

Wild Lands Advocate

BY ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

FALL 2026

When coming face-to-face with the mistakes of our past, what can we do to avoid repeating them?

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Cover photo:



"It's rare to come eye-to-eye with a red fox given how scared they are of humans. But this wasn't the only rare thing that day. As my wife and I were finishing up our hike in Banff National Park, we came out of the forest and found this fox lying under a bench. We quickly hid ourselves behind the trees at a good distance. It certainly noticed, but decided to accept us being around. It looked up every few minutes before sticking its face back into the ground. Quiet and settled in the wilderness, all three of us suddenly heard a squeak in the distance. This was enough to launch the fox into action, and as it started to walk out into the sun, the gaps in the bench created a beautiful pattern on its fur. Although it was focused on the squirrel, it heard my camera's shutter and looked towards me for a quick second, holding this predator's stance before it turned and ran for the hunt!"

– Vinayak Mahajan

Editorial note:



Summer's brevity always surprises me. As the days are slowly growing shorter, Alberta's diversity of residents are preparing for what's to come: filling our supply rooms with food for the winter, travelling back from our migratory stopovers, and making the most of our remaining warm days. Since my first day of kindergarten, fall has always reminded me of new beginnings, and a chance for a new outlook. It's a good time to reflect on the progress we've made over the season, and think about how we can plan for newfound resilience in the chilling air. There are a lot of things happening at once, and it can be discouraging to think of our actions in the face of the enormity of challenges. But I would encourage you not to give up hope. Fall is a time for change and action. We won't stop working towards a better future until we're living in it.

– Sara Heerema, Conservation Outreach Specialist and *Wild Lands Advocate* Editor

ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

Defending Wild Alberta through awareness and action

Dedicated to the conservation of wilderness and the completion of a protected areas network, Alberta Wilderness Association is a voice for the environment. Since 1965, AWA has inspired communities to care for Alberta's wild spaces through awareness and action. With a provincial office and library in Calgary, AWA has active members, volunteers, and sponsors throughout Alberta and beyond. AWA is a non-profit, federally registered, charitable society. Donations and financial support are greatly appreciated.

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Lessons from the Archives: Snakes and Ladders

By Rachel Pizante, AWA Conservation Archivist

Manila folders in the library. **Photo © S. Heerema**

When I first set foot in the Roger Creasey Memorial Library and saw the rows of bookshelves filled with books and documents, I didn't know what to expect. I knew I'd be reading about the history of AWA through documents from campaigns and environmental issues of the past 60 years. But what did that entail? So much could be hidden in those 5556 manila folders.

The folders are organized into eight main categories: environment, land use, forestry, recreation, water, energy, reclamation, and wildlife. My first order of business? The water files.

AWA has a long history of protecting Alberta's watersheds, none of which I knew prior to going through the files. The files contain stories of fierce legal battles, tense international relations, agendas from productive — and sometimes unproductive — committee meetings, and countless pieces of correspondence between AWA and other ENGOs, government, and industry.

It's easy as an environmentalist to feel like no progress is being made. Ups are usually met with downs, and it can really feel like we're fighting the same battles over and over again.

When I first started at AWA, I was worried going through the library would be depressing — and sometimes, it is.

But, while current headlines might be woefully similar to their much older counterparts, there were differences in the details. Sometimes those differences were positive, sometimes not. Usually, any changes were incremental, with pieces of work building on top of each other. The more I thought about it, the more environmental work seemed like an infinite game of snakes and ladders. Sometimes you get to climb the ladder, and sometimes you're pushed down the snake. But you're almost never in the same spot twice.

This issue of the WLA includes a feature article on the conservation of Bull Trout, a long-standing fish of interest to AWA, as well as a Wilderness Watch update on our concerns with the renewed interest in building the long-proposed Ardley dam along the Red Deer River. With that in mind, let's dig into the history of these topics, see where we currently land on the game board, and figure out where we can go from here.

Bull Trout

You may have seen Bull Trout in the news recently. In 2025, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) halted a years-long investigation into the Highwood River bridge. The bridge was originally built illegally in 2023 and subsequently torn down in 2024, only for DFO to issue permits to rebuild the bridge in 2025. In August 2026, the CBC released emails they obtained through Access to

Information (ATI) requests (formerly Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) requests) that show DFO halted their investigation because of logistical constraints, rather than a lack of evidence that a contravention had taken place. Also in August 2026, Timberwolf Wilderness Society requested a judicial review into the permits issued in 2025.

Illegal bridges built, torn down, and built again. Government investigations leading nowhere. Scandalous emails. An impending legal battle. How did we get here?

Trout have long been of conservation concern in North America. The oldest document in our library citing concern for trout is a 1956 article discussing the impact of dams on fish in BC. The oldest document referring specifically to Bull Trout (then called Dolly Varden) is a 1959 scientific paper published by the Department of Fisheries of Canada (now DFO) examining the effect of dams on fisheries in the South Saskatchewan River system. The paper found that power projects in mountainous areas were "uniformly deleterious to the sport fishery" and that attempts to establish trout fisheries in large reservoirs in lower-altitude areas were unsuccessful. Only Rainbow Trout fisheries could be established in small reservoirs.

Power projects on high altitude lakes and rivers have proven to be, in Alberta, uniformly deleterious to the sport fishery. Trout and char fisheries which existed in the lakes prior to the power developments have deteriorated very markedly. On the whole, physical and chemical conditions and the plankton have been little affected; the bottom fauna has usually suffered profound changes, particularly littoral forms which are eliminated by fluctuating water levels. The trout have become scarce partly because of this change in bottom food, but mainly because of the elimination of suitable spawning gravels. At present there is no promising management scheme in sight for these power lakes.

Snippet of the 1959 article: "The Effects of Power, Irrigation, and Stock Water Developments on the Fisheries of the South Saskatchewan River". **Article by R. Miller and M. Paetz**

Despite the knowledge of dam impacts on trout fisheries, dams were built on native trout habitat across North America anyways, and, surprise, surprise, Bull Trout populations dropped dramatically.

"HIGH DAMS OF 70 OR 80 FEET present other problems, for, even if the salmon manage to climb that high by means of fishways, they are so tired when they reach the top that they are swept back over the dams. Transportation of salmon by tank truck or vertical lift has also proven futile. The fish react violently to any sudden change in their environment and put up such a fight that they are exhausted when released above the dams."

Snippet of the 1956 article: "Dams & Fish", discussing some of the challenges that fish face when dams are constructed within their habitat. **Article by R. McMynn**

The United States was the first to assess and list Bull Trout as Threatened in 1999. Canada didn't act until much later, with the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) not assessing Bull Trout until 2012. Finally, in 2019, Bull Trout were listed as Threatened in Canada under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA).

These listings didn't happen by accident; they are the direct result of decades of work by scientists and activists. And clearly, given the recent harm caused to critical Bull Trout habitat and the lack of repercussions for that harm, there is still work to be done.

Legislation like SARA helps by giving conservationists and activists a legal foothold to fight developments that negatively impact at-risk species and hold governments accountable when they fail to uphold their responsibilities described under the Act. So, even though we've just landed on a space with a snake with the saga of the illegal Highwood River bridge, we've also climbed many ladders in the past few decades and are higher up on the game board overall.

Ardley Dam

First proposed in the 1940s, the Ardley Dam never really dies. It has been considered at least four times in what feels like an infinite loop of project proposals and feasibility studies.

In the AWA library, the Ardley Dam first shows up on maps from the Prairie Rivers Improvement Management and Evaluation project, more commonly known as PRIME. PRIME was an interbasin water transfer and export scheme from the late 1960s that was developed by Alberta's last



The Roger Creasey Memorial Library in 2002.
Photo © AWA Archives

Social Credit government. PRIME arose out of the ashes of the slightly more famous North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA) project that, along with other obscene dams and canals, would have seen an 805 kilometre-long reservoir in the Valley of a Thousand Peaks in the Rocky Mountains. The goal of the project was to export Canadian water to the United States for water management and power production purposes.

Because of its sheer size, NAWAPA eventually fell apart, but smaller-scale versions of the project kept cropping up in the ensuing decades, including PRIME. Opposed vehemently by the leader of the Official Opposition at the time, Peter Lougheed, PRIME was shelved once he became Premier of the province in 1971.

However, just like NAWAPA before it, PRIME didn't completely die. While Lougheed consistently opposed water export, he wouldn't completely rule out within-province interbasin transfers. When prodded about it in the Legislative Assembly, he would say they weren't considering such a scheme "now".

In 1979, news broke that the Progressive Conservatives were considering building a large network of dams and canals throughout the province for interbasin transfers. Headed by Transport Minister Henry Kroeger, the plan consisted of 25 dams and canals that were to be built in a series of 10 stages, all funded through the Heritage Savings Trust Fund. Despite striking similarities to PRIME, Kroeger maintained to the public that this plan was not the same as PRIME because the goal was not to export water to the United States.

Kroeger's plan never really went anywhere. For the rest of his time in office (he passed away in office in 1987), interbasin water transfers would come up every few years, and he would reiterate that the government was not considering any such scheme, even though his personal opinion was that interbasin transfers were inevitable.

Is the Ardley Dam currently being considered a part of a large interbasin water transfer plan? Almost certainly not. The outcry from the cost — both economic and environmental — of such a large infrastructure project would be a political nightmare for any government that took it on.

On a much smaller scale, the Government of Alberta has recently enacted changes to the *Water Act* to facilitate "low-risk" water basin transfers, so we have recently slid down a small snake. However, the thought of someone building an 805 kilometre-long reservoir in the middle of the Rocky Mountains is laughable now, despite serious consideration 80 years ago. We have climbed many ladders to arrive at a much more reasonable position on interbasin water transfers, even though we are still not at an ideal outcome.

Final Thoughts

It's easy to see the snakes — the instances where conservation has backslid, and where preventable harm has been caused to the environment despite our best efforts. It's harder to see the ladders. They're usually much shorter than the snakes, but by continuously fighting our way to the ladders, letter after letter, meeting after meeting, we're eventually much higher up on the game board. We'll never reach the top, but that doesn't mean we won't get closer.

