same property. Upon inspecting the deer, FWO RAYMENT discovered that all three of the deer were still un-gutted, and none had been tagged.

The occupants were placed under arrest, Chartered and cautioned. Upon reviewing the licences held by the individuals, it was determined that the antlerless mule deer licences they did hold were only valid in WMU 160, which is located on the east side of Highway 56.

Both subjects pled guilty in the Strathmore Court on February 8th, 2023 for a total of $5,500 in fines.

Anyone with information of suspected poaching is encouraged to contact Report A Poacher by phone at 1-800-642-3800 or online at www.alberta.ca/report-poacher.aspx. All reporters can remain anonymous and could be eligible for a reward.

REPORT A POACHER NOW. CALL TOLL-FREE OR REPORT ONLINE 24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK.

All calls are kept strictly confidential, and the information you provide can lead to an arrest, fines, and jail time. The Report A Poacher program is delivered in joint partnership between Alberta Justice and Solicitor General and Alberta Conservation Association.

Cooking Stocked Trout

► *article, recipe, and photos by Brad Fenson*

Beautiful pan-sized trout from small, stocked lakes and ponds are incredible table fare. The recreational stocking of 2.1 million trout in 240 waterbodies in Alberta each year makes them readily available for anglers in any community. While the majority are rainbow trout, brown, brook, cutthroat, and tiger trout are also stocked in the province. Some of the stocked lakes are aerated, producing larger fish that overwinter.

Stocked trout often get a bad rap for having an off-taste that some describe as muddy. Warm weather, shallow water, and wetland substrate can all affect the way fish taste. However, there are some tricks for having great-tasting fish, and it starts with being prepared when heading out with rod in hand.

How to beat bad taste

Any fish caught for taking home should be dispatched quickly with a blow to the top of the head. Wrap the fish in a paper towel or newspaper to absorb any sliminess and moisture that can be the root of the flavour problems. The protective coating that guards the fish from the environment can pick up unwanted tastes and smells. Getting the slime off the fish makes a big difference.

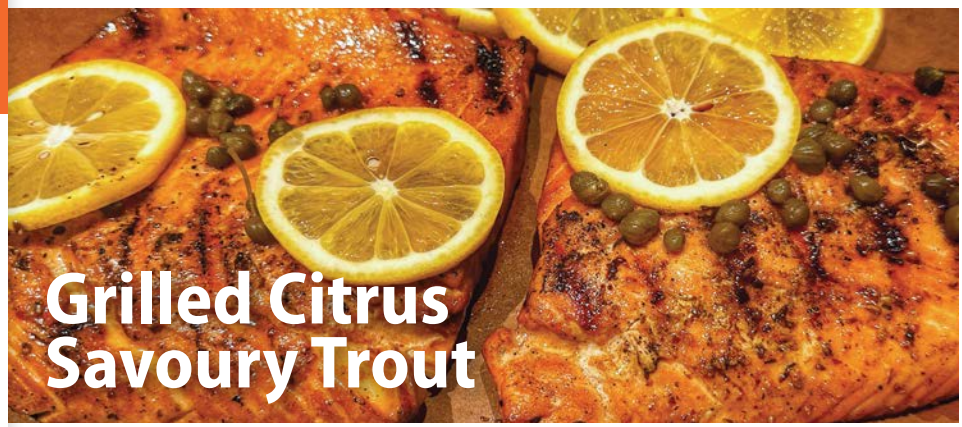
When possible, gut and gill the fish. Always have a cooler with ice and get the fish stored in a cold environment as quickly as possible. Commercially harvested fish are handled in the same manner to ensure quality.

Skin and scales

Tips: Scale the trout under running water using a knife's back or flat edge. The scales can take on the flavour of warm water and removing them makes for a better-tasting fish. If the problem prevails, fillet and skin the fish to remove anything that may have had contact with the water.

Recommendations: Brine and smoke the fish for some outstanding flavour. You can serve it alone, or use it in other recipes. There is never enough smoked trout to enjoy on your next fishing excursion. Smoked trout wontons or cheeseballs are two delicious options.

Fish always tastes best fresh and not frozen.



Grilled Citrus Savoury Trout

Prep 25 minutes | Cook 8 minutes | Serves 4

Ingredients:

- 1-1/3 lbs trout fillets, deboned
- ¼ cup soy sauce
- 3 tbsp maple syrup
- 1 lemon, juiced
- ½ tsp sesame oil
- black pepper
- 2 tbsp capers (optional)
- cooking oil spray

Directions:

- In a small baking pan or deep dish, combine the soy sauce, maple syrup, lemon juice, and sesame oil and stir with a fork.
- Place the trout fillets flesh side down into the marinade and leave for 20 minutes.
- Heat the barbecue grill to medium-high. Spray the skin of the fillet with cooking oil and place it skin side down on the grill. Reduce heat to medium.
- Grill the fish for 2 to 3 minutes.
- Spray a light coating of cooking oil on the flesh of the fish and season with pepper. Turn it over and grill for 2 minutes.
- Turn the fish skin side down once again and grill until the flesh feels firm, but still spongy.
- Remove the fish from the grill and serve hot, topped with thin slices of lemon and capers.