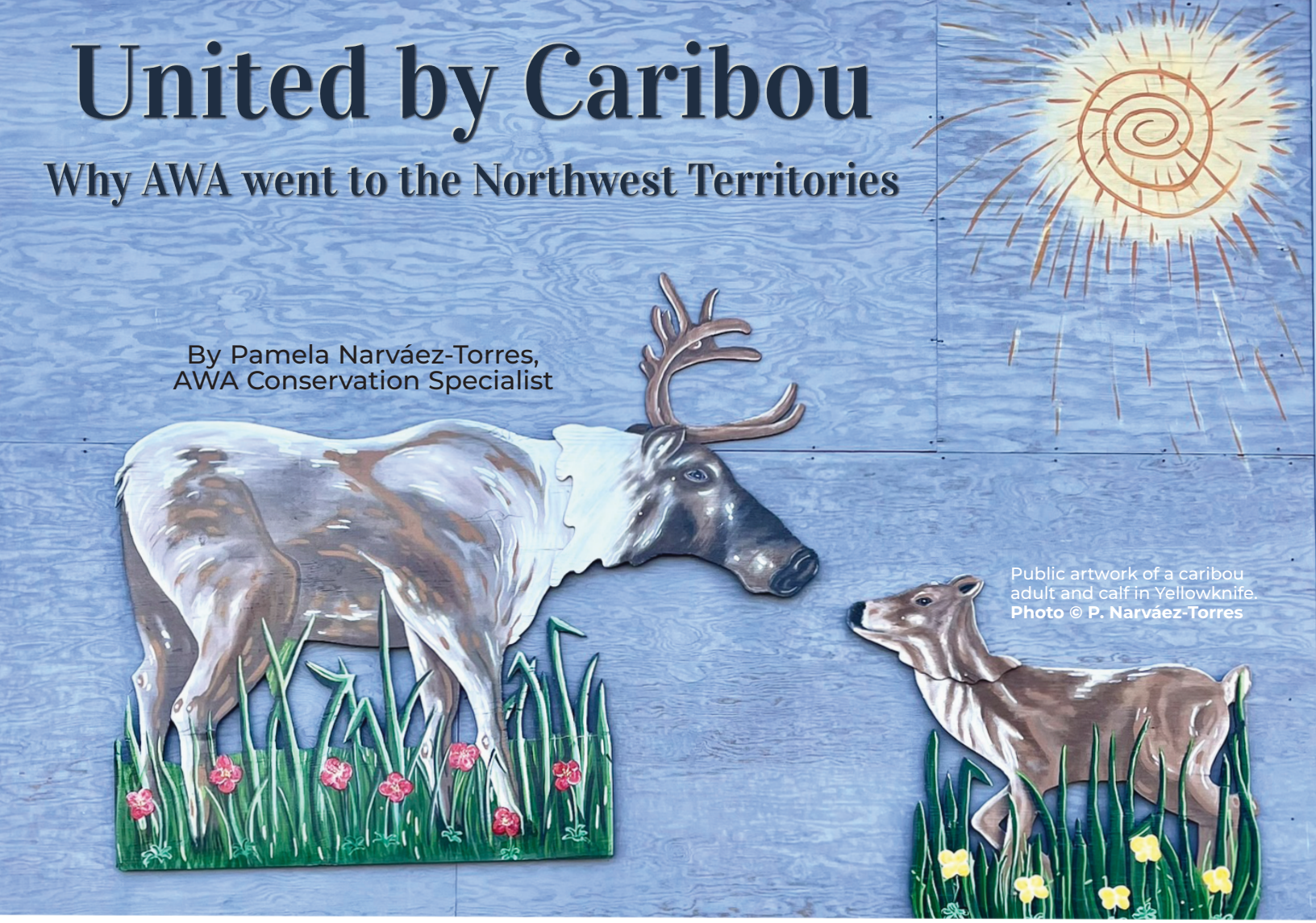


The Roger Creasey Memorial Library in 2025.
Photo © S. Heerema

United by Caribou

Why AWA went to the Northwest Territories

By Pamela Narváez-Torres,
AWA Conservation Specialist



Public artwork of a caribou adult and calf in Yellowknife. **Photo © P. Narváez-Torres**

Every two to three years, the North American Caribou Workshop (NACW) brings together the people who are working to understand and protect one of North America's most iconic — and imperilled — species. This past June, I had the opportunity to represent AWA at the 20th NACW in Yellowknife, where nearly 400 participants from across Canada, the United States, and Europe got together under the theme "United by Caribou."

Researchers, Indigenous Nations, government agencies, conservation organizations, consultants, and wildlife managers all came together with one thing in common: a commitment to protect the future of caribou.

For an organization like AWA, attending a conference like this is about far more than sitting through presentations. It is an opportunity to hear the latest science, learn how other jurisdictions are approaching conservation, connect with the people generating knowledge, managing wildlife, and working on the ground, and build relationships that can lead to future collaborations. It also helps ensure that our advocacy work in Alberta remains informed by the best available practices.

Bringing Alberta's story to the NACW

One of the highlights of the workshop was presenting some of our work alongside Tara Russell, Program Director with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Northern Alberta Chapter (CPAWS NAB).

Our presentation, "Disconnect Between Scientific Evidence and Policy Decisions Leads to Further Endangerment of Species at Risk: Upper Smoky Sub-regional Planning as a Case Study," examined the implications of this plan for the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway Southern Mountain Caribou populations. These are two of the last three Southern Mountain Caribou populations remaining on provincial lands in Alberta.

Over the past year, AWA and other environmental organizations like CPAWS NAB and Nature Alberta have spent countless hours reviewing this plan, participating in public engagement processes, providing detailed technical feedback, meeting with government officials, and communicating our concerns to both decision-makers and the public.

In our presentation, we wanted to answer a question the Government of Alberta never did. Using government data, we overlaid proposed timber harvest areas within the plan with critical winter habitat and recent caribou locations. Surprisingly, this analysis was never presented as part of the government's planning process, despite being fundamental to understanding what the plan actually means for caribou.

The results we found were deeply concerning.

The proposed timber harvest will remove substantial areas of the remaining biophysical habitat within the winter ranges that these caribou populations still use. Even more alarming, the plan contains no measurable objective to recover caribou or restore their habitat. Instead, it allows continued industrial development while relying on predator control to keep declining populations from disappearing altogether.

Our conclusion was straightforward: **as written, the Upper Smoky Sub-regional Plan cannot recover these populations.** Instead, it places them on a pathway towards extirpation.

The response from the audience reinforced just how significant Alberta's decisions have become. Attendees expressed concern about the direction Alberta is heading and asked thoughtful questions about the planning process and its implications for caribou recovery. Many people were surprised to learn about Alberta's sub-regional planning process and the consequences for caribou. It was encouraging to realize that there are people far beyond Alberta who are paying attention, and that sharing what is happening here helps make sure Alberta's experience does not exist in isolation.

Learning from others

While presenting our work was rewarding, one of the best parts of attending the NACW was simply listening.

The opening workshop, organized by the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board, explored the relationship between Dene people and caribou. Elders shared stories about migration routes, changes they have observed over decades, and the deep cultural relationship between their communities and the land.

One message stayed with me throughout the week: as caribou populations decline, many Indigenous nations have voluntarily stopped harvesting them to help support their recovery, a decision that represents an enormous sacrifice. Younger generations are growing up without experiences that were once central to their cultures, not because those traditions are no longer valued, but because protecting the remaining caribou has become more important.

Throughout the conference, speaker after speaker reinforced the idea that recovering caribou is not “simply” an ecological challenge. It is also about protecting cultures, languages, food security, and relationships with the land that stretch back thousands of years. Those discussions, and the relationships built through them, often continue long after a conference ends, an important reminder that strong conservation and effective advocacy depend on staying connected and learning from the people doing the work.

Conversations beyond the conference

Some of the most valuable moments happened between presentations. Over lunches, coffee breaks, and evening events, I had the chance to meet graduate students, researchers whose papers I had previously read, government biologists from across Canada, and colleagues from organizations working on similar conservation challenges.

One evening, I found myself sitting next to a researcher from Norway. Our conversation quickly turned to reindeer conservation, public awareness, and chronic wasting disease (CWD). She explained that many Norwegians are unaware that some wild reindeer populations are now considered at risk, and she described some of the difficult management decisions Norway has made to reduce the spread of CWD. It was very interesting to compare approaches across continents and to realize how many of the same conservation challenges are shared internationally.

Those conversations also reminded me how valuable it is to meet people in person. Many of the individuals I spoke with are people I had previously



Alison McCreesh created illustrations of the goals and priorities discussed each day. GRAPHIC RECORDING © ALISON MCCREESH

known only through scientific papers or virtual meetings. Conferences create space for relationships that sometimes are hard to develop through a computer screen.

There were also important discussions closer to home. Government of Alberta biologists presented new findings on caribou deaths linked to the meningeal worm (a parasitic roundworm affecting wild deer species, including caribou), highlighting yet another emerging challenge being faced by already vulnerable populations in our province. Hearing about these new threats reinforced that habitat loss is not the only pressure caribou face. As diseases, climate change, and other stressors continue to emerge, protecting remaining habitat becomes even more important.

Captive breeding projects

One symposium focused on ex-situ conservation, or captive breeding programs designed to prevent local extinctions of caribou.

We heard examples from British Columbia, Quebec, Finland, and Jasper National Park. Each project represented years of planning, collaboration, research, and significant financial investment.

The Jasper National Park caribou conservation breeding program has already shown encouraging success. During their first year of operations, they were able to release young individuals into the Tonquin Valley, showing that carefully designed recovery programs can contribute to the rebuilding of populations.

However, the project in Jasper also highlights an important difference. The caribou being released are mostly returning to habitat within a national park, where the landscape is protected. The same cannot be said for most caribou populations within provincial lands in Alberta, where industrial development continues to destroy and fragment the habitat caribou need to survive.

But, those presentations also raise an important question: if Alberta eventually turns to captive breeding to prevent the loss of more provincial caribou populations, where would these animals be released if the habitat they depend on is gone? If we continue to allow habitat destruction to outpace conservation and recovery, where exactly are these animals supposed to return to once breeding programs produce more caribou?

Captive breeding can buy time, but it cannot replace intact habitat. The same is true for Alberta's extensive wolf culling program. Predator control has become the province's primary conservation intervention for many struggling caribou populations, but the need for wolf culls is largely a consequence of industry-caused habitat disturbance.

Protecting habitat before populations are almost gone is not only more effective, but also far less costly than trying to rebuild populations after decades of decline.

Exploring Yellowknife

Yellowknife, the capital and largest city in the NWT, is located on the northern shore of Great Slave Lake within the traditional territory of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. It is a place where the landscape is a constant reminder of how


A caribou in the Tonquin Valley.
Photo © C. Hunter

closely northern communities remain connected to the land.

One of the things I was most excited to experience in Yellowknife was the famous “midnight sun.” During the summer here, darkness barely arrives. While many of us might struggle to convince our brains that it is bedtime when the sun is still shining, wildlife has evolved to make the most out of these endless days. Caribou, for example, don't follow the same sleep cycles that humans do. Instead, they rest in short periods throughout the day while taking advantage of the brief but productive northern growing season.

The conference days were full, typically running from early morning until late afternoon, but the organizers made time for participants to experience the city and its surroundings. Before the technical sessions began, we gathered along the Yellowknife River for a welcome reception hosted by the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. Through songs, welcoming remarks, and a traditional round dance, we were reminded that caribou conservation is about much more than just wildlife management. For many Indigenous nations, caribou are inseparable from culture, identity, language, and ways of life that have existed since time immemorial.

On another evening, we visited the Yellowknife Historical Museum, located at the former Giant Mine site. Mining built Yellowknife into the city it is today, but it also left behind one of Canada's largest environmental remediation problems. Learning about the mine’s history and the enormous financial and environmental costs of cleaning up decades of arsenic contamination was a powerful reminder that decisions about resource development can leave consequences that last far longer than the projects themselves.

That lesson felt particularly relevant to the work AWA has been doing in Alberta. Whether they be issues with coal mining, tailings from the oil sands, or oil and gas development, the goal is the same: make sure that the environmental costs of today’s decisions are fully understood before they become tomorrow’s problems.

Beyond the conference, I also had the chance to explore Yellowknife’s historic Old Town, one of the city’s most picturesque neighbourhoods. Colourful homes, log cabins, murals, local artwork, and flower-filled gardens overlooked the lake, while floatplanes came and went from the shoreline. Walking through Old Town, I spotted fish swimming in the clear waters of Great Slave Lake and encountered several foxes wandering around. It was a great reminder that wildlife and people continue to coexist in many places.

United by caribou

The conference theme “United by Caribou” was remarkably fitting. Although participants came from different countries, disciplines, and worldviews, there was broad agreement on one fundamental point: caribou recovery ultimately depends on protecting and restoring the habitat they need to survive.

That message emerged repeatedly, whether from scientists presenting decades of ecological research, Indigenous knowledge holders sharing observations accumulated over generations, or wildlife managers describing difficult conservation decisions. No single system of knowledge has all the answers. Recovering caribou requires bringing together Indigenous knowledge, Western science, practical management experience, and meaningful collaboration.

Leaving Yellowknife, I felt hopeful, not because the challenges facing caribou had become any smaller, but because I had been reminded that so many people continue to work tirelessly to address them.

Back in Alberta, that work continues. AWA will keep reviewing sub-regional plans, communicating scientific evidence to the public, engaging with decision-makers, and advocating for policies that give Caribou a real opportunity to recover.

Attending the NACW highlighted why that work matters. It reminded me that we are part of a much larger conservation community, one that is watching closely, sharing knowledge, and working toward the same goal of making sure future generations inherit landscapes where caribou still roam free.



A view of Yellowknife from the Bush Pilot’s Monument.
Photo © P. Narváez-Torres

Alberta's All-season Resorts Act

Bill 35 is Setting Concerning Precedents for Parks and Protected Areas

By Cameron Hunter, AWA Conservation Specialist

Bill 35, the *All-season Resorts Act* (ASRA), was passed in December 2024. This legislation changed the way decisions are made around all-season resorts, moving away from the more legally robust and publicly transparent *Natural Resource Conservation Board Act* (NRCBA) processes, and creating a new regulator within the Ministry of Tourism and Sport.

ASRA gives the Ministry of Tourism and Sport the power to allocate public lands and re-designate protected areas for the creation of "all-season resort areas." These enable the ministry, through regulatory authority, to make authorizations under the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* (EPEA), the *Public Lands Act* (PLA), and the *Water Act* in relation to all-season resort developments, such as whether to require an environmental assessment. These decisions are also unable to be reviewed due to privative clauses within the Act.

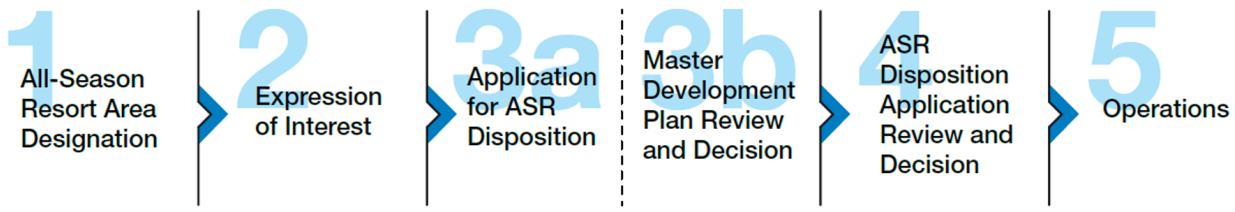
Many public lands include critical species-at-risk habitat, wildlife corridors, and other environmentally significant areas that are unsuitable for tourism development. Unfortunately, through ASRA, the removal of public lands is now occurring, demonstrating a shift from ecological expertise and public opinion to tourism-forward priorities and investor confidence.

Current proposals

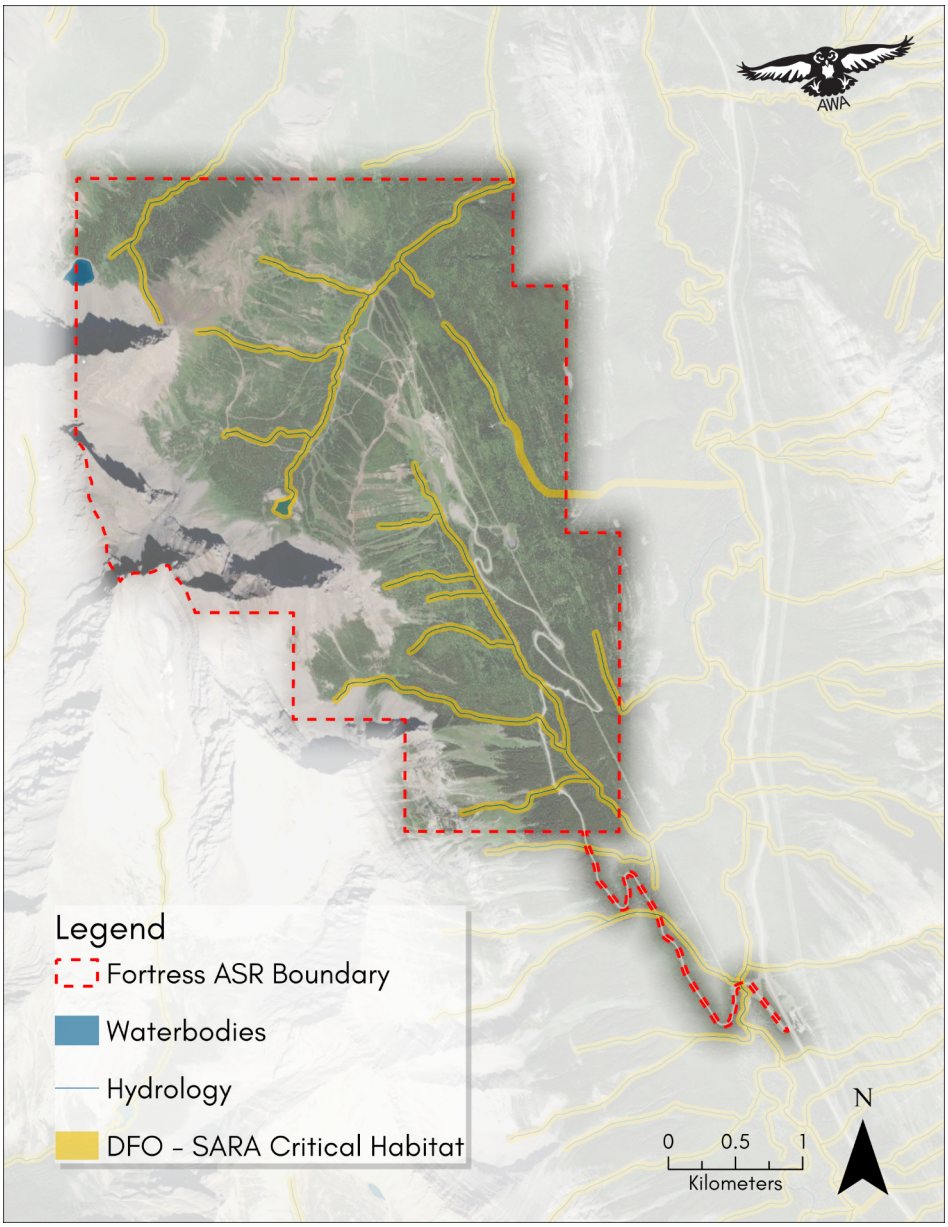
As of December 2025, the All-season Resorts Act Policy was released, which detailed criteria for the designation of all-season resort areas and evaluation of their development proposals. Subsequently, the Ministry of Tourism and Sport revealed the first three locations to be designated as all-season resort areas: Fortress Mountain Resort, Nakiska Ski Area, and Castle Mountain Resort. Each designation was accompanied by changes to public parks and/or protected areas: Fortress' lease was expanded by the removal of 131 hectares from Spray Lakes Provincial Park; Nakiska was accompanied by 929 hectares of redesignated land from the Evan Thomas Provincial Recreation Area; and, inversely, Castle Mountain Resort had a 54-hectare portion of its lease returned to Castle Provincial Park.

Through ASRA, the government cannot designate parks and protected areas as all-season resorts. But, there is a workaround. ASRA enables those parks and/or protected areas to have their park or protected area designation rescinded, and once those designations are gone, there is nothing restricting redesignation to all-season resort areas. This is what happened with both Fortress and Nakiska — parks and protected areas were removed and redesignated as all-season resort areas to allow for the expansion of leases and the development of all-season resorts. In both cases, this occurred without any public consultation.

Designation is the first step of the all-season resorts process, and has been completed for Fortress, Nakiska, and Castle.



Overview of The All-season Resorts Process.
Image © Gov. of Alberta



Map of Bull Trout Critical Habitat, as designated by the *Species at Risk Act*, within the area under consideration for Fortress All-season Resort. **Cartography by C. Hunter.**

Fortress Mountain Resort

Fortress Mountain Resort is a currently closed ski resort located in Kananaskis Country. They now hope to revitalize the area with an all-season resort.

Fortress, as required in step 3A (see GoA graphic on page 8), submitted their all-season resort application, master development plan (MDP), environmental assessment, business plan, economic impact analysis, engagement and consultation plans, and emergency services and wildfire assessments. As of August 2026, Fortress Mountain Resort has just reached step 4, and has had its MDP approved with conditions, allowing for some construction to begin.

During public engagement on Fortress' application, AWA and other organizations shared concerns about the impacts the Fortress Mountain Resort development would have on the Kananaskis region. Increased use in the area around Fortress would likely increase human-wildlife conflict with Grizzly Bears, as Fortress is an important resting and feeding area for this species. In addition to bears, the Fortress all-season resort boundary intersects with a large amount of critical habitat for Threatened Bull Trout, with 17 percent of the total area of the Fortress boundary listed as critical habitat.

Wolverine, listed as Special Concern under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) are also noted to be in

the area and are highly sensitive to human disturbance. And let's not forget our flying friends — the federally and provincially endangered Little Brown Myotis bat has also been identified at the site and within the Fortress lodge, along with the Olive-sided Flycatcher.

A resort of Fortress' size (3,600 hectares) is bound to have impacts on these species through habitat degradation and fragmentation, which can also result in increased human-wildlife conflicts. The ecological importance of the Kananaskis Valley deserves a regional environmental assessment that considers cumulative effects, as called for in Alberta's South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP), and as stated in Alberta's Land-use Framework: "Cumulative effects cannot be managed as an "add-on" to existing management approaches; nor is it about shutting down development."

Fortress' approval is dependent on conditions pertaining to further site-specific fish and wildlife surveys and management plans, adequate Indigenous engagement, and updates to their MDP. But many questions remain unanswered, such as the cumulative effects of having Fortress and Nakiska all-season resorts operating in tandem so close to each other. Water also remains an area of concern with this development, as Fortress' current licence cannot meet the demands of the project, and a moratorium on new water licences within the South Saskatchewan River Basin leaves the question of where water will come from for this project.

Nakiska Ski Area

Nakiska Ski Area, located just 13 kilometres away from Fortress Mountain Resort, has also been designated for an all-season resort.

Nakiska is somewhere between steps 2 and 3 in the process. They recently announced plans for 2027 summer operations, although the requirements identified in step 3A of the all-season resorts process for an MDP — an environmental assessment, business and capital investment plans, and information on landscape compatibility and municipal integration — have not been supplied. Nakiska did perform public engagement, but our participation was impacted by the lack of the aforementioned requirements of step 3A (these were present in Fortress' application).

The Ministry of Tourism and Sport notes that Nakiska's proposal is currently still under review, and Nakiska recently shared the results of their public engagement. It is important to understand how Nakiska plans to handle human and wildlife interactions, seeing as the slopes of Nakiska are critical habitat and movement corridors for Black Bears and species-at-risk Grizzly Bears. So far, there has been no formal public-facing proposal available for review beyond Nakiska's website announcement.

Castle Mountain Resort and Silvertip Gondola

Castle Mountain Resort has not proceeded past designation (step 1), and they currently do not seem to have intentions to proceed further.

There is also a current decision pending for the Silvertip Gondola, another candidate for an all-season resort, which would be located in the town of Canmore on Mount Lady Macdonald. This decision hinges on whether, through ASRA, the government could perform a land-use change, which would require amending the SSRP and changing the boundary of the Bow Valley Wildland Provincial Park to redesignate the removed parkland as an all-season resort area. The proposed all-season resort would intersect the Upper Silvertip Wildlife Corridor, an important corridor for Bighorn Sheep, Grizzly Bears, Gray Wolves, and Elk, and one that connects Banff National Park to Kananaskis Provincial Park. Results from the public engagement on this land-use change are still pending.

Ecosystems under pressure

A trend you may have noticed by now is the concentration of all-season resort area designations and proposals around Kananaskis and the Bow Valley, two regions already under pressure from over-tourism. In 2025, Kananaskis had a record-breaking 5 million visitors, and the Bow Valley was just shy of that with 4.5 million visitors.