Notes:

Smaller fish cook faster, so adjusting cooking times is important. A chef often touches the fillet with a clean finger to assess the moisture content. Soft means it isn't cooked. When the flesh feels firm, but has enough moisture to provide a spongy feel, it is time to remove it from the heat.

If you skin the fillet, cook it on the grill on a non-stick grilling mat, which will hold the moisture in.

Use a cooking oil spray to prevent the fish from sticking to the grill or falling apart. It also generates nice char lines for presentation. You can also brush on cooking oil if you don't have spray.

Trout have a pin bone that runs above the ribs and points from the backbone to the skin. Pin bone pliers work great for removing these. You can also fillet on either side of the bones to remove them in a thin strip, making the fish more enjoyable to eat.

For wild game recipes, how-to videos, the Harvest Your Own podcast and more, visit: www.harvestyourown.ca

photo: Brad Fenson

The One That Got Away... Almost

► *by Adrian Watzke*

Every angler has a great story of the one that got away. Spit hooks, snapped lines, broken rods–been there, done that. My great story is about the one that didn't get away. It was truly a case of, "If you love something set it free and if it comes back, it's yours forever."

photos: Lucky and I on the Crowsnest River in 2004 (left); Lucky and I fishing on the Forestry Trunk Road by Nordegg (top right)
credit: Darren Jacknisky

It's a given that anyone who fishes may, from time to time, be prone to exaggeration, particularly when talking about the one that got away. And though every word of my story is true, even I have a hard time believing it.

It was a sunny Saturday morning in May of 2005 when my buddy and I decided to try out his inflatable pontoon boats at Star Lake, southwest of Stony Plain. Our target for the day was the rainbow trout that call the lake home. After pumping up the boats and rigging up our fly rods with prince nymph beadheads, we hit the water, cast our lines, and set about trolling as we rowed to where we figured we'd have a shot at some fish.

As we made our way across the lake, I was confident in the knowledge that my rod was secured in the rod holder. Let's just say "confident" and "knowledge" are two words that shouldn't go together. One minute I'm rowing at a relaxed pace and the next my fly rod is skipping across the water, out of my sight. Not just any rod, but my first real fly rod—a 9 foot, 5 weight, 4-piece St. Croix Imperial rod with Scientific Anglers reel and line, the whole shebang.

And then I saw it, about 2 feet of rod tip sitting above the water just 20 feet away. Turning the boat, I got within 5 feet before the tip jerked a few times, waterskied for another 5 feet, then disappeared under the water. Gone. Not just gone but gone toward the deepest part of the lake. My buddy goes, "Maybe you got Grandpa?" to which I replied, "No, Grandpa got me." Fish 1, Adrian 0. Game over.

Sadly, we had only been on the water for about 10 minutes. I paddled about for a bit hoping to see my rod on the lake bottom—not that I was going to compound the situation by attempting to dive in. I told my buddy to keep fishing, and I set out to make up for a lack of a gym membership and was set to spend the rest of the day on this floating rowing machine. It was a beautiful morning with a slight breeze, and despite the loss of my gear, which I couldn't really afford to replace, I was having fun thinking up Father's Day scenarios to get a new rod or reel, or both.

After a couple of hours, I suggested that my buddy try the other side of the lake. Leading the way, while looking back over my shoulder, I spotted what appeared to be the tip of a fishing rod sticking out of the water close to the far shore. Wait, that wasn't just any fishing rod—that was a St. Croix Imperial fly rod, with that oh so familiar moss green floating line. Remembering what happened last time I got close to it, I decided to row across the line, so if it were to take off, the rod would hit the boat and I would have a decent chance of retrieving it.

It turned out to be unnecessary as there wasn't a fish on the line, but I did get my rod, reel, line, and hook back—a little waterlogged, but intact. My buddy and I just shook our heads and laughed at recovering my gear about a football field and a half from where I lost it.

I can't even imagine what the odds of this happening were, but I can only assume they were staggering. We fished a little longer and caught nothing, but that didn't matter. I had already landed the catch of the day—my trusty fly rod "Lucky," which has been my go-to for two decades now.

We stopped for lottery tickets on the way home and though we got Lucky that day, we didn't get seven-figure, life-changing, fishing-all-the-time kind of lucky. But we didn't care.

Conservation works better when we all get involved.

Partners like AFGA make projects like MULTISAR West possible. Through this partnership, we can continue to foster mutually beneficial relationships with the agriculture community and improve wildlife habitat for all species in southwestern Alberta.

Alberta Conservation Association Member Groups:

photo: ACA staff conducting a range health survey.
credit: ACA, Amanda MacDonald

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