Tourism should be about promoting healthy and connected ecosystems and supporting nature and wildlife, but we are at risk of loving these spaces to death. And this is not in the cute way, the "Oh my goodness I love it so much I could die" feeling we get when we see puppies or baby marmots. No, this is the kind of 'loved to death'



Grizzly bears are one of the species that may be impacted by new All-season Resorts in the Kananaskis and Bow Valley regions.
Image © C. Olson

where species at risk are extirpated and parks are paved over, causing us to lose what makes these places special and deeply cherished to begin with.

One of ASRA's goals is to reduce overuse, but Fortress alone is projected to bring in 8,300 daily visitors (lowered from 10,000 as part of their conditional approval). This is contradictory to ASRA's own goal, as well as local policy within the Kananaskis Country Recreation Policy (KCRP) that has clear core values of ecological conservation above private large-scale commercial development.

Sure, it could be argued that demand is there. But polling and policy do not align with what is being proposed by these resorts, as shown in the KCRP and polling from Alberta's Plan for Parks. If the long-term goal of the province is to triple tourism revenue by 2035, with a $4 billion annual target, then there needs to be a proportional increase in our parks and protected areas in order to avoid continually straining regions already suffering from the pressures of overuse. There must also be a clear path for how to establish those protected areas, especially since we are still waiting for parks that were promised in the SSRP.

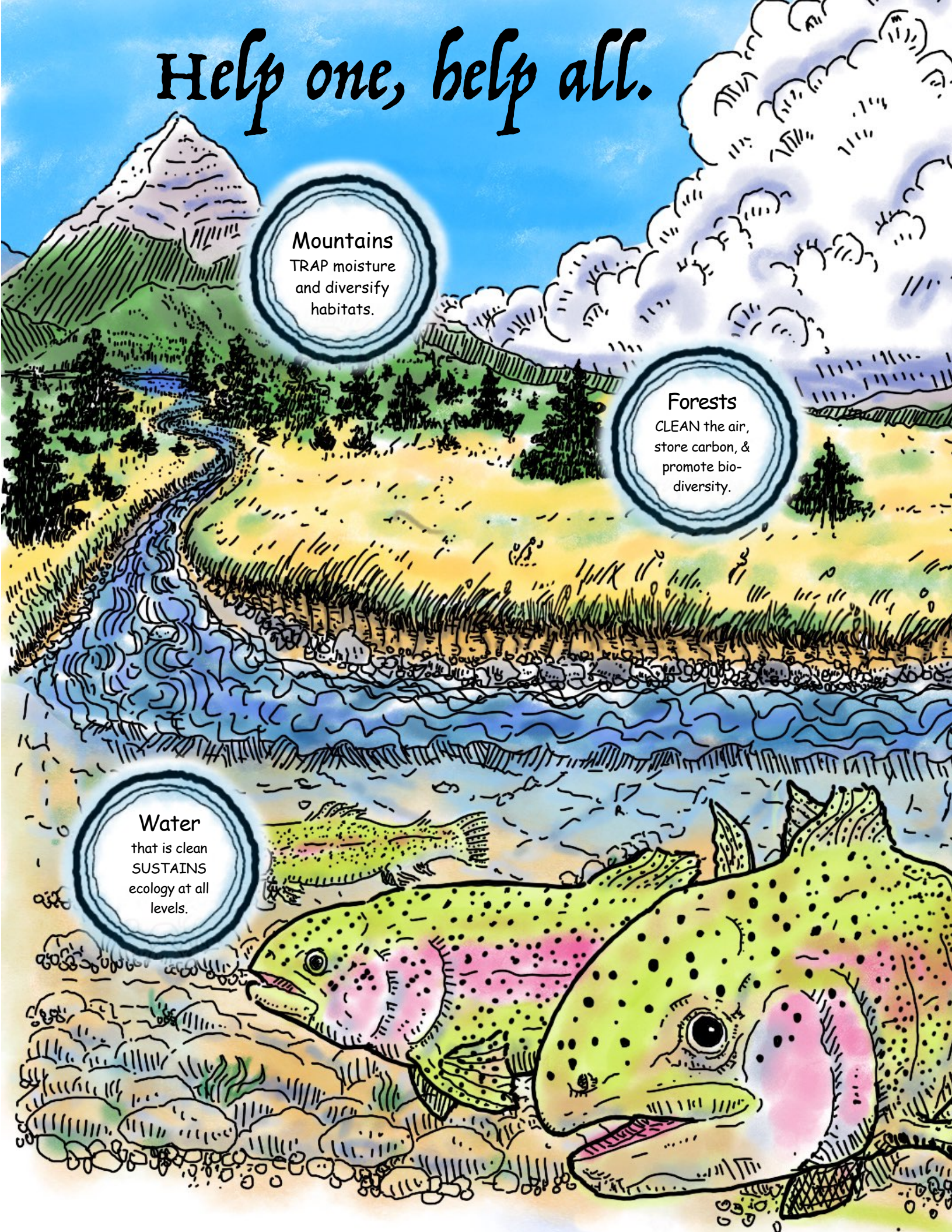
If we are focusing just on the economic viability of retaining parks and protected areas, we already have an argument. Every $1 spent on protected and conserved areas generates $3.62 in visitor spending, and these same protected areas also provide us with valuable and important ecosystem services. On a broad scale, they can reduce climate change impacts through carbon storage and sequestration, and at local levels, intact forests can help reduce flooding risk and soil erosion. When kept intact, forests also purify water and provide habitat for wildlife and species at risk. Restoring landscapes and ecosystems is expensive and takes more time and resources, and unfortunately is not often successful in recovering what was lost, so protecting and retaining these landscapes and public lands makes sense economically for the long-term.

ASRA continues its push to remove public lands from Albertans for the sake of privatization, and it will continue to do so at the behest of the Premier. The directive of the Minister of Tourism and Sport, under their Sept. 17, 2025 mandate letter, is stated as "Continuing development and implementation of Alberta's All-Season Resorts Strategy by expanding opportunities for sustainable tourism in Alberta's Rockies with a special focus on Kananaskis, Crowsnest Pass, David Thompson and Grande Cache regions."

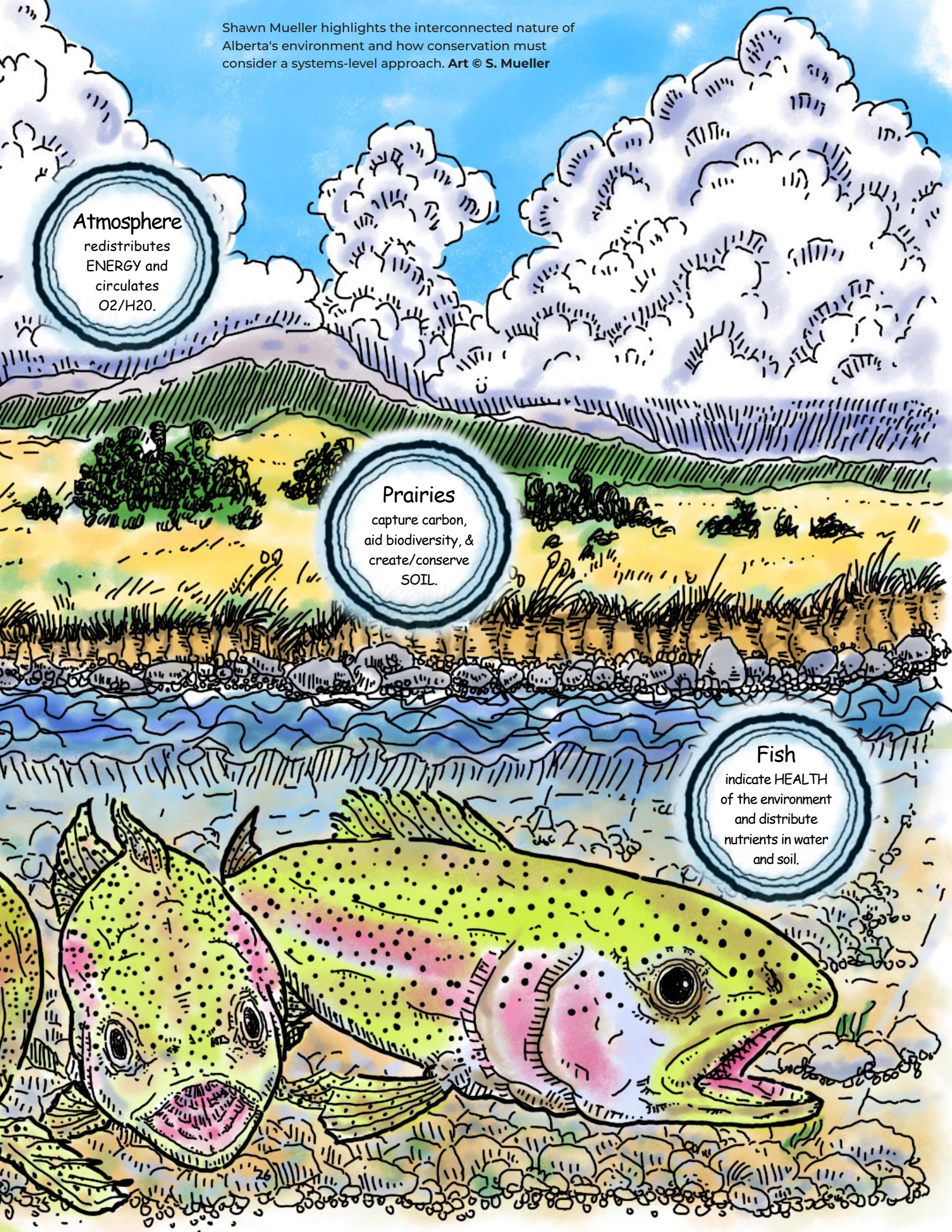
Expanding resorts to these regions may help distribute tourism throughout the province. However, we are currently seeing a densification of tourism and expansion of all-season resorts into the Bow Valley and Kananaskis, resorts that will further intensify tourism in this pressurized region.

Expanding parks and protected areas would allow for a more sustainable approach that protects these important ecosystems and headwaters. It would create a model that allows tourism and conservation to lift each other up to achieve both ecological and economic objectives and could help distribute sustainable tourism throughout the communities of Alberta's Rockies. As stated by Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society: "Developing clusters of protected areas can offer broader, multi-visit tourism experiences for greater economic returns while also establishing ecological corridors that maintain animal habitats and connectivity crucial for functional ecosystems".

The removal and redesignation of public parks and protected areas sets a concerning precedent, and limited transparency on unreviewable decisions adds to the list of concerns associated with ASRA. Protection of wildlife corridors, headwater ecosystems, and parks and protected areas is key for the long-term sustainability of tourism and wildlife across the Rockies. Supporting sustainable development choices and expanding parks and protected areas are proven alternatives and could spread the benefits of nature-based tourism across more communities in the Rockies.


Help one, help all.
Mountains
TRAP moisture and diversify habitats.
Forests
CLEAN the air, store carbon, & promote bio-diversity.
Water
that is clean SUSTAINS ecology at all levels.

Shawn Mueller highlights the interconnected nature of Alberta's environment and how conservation must consider a systems-level approach. **Art © S. Mueller**



Calling All Bull Trout Nerds



2026 Meeting of the Salvelinus confluentus Curiosity Society

By Sara Heerema, AWA Conservation Outreach Specialist, and Cameron Hunter, AWA Conservation Specialist

Photo © ScCS

The annual meeting of the *Salvelinus confluentus* Curiosity Society (ScCS) brought together Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) lovers from across Canada and the United States. This August we met in Exshaw, along the Bow River, to discuss the past, present, and future of Alberta's provincial fish.

The ScCS is a subcommittee of the Western Native Fishes Committee of the Western Division of the American Fisheries Society. It started up in 1989 as a collection of biologists, conservationists, and other lovers of this iconic species. The organization had a simple goal: share resources, research, and fieldwork expertise to work towards preservation of Bull Trout in their natural tributaries across their Northwest range. Now, more than ever, this conservation work is essential, as Bull Trout populations experience more and more challenges in their natural landscapes.

Bull Trout at one point had the largest distribution of all trout in Alberta. As an aquatic apex predator, they often eat smaller fish and invertebrates. They grow slowly and need cold, clean, and connected waters to complete their lifecycle. Spawning happens in early fall and requires the right type of gravel deposits within tributaries for females to deposit their eggs. As cumulative land impacts in and around their habitat have increased in Alberta over the years, they have declined to the state they currently rest at; Bull Trout are listed as Threatened under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*, and the main Alberta population is also Threatened under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA).

This year's gathering spot for the ScCS was in the midst of the habitat for the Saskatchewan-Nelson River population. This is the population of Bull Trout that is the most threatened in Canada, and some of the most essential remaining habitat for their survival is contained in this region. This location gave us the chance to see some of the areas discussed during presentations, as well as complete some on-the-ground remediation and research work to try to have a direct impact on species recovery.

Sharing stories and strategies

Bright and early on the first day of the conference, we gathered in the Exshaw Community Hall. Looking around, we were met with a sea of fish-themed clothing, with multiple people sporting t-shirts and hats bearing designs from previous ScCS meetings. We were given a brief chance to chat with some of our associates from organizations like Freshwater Conservation Canada, the University of Calgary, the Miistakis Institute, fRI Research, and Parks Canada. We also got to meet some other fish fanatics from across Canada and the U.S.

With more than 20 speakers over the course of the conference, we had a packed schedule of presentations. Elder Tom Snow of the Stoney Nakoda First Nation started our day by introducing us to the land and sharing his history

of living and working within this area. Elder Snow spoke of his history and relationship with the region and the native trout, and he told stories of other beings with whom we share the land. After this, we got into the meat of the presentations, discussing trout diseases, threats to their survival, strategies for habitat rehabilitation and monitoring, tools to deal with invasive species and hybridization, and reintroduction programs. Presenters shared information from their local study areas and the lessons that could be applied elsewhere.

Our keynote presenter, Dr. John Post of the University of Calgary, gave a history of the designation process for at-risk fish species, and explained how Bull Trout populations have been assessed since we first began noticing their declines. He emphasized that local populations of species, such as the Bull Trout that live in the rivers and tributaries around the Bow Valley, often have unique adaptations and genetic variations that separate them from other populations, making them ecologically irreplaceable if they are lost. Dr. Post also spoke of the need for integration of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), referencing the stories of Elder Snow and recognizing the place where TEK falls within Rumsfeld's "Known Unknowns" in our current scientific approach.

Although AWA was not presenting at the conference, fisheries biologist Matt Coombs was able to share his field research on behalf of AWA and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society – Southern Alberta Chapter (CPAWS SAB) on the logging reviews he completed in the field over the last couple of years. His research showed the many ongoing issues present at logging sites in Alberta's Eastern Slopes, which have damaged and degraded critical habitat for Bull Trout. Some of these issues included sedimentation into critical habitat, failing erosion and sedimentation controls, completely cut-over critical habitat, and insufficient buffers, to name a few.

A common theme throughout the presentation days was the desire to connect more people to trout and to the water systems they rely on. Many of the conference participants were avid fisherpeople, and they shared common experiences of hoping to protect the species and the water so that this land-based tradition can continue. Although Bull Trout in Alberta have been catch-and-release only since 1995, angling surveys are a common sampling method for determining fish presence in waterbodies, and they were included as part of our field day assignments.

One of our presenters, Shona Derlukewich, shared how seeing a fish up close and being able to ID it can change our entire perspective on why it's important, how we connect with it, and how we protect it. Shona has been working to educate people on Alberta's fish through her project "School of Fish" and has also released a very comprehensive "Fishes of Alberta Field Identification" guide to aid others in their journey towards understanding Alberta's fish species.

It was emphasized throughout our discussions that in order for recovery efforts to be successful, critical habitat for Bull Trout must be preserved. As we crawled into our tents each night, we thought about the history of this land-based tradition in the ScSC, which began with members camping together in Oregon during their first year at the Gearhart Mountain Bull Trout workshop. It's a good way to remind us all that we are a part of this land and this habitat, and that we depend on these tributaries and clean water as much as the fish we are fighting to protect.

Getting our feet wet for fish

Phil Howell, one of the society's original members, explained that one reason for the summertime gathering was to bring enough field biologists together to complete monitoring projects in regions that do not always have the necessary resources. There has always been a focus on getting participants out into the field, and this year was no exception. On the second day of the conference, we awoke bright and early to participate in our chosen field activity, which ranged from snorkelling surveys to electrofishing to habitat rehabilitation work.

Sara was part of the group that set out to collect environmental DNA (eDNA) samples from tributaries around the Jumpingpound Creek watershed, led by Sandi Riemersma of the Jumpingpound Creek Watershed Partnership. The goal of this field project was to collect environmental information that would show whether Bull Trout and other fish species were present in



Sara measuring water depth and velocity.
Photo © N. Sinnatamby

these tributaries. Sandi had emphasized in her presentation at the community centre that being physically on the land and walking these creeks puts everything into a new lens. We all experienced the truth of this as we created new connections with the land and felt the importance of the project that we had learned about on a projector screen.

At each of the four sites that we visited, we unloaded the cars and hiked down to the open tributaries that we were sampling. Our team of eight collected eDNA using equipment that ran the creek water through a small filter to collect any suspended particles. These filters will then be sent to the lab to see if there is a positive DNA match to any of our target fish species, which would indicate that those fish are present in the water system. Knowing where species at risk like Bull Trout can currently survive is important information for determining where recovery efforts should be focused, and what kind of environmental conditions are required.

To complement the eDNA collection, at each location the team also collected information on the health and condition of the water habitat and the surrounding riparian habitat, land uses in the region, and water quality indicators such as temperature, pH, velocity, and the presence of aquatic invertebrates. Sandi walked us through each new measurement and how to use the equipment, reminding many of us of our field school days from university. Trying out the new techniques brought about lively discussions on the different sampling methods and equipment that each person was familiar with. One of the highlights of the day for us was trying out these new field methods together, reminding us that science can be done in a variety of ways for the same purpose.

Making pals by making PALS (post-assisted log structures)

While Sara was collecting samples from some of the creeks in the Jumpingpound, Cam travelled to Banff National Park to complete some real-time fish habitat restoration, led by Dan Struthers and Nicole Sulewski of Parks Canada.

In 1941, nine kilometres of the former Cascade River were dammed, which created what we know today as Cascade Creek. It became a spillway for the Lake Minnewanka dam project, now owned by TransAlta Utilities. Lake Minnewanka has a long history of dam projects, first aimed at improving boating access in 1895, then for hydroelectric power generation in 1912 and again for the current dam, which finished its construction in 1941. Nearly 50 years later in the 1990s, murmurs about the restoration of Cascade Creek began to emerge.

Unfortunately, by then the creek had filled with sediment due to its restricted flow, causing the local native trout populations to struggle with habitat loss and competition from non-native species such as Brook Trout entering the stream. Brook Trout were introduced to Alberta from Ontario as a stock fish in the early 1900's. These Char started to compete and occasionally hybridize with the local Bull Trout populations (another member of the Char genus). Brook Trout are well adapted to silty, warmer, low-flow streams like the conditions present in Cascade Creek at the time. Eventually, the lack of flow proved too much for the native Bull and Westslope Cutthroat Trout (another threatened native Alberta trout species), and the local populations disappeared from Cascade Creek.

In 2010, formal discussions began around the restoration of Cascade Creek, and in 2013, there was a push from Mother Nature herself. The floods of 2013 gave this project a hand when the Cascade Creek spillway was opened for the first time since its creation in 1941. Although this event was quite destructive, it provided a unique opportunity from which restoration work on Cascade Creek could begin. By clearing out the sediment-laden creek and removing old, undersized road-stream crossings, the flood provided clean water from which to begin the restoration project.

Fast forward to Aug. 19, 2026, Day 2 of the ScCS conference. Cascade Creek had since received new culverts more conducive to the movement of trout, allowing them to move upstream through the culverts. Volunteers from AWA, fRI Research, InStream Fisheries Research, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the Alberta Government, and others from ScCS came together alongside the Parks Canada Banff Field Unit team and Freshwater Conservation Canada to take the next step in the restoration of Cascade Creek. With infrastructure improvements in 2017, TransAlta has been to provide an adequate base flow for the fish, and with a



Bull Trout in Kananaskis Country.
Photo © R. Blanchard





Constructing PALS on Cascade Creek.
Photos © C. Hunter

recent reintroduction of Westslope Cutthroat Trout by Parks Canada, the next step for Cascade Creek was to create some complexity within their newly reformed habitat by constructing what are known as PALS, or post-assisted log structures.

These structures are created as a low-tech restoration technique to mimic natural features like log jams. The PALS aim to create complexity in the creeks by helping promote the creation of natural pools that provide habitat for fish. They also capture sediment, reduce erosion, and improve bank stability. Simply put, they are piles of woody debris that are then reinforced with untreated wooden posts. The goal is to reduce the use of unnatural materials, such as cables, so that as the PALS break apart, they do not leave dangerous or unnatural material behind in the ecosystem.

Throughout the day, and with the help of a hydraulic post-pounder, the team came together to construct five bank-attached and one mid-stream PALS on Cascade Creek to provide shelter and habitat complexity for the resident Westslope Cutthroat Trout. Bull Trout themselves were not reintroduced first in Cascade Creek, as they are known piscivores (fish who predate upon smaller fish). In the coming years, Parks Canada will consider reintroducing Bull Trout and eventually other native fish species into the creek. For the time being, the newly introduced Westslope Cutthroat Trout are being monitored and given some time to establish their population in their restored home, without the added predatorial pressure of Bull Trout.

In the coming years, Parks Canada will be constructing a total of 20 to 25 PALS within Cascade Creek, and the spillway will receive experimental “flushing flow” to remove sediment that may be accumulating within the creek. This strategy aims to keep this critical habitat clean, clear, and complex for the Westslope Cutthroat Trout and other future fish species who will be reintroduced to the gorgeous montane waterway.

Creating new streams of collaboration

Sharing our evenings at the campground gave us the chance to connect on topics that we had not discussed during our formal presentation days, ask follow-up questions, and learn more about the different strategies people were using to understand and protect this essential fish species. We also had the chance to check out an incredible resource: the ScCS Bull Trout digital library, where research, gray literature, and knowledge about trout conservation could be accessed by everyone. As we mingled around the campfire, it was intriguing to hear about what monitoring and recovery strategies our colleagues in the U.S. have been utilizing, and how these compared to those of us coming from across Canada.

Many people shared stories of how they first became interested in fish work, and although many had different backgrounds and experiences, what united us all was a true love for these charismatic species. Horror stories from the field were shared alongside the memories of once-in-a-lifetime experiences that you can only get from being outside and learning from the natural world around you. As bats weaved through our campsites, we shared contact details, planned collaborations for the future, and considered how we could work together to achieve the same goals. The sun was setting on the day, and on the conference as a whole.

Corporate Speak, Corporate Lies

By Lorne Fitch, P. Biol.

A grader had already ripped up a linear section of the native grassland on the Antelope Creek Ranch when Bob, the Ranch Manager, corralled the operator and asked what he was doing. "Building a new lease road to a proposed wellsite," was the answer. When asked for the letter of authorization, the operator shrugged and replied, "I don't know anything about the paperwork. I just get paid for building roads."

After Bob called me, I determined that the company hadn't even applied for the authorization, let alone been given the go-ahead for construction. The Antelope Creek Ranch is a working ranch of about 10 sections, set up initially to integrate and demonstrate ways of conserving native prairie and its biodiversity alongside livestock grazing and petroleum development. Building another road across the grassland, especially without permission, and adding to an already cumulative weight of development, did not fit with conservation objectives.

I ordered the company to cease and desist their road construction. I also pointed out that there would be no more petroleum development on the ranch, given their failure to adhere to the rules. The company wasn't aware that I didn't have the authority to do either.

You would have thought the energy security of the free world was at risk, given the company's response. Since my role was biodiversity conservation, not energy development, I remained unmoved by the tirade. I suggested they first re-read the conservation plan for the ranch, of which they were a signatory, and then we might talk.

A meeting was arranged in their corporate headquarters in Calgary, an imposing downtown skyscraper. Upon my arrival, I was asked to wait, a standard intimidation technique. I browsed the oil patch magazines, thoughtfully arrayed on a table. One article caught my eye, and I took the magazine into the boardroom, a cavernous affair with an immense oval table surrounded by leather chairs. Art, depicting oil derricks and other petroleum-related works set against scenes of tranquil and wild landscapes, surrounded the room.

Every chair but one was filled with grim-faced executives. It was to be the inquisition of the lone biologist. I began by quickly reiterating the goals and objectives of the ranch, and especially the integration of petroleum activity with wildlife conservation. I then opened the magazine and asked if I could read them a corporate perspective on how one oil company was responding to those challenges.

I don't remember precisely how the piece was worded, but it included references to environmental sustainability, the necessity to plan accordingly, and commitments for reclamation and restoration. It talked about working cooperatively with local communities and groups, corporate responsibilities to adhere to government policy and regulations, and going the extra mile to be seen as engaged and good corporate citizens wherever they worked.

I asked them if they agreed with this corporate prospectus. All nodded. I then asked them whether they knew which company was referred to in the article. None did.

I revealed that the article in fact referenced their company, their corporate objectives, their corporate commitments, and their corporate philosophy. The inquisition was turned on its head, and there was much coughing, sputtering, and twisting in leather chairs. Their corporate actions on the Antelope Creek Ranch were 180 degrees from where their stated philosophy sat.

This isn't an anomaly, a one-off from one company, an excuse that lower-levels didn't get the "memo." No, this is corporate spin to cover what is in practice a lie. Fine words meant to soothe, to placate, and to disguise from true intents, are epidemic.

To say it's lying seems so harsh. When challenged on the suspect truthfulness of a statement, John Crosby, the ever-glib Newfoundland politician, replied that he hadn't lied — rather, he was simply "being careless with the truth." To distinguish whether corporations are "being careless with the truth," it's important not only to weigh their words, but to monitor their actions. The latter speaks volumes about veracity.

The Alberta Forests Products Association, the lobby group for the timber industry, says their environmental mandate is, "Healthy forests help maintain a healthy environment, and we make sure the forest industry does too. The health of trees, plants, animals, air, water and soils — today

and in the future — drives what our industry does and how we do it."

One of the companies active in the Eastern Slopes provided this response: "We agree that understanding cumulative disturbance across ownerships is important and West Fraser will continue to utilize best management practices, low-risk watercourse crossings and temporary roads to minimize our footprint."

Actions speak louder than words, and in an assessment of logging practices in the Upper Oldman watershed, Alberta Wilderness Association documented a complete failure on the part of West Fraser to "maintain a healthy environment," "use best management practices," and employ "low risk water crossings."

Riparian buffers were logged over, and erosion protection at stream crossings was generally either missing, poorly installed, or not maintained. Subsequent monitoring showed excessive erosion and sediment delivery from logging roads to streams containing threatened Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout.

The findings of 667 failures to adhere to even the minimal timber harvest operating ground rules, the *Fisheries Act*, and the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), would suggest that the reality on the ground is a complete swap for the rhetoric of sustainable logging practices and protection of other forest values like species-at-risk trout.

Given the evidence, what drives the logging industry isn't the narrative of a healthy environment, but a profit-driven one, to the exclusion of most of the essential ecological checks and balances to logging activity.

The Coal Association of Canada says, "Canadian coal operates under the world's strictest environmental regulations." Given the evidence that every open-pit coal mine in Alberta has had, and many continue to have, acute, chronic, and catastrophic failures that impact water quality and biodiversity, this might suggest either the regulations and standards are hardly strict, hardly enforceable, or hardly enforced.

Hitchens' razor is a general rule for rejecting certain claims of knowledge. It states, "What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence." No facts are in place to establish this assumption that Canada's (or Alberta's) regulations are superior to those across the world. Nor does it offer evidence that regulations are uniformly followed.

Since the Coal Association, as the lobby group for coal interests, constantly lobbies both provincial and federal governments on reducing the environmental regulatory "burden," one should take the statement on operating "under the world's strictest environmental regulations" with more than a pinch of salt.

In the case of coal mining, the evidence of environmental failures is voluminous, unequivocal, and compelling. The impacts of legacy coal mines, in terms of a constant release of a chemical stew of contaminants, especially selenium, into receiving waters, are not a credible endorsement of the industry or its claims of environmental excellence.

It is as if corporate speak is designed to paint a picture that is a lie and then have it told frequently enough to be believed by some, especially politicians who continue to support unsustainable logging, mining, and petroleum extraction practices.

The truth is painful, unpalatable, and politically dangerous, at least in the short term. In contrast, lying is profitable (at least to some) and allows the powerful to set the narrative. To the uninformed, these lies seem practical and easy, even beneficial. But as José N. Harris, an American author, reflected, "Lies only strengthen our defects. They don't teach anything, help anything, fix anything or cure anything. Nor do they develop one's character, one's mind, one's heart or one's soul." That works at a corporate level as well as on a personal one.

When many people understand they are being lied to, they start to look under the surface and find the cracks in corporate speak. They recognize it for what it is, and not, as Churchill labelled it, a "terminological inexactitude." Once credibility and trust fly, the social licence to operate is lost. The regulatory one may be soon to follow.

Children are taught that the ethical principle is to tell the truth at all times. Yet in politics and business, it seems this is a common transgression. Some lies are made in apparent error, because of failures to investigate all the evidence. But lies by intention, when the truth is known and the facts are indisputable, should be considered the most serious of crimes.

When Jack Ward Thomas, an eminent wildlife biologist, took over the helm of the US Forest Service, he sent a short but pointed memo out to all staff. It read, "Tell the truth and obey the law." Imagine if this were to be the new corporate mantra.

Trembling Aspen in autumn.
Photo © C. Wearmouth

An Obsession with Irrigation

Taber's Path to Retreading Past Mistakes

By Ruiping Luo, AWA Conservation Specialist



In June 2026, AWA visited the site that would soon be converted to irrigated cropland in the MD of Taber. Construction had already began. **Photos © L. Wallis**

In Southern Alberta, a green pasture is cut in half by a dark scar of newly deposited dirt. An excavator rolls across the field, flattening yellow blooms and leaving churned mud and tire tracks. Over the rumbling of machines, frogs can be heard calling, and in the distance, meadowlarks sing. Soon, the only trace of these grasslands will be on the edges of newly ploughed fields and in the memories of past visitors.

This describes the fate of six sections of native grassland in the Municipal District (MD) of Taber. In September 2025, the MD of Taber council voted to convert these sections to irrigated cropland, and leases for the sections were auctioned off in June 2026. Construction to build irrigation infrastructure and begin the process of breaking these lands has already started.

The conversion of these lands is more than just a loss of native prairie. It is a loss for the species and people that depend on these grasslands, shrublands, and wetlands. It is a loss of the resilience these lands provide, and a loss of faith in the MD council and the promises made. And, it is a risky and expensive investment in an area that already proved unsuitable for similar investments.

Livelihoods lost

Native grasslands are home to a diversity of species. They are habitat for hundreds of plant species, and also for many insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals. Over 60 species at risk rely on the native Canadian grasslands, and many of these species are still declining.

Grasslands are also home to ranchers and

communities that have lived and stewarded these lands for generations. Cattle grazing on these lands help maintain the health of the prairie, which was adapted to the foraging of millions of bison. The stewardship of ranchers is the reason many of Alberta's large grasslands remain intact.

Before the MD decided to break the native prairie, these lands had been held under grazing leases for decades. Daryl Johnson, a rancher and representative from the Vauxhall Grazing Association (the former lessee of these sections), was one of the people who worked on these lands.

"The Association as a whole, we all will put out less cattle because of the loss of this land," said Johnson.

Being able to put cattle out on the prairie, he went on to explain, is one of the best options for ranchers. Economically, the costs of feeding cattle on irrigation are much higher, but it goes beyond financials.

Johnson continued, "Until maybe the past five years, cow-calf ranching has been like, you have to love it to do it, because nobody's making big dollars at it. It's more of a lifestyle, something you've grown up in, something that you want to keep going... But as a rancher, there's nothing better for your cows and your calves than to get out into the prairie and to graze grass and grow naturally as any animal should. Like you just can't replicate that."

Talking about the land that would be lost, he added, "It's [the land] been a big blessing for us for sure as an association, and that's why we have worked so hard to try to keep it."

The permanent loss of the large, intact prairie these six sections provided will seriously hurt rancher communities.

"And of course," Johnson finished. "Our worry is, once one project like this happens, what stops another project?"

Promises broken

"Don't believe government promises," Cliff Wallis advised.

As a Professional Biologist and AWA Director, Cliff Wallis was involved in opposing the conversion of these native grassland sections. He, along with Cheryl Bradley, Director for Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE), presented written and oral submissions to the MD of Taber council in late 2025, explaining the reasons these lands should not be broken.

One reason was a promise the MD of Taber had made in 2014 to "conserve prairie grassland for grazing for generations to come."

Prior to 2014, these sections were owned by the province. The province had managed them for over 50 years, maintaining these areas as grazing pastures, until the municipality requested the sections be transferred to them. However, the province was reluctant to transfer these lands. These sections were considered environmentally significant areas, meaning they held important or unique habitat for Alberta. At the time, the province kept and protected lands of high environmental significance.

To encourage the transfer, the MD of Taber promised these lands would not be broken. The Municipal Council described their intention "of assuring continued access to the grazing land by the current leaseholder for the long term." These promises were codified in the *Prairie Conservation Bylaw* (Municipal Bylaw 1845), aiming to "ensure the proper stewardship of all municipally owned, controlled or managed Grasslands for the purpose of maintaining healthy and functional natural prairie rangeland ecosystems."

"The conservation of the tax recovery land we have coming back is extremely important to the MD of Taber, so we want to make sure it's managed properly," Reeve Brian Brewin told *The Taber Times* in 2014.

As is recognized in the bylaw, "prairie grasslands owned by the Municipal District of Taber provides both economic and environmental



Taking a look at some of the unique flora in the MD of Taber during an Adventure for Wilderness. Native prairie improves water storage, anchors soil, and protects against severe flood and drought.
Photo © R. Luo


Beardtongue in the MD of Taber.
Photo © L. Wallis

benefits to the residents of the Municipal District of Taber." The bylaw prohibits grazing leaseholders from breaking or altering the native grasslands. It did not, however, prevent the MD of Taber from breaking the lands themselves.

Just over a decade later, the MD council, lured by the prospect of generating more revenue, voted to proceed with irrigation on 3,100 acres of tax recovery lands under their stewardship. They are going into debt — debt that will fall on taxpayers if the project fails — to finance the irrigation project (Bylaw 2022). The decision to proceed with the project passed by a narrow four to three vote.

The MD of Taber is not the only one breaking promises. When the Alberta Irrigation Modernization Program (AIM) was announced in 2020, there were assurances given that irrigation would only be expanded to already cultivated lands, not native grassland. Further, irrigation districts must act in accordance with *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* regional plans, including the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP), which states, "maintaining intact native grasslands and habitat will be a high priority."

Yet, when questioned about these assurances, Richard Phillips, General Manager for the Bow River Irrigation District (BRID), which will be proving water to the MD of Taber for irrigation, replied, "This is not technically irrigation expansion and has no connection to the AIM program." It is not clear how they are defining irrigation expansion if the plowing of native grassland to grow irrigated crops is not considered expansion.

"There's an absence of goodwill there," Bradley noted. "An absence of credibility."

Procedures evaded

The project utilizes other technicalities as well, bypassing the safeguards and regulations around irrigation expansion. For instance, the irrigation district intends to irrigate the land under annual agreements, which means water will only be guaranteed for one year before agreements must be renewed. As a result, according to the BRID, the new parcels do not need to be added to this irrigation district.

"Because they're annual acres, they don't appear on the assessment, right? They're not considered part of their [the BRID's] expansion limit," Bradley explained of the response she received after reaching out to the BRID. "It seems to be really devious, like they're playing some kind of game to avoid abiding by the rules regarding allowable irrigation expansion."

Since these sections will not be added to the district, the BRID maintains it does not have to give notice of the added irrigation sections, or assess the new parcels, as would normally be required under the *Irrigation Districts Act*.

"With the annual agreement, they really bypassed everything," Johnson stated.

"They made a grey area even greyer," Wallis agreed.

Not only are they using annual agreements, but the MD of Taber has also promised that the project "will not impact other water users' allocations, as it draws from excess water that currently cannot be fully utilized." They are referring to 'spillwater' from the Scope Reservoir, which is extra water remaining in the reservoir that is not fully used for irrigation.

"This is not real water. This is just ephemeral water," Wallis said, referring to how the water is seen by irrigators, though normally, this water is returned to the Bow River and contributes to the instream flows for the river. The Bow River, downstream of the Bassano Dam, is already degraded from excessive water use, mainly by irrigation.

Because this is water already drawn from the river, no new water rights had to be purchased, further bypassing procedures that exist to reduce the irresponsible use of water.


Rocky Mountain Beeplant in the MD of Taber.
Photo © L. Wallis



Fleabane in the MD of Taber.
Photo © L. Wallis

Warnings dismissed

"So these ones here are specifically called tax recovery lands," was how Johnson presented the site when AWA visited there in June 2026. "And so in the thirties, when the original settlers came and tried to farm these areas, they couldn't make it due to the poor land. Thus, they couldn't pay their taxes, and the province took the land back."

As tax recovery lands, these lands already have a history of failed cultivation. Alberta's Land Suitability Rating System classifies these soils as poor, with severe to extremely severe limitations for crops. The soils are sandy and do not hold water well.

> "I fear we're having to relearn the lessons of the Dirty Thirties."
>
> -Cheryl Bradley, SAGE

Despite this, the BRID has now determined the land to be suitable for irrigation.

"I think we're taking quite a risk," Bradley observed. "Because if we get a couple of years of drought, and then we get winds similar to those that came in the thirties, exposed topsoil will erode and all the productivity that nature provides will blow away."

Irrigation can worsen soil erosion. Many irrigated specialty crops, such as sugar beets, potatoes, and beans, leave little residual cover to shield the topsoil from strong wind. Without residuals, the best prevention for soil erosion is to plant a cover crop, a layer of vegetation that covers the soil through the winter and early spring; however, these specialty crops are also harvested in late fall, leaving little time for a cover crop to establish. As a result, these fields are unprotected throughout the winter and in the spring, when strong winds can easily carry away soil.

Other methods for soil conservation can also be difficult to apply to irrigated crops. For instance, reducing tillage helps minimize soil loss, but crops such as potatoes and sugar beets require tillage, since the vegetables need to be dug out of the ground. Farmers also use deep tillage as an emergency solution to blowing soil. Unfortunately, while this may help in the short-term — by revealing heavy, moist layers and creating grooves that trap airborne particles — it has long-term consequences in breaking apart deeper soil layers, making them more likely to be blown away once dry. The dust storms created from this can be highly destructive. We are already seeing the effects.

In 2021, high amounts of soil erosion were reported in Lethbridge, Taber, 40 Mile, and Newell, all counties with irrigation agriculture. In 2022, a dust storm blew through Southern Alberta that covered the skies and was seen from space. In 2024, severe drought conditions prompted more warnings of soil erosion, with *The Canadian Press* noting that "severe erosion events have been increasing in frequency and severity in recent years." Another massive dust storm formed in May 2026, blowing across the Canadian prairies and stealing more soil from fields.

Once the soil is lost, it takes decades or even centuries to recover. Without soil, no amount of water will make the crops grow.

"I fear we're having to relearn the lessons of the Dirty Thirties," Bradley noted.

Keeping the land as native prairie is one of the best strategies for surviving drought and reducing soil erosion, yet we are continuing to lose our grasslands. The conversion of these six sections in the MD of Taber is just one of many projects that favour irrigation or other developments over the protection of our prairies. They made an economic decision, prioritizing immediate profits by selling our future.

Staff Feature: Pamela Narváez-Torres

By Jill Girgulis, AWA Outreach and Communications Specialist



Pamela on Jumpingpound Mountain with her dog Kaila. **Photo © A. Paulson**

For wildlife biologist and AWA Conservation Specialist Pamela Narváez-Torres, growing up outside of Canada (she's lived here for 10 years but is originally from Mexico) meant that she wasn't previously aware of the extent of our environmental concerns.

As Pamela explains, "From my perspective, as a foreigner, you think Canada does everything great. Everyone just looks at Canada as a great example of how conservation is done... so I wasn't really paying close attention to issues in Alberta."

It wasn't until she moved here for the next phase of her graduate studies that she began to better understand the local conservation issues plaguing our province. "I started paying more attention to what was going on in Alberta, and I realized that it wasn't as I once thought," Pamela says, and she credits the work of organizations including AWA for contributing to her increased awareness.

Pamela joined the AWA team in the fall of 2024, after having completed a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a Master of Arts in Anthropology from the University of Calgary's Department of Anthropology and Archaeology. She's also a PhD candidate at the University of Calgary in the same department as her master's degree, and is in the midst of writing her dissertation.



Hiking in Anja Community Reserve in Madagascar. **Photo © N. Guthrie**

As a Conservation Specialist, one of Pamela's primary — and preferred — areas of focus at AWA is the caribou file. "I became a wildlife biologist because I like working with animals," she admits. Her AWA work also includes representing AWA as a board member in the Ronald Lake Buffalo Herd Cooperative Management Board, as well as being responsible for the boreal region, oil and gas, Wood Bison, boreal-region forestry, and chronic wasting disease files.

The caribou file in particular is a "really complex topic," Pamela explains. "There's just so many things happening with land-use planning and different interests that fight for the same resources, like oil and gas, forestry, and then, of course, the wild species that are in wild spaces that the government is not interested in protecting."

To Pamela, the situation with Alberta's Threatened caribou reminds her of a similar one from the 1970s with the Mexican Wolf (a genetically distinct subspecies of Gray Wolf in North America). "We used to have wolves in Mexico, and the populations used to span the north of Mexico and the south of the U.S. But with the arrival of cattle in the States, they started this eradication campaign because wolves were seen as a direct threat to cattle."

But the problem wasn't stopping, so eventually this U.S.-based eradication campaign expanded to Mexico, "to the point where there were almost no wolves left in Mexico and the United States."

What followed from this point was a cooperation agreement between Mexico and the U.S. to bring the species back, namely in the form of breeding programs. "They started with less than five individuals and a couple of decades later, they had over 100 individuals," Pamela says. "And right now in captivity, there's over 300 individuals. So a lot of them are still in captivity, but there's been this effort to reintroduce them into the wild."

As this example shows, the process of bringing this species back from the brink has not only taken several decades, but has also required international cooperation, considerable funding, and ongoing advocacy work (in this case, to challenge public perception of predators). "I like [this example] because it shows how much work it takes," Pamela says.

She also considers the Mexican Wolf situation a potential indicator of what's to come for Alberta's Woodland Caribou. "If you get to the point where you have almost no individuals or populations left, it's going to take a lot to bring them back."

As she points out, "It's not an easy task, so the government should start working on it right now and maybe start working on the things that took those populations to that point, like the challenges driving them to extinction or to extirpation."

In other words, while it's encouraging to see some recovery in Mexican Wolf populations, "it would have been better if we had avoided all this from the beginning," and the same applies to caribou in Alberta.

"We're at a point where the federal government and other organizations have started breeding programs because there are only a handful of individuals left," Pamela says. At the same time, there are still a few populations that could be self-sustaining, so long as we "leave them alone and protect their environment and actually recover their habitat."



Pamela climbing trees in Madagascar as part of her PhD research.
Photo © M. J. E. Rahariniaina

Boreal Caribou habitat is located in the boreal ecoregion of Alberta. Found in the northern aspect of the province, the boreal is one of the places in Wild Alberta that Pamela hopes to spend more time exploring. "I would really, really love to go more to the north of the province," she says, noting that the majority of her work with caribou, Wood Bison, oil and gas, and forestry relates to Northern Alberta. "I care deeply about protecting the north of our province even if I don't get to visit often."

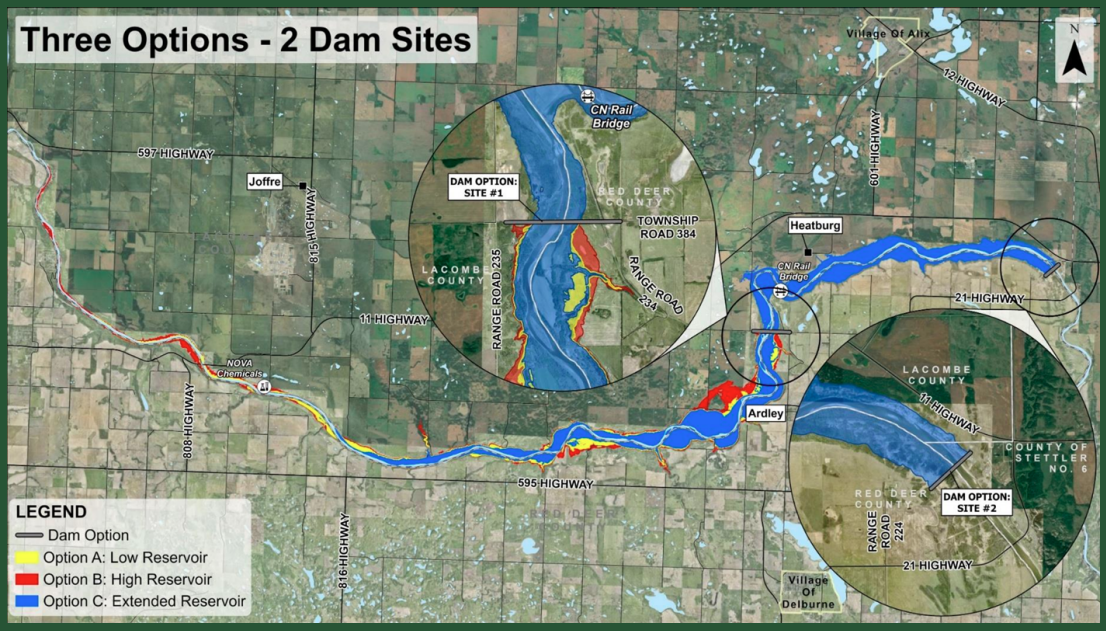
As for her favourite wild spaces in the province? "Like a lot of people in Calgary, I really like going to the mountains," Pamela says, citing Jumpingpound Mountain in Kananaskis Country as a particular standout. "I know we're very lucky to have the mountains and the prairies so close."

She also has fond memories of visiting Dinosaur Provincial Park. "It kind of feels like you're on a different planet," Pamela says of the iconic hoodoos and coulees. "That's how I picture it. Like, you're just on the prairies and then suddenly you get to this space where everything looks different."

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Scoping Out if it's Feasible to Study the Scope and Feasibility to Feasibly Undertake a Study of the Ardley Dam's Scope

By Kennedy Halvorson, AWA Conservation Specialist



Three dam and reservoir options being investigated near Ardley. **Map © EPA, Gov. of Alberta**

The idea of damming the Red Deer River east of the city has been tossed around for over a century, and it's back, back, back again in the government's latest Ardley Reservoir study engagement. It's a confusing process, with the province "asking Albertans for feedback on the Ardley Reservoir Scoping and Feasibility Study," a study that's not yet available to the public. Attending an engagement session reveals what they actually want, which is for folks to provide any concerns about a potential dam and reservoir in the area, which then may or may not inform the study the government is working on.

Specifics on Ardley have been sparse: we know they're investigating three options, 'High,' 'Low,' and 'Extended,' but impacts to river flows, aquatic ecosystems, local landowners, recreation interests, and even just ballpark costs are apparently still being determined, which is hard to believe. So, without providing some critical information, they want to know your thoughts! Clear as a sediment-laden reservoir bottom, right?

It's also unclear why the Ardley Dam is even being studied again. In 2014, Stantec Consulting Ltd. completed a "Flood Mitigation Study" on the Red Deer River for the province, which reviewed but ultimately did not recommend Ardley because it would be "expensive to construct," have major operational costs, and have high environmental, social, and cultural impacts. They estimated that for every dollar the project costs, we get only 81 cents in beneficial returns, with a net negative of over $26 million. Stantec concluded by saying that projects like Ardley should only be considered "if it is determined that the localized flood protection measures do not provide sufficient flood mitigation."

A year later, in 2015, WaterSMART came to similar conclusions during government-contracted work in the basin. In their "Room for

Some quick math:
In 1968, it was estimated that the Ardley Dam and Reservoir would cost **$68 million** to build and **$4.2 million** to operate annually. Adjusting for inflation, today that's **$612 million** in capital costs plus **$38 million** a year to operate. Notably, the Oldman Dam's final construction cost was almost three times more than what had been estimated in 1968, after controlling for inflation. If Ardley was similarly underestimated, the project is looking at building costs of over **$1.8 billion**.

the River Report", it was noted that while Ardley could provide mid-stream storage for "both flood and drought mitigation," such an option "presents fiscal and environmental trade-offs" and "can encourage more risky floodplain development and exposure to catastrophic failure." Numerous other recommendations were supported as first measures, including reducing human footprint in the headwaters, conserving wetlands, relocating residences out of floodplains, and siting and constructing municipalities and infrastructure such that they are resilient to natural disasters.

WaterSMART's "Climate Vulnerability and Sustainable Water Management in the SSRB Project", published in the same year, modelled "four plausible basin scenarios" and management strategies for the Red Deer River. Additional storage from a dam and reservoir at the Ardley site only emerges as a strategy if there is High (Scenario 3: 525 billion litres allocated, 444 billion litres withdrawn) or Extremely High Growth (Scenario 4: 655 billion litres allocated, 575 billion litres withdrawn) in water use in the basin. Currently, cumulative allocations on the Red Deer River before it exits the province are 340 billion litres, well below either scenario described. WaterSMART noted that "additional storage would likely only be considered once growth outstripped the ability for current storage and infrastructure to meet demands and all feasible conservation efforts had been applied."

Undertaking another Ardley study now raises numerous questions. Is the government anticipating a large increase in water use and allocations in the Red Deer River, and if so, what for? Has Alberta exhausted all other measures and conservation tools recommended as first priorities by the consultants? And if so, have these still not been sufficient to meet current growth trajectories or provide water security and natural disaster mitigation in the Red Deer River Basin? Who knows what answers we'll get — government staff did confirm there were no guarantees if or when findings from the Ardley Reservoir engagement would be made publicly available.

Dams never die. Instead, they are scoped and studied to oblivion until a government, willing and ignorant enough, comes into power and decides it's feasible to ram one through.

Congratulations to our 2026 AWA Environmental Scholarship Winner!

"I am a fifth-year Biological Sciences and Science Education student at the University of Lethbridge. Working closely with faculty mentors has given me unique opportunities to study Alberta's biodiversity through herbarium work and hands-on field research, experiences that have deepened my connection to the natural world and helped me discover a sense of purpose in protecting it. After graduation, I hope to pursue graduate studies in ecology while using both research and education to inspire others to better understand, value, and care for the wilderness. Thank you again! Receiving the environmental scholarship is truly an honour, and I am incredibly grateful." - Courtlynd Cherpin

To learn more, visit: www.albertawilderness.ca/alberta-wilderness-association-environmental-scholarship/



AWA Executive Director Debborah (left) presenting Courtlynd (right) with her scholarship. **Photo © S. Heerema**

Alberta Native Plant Council Workshop

By Ruiping Luo, AWA Conservation Specialist



Ruiping presenting on AWA's Cypress Hills Bioblitz.
Photo © S. Davis

On May 2, Alberta Native Plant Council (ANPC) hosted their annual workshop in Calgary. Tucked in the Wild Rose Brewery, participants were sitting in rows and at tables, wandering past displays for native plant seeds and plant guides, and chatting in small groups.

ANPC is a volunteer-run organization that shares knowledge and supports the conservation of native plants and native plant habitats in Alberta, including helping fund many restoration or conservation projects. Their annual workshop is held in various locations across Alberta, but it has been nearly 20 years since it was held in Calgary.

The theme for this year was "Grassroots Grow Deep: Local Action, Global Impact," and the workshop included many presentations focused on restoration and management, especially of grasslands, wetlands, forests, and urban parks.

The workshop presented a great opportunity to learn about the many incredible projects helping to rescue, restore, and protect natural ecosystems, and supporting biodiversity in parks and public, private, and Indigenous-owned lands across the province. Presenters spoke about topics such as stewardship challenges and successes, collecting seeds and plants, and carefully building communities, not only for native plants, but also for the pollinators and wildlife that require them.

Representing AWA, I was given the opportunity to present on the Cypress Hills Bioblitz from June 2025. The presentation covered our data collection and results and the activities aimed at public engagement, then finished with possible future projects. It was well received, sparking discussions about the bioblitz and the biodiversity of Cypress Hills, the benefits and drawbacks of using iNaturalist, and future bioblitzes.

The people behind these projects are also important, and the connections and collaborations are what make most of this work possible. The ANPC workshop was a place to learn about important work around Alberta, but also to meet and to speak with the botanists and naturalists who are recording and sustaining plant diversity. It was a good reminder of the productive work that is slowly reclaiming our native ecosystems from ruin.



Ruiping with Andrea Dechene, Vice President of ANPC.
Photo © S. Davis

Creative Witness
Spring 2026

This spring, AWA invited participants from across Alberta to slow down and connect with natural areas near their homes. Inspired by weekly prompts, participants spent time in these spaces and connected to them through their chosen creative practices.



I have only grown tall because of human changes;
Buffalo used to roam free and keep the grassland;
but now they are gone from the landscape;
So instead of grassland, I grow alongside with the other aspens.
Our view used to go on, unimpeded, towards the mountains.
Then the humans built their neighborhoods surrounding us.
Houses popped up all around us.
-Beth Crowe

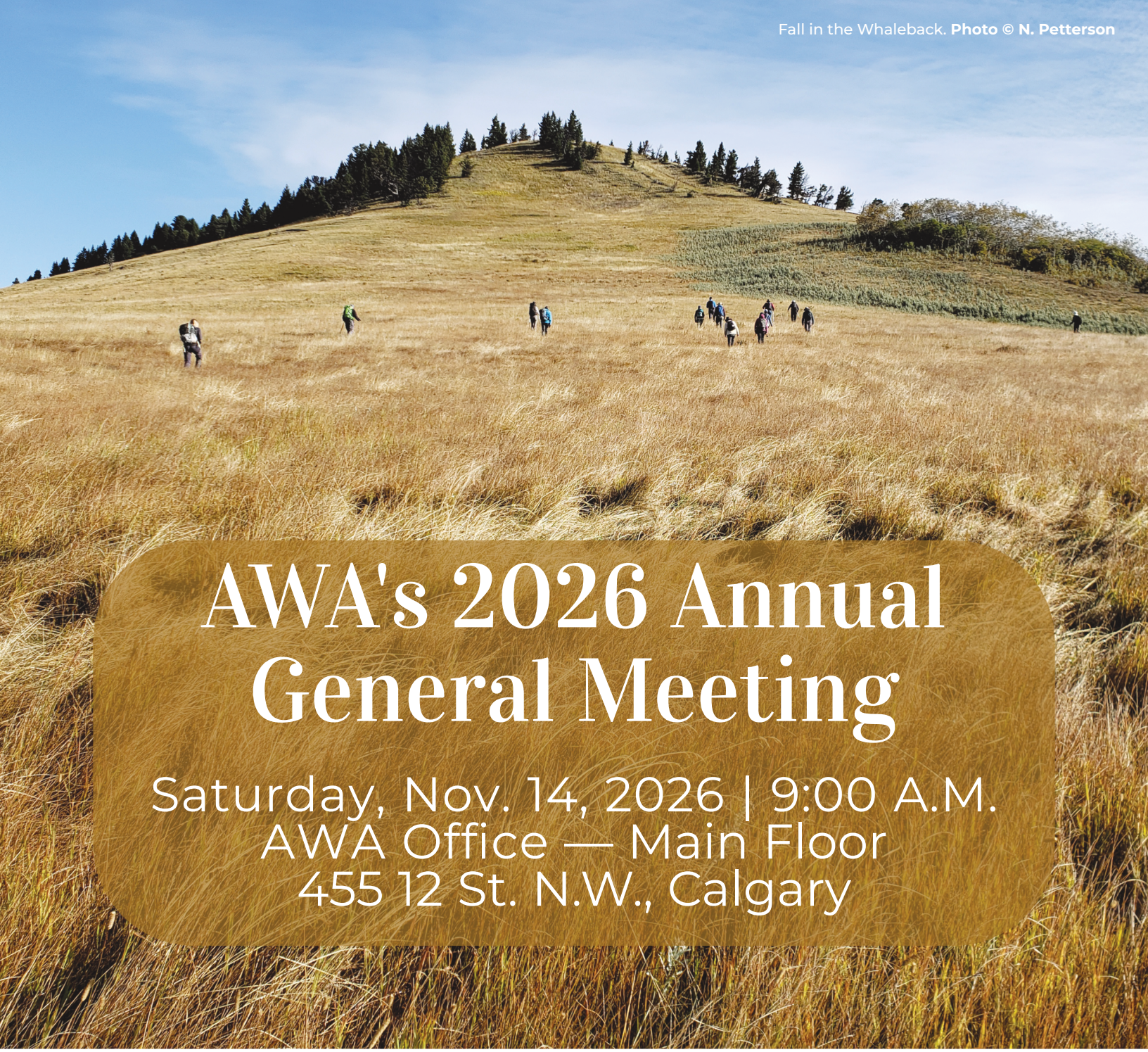
The View From 10 Centimetres



It's easy to look up and away. Seeing the big trees, the clouds, the blue sky and, of course, the birds.
Today though, it's eyes down. Seeing what's at ground level.
It's not just me looking down. The Saskatoon flowers, bent over from the rain, peer down at me. A raven squawks from somewhere above. All of them watching.

A small worn path winds through the undergrowth. A large beaver house nearby and water channels to the east suggest the beavers used the path to go from water to more trees inland.
But not only beaver, as coyote and deer scat near the path tell tales of taller beasts passing through.
Mayflies in the grass. Little Western Tailed-Blue butterflies bouncing around. Up, up and sideways, but always back down to near the ground.

The butterfly leads my eye to new flowers. Purple blue-eyed-grass, the parasitic white bastard-toadflax, and the yellow meadow parsnip – all a pleasure to the eye.
And, of course, ants, ants, ants...everywhere.
-Bob Acton


Fall in the Whaleback. **Photo © N. Petterson**

AWA's 2026 Annual General Meeting

Saturday, Nov. 14, 2026 | 9:00 A.M.
AWA Office — Main Floor
455 12 St. N.W., Calgary

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